Scruffy Girl

by Dirtyhands

Summary

Steve may as well be invisible. All most people see is the Cap. But one scruffy girl sees him. Responsibility rests heavy on his shoulders after the fall of SHIELD, and only she lightens the burden for him. Steve has to learn to deal with the messy side of being a real man in a world full of false people. Good thing he's got his scruffy girl to remind him of what's important.

Notes

Constructive criticism welcome! I'm doing this as a writing exercise before I move onto a larger work. I won't necessarily heed criticism if I see things differently than you, but I appreciate your thoughts if they can improve my work. I'm not trying very hard to stick to canon, just having fun with the characters. This is my first posting to this site, so please be patient while I learn how to get the formatting correct.
Chapter 1

Steve ground his teeth at the same time that he was shaking the tension out of his arms and legs. For almost two years, his morning run had served him well to loosen his body right along with the constant tug of stress that nagged his mind. For the past few months since the fall of SHIELD, he'd had the responsibility of leading the Avengers. Lately, running only worked his heart and lungs for him. He ended his miles just as tight and tense as when he'd began. His brain wouldn't shut up. There was too much to think about.

Steve bent and stretched at the corner of the park before he was in sight of the sidewalks and traffic. He breathed deeply of the grass and the trees. It was a nice morning, not too hot for August in New York. Sweat slicked his body, but he felt fine. A breeze rustled the leaves on the trees as he strode through the park gateway and to the crosswalk at the corner. The sounds of vehicle traffic, busses, taxis, and couriers on bicycles roared in his ears, but it was all normal background noise.

He was always alert, always assessing his surroundings. He mixed in with the bunch of pedestrians waiting to cross, most hurrying to work in nearby office buildings. There were various ringtones and text alerts, mixed music leaking from people's earbuds, and several voices talking on phones.

A small child's voice caught his attention. He looked down and to the side where a young woman stood with a baby in a stroller and a toddler in hand. The little girl was dark skinned, with beautiful curly hair held in purple clips.

"Mama, is dat Cap'Merica?" the child asked as she tugged at her mother's hand.

The woman barely paid attention to her daughter, she was so focused on safely navigating her family on the busy sidewalk. The crosswalk light changed to green and the crowd surged forward.

"I don't think so, Boo. Come on, let's go," the woman murmured.

She tugged the child along, but the girl only had eyes for Steve. He smiled at her and nodded his head slightly. Just so the kid didn't stumble in the street trying to look at him and walk at the same time, Steve strode ahead when he could so at least the child would be looking the same direction she was supposed to be walking.

He'd been back in the city for a while now, so people were getting used to seeing him around. Especially near the park in the mornings. Most people going about their business paid him no mind, like the mother had done, just now. Everybody was in too much a hurry to notice another tall guy. They were too engaged with their phones. At least once a week, he saw people almost get flattened in traffic while looking at their phones.

The crowds thinned when he was a little farther away from the main shopping centers and the office buildings. His destination was only a few blocks from the tower. A glint of unusually bright metal in the sun caught his eyes, but when he looked up, it was just a reflective sticker on a courier's pack. Steve frowned at himself and turned to walk through the door of his most recent favorite coffee shop.

The morning rush was almost over, so he was just third in line at the counter. The girl at the register saw him and smiled in a manic sort of way. She got his usual size cup and wrote his name on it. There was a brief and ever so slight hush inside the shop, then Steve could pick out people's voices here and there excitedly saying "Captain America" or some derivation of his name. Most people were regulars and knew better than to make an issue of his presence, but there were always
tourists and new people.

"Good morning, Kara," Steve said when he stepped up to the bar.

"Hi," Kara said. She smiled shyly and blushed to a deep rose color.

"Iced mocha today," Steve told her. He schooled his features into a kind, bland smile. Izzy, the morning barista, took the cup with Steve's name on it and started making his drink. Steve paid and tipped a dollar into the jar. Izzy rolled his eyes at Kara's flustered silence.

There were several different kinds of reactions he got from women, and they hadn't changed a whole lot since he came out of the ice. Kara was just about in the category with the worst of them, barely saved from it by her shyness and her blushing. The very worst just blatantly stared at him, either in shock or in open lust. At least Kara had the dignity to turn her attention to the next customer nowadays and she tried to ignore Steve until her blushing stopped.

The first day he'd come into the coffee shop, she'd been much worse. They'd been busy and Kara was already a little overwhelmed. The customer in front of Steve had stepped aside and Kara's mouth fell open. She'd stared silently at him for a good fifteen seconds before Steve had tried a grin along with placing his order. Izzy'd had to bump Kara away from the register and take Steve's order, then wash his hands again after handling the money.

"Are you crazy? Captain America shouldn't have to pay for his coffee!" Kara had finally hissed at Izzy as if Steve wasn't standing right there.

"Kara," Steve had said, looking at her nametag, "Captain America sometimes gets a free ride, but Steve Rogers always pays his way."

"Yessir," she'd mumbled faintly.

Steve had taken his drink from Izzy and left the shop. The next several visits to the coffee shop were almost as bad. There was no point in switching shops, because he got pretty much the same treatment everywhere. By now, Kara just blushed and let him pay, so it was tolerable.

Today, there were people at all the café tables outside. Steve realized he was grinding his teeth again and made himself loosen his jaw. It wasn't these people's fault that he had a lot on his mind. He was aware of how his facial expressions affected others, since he was stared at so often. When he looked anything other than pleasant or bored, young people tended to get nervous around him. Older folks picked up on his mood and he didn't want to bring them down. He purposefully relaxed his face and glanced around for a spot to park his rump.

The only spot that wasn't in anyone else's personal space was at one end of a long city bench near the sidewalk. A thin, scruffy looking person sat on the other end. Steve wasn't afraid of scruffy. He'd been scruffy for a while, himself, many years ago. He swished his iced mocha around in the cup with his straw and ambled casually over toward the bench.

"Mind if I sit?" he asked the person on the bench.

Dark eyes flashed up at him from under matted blonde hair, then a hand waved at the vacant seat. As Steve sat, the person inched as far away as they could toward the other end of the bench. Steve felt bad for bothering an obviously disturbed person, and almost changed his mind. Then, he glanced up from sipping his beverage to see everyone pretending not to stare at him on the bench next to the scruffy person.

While he very well understood the concept of personal space in the city, there was a different
dynamic going on here. He could feel it. The street person next to him wasn't drunk or drugged out of their mind, nor were they sleeping. They were hyper-aware and clutching their almost empty coffee cup in a slightly trembling hand.

For some reason, the sour tension fogging Steve's mind and the speculative, judging looks they were getting from the other coffee shop patrons broke his intentions to stay pleasant.

"Look at them. Wearing their hundred-dollar shoes, holding their thousand dollar phones, staring at us like we're gonna do something to them. I wonder what they think I'm gonna do?" Steve said, low and disgusted. He kept his eyes on his running shoe, which was crossed over his knee. He flicked a few blades of grass off of the dark gray rubber sole.

The silence next to him was still intent and uncomfortable, but Steve got the sense that the person wasn't on the verge of running away anymore. So he kept on.

"Yeah, I know I have hundred-dollar shoes, too, but I actually use mine for something. Really, decent shoes can't even be had for a hundred dollars anymore. That's a shame, huh?" He said, still keeping his voice from carrying across the twelve or so feet between their bench and the café tables. People walked by in between on the sidewalk, but nobody was stopping to listen to him. He could say anything he wanted, and only Jarvis might be listening, this close to the tower.

Steve saw that the other occupant of the bench had their feet pulled up under them, knees bent sideways. They probably didn't have hundred-dollar shoes. Steve relaxed back against the bench and angled himself into the corner a little. It wasn't precisely comfortable, but Steve didn't expect comfort everywhere he went.

He sipped his coffee and let himself shut his eyes in appreciation of the cool breeze that swept past the bench. There was a small tree shading them, and its leaves shushed softly in the wind.

"You've got good taste in sitting spots. This is nice," he said lazily.

For some reason he couldn't figure, the tension he had worked so hard to get rid of during his run was draining away while he sat there. For several minutes, he held his cup in one hand propped on his crossed knee. His other hand hung limp from where his elbow was bent over the back of the bench. The breeze dried the last of the dampness from his skin, and he felt his body temperature ease back to normal.

"'Scuse me, Captain 'Merica, can I have your, uh, auto, uh, can you write your name for me?" a little voice asked at his bent knee.

He'd heard the small person approach, his ears listening to shifting sounds as people moved by. He could almost see his surroundings in his mind, just from what his ears were telling him. He opened his eyes and turned a relaxed smile to the little guy who'd so bravely approached him.

"Sure, buddy," Steve said.

He even withheld the sigh he felt like huffing out. It was a little kid, and little ones didn't understand that he wanted to be left alone while he was off-duty. Steve glanced at the child, then across at the mother who had sent him over. The kid only had eyes for him, but the mom was watching his bench-mate with concern and a little frown on her face.

He signed his name with the ink pen offered onto the bill of the red ballcap the boy held out to him. The brown haired child stared at him for several seconds more after he'd handed the pen and the cap back. They did that sometimes, like they were waiting for something else. Steve took his arm
off the bench long enough to pat the kid on the shoulder, then he rested his arm back where he'd had it.

"Be good for your mom, now," Steve said.

The boy nodded seriously and turned to run back to his mother. He bumped into a passing man, but the man ignored the incident and kept walking. The mother exclaimed over the autograph on the ballcap, then ushered her son away from the coffee shop.

"Would ya look at that," Steve exclaimed softly, "They don't know me any better than they know you, but they want my autograph while they're scared of you."

"Hmph," the person next to him on the bench grunted. It was a distinctly feminine grunt, so that answered one of Steve's questions. The baggy, dull-colored clothes and huddled posture had made it impossible to tell the sex of his bench mate. Not that it mattered.

"Yeah," Steve agreed vaguely.

Celebrity had settled uneasily on his shoulders. He'd rather be out fighting or training in the gym, or running miles than be fawned over by the public. But he didn't always get what he wanted. He hadn't thought about becoming a celebrity when Dr. Erskine had offered him the serum. He'd only wanted to serve his country like his father had. Like Bucky was. Steve understood the kind of symbol he was for people, and he tried to project the image most people wanted to see from him. Lately, he'd more often wanted to keep his on-duty and his off-duty lives separate. Maybe that was because he had so much to manage and plan that he had almost no off-duty time and what he had, he wanted to guard jealously. But he was tired of looking at the internet and watching movies up in the tower.

Steve allowed himself to shut his eyes. He hoped he had at least a few minutes of peace in the pleasant breeze before he heard the words "Captain America" again. The sun was hidden behind a cloud and the breeze got even cooler. It felt like it might rain. Steve let his mind drift. He'd tried closing his eyes like this before and pretending that when he opened them, he'd be back home and Bucky would be beside him, smirking at something he was thinking about doing. It didn't work well. New York sounded too different.

There was movement near him, and Steve tensed slightly, imperceptibly. He waited for someone to ask for another autograph, but the person must not have been coming for him. They moved away and his peace continued undisturbed.

A light, misting rain began to fall, and people got up from the café tables to hurry away from the weather. Steve sighed deeply, happy to hear them go. Sure, there were still some folks around, but he knew they clutched umbrellas and hurried along. Nobody would stop to bother him in the rain.

The scruffy girl was still sharing the bench with him. Steve rolled his head around and cracked an eye at her.

It was a light rain, just barely enough to dampen his hair and his shirt. He hardly noticed damp skin anymore. Dark eyes watched him.

Steve shrugged.

"The rain doesn't bother me, but maybe you should get somewhere dry?" he suggested with a rattle of ice in his nearly empty coffee cup.

Her eyes darted around nervously. Her clothes were in pretty bad shape, and the dampness in the
air carried a distinctly human smell to him. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't perfumed and shampooed, either. He'd smelled worse. Much worse.

She was uneasy with just him there and she didn't want to make the first move. That much was obvious. Steve casually got to his feet and sipped down the last of his drink. He stepped over to toss the cup in a recycling bin. The wind was starting to gust and the rain was getting heavier.

"See ya," he said to the person on the bench. He tilted his head at her and then turned to stride off to the tower. He didn't look back. She didn't want him to see where she went. He understood and respected that, so he kept walking.

She waited. Since she'd been caught by the rain, it wouldn't be good to go to the library. They didn't like any dampness brought in near the books. She watched his tall figure for a few blocks until he was lost among the few other people on the sidewalks. He probably turned in at the big tower.

It wasn't fun being damp, but at least it wasn't winter. When she was sure that nobody was watching, she moved toward the alley beside the coffee shop. She squeezed into the narrow gap between the dumpster and the chain link fence. Where the fence met the brick wall of the building, she'd unbent a few wire brackets so that she could squeeze through. Her clothes snagged and tore a little, but it didn't matter. The chain link fence wall had privacy battens running diagonal both ways across the alley, and nobody could see her after she passed through it.

Her alley was almost fifteen feet wide, paved with cracked asphalt, and surrounded on all sides by brick, except for the one chain link wall. The two buildings were pretty tall, but older and not made of metal or glass. The only windows were a few small ones above the second floor, mostly covered with curtains which never moved. The back wall was mismatched brick, probably twelve feet high. Nothing ever came over it but maybe a cat now and then. She liked cats.

She hurried to her shelter against the side of the coffee shop. She'd scavenged some abandoned scrap at night and snuck it into her alley. There was an old trash can shelter with a metal roof from before there'd been a dumpster. She'd cleaned it out until there was nothing but pavement and brick wall. Then she'd raised the floor with pallets so that she could lie down right up under the metal roof, out of the rain or the snow and away from any eyes. Eventually she'd closed in the sides with metal and plastic so that the wind didn't get her so much in the winter. Layers of mostly new, clean carpet remnants cushioned her wooden pallet bed.

She had learned that it was best to keep no food or water near her nest. She'd tried setting out a little extra food to attract cats, hopeful that they would keep vermin away, but cats were unreliable. Mostly, vermin had come instead. So she'd scavenged an old broom and kept her alley meticulously clean.

Rain water ran down the brick wall her little lean-to roof was attached to. That was alright, because she'd moved her pallets and carpets an inch away from the wall a long time ago. As long as she lay still and careful and the wind didn't blow too much, she would stay dry.

Except, she was already damp from having to sit out in the drizzle until he'd left.

Sure, maybe he was a hero and all, but she didn't let anybody know where she lived. It wasn't safe. No one could be trusted. She knew she had a good place here, but if anybody knew about it, she'd have to move on. And she'd have to find another place. And more scraps for shelter. And worst of
all, she'd have to learn the timing of everything all over again.

She'd moved around a lot. This alley was the longest she'd stayed anywhere, and that was because she was getting wiser. The police had shuffled her along out of her last place, and there'd been too many dangerous men at the place before that. This part of town was a good place, relaxed and low-key. She'd passed by and watched for days before she'd looked for a nook to settle into. There were always small places for small people. Some were better than others.

As she lay down and pulled her clean, dry blanket around her, she wondered what it was like to be a hero like him. He was on the news every time something big and awful happened. And he was on the news when he went to charity things, too. She'd seen him in shop window televisions, and the muted coffee shop TV, and it was blaring from everybody's phones when something was actively happening. That thing with the weird ships going up then falling out of the sky had been so unreal, she wondered if it had actually happened. Did the government actually have ships like that, that could just hover over people ominously? She shivered. She guessed they didn't anymore. Because of him.

He did what he had to do. Some people loved him for it. Others complained about the mess. Like with the aliens. She didn't think the aliens were his fault. If anything, they were likely Stark's fault. Or maybe it wasn't even related, and the Avengers had only stepped in to stop the aliens. Aliens!

"Hmph!" she grunted and shook her head to clear it of the troubling thoughts. Nobody wanted to think about aliens. Nobody in New York, anyway. She wondered if people in other cities didn't believe that the aliens had been real, just like she had a hard time believing the hover-ships were real. But she'd seen the aliens with her own eyes because it had happened here, right overhead. A lot of the scraps her shelter was built from were throw-outs from all the reconstruction.

She'd gotten distracted from thinking about him with distressing thoughts of aliens and hover-ships. Her mind wasn't always the best, though she tried. She knew that she'd need to eat more if she wanted her brain to work like it used to. But it wasn't worth the risk.

She fell asleep to dreamy thoughts of what it would be like to be strong and big, like him. How wonderful it must be to not have to be afraid all the time. To walk down the street like she owned the place and didn't expect anything bad to happen to her…

Steve hit the bag again, hard. He wished Thor was around, but he was off somewhere with Jane. He had learned to moderate his anger and frustrations, drawing them out into longer boxing sessions, instead of short bursts of rage which broke equipment. The tough Asgardian could take as well as he gave, and Steve didn't have to hold back for him. Tony could only spar with him wearing one of the suits, and Steve had damaged the suits too often for Tony to want to do that anymore.

Bruce. Steve huffed a laugh between punches. Bruce was amazing. He had very little agility or aggression in him most of the time. Getting him into the training room was like trying to herd water uphill with a sieve. Mostly, Bruce stood resigned and cautious when he could be badgered into the training room at all. The one time Steve had tried to punch him lightly to get him in the mood, Bruce had caught his fist like concrete with a slightly green hand. Natasha had smirked at them both and shook her head.

Thor was who he needed. Steve felt humbled working with Thor. Natasha was a thrill and kept him on his toes, but they both knew she couldn't really hurt him. They both knew he could ignore the
pain she rained down on him and choose to slam her to the mat if he really tried. Nat mostly sparred with Clint, who understood her. Or with Thor, who got the biggest grin of admiration when he was with her on the mats. Because Thor was a gentleman. Like Steve used to be.

Steve moved from the heavy bag to the speed bag. It was frustratingly small, but it helped him work on his timing.

Like his morning run, Steve eventually left the floor unsatisfied. Without Thor, there wasn't anyone or anything that could really work him. It was only early afternoon, and unless something happened, Steve had no plans.

He wiped at sweat with his towel and headed for the elevator.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Jarvis greeted him.

"Hey," Steve replied. He wished Jarvis would simply call him Steve, but that apparently wasn't going to happen.

In a bid to encourage Jarvis to be less formal with him, Steve used casual grammar in the common areas of the tower whenever he could.

"Do you have eyes on the coffee shop I went to this morning?" he asked while the elevator sped up to his floor.

"I do have surveillance available, if you wish to review it. I only keep the last month's data unless a notable event occurs. I can have anything you wish sent to your rooms. Do you have a time range I should provide? Visible spectrum or infrared?" Jarvis offered.

"Thanks, Jarvis, but no. I don't think I'll need all that. Did you see the person on the bench with me today?" Steve asked.

The elevator stopped on his level and opened at the lobby he shared with Clint. Steve walked to his suite and Jarvis' voice followed him.

"I did. Female, between fifteen and twenty years of age. Appallingly undernourished," Jarvis offered the information. His voice was polite and cool, even when mentioning her poor physical condition.

"Fifteen?! It was hard to tell, but…Wow. What could cause a person so young to be out on the street? Are you sure?"

"A dental scan confirmed her age range, though I am sorry to say I cannot be more precise. Unfortunately, there are many reasons a young person might find themselves without a home. An internet search for the terms "homeless youth" would provide you with better answers, Captain," Jarvis told him.

"Alright. Thanks, Jarvis," Steve said.

His door was keyed to his biometrics. All of them, down to the serum in his blood. It opened and he walked into the cool, dark space.

"My pleasure, Captain," Jarvis said from out in the hall before the heavy door closed.

Steve knew the AI could listen and speak to him in his suite, but Jarvis was good with at least maintaining the illusion of privacy. Steve walked through his spacious living room, past the
efficient galley kitchen, and to the end of the hall into his bedroom. The living room and master bedroom had floor to ceiling windows, but Steve kept the privacy tint active in the glass much of the time.

He flicked on the lighting in his room and shucked off his shoes by the closet door. The rest of everything came off in the bathroom and splattered onto the creamy tile floor. Steve stepped into the shower and again marveled that even the first spray of water was warmed to the temperature the preferred. Tony had every physical comfort he could think of available to the Avengers, and many Steve had never imagined.

He didn't want to know what a flesh light was, but he'd found one in his night stand drawer. It was still unopened in its clear plastic hygienic wrapper. The mind boggled. He'd set the unwanted thing out in the elevator lobby. It had been gone the next morning and Tony had frowned at him like a kicked puppy for days. He knew Tony. The disappointed expression was only there to bait him into asking what was wrong. Steve had resisted the bait.

Steve relaxed under the warm water until he was thinking about nothing but the sensations from his body, as Bruce had taught him. As a calming tactic, it only worked in the shower when there wasn't anything else to distract him. Bruce could meditate in the middle of a busy street, Steve imagined. He grabbed the bar of soap and lathered up. His ma had taught him since he was little to clean out funny areas like the crinkles of his ears and his navel. He scrubbed his back with the floofy thing, then rinsed off. He liked the floofy thing a lot, except when he had stitches.

His hair was getting longer because the guys in his barber shop only wanted to talk about Captain America, and he didn't want to be rude and correct his elders. Well, technically, they weren't his elders, but they looked like his elders even though he had a good thirty years on most of them. It was simpler to go to the barber shop less often when he felt like indulging the fellas and putting on his Cap act. So, his hair was a little longer. Nat didn't mind trimming the back for him when she was around.

Steve squeezed a dollop of shampoo into his palm and worked it into his hair. He scrubbed and rinsed, then eyeballed the hair conditioner skeptically. Pepper would fuss at him for leaving his hair unconditioned, but he hated the stuff. It felt like slug slime or axle grease to him. Squeaky clean hair was good enough.

He shut off the water and dried his skin roughly. He wasn't planning to go anywhere so he poked his legs into his boxer briefs and went to the kitchen for something to eat. With a bowl of herbed noodles and shredded beef, he settled onto his couch and pulled up his pad to rest against his thigh while he ate.

Jarvis was right. He learned more than he ever wanted to know about why young people were homeless these days. It wasn't because of fathers lost to fighting a war. It wasn't because of tuberculosis or parents away to find work in a distant city. It was just sad. People were crappy parents.

He wondered at the cause of her situation. He was aware that he was a poor judge of what was dangerous and what wasn't. He always had been. The other folks at the coffee shop seemed to fear the girl on the bench with him today. He wondered why. She was sickly. Too poor to own a gun or a decent knife. If anybody took the time to look, they could have seen that she was more frightened of everyone than they were of her. The most she could have done would be to punch or bite someone, yet she hadn't been violent. It was a wonder she'd been brave enough to sit out in the open at all. With no phone to look at to put up a social barrier around her.

Steve flipped the cover over his pad and set it on the coffee table. He folded his arms behind his
head and slid down into the deep cushions of the couch. He could faintly hear the rain hitting the glass on the outside of the tower. Where was she now? In a doorway somewhere? No, people didn't allow vagrants to linger in doorways anymore. Was she in a communal shelter somewhere, having to listen to a speil or attend a church service simply to have a roof over her head and a meal? Why was she so underfed?

Steve pondered all this as the rain lulled him into a shallow, restless sleep. Why did she choose to live like that? Did she find freedom in it? Life was complicated today. More complicated than it had ever been. Everything required paperwork and contracts and agreements not to sue. Just to live required a paper trail and medical plans and electronic accounts. Steve wanted to ask her what it was like to leave all that behind and not worry about it. To not have to be responsible for the lives of others must be wonderful. To walk down the street and have nobody notice him at all…
Chapter 2

Kara's color was high today, but not exactly a blush.

"Good morning, Kara," he said hopefully.

"Good morning, Steve," she whispered back dutifully. Her cheekbones glowed a little brighter. Her eyes gave him the once over and he tried not to grin at how pathetically obvious the girl was. He bit his lip and looked down at the countertop and all the little treats arrayed temptingly there. He studied the pastries in the glass case under the counter and gave her time to get over her nerves. There was nobody in line behind him, so he could afford to give her some time in Cap-resistance training. He glanced up from under his brow at her. Nope. She was still staring, still flustered. Steve let go of his bit lip as his face pulled into a grin anyway. Poor kid. She was too young to know what to do with him.

"Just a large plain cappuccino, please," he said gentle and pleasant. He was in a better mood today and the voices murmuring around him didn't bother him so much. Kara was more an entertainment than an annoyance to him.

"Quit that before she hyperventilates. I need her on her feet for at least another half hour" Izzy said to him. The barista was busy with his drink, but he spoke loud enough to be heard over the steam wand and the tamping.

"Sorry," Steve said. Izzy smirked at him, then handed him his drink. Steve stuffed a one in the jar and ambled outside.

It was another sunny day, with no hint of clouds this time. It was a little later in the morning, so there were plenty of empty tables. But he liked the bench. And there she was. She hadn't been there when he walked up to the coffee shop.

"May I?" he asked.

She raised her chin enough to look briefly at him, then she gathered herself toward the far end of the seat again, just like last time, but without the hand gesture of invitation. Steve tossed away his little red stirrer stick in to the recycle, then settled on his end of the bench. She was on the shadier end closer to the tree, but she'd been here first. Sweat prickled on his forehead in the dappled sun. He wiped at it with his workout towel and sat away from the corner where the brighter sunlight was.

Her eyes looked at the available empty tables, then at him, then down at her feet in her busted out old white sneakers.

"I know there's other places to sit, but you make for better company," Steve told her. He had to watch his tone because it was quieter out today and he didn't truly want to offend people. There were a few older women at a table across from them, and some people in suits, and a mother with school aged kids at the one other shady spot in the patio. Probably home schoolers, Steve figured. He fully expected one of the three kids to approach him eventually. He liked kids, but they could always be counted on to make a fuss around him. One of the business men was looking his way, and Steve nodded once in greeting. That was usually enough for his adult male fans.

He sipped his hot beverage and enjoyed the flavor of the whole milk. As long as he'd been awake in the modern world, he still appreciated the little luxuries that everybody else took for granted.
Back in the day, milk was saved for babies and old folks. There were endless little packets of sugar to doctor his coffee with. Several different kinds of sugar, as if regular sugar wasn't enough.

Steve felt his mind going down the old tired path of how soft and spoiled people were now. It was depressing to think that few would likely get behind any kind of war effort that caused a hint of inconvenience. He sighed and rubbed his temples with his thumb and forefinger.

A look over at his bench buddy eased his negativity some. Here was a tough girl. She didn't need fancy, complicated gadgets or pampered indulgences. He was sorry for the haunted shadows in her eyes, but he admired her for making it through whatever it was that got her here. Steve imagined he could have tugged her under his arm while the Commandos made their way across Europe and she wouldn't have complained about the deprivations.

"I'll be back in a minute or two. Save my seat, will ya?" he asked her with a smile. He got up and walked over to a hotdog cart a half block down the sidewalk. He wanted to give her a chance to get away if she really didn't want his company. Like the other day, he didn't look back at her. She could run off unseen if it made her feel more secure.

When he got back to the bench with four chili dogs, she was still there, but she refused to look at him. He set the dogs in their little paper tubs on the bench between them and placed his coffee down on the pavement. He devoured the first hotdog quickly and neatly. He slowed down a little on the second one. He made his way half through the third dog, then set it down and patted his belly. The fourth one sat untouched.

"Hmm. I'm not as hungry as I thought I was. Oh, well," he said. He got up and brought the hotdog and a half to the dumpster in the nearby alley. Instead of tossing them in, he left them on the metal ledge the garbage truck used to lift the dumpster. The large dumpster had recently been emptied and sprayed down, so there weren't any flies or stench.

He returned to the bench and picked up his drink. She had an empty cup sitting on the ground on her side of the bench. There were a few coins in it. Not enough for a hotdog or even another coffee.

Steve settled back into the corner of the bench again. The angle of the sun had changed enough that there was more shade. He shut his eyes and felt for any hint of a breeze, but there was none today. Still, it was nice to enjoy the relative quiet since most people were inside for the morning. He sprawled out with his ankle across his other knee and his elbow up on the bench back.

He heard the mother and children get up and move. He expected to be spoken to, but they moved on by after momentarily coming his way. Steve crinkled his brow. He was going to ask Jarvis for a review of that moment. Something strange was happening.

The quiet of his bench buddy and the emptiness of the sidewalk had him almost dozing off in the warmth of the day. He was brought to attention by a man's footsteps, sure and confident toward him.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain, but I wanted to thank you for your service to our nation," one of the business men said. He was in his early forties, probably. He held out his hand and Steve sat up properly to shake it.

"It's my honor to serve," Steve said solemnly and stood up to greet him properly. The man made a familiar aborted move, which Steve began to reciprocate, but they both smiled tightly instead. As the man walked away with his co-workers from the café table, Steve noted from the way he moved that his right leg was a prosthetic under his suit pants. There was a rough pattern of scarring on the back of his neck and up his scalp into his hair.
"Ugh. Nasty devices," Steve said when he sat back down, "sometimes the wounds never fully heal. But he seems to be doing alright." He nodded at the retired soldier and sipped his drink.

She turned her head and looked at the man walking away. Her eyes swept past the alley and the hotdogs sitting on the edge of the dumpster before glancing at Steve's face, then down to her hands curled in her lap. God, she was skinny. He hoped she ate what he'd gotten for her. She was smart enough to know what he'd done, but maybe too proud to accept the help.

"See ya later," he said after a moment. He walked to the tower and didn't look back.

"Jarvis, you have my recent encounter with her?" Steve asked as the elevator took him up. It was barely noon, and he'd felt no need to visit the heavy bag. Maybe tonight. Right now he wanted to investigate what had happened.

"I do, Captain. Would you like to view it on your pad?" Jarvis offered. The AI knew that Steve rarely turned on his huge flat screen television.

"That'd be great," Steve said as the elevator doors opened on his floor.

He took a quick shower because he could smell himself. He didn't want to get man stink in the furniture's upholstery like Clint did in his suite. His ma would twist his ear for dirtying the nice furniture. The furniture in his suite of rooms didn't look like anything out of the ordinary. The stuff was heavy, it never stained, and it was firmly but softly upholstered. Anything understated in Tony's building was that way on purpose. He was thankful to either Tony or Pepper, whoever was responsible for not making his suite into a steel and glass monstrosity like so much of the tower was.

In only his underwear again, as a mild act of rebellion against how proper he was required to appear in public, he settled onto the couch with a glass of water and picked up his pad.

He tapped around until he had opened the file Jarvis sent him. He disliked looking at recordings of himself. He didn't want to get man stink in the furniture's upholstery like Clint did in his suite. His ma would twist his ear for dirtying the nice furniture. The furniture in his suite of rooms didn't look like anything out of the ordinary. The stuff was heavy, it never stained, and it was firmly but softly upholstered. Anything understated in Tony's building was that way on purpose. He was thankful to either Tony or Pepper, whoever was responsible for not making his suite into a steel and glass monstrosity like so much of the tower was.

His scruffy friend sat pretty much motionless. He sped up the video play until the woman and kids got up from their table, then slowed to normal speed. He used his fingers to zoom in a little. There it was. The pre-teen boy of the family had approached him, but something made him break off and rejoin his sisters and mother. He looped back and watched the moment several times. There was an only slightly perceptible turn to his bench buddy's head right before the boy had decided to change course. He wished the camera angle was lower, but it was clear what had happened.

"I've got a little watchdog," Steve said, amazed.

She was turning away people who would bother him with just a look. The wounded veteran chose to ignore her warning and approach him anyway, but anyone less than a hardened soldier she turned away from him.

"Whaddya know, I've got my own watchdog! She's not as shy as I thought," he marveled.

He watched on through until he saw her take the hotdogs he'd left for her. She didn't take all of them, and the dumpster was at the very edge of the camera's field of view. He couldn't see her body, just her hands as she carefully pulled the sausage out of the buns and scraped the chili off
Steve sat back and closed the tablet. He liked her, but that didn't mean that she owed him anything. Or that he owed her anything. Of course, he wanted to swoop in and 'fix' her life for her. But he was old enough to know that wouldn't work as slick as he would want. People were how they were for a reason. If he wanted to do anything for her at all, he'd have to be slow and patient and respectful of her limits.

Mostly, he liked the way he felt when he was around her or even thinking about her, like now. She relaxed him. When his thoughts were on her, he wasn't thinking about Hydra or personnel management or public relations or any one of the myriad other tasks he was responsible for. Her uniqueness broke him out of his usual mental scrum. It was selfish of him to like her mainly for how she made him feel, but for once, he wanted to be selfish. It's not like he would do anything to hurt the kid. Maybe they could find a way to help each other out.

He was back again, standing outside the coffee shop. It was raining hard and he was dripping. He didn't use an umbrella. Maybe he wasn't joking when he'd said that the rain didn't bother him. Lightening flashed and thunder rolled and he smiled up at the sky like a crazy person. He finally stepped under the awning and started wringing his towel out.

She watched over the rim of her coffee cup while he went methodically about wiping himself dry, then wringing the small towel, then wiping again until he was dry enough to come inside the coffee shop. Thunder rumbled and rain poured down a few inches away from him, but he wasn't in a big hurry to get inside like the other patrons who rushed in, dripping, from the sidewalk. Half of them didn't order anything. They stood inside the door and waited for the downpour to pass. And they looked at him while he took his time making himself presentable.

The inside tables were all packed full except for hers. She had her feet looped possessively through an empty chair. People had tried to take it but she wouldn't let them. The barista was giving her hard looks, but she ignored him.

He got in line and smiled at her when he saw her sitting inside. His hair was spiky in front and a little mussed off to the side from the sloppy toweling off. It was a while until he got his drink, a hot mocha with whipped cream and cinnamon. She held on tightly to her empty chair.

He looked around briefly, but then headed right for her table. His eyes noted her legs twined in the empty chair and he paused across from her.

"May I?" he asked politely. He was happy today, despite the weather. Or maybe because of it. She thought he was a little unhinged, but maybe being a hero made him that way. She moved her feet, then used one to push the chair out at him.

"Thanks," he said to her. He tilted his cup to sip and whipped cream touched his nose. He wiped it off with a knuckle.

"Thanks," he said to her. He tilted his cup to sip and whipped cream touched his nose. He wiped it off with a knuckle.

"Did I get it all? I'd hate to sit around with cream on my nose," he asked.

She nodded a little. Her plain black coffee was heavily doctored with half and half and sugar. She was feeling giddy at the rush of caffeine and sugar. Her heart thumped fast and kind of painfully. It was loud in the coffee shop with all the people crammed in.

There was a small uproar when he'd come inside, but he'd blandly ignored it, other than to smile kindly around at everyone in general. She got just the opposite treatment. People went quiet around
her and reached to put their phones in front of their faces. Nobody wanted to talk to her or look at her. Nobody but him.

She eyed his damp towel and his damp clothes. His pale blue shirt clung to him, as did his navy blue shorts, but the truly wet people were even worse off than him. The difference was the way his clothes fit him, even when he was dry.

"I told you I don't mind the rain. The thunder is my fault, I'm afraid. I pranked Thor. He must have found the surprise I left for him," he said with a smile. Women were staring at him behind his back. They were wondering who the bum was he'd sat down with and giving her nasty looks. She stared back at them until they looked away. Nobody wanted her attention.

When she looked back to him, he was smiling at her like she was the gifted one.

"You're really good at that. Getting them to back down. It's your super-power, I think," he said. He took a more careful sip of his coffee and avoided getting the whipped cream on his nose.

"They gave me too much. I can't even drink this," he said. He picked up his unused lid and scraped most of the cream and cinnamon off and set the cream-filled lid on the table between them. She wasn't interested in cream right now.

He was smiling and mostly happy, but she could see that the crowd of noisy people was forcing him into a constantly pleasant show of attitude that wasn't at all like how he'd behaved the last two times she'd seen him. He was relaxed, but resigned about the situation he was in. Why did he keep doing this if he didn't like being out in public?

A group of four teenage girls dressed in soggy high fashion crowded into the door and hurried through the crowd to a table of two more dry but similarly dressed girls. The dry girls pointed to her and Steve's table and a squeal of excitement went up.

A muscle jumped in his jaw, but he clamped his pleasant smile firmly in place. There was a bustle in the crowd and she turned to watch all six girls push through toward their table.

"Stand down, soldier. I can handle this," Steve said to her. She was about to turn her eyes to the approaching girls, ready to scold them when they broke through the huddled wet people, but he held his finger up from the table slightly and locked onto her eyes. She grunted in resignation and hunched her shoulders in distaste.

"Hey! Captain America, can we please-please-pretty-please get your autograph?" the dry girl in the lead said loudly when she had shouldered past a dad with a cranky toddler trying to nap on his shoulder.

"I'll give you my phone number in exchange," one of the wet girls called out in a teasing voice, as if the Captain would be eager for the trade.

Steve sat and sipped his coffee. He smiled fondly at his bench buddy as if a half-dozen pushy girls weren't standing at his elbow, practically bouncing with excitement. An awkward moment of silence stretched past.

A patron at an adjacent table got up to leave, and Steve snagged the chair with quick reflexes. He pulled the chair around to their table and bent back to look at the frustrated father standing behind his shoulder.

"C'mon, take a load off. It'll be raining for a while," Steve told the man.
"Thanks," the man said. He sank down carefully and patted the little boy's back and bounced him rhythmically. He smiled at Steve, but quickly returned his attention to soothing his boy. She carefully ignored the person he'd invited to their table. She ignored the pushy, entitled princesses too. Because he had said to.

"Look, I know it's got to be you, Cap. Can't we have a second of your time?" the lead girl asked again.

Steve tucked his smile away and turned to look at her with indifference.

"I'll be happy to give you an autograph as soon as you make a sincere apology to all the people you shoved past just now," he said cordially.

The lead girl and the ones on either side of her took a moment to realize that Captain America wasn't happy with them. Then they got angry.

"What an ass! I'm going to post a pic of you sitting around soggy with these losers," the prissy girl snapped her gum and pointed her phone at them.

"Jarvis," Steve said quietly.

"Oh my God! What did you do? All my pictures are gone! Oh my God!" she exclaimed, thumbing frantically across her phone.

"I'd appreciate it, Miss, if you wouldn't take the Lord's name in vain," Steve said somewhat less cordially. The girls beside the loud one were looking at Steve's face and tugging at their friend.

"Oh my God!" the loud one cried out, distressed that her phone was misbehaving.

Steve tilted his head slightly. The two more cautious girls grabbed their friend's arms and pulled her toward the door of the coffee shop. She balked when the rain hit her, but her friends looked back at Steve and kept pulling her.

A cheer went up in the coffee shop and the wet girls flipped the finger at them through the window. A lightning bolt struck nearby with a deafening boom of thunder. The girls shrieked and ran away in the rain. Steve laughed.

"That's a little too much, brother. I didn't want to terrify them," Steve murmured low enough for only her and the wide-eyed dad to hear. He was still chuckling, though, and the rest of the coffee shop had gone quiet.

"I'm sorry, folks. That happens sometimes. There's not much I can do about people like that," Steve said to the coffee shop patrons. He was a little embarrassed to have been the cause of a scene.

"Don't apologize, Cap. That was worth it," Izzy said into the hush. The crowd of people mostly agreed, though some were still dazed from the close lightning strike.

The fussy toddler had fallen asleep on his dad. Steve had seen reactions like that before. When little ones couldn't handle the sensory stimuli, they crashed. Or they cried.

"Sorry," Steve mouthed to the father.

The man shook his head and waved a hand.
Steve turned his attention back to his coffee, then to her.

"I think I've been rude. I'm Steve," he said. The corners of his eyes were crinkled with leftover humor. Women were staring at him again, but differently now. They anxiously edged away from his back as the coffee line moved around him.

She didn't shake his hand or respond politely because he didn't offer his hand to shake. He knew not to. She pulled a stained paper napkin toward her on the table and reached around for the can of markers that the coffee shop kept on the bookshelf under the dry-erase board.

She drew a shape on the napkin and pushed it at him.

"Star? Is that your name?" Steve asked her.

She shrugged one shoulder and looked away from him. She didn't like her name said out loud, even if he was saying it wrong. It gave people the ability to talk about her, if they heard her name. She didn't like it.

She reached quickly and snatched the napkin from his fingers. She crumpled it and stuffed it into her clothes. She clumped the marker can loudly back onto the bookshelf.

Steve wondered what he'd done to upset her. She'd been gleeful right along with him up until he'd said her name. Or, what she'd given him to assume was her name. It must be, or she wouldn't be unhappy right now.

Steve glanced aside at the man at the table with them. It was rude to exclude someone in their shared space, but the man had his chin tucked down and appeared to be dozing with his son. He doubted that was the case, but maybe the guy was trying to be polite and give him and the girl room to talk.

"You don't want me to say your name," he guessed.

She shook her head, still looking at the floor.

"No problem. I wish I could make that request of everybody, but it's too late for me," he said. She looked up at him and nodded sadly.

A young man moved away from the bar with his coffee and angled toward their table. She looked at him, but then at Steve. She didn't know if he wanted to deal with people today. Maybe he did. In the time it took to get any indication from him, the young man had approached them.

"That was awesome! You should charge admission for stuff like that," he said. Steve's pleasant smile faltered, and the young man gulped uneasily and hurried on past them.

"Hmph," she grunted and rolled her eyes. People had no sense. They were treating him like he was a circus act, and then they expected him to be happy about it. She stared at Steve for a moment, then pulled another napkin close. She got out the markers. He leaned forward to see what she would do.

She froze still when his head neared hers over the table.

Steve saw the fear in her eyes when he got too close accidentally. She was looking at him like something dreadful was about to happen.

"It's alright. You're safe. What do you want to show me?" he asked. He didn't back away. He knew
he should, but something told him that she needed a firm and steady approach at just this moment. Any retreat would make it seem like he agreed that he was doing something wrong. He turned his eyes down to the napkin and the blue marker she'd uncapped.

She felt like an idiot for reacting so skittishly to his proximity. He was Captain freaking America and she was smelly and ugly right now. Of course he didn't want to be close to her for that reason. He could have any female he wanted and he'd never shown any lewd interest in her.

She backed away slowly so she wouldn't seem so frantic and foolish, and she started drawing. First, she clearly wrote his first and last name in cursive, as he usually signed his autograph. Then, she firmly scratched through it and shook her head at him. Next, she drew a loose circle, dashed a star into the middle of it, which made it look vaguely like his shield, and added "Cap" across the bottom of the shield off to the right hand edge. She pushed the napkin at him and snapped the cap back onto the marker.

He took the image and studied it. She was right. The people who wanted a little piece of him weren't looking for Steve Rogers. They wanted the Captain. Even just now, Izzy had called him "Cap" in front of the crowd instead of Steve, though the barista knew he preferred to be called his name, not his title.

"You think I should use this instead of my signature? It looks like something Tony would do," Steve studied the napkin. He turned it one way, then the other. He liked it, but it felt too glossy and abstract. It didn't match his personality. He looked up at her. Of course it didn't. That was the point she was making.

"Can I keep this?" he asked as he was about to tuck the folded napkin into the key pocket of his shorts. It was her work, and he didn't want to make off with it without her permission. That would be unforgiveable, and he understood that as an artist.

"Pssh!" she blew air at him and waved a hand at his pocket.

"Thanks. You're great," he smiled warmly at her. He glanced at his cheap plastic sport watch, then at the shop window. The sun was trying to burn through the clouds and steam was rising from the wet sidewalk.

Steve looked at her, then at the man and child napping at their table. She wouldn't want to be left alone with the strange man, no matter how nice and harmless he appeared.

"Sir, the rain has gone," Steve said softly. He tapped the man's shoulder. The guy opened his eyes and nodded drowsily at Steve. He pushed to his feet with his hand cradling the child. He nodded his thanks to Steve again, then moved to the bar. He hadn't ordered a coffee, but he put a dollar in the tip jar, then left the shop.

"Some people are decent folks," Steve observed.

She nodded at him and held his stare for a beat too long. Her eyebrow went up slightly.

"Me? Nah. What else could I do with all this? It's no more than is expected of me," Steve said shyly. He looked down at his feet, but the weight of her gaze drew his attention back.

He sobered some. She was telling him something heavy, but this time he wasn't sure precisely what.

"Yeah. I could have done something else with it, but then I really wouldn't be able to sleep at night," he said.
She tilted her head at him, much as he'd done when the loud girl wouldn't quit saying "Oh my God!" earlier.

"Alright, alright, yeah. You're as bad as Bucky. You got me. I'm not really that modest, but I'd look like a heel if I puffed up all righteous about it, okay? It's a learned response when people say things like that to me," he said quiet enough for just the two of them.

She scrunched her brow oddly and smiled. He was used to that response, too. Wow, she had nice teeth.

"Uh-huh. I know I talk strange. It comes from being so old. Look, I could stay here and talk with you for hours, but I have to go to a thing in seventeen minutes, so I gotta run. But I owe you for saving me a seat, and for this," Steve patted the waistband of his shorts where he'd tucked her simple sketch.

She shook her head and frowned at him.

"No, honest. It's worth something, and I'll make it up to you next time," Steve said. He smiled at her, and then he was away. He didn't look back to see her scowl.

Her face softened while she dipped her finger in the luscious cream and cinnamon he'd left her, though. She hadn't had cream in years. And cinnamon. She lifted her finger to her lips and licked the treat off quick and as ugly as she could. She closed her eyes and bent her head down to hide her face.
Chapter 3

She wasn't there the next time he came around after a run. Steve felt stupid for expecting her to be there. As if she lived just to be where he wanted her to be. He smiled briefly at Kara and she had no trouble taking his order today. He didn't feel like talking much.

"She was here a minute ago, out on the bench, but she left when she saw you coming," Izzy said to him.

"I'm that obvious, huh?" Steve said.

"Not so much. No more than the next guy. But the way she interacts with you… It's way more than I've ever seen," Izzy said.

Steve nodded noncommittally and took his drink. He dropped several quarters from his pocket into the tip jar.

"Thanks, man," Izzy said.

Steve smiled a little and headed for the bench. He could have sat anywhere, but he saw the black iron seat at sort of his now. He was let down and there was no hiding it. He'd slightly modified the signature sketch she had suggested. He'd practiced scrawling it quick, as he would when he gave it to people. It took him less time than writing out his full name. The only change he'd made was to slightly emphasize the A in "Cap" as a nod to the Avengers. He had a nicely drawn rendition of her sketch that he wanted to give to her first, before he started scrawling it to other people.

And there was other stuff he'd wanted to do to show his thanks, but she wasn't here. Izzy said she'd left on purpose. Steve sighed. He was pushing too hard, too fast.

She was damaged. She wasn't ready for a one on one relationship, especially with a man, even though he only wanted to be a friend. He sat on the bench just long enough to drink his Italiano.

She was remarkable. She'd never said a word to him, but he thought he understood her well enough. She was so expressive. Since she had started looking at him halfway through his second meeting with her, he could almost read her thoughts just from her face. And now he'd blundered in like an awkward calf and scared her off. Steve dug his finger and thumb into his eyelids and grimaced.

He surely could use a few words of wisdom from Bucky right now, if the dumb prick would just quit running and hiding. He and Sam had spent three days combing through a small town in Georgia on a flimsy lead about a man with a silver arm. Buck was like the ghost Nat had called him. Steve was willing to put out a billboard in Times' Square if it would get the message across to Buck that it was time to come home, but maybe Bucky wasn't ready to see him yet, either.

Steve sighed and stood up. He tossed his empty cup in the bin and tucked the drawing into the back pocket of his jeans. He needed to back off of both her and Bucky for a while, maybe. Sam had said as much about his old friend, and now he was ready to listen.

She watched him from behind her chain link wall, through the little gaps in the battens. She was very quiet because she suspected that his hearing was enhanced along with the rest of him. If she
made any noise louder than a breath, his head would come up and he'd investigate. Then she'd be cornered in her alley. It was a bad flaw in her living arrangement, but no place was perfect.

She really wanted to go out and let him see her, but she couldn't. He had something for her. He wanted to give her something. She couldn't let that happen. When people gave her anything more than pocket change, they expected things from her. Things she didn't want to give.

He perched on the bench, bent over with his elbows resting on his knees. He looked like he really needed someone to talk to. It couldn't be her today. She almost willed a kid to approach him for an autograph, just so the lost and unhappy look would disappear from his face for a moment. It didn't work like that. He'd shown her last time that he was fully capable of backing down even the most obnoxious autograph-seekers all on his own, and scaring an entire shop full of people while doing so.

She hadn't been scared of the lightning. She'd been thrilled to see him call it, then to send it away. It wasn't him. He'd said as much. It was his friend, the big blonde one from the other world. Thor, he'd said. That guy did the lightning and thunder. But he'd somehow heard Steve sitting in the coffee shop, from wherever Thor had been. Thor was not small, even on television. There was no way he could have been within speaking distance and not been visible to everyone. It had something to do with Steve's phone, she imagined.

He was a fighter and he was taking down an average of three Hydra bases a month, if the news could be believed. It was only prudent of him and his friends to keep some kind of open communication among themselves when they were apart, in case something bad happened to any of them in retaliation for what they were doing. That had to be how Thor had heard his softly spoken words.

Her head hurt. She was trying to think too much. She rubbed the back of her skull under her awful hair. She hadn't had any coffee in a while. She was too down to put her cup out for change.

Steve got up and walked past the alley to go home. He looked nice in jeans and a good shirt. He wore boots with his jeans, which made him seem even taller. He wasn't looking in her direction. In a moment, he was gone from her view and she let herself climb onto her pallet bed to hopefully sleep off her headache.

Steve spent a week and a half focused on his work. Another Hydra base was a burning wreck, and Thor had gone home to take care of Asgardian affairs. Sam had joined the team along with Clint, but not Natasha this time. Sam was having some residual shock issues after the mission, and he'd left him with Bruce to meditate. Sam was so great with trauma in others that Steve had half expected him to not feel it himself.

The mission had gone bad near the end and there'd been more casualties than anyone wanted. Steve needed Natasha's firm, merciless resolve to stiffen his spine sometimes when the body count got too high, so she walked with him toward the coffee shop. It was after eight in the evening on a Thursday, but neither of them cared. Caffeine didn't do much for them. Steve was tired of briefings and intelligence meetings in the tower. He needed air with some texture to it, not just the filtered clean stuff Tony piped in.

"Is that her?" Natasha asked while they were still a block away.

"Yeah. She always wears the same thing, but she doesn't smell bad. Just earthy, you know? Not
American,” Steve said. He tried hard to control his happiness at seeing her. Nat was too good at reading him and he didn't want her to get the wrong idea and tease him about it.

Natasha wasn't looking at him. The golden light from the interior of the coffee shop lit the patio and tables outside in the dark of the evening. She sat near the shop front, but off to the side at a table. She had a book in front of her, open to catch the light from the shop window. The light reflected off the book and lit her face up.

"Steve. She's gorgeous,” Natasha said. The way she said it, like it was a bad, bad thing, worried him.

"I didn't see it before, but I guess you're right. She keeps her head down so that most of what people see is her hair. With the light that way… Sure, she's pretty. But she's not well. Look how thin-"

"Cap, shut up and think for a minute," Nat pushed him aside until his back was to a plaster wall. That she called him by his title tripped his brain into work mode.

"Alright. So the scruffy street persona is a cover. She doesn't feel safe. She's serious enough about staying hidden to damage her health for the sake of cover," Steve concluded.

Natasha nodded. Her eyes were coldly serious. She looked at him that way when she was reluctant to reveal some truth to him that she thought would damage his perceived innocence.

"Scheiss!" Steve bit out.

"Language, boss. Don't let Tony hear that from you," Nat gently teased him.

"It isn't funny. She's been hurt bad. Badly enough for her to give up everything about a normal life and starve herself three-quarters to death," he ground his teeth.

"Quit messing up your perfect teeth. Unless the serum grows them back when you wear them down?" Nat badgered him.

Steve shoved his hands deep in his pants pockets. Nat rubbed his arms. She knew he wanted to hit something. The only things around belonged to other people and the Avengers already had a shaky reputation on property damage.

"Are you sure you want to get involved with this girl? Things could get messy. I know you want to help, but some people are better left alone to work out their own problems," Natasha asked.

"I know she's messed up. I just didn't know how badly until tonight. Nobody talks to her, Nat! You think that because she's got trauma, she doesn't deserve a friend? She's amazing, and we get along. What's the harm in befriending her?" Steve asked in a whisper. Nat grimaced at him and pulled him into the darkened alcove of a closed shop front. It wasn't a perfectly concealed hiding spot, but they both knew what to do to avoid too much notice.

Steve's hands went to her hips and she pressed into his chest. He tilted his head down and she spoke right at his mouth. It would look like they were kissing, and maybe they were, but the talk was all business. People hurried past and avoided looking at them.

"You're a walking erection, Rogers. You've got the body of a young man, and she's far too pretty, now that you've noticed. She's damaged and skittish. It's only your natural charm that's had her at ease with you so far. If you show her one little hint of libido, she's gone and you've done nothing but reinforce her fear of men in the worst possible way. I don't see how this is a winning situation
any way you look at it," Nat warned him.

Steve banged his head back against the wall in frustration. She was right about that, but she wasn't seeing the big picture.

"I'm not like this when she's around. I'm relaxed. She's the only thing that can distract me from everything else. She's so different that it all melts away. The barista says she doesn't talk to anyone else like she does to me. There's a connection. I think she trusts me, and I think I'm good with this. I can handle it," Steve said.

"Really? Right now could you walk up to her table and be cool and emasculated with her?" Nat asked. She was snugged right up against him and he'd spread his feet to equalize their height some. There was no hiding.

"That's your fault and you know it. It's got nothing to do with her," Steve growled at her. He thumped their foreheads together.

"Ow," she complained.

"Faker," he grumbled. They head-butted each other in the training room with far more force.

"Be stubborn then. But I'm telling you that you need to find a woman to ease yourself with before you continue anything approaching platonic with this girl. You're too much for her, and she's too much for you. She'll hurt you. Break you. You're too soft, Steve," she warned him.

He laughed.

"That's rich. You complain about me being hard, and now you tell me I'm too soft. Make up your mind, Nat."

"Quit deflecting. This is important. The only way you should go near her is if you first sex up the nearest available dame," she scowled at him, "Nearest available dame, I said, old man. I'd break your balls off and eat them, you're such a pup. Now, are you going to listen to me, or do I have to whistle for a prostitute?" Nat asked archly.

"There are no prostitutes in this part of town," Steve dared her.

Nat spit out her gum and flattened her lips to whistle.

"Hey, hey! Alright, I believe you. God help me, don't whistle!" Steve clamped a hand across her mouth. He looked around nervously until he felt her body shaking with laughter. He frowned down at her and let his hand fall.

"You're a hoot, Rogers. I don't know how anybody with a kill count like yours can be so green," Natasha laughed, throaty and delighted. Then, her eyebrow arched at him.

"Shut it," Steve squeezed his eyes closed. Her laugh was sinful when she really meant it. He'd been calming down until she laughed.

"I wouldn't have to threaten you with prostitutes if you'd find yourself a nice lady," she pointed out.

"Remind me why my sex life is any of your concern?" he asked blandly.

Natasha was doing a real good job with him, she decided. He looked innocent and snarky, but she could feel the heat of him against her belly. If she didn't know him so well, she'd think he was
calm.

"It's my concern because we all need your head on straight most of the time. You know that," she pulled out the big guns. Guilt and responsibility.

"Since when have I ever let personal matters affect my duties, Natasha?" he challenged her.

She let her head fall onto his shoulder. He was a sad, sad man. Just as sad as she was.

"Never. But you're not a machine, Steve. You're not like me. You grew up a nice kid with stars in your eyes. You deserve some happiness where you can find it. Don't push yourself until you break and become a man you're not proud of. Pride is important to you," she said.

He could hide some things from Bruce and Tony. He could even hide a few things from Thor if he tried very hard. But it was hopeless with Nat. She knew how on edge he was. It's why she'd been pushing him for months to go out with every 'nice' girl she could think of. She was pushing harder lately because she knew his resolve was slipping. He was changing.

Steve sighed and let his head rest down beside hers.

"I can't bring any unsuspecting woman into a relationship. Not with what we do. It would be cruel. I would be gone for weeks on missions, or I would die and hurt her. Or some Hydra creep would take her hostage because he knows I've got a weak spot in her. You know these things better than I do. How can you seriously suggest that I get involved romantically with anyone?" he asked.

"I only tried to set you up with romance because I thought it was all you'd go for. I'm not joking when I suggest a prostitute. It would solve the problem without endangering anyone," she urged him.

"As you said. I've got my pride," Steve bit out. He shoved her roughly away. Being who she was and how familiar they were with each other's bodies, Natasha didn't stumble or go through the window behind her. She smiled at him in appreciation and recovered her stance a few feet away from him.

"Then she's a casualty. An acceptable loss," Natasha said. She tipped her head briefly toward the coffee shop and the girl who waited for him there.

"She's not a casualty," Steve denied through his teeth.

Natasha looked down at the front of his jeans, then gave him the look that told him he was being a naïve fool. Again.

"I tried my best to warn you, Rogers. It's on you," Nat said. She left him and walked off into the night.

It took him six minutes of cursing himself and pacing before he calmed down enough to even consider approaching her. In the end, Natasha was right. It was better to not get close to his friend tonight. Not because he didn't trust himself to be platonic around her, but because he was in too much of a foul mood to inflict himself on anyone.

He went home and damaged a few thousand dollars' worth of equipment in the training room.
Steve tried a new tactic the next time he found her at the coffee shop. He didn't ignore her, but he didn't speak to her either. He passed her on his way in to get a cup. Then on his way out, he didn't stop and ask if he could sit with her. He strode to the bench and sat. He noted that she was sort of squirming as he approached the bench.

He looked over at her. She was clutching the far armrest and had her chin firmly down. Her legs moved restlessly, like if she only decided to touch them to the ground, she'd be gone. For over a minute, he drank his plain coffee and let her fidget. She was seething at him. He could feel it. If she spoke, she'd be ranting at him about approaching her so aggressively. He wasn't sorry. She needed to get over her fear of him or run away.

She looked at him briefly from under her hair. Yeah, she was not happy with him. And he wasn't happy that she'd been avoiding him. They sat in stiff silence until he finished his drink, which took a good twenty minutes. She wasn't running, though her legs did still twitch every few minutes.

Nobody came to talk to him, so he knew his face was anything but welcoming. He crushed his cup and aimed it at the bin. It flew in and ricocheted down the inside of the receptacle.

He braced his hands on his knees and thought about getting up to go somewhere else. Nat was right. The girl was too damaged, and he was too impatient. His time was short and he wanted to make things happen. She needed people to not make her do anything in a hurry.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Steve drew in a breath and held it. He counted to ten and let it out slowly.

"It's alright. Not your fault. I'm pretty good at strategy and results. Cause and effect. Probable outcome. You don't have to say anything. I know from up close and real personal what dicks men can be," he tried to comfort her.

She actually pushed him. Her weakened little claw of a hand shoved his shoulder. He barely moved. His head jerking around in astonishment that she'd touched him was more of a movement.

You know nothing, she moved her lips at him, not even a whisper this time.

"Then walk with me," Steve told her. There were too many people watching them, listening. He didn't want Jarvis listening, either. He got up and waited for her to get up too. She looked everywhere but at him, but she got to her feet. Steve started moving back toward the park where there were wide open spaces and no one was likely to listen in on them.

She wasn't beside him. He turned back, and she was standing by the bench, looking agonized and undecided. The direction of her gaze darted between the coffee shop and him. People were watching with unveiled interest.

"Nobody will bother you while you're with me. Come on. You can do this," Steve said as he would to a new soldier who needed to jump out of an airplane. His voice was authoritative and certain.

At his tone, she quit glancing around undecidedly and stared at him. She gave him what must have been the glare that she gave to eager Captain America fans when they wanted to bother him for an autograph.

"Alright. I'm gonna go walk it off. I'll see ya around," Steve said. He lifted his hands in a gesture of capitulation and he backed away a few steps before turning and striding off toward the park by himself.
She stood there and frowned powerfully at his retreating shoulders. She disliked bossy men. But even more than that, she disliked knowing that she was a cause of unhappiness for him. Belatedly, she reasoned with herself that of course he would be bossy out of long habit. He was a leader of strong people and accustomed to giving orders and having them followed. He'd been very relaxed around her so far, and this was likely simply him behaving more like himself.

"Go after him, girlie," a warbly old voice said to her from one of the café tables. She looked to see a silver haired lady pointing a finger toward the direction Steve had gone.

She looked down at her disheveled self in disbelief, then back to the old lady.

"He doesn't seem to care what you look like or who you are. Go!" the woman urged her. A well-dressed man in women's clothing nodded in emphatic agreement with the old woman, his plucked and arched eyebrows telling her she was crazy if she didn't run after him.

She shook her head in dismay, but her feet started moving.

"Captain, it may be beneficial for you to stay where you are for a moment," Jarvis' voice came to Steve from where he had his phone tucked into the back pocket of his jeans. Steve came to a stop and crossed his arms in an effort to stand still despite his agitation. He refused to ask Jarvis why he should wait. He knew already. He could hear her labored breaths approaching.

Steve turned and watched her make her way, wide-eyed and nervous, through the crowded sidewalk. He stood up taller to make sure she knew where he was. He well remembered when rushing around made him wheeze and huff like she was doing now. He had little sympathy. She'd got herself into this physical condition. He'd had no choice.

His heart softened when she reached him and leaned one hand against a sign post to catch her breath.

Asshole, she mouthed at him.

"Language," he grumbled at her.

Her mouth was partially open so she could breathe, and her lips quirked up at his admonishment. He was so weird sometimes.

"Are you ready to move?" Steve asked impatiently. He knew he was being an ass. He was intentionally testing her. He needed to know that she wanted his company, for whatever reason, enough to make a little effort at it. If she would do this, then he knew that Natasha was at least partly wrong. If she trusted him enough to walk with him out of her comfort zone, then there was something to build on. If not, he wouldn't bother her anymore, except to say hello to her at the coffee shop sometimes. He was willing to make an effort for her, and he needed to know if she felt the same before he invested anymore emotional capital in her.

She took a step away from the sign post toward him. People passed by between them, like water flowing around stones, but they were both plenty skilled at city walking to navigate the busy throng. Steve turned his body so that his right arm was toward her. He bent his elbow and offered his arm to her.

"You're not my girl or anything, but I know what bad lungs feel like. Take a little weight off and I'll tow you along," he offered. Truly, he'd do the same if he was helping an elderly person across the street.

She closed the distance between them enough that people began flowing around the two of them,
rather than between them. She eyed his bare arm sticking out from his shirt sleeve as if it was a snake. Her fingers rose to touch him, then pulled back. She couldn't make herself do it.

"Or I'll walk slow," Steve compromised. He'd watched her closely. He could see that she'd tried. He was happy that she'd even considered touching him. It was good enough for now.

She shuffled along beside him, not close enough that they might accidentally touch. She hovered just at the edge of his personal space. The park wasn't far away, so he moderated his urge to get there quickly and get out of the crowd so they could talk.

He watched her while she looked around cautiously. She presented an appearance of hunched, fearful menace. No wonder people avoided her. He kept his mouth shut about it. There were bound to be reasons for why she was the way she was, and it wasn't his place to judge her. Still, a young woman her age acting like a crone was a sad sight.

Steve seethed at the likely causes of her behavior while she went with him into the park. It was over an hour before lunch, so the green space was more vacant than not. He led her to a bench just like theirs in front of the coffee shop. They automatically settled in their usual positions on the bench.

He could see her pulse jumping fast and shallow when her head moved to look around and the mats of her hair revealed her painfully thin throat. Her condition reminded him of the starving people the Commandos had liberated from a prison camp in Germany. His jaw firmed against the anger that she thought she needed to live this way. Whatever had happened, surely there were other options available to her? He knew that weak as she was, all it would take was a bout of pneumonia to kill her this winter.

She finished looking around at the park lawn and trees as if she expected someone to jump out at her. She turned her face to him though her body sat formally still on the bench. Her hands didn't even twitch in her lap.

"Thank you for coming with me. There are too many ears at the coffee shop today," Steve said pleasantly. He looked away before she felt she had to. Her lips were still parted to make up for all the extra oxygen her thready muscles had used to walk with him.

One shoulder shrugged her shapeless top at him. For at least the fifth time, he wondered what the heck she was wearing. He'd never seen anything like it in a clothing store. It was like a few different but similar shirts bunched up around each other. It completely concealed any shape that might reveal whether she was female or a small-framed male, like he had been. If somebody really wanted to know, they could wait in observation and see that her hands were too delicate to be male, and her throat was the same. But she often hid her hands and throat. She knew.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked to no one in particular.

She'd heard him say that word before. There was no response from anyone. She watched him curiously while he pulled out his phone and made a call with a few touches.

"Hi, Cheryl. I'd like to speak with Jarvis," he said into the phone.

"Captain, how may I assist you?" Jarvis' voice immediately took over the line from the Stark Industries receptionist.

"I've moved out of range, can you locate?" Steve asked.

"Of course. Do you need assistance? Sir could be there within the minute," Jarvis offered.
"No. What I'd like you to do is scan the area for organic proximity and surveillance tech," Steve requested.

"I have one person seated to your right at one point one one meters. The next nearest person is seventeen point five two meters away at mark and increasing distance on a vector of two-hundred seventy two degrees. Purely organic wildlife, and no surveillance tech with the exception of the city security cameras at the park gate and a non-functional listening device under your bench which appears to have a manufacture date sometime in the nineteen eighties. It is coated over with five layers of paint. Unless you remain on the phone with me or move twelve meters closer to the city camera, you will evade stationary surveillance," Jarvis answered.

"Thank you, Jarvis. You're a pal," Steve said with a smile.

"I'm honored to have you think so, Captain. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, that's all I needed," Steve replied.

"Good day, Captain," Jarvis said, and the line went dead.

She was looking at him and the phone. He'd had it on speaker so she could hear.

"Perks of having Stark as a friend. We can speak freely and no one will hear us, Star," Steve told her.

She made a slight face. He was glad that she turned her face up to him fully and wasn't trying to hide behind her hair, but he hid his delight. Nat's training on schooling his features came in handy more than he'd thought it would. He didn't want her to think he was a creep if he seemed too happy to be around her.

"You still don't want me to say your name?" he asked.

She waved her hands at him, telling him he had it all wrong. Quickly, before he could jump to the wrong conclusion, she opened her mouth and silently enunciated her proper name to him.

"Again, please," Steve asked. He watched her mouth closely.

He smiled wide in understanding.

"Estrella. It's Spanish," Steve grinned. He didn't know nearly as much Spanish as he did French or German or Japanese, but he knew enough to understand why she'd drawn him a star on the napkin for her name, now.

"It's nice to meet you, Estrella. Am I pronouncing it right?" he wondered. He'd slightly rolled the 'r' and guessed that the two l's made a 'y'sound.

She smiled shyly and nodded.

_Just like my mami said it._ She mouthed to him. He was a marvelous lip-reader, because he smiled again.

"I hardly have the opportunity to use anything but my English anymore. It seems the whole world has learned English while I was on ice. You know about that, right? That I'm older than I look and I spent seventy years frozen in the Arctic?"

_Everyone knows that_, she mouthed.
"Good. Sometimes I wonder what people believe is real, and what they think is just a story. It all seems too make-believe to me sometimes. I mean, aliens? C'mon! I never would have believed that stuff when I was a kid," he said.

She nodded. It felt good to have a conversation with someone. She was skeptical about why he was spending time with her, but he was so nice to be around, so real. More real than most people who strenuously ignored her and hid behind their phones. She was a fool to trust him, and she knew it. But she couldn't stop herself from doing so.

She should have been terrified of him. He was large and male and strong. Everything she feared. It was difficult to see him as a threat, with the way he'd chosen to sit beside her and see her as a person worthy of his time, even though she looked like she did. She could recognize a manipulative predator in an instant. She was sure that he wasn't cultivating her trust for sinister reasons. It troubled her that she couldn't list to herself why she was so certain he wasn't up to no good, but she was sure that his intentions were simple and wholesome.

There was a faintly awkward moment of quiet in the conversation, and they both looked away at the squirrels chittering and chasing each other around a tree trunk. Steve was marveling that she wasn't asking him all the trivial questions that everyone else wanted answers to.

Estrella took a breath for courage, because she felt it wasn't her place to ask him anything deep. He'd asked a lot of her today, making her come here alone with him in an almost deserted park where people would pay no attention if she screamed. She bucked up her courage. He was looking at her, waiting. He knew she wanted to say something.

Why me? She shaped the words with confidence that he understood her. She lifted her hands from her lap and let them fall, indicating her appearance.

Steve opened his mouth to tell her why, then he shut it again. Nat would scold him for being too easy.

"That's a personal question, but we can negotiate. I'm willing to tell you the answer if you're willing to answer the same kinds of questions for me, on a basis that feels fair and comfortable to you," Steve said with level sincerity.

Estrella felt like a different person had taken Steve's place on the bench next to her. His folksy, boy-next-door demeanor had quickly gone guarded and professional. He was still open and kindly looking, but all manner of joking or humor was set aside.

He could see her pulse thump harder at her throat, and she turned her face down again. Her hands grasped each other in her lap. He didn't like seeing her afraid, especially of him. It was plain to see that she had a problem history with authority figures, and he'd sounded like what he was.

"Estrella, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uneasy. I live two different lives, maybe like two personalities in one body, or two sides of a coin. They're both me, and both genuine, but life has taught me that I need to behave differently in different situations. Sometimes I can be easy and relaxed. More often I have to focus on my responsibilities. If you see me go from one to the other, it's just me dealing with situations in the ways that I know how. Can you handle that, or is it too strange for you?" he asked.

He was hopeful that she could find parallels of what he meant in her own life. He could see her thinking it through. She wasn't frozen immobile with fear or locked down with indecision. She was calmly studying her clean fingernails while she considered his words.
When she turned to him and nodded, he knew she got it. She'd been there and had cause to compartmentalize herself, too. She did him one better and smiled at him in understanding.

"I'm really glad you get that. It goes along with the fact that I may not be around for long periods of time, sometimes. I have to travel a lot. Things happen," he said vaguely. He didn't want to be too dramatic and tell her that what he did was dangerous and that he could die and never see her again, but that's exactly what he meant.

Estrella regarded him soberly, then her lips pursed out in a mutinous look. He'd have thought that she was angry with him, but her eyes got a little watery, then she turned away to rub at them.

"I used to think that I had some control over certain things, but I don't. All this," he flopped his hands in his lap, much like she had, "and there's still a whole lot of things out there that are bigger and more dangerous than me."

"You need a smaller pond", she whispered.

It took Steve a second to get what she meant. When he did, he smiled in appreciation of how her mind worked.

"You're a genius. And I think you've answered your own question. Maybe you're my smaller pond, Estrella. When I'm with you, all the busy things in my head fade away. I don't know why, but they do. You remind me that the real, everyday things are just as important as the crazy things I find myself dealing with," Steve said.

A few seconds after his mouth shut, he realized that maybe he'd sounded patronizing and insulting from her perspective. He made a pained expression and ducked his head some while his shoulders hunched up.

Estrella wondered if he thought she was going to hit him.

"Sorry," Steve said.

*Quit apologizing. It's good that you're honest,* she shaped the words.

"I didn't quite get that," Steve said.

"Quit apologizing. It's good that you're honest," she whispered.

He was relieved that she hadn't taken offense at his conversational clumsiness. Some people were real particular about getting their feelings hurt. He was glad she was tougher than that, because he knew he was a klutz and bound to say the wrong thing regularly. He cautioned himself to not take her easy-going manner for granted. Sam told him that people suffering from trauma had unexpected triggers. He had a few of his own. Estrella was fragile. Anyone could see that. Steve hoped he was mature enough now to avoid hurting her feelings or triggering bad memories.

They turned their heads to watch a young couple walk by them to get to a shade tree. They had lunch bags with them. It was a reminder that the park would become crowded over the next few minutes.

Steve looked at her. They didn't have much private time left. Soon, someone would notice him and he'd have to conform to social expectations again.

"I'd like to know why you don't speak," he stated. He didn't phrase his words as a question because he didn't want to make her feel that she had to answer him. Again, her pulse reacted.
"I won't be let down if you don't tell me, but you gotta admit, it's unusual," he said casually.

Estrella nodded. Her being mute was a major source of problems in her life. But the alternative was worse. He'd been open with her. She felt compelled to tell him at least something.

"My voice isn't right. I get bad reactions from people when I use it, so I don't," she whispered. That was more than she'd told anyone in New York. It would have to be enough for him.

Steve watched her, wanting to glean any extra information that her expression or body language could give him. She became still and she looked away from him again. He noticed that her skin tone was a medium golden color. Her hair was a poor attempt at blonde, and her eyes were dark brown. Estrella. She was a Hispanic American. Her hair should be black. He closed his eyes in helpless anger when he knew that she hadn't tried to bleach her hair.

She raised a hand absently and rubbed at the back of her neck, the base of her skull.

"You have a headache," Steve said.

Sometimes, she responded.

Steve forced himself to breathe calmly instead of dressing her down at loud volume as he would a disorderly recruit. She saw the anger in his expression and her eyes widened. At least she didn't creep away from him on the bench. That was progress.

"I'm angry because you're not taking good care of your health. I just remembered that light colored hair can mean extreme, long-term malnutrition. I want you to eat a better diet, Estrella. I don't want you to get sick, or any weaker than you already are," he said as gently as he could, but his words still came out as a command.

I can't. I have reasons.

"Are your reasons worth dying for?" Steve asked with grim determination.

They are to me.

Steve sat back and crossed his arms tightly. Nat would nag him for grinding his teeth. He didn't unclench his jaw, but he quit the satisfying grind of his molars. She'd gone still and scared beside him. He could hear her heart trying to keep up with the adrenaline reaction that his anger was causing her. Crap.

"Estrella, I know I can't change your mind. I have to accept that you do what you do because you think it's best, and I don't have the privilege of understanding your motives. I know myself, though. I've met you now, and I like you. I think of you as a friend. It won't be easy for me to see you suffer. I'm a man of action. I want to help you," he explained himself.

"I don't want anything from you," she whispered. Her hand rose to rub at the back of her head again.

From the look of dread on her face, he could tell he'd hit one of her triggers. And he was making her head hurt. People were starting to stream into the park for their lunch breaks. It was time to take her back to the coffee shop and leave his friend alone to calm down. Damnit, he hadn't meant to upset her today. She wasn't going to want to see him coming if he kept this up.

"Let me walk you back?" he offered hopefully.
Steve sighed and stood up. Estrella got up slowly and carefully. It was painful to watch. A sense of urgency prodded him. Anything could happen to her. Just a fall and a broken bone would end her if nobody was around to see to her. She wasn't going to willingly change her ways. He had to talk to someone. Nat. Sam. An eating disorder specialist. She was killing herself. Not on his watch, he vowed to himself.

"Don't worry. I won't say your name where anyone can hear," he assured her when she looked around and saw all the people they'd have to move through to get back to the coffee shop.

She knew she'd disappointed him. She'd been rude when she'd refused to let him help her, but she couldn't. If she let him help her like he wanted to, then her life would become a nightmare again, and he might even get caught up in it. She couldn't do that to him. Or to herself.

Estrella made her way back to their seat in front of the coffee shop. Steve was kind enough to follow behind and leave her alone as soon as he saw her sit down again.
Steve disliked asking Tony for anything. Not because Tony made a big deal out of it. Tony was always generous and glad to give to a good cause and to some not so good ones as well. But he asked a lot of pointed questions.

Tony was an expert on juicing. He could occasionally even be serious about things. Much as he thought of ways to help his friend, Steve kept circling back to the conclusion that he needed Tony's help for this. But he had to be careful. He wasn't going to tell Tony all about Estrella. She wouldn't want that.

"I have to know who it's for if I'm going to make the right formula. I know you've got a whole private thing going on, but I need some information to work with. Come on, Steve. Give me an age? Species? Sex?" Tony rattled at him. He was in the common kitchen the Avengers shared when they felt like gathering.

"Young. Human. Female. She's severely malnourished and she needs vitamins and nutrients she might not be getting from what little she eats," Steve said.

He sat at the bar that overlooked the kitchen workspace and spun a bottle of hot sauce around and around with his finger.

"Anorexia? I can make a calorie-dense mix with fiber and supplements, tropical fruit, maybe. Girls like that shit," Tony offered.

"It's worse than that. Too much sugar and she'll go into arrest. It needs to be low calorie, mineral dense," Steve said.

"Sounds like she needs to be in a hospital. I'm guessing you told her that and she refused?" Tony started moving around the kitchen.

"Jarvis, I'll need supplements for refeeding. Powdered, preferably. We have milk. Good," Tony said absently.

"She barely lets me leave things for her. She might refuse this. A hospital is out of the question. I think she's hiding from something or someone," Steve told him.

Tony nodded, then went through the living room and out onto the patio through the glass doors. He came back in carrying a grow tray of grassy looking plants.

"We could fix her up in-house, no questions asked. Pro bono," Tony said. Steve knew the offer would come out eventually. It was things like this that eased the frustrations he sometimes felt in dealing with Stark. He was peculiar and outrageous, but he was a good man.

"I'd love to do that for her, but she wouldn't come in for it. She doesn't want anything from anyone. I'm not looking to fatten her up or fix her right now. I just want her to survive until I can talk her around to accepting more help. That might take a while, if ever. She's stubborn and I'm not the best at persuasion," Steve smirked.

Tony barked a laugh.

"Show her your ass. Has she seen it yet? If she's seen it and she's still balking, she might not be human or female. I'd re-assess," Tony chuckled. His hands fidgeted with a metal thing he pulled
out of his pocket. Steve had caught him just as Tony was getting up for the day. He was likely
eager to get to his lab or his workshop. Or his garage.

Steve made a face and shook his head. And this kind of talk was the reason he was glad Tony was
generous enough for him to overlook it. It was like Tony couldn't tolerate simply being nice. He
had to mix it all up with raunchy comments.

"She's not like that. She's afraid of men," Steve said. Tony looked away with a frown after a
second. They both understood what that meant.

They were waiting for a courier to come with the ingredients Tony had requested. Steve went
around the bar and searched the refrigerator for something to eat. He pulled out makings for a
sandwich.

"Want one?" he asked Tony.

"Nah. Not all of us have the metabolism for so many carbs," Stark denied.

By the time Steve was finishing his hoagie, Tony had taken the toaster apart and cleaned it and put
it back together again. A runner had come up with a bag full of nutritional supplements from one of
the downstairs shops. Tony worked the juicer like a master. The beverage was looking dark green.
Steve grimaced. It wasn't anything he'd want to try. He hoped Estrella would humor him.

"Keep the calories low," Steve reminded when he saw Tony pouring milk in.

"Hold your stripes. I've got this," Tony fussed at him casually.

While the machine whirred and spun and mixed, Steve pushed his pickle wedge around his plate,
gathering crumbs. Tony got down two insulated metal tumblers and poured the juice mix into
them. There was still some in the juicer, so he tasted it himself.

"Yeah. That's what we're looking for. Here, try it," Tony held out the juicer cup to Steve. He took it
with more hesitation for drinking the green stuff than for any concern of drinking after Tony.
Germs didn't bother him. He'd eaten spoiled meat and moldy bread off the ground before. With his
metabolism, sometimes he couldn't be too picky.

Steve grimaced and smacked his lips after tilting the container back to get the last little bit left at
the bottom.

"It only tastes bad to you because you eat mostly pizza and burgers. If she's as starved as you say,
she'll like it whether she really likes it or not. Here. Goose and gander. If you expect her to drink it,
you'll have to have some too. Get going. It's better while it's cold." Tony pushed both tumblers into
his hands and gave him a little push toward the hallway and elevator.

"Thank you, Tony. Did you save the recipe in case I can get her to drink it?" Steve asked over his
shoulder as he walked away.

"No, but Jarvis has it. I'll leave the supplements in this cabinet. And you'll need some of this. It'll
be on the patio," Tony said. He was putting away the canisters of powdered supplements, then he
walked the tray of grassy plants toward the glass doors.

"And you're welcome. Good luck with that," Tony added as the elevator doors opened for Steve.
Steve nodded and stepped in. Overall, Tony hadn't been too intrusive. There was no way to get this
done without telling him anything, but Steve figured he'd made an acceptable trade.
She wasn't at the coffee shop. Not wanting to give up, Steve walked into the shop anyway. Maybe Izzy would know where he could find her. Izzy eyed the tumblers in his hands curiously. Steve knew it wasn't polite to bring in outside drinks, but it couldn't be helped.

He waited until Izzy had a moment between making drinks, then stepped close as he could to talk over the espresso machine.

"This is for her. Any idea where I can find her?" he asked Izzy.

"Try the library. Down that way," Izzy jerked his head to the left while his hands were busy cleaning something Steve couldn't see.

"Thanks, man," Steve said. He strode purposefully out and took a left at the sidewalk. Two and a half blocks down, there was a small blue sign that said "Library" with an arrow that pointed left. Steve turned into an outdoor mall area, then saw the library on the right. He frowned at the beverages in his hands, then pushed through the library doors. There was a security desk with a large black woman who looked up at him, and then to the drinks in his hands.

Steve would have walked on past, but he'd learned that in some places, it was better to stop and chat.

"No drinks in the library," the woman said.

"I'm sorry, I know. But I'm looking for someone. Real skinny girl in rags, bad hair. It's a nutritional supplement, if I can get her to drink it. Soon as I find her, I'll get her outside and we'll drink it there," Steve gave the woman an earnest, innocent look that had always worked on everyone except Bucky and his mother. Or Natasha.

She was looking at him like she knew him from somewhere, but couldn't quite place him. Then, her mouth fell open in a brief 'o' of recognition. She quickly regained her stern demeanor.

"I'm sorry, Sir. No drinks in the library. You can leave them here if you want to go in and get her. She came in a half hour ago," the woman held her ground, but she indicated the desk for him to set the drinks down. Steve would have taken her up on the offer, but he was too suspicious anymore to leave consumables in the company of strangers. Weird things could happen.

"Can we work something out? Tony said I should get it to her quick while it's still cold," Steve gave her a hopeful smile. He casually shifted his stance to one that usually got him a lot of looks from the ladies. Nothing overt, it just emphasized his assets a little more. Tony would laugh at him. Used to, he would have been too stiff to use his body like this, but time had changed his perspective a little.

"Tell you what. If you show up and read for children's story time at ten o'clock on Tuesday, you can go in with those drinks. But you have to get her and come right back out. I can't let people think it's okay to walk around with drinks in there," the guard said.

"Ten o'clock on Tuesday. Got it. What age are the kids?" Steve asked. He'd learned that different age kids needed a different show. The youngest ones hardly recognized him without the full get-up. Older ones smirked at him funny if he was fully geared out in a casual setting. He didn't blame them.

"First and second grade. You gonna be here?" the woman asked. Her tag said "Wanda."

"I'll be here, Wanda, unless I'm needed somewhere else for something important," Steve assured her.
"Alright. Go on in. But no loitering with those drinks," she said dryly and with a warning in her cocked eyebrows.

"Jeeze, tough crowd," Steve teased her, but he smiled. He used his rump to push open the old metal and glass doors from the lobby into the main room of the library.

"She usually sits on the right, back in the corner by the windows," Wanda called out to him. He nodded his thanks.

The large room had pale fluorescent lighting and the air conditioning kept the air dry and chilly. Steve breathed deeply of the air. He enjoyed the smell of books. Old ones, new ones, leather bound and clothbound and paperback. When he was a kid and feeling poorly, he'd spent a lot of time in bed with books as company. He hurried through the fiction stacks toward the light from the tall skinny windows.

There she was, curled up in a deep, softly upholstered chair. He could see why she spent time here. It was quiet and nice, and nobody paid attention to her because she was a regular. She glanced up and did a double-take at him. Then she scowled when she thought of how he must have found her.

"This is a great place. Love the smell," Steve said before she could say anything to complain about him tracking her down. He sat in the chair adjacent to hers and set the tumblers down on the table between them.

"You're not allowed to have drinks in here! Wasn't Wanda at the desk?" she whispered at him in a rush. She looked around like she expected Wanda to come thundering at them around the corner of the stacks.

"Wanda's a doll. I'm reading to the kids on Tuesday, so she let me in. But I gotta get you and get out of here with these or the deal's off. Let's go sit out in the mall for a few, then you can come back inside," Steve suggested. He wasn't looking forward to drinking the stuff with her, but if he had to do it to get some nutrition in her, he would.

"What is it?" Estrella whispered skeptically. She picked up the tumbler nearest to her and flipped the drink hole open. She gave it a sniff, then another one. Steve saw her throat work at a swallow. Tony was right. Just a smell and she wanted it.

"Tony made it. It's mostly minerals and vitamins. Only twenty-eight calories. It's got some green stuff in it too. He grows it himself on the balcony. Tony's big into juicing. I think it's awful, but it's supposed to be good for you, I guess," Steve shrugged.

She slipped a paper bookmark into the mystery novel she was reading and set the book on the table. Steve almost put out a hand to help her up from the chair, but he restrained himself. She wouldn't want him touching her. She didn't notice his aborted effort, anyway. She took the tumbler that was for her and made for the exit in a slow, careful walk.

"Are you sure it's only twenty-eight calories?" she turned to whisper at him. He came to a quick stop so he wouldn't get too close to her.

"As sure as I can be. There's no fruit or sugar. Tony doesn't usually fib about that kind of thing. He was proud about making it low calorie," Steve assured her.

"Tony Stark made this?" she whispered.

"Sure. The man loves his juice drinks. There's no weird super-hero stuff in it, I promise. You won't turn into the Hulk. Come on, before Wanda comes after me for loitering," he prompted. They
could talk about it outside.

Estrella eyed him suspiciously again, but she went. Steve leaned around to push open the door for her. She edged away from him, but didn't make too much a big deal out of the proximity.

Wanda looked on.

"See you Tuesday," she said to him.

"I imagine you will," Steve said.

Estrella looked at him sourly as he held the outer door for her.

"I'm sorry. My ma taught me to always hold the door for a lady. It's a hard habit to break," Steve said. He wasn't really sorry, but if she thought so, that was alright.

They sat on the rounded concrete benches around a concrete table which was affixed to the mall floor. Estrella watched him and his drink tumbler.

Steve's lip hitched up, but he forced himself to take a big swig of the juice drink. It was like drinking milky, grassy, sandy sludge. He repressed a gag at the mineral tang in it. Russian beer was better. He clunked down the tumbler and looked expectantly to her.

Estrella drank hesitantly. One sip, and she licked her lips. Then, she picked it up again and took a bigger drink. Her eyes cut to him over the rim of the cup like she didn't want to be seen enjoying it.

Steve paid attention to his own tumbler of sludge. He swirled it around, hoping that mixing the stuff would make it taste better. Aw, hell. Better to get it over with. He unscrewed the top and chugged it down in a hurry.

"Bleh!" he exclaimed and slammed down the tumbler like Thor did his empty cups when he wanted another one. Steve sure didn't want anymore. To the side, he could see that she was sipping her gunk pretty steadily. He propped an elbow on the table and relaxed while he waited for her to finish.

"You shouldn't bring me things," she whispered a few minutes later.

"Yeah, well, I don't think any thanks are appropriate for getting you to drink that junk. Do I have to drink it too, next time?" he whined.

Next time? She mouthed to him.

"Yes, next time. It's low-cal so you won't get fat. I don't know how you can stand the stuff. It's like a punishment to drink it. But I want your bones to be stronger, at least. And an immune system boost would be good, too. I can bring it to you here on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I'm in town?" he asked hopefully.

Estrella stared at him with the evil-eye.

"I know. It's vile. But would you do it for me so I won't worry about you while I'm gone?" he begged.

No. But I'll do it for Tony Stark.

"Hey, what's Tony got on you that I don't?" Steve asked with false hurt feelings softened by a smile.
She smiled a little but tucked her head down and didn't answer. She tilted the tumbler up in front of her face and looked down the hole to see if there was any left that she might have missed.

"You could have had all of mine," Steve said.

On Friday morning after his run, she was on the bench outside the coffee shop. It was a warm, sunny day but chunky clouds were scudding by fast with the wind off the Atlantic. He'd hesitated to go for a run this morning because there was a lot of intel chatter about something developing in Sri Lanka. It seemed that villains and tyrants thought they could hide in obscure places and get away with anything, but global satellites and electronic ears caught lots of hints if the right people were listening. The Avengers had recruited enough of the right people, finally.

Nat had told him to go run anyway, since things weren't quite wrapped up enough for any action. He'd pushed himself faster than usual in the run so that he might get done before he got called in. He was antsy and wanted to get back to the tower, but Estrella was right there, and she'd seen him already.

He nodded to her and hurried inside to get a drink. There was no line right now, so Kara and Izzy had him in and out fast with his plain Americano. Steve tipped his usual amount, then hurried out to their bench.

She didn't flinch away from him this time even though he was moving aggressively. She seemed to know that it wasn't about her. Her eyes watched him patiently. He thought he discerned a happy look about her, something about the corners of her mouth and eyes.

"Did you get to finish your book?" he asked her.

She nodded.

Steve noticed that she was wearing different clothes today. He still couldn't tell what it was supposed to be, but it was dark gray. The kind of gray that had been black once upon a time. The top half was raggedy and concealing just like her other clothes, but it draped diagonally across her in some attempt at fashion. Part of her collarbone showed, but she fiddled with her hair there as if she was aware and trying to cover up the bare spot. Her bottom was miss-matched navy blue baggy pants with a frayed hem. Dingy socks showed above the same pair of worn out sneakers.

Steve had to look away for a moment. Frustration kept flaring up in him that she felt she had to keep herself this way. Even during the depression, he and his ma had kept up better appearances with mending and thrift. Estrella wasn't stupid or incapable. He was sure of it. She wanted to look bad. He really wanted to know why she did it, and then he wanted to fix the problem. He forcefully let go of his feelings on the matter. Her wishes were more important.

She didn't have much to say today and neither did he. They looked at each other and smiled some, and then he paid attention to his drink for a while. She didn't know what he did for him. His mind was full of information about the idiot who was chopping up street kids in Sri Lanka for the black market in human organs trade. It was a hard thing to stop thinking about. He couldn't wait to get over there and make it stop. But sitting here for a few minutes with Estrella calmed him. She was smart and she was safe for now. He didn't know exactly where she slept, but he knew she was cautious enough to look out for herself.

He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and turned his head to look at her for a minute. He wanted to picture her here normal and safe before he had to go off and see the horrible things he knew awaited them over there.
She smiled faintly at him. Then she noticed the peculiar intensity with which he looked at her. She cocked her head aside to question him.

"Nah, it's nothing. Just… I'm probably gonna have to go soon. There's something that needs tending somewhere. I like to know that some things are still right and good while I'm gone. It helps," he said low enough so that the interested people at the café tables couldn't hear him.

Estrella thought of how she checked that her carpets and bedding were tucked out of sight and safe from rain every time she left her alley. How she took satisfaction in keeping any dirt or trash out of her living area. She had control over very little in this world. She owned almost nothing. But what she had, she liked to keep just so. It made her feel safe to return in the evening and see that things were as she'd left them.

She nodded at Steve in understanding. It bothered her a little that he thought of her as one of his things, but his face was so guileless. It made no sense that he would care about what happened to her, but he was like that. It took a person like Captain America to fight and suffer for strangers. Lots of people wouldn't even fight for their friends if it was too much trouble.

She made herself let go of her natural suspicion and distrust. He was a man from another time when things had mattered. Things like compassion and honor and selflessness. Did she dare have a little faith in him? Maybe just a little. But he'd told her that he might not come back someday. That was enough for her to guard her feelings. It would be painful to lose a friend like him.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket and he stood abruptly. It was Nat's buzz pattern. Three shorts and a long.

_Updater, Cap._

His muscles tensed to turn and run. Ten minutes wasn't long to get back, get suited, and board. He'd like to shower too. Estrella watched him.

"Gotta go now," he told her.

She nodded and held out the fingers of her left hand, palm up. Steve was surprised and humbled. He carefully controlled his features and touched his fingertips to hers. She was staring at him intently, wanting something from him.

"I'll be as safe as I can. No guarantees," he said.

She nodded solemnly.

He didn't make a practice of running through the people on the sidewalk, but he really wanted a shower before he had to get into the suit. He powered through what open gaps he could find, carefully avoiding touching or jostling anyone in his hurry. He leapt over the last trash receptacle before he reached the lobby doors of the tower. Business men on the inside heading out backed out of his way when they saw him intent on getting in the door.

"Thanks," he said tersely in passing. He squeezed into the elevator doors as they were closing. There was an older woman from the custodial staff and one of Stark's couriers already in the box.

"You have good legs?" he asked them both.

The woman nodded at him with widened eyes. The courier boy, Billy, grinned. Both of them grasped the hand rail.
"Jarvis, double-time it," Steve said.

"Of course, Captain," Jarvis responded.

The elevator smoothly but quickly accelerated into a speed that made Steve feel his own weight. At the top, his feet felt like they were going to leave the floor tiles. The woman gasped.

"Sorry, Ma'am," Steve told her while he waited for the box to come to a complete stop. The doors were opening before the car was level with the floor. He was out and running to his room for his shield. Jarvis held the elevator open for him. The woman had stepped out to avoid any more double speed elevator rides, but Billy was still grinning.

"Up," Steve said soon as he was in again with his shield. It had been three and a half minutes since Nat texted him. He'd probably have time for a quick shower in the locker room near where his uniform was kept. His running shoes felt wrong on his feet, now that he was thinking about the mission again. He wanted the thick, supple leather of his boots and their sturdy, grippy heels.

Bruce and Sam were standing in the departure lobby on the launch floor at the top of the building when the elevator doors opened. Steve dodged around them and started stripping while he jogged to the shower.

"We're not in that much of a rush. It's not like we'd leave without you," Sam called after him.

"Wanna shower first," Steve hollered. Bruce and Sam understood. Being clean was a luxury they often couldn't afford past the first few minutes of a mission. Starting out a trans-ocean flight already smelly from a morning workout would make for a grumpy Captain, and nobody wanted that.

Steve nodded at Natasha as he hopped through taking his shoes off. She was pulling up the top half of her standard suit over her undergarments.

"It's a little late for a shower, huh?" she called out to him while he shoved down his underwear and kicked them off, then ripped the shower curtain closed behind him.

He pushed the water to cold and full on while his other hand grabbed a pump of soap from the dispenser. With quick, practiced motions, he slicked his hair and body with lather and let it rinse as soon as he was soaped. In less than a minute and a half, he was rinsing his hair and shutting off the water. Large, absorbent towels were on a shelf outside the shower. He snagged one and dragged it over his hair and face, then passed it around his back. He did his chest and arms, then wrapped it around his hips.

Three seconds to apply deodorant and step to his locker. Nat was lacing up her boots. She wasn't looking at him. He angled his locker door to mostly hide him, and hurried into fresh underwear. They dragged up his legs partly because they were snug, and partly because he hadn't fully dried off. He got a pair of the specialized liner socks he wore under his uniform boots and sat beside Nat on the bench to pull them on.

"How you doing?" she asked him in a way that would seem casual to most.

"Fine. Looking forward to this one. We ought to focus on these kinds of perps for a while. I'd sleep better putting it all to a stop," he said. He took the time to use the edge of his towel to dry carefully between his toes.

"You know better," Natasha scolded him. Greed wasn't going away any time soon, and as long as there was a market for the organs, there would be a source. Sri Lanka, Taipei, Sao Paulo, it didn't
"Yeah, well a guy can dream," Steve said.

He readied his feet, then went to his locker to pull his uniform on. He could feel Nat's eyes on him. It annoyed him sometimes that she paid such close attention, but she'd saved his skin many times, so he didn't call her on it.

"You need any phone numbers?" she asked him with a little smile.

Steve looked over and frowned discouragingly as he pulled his jacket across his shoulders, then grabbed the leather harness for his shield.

"Naw, Nat. I know how to work the internet since over a year ago. That stuff is in half the men's rooms across the city. I don't know why they let kids see it," he grumped.

His uniform jacket wasn't zipped all the way, but it was enough for now. He'd have time to get things finished on the flight. He tipped his shield away from the wall with the edge of his boot and caught the rim with his fingers. His helmet hung from his other hand.

Natasha got up and slung her bag over her shoulder. Many of her weapons were already within her suit, but she still had some equipment to put on, like he did. They headed for the quinjet bay side by side. Bruce and Sam weren't lingering in the lobby anymore.

"If you don't get a move on, I might have a girl delivered to your door along with a pizza," she teased him.

"And if you don't let it rest, I might report you to the boss for sexual harassment," Steve smirked back at her. Steve was the boss. It was an empty threat and she knew it.

"How modern of you," Natasha smiled.

He was in the jet with the hatch closing with thirteen seconds to spare. Tony and Thor would be sitting this one out, because the threat was expected to be low and the two of them had prior commitments with Pepper and Jane. Bruce was along mostly to sit with the jet while Steve, Sam, Nat, and Clint did the work.

Steve was back home in thirty-six hours, but he wasn't fit company for anyone until he pulled himself out of bed for Sunday morning church service. Sam joined him and they quietly made their way to the church.

Sam seemed to know that there wasn't much point in talking about what they'd seen on the recent mission. Some things could be worked out in discussion and some things needed time to fade before you could touch them again. They'd done all they could, and it was enough. It had to be.

Steve held the door for some older people and they all smiled at him and greeted him warmly. He and Sam were favorite pets of the older members of the congregation. Most Sundays, they went home with plates of cakes or muffins. Steve's favorite was Mrs. McIlhenney's spice cake. Sam favored Mrs. Camerioni's lemon pie. Anyone who got a streusel cake from old Mrs. Stiles felt special. The woman was older than Steve, but still knew her way around a kitchen.

Steve glanced at his watch as the ornate wooden doors closed behind them. He had enough time. The hush inside the cathedral caused him to silently gesture to Sam that he was going to wait for confession and that Sam should go on in. Sam shook his head at him and smiled a little, but he
went to find a seat.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been two weeks since my last confession. In that time, I've entertained impure thoughts and I'm guilty of abusing myself a few times. I get too angry at people. I'm impatient. I expect too much of others. And I've used some bad language. I killed nineteen men yesterday. For these and any sins I don't realize or remember, I'm sorry," Steve said.

The confessional booth was upholstered in such a way that it seemed to swallow sound as soon as it left his mouth. He'd be too ashamed to admit some of these things to other people, but over the years, he'd gained the courage to confess his sins face to face with the priest. He saw the old man as a fellow soldier, and soldiers understood. But they didn't always spare your feelings.

"Steve, you're too hard on yourself. Some of these things are sins, and you are guilty of them. For some of it, you bear no guilt, yet you allow your conscience to trouble you anyway. These killings, were they in the line of duty?" Father Miller asked.

"Yes," Steve replied.

"Are you certain that there was no other way to stop a greater evil than to kill these men?" Father wanted to know.

"We spent weeks determining that. We can never be certain, but my actions were necessary to stop evil. The murder and dismemberment of innocents," Steve grit his teeth and a swift shimmy of remembered horror shook him, "It's possible that some of the men may have been spared if I'd had the time to consider each one individually."

Father Miller looked at him with placid consideration.

"We both know that there isn't always time to do so in these situations. As long as you upheld your normal diligence, then you are not guilty of murder. Continue to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your thoughts and actions. As for the masturbation, you need to improve your relationship with our Lord through prayer and fasting. The anger and impatience are merely character traits as long as you don't act on them. I bet you rarely express your anger and impatience toward those who inspire it?" Father Miller asked with a faint smile.

"Not verbally or in action, but I know my face shows it," Steve said.

"Feelings are not sinful things of themselves. Mind your actions and try to be more at ease with your feelings. Now make an act of contrition…" Father Miller said.

Steve did so, and received absolution. Then he went to find Sam and do his penance. The only place he ever knelt anymore was in church. It was odd how kneeling before a benevolent god was so different from being made to kneel before a demented power-hungry person who thought of themselves as a god. For a little while after the service, he was at peace. Especially when Mrs. Stiles told him to follow her to her car.

Sam grinned at him and shoved him with an elbow. Other people who were walking home from the church service looked on in happy envy as Lilian Stiles bent her already hunched back and took a strawberry streusel cake from the backseat.

"Aw, Miz Lily, you didn't have to. But thanks! I'll hide it from Tony," Steve said with playful greed.

"Mister Stark isn't so bad. You should give him a little piece. And be sure you share with Sam. I made it for both of you," she said.
Steve passed the wrapped cake to Sam and bent to give Mrs. Stiles a hug. He'd noticed how much effort it took for her to get the cake out of the car. It didn't feel heavy at all to him, but she had struggled with it. Lilian giggled like a girl and patted Steve's shoulder a few times.

"That's too much for an old lady, but thank you. Wait til I tell Lawrence. He'll have it in for you!" Mrs. Stiles threatened him with a twinkle in her eye. Everybody knew that Lawrence had been dead for seven years now. Steve nodded and rubbed his belly while he looked at the cake.

"Miz Lily, I don't like you having to bring a big cake to church and walk it to the car and all. Maybe I can come have coffee with you sometimes instead?" Steve offered. He patted his backside and found his notepad in his pocket. He wrote his phone number down on a page and tore it off. He supported the lady's elbow as she lowered herself into the driver's seat of her Lincoln. He set the paper with his number atop her dash so she couldn't refuse to take it.

"Maybe if I have the rest of the girls over, I'll call you on a Monday. Now you go home and enjoy some cake," Lilian said.

"Yes, Ma'am. We sure will," Sam said and closed her car door for her.

He and Steve turned around to head back to the tower. Steve reached to take the plate the cake was on so Sam wouldn't have to carry it.

Sam turned his upper body away and kept the cake from him.

"Nah-ah! You handed it off to me. It's mine now. You still owe me five dollars from our last poker night. I'm keeping this cake," Sam insisted.

Steve dug out his wallet and tucked five dollars into Sam's jacket pocket.

"Mmm-nn. It's worth more than five dollars, man. She's never made us a strawberry one before. There was blueberry and lemon, but this one is strawberry.

"Fine. You carry it. Torture yourself," Steve shrugged, then put his hands in his pockets. It was a comfortably cloudy day and he felt no need for a run or a workout. He picked up his pace to get back to the tower, though. Cake and coffee sounded good. Sam was right beside him, thinking the same thing.

Steve took the cake to the common room and served a generous slice for himself onto a plate. Sam was already making coffee.

Steve stared down at the oozing strawberry filling and the fluffy cake and the drizzled, home-made icing. His mouth watered. He braced his hands on the countertop and thought.

"This is mine. Don't mess with it. No pranks," Steve warned Sam.

Bruce and Clint were lounged on the couch in front of the television watching something about fishing. Steve turned his warning on them, too. Bruce pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows in a way that said he thought somebody was being a little too serious.

"I hear ya, Cap," Clint ragged him, and threw a wadded up sock at him. Steve caught it and tossed it back as he strode through the room and out onto the patio. Over near the rail was a cart which held the tray of plants Tony had used for juicing. He got it and went back inside.
He would have thought Estrella was sleeping if her eyes wouldn't have caught on his legs and travelled up as he got closer. She tried to hide that she was happy to see him, but he could tell. He paused by the bench and handed her the plate. She looked at it, confused.

"Guard my cake with your life. It's special. Would you drink this while I get some coffee? Same stuff as last time, but I made it. It might be even worse," he told her.

She looked at the tumbler he set down on the bench. She held the cake plate on her lap with one hand and reached for the tumbler with the other. Before he turned away, she was sipping the juice sludge. He was glad she liked it, but he needed coffee.

Several minutes later, he was outside again with a plain black coffee. From the tilt of her tumbler, she appeared to be about halfway done with her beverage. Soon as he was settled, she pushed the cake at him. He took it and held it on his knee.

"Anymore headaches lately?" he asked her.

Estrella shook her head. She hadn't noticed that her headaches were gone until he'd mentioned it just now. Her crossword puzzle book was easier to solve these last few days, too.

Thank you, she mouthed silently, and finished the last of her juice. She wasn't making any sour faces, so Steve hoped he'd made it well enough. His other knee that didn't hold the cake was bouncing impatiently, his heel tapping softly against the pavement.

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he gave her his best innocent look.

She set the empty tumbler down on the bench between them and inched away from him. Or away from the cake, rather. She suspected what he was about. Steve pulled a clean fork out of his back pocket.

"Fair is fair. I had to drink nasty stuff with you. Now, I'd really like it if you'd try one little tiny bite of Mrs. Stile's streusel cake before I eat the rest of it. I'm too selfish to give you more than a small sliver, but here, try. It's fantastic," Steve said. He sliced a cracker-thin shaving of cake off onto the edge of the fork. He made sure to include some strawberry filling and a little icing.

She didn't want to. She avoided things with too many calories, like cake. But he was so eager to share with her, like the little boys who approached him for his autograph. It really was a tiny sliver, just enough for a taste. What harm could it do? She held her hand out and he turned the fork around so she could take it.

Oh, God. It was heavenly. The middle of it was still slightly warm and the icing was sticky and…

Steve flinched when Estrella let out a quiet, brief groan. It got him in the gut somehow, like a hit he'd not seen coming. The sound was low and more drawn out than the few sarcastic grunts he'd heard from her. Her voice was beautiful, not high and screechy like he'd suspected it might be. She moved her tongue around to savor the cake, then swallowed. Steve passed her his coffee and sat on the bench dazed and confused.

He scooted his rump back and leaned forward so his Sunday jacket would conceal his lap. He took the fork from her hand and dug into the rest of his cake. It was good, but his embarrassment over his sudden erection distracted him from enjoying it. Anger caused heat and color to rise in his cheeks. Damn, why was this happening right now? There was no cause for it and it was entirely inappropriate. Knowing that he was blushing made him even more embarrassed and angry, making him blush more. He chewed the cake like it was the heart of an enemy combatant and gulped it
down.

His coffee cup nudged him in the side and he took it without looking at her. In under a minute, he finished off the cake and the coffee. He almost threw the plate in the recycle bin instead of the coffee cup, but caught himself in the last instant. He corrected his motions and set the dishes for the tower all together on the bench. There was nothing left to do with his hands and he couldn't get up and leave yet. The sound of her voice echoed in his head.

Steve hung his head and closed his eyes. He controlled his breathing as if he was hiding in a closet and didn't want anyone to find him. Slow and steady. Deep and slow and steady. He felt the heat fade from his face. Finally. People were strolling past, most of them in no hurry on a Sunday. Nobody saw Captain America in the man hunched over at the bench. Some people at the café tables knew who he was, but they were regulars and didn't make a fuss.

Slowly, Steve sat back and crossed his ankle over his knee like usual. He didn't rest his elbow on the bench back. His hands were laced together in his lap in what he hoped was a casual posture.

After a few more breaths, he turned to smile at Estrella to show her that everything was great and nothing was going on.

She had one hand at her mouth with her fingers pressed to her lips. Above that, her eyes were watery with tears. She shook her head slightly back and forth in denial as if something horrible had happened. Or as if she'd caused something horrible to happen.

"What? Was the cake so awful? I'd take it any day over that stuff you seem to like," Steve said. He tried for a smile, but it seemed forced, so he let it go. Her disproportionate response troubled him.

She turned her face down and her hands clenched in her lap. It was easy to see the two tears that fell. They glinted in the light and dampened the rough fabric of her pants. He wished he knew where she lived. She looked like she needed a good cry in private and he wanted to walk her home safely.

"Hey," he said gently, and he touched her knee with his knuckles. She jerked away from the touch and he did too out of responsive reflex.

She waved a hand at him in a shooing motion, back toward the tower. She wouldn't look up at him. They were done for the day. And he didn't even know what he'd done.

"I hate to leave you like this. What did I do?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's me. Just go," she whispered.

Steve wasn't quite ready to go yet. He made it a practice to not walk around in public with anything too obvious in his pants. But she wanted him gone. He gathered the plate, fork and tumbler.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but nothing horrible happened here. You didn't do anything wrong, and neither did I," he said with firm certainty, "I'll see you Tuesday morning at the library, okay?"

She nodded, still not looking at him. That was good enough. Steve got up in a hurry and went away.
Chapter 5

It was almost raining frogs on Tuesday morning. Steve stood at the glass exterior wall of the common living room with his old leather satchel leaning against his leg. It was true that he didn't mind a walk in the rain, but not to the library. And not with this stuff in his hair. Since it was getting longer, Nat had given him a little bottle of hair foo that hardened to hold his hair in place so he could at least look orderly for presentations like today.

Arriving drenched to the library was no good. Showing up at the back entrance in one of Tony's cars was no good, either. Taking his bike was the worst combination of both options. Heavy footfalls came down the hall from the elevator. Steve turned his head back to watch Thor enter the room. He was in black jeans and yellow work boots. A purple Jimi Hendrix T-shirt was stretched across his chest.

"Good morning, brother," Thor said with a smile. His cheery mood didn't match the weather outside at all.

"Good morning to you," Steve replied somewhat formally, "Is this you?" He indicated the weather with a thumb. Thor shook his head and looked at Steve's odd miss-match of clothing. Steve stood in his uniform brown leather boots and his dark blue uniform pants. The shield and folded uniform jacket was visible in his satchel, but he was wearing a plain gray T-shirt.

"Unfortunately, no. The rain comes only as the clouds bid it. I see that you have plans. Are you off to stand with the veteran shield-brothers? Or perhaps to bring cheer to the hairless children at the hospital?" Thor asked.

"Not today. I made a lady a promise that I would read books to the children at the library. They're always trying to get the kids to appreciate reading. Famous faces help. But paper books and wet super-heroes don't mix well," Steve said. It was time to go. He picked up his satchel and shouldered the strap.

"Then I will go with you. If that is acceptable, I mean. I would not wish to intrude if I would be out of place," Thor said. He was learning human etiquette through a continuing effort from Jane and Darcy.

Steve studied the Hendrix shirt. It wasn't one of the more controversial ones.

"I'd love your company. Wanda might even smile. The hammer would be a great touch for the kids," Steve said.

"Then I will retrieve it," Thor said.

He and Steve went to the elevator. Thor kept Mjolnir on a table in the elevator foyer of the floor he shared with Bruce. As soon as the elevator stopped and the doors opened, he held out his hand and it flew to him.

"We might draw less attention if you put Mjolnir in my bag," Steve suggested.

"Indeed," Thor agreed.

While still in the elevator, Steve opened his bag and pushed aside his uniform jacket to make room for the hammer. Gently, Thor nestled Mjolnir down into the bag and removed his hand. Steve closed the flap and Thor eased the bag and its strap back up onto Steve's shoulder.
"Too heavy?" he asked Steve. The elevator doors opened onto the ground floor lobby.

"Nah, I got it," Steve said. It was the weirdest thing that Mjolnir didn't pull down on his shoulder, but he could feel the weight of it. It was like carrying a person in his bag. A large person. His boots gripped harder as he walked across the lobby floor.

Thor smiled at him. He greatly enjoyed their secret. It was likely that only Jarvis knew of it.

As they went outside, the rain cloud above them shifted slightly. A misting rain fell on them while they walked, instead of the downpour that pounded the pavement everywhere else.

"Is this the place you patronize after your morning run?" Thor asked as they walked between the bench and the café tables of the coffee shop.

Estrella wasn't there. Steve didn't expect her to be out in the rain.

"Yeah, it is. The folks are getting used to me so there's not so much staring. Hi," Steve answered Thor, then greeted a man he recognized.

The man nodded at Steve as he hurried with his umbrella, then he noticed that the rain was hardly wetting Captain America. He smiled when he figured out that it was Thor walking beside the Captain. Thor didn't walk the streets much in casual clothes. It took a while for people to recognize him sometimes.

"Hiding my hammer was a good idea," Thor murmured to Steve.

"It's a good idea if we want to get to the library without having to stop for autographs," Steve said. Their long strides had them at the little mall the library was in in time enough for Steve to be early for his commitment.

He was surprised to see that Estrella was seated at a concrete table out front. There was an awning over that particular table. The pavement was wet all around her, but she was dry under the awning. She was also trapped by the rain and unable to go home. Wherever home was for her.

Steve smiled broadly and walked up to her table with Thor at his side. The rain shadow followed them until it included one section of the awning. Steve ducked under to sit and then Thor followed him.

Estrella looked between the two large men seated across from her. Her eyes were wide and she was nervous almost to the point of running off.

"Thor, this is my friend," Steve said carefully. He turned to Estrella and set his bag on the seat beside him. He reached into the loop he'd once used to transport a map case across Europe and pulled out her tumbler with the juice drink he'd made for her.

"You know about Thor, right?" Steve said as he set the drink in front of her.

Estrella nodded, but she kept her head down. She took the tumbler and drank from it. She knew she was being unwelcoming but she couldn't help it. Thor jangled her nerves just as bad as Steve had when they'd first met. Too large. Too male. She heard he was a very nice man, but he was still a man. Then she remembered that he'd been listening in the coffee shop the other day that it had rained and he'd played a part in startling the rude girls in the street.

Her lips curled so that she couldn't drink for a moment. Her gaze skipped across to take in the big man, then she hid behind her hair. Thor was smiling kindly at her.
"She likes that you jolted those rude girls the other day," Steve told Thor.

"Ah, that was good fun. I am aware that I am also rude at times, albeit unintentionally. Perhaps I should not enjoy making others uncomfortable for their rudeness when it is a failing I share?" Thor rumbled thoughtfully.

"Are you kidding? That was great. Wasn't it?" Steve asked Estrella.

She nodded. She was steadily consuming her juice drink, using it as a prop to help hide her from Thor's presence. Steve looked at his watch. He still had a few minutes.

He was proud of Estrella. She was holding up well under the strain of being around Thor. Thor was on his best behavior, too. That helped.

They heard the marching of lots of little feet approaching the mall from the street. A parade of school children under umbrellas came around the corner. Steve cut his eyes to Thor and the large man disappeared behind a planter. Slowly, Steve eased his satchel flap closed over the top edge of his shield. He scooted around the concrete benches so that his back was to the approaching kids. He hunkered down beside Estrella and leaned his elbow on the table, his face against his curled fist.

"Mrs. Romilly's class, stop. Mrs. Caldwell's class, go into the foyer and take off your boots and put your umbrellas in the rack," a teacher said in a clear, strong voice. Another woman held the outer door for them and the sound of sixty little feet tromped into the library.

"Say hello to Miss Wanda," the first teacher said.

"Good Morning Miz Wanda!" shouted out thirty little voices exuberantly.

"Good Morning, children. Remember to keep all the water in the foyer. Walk on the rainy rug. That's right, go straight to the reading room," Steve could hear Wanda's voice from inside the open door. She sounded far nicer to the children than she'd been to him.

"Das a big man. Is he a football player, Miz Romilly?" one child asked while the second class waited for their turn to go inside.

"Jamal, you know it's rude to talk about people instead of to them. Apologize to the man," Mrs. Romilly corrected the boy.

"I'm sorry, Mister. I wasn't trynna be rude," Jamal called out, just as enthusiastically.

"It's fine, son. No worries," Steve said without turning around. Estrella had been concerned at first when he'd slid close to her, but Steve couldn't stop smiling. The kids sounded so cute. Estrella appeared to enjoy them too, though she wasn't looking.

"Mrs. Romilly's class, go inside and take off your boots. Put your umbrellas in the rack," the teacher instructed.

"Hello, Miz Wanda!" one child said, and then they all spoke up in a chorus of greetings.

"Good morning to you all. You know what to do. Very nice. I like to see smart little people. Follow the rainy rug to the reading room," they heard Wanda's instructions. Then the door of the library shut.

"I'm on. You may as well come on in out of the rain, since you finished your drink," Steve said.
Estrella got up and went inside. Steve held the door for her, then went back to the table to get his satchel.

Thor came around from behind the planter and pulled Mjolnir from Steve's bag. It wouldn't do for anyone to see that Steve had been carrying it. They went into the foyer to find Wanda bent over straightening rows of rubber rain boots.

"Rack your umbrellas before you go inside. Wipe your feet," she said without looking.

"On the rainy rug. I know," Steve said.

Wanda straightened up and turned around. Her ominous black polyester security uniform was tucked in properly and a large flashlight and key ring hung at her belt.

"You're late," she told Steve. She narrowed her eyes at Thor, then looked down at the hammer in his fist. Thor was grinning like an idiot, eager to have some fun with the children.

"No weapons in the library. That's the number-one rule," Wanda announced sternly. She crossed her arms at her impressive bosom and lifted her chin.

"I wasn't really late. I heard the kids coming and we hid outside. We didn't want to spoil the surprise," Steve lifted the flap of his satchel and showed her his shield so that Thor wouldn't be the only one in trouble, "No weapons at all? Not even for show and tell?"

"Aw, you go on. But be careful with the kids. They're little," Wanda finally broke and smiled at them.

Steve stayed on the rainy rug, but he didn't take his boots off. Neither did Thor. The inner door was already propped open with a wedge so that the children could get through easily. Steve followed the sound of many little voices. There was a room at the left side of the library with a closed door. He and Thor approached and listened. They didn't want to interrupt anything important.

"Mrs. Romilly's class, Mrs. Caldwell's class. Let's have a seat. You know what to do. Everybody pick a square on the carpet and sit down. We were supposed to have a special guest today for reading time, but the weather was too-"

Steve chose that moment to open the door and stick his head inside.

"Am I in the right place? Is this first grade and second grade?" he asked. He eased inside to gaping mouths and stunned silence.

"Only second grade today," Mrs. Caldwell smiled at him. She was relieved that he'd showed up. Mrs. Romilly was apparently one of those women, like Kara at the coffee shop. She had stopped speaking mid-sentence and was as astonished as the children.

"It's Captain America!" one astute child said when they saw his pants and his boots. They hadn't been sure. The room of sixty children erupted in shouts and yelling. Most of them leapt up from the carpet and started jumping in excitement. Steve set his satchel down and stood in a command posture. He looked at them all kindly but sternly and put his finger to his lips. It took a moment, but the children got quiet. They were standing still, breathing in hitches and starts and one little girl was hiccupping. Steve kept one finger at his lips and motioned them down to the carpet with his other hand. He smoothly crossed his legs and sat on the multi-colored carpet too.

Thor opened the door and walked in quietly. The kids' eyes turned to the blonde Norse god and the pandemonium almost started all over again. Thor held out a hand in a strong 'halt' gesture and the
kids quieted again, likely in awe of his arm muscles. He moved next to Steve and sank down into the same position as Steve and the kids, with his legs crossed and folded.

Mjolnir thumped against the concrete that was under the carpet.

"Whoaa.." some of the boys called out.

"Is that really Jol-nir?" a girl asked.

"It is, but we are here to read today, are we not? I cannot read with a hammer. Bring me books!" Thor demanded.

Mrs. Caldwell scrambled to bring a set of thin books to Thor.

The children laughed, after they got over their shock at Thor's outburst. Thor took the books imperiously from the teacher and shuffled through them. Steve fought hard to keep a straight face. He had no idea what Thor's plan was, but the guy was an expert at improvisation.

"Oh no, Captain. This is horrible. The words on these books are too big for me. I can't read them," Thor dejectedly let the books rest on his knee.

"I thought everybody in Asgard was really good at reading. You're the prince, and you can't read?" Steve asked.

"I can read chapter and verse in Asgardian, and in Elvish, and in Jotun. But I only know how to read the small words in English so far. Reading is so much more difficult than speaking," Thor confessed.

"Let's see what you've got there. Maybe I can help you. I've been reading for a long time," Steve said. Thor handed him the books, still looking sad.

"Amelia Bedelia. That's a funny name. Clifford the… Wow! He's really red. And really big! Do dogs come in that color nowadays?" Steve held up the book's cover and pointed to the very red dog.

"No! It's just make believe," a child said.

"It's a story," another one explained.

"Oh. That's good. Because that's one big dog," Steve said.

"Is the Hulk coming?" a boy in a green shirt asked. He smacked his fist into his other hand gleefully.

"No, he's not. He's very tired from all the smashing so he had to take a nap," Steve explained. The boy's smile faded a little, but then he looked to Mjolnir on the carpet and he was happy again.

"Can we see your shield?" somebody asked.

"Did you bring it?"

"Pleezeze?"

"Are you the real Captain America? Because the Santa Clause in the mall isn't the real one, and Jamie says that-"

The kids were getting wound up again.
Steve made a fist and knocked his knuckles hard against his satchel. The unmistakable hum of vibranium silenced the room.

"We're gonna read about this big red dog first, and we'll help Thor with the hard words. Then you can see the shield," Steve stated.

Nods of agreement moved around the room. Steve opened the book and read. He held the book so that the kids could see the pictures. Thor leaned so that he could see the book too.

"Dog! I know that word!" Thor exclaimed in the middle of a sentence.

Steve stopped reading and gave Thor the stink-eye.

"It's rude to interrupt people while they're reading," Jamal said helpfully.

"I am sorry, Captain. Please forgive me. I will be quiet so that you may continue," Thor apologized humbly.

Steve continued reading in an animated, deep voice which kept the kids captivated. He turned the page and read for a while longer. Thor started squirming on the floor.

"What is it, Thor?" Steve asked.

"I am not learning anything. Will you let me try?" he complained.

"Should we let him try?" Steve asked the second graders.

"Yeah," seemed to be the consensus, so Steve handed Thor the book.

The kids loved helping Thor read when he got stuck on a big word like "collar" or confused with words like too, two, or to. Soon the first book was finished.

Before anyone could ask him again, Steve opened the satchel and pulled out his shield. He put his arm through the straps and held it in front of him so the children could see it well. It currently had the subdued blue scheme that he'd used on the last mission.

"It's supposed to have red," a girl said.

"You're right. Usually it does. See how the silver parts are more gray than shiny?" Steve asked. The kids nodded.

"Mister Stark, Iron Man, has a machine that can repaint my shield in a hurry. When we have to fight the bad guys at night, I don't wear the red or any shiny colors, so we can sneak up and catch the bad guys before they run away. See? Even the white stripes are gray, if you really look at it," Steve said.

He pulled out his uniform jacket and handed it to the nearest girl on his right. The jacket got passed around and tugged impatiently and dragged on the carpet. It had been through worse, but he'd made sure his gear was clean before he brought it today.

"Why is it sewn up?" a thin, dark haired boy asked. He was fingering the mended spot on the side of the jacket.

"Because I don't always want a new jacket when it gets damaged in battle. When things are only broken a little bit, it's better to fix them than to get new things," Steve explained. When his jacket made it all the way around and Thor handed it to him, Steve slipped it on and zipped it up.
"Whoa! You really are Captain America!" said the child who had doubted him earlier. Steve slipped his gloves from the satchel and put them on. He smiled at them all.

"Can we touch your shield?" somebody wanted to know.

"I want to hold Mjolnir!" someone else said.

"You may try. But first you must sit in a circle around the room," Thor told them. He turned to Steve and waited for further instruction. The children eagerly shuffled around the open space. They certainly weren't in a circle, but they were side by side.

"Here's your orders," Steve said briskly, "What's your name, soldier?"

He'd turned to the kid to his immediate right.

"Marcus," the boy said. He looked a little scared, so Steve moderated his tone to something more fatherly than commanding.

"Marcus, I'm going to pass you my shield down low. You can hold it and look at it. Keep it down low, right at your knees. The edge isn't sharp, but if you hit your face with it, you'll split your lip or bust your nose, and then your mom might get mad at me. I don't want your mom to be mad at me. So keep the shield flat and low to your knees. Pass it to the next person when you're done," Steve instructed. Marcus nodded and held out his hands.

The shield was heavy for a small child, but there wasn't anything on it that would hurt them unless they swung it around wildly. Steve kept a careful eye and reminded them to keep it low when anybody got a little too excited.

Thor waved Marcus over when he was done with the shield. He let the children touch Mjolnir or try to pick it up one by one.

Steve read a second book about Amelia Bedelia in the hush that followed. Thor studied the room and the things in it while Steve read. There was a slim window in the door, but it was reinforced. Everything else in the mid-level airspace of the room was durable.

Steve noted his inspection but kept reading. At the end of the book, Steve stood up to hand the books back to Mrs. Caldwell. He motioned quietly for the teachers to get low and sit on the floor like the children.

Thor stood up and began to spin Mjolnir from its leather lanyard. It was a lazy spin, almost idle for Thor, but the kids were impressed. Steve kicked the shield up and shoved his arm into the straps faster than most eyes could see it happen.

The kids yelped happily, sensing that something was about to happen.

Steve swung in from low as if he was going body-check Thor with the shield. Thor stopped the spinning hammer with a good grip and brought it down for a carefully moderated tap against the shield. He kept his back to the glass in the door to be sure it wouldn't break.

There was a sound-numbing shockwave through the room. Display books sitting open upon the middle shelves slapped shut and fell to the floor or tumbled down in a splay of pages.

The children covered their ears and looked on, amazed.

"Thank you for reading with us today," Steve said. He picked up his satchel and nodded to the
Estrella looked up from her Western novel when a strange anti-sound seemed to warp the air through the library. A decorative paper mobile hanging from the overhead air vent rocked on its wire, then swung back to hanging limply. No one in New York liked to hear explosions anymore, but she forced herself to stay calm. It could be no coincidence that Captain America and Thor were in the library right now.

She held her finger in the book and waited to see what would happen next.

Thor and Steve came bounding through the stacks and stopped not far from her chair in the corner. She'd never seen such large people move so silently. And Steve was almost fully dressed in his Captain America uniform, with the shield on his arm and everything. All that was missing was the helmet and a little tucking, where his gray T-shirt peeked out from under his jacket.

He flashed her a high-voltage grin and Estrella was upset with herself for feeling a little thrill at his proximity. At least it wasn't a romantic thing, she soothed herself. Anyone would feel excitement at being so close to two super-heroes. The children must be very happy, she imagined.

"That was most entertaining," Thor said quietly. He knew his voice had a tendency to carry, and they were hiding from the children.

"Wasn't it, though? I don't even think we broke anything. I should go back and pick up the books we knocked down after the kids leave," Steve said.

He let his satchel down near Estrella's feet and lifted the flap to insert his shield. He stripped off the fingerless brown gloves and tucked them inside. Next, he shrugged out of his uniform jacket and folded it carefully. That went into the satchel too. He eyed Thor's hammer.

"No thank you, brother. I am due to meet with Jane for lunch in Philadelphia," he said.

Just then they heard the excited, babbling voices of the children as their teachers herded them out of the reading room, along the rainy rug, and to the lobby to get their rubber boots and umbrellas. Thor and Steve moved as one to hide themselves at the ends of the bulky stacks. If the children saw them lingering in the library the teachers would have a difficult time getting their students back to school in an orderly fashion. All the little voices made their way outside and the library descended into quiet again.

Thor and Steve eased away from the bookshelves and stood in a more casual fashion. Estrella nudged Steve's satchel with her toe and felt the hard edge of the shield against her shin.

"I have an idea. I wish to walk with the children back to school. There are many stories I can tell them which they will likely enjoy," Thor said. He turned and bowed politely to Estrella.

"It was an honor to meet you, Lady friend of my shield-brother. I bid you good day," Thor said. He gave Estrella his understated charming smile and strode away between the stacks.

"Don't rile the kids up too much or the teachers will have holy heck with them for the rest of the day," Steve called after him.

"Teachers are made of stern stuff. I do believe they can manage some holy heck," Thor replied in his more usual booming voice. There was an "Eep!" of surprise from a library employee and then Thor was gone.
"I bet we'll see something of him on the evening news, or at least in tomorrow's paper. It sounds like the rain has stopped. Wanna go for a walk?" Steve asked. He stood in front of Estrella, still a little jazzed from playing with the kids.

She looked up at him but shook her head. She lifted her book in explanation, then let it rest in her lap.

Steve sat in the chair on the other side of the table from her, his back to the tall narrow window. The sun was coming out and it would be a sauna outside after the rain. Estrella was smart to stay in the library for a while.

"Oh! The books. I'll be right back," Steve said.

He got up and hurried to the reading room. When he went inside, there was a library employee vacuuming the carpet and the books had already been replaced on their shelves from where Thor's hammer strike on his shield had knocked them down. The older woman with the vacuum looked up at him and flipped off the power to the noisy machine.

"Sorry about the mess. I came back to help clean up," he told her.

"That's alright, Captain. The children were happy to help," she said.

Steve nodded and she flicked the switch to resume her vacuuming. There was nothing to do but go back and visit with Estrella for a while.

She studiously kept her face in her book until Steve sat near her again. She looked up once to acknowledge him, gave him the smallest of smiles, then looked back at the words in her book again.

Steve felt somewhat dismissed, but then reminded himself that he was in a library, not a coffee shop. It wasn't the best place for conversation. Besides, Estrella wanted to read, not talk today.

He got up and browsed the stacks near them. He had read a lot of reference books, history books, and nonfiction in the last two years. He hadn't had much time for fiction. He used to love thrillers and Westerns as a kid.

There was an entire section of Westerns, unlike the few available to him eighty years ago. He spent some time reading paperback covers until one interested him. He walked slow and distracted back to his chair, already getting into the first scene of the book. Estrella smirked at him, but he didn't notice.

An hour and a half later, his belly grumbled loudly at him. Estrella looked up from her book and Steve looked up from his.

"I guess that means it's lunch time. Wanna go with and get a salad or something?" he offered to her.

She shook her head.

"No, I feel full enough."

"Alright, suit yourself," Steve got up and retrieved his satchel, "I think I need to update my library card. See ya."

Estrella nodded to him. Steve gave her a friendly smile, then walked toward the central circulation desk with his half-read novel in his hand.
The balding man at the desk set his own book down and stood to move toward the computer to check him out.

"Oh, hello Captain. I'd heard that you read to the children today. I didn't realize that you were still with us. How can I help you?"

"Please, call me Steve. Nice to meet you," he held his hand out and the man shook it hesitantly.

Steve carefully removed the cards in his wallet and separated out the old yellowed paper card with the metal band clipped in it. It was folded in half because it wasn't the same size as the other cards in his wallet. He tossed it onto the circulation desk.

"I think I need to update my card," Steve said.

The librarian reached a reverent hand out toward the card.

"This is a Brooklyn card," he said. He lifted it and carefully unfolded it.

"Of course it is. Is that a problem?" Steve wondered.

"Not at all. I'm simply pleased to see it. Nineteen thirty-nine. Lovely," the man looked at the information written on the card, then at the titles and stamped dates.

"You can keep it. I need a new one that'll scan. Will this do?" Steve handed over his New York driver's license.

"Mister Rogers, I can't possibly keep your paper card. It's a collector's item and likely of considerable value," the man told him. He set Steve's old card back down carefully on the desktop.

"Sure ya can. Consider it a donation to the library, as long as I get a new one," Steve told him. He was impatient to get a card issued so that he could check out his novel, then get on to lunch. His belly rumbled at him again.

"Thank you, Mister Rogers! Our Library board will be quite pleased," the man said. He was still fixated on Steve's old card, not knowing what to do with it.

"Just call me Steve, please," he reminded the man.

"Of course, Mister Rogers," the librarian said. He reached to slip a clean new sheet of copy paper out of the paper tray of the desk printer. Next, he used a little plastic tool to slide Steve's old library card onto the sheet of paper. The man stared at the card for several seconds, as if he expected it to do something.

Steve felt his molars begin to grind together. There was a movement to the side, and Steve looked to see that Estrella was joining him at the desk. The librarian looked to her kindly, but confused.

Estrella pushed Steve aside and squared herself firmly in front of the librarian. She picked up Steve's ignored driver's license and poked it into the librarian's personal space.

"Mister Rogers, I'm terribly sorry! She's not normally so-" the man flushed red at Estrella's apparent rudeness.

"Steve!" Estrella whisper-shouted at the librarian. She jabbed the driver's license at him until he reflexively put his hand up to take it. Estrella pointed an emphatic finger at the computer keyboard.

"I'd listen to her," Steve said.
"Oh!" the librarian said. He finally turned his attention to entering Steve's information into the computer system. Estrella nodded at him once, then walked off back to her chair by the windows.

"Thanks, doll," Steve called after her. She waved a hand back at him without looking. He couldn't stop grinning. What a gal! She was too good to him. He wished she'd let him at least buy her lunch, but he knew better than to argue.

In only a moment more, the still flustered librarian handed him a new plastic library card and a felt marker.

"Sign here, please, Mister, ah-Steve," he caught himself in time. Steve scrawled his name onto the card and then blew on the permanent signature so it would dry faster and he could slip it in his wallet and go.

Steve put it and his driver's license away and tucked his wallet into the back of his uniform pants.

"I'm sorry for the wait. I should have been more efficient in assisting you," the man apologized. He'd seen Steve's obvious appreciation of Estrella's help, so he didn't feel comfortable apologizing for her behavior.

"Don't worry about it. You'll do better next time," Steve told him. He wasn't about to ask the man for anymore help, so he checked his Western novel out at the self-service laser scanner, then strode into the foyer.

Wanda was reading a magazine, but she closed it when she saw Steve.

"Thank you," Wanda said.

She didn't smile at him, and Steve nearly hugged the woman for her lack of overt fan girl behavior. His belly was driving him to find lunch, but he paused for a moment and stepped close to Wanda's rigidly arranged, almost bare desk. She looked up at him patiently.

"It was my pleasure. I enjoy kids. Wanda, could you do me a favor?" he dared to ask her.

"That depends," she said hesitantly.

"Keep this quiet for me. I wouldn't want her to know, because she's an independent lady and she might get mad at me. Can you get a message to Stark tower if you ever see that my friend in the corner isn't doing well? I'm not around all the time, but if she needs help, somebody at the tower will do something. Ask for Jarvis. He'll know what to do," Steve said in a hushed tone.

Wanda regarded him with a basilisk glare for a moment.

"You better leave that girl alone. She don't need you bullying into her life and causing trouble. Can't you see she's got it rough enough as it is?" Wanda told him.

"I know she's got history, Ma'am. I may look young, but I'm old enough to be your grandfather and I know a fragile person when I see one. My intentions are purely honorable, and I've already warned her that I could die at any time. She's quiet, but don't mistake her for stupid. Just keep an eye on her for me, will ya?" Steve said. He tapped his novel against his thigh. His belly wanted him out the door right now, but this was more important.

"Alright, I'll do that, but you better watch yourself with her. Whatever she needs, she gets it for free. No strings. Jarvis, you said?"
Steve nodded.

Wanda gave him a hard eyed look strongly reminiscent of Fury.

Steve nodded again in understanding. He got the message loud and clear.

Wanda kept her eyes on him until the library door shut behind him.
Steve was gone. There was no one to tell her where he was or when he'd be back. Even if somebody knew, nobody would talk to her and she couldn't ask. All she could do was linger in the lobby of an office building for as long as she could before they sent security to chase her out.

That particular building had a place to sit and television displays in a waiting area that showed business and stock market channels and two different news channels. For a day and a half, there were news blurbs of the Avengers fighting to defend some small nation in Africa, then the story faded from public interest and she was left to wonder.

She didn't hear the distinctive sound of the Avengers jet returning to the building, and most of the lights were dark on the upper floors of the tower when she looked at night. She hoped he was alright, whatever was happening. She hoped all of the Avengers were alright, but it wasn't the rest of them that she worried about and missed seeing at the coffee shop.

Estrella felt sick at the turmoil that worrying about him caused. Worrying about someone and missing them meant that she cared too much. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't get attached to anything more dangerous than a pigeon, and she was breaking that promise to herself. Anxiety made her dizzy and nauseous. She shouldn't do this again. Nobody was worth what always happened when she let someone get too close.

It was after two in the morning and she couldn't sleep. The sick squeezing in her gut and the bruises on her back and hips made her too uncomfortable to get any real rest. Her mind would wander, usually to fantasies of the past before she was twelve. Often, thoughts of Steve would intrude and she'd force them away with a mix of regret and longing. She had to be strong.

Thinking of the past and thinking of Steve was better than remembering what had caused her bruises. Things like that, she stored away in a mental map of places to avoid in the city. People to avoid. Things happened. It couldn't be helped when you lived on the street. The best she could do was learn behaviors that reduced the risk of it happening again.

For the hundredth time, she wished she could have a little light to read by, or to work her crosswords by. The money for a light wasn't the problem. The home improvement stores sold solar lawn lights for just three dollars. If she saved up for a week and had only plain coffee, she might be able to get one. It just wasn't safe. She had to keep her alley dark and silent at night. Any glow of light would attract attention and then bad things would happen.

At this time of the late night or early morning, there weren't many people on the streets or sidewalks compared to the daytime, but the ones who were out were the most dangerous. Her fellow street inhabitants were mostly harmless, but the ones who stayed pickled on drugs were unpredictable. The petty criminals were the worst. They felt entitled to anything and anybody. If they knew she was here, they'd hurt her and ruin her home just for the evil joy of it.

She'd gotten used to sleeping, despite the danger and lack of a room with a locked door to protect her. She slept lightly. Most people walked on by, oblivious to her presence. Some of the street people stopped to dig in the dumpster when there was something in it, but they never tried to get into her alley. She was thinner than them and they didn't even notice the loosened clips in the fence.

She liked rainy nights the best. People stayed inside on rainy nights. Even the dangerous people. Nobody liked getting wet. He did, but she wasn't going to think about him.
Steve had been gone for over a week when the next big rain came. She was still wearing the same clothes he'd last seen her in and she was starting to smell more than she liked to. It was part of her protection to smell a little unpleasant, but it came to a point where she didn't want to smell herself anymore. She had her shriveled and cracked bar of soap dug out of her bag, and her only other set of clothes set out when she saw the heavy clouds gathering near sunset. It was a perfect night to get clean.

Estrella slipped out of her shoes and set them on the farthest end of her pallet bed that she didn't use for sleeping. Next, she carefully peeled off the layers and layers of her clothing. She put them in the bag she would take to the laundry. She had enough quarters saved for a washer and dryer load. It made her happy when a rainy night, a good bath night, coincided with having enough change saved to wash her clothes.

She waited naked on her bed, soap in hand, for the first of the cold rainwater to flush down the broken downspout across the alley. It was nasty to use the first of the water, because it contained debris from the roof. A good, hard rain soon flooded the roof and gutters clean, and then she could wash.

There wasn't much light to see by. She was used to doing this in the dark. The dark protected her from anyone else who might have the slim chance of seeing her from the high windows over the alley.

She quickly soaped up her body, paying the most attention to the smelly parts. Those, she lathered and rinsed twice. She was satisfied to feel her bones pressing at her skin, sharp and angular. Her breasts lay flat and hung slightly against her ribs. The bruising on her back from being thrown down and kicked felt like it would be purple and green and maybe some yellow around the edges, but she didn't linger. As long as the skin wasn't broken, she'd heal. Her fingers rubbed over the knobs of her vertebrae up, then down. Nothing felt broken, she guessed. Her ribs were easy to assess. They were sore, but there wasn't too much pain at any particular spot.

Her hair took the longest. Warm tears tracked down her face in contrast to the cold pounding from the downspout on her shoulders. Her hair used to be so pretty. She'd taken pride in keeping it long and glossy. Her mami would buy her pretty clips and flowered hair bands.

The elastic one with Tinkerbell was her favorite. It was lavender and yellow, though the glitzy decorative ribbons were long gone. She still had it and used it as a bookmark. The memory of the feel of her long, silky hair brushing her back on a summer day was starting to fade, but she remembered what it felt like to run her fingers through the cool, loose strands and tuck them behind her ear.

Estrella let the rainwater from the downspout pound on her head like a soft hammer. Thud, thud, thud. Her neck jerked at the force of it. When enough water had penetrated the mat of her ruined hair, she bent over and scrubbed the bar of soap into the coarse pad on and around her head. It would take the rest of her bar of soap to get out all the smell and oils. Bar soap was horrible for her hair, but it was great for her. It made her hair even uglier, which was the goal. More tears fell as she tried to remember the lovely floral scented shampoos she used to use.

Sometimes she walked past the bath shops with their wonderful smells. Lotions, shampoos, perfumes, candles and pretty things. It would be a nice way to spend time, going in and looking at and maybe even touching those things. She couldn't. The stares from the shop keepers and the shoppers with money drove her out. Some days she was lucky to walk by the door to those shops
when someone was coming out. She always breathed deeply when that happened.

For now, she scrubbed until her fingers ached. The hair growing from her scalp pulled painfully while she worked soap in everywhere she could. She prayed that the rain would last until she could get all the soap rinsed out. It did, and Estrella walked back across the wet, clean pavement to her shelter. She felt so fresh and free like this. Goose bumps covered her head to toe, and the weight of her wet hair pulled at her neck, but she felt light and clean.

She crawled up onto the edge of her pallets, not far from her shoes. A towel was too bulky and difficult to keep clean, so she didn't have one. They soaked up dampness from the air and always ended up smelling musty, even when they were clean. She drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them. She didn't have enough money to put her blanket in the dryer, so she stayed away from it. She'd washed it last week, anyway. Estrella spent the night sitting up wet, trying not to wonder if he was okay.

At first, she'd tried to fool herself that he was invincible. Everybody thought that he was. But she'd seen him eat. She'd seen him go into the bathroom at the coffee shop and come out again. He sweated, and he even smelled a little when he sat near her on hot days after a run. He never smelled worse than she did, just different. He got hungry. He got tired, frustrated, and disgusted. She saw it in his eyes, in the things he must be thinking but didn't say. So many people said whatever was on their mind. He kept a lot inside. He was classy like that. Never an unkind word unless it was appropriate, or he was feeling really low.

Anyone who had the bodily functions of a regular person, the feelings of a regular person, was vulnerable to damage. She knew he was tough and fast, and he probably healed well and quickly. But the chances that someday he'd run into something that was too much for even him increased every time he went out to fight. She was glad he had his friends at his side. Especially Thor, who had called him 'brother.' Estrella was skeptical that Thor was a real god, because he probably ate and farted and pissed too, but she asked him quietly, in her head, to look out for Steve.

She shook her head and pinched herself hard in punishment. She had to find something else to think about until morning.

Two days later, she saw it was a Tuesday by looking at the "Tuesday's Specials" chalk board in the coffee shop window. She sat under the umbrella of a café table because it was hot and bright today. Her hair was still slightly damp underneath, and that helped to keep her cool.

Estrella had found a new Sudoku book in the free book box at the library. Only five of the puzzles had been done, so it was a great find. Her pencil was a two inch stub, but Izzy had a sharpener he let her borrow, and he saved stray pencils that coffee shop patrons left behind. The problem was that hardly anyone used pencils anymore. With her brain the way it was, she needed to work her puzzles with a pencil that had an eraser. She used to could do them without even checking the answer key, and she'd made no mistakes. They weren't so easy anymore, but that just added to the challenge and used up more of her empty time.

Her coffee was almost gone, and she would move out to the bench to see if she could collect some change with the empty cup soon. She enjoyed the shade while she could. Just three more weeks of summer and the city would start cooling down for the fall. Fall was great, but it brought winter close behind. Everyone on the street dreaded winter. She tried not to resent the heat because at least it meant winter was still a little ways off.
Her headaches were easing back to bother her, but not as bad as before. She didn't know what was in the drinks Steve had been bringing her, but she liked them because they made her feel better without making her fat. She would never take a drink offered by a stranger, but she could see that Steve wanted so badly to do something for her. It was better than letting him outright buy her things, so she took a chance. She'd been feeling pretty down when she'd first met him, so she hadn't cared much if he was trying to drug her or hurt her with the drinks, anyway. The drinks actually helping her was an unexpected surprise.

Estrella heard a sound coming from far away. She tilted her head to listen, because her hair impeded her hearing some. Yes, it was the Avengers jet! She was helpless to hold back a smile of relief, until she had the thought that the return of their jet didn't mean that Steve was alright. She didn't get up to look. That would be too much like a person who cared.

She sniffed and squared her shoulders. If Steve was back and safe, she wouldn't know it until she saw him again. She had to wait. Not like she should care anyway. Her coffee was gone.

She'd been sitting at the table for a while, so she was stiff when she got up. Sweat prickled her skin as she carried her pencil, her Sudoku book and her empty cup to the bench. The cup went down where pedestrians could see it and easily bend down to it, but where it wouldn't be in their way.

Estrella worked her puzzles for a while, and then there was a clink of change in her cup. She didn't acknowledge the person who had put the change, because she didn't want to interact with them. Sometimes they wanted things, even for twenty-seven cents.

A shapely woman with glossy red hair stood up from dropping the change in the cup, then she only took a few steps before she sat on the bench in Steve's spot.

Estrella immediately levelled her 'go away or I'll do something horrible and dirty and unimaginable to you' look at the woman. How dare she sit there?!

The woman was more than just pretty and shapely. She was graceful like a dancer. Her casual clothes were sleek and stylish. Her body was trim and lush and rounded like a woman, but it was clear that much of her shape was made from muscle. She looked Estrella dead in the eyes until Estrella felt like bug under a microscope. Or, more like a bug struggling in a spider's web. A microscope was clinical, harmless. This woman was not harmless.

Estrella's mind skittered through fight or flight options, all of which felt inadequate and hopeless. She was too scared to look away, too scared to move.

The roar of a motorcycle on the street, four traffic lanes away, echoed and bounced off the buildings. The engine rumbled thrice in quick succession, then once sustained for longer. The oddness of the intentional engine sounds drew Estrella's eyes away, even from the threatening woman.

It was Steve. She stretched her neck to look. Her heart rushed with gladness and relief at seeing him physically whole and apparently healthy. He was staring right at her over the roof of a yellow cab. He had his leather satchel slung over a shoulder, diagonally across his back. He looked very serious. Troubled. But his eyes stayed on Estrella as long as his bike was stopped in traffic.

Estrella whipped her head around again. The red-headed woman on the bench with her held up a thumb's up without looking over at the bike in traffic or the man on it. Her arm went down, then the bike roared off as traffic moved.

Estrella was torn between watching Steve's back move farther away as she could see him in
between buses and vans, and paying attention to the woman. The woman hadn't hurt her yet, so she took a chance and watched Steve until he was gone.

"He has to go. He wanted to see you, but he's not off-duty yet. I get to be the errand girl," the woman said.

Her lips quirked ever so slightly, but Estrella thought the almost smile made her look more dangerous instead of less so. The lethal aura around the woman and the wordless communication she'd shared with Steve told Estrella who she must be. Her fear eased a little. Black Widow was supposed to be one of the good guys. An Avenger. She was a hero now, with the rest of them. There shouldn't be any danger from her, because heroes didn't make a practice of hurting people.

"I don't like this thing you've got with him. It distracts him. I think it's one of the stupidest things he's tried, but he won't listen to me. So you listen. We need him focused on his job. It would be better if you weren't around. Move away from here. Find another place," Black Widow told her.

Estrella considered what she said. She really did. An assassin wanted her gone. She got that, but her life wasn't worth much to her.

Steve might think she'd abandoned him if she just left. The thought of his soulful, expressive eyes concerned and wondering what had happened to her firmed her resolve.

The Widow was wrong. He'd be just as distracted if Estrella left as if she stayed. If she stayed, at least he'd have somebody in the city to talk to who didn't insist on calling him 'Captain' or fawning over him. He was too kind and polite to stand up for himself most of the time. He needed her.

No. She wouldn't go. If Widow wanted to kill her, that was fine. She wasn't supposed to be evil anymore, so her death would probably be swift. She wouldn't feel much. The repercussions would be on the Widow. She wouldn't leave unless Steve asked her to.

Her chin came up. She'd made her decision. Once a decision was made, it was best to stick with it. Still, the woman was sitting there, taking up Steve's space, trying to threaten her into hurting him.

Estrella reached out her hand and grabbed a fistful of Widow's shiny, slick red hair. She shook it roughly, like a rope in her fist, until Natasha pulled her head away and pushed Estrella's hand down.

Estrella found herself breathing fast, rage and fear making her arms tremble. She was weak and dizzy with it. The Widow could do whatever she wanted with her. Estrella wanted her gone. Her demands, gone. Her beautiful, glossy hair, gone. Away from Steve's spot.

Natasha looked at the emaciated, raggedy girl. She blanked her face of all emotion. With controlled dignity, she got up and walked away from the bench, back to the tower.

Estrella watched her go, then kicked over her coffee cup so that the coins clinked across the sidewalk. One rolled off on its edge, then fell flat when it hit the recycle bin. She clutched the top bar of the bench tightly because her vision was going cold and narrow. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Calm. She couldn't afford to pass out in front of all the people staring at her from the café tables.

After a moment of concentrating on her breathing, the cold tingles passed and her vision returned to normal. She slowly and carefully bent to pick up her puzzle book and her pencil. Strange how she hadn't noticed them falling to the ground.

Her fingers shook too bad to write any numbers in the squares, but she pretended to. People were looking.
"Clint! Clint! Bruce!" Natasha called as she hurried out of the elevator and into the common living room.

The guys, including Thor and Tony, were devouring pizza with stuffed-cheek greed. They were all hungry, but Steve had insisted that two slices was enough to hold him, and he'd asked Nat to go down to the coffee shop and see if she could find the girl.

Clint looked aside, curious at what could have Natasha rushing and calling out. Tony set his pizza down and waited. He had that look like he knew he was about to be entertained.


He arched his brow at her as Natasha stole his pizza and stuffed it in her mouth.

Tony made a hurry-up gesture with his hands. Natasha chewed and swallowed quickly. Thor pushed a glass of grape soda her way across the bartop. She gulped a few sips of the sugary drink, then sighed at the relief of sugar and calories rushing into her blood.

"WHAT!?" Tony cried out.

"You won't believe this!" Nat said, and started laughing at her own disbelief, "I made sure she knew who I was. The girl was terrified. Shaking. Then I told her to leave. To go away and leave Steve alone."

Thor's jaw set tighter and he put down his pizza to cross his arms. Nat glanced at him, recognized his displeasure, but kept on.

"She thought about it for a minute. Then she grabbed me by the hair and shook me! Like a dog. I don't think Steve knows what he's getting into," Natasha smiled as big as any of them had ever seen her smile. She combed her fingers through her hair and scratched at her scalp, then reached around Clint for another piece of pizza.

"Steve's lady friend is very brave, but she is weak from hunger. You should not have provoked her," Thor said. Thor never liked being caught in a conflict among his human friends. Ribaldry was good sport, but this was serious. It would be an injustice to not speak his mind in defense of Steve's friend.

"You misunderstand me, Thor. This means she's worthy. She thought I was going to kill her, but she won't leave Steve. You should have seen her watching him when he went by us on the street. She was concerned about him the entire time he was gone. I'd put money on it," Nat said.

Thor's expression changed to one of admiration at her tactics, but then he frowned again.

"Still, she is weak. Excitement is not good for her health. Did you observe that she was alright after you walked away from the encounter?" he asked.

"Of course I did. She's a big girl. She held it together. I don't want Steve pissy with me for hurting her. I don't want to hurt her. He's right. She's remarkable," Nat marveled.

Grown men, bad men had trembled at less intricate intimidation tactics than she'd played on the girl. The guys couldn't understand the nuances she'd employed with her hair and her body and her face to intimidate the girl. Natasha trusted Steve's instincts. The girl was mentally strong, and she
was likely a good person if Steve was so drawn to her. Nat felt bad for testing her and upsetting her, but she had to know. She'd find a way to make it up to her later.

Natasha had no idea where she'd come from. There were no files on her. No biometrics. She was just what Steve needed, but Steve wasn't ready. Neither was the girl. Everyone thought she was really young, but Natasha wasn't convinced. There was something about her that implied more years than Jarvis thought she had. Nat bit her lip and grabbed another piece of pizza.

"We should help her. Help them. If they're not careful, they'll bungle it, and then we'll have a pissy, pouty Steve on our hands," she said between bites.

"It? What it? There's no 'it.' Did an 'it' develop while I wasn't looking? The girl is fifteen, maybe nineteen at most, though how you can tell under all the Auschwitz, I don't know. He's never going to go for a woman that young. There can be no 'it.'" Tony said, enunciating the last word with a pinched and thrown hand gesture.

"Tony, you're an ass, but you're right," Bruce said, "We're not helping with anything. Leave Steve alone, Natasha. I can see that you're excited about finally matching him up with someone, but the someone can't be her."

Clint chewed his pizza, as did Thor. Once a discussion got to this stage, they knew the best thing to do was to sit back and observe until reinforcements were required by one side or the other. Their task was to determine which side deserved reinforcement.

Sam walked in fresh from his shower, in casual sweats and a muscle shirt. He looked tired, but he also felt the tension of the unresolved discussion in the room. He went around Natasha, and Thor moved so he could get to the pizza.

"It's gonna bite y'all in the ass, messin' in Steve's business like this," he said in mild warning before food went into his mouth. He grimaced at the bottle of grape soda and looked in the fridge for a beer.

"Hmm!" Clint pointed to Sam in agreement, and chewed until he could swallow, "What he said."

"Alright, guys. You're not seeing what I'm seeing, that's all. They could be good together, but only if they can get past some serious problems," Natasha said.

She was done eating, though the guys would be a while. They were bottomless pits after missions like this one. She stood by the bar and turned her attention inward, thinking.

Tony didn't like that she was turning her creepy espionage brain toward engineering a train wreck involving one of his favorite spangly people. He'd wheedled the digs out of Jarvis and he knew that the chances of anything heart shaped occurring were mathematically abstract to the point of being mere theory. Shaky theory. He moved to distract her from that dangerous thinking thing she was doing.

"Match maker, match maker, make me a match. Find me a find, catch me a catch! She's way too young…, and Steve's got a big hairy itch he can't scratch…" he sang imperfectly as he swept Natasha into his arms. Bruce groaned and put his hands over his ears. Clint guffawed and watched Natasha humor Tony by allowing herself to be danced around the floor. Her natural grace kicked in so that while her face was barely tolerant, her body followed Tony's lead flawlessly.

"Sing with me, Yenta! For Papaaa, make him a virgin! For Mama, make him grim as gangrene! For her, though, I wouldn't bother 'cause she is as skittish as… Hmm. I can't think of a word for that
spot. But you get the point, right?” Tony stopped dancing abruptly and stepped away from Natasha.

_There is no ‘it’,_ he mouthed to her and made the hand gesture again, in her face.

Natasha grabbed his hand and twisted his arm around until Tony was arched sideways and grimacing.

"Ah! Ahh! Careful with the rich guy," Tony stood on his toes until she let him go.

She went right back to thinking again. Tony frowned at her.

"You're all delirious from lack of sleep. You know that, right?" Sam said. He didn't know how they were still on their feet.

They'd spent enough days in Wakanda that it was all blurred together in Sam's mind, but it didn't end there. On the way home, Fury had called in a side trip to Cuba. Somebody had enough enriched uranium to start making dirty bombs and the intel pointed to some people having a very bad visit to Disneyworld because of it. Grabbing the uranium wasn't enough. They'd spent another several days tracking down the back trail to the source and ended up in Damascus, of all places.

Then, no time to sleep on the flight back because Tony, Thor and Steve had to take turns carrying the uranium outside the quinjet, Steve using Sam's wings. Tony supposedly had enough shielding in the suit, and Thor and Steve were less susceptible to radiation poisoning. Even Thor with Mjolnir couldn't fly fast enough to get the hot package home without some uncomfortable side effects, so they'd taken turns.

Bruce was unhappy because he was practically immune to radiation poisoning, but he had no way to fly it back. Sam's wings couldn't be adjusted to carry the Hulk. Clint, Sam, and Natasha had kept the quinjet available as a switch out platform on the long flight home.

Once home, Tony slipped the messy bundle of uranium into a case Jarvis had been working on. The specially designed case shielded it from the public while Steve brought it to the proper authorities. Agents were still on the ground in Cuba and Damascus helping people who were likely exposed to the hazardous material. Sam seethed at the wickedness of terrorists who would expose thousands of their own people to uranium simply for the sake of taking out other innocent people.

Thor and Clint were watching Tony and Natasha, waiting to see if Tony could annoy Nat out of thinking so much. Bruce was slumped sideways on a stool against the bar, rubbing his tired eyes, glasses held in the fingers of his other hand.

"Come on now, this is papa Sam telling you it's bedtime. Time for all good little heroes to get some shut-eye before we get called out again," he reminded them. Their assignments tended to come in bunches. There'd be a flurry of activity followed by a long, boring lull. Just like the military. Sam sighed.

Bruce was happy to shuffle off to bed. Thor clasped a hand on Sam's shoulder before he left the kitchen.

"Thank you for reminding us of our limitations. Sleep well," he said in a gentle reminder that Sam should get to sleep too.

"I will, soon as you're all tucked in. You too, Tony. Quit worrying about Steve. He can handle the uranium. He can handle Natasha. And he can handle the girl at the coffee shop," Sam assured them.
"I know. This was all for fun. Mission wind-down. Delirium, like you said. But I'm waiting up until he gets back. I want to take a reading on him, make sure he's alright," Tony said.

"Good enough. What about you?" Sam asked. He watched as Natasha and Clint moved off to the elevators, moving slower than usual and nearly leaning on each other.

"Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"You've received the equivalent exposure of five years' worth of dental x-rays. The shielding performed as designed," Jarvis told them.

"See? I'm good. Just a little…tired," Tony said around a jaw-cracking yawn.

"You people are way beyond my counselling certification. I need to go back to school and get some more creds for this," Sam said. He went to the elevator to go get some real sleep in his suite, not the fake stuff he'd had leaned against the wall of the quinjet, trying to stay away from radioactively hot super men.

Tony enlarged a display in the air and watched the red dot that was Steve moving the uranium to its final destination.

An hour and a half later, Estrella startled awake on the bench at the sound of a large motorcycle nearby.

She straightened up from the slump she'd fallen into and turned to see that Steve had pulled his bike off the road and into a curbside parking space just beyond the coffee shop. He glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled as he put down the kick stand. He stood up from the bike and dismounted, then put his satchel on the seat. He was in full uniform, with only the helmet off. His shield was probably in his satchel, she thought.

"Hey, Cap!" one of the people sitting at the café tables said.

"Hello," Steve waved a hand at the people at the tables. Several smiled at him. They were dazzled because he never came around in uniform, or with such a serious face.

He took a few steps closer to Estrella and the bench, but he stopped several feet away. He looked tired. Very tired. The evening was glooming into dusk, but she thought she saw bruises on his face, or maybe it was dirt.

"Was Nat nice to you?" he asked.

Estrella shrugged. It didn't matter. Lots of people weren't nice to her. What was one more?

Steve sighed. She patted the bench next to her. He remained where he was, at least six feet away from anyone.

"I can't right now," he said.

They were both aware that people were watching and listening. It had become somewhat of a local thing that Captain America had taken pity on a scruffy street urchin. Some came by the coffee shop on the hopes of catching a glimpse of their glittering hero sacrificing his time on the lowest of the low.
Steve was aware of it. Estrella didn't care about the opinions of others. She was happy for Izzy, if he was getting more tips. Except, having an audience made it more difficult to visit with Steve. She frowned at Steve and patted the bench again. She didn't care if he was dirty or sweaty, or even bloody. He needed to get off his feet. He needed to be closer so they could talk without all his words being overheard.

"I can't. I really can't. I only wanted to see you for a minute before I go home. It was rude of me to ride on by a while ago. I didn't want you to think I was brushing you off," he said as quietly as he could.

Steve clasped his wrist behind his back and braced his legs. Jeeze, he was beat. He didn't know if drowsiness was one of the symptoms of radiation exposure, and he wasn't going to take the time to look it up. He'd be fine by morning, either way.

Estrella looked steady at his face. Unlike so many dames, her eyes didn't wander all over him. He saw sympathy in her eyes. She wanted him to sit down because she knew he was tired. It felt good to have somebody who didn't care what he'd just been doing, didn't care what might be on him. Like his ma, she wanted him rested.

"I gotta go, but I wanted to tell you that Nat means well. I hope she was nice to you, but if she wasn't, well... I don't know what's in her head. Do you want me to rough her up for ya?" Steve was joking, trying to get a smile from her.

Estrella considered the idea, mostly just to mess with Steve. When he started looking concerned that she was actually going to ask him to beat up his friend, she smiled and shook her head.

"That bad, huh?" Steve asked. He knew Natasha pushed things a little too far with civilians sometimes. She'd never really been a civilian, so she wasn't so in tune with their threat tolerance levels. She tended to make people nervous when she was left rattling around loose.

"No, no. She's only concerned about you," Estrella whispered and hoped that Steve could either hear her from six feet away or read her lips.

Just then, a camera flash went off. Estrella turned her head to see who had taken a picture of him looking so tired and worn. People shouldn't take pictures of him like he was a performing entertainer. There was a woman in a group of other women at a table. She was trying to hide a smile while she tapped on her phone. The woman noticed Estrella's glare and put her phone away.

"It's alright," Steve said softly, just for Estrella. He didn't want her fighting his public battles for him all the time. Sure, he was tired of being a spectacle, but he was also resigned to it.

Estrella looked mutinously at him, then at the woman, and back at Steve again.

"Peace. It's no harm," he said.

Estrella sighed. She loved seeing him and knowing that he was home safely, but he needed to go. He'd been working hard and it was time for him to rest. And probably eat.

She shooed him toward the tower with a hand.

"Alright, doll. See ya tomorrow. But we're gonna go somewhere that's not here, okay?" he asked her. He wanted to give her a chance to tell him no. He'd had enough of the eyes and ears always looking for a publicity op with the Cap.

Estrella shrugged. She'd deal with that decision tomorrow.
Go, she shooed him again.

He nodded. He wanted to hug her or something. The touch of somebody who cared and saw the real Steve Rogers would feel good. The way people were watching, though, he didn't even want to reach a hand out to her. It would likely end up in the paper or on the internet, with all kinds of nasty speculation.

Instead, he looked at her for a moment. She looked back, her eyes so soft on him that it almost felt like a touch. He smiled sweetly before he turned for his bike to go home. She watched him sling the satchel over his shoulder and settle it across his back. He swung his leg over and shifted his weight. In one motion, he tucked back the kick stand and started his bike. He waited for traffic, then in a rumble, was gone.

Estrella was glad that he'd had his back to the people at the coffee shop when he'd smiled at her. They'd have gotten the wrong idea. She knew there was nothing like that between them, and he simply didn't know that people weren't supposed to look at each other that way anymore. Nobody was that kind. That genuine. She'd have to teach him to guard himself, or somebody was likely to take advantage.

Lots of women would use him if they knew how sweet he was. Then, he would get hurt and defensive and jaded like everyone else. She didn't want to see that happen. He deserved to keep his soul until he could find a woman who was worthy of him, she decided.
Chapter 7

Author's note: Here's where this story starts earning its M rating. If you're not comfortable with that, please don't read this chapter. I've loved writing this because it's so fun playing with the characters. I'm far from done with it, but my family is going on vacation til the 15th of June and I want to be with them. Plot elements play in my head all the time and make my fingers itch to type, so by the time I get back, I'll have a lot to write. I posted this as a writing exercise. I didn't anticipate all the lovely follows and faves and comments. Thank you. I feel humbled. I also didn't anticipate how getting reviews would make me want to get more out to you. More later!

"Naw, man, but you should have seen the look on his face! Classic Fury, all the way. I thought Tillis was gonna puke, he was so nervous," Sam said around a smile, then stuck a buffalo wing into his mouth.

"Is not agent Tillis the new one from Texas?" Thor asked.

"He sure is. We had to hide his cowboy hat until he finally figured out that it didn't go with the suit," Sam answered when he had chewed and swallowed.

Clint laughed silently and poured himself more beer from the pitcher. The restaurant was crowded. Football was on the big screen, and waitresses hurried around athletically delivering platters of food and pitchers of beer to the noisy crowd. There were frequently moments of hushed anticipation in the large room, followed by either raucous shouts of triumph or boos of disgust.

Steve smiled along with his friends and halfway paid attention to the ball game. The energy of the diners was infectious and he felt cheered by the roar of the crowd. It was like baseball, but with more beer and chicken. And the waitresses… Steve grinned and shook his head.

He hadn't wanted to go out with the guys tonight, but Nat had given him that eyebrow, so he'd changed into his best jeans, (as determined by Natasha, Pepper, Jane, and Darcy), a crisp white shirt, and his brown leather Western boots.

After reading three Western novels back to back, he was imagining the jingle of spurs when he walked. He didn't think Tillis' hat was so bad. He'd held it in his locker for Sam and was only partially ashamed to admit that he'd tried the hat on. He was too clean shaven to make it look quite right.

Another roar went through the crowd and Steve looked to the screen to see that there was a penalty. He poured himself more beer for the taste of it. Wings weren't complete without beer, he'd learned.

They had three waitresses serving their table, apparently, because every other minute or so, one of the lovely ladies would come by and offer them something. Anything. Apple pie. Beer. Phone numbers in case any of them needed anything after hours. Steve was used to it, but he didn't let Sam see him pocket one of the phone numbers. He was tempted to call it in front of Nat just to make her day.

His good cheer was dampened slightly by looking around and seeing all the overhanging bellies. And then looking down at his own plate of discarded wing bones. He's probably consumed four
thousand calories tonight. As well as breakfast and lunch and a snack earlier.

Estrella had let him touch her briefly yesterday while they walked to the library. There'd been a puddle near the sidewalk and a car was coming. He'd grasped her upper arm and guided her slightly behind him so that he could take the splashed water as the cab rushed by. She'd felt like bones in his hand.

Why would she be letting herself get worse? He didn't know, but he was on the razor's edge of forcing her to come to the tower for treatment. If forcing her put a rift in their friendship, then it was better than her being dead.

Sam nudged his leg under the table. Humor still gilded his smooth features, but there was a depth of concern in his eyes.

Steve smiled a little and shook his head. On purpose, he watched a well-rounded waitress prance by. Sam's watchful gaze moved away. Having Sam around was like having a doctor and a mother hen with them at all times, mixed with a heavy dose of Casanova. The man got as many phone numbers as Thor and Steve did, and nobody knew who he was.

Thor drank beer like water, and Clint looked a little buzzed from trying to keep up. Steve needed the restroom. When he came back, everyone was ready to leave, finally. He left a nice tip because he knew the girls were working their feet off tonight.

His boots would have made him as tall as Thor if Thor hadn't seen them and demanded to know where he'd gotten them. As a result, he walked in his brown scuffed leather, and Thor kicked along beside him in black and white rattlesnake. He was surprised that Thor hadn't stolen Tillis' hat. He'd already apprehended two of Steve's Western novels. Poor English reader, my ass, Steve thought. Not that Westerns had many large words in them.

Clint was laughing for no reason, or at least no reason he was willing to share with the rest of them. Steve thought it was both pleasant and strangely empty that Tony wasn't along with them. A gathering always had a certain reckless excitement when Stark was around. You never knew when strippers would arrive, or a flaming dessert cake he'd never heard of. Still, it was nice to have a low-key evening and appreciate the Americans around them enjoying life. Tony tended to draw the focus of things to himself, just from sheer flamboyance. The guy knew how to party, as long as he wasn't too drunk.

Pepper had claimed Tony's time for the night. Jane was waiting for Thor as soon as the elevator door opened. Steve blushed at the openly eager look of appreciation on Jane's face as she tugged Thor forcefully from the elevator.

"Good evening, guys," she'd said. Thor had only grinned back at them and followed along behind Jane with no protest.

Sam and Steve helped Clint into his suite before Sam left him to go to his own.

"You gonna call that waitress?" Sam asked him.

Steve laughed and rolled his head down to stare at his boots. He thought he'd been smooth, but he couldn't out-smooth the king of smooth. Dammit, Bucky could have taught him to do better. There hadn't been much opportunity to learn before, because the dames had wanted nothing to do with him. Then, when they'd been with the Commandos, there was little time for wooing women.

"Hey, it's all good. But I really think you should call that number in front of Natasha," Sam said.
"That's exactly what I was thinking," Steve said with a finger pointed to emphasize his agreement.

"I want to be around when that happens," Sam said, and then he was in the elevator and gone.

Steve ambled to his door with a warm, happy feeling all over him.

Why wait? He wondered.

It was after eleven. Surely the restaurant was closing soon. He left the lights off in his suite. The air was fresh and cool. He reached in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the number the waitress had written for him on an empty order ticket. Sherice, it said, in pretty, loopy script. There was a number, then a little heart drawn under it. Steve pulled out his phone.

"Who's this?" he heard the blonde answer. She sounded busy, distracted. Other voices were in the background and there was the sound of dishes and silverware clinking. She must still be at the restaurant, Steve thought.

"I know my name doesn't show up. It's Steve. Steve Rogers. You gave me your number tonight. I was wondering if you wanted to come around for a little fun," Steve forced himself to sound casual, imagining how Sam would have said it.

"Who did you get my number from, Steve? You sound cute, but I didn't give it to a Steve," she sounded impatient. He heard a sharp clank, and Sherice mumbled 'shit' under her breath.

"You gave it to me and told me to call you anytime. It looked like you thought about giving it to Thor instead, but you changed your mind," he told her. He hoped he was giving her enough information for her to figure it out. His jaw would lock shut before he had to remind her who he was by using his title instead of his name.

"Captain America?" she said breathlessly. He heard her say OhMyGod, the words muffled against something. There was a harsh, clattering scrape, like maybe her phone dragging over her name tag or some jewelry.

"Sure. But I'd prefer it if you called me Steve," he agreed.

"Steve," she said, sounding a little lost.

"Yeah. Steve. So, when do you get off?" he asked. He wasn't quite as eager to meet with her anymore, but he hadn't expected it to go perfectly.

"Theresa!" She called out, her face probably turned away from the phone, "Um. I can leave now?" Sherice said like a question. Steve heard a little squealing in the background. He winced.

"I'll see you soon, then," Steve told her.

"Okay. Where do I go?" she asked.

"Stark tower. Avengers tower, I mean. Get in the elevator and my suite is on the right when you get off," he said gently. She sounded like she was having trouble breathing.

"Isn't there security or something? Do I need a code? Which floor?" she asked.

"There's security, but you won't see it. Just get in the elevator. Suite on the right," he reminded her.

"Okay. I'll be there in like… twenty minutes?" Sherice said.
"That sounds great. I'll see you then," Steve agreed. He heard another litany of *Oh My God, Oh My God, Oh My God* before the phone went dead. He grimaced and reminded himself of Sherice's assets as he set the phone down.

He had twenty minutes, which could feel like forever in certain circumstances. He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth and flossed them. Next, he made sure that dishes and laundry were all squared away. His shield was propped against the wall by his bed, so he slid it under the edge of the bed. It was still within reach, but out of sight.

Two pairs of shoes were on the floor. He tossed them in the closet. The more he moved to get ready, the more nervous he felt. He ran down a checklist of what he would need, like he was packing gear for a mission. Suite clean. Bed made. He didn't stink. What else?

Crap.

He called Natasha. This was too important for a text she might or might not answer. He needed to hear her voice.

"Why are you calling me at… 11:42?" she answered, sounding sleepy. He knew she was yanking his string. Nat always woke in an instant, alert for anything.

"Do you have any condoms? I wasn't thinking I'd need any so soon, and I-"

"Calm down, Steve. All I have is regulars, and you're going to need a magnum. Call Thor," she said. He could hear the pleased smile in her voice.

"Okay," he said. He didn't want to call Thor. He was pretty sure Thor was busy right now.

"Get off the phone with me and call him," Natasha reminded him.

"Yeah. Thanks," Steve said. He ended the call and looked at his phone. He *really* didn't want to call Thor. But he had to. The pharmacy in the tower closed at ten, and he could probably get somebody to open it for him, but then everybody would know his business. Crap. He called Thor.

"Ngh. Your timing could benefit from a little luck. How can I help you, brother?" Thor asked. He heard Jane giggle in the background.

"Nat said you'd have magnum condoms?" Steve asked. He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. He was at Thor's mercy as to whether he would keep this quiet, or announce the incident loudly in front of everyone later just for fun.

"Ngh. Your timing could benefit from a little luck. How can I help you, brother?" Thor asked. He heard Jane giggle in the background.

"Nat said you'd have magnum condoms?" Steve asked. He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. He was at Thor's mercy as to whether he would keep this quiet, or announce the incident loudly in front of everyone later just for fun.

"I do," Thor said. Steve could hear the huge grin in his voice. He was going to make him ask.

"Do you mind if I run up and get some? This was pretty unexpected," Steve said. His teammates knew he always liked to be prepared, but maybe he hadn't been thinking that Sherice would agree to come over.

"I will go now to put some on the foyer table. Good hunting to you," Thor said. The line went dead, but Steve didn't move. The 'Good hunting' bit must be an Asgardian euphemism. He gave Thor a few minutes to get the task done, then he went to the elevator.

Right next to Mjolnir was a strip of five square packets in black foil. Steve grabbed them and folded them, then stuffed them in his pocket. He hurried back to the elevator which was waiting open for him.
"Thanks, Jarvis," he said.

"It's my pleasure to assist, Captain. Shall I inform you when Miss Sherice arrives, or would you prefer to be surprised?"

"I'll hear the elevator. That's good enough," Steve said.

He hurried back to his room and put the condoms in his night stand drawer. How much time did he have? He looked at his watch. She'd said twenty minutes twelve minutes ago.

Steve went to the upper cabinet in the kitchen and got down the bottle of bourbon. It was a gift from Tony, so he was sure it was ghastly expensive. Steve cracked the seal and poured a highball full. The stuff was strong but smooth. Useless. The smell at least made him imagine he was accomplishing something.

"Captain, there is a slight complication. Miss Sherice has brought a friend. Would you like to entertain them both, or should I provide tea for the guest in the rear waiting room?" Jarvis asked from somewhere in Steve's suite.

"Keep the guest downstairs," Steve responded. He tossed back the bourbon, then chased it with water from the tap.

A minute and a half later, he heard the soft sound of the elevator slowing to a stop out in the foyer. There was a light knock on his door.

"I might recommend turning on a few lights, Captain. I'm certain that Miss Sherice is unable to see as well as you are able to," Jarvis said at a very low volume.

"Right," Steve said. He hurried over and turned on a lamp in the living room. There was another knock on the door.

_Think Bucky. Think Sam. Just do what they'd do_, Steve told himself. He ran his fingers through his hair, the last nervous gesture he would allow himself. Then he went to open the door.

"Sherice. Hello. Please, come in," Steve said. He held the door wide and stepped back so that she could enter. He could feel his pulse hammering, but she wouldn't know that. Natasha's teaching kicked in. He smiled at the waitress.

She was a little off her game too, he thought. She'd been all sparkle and confidence at the restaurant, but she was quiet and hesitant here. He preferred her that way. At least she'd stopped saying 'OhMyGod.' It was a reminder that he was about to do something wrong. Steve thought about what Nat had said. He needed to do this. He was aware that he was a grumpy, distracted bastard more often than not lately. Lesser of two evils, he justified to himself.

Sherice entered and he closed the door behind her. She looked around at his large suite and the window which he'd cleared so they could see the lights of the city if they wanted to. He let her look around while he moved to the kitchen.

"All I've got is bourbon right now. Would you like any?" he offered.

"No, thanks, I don't usually drink bourbon," Sherice turned around to look at him standing in the light of the kitchen holding the bottle.

"Is that Hirsch?" she asked. She moved closer to the kitchen, her eyes on the bottle.
Steve turned it in his hand to look at the label.

"That's what it says," he confirmed.

"I'll have some. Please," she changed her mind.

She looked like she didn't know whether to stare at Steve or at the bottle. For the moment, the bottle was winning. Steve was happy that she wasn't ogling him. Her distraction was amusing enough to ease his nerves. Maybe he ought to walk around with a bottle of this stuff in his hand. He smirked and poured her a few fingers in a fresh glass. He poured more for himself. He didn't want her to feel odd to be the only one drinking.

The bourbon went back in the cabinet and he left the kitchen to bring her drink to her in the living room. She seemed to like the view, so he went to the window. She followed. He propped one elbow on the glass and sipped his drink with the other hand.

"Whooo.." Sherice breathed out, half sound and half air. She'd taken a sip too, and she fanned her face after she swallowed.

"You don't like bourbon. You don't have to drink it," he smiled down at her. Sherice was of average height, just about at his shoulder. Her cute top and tight jeans showcased the features that had made him call her number.

"It's good," she said. He saw that her pulse was jumping under her skin, a curl of bright blonde hair almost hiding it. She was more nervous than he was.

Steve was happy that he wasn't making a fool of himself so far, but tension was building. There was no point in drawing this out. They both knew the reason for the visit.

"Come on," he told her. He curved a hand around her waist and escorted her toward his room. She went willingly.

"I need a minute? I don't normally go anywhere but home right after work," she said. She stepped toward his bathroom.

"Sure," he said.

She was beautiful, and he was eager to get on with it, but she needed some time. When the door closed behind her, he tried to think of a plan for when she came out. He could kiss her, but how should he lead into that? He finished his drink and set the glass on the night stand. Taking off his boots was awkward, so he sat and removed them while she was in the bathroom.

She had all the plan they needed. Sherice joined Steve at the bedroom window wall and slid her arms around him from behind. It should have felt good. Especially when she pressed against him and rubbed firmly up and down his chest and abs. He almost shoved away out of her arms, though. No one touched him. Not like this. He'd dreamed of it, wanted it. But now that the moment was here, he was having a hard time adjusting to allowing her to do it.

He'd done quick sex a long time ago in Europe with dames who didn't speak English. He didn't remember their faces. They were probably dead now, most of them. It felt like forever ago. It had been so fast that there wasn't much to remember. He could do this. He let Nat close to him, but Nat regularly crawled all over him in the training room. This woman felt foreign. He could do this, he told himself again.

Steve turned in her arms and kissed her. They both tasted like bourbon. Her curves felt good in his
hands. Things went pretty fast after that. Sherice became more eager and clothes started coming off. She took off his shirt, messed around for a while, then pulled off her own. Her little lacy pink bra was gone, and Steve barely could appreciate anything before Sherice was undoing his belt, his zipper, and then hers. He would have helped, but he'd have wanted to do things slower.

"You gotta be somewhere?" he asked, teasing.

From the flush on her face and the way she looked at his body, he doubted she was listening. Her jeans hit the wall, then she tugged at her panties. They would have hit the wall too, but lacked sufficient mass, so they fell short onto the floor.

Steve lay back on his large bed, atop the covers, and wondered what he was supposed to do. She seemed to be doing it all. She straddled his hips and sat up. His bedside light was on, and his eyes went straight to where their bodies touched. He'd been thinking pretty hard about feminine bits and pieces lately, and she was a sight, but-

"Uh, Sherice, what happened to, uh?" he asked dumbly.

"Hmmm, what?" she asked in a hot kitten purr. She held up her glorious blonde curls and rode him over his jeans.

"You don't have any hair. How old are you?" he asked. Steve was confused. She was a grown woman with a job and everything, but that didn't look like what he was used to. It was strange and juvenile looking to him.

"What?" Sherice asked, coming out of her haze some. Her arms came down and her body stopped making those undulations which felt so nice.

"It's nothing. Never mind. Just..." Steve moved aside underneath her, then rolled her over. In this position, he wouldn't be seeing her bare parts unless he deliberately looked there. She was looking happy again, so he started to work his jeans down. He had them off, and thought it would be a good time to get a condom before she could possibly be exposed to anything that could have permanent results. Her hands grasped at the muscles of his sides while he reached and got what he needed. He'd been right. Hands on his skin felt good when he was ready for it.

"You don't need that. I'll let you do it bare," Sherice said.

"That's sweet, but I'm wearing it," Steve told her firmly.

"Oooh, Cap. Tell me what to do," she cooed. She raised her arms up toward the headboard and twined her hands together.

Steve hid his distaste at her refusal to use his name. Then he was confused. Why would he need to tell her what to do all of a sudden? She'd been in the lead since the clothes came off. And what was with the odd arm thing?

He decided to ignore the strangeness for the sake of the moment. She was a beauty and he'd like to get this done. He stood beside the bed for a minute to finish undressing and put on the protection.

Sherice's eyes burned at him in admiration. He was drawn to her groin, but then looked away again at the strange sight of her lying there squirming and hairless. She didn't see his brows go down because she was looking at him while he rolled on the condom.

"It's so nice. Too bad you want to cover it up," she pouted.
He chose not to respond. Things were shifting in his mind. He got on the bed and covered her before they could shift too much. She was eager enough and she welcomed him in. Her arms pulled at his shoulders to encourage him.

"Oooh, I can't believe I'm fucking Captain America. Theresa's going to shit," Sherice murmured, her eyes closed.

He didn't get more than a quarter of the way in. He knew better than to shove in, with his size. His brain was far faster than his hips. Unfortunately. Things came to a crunching halt in his head, and the switch went cold off.

She was fucking Captain America, talking about shit, and planning to tell her friend all about it as soon as she hit the lobby. Steve got off the bed and bent to grab his underwear. He had them on before she could blink and sit up.

"What happened, Cap?" she asked. He made a face like he was in pain.

"Nothing much, Ma'am. I'm sorry to say that we're not compatible. I shouldn't have wasted your time. I'll have a car brought around for you while you dress. Steve bent and kissed her softly on the forehead, to ease the sting.

Sherice stared up at him, dumbstruck at what was happening. He was still plenty hard. He had a sweet blush across his face. But he was very serious. She wanted to ask what he didn't like. She wanted to call him a few names. But he was standing like a mountain, still and adamant. She could still feel his kiss on her forehead. Calling him names wouldn't change anything.

"Okay," she said.

He nodded to her and retrieved his clothes. He shut the door behind him so she could dress in privacy.

Sherice sat up in a confused blur. She drank down the last of the bourbon he'd given her. Then she got up to find her clothes. Her panties were right by the bed. As she bent to get them, she saw the curve of something under the bed. Was it…? It was.

She drew his shield out. It was heavy. One edge of it scraped along the floor. It made a strange humming sound.

"That's not for you," she heard him say from down the hall. Shit! Her fingers fumbled at being caught, and she dropped the shield. The edge of it hit her big toe and the shield rolled away lazily.

Steve rushed into the room. The shield was still going round and round on the floor, shimmying faster as it wobbled like a top. He stepped on it to stop the noise. His hands pushed the naked woman back to sit on the bed. He lifted her foot where her toenail was already marked with purple.

"I know that hurts. I've done it a time or two myself," he squatted down and rested her foot on his thigh. He rubbed the top of her toe with a thumb to soothe the ache.

Sherice wanted to be angry. She wanted to rage and spit at him for rejecting her and sending her home unwanted. But he was so nice. His hands were warm on her foot, and her toe didn't hurt anymore. He wasn't even mad that she'd messed with his stuff. He looked at her with concern.

"Feel better?" he asked.

She nodded. He wasn't in an awkward hurry to get her out of his place. Weird.
"Can I ask why you stopped?" she dared.

Steve dropped his head to pretend to inspect her toe. He thought of what to say for an instant, then looked at her.

"I'm not ready for the women of this century. I thought I was, but I'm not. Things are too different," he said.

He'd decided that if he placed the fault with himself, maybe she wouldn't feel bad. It was the truth without the details. It must have worked, because she smiled a little.

"Can I at least have a hug?" she asked.

"I'd like that," Steve smiled too. It was a wonderful hug. He only had his jeans on, so there was a lot of skin and she was soft. That was the best part. He lingered for maybe too long, then patted her hair and drew away. He got up again so she could get dressed.

He'd normally kick the shield against the wall with a bit of downward force to pop the edge up so he could grab it, but the mood was quiet and soft, so he took the time to bend down and get it like a normal person.

Steve smiled and wagged a finger at her as he left the room with it on his arm.

Sherice sighed and got dressed. She wouldn't tell Theresa what had happened. He was just too sweet.

Steve was brutal in the training room the next morning. Natasha patted him on the shoulder and walked off the floor. She and Thor exchanged looks as he took her place. Natasha toweled the dripping sweat from her face and went to the showers.

"Things did not go well," Thor said.

Steve ignored the banter and laid into his friend so that Thor had to take a step back.

"You're smarter than you look," Steve ground out. Thor nodded, refusing to rise to his provocation. They traded blows for a while. It felt good to let the aggression out. Steve was feeling at the top of his game, and Thor responded by pushing him harder, moving quicker until Steve was using his brain as much as his body to stay on his feet.

Blocking didn't do much good with Thor. If Steve's bones weren't as strong, they'd be broken. He took a hit to the diaphragm that tossed him across the mats. Thor was grinning, but it wasn't the golden, sparkly one he used with civilians. It was the scary one he used in battle. Nearly a thousand years of fighting experience danced there, ready to swat down anything from Steve's brief ninety-four years.

Before all of his body made contact with the mat, Steve was up and engaged again. He forced Thor into the neutral ground between offense and defense, hitting and blocking at the same time, feet moving to avoid being hooked and spilled on their ass. If he lost his footing, it was over. Natasha was speed and pain. Thor was speed and crushing injury, if he wasn't careful. Steve reveled in the struggle. He wondered how much Thor was holding back for him.

"Hit me!" Steve snarled at him.
"I thought I was," Thor responded.

They broke a brief grapple that rode on the edge of entrapment and defeat. They shoved each other away.

"Rrragh!" Steve shouted at Thor. He stood panting, loose, waiting to see if Thor wanted more.

"Graaught!" Thor shouted back.

They burst out laughing.

Steve's belly hurt, but he couldn't tell if it was from the fighting or the laughing.

"God, that was great," Steve wheezed.

"It was. Shall we continue?" Thor asked. The other smile was back in place.

"I'd love to, but I gotta get to the coffee shop. Wanna come with?" Steve asked.

"I would, but your lady friend is happier without my presence," Thor said.

Their breathing was loud enough that they hadn't noticed Sam and Clint standing at the side of the room with a freshly showered Natasha.

"That would have burned out the YouTube servers if I'd had my phone," Sam said.

Steve walked over to them and picked up his water bottle. Natasha looked at the bruises on his arms and face. She shook her head and rolled her eyes, then left the training room.

"What's wrong with her?" Steve asked.

"A little too much testosterone," Clint said.

"I am in need of a washing. Thank you for the entertainment, Steven. It's been too long since I used anything but my hammer," Thor said on his way to the showers.

Steve had too many responses that wanted to come out at once, so he kept quiet. He would need to speak to Thor later. He turned to Sam and Clint.

"You're pretty well matched with him," Sam said.

"Not at all. He was holding back, and he's a gentleman about it. I hope I never see him truly angry," Steve cautioned them.

Sam and Clint were amazing men with their own talents, but he didn't have the words to describe to them what being on the mats with Thor was like. He felt happy and loose now, and that was a fine accomplishment, considering how he'd been feeling when he'd first entered the training room.

Steve got his towel and picked up his watch. He shook it. Maybe it was broken.

"It's right. You were on the floor with him for thirty-seven minutes," Clint said.

Steve shook his head. The amount of sweat on his body and the sheen of it on the mats proved it. It had felt much shorter. He drank more water.

"Gotta eat," Steve said. He headed for the door.
"You're a mess. Don't you want to shower?" Sam asked.

"Shower later, food now," Steve grunted.

Clint laughed and checked his phone. Yup. Thirty-seven minutes of video.

Estrella couldn't leave her alley. There were men by the dumpster. Angry men.

It was early and the coffee shop wasn't open yet. The street lights were still on, but they'd go off soon, when the sun rose a little higher.

There was yelling, and somebody got shoved into the chain link fence, making it shake and jingle. She breathed fast and crawled back deeper into her shelter. Their accent was foreign and heavy. She couldn't understand what they were saying or what the conflict was about. She wanted them to move on and get away from her space. She wanted to whimper or scream, but horrible things would happen if she made a sound.

More yelling, and she thought she saw a weapon pulled. A few cars went by on the street, but no one wanted to get involved.

The bang of gunshots fired, and some of them whistled past her shelter to chip into the rear brick wall. She jerked and cried out a little, but there was more yelling which covered up any sound she made.

A man suddenly landed on the pavement somehow from above. Right in front of her, like he fell from the sky. She took a breath to scream, but he was too fast. She saw only a dark blur of movement, then he was up into her shelter with her. She struggled and flopped, but he wrapped her up tight against his body and covered her mouth with a hand. Or a tool. Something. He turned his back to the shooters and leaned his shoulder against the brick wall.

Her heart burned and pinched in her chest. She had to get away! But he was too strong. He pulled her back tightly against his chest and belly with an arm like... like... she didn't know. Then he was speaking low and fast in her ear.

"Stay still and quiet. People like them never stay for long. They'll go and then I'll go and then you'll be safe. Calm down before you hurt yourself," the man whispered.

Dark hair fell against the side of her face. His hand was cool and hard against her skin, but it stopped hurting when she stopped struggling. He had her and she couldn't get free. Now the horrible things would happen. She willed herself to pass out so she could sleep through it, but her adrenaline was too high.

"Shhh. I'm here to help. Just breathe, alright? Breathe and try to relax. They'll be gone soon. Listen. The police are coming. It's almost over," he whispered.

She couldn't do anything but breathe. Her chest hurt as bad as it ever had. She wasn't struggling. She lay limp and the man stayed as he was, a solid mass between her and the guns. More shots banged and echoed around her brick walls.

The man behind her jerked and grunted a tiny bit, but they both stayed quiet. Was he scared, too? There was another burst of angry voices, then the men were gone. Police cars rushed past, and one screeched to a stop at the curb outside her alley. Its spotlight turned and gleamed bright through the
chain link, illuminating her shelter through the cracks. She trembled against the man.

"Shhh," he said, and he patted her arm. Then he let her loose. She expected him to run off and disappear as quick as he'd come, but he just turned beside her and curled his back against the brick wall. He handled her gently until she was leaning back against it beside him. His fingers pressed a spot at her throat, feeling her pulse.

She finally got to look at him.

He was almost like a street person. Like her. His clothing was old faded and stained denim, jeans and a jacket with a frayed collar. Underneath was a black shirt. He smelled a little, changing the familiar scent of her shelter with his presence. She didn't notice his worn boots because she was looking at his face. Long dark hair, searing eyes, scruffy jaw. He put a finger to his lips. She nodded.

The police were right outside the fence. She could hear the engine of the car and the police radio and their terse voices. If she or the man made any noise at all, the police would come and find them.

Her chest hurt, but her mind raced ahead. She would have to move. Someone knew where she was now. He said he was here to help, and maybe he was, but men like him didn't help people for no reason. He hadn't hurt her yet, but he would. He was a rough sort of man, not like Steve at all.

She stared at him, too scared to look away. He was calm. Bored looking, really. His chest wasn't rising and falling quick like hers was. He held her gaze for a moment, then looked through the cracks at whatever was going on outside.

Under all the unkempt shag of him, she discovered that he wasn't ugly as her first impression told her. Maybe he'd clean up nice. He didn't have the sick color of a drug user, or the bad skin. It didn't really matter who he was or why he was here. Why was he helping her? She wondered what he would do if the police came in. He didn't look worried about it.

There was a hot, coppery smell that she recognized. She craned her head to see that blood was blooming in a spreading stain on his jacket. He had a hand pressed there, a black leather glove that was slick with blood. Why didn't he look concerned? There wasn't even a crease in his brow.

A few minutes later the police left. He looked at her and put a finger at her neck again. The fingers that weren't covered by a bloody glove. He nodded and patted her shoulder.

"You better not hurt me. I have a friend who can find you and kill you," she whispered.

"I know. You should let him help you so this doesn't happen again," the man said.

Then he was gone. In less than a second, like he wasn't injured at all, he swung out of her shelter like a monkey and was out of her sight. She was too tired to move, but she heard slight scuffing sounds at the brick wall. Gone.

All she had left as proof of him was a little wet bloodstain on her carpet.

She rubbed at her chest and lay down for a while. It hurt and she was tired.
Author's note: Vacation was great, and then this chapter was wedged in sideways and didn't want to come out. I've got it figured now, and things are flowing. I've been snooping around reading a little about the characters as portrayed in Marvel Comics, and I see that what I'm doing with them doesn't quite match up. Tough. I'm having fun. I'll try to be a little more true to character, but I'm not going back and re-writing everything. It sounds like the original comic book writers did some pretty crazy things with them, so I can be crazy with them too. Thank you all again for the happy vacation wishes and the lovely reviews. I had no idea how much I would enjoy them. I was checking my phone between Splash Mountain and Thunder Mountain Railroad to see what was going on with the story. It added a touch of fun to my vacation. No sexy stuff in this chapter, just a little gore.

Steve didn't like how fragile Estrella looked when he met her on the bench. She was more hunched than usual and she looked around nervously while she drank the juice gunk he'd brought her. He was still full from the large meal he'd had after his workout with Thor, so he didn't bother with a coffee. He could tell that Estrella didn't want his full attention on her, so he pulled out his sketchbook and his pencil.

He wondered why she was playing shy this morning. They'd been getting along great. She'd spent most of their time looking him in the eye like a normal friend in ordinary conversation. She at least whispered more than she used to, though she still didn't speak to him. Steve figured something must have happened since their last visit to the library. He wished she would tell him more about what went on in her life, but she always clammed up if he asked anything too personal.

It didn't take her long to finish the drink he'd brought her. In that time, Steve assessed the street and the people around them. Kids were in school, and most people were at work. It was mostly young women sitting at the café tables across the sidewalk from their bench. He knew why they were there. He'd dressed down in loose fitting clothes and Clint's old ball cap, trying to take some example from Estrella to avoid drawing too much attention. It only marginally worked. Steve kept most of his attention on his bench buddy instead of on the women who'd come to get a chance at watching Captain America.

The weather was finally cooling off and giving the first hints of fall with dry breezes and sharp, golden light. Steve looked up and over a few buildings along the street where the edge of an aluminum roof vent gleamed in the sunlight. His sharp eyes watched for movement, but there was only the angular metal vent and heat shimmers rising from the rooftop.

Again, he made himself let go of the hope that a stray flash of silver could be Bucky. Buck wouldn't be dumb enough to run around with his arm showing. And Buck was likely several hundred miles away doing whatever his tormented mind compelled him to do. Steve shook his head at his eager foolishness and turned his attention back to his sketchbook. The nice weather and the quality of the light was what had made him want to doodle.

When he opened the spiral sketchbook to the first clean page, the signature drawing he'd made for Estrella a while ago slid down the page and almost flew away down the sidewalk with the breeze. Steve's fingers snapped out and caught the rectangle of heavy sketch paper before it could need chasing.
He held the clipped sketch out to her absently as if it didn't matter.

"Here, take this. Throw it away if you want, but it's my version of your idea. Look it over for me. If it's alright with you, I'll start using it," he said.

He had to hold the paper for a moment longer than was socially comfortable, but she took it from him. He wondered if she enjoyed making him squirm. Did she know that her opinion mattered to him and was that why she made him wait and wonder? He was disgruntled about her being so hesitant and distrustful of him still, after all the time they'd spent sitting on this bench and reading near each other at the library in companionable silence.

Then he looked aside at her and saw the little smirk she ducked her face down to hide.

"Punk," he muttered at her.

Her shoulders wiggled some under her frumpy, bulky clothes. She was laughing at him, getting a kick out of his discomfort. She knew him well enough now to know that he was sometimes awkward, and she teased him about it when he was in a favorable mood.

"That's mean. You know an artist is sensitive about his work. Come on, don't play me like that. Do you like it?" he asked her.

He gave up trying to pretend indifference. He turned more fully toward her and watched her finger the corner of the paper while she looked at what he'd done.

"I won't do it in color like that when people ask. I don't carry around markers. It can be in whatever medium they hand me to write with. It won't look as snazzy without the silver, red, and blue, but I wanted you to have a nice copy because it's your idea. What do you think?" he asked.

She looked at him and nodded sharply. She looked satisfied, and her eyes pinched at the corners with a smile. She tucked the card away in her clothes somewhere and he was happy that she'd finally taken something from him without a fuss.

Steve felt attention sharpen on him. On her. With a quick glance, he looked up and saw the mostly female patrons at the café tables watching him and Estrella interact with bald curiosity. They were enjoying the latest gossip spectacle. He understood some of their fascination because he'd idolized his own versions of heroes when he was a kid, but there was something tawdry about the way folks watched his visits with Estrella. They thought she was unworthy of his attention and it made him angry.

"Hey, watch this," Steve whispered aside to Estrella.

He filed his pencil point to how he liked it against the metal bench, then moved his hand onto a blank spot at the top of the new page. With quick strokes, he lined out the frames of a comic in which he and Estrella were doing a series of mundane things like reading, walking, and drinking coffee, and wide-eyed people were following them around in herds with cameras and note pads, then he sketched a TV frame with a news icon in the bottom corner and made a dialog bubble of the journalist reporting their boring activities as if it was great drama.

Estrella watched the sure, quick strokes of his hand as he worked. From the back of the previous sketch page, she saw that he was capable of much more intricate and detailed work, but right now he was messing around with his frustrations and the irony of their situation. She agreed that it was ridiculous how people took note of them and seemed to hate her because he paid attention to her.

She took his pencil when he was done with the sketch and wrote beneath it. Steve watched her
precise letters appear from the end of his pencil.

*Do you think they'd talk about it on the 'net if you yelled out loud for no reason?*

"Yeah, probably. I can see it now… 'Captain America loses his mind, goes rabid from contact with street chum.' They don't know I was a street kid myself most of the time I was growing up. When I could get out, anyway. Summers were broiling. Nobody had air conditioning. We'd play in any water we could find. It was miserable to be inside for a few weeks every year," Steve told her.

He took back his pencil and drew a sketch from his memories of he and his ma's little place in Brooklyn. The walls, the ceiling with its water stains, the window frame near his bed, the black metal electric fan that was their only air movement at night.

Estrella pointed past his hand to the bits and pieces of memory he'd penciled down on the other page.

"Who's that?" she whispered to him.

She'd moved close enough so that her whispered words would only look like lip movements to their onlookers. She knew he could hear very well, so she didn't need much breath to be heard.

Steve looked at the shadowed profile and long hair she was pointing to. It wasn't even a complete face, just a nose, forehead, eyes, and hair, done dark and low contrast. It had been night when he'd seen Buck like that.

"That's an old friend of mine. I thought he was dead for a long time, then a few months ago, bam, there he is again. He's pretty confused right now, and I'm looking for him, but he's always gone when I get to the last place he's been. I want him back because he's the only one who remembers me, but he's being a- never mind. That's probably not very interesting to you. Look at these creeps now," Steve said.

He brushed Estrella's hand away from where she was hovering her fingers at the edge of Buck's sketch. The eyes of their watchers were even heavier on his nerves now that Estrella had moved closer to him on the bench to look at the sketch book. Steve took a quick glance up at them again, then set pencil to paper.

A herd of round, owlish faces appeared on the paper, all of them clutching and tapping on their phones, the phones pointed at the viewer. He made the faces of the women look witch-like, with pointy little features where he'd taken the time to embellish two or three of them.

Estrella didn't like the way he was letting people get to him. Steve's brow was crimped in the middle. He was bothered by something more than their spectators, and he was taking it out on the people in his sketch book. The work he was doing was to the point and evocative of his thoughts on the matter, but it wasn't as detailed and careful as what she saw on the other page.

"I don't care about them. Let me see…" Estrella whispered.

She pulled the sketchbook away from him and onto her lap. Steve wanted to pull it sharply back and complain about her taking over his stuff, but she was looking more lively and engaged and he much preferred that look on her to the hollow, skittish look she'd had when he first joined her today.

He sat back in his corner of their bench and watched her flip slowly through the pages of images he'd put down in the last few months. It was a mixed lot of pieces, hardly any of it complete, cohesive drawings. There were memories of his childhood that he didn't want to lose, like the look
of his bony shins and feet poking out from the bottom of his blanket on his old bed. Bits of architecture that didn't exist in the city anymore. Flashes of how the sky and ground looked while he was making an aerial mission insertion, glimpses of blurred action in a battle. The waggling tail of a duck as it stuck up from the surface of a park pond and rippled the water around it.

Around and among much of it were pieces of Bucky. A hunched, squatted form in black leather on one page as a menacing silhouette. An angular, handsome view of him young and clean shaven in his new uniform. Angry eyes and teeth bared in rage. Bucky skimming fast down the wall of a building, his reflective fingers leaving lines of gouges in the wall while his body braced for impact. A firm metal hand gripping his thrown shield.

"That's why he wears a glove," Estrella whispered. Her fingers traced the finely interlocking bands of metal that Steve had drawn for the man's arm, tapped at the outline of a star on the shoulder.

"He wears a glove? Estrella, have you seen this man?" Steve forgot to not say her name in his startlement. He was whispering anyway, his head bent close to hers in his eagerness to find out what she'd meant by her thoughtless comment. He'd taken on that sharp intensity he got when his Captain brain was paying attention and he wasn't exactly Steve anymore.

Estrella's head throbbed its way into a more prominent headache than she'd had all morning. The day had already been too exciting. Steve looking at her like that and thinking hard, waiting for her to respond, was too much. She put her forehead in her hand and rubbed at her temples.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Have you seen him?" Steve persisted.

He could see that her head was hurting, and he'd let it go if she could just answer this one question. It could make a huge difference in his hunt, if Buck was around local sometimes. His hand hovered over Estrella's back, wanting to soothe her discomfort. He gave up wanting to comfort her and held his breath to better listen to anything she might whisper.

She was so conflicted and she knew she was going to do the wrong thing. The moment had that feel to it, the knowledge that what she told him mattered and that she had to say the correct thing. His friend whom he was looking for, the same man who had helped her and taken a bullet for her this morning, didn't want to be found.

She wanted to help Steve. It was very important to him, and she could hear the eagerness in his voice. But his friend would have gone to him if he wanted to be known. He had a reason for staying hidden and he wasn't as confused as Steve thought he was. Estrella knew well the need to stay hidden. That man knew where she lived. If he didn't like her telling his secrets, he could do something to her.

"I don't know where I saw him. Wasn't he on TV with you a few months ago?" she lied. The pain in her tight whisper wasn't faked. Her chest was still achy, but it was her head that really hurt now. She didn't want to lie to him, but she had to. The man knew where she lived and he might be watching right now. She had to find a different place to live.

"Yeah, maybe he was. Don't worry about it," Steve reassured her. He was being an idiot again. Of course she hadn't seen Bucky. It's not like he would be anywhere around here, and Estrella surely hadn't gone to any of the places where Buck was likely to be laying low.

Like a few minutes ago when he'd seen the roof vent gleaming silver at him, he made himself let go of his thoughts of Bucky. Estrella needed him to back off, so he did. He rested his arm along the bench behind her. What he really wanted to do was bundle her up with his sketchbook and carry her back to the tower. It would be so simple to feed her something and let her rest for a while.
where people didn't stare at her and no one would bother her.

"Let's lose these lurkers. Come on back to my place and we can watch a movie or something. I've
got a stack of files to go through this afternoon and a few meetings, but we could put the hurt on
some popcorn and watch something stupid first," he offered.

Estrella looked up at him suspiciously. She looked to the Avengers tower which was visible from
anywhere in this part of town. Then she frowned at him.

"What, you think they won't let you in there? You're with me, kid. You go anywhere I say you go
and if they don't like it, we'll give em what-for. You're welcome at my place anytime," he assured
her.

Estrella looked down and hid her face. He was naive in his earnest attempt to make her feel
welcome in his glossy, high-energy world. She knew he meant what he said, but he couldn't know
how out of place she'd feel in the tower. Everything was clean and shiny and modern there. The
one time she had walked by the ground floor public entrance, it looked like a laser would shoot out
and incinerate anything that dared to be out of place or imperfect. She'd feel like something meant
to be swept into a dustpan. Still, he was kind to invite her.

What would it be like to sit on deep, comfortable furniture with a bowl of popcorn and a glass of
soda? To ignore everything and enjoy a fantasy on the TV for a few hours? To sit near someone
and enjoy something trivial together? Well, she already did that with Steve at the library sometimes
and she knew it was nice. Those were the best times of her life lately, having someone to spend
time with who actually sought out her company.

"Thank you Steve, but no. I don't belong in your world," she whispered when she'd let the dream
play out for long enough in her head. It was best to not dwell on what she'd never have.

Steve jostled her shoulder. She looked up at him again to see indignation firing his eyes.

"Hey, this is my world and you're already in it. Our world is wherever we choose to go. This is
America, and it's changed a lot in the last decades, but it's still a free country mostly. You go where
you want to," he said with a stubborn firmness in his voice.

He was little boy super-hero cute in his idealism sometimes. He was one of those people with
power. He made things happen, and the world bent and bowed around him. He still didn't
understand that she had to live as one of the people who survived by hiding and staying out of the
way of people like him. Staying out of the way of ordinary people, too. And watching out for the
class below ordinary, as well. She was the lowest of the low.

Her ribs and jaw ached a little from where Steve's friend had held her still and quiet a few hours
ago. He was another strange person like Steve who didn't fit with how she knew people to be. The
man was hard and dangerous, but he'd protected her in his own way. She was sure he hadn't meant
to bruise her, but men rarely realized their strength. Had he gotten help for the bullet wound? He
didn't act like it bothered him, but it should have.

"Eya?" Steve nudged her again.

He was looking at her, waiting. She felt fuzzy-headed. He'd said something and her mind had
wandered off after that. He waited for her to respond, watchful as if she was supposed to say
something.

"What?" she hissed, feeling cranky. The bright sun was making her eyes squint and her head hurt.
"I want you to come with me to the tower. We've got a doctor on staff there and I want you to see him to make sure you're alright. You don't eat enough. No, don't try denying it. You can't even think straight right now. Come with me and let the doc look you over. For free, I promise. He's on a fat salary from Tony and there's no charge for services. You won't owe anybody a dime," Steve tried to convince her.

She frowned at him. Did he think she was stupid? She knew medical care wasn't free. Even the 'free' stuff the president was pushing wasn't really free. She had two dollars and seventy-one cents.

Estrella shook her head at him. It was too hot and he was being too pushy. She carefully got up from the bench because her balance was acting funny today. She went past all the gawkers at the tables and into the cool dark of the coffee shop. Steve was following her, she knew, because the door handle disappeared from under her hand as she went to push it. She'd been counting on it being there and she almost swayed forward too far.

Damn him and his good intentions, anyway. She ignored him standing behind her shoulder and dug out a quarter to slap down onto the countertop. Izzy got her a big Styrofoam cup and filled it full of fresh ice water. He squeezed a fat lemon wedge into the water, and put another one on the rim of the cup, just the way she liked it.

Estrella stood in the middle of the floor in the mostly empty coffee shop. Everyone was outside. If she didn't sit down, then Steve couldn't sit and pester her about changing her life anymore. It was making her mad that he lingered there by her elbow like she was about to fall down and he planned to catch her. She knew when she was about to fall down, dammit, and she was good for right now.

"Go away," she whispered at him. She drank her water like she planned to stand there all day.

Steve glared down at her, feeling just as ornery. If she was a male friend, he'd shove her and say something wise at her. But she wasn't, and a shove would knock her over.

He looked to Izzy, who was standing behind the bar wiping down the syrup bottles. Izzy frowned at Estrella too, then shrugged helplessly at Steve.

"Alright. I'll see ya," Steve said after a moment more of stiff silence.

Estrella lifted a hand toward him in a half good-bye, half go away gesture. He rested his fingers on her shoulder for just a moment to let her know that he didn't have any hard feelings even though she was being a grump.

She sighed and looked at him over the rim of her foam cup as he was pushing out the door. He looked back at her for just an instant, and she couldn't help smiling back some at the rascally grin he gave her. She stomped her foot after he was gone. It made her even madder when he made her smile when she was angry. He was too charming and it wasn't fair that she couldn't stay mad at him.

The next morning was blessedly crisp and cool. Estrella was up and on the sidewalk before the morning rush. Most people avoided bumping her even when it was crowded and busy, but sometimes it happened. It was dangerous to fall when the sidewalks were full and everyone was moving, so she'd set out before the crowds could be a problem for her.
She didn't want to leave her place in the alley. Izzy was nice and he didn't bother at all about her using the bathroom in the coffee shop and hanging around most days. She left his patrons alone, and he gave her extra lemon slices with her water. He didn't seem to mind that she set her cup out for change on the sidewalk, either. It would be hard to find another place like the one she had right now.

She was unhappy that Steve's friend had been watching her place like a creepy ghost. He'd got himself shot for his trouble, and she wasn't sure she was thankful. Life wasn't all that much fun for her, except for the books she could read. They probably had books in Heaven, so she wouldn't mind moving on. If Steve's friend could have kept his nose in his own business maybe she wouldn't need to look for a new place.

Estrella shuffled along toward the library. There might be someplace around there where she could hide a shelter. The little mall of shops was busier than the block the coffee shop was on, but it might not be too bad. She didn't want to move far if she didn't have to. She'd be further away from Steve there, but closer to the library. Wanda was nice. Not as nice as Izzy, but nice enough.

Steve was a bother sometimes and he couldn't leave well enough alone when he wanted to get something done, but he was one of the bright spots in her life, right along with her reading. It made no sense to her that he followed her around and kept showing up, but he did and she didn't have the heart to completely run him off. He was silly for wanting to spend time with a lump like her, but he was kind and she could use some kindness. Sometime in the last few days, she'd given up trying not to care about him. She'd just have to be tough again when he went away for good.

She was tired and out of breath by the time she made it to the library. She didn't go in. Her heart was racing and she had the cold tingles so she eased down onto the concrete bench at the round table. While she caught her breath, she looked around to start assessing the place.

The shops were built all together with no gaps between the buildings, but there were probably service areas around back. There were places where shop keepers stacked bales of used cardboard boxes. Vermin liked to stay around spots like that, but she could clean things up.

She was getting frustrated because the cold tingly feeling was lingering for longer than usual. She couldn't get up and do anything when she was about to pass out. Carrying her stuff over here for the move would take a few trips and she'd have to do it in the small hours of the morning and hope that nobody noticed. It would be dangerous. Maybe she could get a shopping cart to help.

The library door opened. It was Wanda doing her morning routine, unlocking the doors and putting the rubber mat out.

"Girl, get yourself in here! You don't need to be sitting on a concrete bench," Wanda fussed at her.

Estrella pushed herself to her feet and obeyed Wanda. The woman pushed the heavy inner door open for her and Estrella stopped for a drink at the water fountain.

"You need to eat something," Wanda barked at her while Estrella retreated to her regular chair in the fiction section. Estrella hunched her shoulders and stepped high. There was a seam in the carpet that the floppy toe of her shoes snagged on if she wasn't watchful.

Wanda's attitude didn't bother her. She knew the woman meant well, and she reminded Estrella of her mother a little bit. Always wanting her to eat. Eat, eat, eat. She'd weigh three hundred pounds if she'd listened to Wanda and her mother. She could have chosen obesity over starving, but starving was cheaper and easier. And some men liked large women, so being big may not have helped her much.
Estrella sat in her soft chair and rested her head back against the wall. She only sat for long enough to feel better. Once she felt strong enough, she got up and started back toward the coffee shop. There was no time for a book today. She had to find a place, if only her body would allow her to search for one.

Wanda stared at her as she made her way back outside, but she didn't say anything. Estrella wandered around the outdoor area of the mall. There was no one else out because the shops weren't open yet. It looked like the mall and library area wasn't going to work for her. She looked through the gaps in a fence and the service alley was only wide enough for a delivery truck. No room for a shelter.

Estrella made her way back through the increasing morning crowd. She was light headed again by the time she could duck out of foot traffic and ease onto her bench in front of the coffee shop. She liked to be aware of the people moving around her, but she was too tired. She pulled her legs up under her and crossed her arms.

Sometime later, she woke up to loud voices.

She didn't know how long she'd slept, but the morning rush was over and the women at the café tables were starting to leave because they knew Steve would have been here already if he was going to show up at all.

The women weren't just leaving because Steve wasn't here. There were five young men off the side of the sidewalk, close to the café tables. They should have been at school or at work, but they weren't. They were getting loud and rowdy, using rough language. They wanted attention, she could tell. They liked making a spectacle and getting noticed and driving decent people away.

They were driving off Izzy's customers. Not everybody was around to stare at her and Steve. There was the older lady and her niece who met here on Wednesdays, and some tourists with a Southern accent who were likely tired and were drinking coffee just to have a place to sit. The father at that table was looking sternly at the loud boys and was about to get himself in trouble.

Estrella pulled a penny out of her clothes and threw it at one of the young men. She was happy to see it hit him.

"Did that piece of shit just throw something at you?" one of the kids asked with an eager smile when his friend flinched from the penny smacking into the back of his head. The young thug looked around in disbelief, then spotted Estrella glaring at him from the bench.

"What am I gonna do with that? I don't want to touch it," the kid she'd hit with the penny said. Two of them stayed where they were, and the rest swaggered toward Estrella's bench. She gave them her worst stare, but they were emboldened by each other's company.

Estrella felt strangely at peace. She'd been beat before. She could take it again. Or not. It really didn't matter. She bared her teeth at them and waited for them to decide what to do with her when they were done talking and posturing. One of the boys was large. He was the one who had the loudest voice and it was him that she'd plinked with the penny. He was saying things at her and his friends were laughing, but she wasn't listening anymore. Her vision went dark and everything was fuzzy and quiet.

Buck wanted to go right into the tower and smack Steve around. What was he thinking to leave the kid out like this? She was about to get beat or worse. First, he had to hurry down to the street and prop her weak ass up before she fell off the bench and hit the pavement. Then he had to stand there in front of everybody and Stark's brain child to keep the little shits off of her while she was out.
It was difficult to stand still while the thug brats bowed up in his face. He wanted to give them what they were asking for, but they were scared and it wasn't good sport. They were brave enough to take on a skinny homeless kid when the three of them were together. They weren't so brave when he stood in their face and silently stared them down.

He knew it stung their amped up sense of manhood that they weren't able to provoke him into a fight with their antics. So things escalated, just like he expected them to. The big kid reached out a hand to shove him, so Buck twisted his arm back with a sickening sound of tearing tendons. The kid got really loud, squealed like a pig. The four friends got serious then. Instead of helping their hurt friend, they tried to jump Buck.

He didn't want to kill anyone. Especially not stupid kids. He face-swatted one hard enough to stagger him back, and stung another one between the eyes with a tap of his left fist. The two remaining didn't feel brave enough to continue while the other three were incapacitated.

"Git," he said to them.

The two unhurt ones yelled empty threats while they swagger-scurried away and the other three didn't say anything, except for the whining of the one with the ruined arm. They moved off after their friends as they could. Buck watched them go and stood long enough to pay attention to where they turned off the street.

People were staring, and that was nothing new. When all threat to the girl was gone, he sat on the bench and looked at her. She didn't have much left in her. He'd seen stronger people in Nazi camps. Her lips were a little blue and nothing had even happened to her, other than the loud kids getting in her face. Buck straightened her out some so her bent leg wouldn't go numb. Her body condition was gravely serious, and he knew Steve didn't realize the extent to which she'd starved herself or he'd have done something by now.

"Hey, what are you doing with her?" a guy said. He'd come from inside the coffee shop and he had a black apron on.

"Laying her out so she can breathe better. If she doesn't wake up in a minute I'm taking her to the hospital. You got any soda in there? Coke? She needs calories," Buck said.

The guy left and came back with a glass of cola. Buck noticed that the people at the café tables had left. There were a few folks passing by on the sidewalk, but they turned their eyes away and kept walking.

"Come on, kid. Wake up," Buck reached around and supported her neck and head while he lifted her more upright. She was literally almost nothing but bones. Steve would get bent up if she died. He knew he would. Buck knew the feeling, because he'd had a soft spot for a runt once, too.

He took the cola and tipped it against her mouth. The cold fizzy beverage helped to bring her around, and he poured in a little sip before she could fight him much. Her big chocolate eyes blinked blankly at him until she recognized him. Then she scowled.

"If you don't drink some more of this, I'm taking you to the emergency room right now. Drink up," he told her. He pressed the plastic cup against her lip and tilted it up. Her eyes glared mutiny at him, but she took a few sips. He kept at it until she'd taken half the cup.

Buck avoided looking at the guy standing by his side because Stark's camera would catch his face if he did. It was bad enough that Steve would know him in an instant if the video of this was put in front of him. It was probably time to quit playing around avoiding Steve anyway, but he had
wanted to show his face in his own time.

"Do I need to call somebody?" the man from inside the coffee shop asked. He sounded like he didn't know if he wanted to threaten or be helpful.

Buck looked to the girl.

"You gonna drink that?" he asked her, using the guy's words to pressure her into action.

She looked away from him stiffly, but she drank the soda.

"Somebody should have been called a long time ago," Buck said, "Kid, I'm getting tired of having to watch you. I've got my own cats to chase. I told you once to let Steve help you. I'm not telling you again. You go with him, or I'll bring you to a place that's gonna want names and paperwork and money. You hear me?"

Estrella tilted her jaw up and turned her face further away.

Buck grabbed her face and forced her to look at him. She needed firm handling to know he meant what he said, and bruised was better than dead.

"I'm not afraid to hurt your feelings. I don't care if you hate me. Steve wants you alive, so you're gonna live," Buck told her with absolute certainty.

He let her go. She refused to agree with him, but she'd heard him.

"The next time you see him, you're going home with him," Buck said.

He got up and left her with the man from the coffee shop. He had a flight to catch in three days. This starving to death bullshit had to end. She was going to be either dead or getting help before he had to leave.

He resented her for forcing his hand with Steve, but he could tell from watching that his friend liked the kid. Lately, Steve was wound up tighter than he'd ever seen him, but he was easier when he was with her. The weird kid was good for Steve, so Buck did what he had to do to keep her around.

"Widow? Do you have it yet?" Steve demanded over the coms.

He and Thor and the Hulk were fighting off what was left of two hundred Hydra operatives in the back end of Manitoba. Clint was up high, picking off any of them who got close to the power conduit they were defending. The Captain didn't like the sounds he was hearing from over where Hulk was. They needed Bruce in the green on this one, but Steve didn't like the casualties.

"Two more minutes. There's a lot of data," Natasha's cool voice answered.

"This is why you should let me do the data things," Tony advised.

Iron Man melted through the engines of two of the heavy tracked vehicles which were making them stay behind cover. The vehicles could no longer maneuver, but the gun turrets turned to align on Thor's position. An arcing throw of Mjolnir bent the barrel of one, and Tony fired again to melt the end of the other turret into runny slag.
"And that is why I don't have you doing the data things," Steve responded. He threw his shield into the chest of an enemy combatant who was trying to run him down with a motorcycle and drew his sidearm to take down three who were trying to snipe Clint. Tony covered him while he ran over to pull his shield from the crumple of the fallen Hydra soldier. The man lay limp where he'd been thrown off the bike and the bike had skidded across loose earth into the underbrush.

The Hulk was having a great time terrifying the rest of Hydra's men toward them. Steve wondered why more of them didn't run away. It always ended the same. Agents and Canadian support had the base surrounded from the start of the mission. The combatants either came to the Avengers for a rough nap, or they ran the other way for incarceration without the nap. Right now, they had to preserve what data they could to lead them to the next Hydra location before the system wiped the drives beyond recovery. Tony had a pretty good override for preventing that, but they had to keep the power on for it to work.

Hydra bodies were stacking up in front of Steve and Thor. Clint had a nice count near the power conduit, and Hulk and Tony left their toys scattered all over. The Hydra goons kept coming. Mjolnir smeared two more and Steve knocked three out in quick succession. There was the rumble of something big moving over the hill behind the trees. Steve looked to Thor. He used his hammer to carry him up for a better view. They could have used Sam's help, but it was his mother's birthday and they'd told him to go see his family.

"Cap, Jarvis is telling me that someone named Wanda called, and that you would want to know about it. While we're working?" Iron Man said.

"There is a very large tracked vehicle approaching your position. Shall I neutralize it?" Thor said at the same time.

"Yes, Thor," the Captain said while he beat down the determined looking group of men who were trying to get past him to the base's entry door. Tony's words about Wanda registered in his mind, but he couldn't allow himself to think on it right now.

"Cap, something's happening. I need extraction," Natasha said as he dropped the last of the goons near him, then used his shield to knock out two more who were trying to sneak up unseen in the undergrowth.

"Hawkeye-" Cap said.

"I've got it. Go," Clint said from his perch in a tall tree.

The sounds of Tony blasting away at Hydra men, and Thor and maybe now the Hulk hammering and ripping at the approaching large vehicle muted some as the Captain ran into the concrete entry of the base. The external door was wedged open with a boulder Hulk had placed. The door kept trying to close and made grinding sounds against the stone. It was a very simple, heavy magnetic door and it would have taken too long to disable it, so they'd had to chock it open with primitive means.

"Status?" Cap asked as he ran deeper into the facility. He recalled the base schematic from the pre-mission briefing and took the turns and jumped down the stairwells necessary to get to his teammate.

"Data recovery is finished, but my exit is blocked and there might be a detonation imminent," Widow said.

The Captain didn't ask stupid questions about if there was any way she could disarm the explosive
device, or if there was a way she could get around the blockage. If she could have, she would have already done so. He recalled the wall thickness lines on the schematic and changed course.

"Get away from the South wall," he said, and he dug in harder against the floor while he ran.

With the shield in front of him, he hit the first layer of concrete with as much momentum and strength as he could. It cracked, and his body smacked into the shield and the wall. With his free hand, he worked at a chipped edge of the cracked concrete until he could pull away a chunk of the wall. It fell with a thud to the floor and he hit the concrete with another run and smash. There was a second layer of masonry between him and Natasha, and he'd expected that. The other five sides of the room she was in were plated with thick steel. This was the only way in because the door had locked shut with her inside.

"Cap?" Widow asked with just a hint of anxiety. Nothing she had on her had worked against steel plating and she didn't know how long they had until detonation. Hydra hadn't been kind enough to provide a countdown. The only warning she'd had was a glitch during data transfer and an ominous low hum that was building into a vibration under her feet.

"Almost-" the Captain gritted out as he made another run at the wall beyond the first one he'd broken. It was more solid, likely reinforced with rebar. The wall cracked, but didn't crumble. Something large shook the ground outside.

"We're fine," Iron Man told him pre-emptively.

"Nat, when I clear the concrete, I need you to weaken the rebar with a shaped charge at the same time I hit it with the shield," he said with a grunt as he struck the wall again. Smaller pieces of concrete started to fall out of the reinforced wall.

"Ready when you are," she replied. The increasing vibrations were shaking everything now. Dust fell from the broken wall between them and loose items were dancing around in the room behind her.

He slammed at the concrete three more times and ripped an area clear with his hands until they could see each other. The spacing of the thick reinforcing bars which held the chunky remains of the wall was too small for a person to pass through.

Natasha had a charge ready and she pressed it onto a reinforcing bar. She stepped back behind cover and held the detonation device. Steve found as much cover as he could get, but he had to be free to throw his shield.

"Three, two, one…” Nat counted, and she detonated the charge. Steve threw his shield hard at the exact place and time where the bar would be most weakened by the explosive.

Concrete chips embedded into his skin through the arm of his uniform and into his side.

"Again, there," he pointed to another bar near the first break they'd made.

They repeated the procedure, then Steve grabbed the exposed steel and braced his feet against the wall. The vibration in the floor and walls was reaching a worrisome intensity. There wasn't time for more charges.

"Avengers, get clear of the base!" he shouted into the coms. The metal matrix of bars began to bend for him. Before he would have thought possible, Natasha squeezed herself through the enlarged opening they'd made and they were running back up to the surface. It didn't feel like they were going to make it.
Widow seemed to agree. They ducked into a side hallway and crouched low under his shield. Their heads hurt from the intensity of the vibration and the floor and walls cracked as if an earthquake was shifting the ground around the base.

No detonation occurred. The backup power finally failed and everything went dark. There was a strange cracking sound under their feet, then silence. They could hear the exterior door grinding, still trying to close. A slight hissing sound reached the Captain's ears, too quiet for his teammate to detect.

"Gas," he said. He slapped his shield onto his back and clamped a hand around Widow's nose and mouth.

"Close your eyes," he told her. He didn't know what kind of gas it was, but it was probably something unpleasant. He hauled the blinded, smothered Widow against his side and navigated with one hand against the wall as fast as he could toward the exit. Two more turns and a stairwell, and he could see light from outside. His eyes were burning and watering. His skin itched. His lungs felt numb and he tried not to breathe.

"Hulk, clear the door so it can close!" Cap yelled soon as they were out. His voice wasn't working right. It sounded weak as if he'd tried to yell with no air in his lungs. He kept running away from the base, up to higher ground. He didn't stop until there was a ridge of earth between them and the base.

Startled agents and handcuffed, corralled Hydra operatives stared at them as he dropped Natasha and fell to the ground himself. He was wheezing, and he tore up handfuls of dirt to scrub at Natasha's exposed skin. Her eyes were watering but open now, and she was gasping for air. She pushed him away and started scrubbing her own skin with gritty dirt. Her suit had protected most of her from gas exposure, but her neck, head and face were burning like salty wounds.

She scrubbed at herself desperately, but it didn't seem to ease the pain. There was a roar from the Hulk, and Iron Man thudded to a hard landing beside where the Captain and the Widow were squirming on the ground.

Tony retracted his suit and stepped out of it. He swiped his pinky finger against Natasha's scalp, then touched it to his tongue.

"Acid," he said.

"Sir-" Jarvis began.

"I know," Tony said. He kicked the Iron Man suit to make it fall onto its back like an open shell. He picked up Natasha and shoved her into the suit. He pressed her into it until she understood to stop fighting against him and the pain. It closed around her.

"Now, Jarvis," he said. He heard the sound of the fire suppressant system filling the suit. After almost a minute of coating Natasha in the gaseous foam, the suit cracked open and he knelt to wipe her face clear. She was covered in whitish froth, but the suppressant should have neutralized the acid. Natasha was calm and she could breathe.

Tony pivoted to look down at Steve, who had lapsed into unconsciousness. Blood was spattered around his nose, mouth and eyes in a gruesome mask. He was breathing, but it sounded ineffective and gurgling.

Thor landed next to them as Tony started to scoop the foam out of his suit and off of Natasha to
smear it on Steve's skin. The side of Cap's uniform under his shield arm was tattered and bloody. Tony could feel hard bits of shrapnel embedded in Steve's skin.

"There's nothing we can do for his lungs here. We have to get him back," Tony said. He'd done what he could to soothe the Captain's skin, but skin irritation was the least concern.

"Avengers, load up. Tillis, you've got cleanup. We're getting Cap to medical," Tony said.

Thor bent and hefted Steve in his arms. Tony jogged after him to the waiting jet. A messy Natasha followed, rubbing her fingers into her hair. Jarvis flew the Iron Man suit inside. Clint ran in and took flight control. Bruce would have to rely on the agents for transport. They knew to leave him alone until he was ready.

Thor laid Steve out on the empty deck between the rear benches. Natasha pulled out an oxygen cylinder from under a seat and fit the rubber face piece to Steve's mouth. Tony wedged a knee under his neck to tilt his head and improve his airway. Clint had them up and heading South back to New York.

Nat wiped at the remaining foam on her suit and smeared it into Steve's scalp. She removed all the foam she could and rubbed it onto every bit of his exposed skin she could reach. The foam was turning pink as it mixed with Steve's blood and she rubbed it around. Her fingers went to his side and started pulling chunks of concrete out of him.

"Fast thinking, Stark," Natasha said.

Her voice was scratchy and she swallowed a mouthful of saliva against the burning in her throat. If Steve had covered her face only a moment later, she'd likely be permanently disabled or dead. Her scalp still itched where the fire suppressant foam had been slower to work into her hair.

"We all do what we can," Tony said, uncharacteristically subdued.

"Have you nothing to help his lungs?" Thor asked. He was sitting on a rear bench near them, watching them do what they could for Steve.

Tony shook his head. Just like the radioactive containment they'd needed last time, they couldn't have anticipated the need for an acid-neutralizing lung flushing device. He knew Jarvis would already have something for him to consider by the time they got back. He had ideas, but no other materials that would help right now.

Steve took a deeper breath, then curled onto his knees. He ripped the oxygen device from his face to cough a spatter of blood and foam onto the deck. He tried to draw in a breath, but it was awful and bubbly sounding. Tony used a hand to encourage him to lie down again, but Steve was half conscious, and too strong for Tony to push over.

"He's got plenty blood. The bleeding might help with the acid," Natasha said. They got out of Steve's way and let him cough and choke as he would. Thor frowned and reached out to pull Steve's side against his knee. If there was no help for him, then he would at least support him while he struggled. Steve threw aside the oxygen bottle that occupied his hand. It clanged along the floor and hit the rear hatch.

"Careful there, big guy," Tony said.

The metal cylinder had barely missed his shins. Natasha went to join Clint in the cockpit. Tony sat across from Thor and grimaced while Steve coughed and coughed. A bloody mess slicked the deck under his face, so maybe Natasha was correct about the bleeding.
"Tough bastard," Tony said under his breath.

He had his disagreements with Steve, but they respected each other. He'd help any way he could, and he knew Steve would do the same for him. He fought down another bout of lingering childhood admiration poisoned by resentment. Steve was just a man under all the serum enhancements, and Tony tried to be reasonable about their differences of opinion. Seeing Steve down and pretty much helpless got to him some, but he knew he'd be just as angry the next time Steve went toe-to-toe with him over some lily-white moral argument.

Clint got them home in good time. Thor offered to help Steve to the medical ward, but Steve was aware now and didn't want to be carried or laid on a bed in front of the staff if he could help it. It wasn't about pride for Steve. It was about morale. Much of their staff was new and he wanted them confident that they could win this protracted conflict against Hydra. They didn't need to see their leader laid out.

He was blinded by the damage to his eyes, but his lungs were improving and his ears were fine. Steve walked with a hand on Natasha's shoulder. He wanted to make sure she got checked out in medical, too.

"Jarvis, you said Wanda called. Tell me about her," Steve rasped as he strode along the hallway. He could hear people in the halls with them, but they got out of the way.

"Your friend is already in medical. Her condition was critical, but she has since stabilized. Captain, please don't concern yourself at this moment. She is sleeping peacefully and is receiving the best of care. In your current condition, a visit from you would certainly upset her more than it would help," Jarvis told him.

Steve grit his teeth and tried to breathe shallowly. His eyes were healing enough that he could see light when he opened them, but everything looked whited out and watery. The sounds and smells of the halls led him along as surely as Natasha's shoulder under his hand. Dried goop pulled and stretched at his skin, and he could feel sharp chips of concrete moving under his flesh as he walked. They'd have to dig out what had already healed over. He couldn't see Estrella right now anyway, so he let Nat guide him to a treatment room.

"Here, Captain," the doctor said as she moved Steve to sit on a starched, stiffly padded bed.

"Check Natasha first," Steve insisted. He heard several people moving in the room, but couldn't tell if they were all facing him or not.

"They've got me, Cap. More than one doctor, remember?" Natasha said.

Tony had hired more staff just last week. She watched as the staff started working on them both, her on one bed and Steve on the other. It's not that they couldn't afford private rooms, but sometimes it was nice to see that your teammate was getting fixed up when things weren't too bad.

The nursing staff peeled Steve's ruined uniform coat off of him and encouraged him to lie back. The doctor listened to his lungs and looked at his eyes. Natasha opened her mouth wide so the doctor assigned to her could look into her throat with a camera scope. They took swabs of her skin from several places and she moved around to assist them. She felt sticky from the fire retardant and gritty from the dirt she and Steve had tried to use to scrape the gas residue from their skin. Her hair felt like it had egg white in it.

The doctor had her inhale a mist that Tony had concocted and captured in a Mylar bag. It smelled strange, but the burning in her throat and nose eased off. The doctor was applying something to
Steve's eyes, which she could see were glazed with a white film.

If it was Clint lying there looking like that, she'd be horrified. As it was, she felt a strong pull of sympathy for Steve and the pain he must be going through. He refused the gas Tony had prepared for him. His lungs were probably already more healed than hers were, despite the fact that the delicate tissues in his chest had been at least partially corroded away.

Steve allowed a nurse to push up his elbow so that his hand rested behind his head. She carefully wiped his skin clean and the doctor rolled an x-ray machine over so they could see how much concrete was still embedded in his side. He'd taken the damage to get her out. Everything he was going through right now was from his efforts to extract her.

Natasha moved a nurse out of her way and went over to Steve's other side which wasn't being worked on. He turned his head and looked toward her with his damaged eyes. She wondered if he could see her, or hear her, or maybe it was her smell that told him exactly where she was. They should both smell like flame retardant and dirt, she imagined.

"Don't start. You'd have done the same," he said.

"I know. But you can't stop me from saying 'thank you'" she told him.

A little smile twisted his lips. It was ghastly, considering that his face was mostly black and red from blood and dirt. A person who looked like the victim of a close range bombing shouldn't be sitting up talking and smiling.

"So? I'm waiting to hear it," Steve told her.

"Thank you," Natasha said.

"Alright, now that's enough," he said, then coughed a little.

A moment passed while the doctor looked at the x-ray image display. Steve had a lot of knife work ahead of him.

Natasha bent forward and pressed a kiss to his filthy forehead.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"For being a doll," she teased him.

There was one clean-ish spot on the side of his face and she could see him blush through the film of dirt. It was about time that Steve Rogers started learning what it felt like to have that kind of language used on him.

"I hate to ask, Nat, but could you, maybe, go lay eyes on my friend? I know Jarvis says she's fine, but-" Steve asked as the doctor started the first slice into his side to retrieve the concrete chips. He didn't flinch, but she saw the muscles around his lips tighten ever so slightly. They all got used to him taking a beating with no complaints, and it was uncomfortable to see a reminder that he felt every bit of the pain.

"I'm on my way to take a shower. I'll look in on her," Nat promised. She glanced at his impressively distressed physique while his eyes were too cloudy to catch her at it. He didn't catch her at it this time, but the doctor frowned slightly at her. Natasha wasn't ashamed to look. He was worth looking at.
"Thanks," Steve said.

"Don't forget to eat," she replied.

Steve grunted at her, and she heard the sound of concrete dropping into a metal bowl.

Nat left the treatment room and went to the only recovery room that had a light on and a tag on the door.

*Jane Doe*, it said.

Quiet as she could be, Nat shushed the nurse who came to intercept her, then eased herself into the room.

Steve's scruffy street girl was asleep and tucked into a hospital bed. They'd taken her bulky rags from her and dressed her in a bland gown. There wasn't much to the girl at all. Steve would be upset when he saw how bad off she was.

There was an IV bag on a pole and a fluid line tapped into the back of her hand. The labels on the bag told Nat that they were giving her fluids, nutrients, and a mild sedative. She didn't read the file. Jarvis could tell him those things. Her heart profile which blipped on the monitor sounded a little weak and ragged, but regular enough. Natasha wanted to take Clint's trimmers to the mats of her hair, but her own hair needed some attention right now. She'd at least try to give the girl some choice in the matter later when she was awake. She owed her that much for being rough on her before.

She left to get a shower. Now that she was free to go, she wanted nothing more than to get the mess off of her. And to eat something.

"She's doing alright, Steve. She's sedated, so I don't think she'll wake up before you get to her," Nat said over their still functional coms.

"Thanks," he told her again.
Chapter 9

Author's note: Chapters 9 and 10 were originally written as one big chapter that I then split into two, so I'm posting two chapters at once. There's not a lot of crazy action scenes because Estrella is sick and Steve is recovering. Not too much excitement can happen when you're bed ridden. More action coming soon, though!

Steve stood beside the nurse's station and ate from the tray he balanced on the edge of the high countertop. The doctor and Natasha both insisted that he eat. Not just any food was good enough for the doctor's wishes.

Liver. He had to eat a slab of liver for the iron content. He was allowed to pick which cheese, but he had to have cheese. He had a crusty, flaky half-loaf of wheat bread on the plate too. Broccoli and avocado were in dishes off to the side. He was lucky that he could tolerate all this stuff, even the liver, but he would have eaten it anyway. His body was yawing at him for sustenance.

His shower had been itchy, with all the stitches in his side and in his arm. Steve thought stitches were fairly useless, but they were needed when the doctors had to cut him open again after he'd already healed. Without the stitches, he made a mess everywhere, so he put up with the stitches for a few hours until his skin healed and he could remove them.

While he fed his healing body, he looked through the open doorway at Estrella in her bed. He felt bad standing there stuffing his face while she looked like a collection of sticks under the covers, but it couldn't be helped. He could get called out again at any time, and he needed to be in top condition.

His vision was still a little off, but it was much improved. It had improved enough that he could watch her heart monitor as the little line blipped across the display. He didn't like what he saw. He'd sat bedside with hospitalized people enough that he knew something was wrong without having to hear it from the doctor.

Soon as he was done eating, he could sit with her. He had mission reports to write, but he could do that on his pad while he sat in her room. The doctor wanted him lying in a bed and hooked up to a blood oxygen monitor so they could be sure that his lungs were healing. Steve knew his body well enough to tell the doctor he was doing fine without lying in a bed immobilized. They'd have to observe him here at her room if they wanted to keep a watch on his recovery.

Steve chewed the last of his broccoli and washed his food down with a large glass of red wine. Wine wasn't his favorite, but he was used to throwing anything down the hatch to keep his body going. The doc seemed to think that the wine would help with digestion of all the stuff they wanted him to eat. Steve thought the doctor was on a power trip. There was nothing wrong with his digestive system. He couldn't buck every order the doctor gave him, though, because it would be a bad example to others. If he expected his teammates to take some down-time when they needed it, then he had to at least attempt to do so too.

He moved to take his tray and empty dishes to the elevator, but a nurse rushed over and took the things from him. They acted like he shouldn't be lifting anything heavier than a fork. He felt almost normal, except that it was still uncomfortable to take a deep breath and his stitches snagged on the fabric of his shirt when he moved.
He was back in his favorite jeans again, and a comfortable workout t-shirt. It all fit him pretty snug, but there was no one except the staff and his teammates around to stare at him. And Estrella. She wasn't doing any staring right now, not that she ever did. Steve went across the hallway from the nurse's station and into her room. It was his turn to stare at her.

Whatever had caused her to do this to herself was as substantial as the presence of another person in the room. There had to be a reason for this, and he wanted to know what it was so he could counter it.

She wasn't stupid. She wasn't insane. She didn't hate herself. She was scared. Scared of men in general, probably from a traumatic incident in her past, but there was more to her behavior than that.

Rational people didn't go to the extremes Estrella did without an ongoing motivation. What she had done to herself required a level of willpower and dedication that most folks didn't bother with. Troubles from her past couldn't sustain the discomfort of the choices she was making. He concluded that Estrella was under pressure from a current threat, not simply a remembered event from her past.

He wanted to wake her and make her tell him why she was lying there looking like a mummy. He wanted to get at her fears and demolish them so that she'd be free to take better care of herself. She was capable of it. The doctor could tell that she'd been very conscious of what she ate and why, because she didn't have scurvy or a host of other starvation diseases. She'd been smart enough to get some nutrients. It was calories she'd been avoiding.

The doctor said that she would never be fully recovered from years of starving herself. Her heart was permanently weakened. Even if she lived a happy, well-fed life from this day on, she'd never again be physically robust enough to participate in sports or any other strenuous activity. Steve was very familiar with how that felt.

Anger rose in him at whatever had caused her to do this. Instead of pacing around or hitting something, he indulged in the satisfying grind of his teeth and sat down beside her bed. He perched his rump in the vinyl padded chair and leaned his elbows forward onto his knees. His clasped fists rested against his lips and he studied her over his knuckles.

Nat was right. She was structurally pretty, the way some of those old dusty Egyptian mummies were pretty. He'd heard someone talk about elegant bones one time. He'd thought the idea was weird and macabre, but Estrella had that. The artist in him wanted to draw her like this, but the man in him, the friend, cringed away from recording her when she was at her lowest.

Estrella's eyes weren't as sunken as they had been, since several bags of fluid had gone into her. She looked comfortable and peaceful. She was safe for now. It was enough to let him relax and let himself get some rest.

Bruce found him asleep in the chair, arms crossed and leaned back with his head against the wall. He looked at the girl for a moment, but he was really here to see Steve. At the end of the mission, the Hulk had kicked the boulder inside the door of the base so the door could close, and he'd gotten a strong dose of the gas escaping from the base. It was bad stuff. He'd been concerned about his friends.

The nervous new agents had flown him back when he'd calmed down, and Bruce had taken the
time to get cleaned up and dressed, but then he'd come straight to medical. He was perhaps a little
too glad that Steve had been able to get Natasha out alive. The other guy was developing a
fondness for the scary-sexy-cool Widow and it bled over into Bruce's sentiments as well. If Steve
hadn't been able to get her out…

Bruce shook his head. That hadn't happened. He'd seen Nat ten minutes ago. She was fine, and
likely asleep now. It was nearly midnight. He tried not to feel pleased that she'd waited up until he
got back. It didn't mean anything. They cared about what happened to their teammates. That was
all.

And now Bruce was concerned for Steve. The agents had relayed to him on the way home how the
Captain's eyes and lungs were destroyed by the gas, and he believed it. The stuff was bad enough to
turn the Hulk away. He should have known that Steve would already be up and around, more
concerned about other people than about himself.

Bruce nudged one of Steve's feet. The man didn't move. He stayed sprawled from the chair like
one of those risqué blue jean commercials. His shirt was pulled up in the front from his shoulders
having slid down the chair. His belly was showing. Bruce chuckled. He was tempted to take out
his phone and snap a pic. Clint and Tony would love it.

Bruce felt guilty about the nature of some of the pranks they played on Steve. He tried not to
participate, but sometimes it was too fun to abstain from. Steve was a good guy. Old fashioned. It
wasn't his fault that the world had moved on to less restrained proclivities, and it wasn't his fault
that Steve was now blessed with a body that was sure to draw attention. Clint and Tony especially
enjoyed using his body against him to take a metaphorical stab at what they saw as Steve's
overblown sense of morals and modesty. They'd love to post a pic of Steve like this online, then sit
out in the common room and laugh at the viewer comments when Steve walked through.

Their leader took the joking in tolerant humor, but he wasn't changing who he was just because the
other guys jabbed at him about it. Bruce could see that Tony's pranks might be doing more to
reinforce Steve's sometimes stodgy behavior than to cajole him out of it.

Bruce kicked Steve's foot harder. The man finally woke. He didn't jerk upright or look around in
confusion. Bruce would bet good money that Steve was never completely unaware of his
surroundings, even in a dead sleep. Something about his enhanced senses kept him situationally
aware. It looked exhausting to Bruce, but then Bruce had his own involuntary self-defense system.
His was a little larger, a little greener.

"Steve, come on. You should get some real sleep in a real bed," Bruce said.

Steve pushed himself more upright in the chair and tugged his shirt into place.

"You made good time home. You should be sleeping, yourself," Steve responded.

"The other guy didn't like that stuff you were breathing. I had to check on you first," Bruce said.

"Thanks. I'm fine," Steve said.

"Yeah. She's not," Bruce said. He turned to look at the display on the heart monitor.

"That's why I'm here. Trying to get my head around it," Steve said.

"You can't change the past. You know that. No amount of surgery or good food is going to fix her
heart at this point," Bruce said. It was harsh, but he knew Steve was a realist.
Steve looked at him, his eyes clear and focused. His eyes were fully healed, then. And there was nothing wrong with his brain, either.

"You're saying I should give her my blood," Steve stated it out loud. Of all of them here, he and Bruce knew what any version, any amount of the serum could do to a person. He was let down that Bruce would want to inflict those possibilities on a young woman in a precarious situation.

"I'm not saying that. We don't have to do anything at all. She can live like this. She'll be limited, but she can live like this for a while. Several years, maybe. Or, we can use a small amount of your plasma. Not whole blood. It's-"

"Shut up. Too loud," Estrella complained from the bed. Her voice was cranky and sleepy, but clear.

Steve suppressed a grunt of surprise. The tones of her voice rounded over and over inside his head. It did something to him that he didn't understand. At the coffee shop when he'd given her a sample of Mrs. Stiles' streusel cake, she'd made a sound because the cake was so good. He'd had an unexplained and inappropriate reaction then. It was worse now.

He sat back in the chair and tried to get control of himself. The sweet sound of her voice and whatever it was doing inside his head was making him want to move closer to her. He sat still and waited for it to pass.

"What's going on?" Bruce asked, confused.

Steve looked to Bruce, cautious of the possibilities. There was a very real threat if Estrella's voice had the same effect on Bruce as it did on him. Clearly it did. Bruce shifted his posture some in discomfort, but his attention was on Steve.

Steve was staring at him the way he assessed threats in combat. Bruce was thankful that Steve stayed in his chair. With the girl's voice getting to him, and the way Steve was watching him suspiciously like he was a split second away from action, if Steve stood up and got in his space right now, he'd have to leave.

Bruce was long accustomed to resisting impulses related to his more primal wants. The girl's voice was more intrusive than a sexy ad on television that you could choose to turn your attention away from. Whatever was happening wasn't ignorable. Her voice reached out and grabbed a man's interest in a way that was difficult to resist acting on. He felt compelled. Bruce shook it off before the pervasive resonance of her voice took root in his mind. He had to stay focused. Steve knew something about the girl and her voice. This had happened before.

"What do you know about this?" Bruce asked.

The rational part of his brain was fascinated by what appeared to be going on. He needed to think about that. Sound waves, brain function, hypothalamus response… Bruce slammed a flow of clinical thought down on top of the more primal things which wanted to be heard.

Steve watched him get a handle on himself, and he relaxed some. Doctor Banner was in. Not the other guy. As minutes passed since Estrella had spoken, the sound of her voice faded from his mind. It was easier to think again, but he still felt on edge, wanting to act.

"I heard her voice once before, briefly. It wasn't even a word, only a sound. It had the same effect. I thought it was just me at the time. But if it's you too…" Steve said.

"If she effects everyone this way, then-" Bruce concluded.
"Then she wouldn't speak at all. She doesn't. When I first met her, she was mute. Lately, she's whispered. She told me once that there was something wrong with her voice," Steve said.

"Mami, get the cat," Estrella fussed. She raised a hand and let it fall, swatting at the sound of Steve's voice as if it was a bothersome pet on the bed. She made a crimped face of annoyance, but soon settled back into deeper sleep.

Steve sat back and braced his feet against the floor. He breathed through his teeth and shook his head, trying to shake free of the tonal seduction pickling his brain. Bruce took a step back toward the doorway of the room and braced his hand on it.

"There's nothing wrong with her voice. She's been gifted with a powerful weapon," Bruce said.

"Yeah, well, it's only been used against her so far. It's not doing anything good for her," Steve said.

He got up and stalked menacingly toward Bruce, his hands ready to grapple the man down and away from Estrella. Bruce held up a hand and backed out of the room into the hallway.

"Steve, hold it right there. We can think through this. If I can do it, then I know you can too. Jarvis, did you get any audio on her? Broad frequency?" Bruce asked the AI.

"Yes, Doctor. Am I correct in understanding that our friend's voice is having a peculiar effect on the libido of yourself and the Captain?"

"Correct," Steve bit out.

He'd stopped advancing on Bruce, and was disappointed that he'd let himself do something so tactically stupid. He'd felt like he had to make Bruce leave, and he was doing it before he thought about it. He stood in the doorway to Estrella's recovery room and tried to act casual while Bruce shut his eyes and took a few deep, calming breaths.

"I think we can help her control her voice. But first I've got to get some sleep and so do you. I'll get Tony on it and we'll try to have something tomorrow," Bruce said.

"Go 'way. Trying to sleep," Estrella mumbled from the room behind Steve.

Steve stepped out into the hall and pulled the door closed. The sedatives in her IV drip were messing with her. He knew Estrella wouldn't knowingly use her voice on him and Bruce. She'd always been so careful to avoid vocalizing anything at all. She'd been very upset the one time she'd had an accident with the cake. Her circumstance was beginning to make sense to him. He tried to ignore the situation in his jeans and think clearly.

Steve turned to the nurses at their desk. They were frozen still like frightened rabbits, watching him and Bruce. Everyone in medical knew what Bruce was capable of, and Bruce was looking pretty intense and concerned. His aggression toward Bruce had likely made them nervous if they'd seen it.

"Keep that door closed. Monitor her from out here. Only Doctor Kalfey treats her. No visitors unless Jarvis tells you I've approved them. Understood?" Steve asked.

"Yes, Captain," the head nurse said. She started making entries of his instructions in Estrella's records. Steve stepped around the countertop of their workstation to confirm that there was a camera watching her bed. If she started to wake up, someone would see and let him know so that he could be there for her.
The effects of Estrella's voice were fading finally. He shook out the tension in his arms and shoulders. He moved away from the antsy nurses and walked with Bruce a little way down the hall toward the elevator.

"Bruce. I'm sorry. I didn't know this would happen. I thought it was a one-time thing on my part when it happened before," Steve said.

Now that he was feeling more himself, he was disappointed in himself because he'd been acting like a Neanderthal and Bruce was just trying to help. Bruce was a bigger man than him for being able to back down when Steve knew he was being an ass. He was frequently humbled by the strengths of the people he worked with.

"We're alright. Believe me, I understand," Bruce smiled a little, then he left.

Steve got a chair from the waiting room and sat on guard outside Estrella's door. He'd given orders, but sometimes accidents happened. She'd been hurt enough. He wasn't going to let any more abuse happen to her. Bruce had taken the other guy away with him and Thor was the only other possible threat. Steve couldn't see Thor hurting Estrella, no matter what her voice did. Once he had it all reasoned out, he fell asleep again.

"What did you do?" Estrella whispered furiously to Steve when she woke to see him standing by the bed she was in. She felt groggy, and she was in a hospital. That man! Steve's friend. He'd done this to her. He said he would.

"Where is he?" she hissed, looking around.

Steve had to know where his friend was if the man had called Steve to the hospital to see her. She didn't have much hope of finding him to make him sorry for what he'd done to her. That creepy man was only there when you didn't expect him to be.

"Where's who?" Steve wondered. She could tell he was humoring her. He thought she was out of her mind from the medicine that was making her feel sleepy.

"Your friend. The one with the arm. Where is he?" She wanted to know.

She was so angry that it was difficult to remember to whisper. It would feel good to yell if she could. Steve was looking at her finally as if he was taking her seriously.

"Bucky? You have seen Bucky. Why do you think he put you here?" Steve asked.

She ignored his question. It didn't matter. Bucky wasn't here.

As she sat up and moved around more, she first noticed that there was an IV tube going into her arm. Next, she was horrified to see that her clothes were gone and all she had on was one of those awful little gowns that tied in the back.

"My clothes! Where are my clothes?" she yelled.

Her hands moved to try covering herself above the hospital blankets which only came up to her ribs. The little hospital gown was so thin! She heard Steve groan and a thud off to the side, but she didn't look to see what was wrong with him until she had the blankets yanked up to her chin.
Then she remembered that she'd yelled.

"I'm sorry!" she whispered to Steve.

He was sitting on the floor with his head in his hands, covering his ears. His eyes were squeezed shut and his teeth were bared in a grimace of pain. She wasn't happy with him or anyone else, but she hadn't wanted to hurt Steve.

The bed rail wasn't up, so she leaned over, still clutching the blankets under her chin. With her free hand not encumbered with IV tubing and tape, she reached out to touch his shoulder. She hated how bare her arm looked. Where had they put her clothes?

At her touch, Steve turned his head up slowly and opened his eyes. His face was about even with hers because he was sitting on the floor and she was scrunched on the bed to hide under the covers. They tucked the darn covers in so tight under the mattress that she couldn't pull them up like she wanted to.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I told you my voice is messed up, remember?" she whispered.


He felt like he'd been dropped on his head and kicked in the groin at the same time. When she'd spoken softly in her sleep hours ago, her voice had a mesmerizing, titillating effect. When she yelled in anger or fear, it was like being stabbed from inside his skull, a dozen sharp bird beaks digging to get out. Fortunately, the pain of her yelling came on sudden and sharp and it left him almost as quickly.

Steve put a hand on her bed and pulled himself back up to standing. The nauseating ache in his groin lasted a little longer than the pain in his head. Estrella looked at him cautiously, as if she thought he would punish her. He smiled faintly to let her know that he wasn't holding a grudge and pulled the vinyl chair close to her bedside. By the time he sat down, she was angry again.

"My clothes. I want them," she whispered.

"Alright. I'll have to find them for you," he said.

"Could you do it now? Hospitals are so big, and there's so many people. They could get lost."

"You're not in a hospital. You're in Avengers tower, in our medical ward. You're currently the only patient, so I'm sure your clothes are probably in the laundry closet, right over there," Steve said.

He leaned back in the chair. He looked out the door of her room and pointed to somewhere she couldn't see from her bed.

"I'm in the tower? So your friend didn't bring me? I thought I was at Saint Luke's," Estrella whispered.

"I wasn't here when you came in. We were working in Canada. Estrella, Bucky had nothing to do with you being here. A few weeks ago, I asked Wanda at the library to keep an eye on you for me. Not to take notes or anything. I wanted her to call the tower if anything bad happened to you while I wasn't around to help. I haven't gone to see her yet or listened to the audio of her call, so I don't know what happened to put you here. Do you remember what happened?" he asked.

Estrella felt betrayed by Wanda. She had thought that Wanda understood and was on her side because Wanda didn't like men much. She was trying to be angry at Steve for being so controlling.
And she was frustrated that her body had failed her.

"I was almost to the library. The last thing I remember is leaning against the lamp post. You know, the one at the entrance to the mall?" she explained.

"Yeah," Steve said quietly.

Wanda must have seen her passed out on the ground, Estrella imagined. Or maybe somebody else had seen her and word had gotten to the nearby library. Or maybe his creepy friend had told Wanda. If only people would have left her alone for a while, she wouldn't be here in this expensive place. She'd either be with her mother, or she would have woken up on the sidewalk on her own.

Estrella wanted out of Tony Stark's building. She picked at the stretchy, rubbery bandage which covered where the IV needle went into her arm.

"There's no way I can pay for this. Get me out of here," she whispered.

She had little hope that Steve would do as she asked. He'd wanted her to come in for 'treatment.' He would want her to stay. She looked at him to see what he would do with her request.

Steve sat back in the chair and crossed his stupid, powerful arms over his stupid, powerful chest and gave her a neutral and diplomatic expression. Stupid, arrogant, powerful super-person that he was. She frowned hard at him and felt her lower lip push out.

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't want you to be here in the first place. With your choices, you put yourself here-" he began.

"No, I didn't," she shook her head, "I would have preferred to die out there, if you had bothered to ask me instead of interfering where you don't belong. It's you who talked to Wanda. It's Wanda who called here. And somebody picked me up and brought me here. I didn't have anything to do with putting myself here," Estrella insisted.

Again, she wished she could talk instead of whispering like a shy little child. She would be yelling at him if it wouldn't hurt him so much. Steve waited patiently for her to finish anything she wanted to say.

"Estrella, I don't want you to die," he said. His soulful expression and obvious concern almost softened her heart, but she didn't let herself get distracted from what he was really saying.

"It's not up to you, Steve. It's not what you want that matters here. Do you have any idea how arrogant that is? Why do you think you have the right to make that decision for me?" she challenged him.

"Why do you want to die?" he challenged her in the same tone.

Estrella sighed. He didn't understand. Normally she didn't have the energy to waste on explaining things to naïve people, but Steve was her friend. She felt pretty good right now, like she had the energy to help him understand.

"It's not that I want to die. I just don't want this life anymore. I don't get to choose what I was given. It was not my choices that made me live like I've been living. I can't trade in for a different life, and I don't want the one I've got. What do you do with something you don't want anymore?" she shrugged.

"You don't throw it away. You fight to make it better so that it's worth wanting again," Steve
argued.

"What do I fight, Steve? My own voice? My own body? All of mankind? My problems aren't a bunch of lined-up little targets that I can knock down with a hammer or a shield. If it was that easy, I would have fixed it already. You're just a stupid man. Go away!" she growled at him on the last word. If she made him hurt her, maybe he would feel bad enough to get out of her life and leave her alone.

Steve gasped a breath and bent forward to put his face in his hands. It was completely different when he was feeling the effects of her voice and trying to problem-solve the situation with Bruce. It was difficult to think of a distraction when she was the only other person in the room.

She was being a brat simply to provoke him, he knew. She felt powerless and angry. He had a fair load of empathy for being in that position. It had been a while for him, but it was such a strong, bitter feeling that he'd never forget it. She had plenty reason to be upset with him and with life in general. He used empathetic reasoning as a focus to help him ignore the arousal and the compelling desire to move closer to her.

God, this was awful. She was just a kid. He tried not to be disgusted with himself since he hadn't asked for this to happen. It was nobody's fault, but it still felt wrong.

"If you're not going to get me out of here, then you go," Estrella said clear and low. She waved a hand at the door, shooing him away as she frequently did.

This time, the use of her voice made him angry along with the other effects. She knew what she was doing and she was asking for trouble because she didn't care about herself anymore. When the worst of it had passed, Steve stood up to obey her wishes. But he needed her to know a few things first. He couldn't let her think she could run him off with her words.

Steve stepped closer to her bed and leaned forward with his fists on the mattress. She'd used her voice on him on purpose. He had to show her that he refused to be manipulated despite his discomfort. If he let her get the upper hand now, he'd be in a position of weakness forever with her.

"Estrella, I don't use my physical gifts against you. You're my friend and I'd never want to hurt you. I'd love to hear your voice, but not if you're going to use it like a weapon against me," he told her.

She still clutched the blankets under her chin, and soon as he'd loomed over her, she'd gone from angry and provocative to fearful. She wasn't as brave and ready for anything as she'd thought she was. His heart softened again. Darn it! She was too far under his skin and he couldn't fuss at her for long.

Steve eased back a little and lifted a hand to touch her temple briefly.

"Eya, try not to be afraid. I don't want to control you. I want to keep you safe. Maybe we can find a way to make your life better so that you aren't tired of it anymore. Please be patient and give me a chance to try?" he asked. He let his fingers glide across the hollow of her temple, then he took his hand away.

She wanted to tell him to go away again, but it sounded like he was about to. Now that he was, she found that she really didn't want him to go. She didn't want to be alone here. But she couldn't let him see that she needed him. He already had all the power, so she should at least try to keep her dignity. She refused to ask him to stay.

She shrugged and looked down and to the side. What choice did she have? She couldn't go
anywhere without her clothes. Steve left quietly and then she was alone in a strange place she didn't know how to get out of.

The only comfort she had was the lingering feeling of his fingers gentle on her skin and the hope that he'd meant it when he'd told her that he didn't want to control her.

It was six in the morning and he was dead on his feet. He finally wanted to be in his bed. Estrella was well enough to yell at him and pout at him, so he was pretty sure nothing critical would happen to her while he got a few hours of rest. The nurses and Jarvis knew his wishes.

He'd seen her looking around like she was lost. He'd felt her anger against men. She wanted to leave because she thought she couldn't afford treatment and she didn't want to be in debt.

Steve knocked on the door to Nat's suite. He leaned his head against the frame and shut his eyes for a little nap while he waited. He could hear her moving around, walking to the door. She didn't ask who was on the other side of her door. Jarvis had surely told her.

Natasha opened the door in black and white pajama pants that rode low on her hips and a strappy little red top that clung to her. After the last several hours, he didn't feel like pretending. His eyes appreciated her curves from where he still leaned and rested his head against the doorframe. Nat arched an eyebrow at him and stood there with her hand on the edge of the door.

"I'd invite you in, but you don't look like you would stay vertical for long," Nat said.

Steve huffed a chuckle. Nat was the queen of double meanings, maybe triple ones too. Her smirk was too naughty for this time of the morning, but then she let it pass and waited to hear what he was standing at her door for.

"I think she's scared and alone and too proud to ask for help. Too stubborn to tolerate owing anyone anything. She's angry at men, angry at me, and she doesn't want to live. And she has the voice of a siren, literally. Not the ambulance kind. The mythological kind. God, help me," Steve said genuinely. He lifted his head from the door frame just far enough to bang it down again.

"Poor baby," Natasha pouted.

"It's not funny, Nat. She's scared," Steve frowned at her with one eye. The other one was closed.

"Not 'poor baby' her. 'Poor baby', you," Nat said.

Of course she'd taunt him about the latest freakish thing that had happened in his life. She'd seen enough that almost nothing boggled her. Natasha turned her back and walked into her suite, leaving the door open for him. He sighed. The one eye he had open tracked her lush bottom as it moved away in the pajamas. She knew it and she looked back over her shoulder at him.

"Quit staring at my ass and follow it. I promise I won't rape you unless you ask me to," she said dryly.


He followed her into her living room. She moved toward her chair, and she pushed him at her couch when he got close enough. By now, she knew his center of gravity about as well as he did. Steve let himself sprawl face-down on the long couch with one leg and one arm hanging off onto
the floor. He hoped he could avoid drooling onto the cushions at least until he was asleep. He wasn't getting up from here unless the building was on fire.

"Siren, Nat. Poor kid," he mumbled into the upholstery.

"No, poor you," Nat repeated, "She's been living with it for years. It's nothing new to her."

"C'mon. Have some mercy. She's scared," Steve said. His mind kept drifting toward sleep, but he had stuff he needed to say before he could let go. Stuff. Yeah…

"There's nothing wrong with being scared. Let her be scared for a while. It will make her easier to convince," Natasha advised.

"Witch," Steve cracked an eye at her.


"Alright, you win. Bitch," Steve said. He never said the word, so he figured he'd do it up right by spitting it out deep and harsh.

Nat laughed, delighted. He was delirious enough to laugh with her. Why was he so tired? It didn't matter. The couch was soft…

"Steve. Steve, stay awake for a little while longer," Nat said.

He cracked his eyes and wondered why she was suddenly kneeling next to him, patting his face.

"Wha?" he asked.

"You came here to tell me something. Hurry up and tell me so you can get to sleep," she instructed him.

"Oh. Yeah," he said. He thought about it for a moment.

"Talk to her. Get her to talk to you. Find out her age. She needs a woman's company. She's too angry at men for me to help her. Help her think of reasons to live. See if Bruce and Tony are done yet," Steve said. He forced his brain to work until he was sure he'd checked off all he'd wanted to say.

"Got it. Rest now," Natasha told him. She didn't need to. He was already out. She wondered why he was so exhausted. He'd gone long hours with less sleep and more injury before this. She'd have to ask about it while she was talking to Bruce.

Natasha left him to get dressed. Before she left her suite for the day, she covered him with a blanket.
"I'm not going in there," Bruce denied. He held his hands up and backed away from the little piece of jewelry he'd just placed in Natasha's hands.

"Then tell me more. He said she's a siren?" Natasha asked.

She looked at the necklace. It was a choker on black velvet an inch wide. In the middle was a platinum butterfly with sapphire and onyx wings. And diamonds. The smooth metal shape added onto the underside of the butterfly's abdomen was probably the working part of whatever it was that Bruce and Tony had made to help the girl with her voice. The butterfly slipped onto the velvet so that any piece of cloth could be used in place of the velvet. It would look as cute on a scrap of denim or a paisley handkerchief as it did on the plush French velvet, but only if you squinted and imagined that the butterfly was made of cheap tin and rhinestones.

What the hell had Tony been thinking? The girl would never accept something this expensive. He had probably sent a courier to Tiffany's at three in the morning, then spent the next three hours crafting the device onto it.

There was no point in saying anything to the guys. They didn't realize what they'd done and Tony was probably trying to be generous. She'd just have to lie to the girl or trick her into taking it.

Tony was be-bopping around the workshop with his headphones on, cleaning up and putting away his tools.

"Woo-hoo!" Tony shouted, "Shut up! Too loud. Bomp-chicka-wow. Mami, get the caaaat."

Bruce rolled his eyes harder than she'd ever seen a ten year old do it.

"What the hell is he high on? I don't even know that song," Natasha said.

"Endocrine hormones. He mixed the song tonight. Last night. Whatever. Don't ask," Bruce waved a hand.

Natasha watched and listened to Tony for a moment more.

"He never wears headphones. It's always loud in here," she pointed out.

"I refused to work with him if he played the audio where I could hear it," Bruce grimaced at the way Tony kept humming and dancing.

"That bad?" Nat asked.

"You have no idea. Look, just get this to the girl and make sure she wears it before she says anything else or he'll make another song mix and I'm moving to Waco," Bruce threatened.
"That's probably all I need to know," Nat nodded.

"No, it's not. You need to find out how old she is. There's definitely the possibility of an it. Steve's a paragon and all that, but he was Hulk-fishing when it came to defending her. Maybe he's only protective of his friend, or maybe she got to him. Either way, we need to know her age," Bruce said.

"Hulk-fishing? Steve?" Nat wondered. If Steve was being so reckless, then the girl's talents were a force to be concerned about.

"It was hard to tell. Kind of weird, actually. He was like evil Cap or something. Maybe primal Steve. Not our average choir-boy," Bruce said.

"Interesting," Natasha said.

Bruce shook his head and leaned over his work station to save some files and begin shutdown.

"Bruce?" she asked, thoughts tumbling in her head.

"Hmm?"

"Her voice got to you too?" she asked.

"Yeah," he admitted. He lowered his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. She ignored his bashfulness.

"Do you feel tired?" she asked.

"Well, yeah. I've been up for I don't know how long," he answered.

"Steve is sleeping on my couch. He called me a bitch," she said.

Bruce's mouth fell open. They all knew that Steve avoided Natasha's suite like the plague. He wouldn't even get out of the elevator on her side of their floor if he could help it. There had been too many Virgin Cap/Experienced Widow jokes and Steve was serious about not being seen in Nat's living quarters. Or near them.

"I don't know if his uncharacteristic behavior is because of the girl's voice or the gas he inhaled. We need to find out," Natasha said.

Bruce nodded. He looked around for Tony, who had finally taken off the headphones and stopped dancing.

"He called you a bitch?" Tony asked them. His over the top playfulness was gone.

"And he did a good job of it, too," Natasha smiled. She was proud of Steve, if he deserved the credit. She suspected he didn't. Steve's behavior had been distinctly off, like Bruce had described him earlier.

"That's one for the records. Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"Sir, I don't record everything," Jarvis responded.


Even Jarvis' silence sounded pained.
"I don't record everything in Miss Romanova's suite," Jarvis clarified hesitantly.


The sound tone of the workshop changed to match the hushed quiet of Natasha's suite.

"Siren, Nat. Poor kid," Steve's voice mumbled, sounding sleepy.

"No, poor you. She's been living with it for years. It's nothing new to her."

"C'mon. Have some mercy. She's scared,"

"There's nothing wrong with being scared. Let her be scared for a while. It will make her easier to convince,"

"Witch,"

"Oooh. So close. That's an award for intentional under-achievement, Panty-pants America,"

"Alright, you win. Bitch," Steve's voice ground out the naughty word with relish.

Jarvis' playback ended with her and Steve's laughter. Even Steve's laugh sounded off, now that she was listening and not participating. Bruce made a slight face beside her. He agreed.

"Can I sleep now and get to this particular emergency sometime later this afternoon?" Tony asked. As she and Bruce watched him, Tony almost fell asleep on his feet. His head drooped, then jerked back up again. The fact that he hadn't reacted with glee to hearing Steve use rough language underscored to them that something was wrong with Tony.

"Sure, Tony," Bruce told him.

He and Natasha went over to guide Tony to the couch he kept in his workshop. Tony was dead weight in their hands before he touched the couch.

"Sir's vital signs are within normal parameters. I believe he is coming down from the effect of our friend's voice. Do you agree, Doctor Banner, that this answers the question of whether the Captain's peculiarities were caused by his recent gas exposure or by our friend's voice?" Jarvis asked.

"I agree that it's likely her voice, but it needs further investigation," Bruce said.

He looked at the choker necklace Natasha clutched in one hand.

"I know. I'm going," Nat said.

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"Sit up so I can put this on you," Natasha ordered as soon as she was in the door to the girl's room in the medical ward.

Nat didn't give her time to hold the choker necklace, or to look at it, or to protest. The girl moved too slowly for her purposes, so Nat helped her up with a hand between her shoulders. Sure fingers slipped the velvet around her terribly slim throat, and Nat adjusted the closure and the butterfly to how she imagined they should fit. The butterfly rested just below the girl's larynx, at the hollow of her throat.
"That should work to moderate your voice. Talk to me so we can see if it works," Natasha said to her.

"My voice? Does everybody around here know about my voice already?" Estrella asked the Widow.

"Good. It seems to work," Nat said. The girl had a lovely voice, but it did nothing extraordinary or interesting for her.

"My voice doesn't do anything to women. I don't want to talk to a man to find out if it works," she said.

Natasha took out her phone. While her fingers tapped a quick message, she sat on the end of the girl's hospital bed, then pushed herself up onto the mattress more fully. There was plenty of room for her to cross her legs and get comfortable, slumber party-style.

The girl looked at Natasha while her fingers moved over the shape of the choker and its butterfly. Nat hoped that she'd rushed the device onto her so quickly that she'd be used to it before she thought to question it.

"There are some things you need to know because you're going to be here for a while. First, we've got Jarvis. Say hello, Jarvis," Nat said.

"Hello, Miss. I'm sure you remember me talking to the Captain in the park a few weeks ago. I am Mister Stark's artificial intelligence system. I run the tower and offer assistance where I can. Among other things," Jarvis greeted the girl for the first time.

"So you're not real. You're not a man?" Estrella asked.

"The exact definition of reality is open for debate, but I am certainly not a man. I am composed of data, stored on hardware devices, and I think by means of computational process. I am everywhere in this building, and I exist in a few places everywhere else," Jarvis told her.

"There's no privacy? I can't even go to the bathroom?" Estrella asked. She'd already been once, and a nurse had to help her walk because she was groggy from the sedatives. That had been embarrassing enough, without knowing that someone might be listening.

"I do observe privacy directives, Miss. Sleeping quarters and bathrooms are not monitored. However, if my name is called, I am available for help in any location. I can assure you that as a non-organic consciousness, I have no prurient interest in the messier aspects of human existence," Jarvis' cool voice said.

Natasha glanced at her phone to read a text response, then she put the phone away and gave the girl her full attention.

"I'm Natasha. Steve calls me Nat. I know I was unkind to you the first time I saw you, and I'm not done with that yet. There are things I have to do to keep my teammates safe. Business first. Are you good with that?"

"I'm good," Estrella said cautiously. She didn't know what she was agreeing to, but it was pointless to argue this early in the encounter. She wasn't any less intimidated by the Widow now than she had been the day she'd pulled the woman's hair. Soon as Natasha had walked into the room, Estrella felt she'd stepped onto a bus that she had no control over. She wasn't driving and she was barely hanging on. Natasha seemed to know exactly what she was about, and there was some reassurance in that, if she could believe that she should trust Natasha simply because Steve trusted
"We've been calling you 'the girl' and 'Steve's friend.' What's your name? Make something up if you want, but we're going to need something to call you," Nat said.

She was feeling powerless anyway, and there wasn't much more left to hide. They already knew the most outlandish thing about her.

"My mother named me Estrella," she said. It felt like defeat to so easily give what she'd kept guarded. Surrender. If any of the men from her past were still looking for her, she'd just made it easier for them.

"How old are you, Estrella? You don't have to tell me your exact birthdate. We're not keeping a file on you, though we should. We need to know your approximate age," Nat said.

"Why?" Estrella asked.

"Because if you are a minor, then your interactions with the Avengers could become legally complicated. For liability purposes, we need to know how to deal with you," Nat explained.

"Oh. I'm not a minor. I'm twenty-two. No. What day is it?" she asked. Her brain had been in such a fog lately that she wasn't sure how old she was.

"Today is September the fifth," Nat answered.

"Then I'm twenty-three," Estrella said.

"Good," Nat replied. She revealed nothing, but she was very happy that her instinct had been confirmed. Steve might balk at first, but twenty-three wasn't too young.

"You wanted me to bring this?" Thor said as he entered the room. He was planning to return to Asgard shortly, so he was wearing his armor and boots, the leather pants and red cape, and the metal scales which clung to his arms. Mjolnir was likely still on his foyer table.

He held out Clint's hair clippers to Nat and she nodded and smiled a polite greeting at the girl on the bed. Nat took the clippers and set them aside. Estrella saw them and got a stubborn look on her face, but Nat didn't give her time to dwell on it.

"Thank you, Thor. I wouldn't have you running errands for us, but I've got more than one bird to kill," Nat said.

"Ah. I am the stone. How may I assist?" Thor asked with good humor.

He folded his arms and waited patiently. Nat didn't tell him that his combat uniform and tall, squared posture weren't very soothing to a girl who was afraid of men. Estrella needed to get used to tolerating testosterone if she was going to be staying in Avengers tower for a while.

"This is Estrella. I think you've met before, at the library?" Nat formally introduced them.

"I am happy to know your name, friend of my brother," Thor said.

"Hi," Estrella whispered. She looked to Nat. The runaway bus she was riding on felt like it had taken a turn for the painfully awkward. And it was accelerating.

"Estrella, I need you to use your voice. Thor is the strongest man among us, but he is also the most honorable and experienced. If the necklace Tony and Bruce made for you doesn't work, now is the
safest opportunity to find out,” Natasha told her.

"But what if it doesn't work?” Estrella hissed.

She knew Thor was a good man. But a man, still. There was no way for the Widow to know what her voice did to men. It wasn't pretty at all when base lust overcame a good man. It was sad. She didn't want to do that to Thor, and she didn't want to see or experience the effects. If Natasha tried to defend her, she could get hurt.

"There's no reason it wouldn't work. Tony used recordings of your voice to analyze why it affects men the way it does. He's rarely wrong about these things. You should try it, so that you can have confidence in depending on the necklace. Think about it, Estrella. It's worth the risk. You'll be free to speak like everyone else," Nat encouraged her.

"I want Steve to be here," Estrella whispered. If she had to do this, she wanted Steve with her. She already knew that he could resist her voice, somehow. If Tony Stark's device didn't work and Thor went for her, then at least Steve could help her get away.

"Steven is exhausted and recovering from grave injury, Estrella. I would not summon him at this time," Thor said to her, then looked to Natasha, "I want no part of acting against her will,"

His smile was gone, but he kept his stern expression on his teammate, not the frightened girl clutching the covers. He'd gleaned enough information to know what Natasha wanted of him, and he was willing to help, but only if Estrella was agreeable.

Natasha looked to Estrella, leaving the decision to her. Estrella didn't feel she was being given a choice. If she didn't take the risk of testing her voice on Thor, then she would look weak in front of these incredibly strong people. Living on the street, the only way you could survive being weak was to escape notice, or to be so repugnant that nobody wanted to touch you or your things. Being here in their tower had already removed both of her accustomed means of security.

The knowledge of what she was forcing on Estrella was in Natasha's eyes. The woman was pushing her, testing her, expecting things of her. Everyone else seemed to think she was mostly dead and needed coddling, but the Widow was merciless.

"You're standing on a cliff, Estrella. Your old life is over. Dead. There's only ash and monsters behind you. In front of you, there's nothing to do but jump. Fall or fly," Natasha gave her the choice with a curiously light tone of voice and an uptilt of her chin which hinted that she'd prefer Estrella to take the loftier option.

She spoke like one who'd had to make the same choice.

Estrella felt tears sting her eyes. She did feel like she was standing on a cliff. This wasn't just about talking in front of Thor. Everything had changed as soon as she'd met Steve, and she was just now clear-headed enough to realize it. She was shaking and her voice was going to sound stupid and wavery. She took a breath anyway.

"I'm not sure I want to change my life. I don't know what's ahead," Estrella said, uncertain but clearly intoned and enunciated.

"None of us can know what's ahead," Natasha agreed.

Estrella watched Thor, cringing as the seconds passed. The big man stood behind Natasha's shoulder. A smile broadened his face for a moment, but then disappeared as a thought occurred to him.
"I felt nothing. But, what if, being of Asgard, I am not vulnerable to her voice at all? We will have done this with no result except false confidence in the device. There would be a danger of adverse consequences the next time she speaks in the presence of a man," Thor said.

"How true," Natasha agreed again, no surprise at all in her tone.

Both Thor and Estrella looked at Nat. Thor frowned, already accustomed to the Widow's tactics. Estrella thought that the Widow had some of the same kind of creepiness that Steve's friend Bucky did.

"So what do we do? Why didn't you bring in a regular guy to test this?" Estrella asked with a stronger voice.

Her fingers traced the butterfly shape of the necklace. She still watched Thor, fighting disbelief that she was speaking in front of a man and he wasn't acting like an amorous thug.

"Remove the necklace," Natasha said.

Estrella shook her head.

"I'll make a deal with you, Estrella. Those mats on your head are coming off. I can hold you down and shear you like a sheep. Or we can wait for Steve to wake up and you can both get your heads shaved together," Nat offered.

"Neither of those options gets me out of speaking to him without the necklace," Estrella said, and nodded toward the Asgardian. She gave Natasha her worst stare, and even added the little hint of insanity that she'd practiced to scare away the people who didn't scare so easily. Nat ignored her theatrics.

"Correct. But one of the options lets you get shaved with more fun and dignity," Natasha pointed out.

"You wouldn't hold me down anyway. You might hurt me," Estrella let go of her blankets long enough to cross her arms, careful of the IV line and using its presence to make her case for her.

Natasha didn't argue or threaten. Instead, she picked up the vinyl carrying case the clippers were in and unzipped it. She didn't look at Estrella. She got up from the bed and walked near the headboard to find an electric outlet to plug the clippers into. She took out the clippers, untangled the cord, and plugged them in. Estrella watched her, stubborn and aware that she still had a little time to call Natasha's bluff.

Then Natasha was on top of her in the bed faster than she could move to stop her. Estrella's stubbornly folded arms worked against her as Nat used her weight to trap her arms against her chest. Nat flicked the clippers on and adjusted the blade guard to its shortest setting.

"Your choice. Make it now," Natasha said.

She eyed the front of Estrella's hair and changed the angle of the clipper in her hand slightly.

"It is usually better to do what she wants at these moments," Thor advised blandly. When Estrella took her eyes off of Nat's calmly assertive expression to look at him, she saw that he'd have no help from Thor. He did not look harsh or unkind, but he wasn't going to help her against his teammate.

"Okay, okay. Get off me you bitch," Estrella fussed. She wiggled as much as she could until
Natasha turned off the hair clippers and slid off the bed.

"Twice in one day. I must be doing something right," Nat smiled.

She set the clippers down on the empty chair and waited for Estrella to take off the necklace.

The girl moved slowly purely for the sake of defiance and she fumbled at the clasp, but she got the choker off. Nat held out her hand, hoping Estrella would automatically hand it over so she wouldn't notice what the thing was made of. Estrella was still feeling bullied from being pinned down, so she put the necklace in Natasha's hand without hesitation.

"How do we proceed? Is there anything I should do?" Thor asked.

It was getting close to time for Heimdall to call him home. He did not want to rush Estrella, but he could not be in two places at once.

"All she has to do is speak, Thor. Your job is to resist," Natasha said.

"That should not be a problem," Thor assured the women.

Estrella didn't know why Natasha was smiling. It wasn't going to be funny. She felt squirmy and uncomfortable with both of them looking at her, waiting. Now that she'd agreed to say something in front of Thor without the protection of the necklace, she didn't know what to say.

"Do you know any songs or nursery rhymes? It doesn't matter what you say. He doesn't have to understand it. Anything will do," Nat advised her.

"I know it doesn't matter what I say! Just give me a minute to think. You people are crazy and you don't know what you're asking," Estrella whispered furiously.

It didn't occur to her that she could have said the same words instead of whispering them. She was fussing at Natasha, not thinking about Thor.

Ah. There was the story her Granny had taught her years ago. The one about the burro and the spider. It could even be sung, if she wanted to.

"I'm sorry," Estrella whispered to Thor pre-emptively.

"It's alright. Don't be concerned. Proceed as soon as you are ready," Thor assured her briskly.

Estrella took a breath and sang the story of the burro and the spider in Spanish. She didn't know the rest of the language, but Granny had taught her what the song meant. She closed her eyes because she didn't want to look at Thor while she sang.

Thor thought for the first instant that the women were being overly concerned about nothing. The young woman had a pleasant singing voice, maybe even an exceptional one, but…

His thoughts faltered and he took a surprised breath. There was a warm, pulling sensation in his mind and it travelled down his spine and grew in intensity.

The sound of her. It was delightful. He had to do something.

Natasha turned her head to look back and up at Thor. He'd gone from confident and smiling patiently, to stricken and slightly out of breath, and now he was bent and huffing at her shoulder, his hands gripping the footboard of the hospital bed until the faux-wood polymer creaked under the strain.
"How ya doing there, tough guy?" she asked him. The bed jerked slightly in his grip and Estrella stopped singing abruptly.

The end of the singing didn't seem to relieve Thor any. All Estrella's silence did was make it easier to hear the distress in Thor's breathing. He bit off a growl and was silent for a moment in response to Nat's question, but then his harsh respirations returned. The bed trembled.

"No, no, he's not-" Estrella protested fearfully.

"Shh. Give him time. We already know that the necklace works," Natasha said.

Another dose of Estrella's voice added to the urge that prodded him. Thor hung his head until it touched Natasha's shoulder. He asked his father for strength and held onto the tight lockdown he had on his muscles.

"Suck it up, Odinsson. It's over. You've already beat this," Nat told him.

She eased off the pressure from the blade that she held against the leather of his pants. Natasha didn't really know if she would have cut him had he proved a danger to the girl. Maybe not. But she got a nice sense of satisfaction from getting a knife at one of his few weak spots. She wondered why most versions of armor didn't have much protection down there, right under the curve of the package. One skilled swipe of a blade and a man would never be the same. A man who didn't have enhanced healing abilities, anyway.

"That won't be necessary," Thor finally whispered.

He released the footboard and pushed Nat's hand away. She put away her knife before Estrella could see that she'd needed it. Thor stood straight and took a deep breath, then let it out. He did not look at either woman and his fists were tight at his thighs.

"My respects, Lady. I will not think to disregard your abilities," Thor said, his eyes straight ahead.

"I'm sorry," Estrella whispered again.

Thor finally relaxed some and let his arms loosen. He didn't know whether to feel pity or envy for the man who might end up being the girl's mate. No matter. It was time to take his leave of Midgard.

"There is nothing to forgive. I'm glad that we were able to prove the effectiveness of your device," Thor said.

He gave Estrella a gentle look which promised no recriminations for his discomfort, then turned and left the room. Natasha waited until his footfalls retreated into the elevator before she spoke.

"So how does it feel to have the undivided attention of a god?" she asked Estrella.

"He's not a god. He's an alien," Estrella denied, "Are you done with your business now?"

"Almost. We need to talk about Steve," Natasha said.


She was just about done jumping through hoops for the Widow. Her frown eased when she thought that she should have a headache by now. More than a headache. Her heart felt fluttery from the stress of speaking to Thor, but her chest didn't hurt. She bit her lip and tucked her head down.
"What?" Natasha asked.

At first, Estrella didn't want to share her knowledge with the woman, but the Widow hadn't hurt her. Harsh as she was, she'd helped. And tense as the moments with Thor had been, he'd helped too. So had Tony Stark. And whoever Bruce was. They deserved her thanks, if the necklace was really going to allow her to speak. She'd been mute for most of eleven years.

"I should have a headache. And my heart should hurt," Estrella told her.

Natasha smiled.

"I told you. Your old life is over. I can't make any promises, but I think things might get better for you from now on," Nat said.

"But I can't pay for this," Estrella said, touching the butterfly choker and looking around at the hospital room.

"I said that your life might improve. I didn't say there wouldn't be any problems. Look, I know that things have been tough for you. It's nearly impossible for you to trust us, and you're accustomed to seeing everything and everyone as a threat. That's survival and you've been good at it. You've got at least one friend now, and two or more of the most powerful men on the planet are willing to defend you. Instead of dwelling on problems, you can afford to take a day or two to relax and enjoy your improved circumstances," Natasha encouraged her.

"But it doesn't make any sense. I can't trust things that don't make sense. Every man I've met who's heard my voice has attacked me. How is it that Steve and Thor are so different?" Estrella asked.

"They're different because they've trained themselves to do the right thing even when doing the wrong thing would be more enjoyable. The strength that makes them heroic is the same strength that helps them overpower their more selfish desires," Natasha said.

Now that Natasha had said it, Estrella could see it to be true. The determined look she'd seen on both Steve and Thor when they'd been dealing with the effects of her voice wouldn't have been out of place on them in battle. During the battle of New York against the aliens, she'd seen images of them looking similar.

Estrella smiled at the realization that the power of her voice had not turned Steve or Thor ugly with lust as her voice did to most men. They had been awesome to watch. Inspiring. For the same reason that people liked to capture the Avengers' battles on their cell phones and then play the videos over and over again. They were strong. Good. Heroic. People needed to see that because of the way it made them feel. Like Estrella was feeling right now. She felt hopeful.

Natasha let her dwell on the positive for a moment, but there were still some issues to caution her about. She'd kept a watchful eye on Estrella's heart monitor and had almost paused in her plans for the girl a few times. She'd done well, but there was a limit to how much stress she could tolerate.

"Estrella, do you know who Bruce is?" Natasha asked.

"I don't think so. Didn't you say that a Bruce helped Tony Stark to make this?" she asked. Her fingers were rubbing a rough spot on the butterfly's wings. The diamonds. Natasha foresaw trouble coming when she finally got a look at the necklace. Maybe it would be Steve's trouble and not hers. She could hope.

"Yes. He's Doctor Bruce Banner. When he gets too agitated, he's the Hulk. Bruce is one of the kindest people you'll ever meet, but the Hulk isn't. I said earlier that Thor was the strongest man
among us, but that's only because Bruce is calm right now. There's no risk to anyone as long as Bruce stays calm, and he's really good at doing that. But you should be extra careful to always have your necklace on if you speak when Bruce is near you," Natasha said.

"The Hulk lives here?" Estrella asked. Her eyes were wide and she was obviously concerned.

"No. Bruce lives here. You don't go around calling Steve 'Captain America' all the time, so it's not appropriate to call Bruce 'The Hulk' while he's not green and while we're at home," Nat explained.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I know how it bothers Steve when people don't see him for who he is," Estrella apologized.

Estrella kept touching her throat because it felt strange and wonderful to speak, after all her years being silent. Natasha was pleased to see her enjoying one of the perks of her new life. Steve would be pleased to know that she was already finding something to be happy about.

Nat slumped her lower back against the footboard of the bed and let her shoulders round down to a more casual posture. Estrella was getting tired. She could see it in the way she had finally rested fully back against the incline of the bed. Nat hoped she could use a more intimate tone to help with the next and last thing she had to talk about.

"Good. Now, about Steve," Natasha began.

Estrella looked at her with interest. The girl was a wrecked mess at the moment, but Natasha saw potential in her fearlessness and strength of character. She decided to share a little more than she had planned to because she thought Estrella could handle it.

"I can tell you that Steve is my friend as well as my leader and my teammate. He nearly died rescuing my ass less than twenty-four hours ago, so you'll understand that I feel some loyalty to him. If you know him, you'll know that he'd do the same for anybody with little regard for his own life. The only reason he's still breathing is because he's so hard to kill," Natasha said.

Estrella's face pulled into a strong frown at hearing about Steve nearly dying. Thor had said something about him being gravely injured, too. She didn't like that she'd found him standing over her when she'd awakened, now knowing that somebody should have made him go to bed.

"Why didn't you make him go to bed and rest?" Estrella asked.

"Because Steve's a big boy and it's hard to make him do anything he doesn't want to do. He wanted to be near you, in case you woke up. He understands his limits. He can take it. My point is that even though he's heroic and tough, he's not perfect, and he's not immune to pain. Try not to hurt him, Estrella. And don't expect the impossible from him. He's still a man, and he does make mistakes," Natasha warned.

"I know. Why do you think I like him? He'd be so boring if he was perfect like everyone thinks he is. Mostly he's annoying and a little naïve, but there's worse ways to be" Estrella said.

"Exactly," Natasha smiled, "I'm glad you already see that in him."

Nat knew that Estrella wasn't getting exactly what she meant to impart, but she wasn't prepared to go into more details of Steve's situation, mostly out of loyalty to him. If Estrella was meant to know those things, she'd find out in due time.

Estrella was feeling like she could sleep. Her mouth was dry, and she really wanted her clothes. She also wanted the IV needle out of her hand too, so she wouldn't feel tethered to the bed. But
before she asked for anything else, she needed Natasha's advice.

"His friend Bucky is around. I've seen him twice. Steve hasn't asked me more because he could see that I had a headache, but he's going to ask me about Bucky soon and I don't know what to tell him," Estrella said.

Natasha went from casual and friendly to creepy and alert in the time it had taken to say the name 'Bucky.'

"How do you know it was him that you saw?" the Widow asked.

"Because Steve showed me his sketchbook. There's drawings of his friend Bucky all through it, and that's the same man I've seen. There's no mistaking him. The way he moves. The way he watches things and people. He's sinister and quiet. Like you. Worse really, because he's a man. I knew he wasn't a normal street person the first time I met him, before I saw the sketchbook," Estrella explained.

"If you've seen him, then he meant for you to see him. He came to you. Why?"

"I think he's been watching Steve. I was in trouble both times and he protected me because he thinks that Steve likes me. Both times, he told me to let Steve help me. The last time, he threatened to bring me to a hospital if I didn't go home with Steve the next time I saw him," Estrella said.

"This is remarkable. You should be telling this to Steve, not to me. What do you mean when you say that you don't know what to tell Steve? You should tell him everything you just told me. Tell him everything you know," Natasha insisted.

Estrella made a conflicted grimace.

"Why is there any dilemma about this? Steve has been looking for him for months," Natasha said.

"Bucky doesn't want to be found. Steve thinks he's lost and confused, but he's not. He needs time to come to Steve on his own, but Steve is too eager. He'll try to force it, and then Bucky might leave again. I want Steve to get his friend back. It's important to him. But he's going to mess it up if I give away all the details and he goes hunting, pushing. I don't know how to lie to Steve. I don't want to lie, even if I could," Estrella said.

She hoped that Natasha would have advice on what to do when Steve asked her about Bucky. Natasha looked at Estrella in silence for a long moment. Estrella could see that there was a lot going on that the Widow wasn't saying. Things were complicated, then, Estrella concluded. Weren't they always?

"Do you know what Bucky is, Estrella?" Natasha asked.

"Sure I do. He's whatever you are, but more of it. I already said that," she answered.

"Good enough. You're very perceptive. What you need to know is that we don't know if Bucky is a threat or not. We don't know where his allegiance is. We don't know what his intentions are for Steve. He's extremely dangerous and no one has figured out how to catch him or what to do with him. We need all the information on him that we can get," Nat said.

"And what you need to know is that Bucky's allegiance is to Steve. He's a threat to anyone who hurts Steve. You don't catch him and you don't do anything with him. If he's that dangerous, then you leave him alone and mind your own business unless it looks like he's going to do something to you first. That's easy. Law of the street. It's a shame all you smart, rich people can't figure that out"
on your own," Estrella said. She would have said it with more attitude, but she'd run out of steam. Her eyes were getting heavy.

"I know the law of the street, but thanks for the reminder, Estrella. I'll make sure the boss man takes your advice seriously," Natasha said.

The more time she spent with the girl, the more she liked her.

"Can I get my clothes? Or some water?" Estrella whispered. Her eyes were shut and she'd stopped fingering the butterfly to let her hands fall to her lap.

Natasha got up and poured a glass of ice water from the plastic pitcher. She held a straw to Estrella's lips until she'd taken a sip. When she was done drinking, Nat put away the glass and Clint's hair clippers for later. She looked forward to getting the mess off of Estrella's head. And she looked forward to finding out what a girl like her would do to Steve's life.
Chapter 11

Author's note: Yup, it's getting a little out of hand. I've still got the bones of the story firmly grasped, but the fluff of it is squeezing out between my fingers. I had originally attempted to make each chapter use up the dull parts first and finish with a crescendo, but all attempt at that kind of finesse is past. As a writing exercise for a bigger project of mine, it's fun, at least.

Tony Stark had incinerated her clothes and her shoes. All she had left was a clear plastic bag which included the autograph sketch Steve had made for her, a small folding knife, and a dollar and thirty-two cents in loose change. When she'd asked for her clothes, the nurse had brought her the bag and apologized to her for the clothing.

Estrella tried not to be angry at Tony because he'd given her such a wonderful gift in the choker necklace she now wore. She could have made more clothes for herself, but the necklace was unique. Her fingers came up to touch the butterfly at her throat once again. She didn't want to take it off because it made her feel safe. There had to be a way to repay Mister Stark for what he'd done for her, but she didn't know how, yet.

She stood in the bathroom of her recovery room in the medical ward. Natasha had lent her some clothes to wear, now that Doctor Kalfey had removed the IV line from her hand and she could get up and move around. She didn't mind borrowing things so much, but she'd have to pay Natasha back too, for the new bra and the package of plain cotton underwear.

Since her mind felt much clearer, she was sure she could keep a mental list of what she owed to whom. The problem was finding a way to make some money to pay people back. Natasha had suggested that she not worry about that for a day or two, so she was going to try to comply.

Estrella wanted to take a shower before putting on Natasha's borrowed clothes, but there was no lock on the bathroom door. The thought of anyone coming in while she changed made her put on the clothes in a hurry.

She was happy to get rid of the pale, flimsy hospital gown and put on the stretchy sport bra and the jeans and long-sleeved shirt. The clothes hung loose on her and she had to use the belt Nat had provided to keep the pants from sliding down past her hip bones. It wasn't as bulky and concealing as the clothes she made for herself, but it was so much better than the hospital gown that she felt safe and well-covered by comparison. She pulled on the hospital issued tan socks with the rubber lines on the bottom that she'd been wearing when she'd awakened in the medical ward two days ago.

When she returned to her room, she heard Steve's voice out in the hall, by the nurse's station. He didn't sound happy. She thought she heard Natasha's voice too. She went and stood by the door to listen to what they were arguing about.

"You're not in charge of her care, Nat. You can't make decisions like that. If she doesn't want her hair cut, you won't cut it," Steve's voice said strongly.

"No one needs to be in charge of her care. She's a grown woman and she made a deal," Natasha countered.

"Under duress! You were sitting on her!" Steve pointed out. He was getting more agitated, and Estrella didn't like to hear them fighting.
"Steve, give me some credit. I know not to sit on her," Natasha said.

They were speaking loud enough that Estrella didn't feel like she was snooping. Anyone in the medical ward would be able to hear them, and they were just outside her door.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that Tony's already burned her stuff, and now you want to change the way she looks. It's too much too fast, and she's not being given any choice. You know damn well that you tricked her into it," Steve said.

His voice got a lot quieter right before he said the word 'damn.' Estrella smiled at how typically Steve that was. He'd never said the word in her presence, but maybe he talked that way among his teammates.

She touched her butterfly briefly before she opened her door. They were already looking toward the door before she had it opened enough to see them. From the way they both were dressed, it looked like they'd been in business meetings all morning. Steve waited to see what she had to say, his hands comfortably shoved into the pockets of his dark gray suit pants.

"It's okay. She can shave my head. I'm gonna have to get a job anyway and I can't go to work looking like this," Estrella said. She looked up at what she could see of her hair, then at them. She stepped into the hallway and let the room door shut behind her.

Steve was smiling at her. It was the first time he'd heard her speak freely without her voice doing things to his head.

She didn't have to ask why he was smiling so big. It was clear that he was happy for her, and it felt good to have someone to share a happy moment with. There hadn't been anyone she could share things with for a very long time. It felt cozy to share her happiness with him. She tried not to smile in public, but she couldn't help it. Steve's joy for her was infectious.

"Alriiight. We like the voice. Moving on now. You know, Steve, you were part of the deal," Natasha said.

"I was?" he asked.

He was still smiling when he looked to Natasha. His eyes reluctantly dragged away from assessing Estrella. Why did Nat look so smug? That look on her always meant that she was proud of some accomplishment, usually something related to getting the best of her male teammates. He immediately became suspicious of what Estrella's hair-cutting deal had to do with him.

"You have to have your head shaved too," Estrella informed him.

She studied his head and his face, trying to imagine what he'd look like without his classic blonde hair which was so iconic of Captain America. It was getting too long, anyway.

"Wait a minute. No fair. I wasn't here to agree to any deal," Steve said, still in good humor.

"You were the one messing around in my life uninvited, telling Wanda to call the tower on me. If I have to change, then so do you," Estrella said.

It felt really good to be able to assert herself without the annoying whisper. She'd meant to be sharp with him, but every time she spoke, he looked at her and grinned.

"What?" she asked.
"You have an accent. It's slight, but-" Steve said. He was uncertain if pointing it out would offend her.

"I know. I'm stuck in the middle. Everyone used to assume I spoke Spanish. My granny spoke it, and my mother had a strong accent. She wanted me to blend in, so all I know is English, but when I open my mouth, this comes out," Estrella shrugged.

She knew her words had a slight Latino lilt, and she'd tried to moderate it, but there hadn't been much opportunity to practice. Steve seemed delighted by everything about the way she spoke, and she squinted at him suspiciously, wondering if her necklace wasn't completely working.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked him.

"Nothing. Can't I be happy?" Steve wondered.

He was still smiling, and it infected her again.

"Stop smiling. You look like an idiot," Estrella fussed, but she couldn't get her face to behave, either.

Natasha wanted to tease them about the way they were acting, but she didn't dare. If she mentioned anything at all about how the air felt thicker between the two of them, they'd probably get prickly and awkward and the moment would be ruined. She'd seen a few different smiles on Steve, but the goofy, companionable one was new.

She left them googling at each other in the hallway to go retrieve Clint's hair clippers from Estrella's room. She felt like doing a goofy victory dance, herself, but she kept it locked inside. If any of the guys quashed the potential she felt between Steve and Estrella with jokes and teasing, she'd make them piss blood.

They both looked to her when she came out with the clippers. She had to bite the inside of her cheek hard to not give herself away with the satisfaction she felt. Steve had followed her down to medical, ripping at her for how she'd been too forceful with Estrella on the video files he'd seen, but now he looked relaxed. The girl was good for him.

"Estrella, I convinced Doctor Kalfey to release you, but only by assuring her that you would be staying with me and that you would wear this monitor on your wrist," Natasha said.

Like before, she didn't give Estrella time to argue about it. She took her by the hand and pushed up the slouchy purple shirt sleeve.

"What does it do?" Estrella asked.

The monitor was made of that white fibrous paper which wouldn't tear. There was a silvery metal strip down the middle of it. Natasha fit it comfortably snug around her skin and pulled off the paper tab which protected the adhesive. In less than half a minute, the wrist monitor was on, and she barely felt it.

"It sends a signal to the nurse's station so they can monitor your heart," Natasha explained.

Doctor Kalfey had come to see her this morning. Estrella already knew she had heart problems, so what the doctor had told her wasn't any surprise. They wanted her to eat a certain diet they'd come up with for her, too. She'd had a shake for breakfast and a cup of beef broth for lunch. She couldn't finish more than half of what the nurse brought her before she felt stuffed. She would eat a little to make them happy, but as soon as she was out of here, she could do what she wanted.
The three of them walked toward the elevator. Estrella thought it was strange that the medical ward was empty. Not even a nurse was in sight. She'd been the only patient. As soon as Doctor Kalfey had discharged her, the place cleared out.

Natasha walked on Estrella's right, and Steve was on Natasha's right. Nat was hardly taller than her, but Steve's height and bulk kept making her startle. In a crowd on the streets, being near him hadn't bothered her. When he was sitting and talking to her or reading near her, like in her hospital room or at the library, his personality and his wit distracted her from the fact that he was a large man.

She was feeling better than she had in a long time and she could walk faster without the encumbrance of her floppy shoes. The only times she and Steve had walked anywhere together, he'd moved slowly to match her. Today his size, his athletic stride and the emptiness of the medical ward kept telling her that she was in danger.

Natasha and Steve were both looking at her when she glanced at them. They shared a quick look between the two of them as they all three reached the elevator. Their silent communication spoke of long hours working together, making quick decisions with few words. Estrella felt like an outsider. They were strong and rich and smart. What was she doing here with them? Why did they want her here?

The elevator door opened for them without any buttons being pushed. Steve and Natasha got in it. Estrella's feet seemed to stick to the floor in the hall. She couldn't make herself go in. She wanted to, but… she couldn't. He was too big and the elevator was a closed space, and there was only Natasha with them.

This time she saw them make a decision together without so much as looking at each other. Steve released a breath which wasn't even a sigh and Natasha stepped out of the elevator again.

"Steve, you go on and we'll catch up with you later," Nat said.

Estrella got the impression that the words hadn't been necessary and had only been for her benefit.

"Sure. See ya," he said to Estrella in his typical manner, but his brow looked slightly troubled.

She felt stinging at her eyelids and her throat felt tight. She couldn't say anything, so she nodded as the elevator door closed.

"I know you didn't mean to, but you hurt his feelings," Natasha said after giving Estrella a moment to get herself under control.

Estrella nodded.

"Don't worry. He understands. He just wasn't expecting it," Nat said kindly.

"I wasn't either," Estrella said, low and sad.

The elevator was gone for only a minute, then it opened again for them. It was empty.

She had no trouble getting in it with Natasha.

"Where are we going?" Estrella asked.

"To my suite. To do your hair. We won't see anyone on the way. Jarvis is good like that," Natasha said.
They got out of the elevator in a nice, public-looking lobby which had three other elevators in it. Estrella followed Natasha directly across to the one with the door open waiting for them.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Estrella said.

"You're welcome, Miss," Jarvis replied.

Again, Natasha didn't press any buttons. In fact, there were no buttons. There was a rectangle in the brass wall panel where the buttons would have been, but the panel was smooth and blank. It was a walk-through elevator with doors on the other end, but there were no buttons over there either.

"How do people use this elevator?" Estrella asked.

"They don't. This is the only way to the Avengers' living quarters. No one gets in without Jarvis," Natasha told her.

"But what about power failures?" Estrella wondered.

"If there's ever a power failure, we've got much larger problems than the elevators," Natasha said dryly.

Estrella didn't know what that meant, but it sounded like there probably wouldn't be a problem with the elevators.

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened to a much smaller lobby. A residential foyer, really. It was mid-afternoon and the glass wall at the end of the hall between the two suites let in bright daylight. Estrella wanted to go and look out because it seemed that they were really high up, but she followed Natasha to the suite on the left.

Natasha's place was comfortable and modern, in warm jewel and earth tones. The floors were dark wood and the kitchen was done in gray stone and bronze. There were a few décor touches, but there were no homey personal items lying around. The large living room had another wall of windows and Estrella went straight to look at the view. She stepped right up to the glass, then stepped back again.

"What floor are we on?" Estrella asked. She'd never been high up like this. The city spread out below her, and other tall buildings which she was accustomed to looking up at were down below her.

"Low nineties. Steve and Clint have the suites on the other side of the wall from us," Nat told her.

Her evasion of answering the question more precisely told Estrella that she was asking for more information than people were allowed to know.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry," Estrella said.

Natasha only smiled at her slightly.

Ooo! These people were so much in their heads. No wonder Steve had been able to hold conversations with her when she wasn't even talking. It was like they had telepathy or something.

"Are you guys telepathic? Because you don't even talk," Estrella said.

Natasha only curved her lips a little bit more and held up the hair clippers.

Estrella blew out a sigh. Was the woman playing with her?
Natasha and the clippers went into another room down the hall, so Estrella followed. It was an amazing bathroom, done in honey-colored marble. There was a large window here, too, right beside and over the huge soaker tub. An open shower boasted a dark wood bench and several water nozzles. There was a wide mirror over the countertop and Estrella saw herself in it. She looked like what she was.

"I don't belong here," she said.

"Lots of people would like to have access to what you do right now. But they can't get in. How did you get here?" Natasha asked.

She plugged in the clippers and sat on an upholstered bench with carved legs and feet. She held the silent clippers and waited for Estrella.

"Steve brought me here," Estrella answered. She was still mad at him for that. A little.

"This is Avengers tower. Do you know who leads the Avengers?"

"Tony Stark?" Estrella guessed.


Nat's words made sense to her in the technical way, but she still felt out of place. Her house was a tin roof by a dumpster with a bed of carpet scraps, none of which she really owned. Everything she had was given to her or scavenged.

This was probably the most advanced building in the world, with all the security and with Jarvis, and all the nice things. There was even a jet and a landing pad. No, she didn't belong here, no matter what Natasha said or Steve did. She was the daughter of immigrants who had owned nothing, themselves. She still was nothing, even if they pitied her and gave her gifts. Especially then.

Estrella felt a surreal detachment from the moment she was living in. This was like a dream. She didn't know if it was a bad one, or a good one, or simply a weird one.

Nat patted the bench beside her. Estrella went and sat. She wasn't going to miss her matted hair. The only reason she didn't want to lose it was in case she needed it again so she could be repulsive. Natasha pushed her gently down across her lap and switched on the clippers. There was a waste bin on the floor at the end of the bench.

The clippers bit into the hair at her scalp, first in the back, then they worked around her hair line. Natasha worked patiently around and around. It pulled sometimes and the clippers grew hot against her skin. Estrella didn't complain about the hot metal or the pulling. It was so strange to feel cool air on her scalp.

"Your hair is already growing in black. You'll look cute in no time," Natasha said.

Nat worked the clippers at the top of her head, and then a wig of matted, orange-ish blonde hair fell into the waste bin. It made Estrella queasy to look at it, it was so ugly. She sat up quickly and stood to go look in the mirror.

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With the ugly mats gone, the shape of her head wasn't bad. She looked like bones, but her eyes were large and brown and a short fuzz of black hair ghosted her scalp. It already made her uneasy that her cheekbones, jaw and lips were pretty and feminine without the horrible hair to draw attention away from them.
"I look like a skeleton," Estrella said critically.

"Almost," Natasha agreed.

Natasha set the clippers down and moved to start the water in the bath. When the tub was stoppered and she'd poured scented bubbles into the water, she came to stand behind Estrella at the mirror.

"Your skin is irritated where your hair was. I've got some good lotion for that. For now, get in the tub. Take your time and relax. I'll be in the living room if you need me," Nat said.

She took a plush bath towel from a cabinet and set it by the tub. Then she left Estrella alone.

Estrella didn't linger in Natasha's bathroom like she owned the place. She took off her necklace in case the water would hurt it, and she got clean quickly. She hadn't shaved in years. Nat had put a new razor out for her, so she used it on her legs and under her arms.

The whole time she bathed, her nose enjoyed the wonderful, subtle scent of the pink bar of soap she was using. The soap felt fatty and luxurious. It left her skin feeling moisturized and soft.

When she was done, she felt so smooth and strange. She cleaned out the tub with supplies she found under the sink, then rinsed the tub so it was as clean as new.

Natasha must have heard that she was done, because she knocked once, then came in with another set of clothes. Estrella stood wrapped in the towel, holding her necklace.

"I've already got clothes," Estrella said, indicating the borrowed clothes she'd taken off.

"They didn't suit you. Try this," Nat said. She handed Estrella a folded stack of clothes and put her necklace on for her while her hands were full.

"Thank you, Natasha," Estrella said quietly, for more than just putting her necklace on.

"Don't thank me yet. Remember, we don't know what the future holds," Natasha replied.

Estrella didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't say anything.

"Where are we going now?" Estrella asked as they got in the elevator again.

She was happy in the long, full skirt that Natasha had lent her. It was dark brown and it partly hid how hideously slim she was. She had a dark red tunic top with a wide elastic belt. The top would have felt too thin and revealing, but Nat had paired it with a suede vest that covered her up well enough.

"Jarvis, where is Captain Rogers?" Natasha asked.

"You will find him in the common room," Jarvis replied.

Estrella wanted to ask where that was, but she decided to wait and see.

"Pause, Jarvis," Natasha said soon as the doors were closed, but before the box started moving.

Estrella looked to Nat. All the silence was making her nervous. She was accustomed to silence when she was by herself, but to be around such a vibrant person as Natasha yet have most of the moments filled with silence was getting to her.
"Estrella, we're the only women here. Thor left yesterday, and Clint is out working, but you might see Bruce, Tony, or Sam. We're going to get Steve with these," Natasha held up the clippers, which she had brushed clean.

"Okay," Estrella said. She rubbed at the sore spot where the IV had gone into her hand. The small bandage was something to look at while Nat watched her.

"They aren't like regular men on the street. Thor is way over the top, and the rest of them aren't much better sometimes. There's a lot of testosterone flowing around here, and I've never wanted them to leash it. If you feel uncomfortable, go to the elevator and Jarvis will take you to my suite, no questions asked. The guys don't go to my suite at all, so you can retreat there if you need to. Do you think you can handle this?" Natasha asked.

Estrella shrugged. She really didn't know. She'd surprised herself with her inability to get into the elevator with Steve earlier.

"Fair enough. I'm not going to protect you. I won't need to because they're good guys. Tony is a pest, but he means well. Try to be brave, because you'll have to get used to being around men in small spaces sooner or later," Natasha said.

Estrella nodded. Now she really felt nervous because she expected to have to walk into a room full of men.

"Go, Jarvis," Nat said.

A very short moment later, the elevator doors opened into a dim hallway, but there was a large, day lit room to the right. Natasha led out of the elevator, clippers in hand. Estrella followed hesitantly.

From the hallway, the room opened wide. It was a multi-level space of glass and metal, with stylish leather furniture and architectural masonry walls. The floor was glossy stained concrete, and a deep, white furry rug floored the seating area in the middle. A man sat with his back to the hallway, his arm up along the back of a couch. Steve sat on the other couch across from him.

"It's Delilah, Steve. Maybe you should run," the man said with a warm smile. He looked at the women over his shoulder, but he didn't get up until Estrella followed Nat around the couch to face the men.

"Ain't scared," Steve denied. Estrella noted that he'd changed into casual khakis and a V-neck green t-shirt.

"Hi, I'm Bruce," the man she didn't know said. He stood to greet Estrella. He held out his hand in greeting, and Estrella forced herself to reach out and touch it. He adapted his gesture to merely touch her fingers and his friendly smile stayed in place.

"You helped with this. Thank you," Estrella whispered. She touched her fingers to her necklace.

"You're welcome. I'm glad we could help. Doesn't it work?" Bruce asked.

"Maybe she doesn't feel like talking right now," Steve said. He got up and came over to look at Estrella's head.

"I always did like the look of a fresh buzz," Steve made a curious face and leaned forward and down slightly to sniff at her head, "Smells good too."

"Do you want ylang-ylang lotion rubbed on your head? Because I can go get it," Natasha offered.
Bruce smiled at Steve while Steve made an attempt at shaping the repetitive word with his mouth. His brow crinkled with amused uncertainty.

"No, not at all. I've got to see this," Tony's voice insisted as he walked out of the elevator in the hall.

"It's just a haircut," Sam said, getting out behind him.

The two men entered the room. Sam hung back, then went to the kitchen. Tony walked right up to Estrella and looked her over.

"No more Auschwitz vibe. You've got more of a, uh-" Tony waved a hand at her, then fell silent at the steely look Steve was giving him over Estrella's head.

"Tony," He said to Estrella instead.

He was still looking at her intently. He was in an old t-shirt so faded that she couldn't make out what the print on the front once had been. His black jeans had stains on the knees, and his hair was spikey and disarrayed. This was definitely not the Tony Stark she'd seen on television at gala events or in the Iron Man suit. But it was Tony Stark. There was no mistaking his handsome face and his attitude.

Estrella ignored the Auschwitz comment and smiled at him.

"Thank you for my necklace," she said shyly.

Tony had looked eager when she'd opened her mouth to speak, then slightly disappointed when her voice did nothing to him. Bruce shook his head in disgust and sat back down on the couch.

"It's nothing. So, Goldilocks, get on with the show," Tony quickly turned his attention to Steve and Natasha. He rubbed his hands together and sprawled back in the leather chair at the end of the couches.

Estrella felt relief that the bright laser of his attention was no longer aimed in her direction. Sam drifted to her side with a beer in his hand. His posture was so relaxed that she felt no anxiety at his approach.

"Hi, I'm Sam. The sane, normal one around here," he said. He stood a comfortable distance away and simply smiled at her without offering his hand to shake.

"Are you sure? Because I saw you flying all around getting shot at near those creepy hover ships," Estrella said.

"Ooooh," Steve winced, then grinned at her proudly.

Steve turned away to walk over to the chair Nat had pulled closer to an electrical outlet, but he was still smiling faintly when he sat and pulled his shirt off. He leaned forward over the concrete floor and braced his elbows on his knees. He wadded his shirt in one hand and waited for Nat to begin.

"Do you want to do this?" Natasha offered Estrella the clippers.

Estrella looked at all of Steve's bare skin and the amazing display of muscles which he was so casual about baring. She shook her head and stayed where she was. She was more comfortable with her familiar version of him. The one that wore clothes and spent time on the street with her. This fancy place, these smooth, confident people, were making her feel out of sorts. It was dream-like
"Want to help me make some drinks in the kitchen? We can do that instead, if you don't want to watch buns-n-thighs over there," Sam offered.

She didn't know why he was talking to her, a stranger, but his demeanor was nothing but kindness. She didn't want to make things in the kitchen, and it wasn't because she disliked Sam. Her eyes went back to looking at Steve and how he stayed bent patiently so Nat could move around him. Steve was so much bigger, but Natasha didn't fear him at all. She pulled his ear and laughed when he said 'ow' and frowned at her.

"Moth to the flame," Tony commented. He was watching Estrella watching Steve.

Estrella glanced at him, confused. Had he been talking to her? When he said nothing more, she returned to watching Steve and Natasha. The first lock of hair came off Steve's head. It sat on the back of his neck until Nat brushed it onto the floor.

"Tony," Bruce admonished him quietly.

Tony and Bruce's words sounded like nothing she needed to get involved in, so Estrella let herself drift across the furry rug. She vaguely noticed that it looked like real fur. Her borrowed sandals brushed through the thick hairs until she was off the other side of the rug and not far away from where Steve's look was quickly changing.

He looked up at her with his eyes though he didn't lift his head for fear of disturbing Nat's work. Estrella squatted down in front of him to better be able to see how he was changing with each swipe of the clippers. Natasha moved from his side, around his front between them, then over to his other side. Estrella stayed several feet away, leaving Natasha plenty of room to move.

"I don't think I like it," Estrella said.

She wasn't sure. His hair was darker underneath, cut so close to his scalp. She'd wondered if he would look bald because his hair was light like his skin, but the darker hair color against his skin made him look more serious. Severe. He had a nice shaped head, intelligent and refined looking.

"It'll grow back," Steve said. He looked at her hair too.

He was trying not to make her uncomfortable by staring, but his eyes kept going back to her. His fingers twitched, and he squeezed his t-shirt more tightly. Gosh, she had great lines. He changed his mind. He did want to draw her. She was really thin, and he didn't like what that meant for her health, but from an artist's perspective, she was technically interesting. He felt like a cad for thinking so coldly of it, but sometimes the things he drew weren't easy to think about or look at.

Why was Steve looking at her like that? She would have said he was studying her like she was a bug, but he had lingering hints of happiness around his eyes and mouth. He looked eager for something, like a kid waiting for a treat.

"What do you want?" she whispered to him. Being engaged with his thoughts and his facial expression helped her lose her uneasiness of his size and shirtlessness. She slid her feet forward until she was just a few feet from him so he wouldn't have to speak loudly.

"I want my sketchbook. And I want to go somewhere else. Somewhere with good light and not so many people," he near-whispered back at her.

"You want to draw me? I look like a scarecrow," Estrella said.
"Scarecrows can be interesting," Steve said.

Natasha smacked him hard on the back of the head. His head didn't move, but tiny filaments of cut hair poofed into the air to settle onto his shoulders.

"What?" Steve asked.

He turned his head to complain at Natasha, but she threatened his eyebrow with the clippers, so he drew his face back.

"You're an idiot, Steve Rogers," Natasha told him when he couldn't seem to figure out why she'd smacked him.

"She thinks you shouldn't have agreed with me when I said I look like a scarecrow. But I don't care. It's true," Estrella shrugged.

"No. Scarecrows are rough and gawky. Your lines are better. I like the way they flow, and the angles," Steve said.

He was looking at her again, like before. She could see his fingers try to move against the shirt. He really wanted to put her in his sketchbook with Bucky. Again, Estrella didn't feel worthy. Bucky was something special, even if he was an uncaring asshole. Bucky meant something to him.

"Are we done yet?" Steve asked Natasha.

"I don't know. Stand up," Nat told him.

Steve stood and Natasha moved around him, turning him so she could use the light from the window wall to look for any hairs she'd missed. She turned the clippers back on and touched up a few spots. Steve bent and moved how she wanted him to. Estrella got up carefully and stepped away. There was too much skin.

Steve shook his head like a dog, and brushed his fingers briskly over his prickly-shorn head. Natasha used his shirt to slap cut hair off his shoulders. Then, she turned the clippers back on and made a swipe at his side near his armpit.

"Ow. What was that for?" Steve asked.

"The stitches. You missed one when you were taking them out," Nat said. She had used the clipper blades to snip the string, then to tug it free from his skin.

Steve nodded and snapped out his shirt sharply a few times. He pulled it on over his head, then worked his arms and shoulders into it and tugged it down. Estrella wondered how watching him put on a shirt was nearly as uncomfortable as watching him take it off had been.

"If you wait here, I'll go get my sketchbook. Or, uh, you could go on down and I'll join you in the lobby. We could go to the coffee shop," Steve suggested hopefully.

The idea sounded wonderful to Estrella, but…

"Don't you want to see what you look like?" she asked him. He looked very different. She hadn't expected how much he would change. Natasha was putting away the clippers, but she was looking at him smugly, too. She thought the short buzz looked good on him.

"Nah. I know what I look like," Steve said.
"No, you need to see. People are going to stare some more and you need to see why," Estrella said.

She looked around for a door that could be a bathroom with a mirror. Natasha pointed her to the mirror behind the bar instead. She nodded her thanks to Nat and grabbed Steve's hand. She tugged him over to the mirror and made him look.

A sparkle caught her eyes and she looked further down the mirror to her own reflection. In the golden light behind the bar, her necklace's reflection was winking at her. She leaned closer too, and really looked at it for the first time.

"What is…?" she asked absently.

Then she was pulling the necklace from her throat. It tugged, then her fingers worked the clasp successfully. Steve distracted her by pressing a finger to her lips briefly as she put the butterfly in good light to look at it.

Soon as she realized she'd taken the necklace off in a room of four men, including Bruce, she froze still. Steve saw her realization and crossed his arms patiently. He pressed a finger to his own lips to remind her while she looked at the necklace.

It was too sparkly, too lustrous. Heavy. She turned it over and tugged some slack in the velvet choker band until she could see the silvery metal of the back side. There. There were stamp marks in the metal. She moved it closer to her face, but she didn't have a magnification lens.

Steve took it from her and read the markings out loud.

Estrella gasped. Steve quickly reached to press a finger to her lips again.

He didn't know why, but she was angry. Very angry. She took the necklace from him and put it back on.

Quick as she could stomp with any dignity, she went over to Tony.

"Are you crazy?! I can't take this! It's as expensive as, like, a car! Or a house!" Estrella exclaimed while she stood in front of Tony.

"Not as expensive as any house or car I would have. So, there." Tony said as if that settled it.

"I can never repay this! I can't take it," Estrella said. She started taking off the necklace again. In her hurry, her fingers fumbled. She couldn't get it, and her hands were trembling.

She felt heat along her back, and large fingers touched her nape, brushing her ineffective hands away. It was Steve, trying to help her. A large man at her back, and Tony Stark sprawled, smirking, in front of her.

She gulped in a breath and tried to hold it, but then let it out in a whine. Tony looked down at his phone at the same time that Jarvis and Sam spoke.

"Sir, if you would-"

"Hey, Tony, come over here," Sam said from the kitchen.

"Steve, give her some space," Natasha said.

"I'm just gonna go," Bruce said quietly.
Bruce got up to leave, but as soon as Steve stepped away, Estrella ran to the elevator. She got in it and was gone as quick as Jarvis could get her away. Steve stepped to follow her, but Nat got in front of him and pressed her hands to his chest.

"Nat, she's upset," Steve said. He leaned forward into her hands, just to have something solid to press against.

"And you would make it worse," Tony said, "Jarvis, when should we be concerned about what her heart is doing?"

"I am already concerned. If she doesn't start to calm in twenty seconds, I'll bring Doctor Kalfey," Jarvis told them.

Tony watched his phone and the little fluttering blips that were being transmitted from her wrist monitor. They watched as his lips silently counted down.

"I can't visually determine, Jarvis," Tony said.

"She is calming slightly, but this upset will keep her heart rhythm irregular for several minutes, possibly up to an hour. I will observe her," Jarvis said.

Steve squeezed his eyes closed and breathed through his mouth. Nat watched his heart thump at the vein in his throat. He was very worried about Estrella.

"We shouldn't have taken her from medical," he murmured.

"Keeping her trapped there alone would have upset her, too," Natasha attempted to soothe him.

"Steve, you should-" Bruce began.

"No, Bruce. I'm not doing that to her," Steve denied.

"I know there have been a lot of failures and twisted outcomes, but Bruce and I have had plenty of time to work on-" Tony said in a sensible tone which he hoped Steve might listen to.

"I said no," Steve enunciated firmly.

"I should go to her," Natasha said.

"No. Give her some quiet. This has been too much and she's overwhelmed. Jarvis, where is she? What's she doing?" Steve asked.

"Miss is in the guest room assigned to her in Miss Romanova's suite. She has removed the device and is sitting in the corner, facing the door. Should I attempt to speak to her?" Jarvis asked.

"Tell her I said that I'm an idiot and I'm sorry. That I'll try real hard not to crowd her like that again," Steve said.

"Very well," Jarvis said.

"Tell her I need help in the data entry department. If she wants the job, we can work out payment arrangements from her salary," Tony said.

Tony cursed under his breath, then stood up to go fix himself a drink at the bar.

"Why can't she just accept a gift? I was happy to make it for her. I blow more cash on a house party
and I don't lose any sleep over it," Tony clunked down the decanter, replaced its stopper, and tossed the scotch back.

"She's not like you, Tony. Resources matter to her. In her life, everything is judged by whether she can afford it. Or by whether any action would put her into debt to someone which she would then be expected to repay with her body. She can't accept something so expensive as if it was a thrift store trinket. She feels like you're buying her. Like a slave," Nat said.

Tony was silent. He poured himself another drink.

"Guys, you're the best. I know you want to help. But it's too much," Nat told them.

"So I should have paper clipped the modulator to a plastic My Little Pony necklace from Walgreen's?" Tony said sarcastically.

"That would have been better," Nat agreed. Steve was relaxing into strategy mode instead of action mode, so she eased the resistance of her arms from him and he stepped back.

"I have to fix this," Steve said.

"Jarvis, tell her that if she gives the necklace to Nat, I can re-do it myself. Tony can return the butterfly and she won't owe him except for the time he spent on the modulator. Tony, what's the labor charge?" Steve asked.

"Two and a half hours, mostly waiting for the courier," Bruce answered.

"So, a half hour of our time, Bruce and I. That works out to just about as much as the butterfly is worth. But she doesn't know that. Tell her three hundred dollars. That should keep her around here long enough for us to convince you to let us fix up her heart, Cap," Tony said.

Steve knew that Tony was feeling snippy with him when he called him Cap while they were off-duty.

"That is an entirely different issue. Detach and reevaluate," Steve ordered. If Tony was going to talk to Cap, then he'd get the Cap.

"Two ninety-five, or nothing. I'd rather the nothing," Tony said. Bruce nodded. The girl should be charging Tony for the fun he'd been having while they were making her necklace.

"Sir, Miss says she will accept the data entry position, but only if you pay her in cash and bill her medical care to Captain Rogers," Jarvis responded.

"She's angry and she wants to punish me for bringing her into this," Steve said. He was smiling. They all knew that self-sacrifice was one of his favorite pastimes.

"How is her heart, Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"She is calming, but continuing irregularities can be expected," Jarvis told them.

The elevator opened in the hallway. Natasha went to see why, because nobody had stepped out. Estrella's necklace was lying on the floor of the elevator. She brought it to Steve.

"Can you get the working part off of this and reattach it to copper?" Steve asked Bruce.
"Sure. In about five minutes," Bruce said.

He’d never worked with copper, but he’d worked with cutting torches in the field many times. Artistic intuition guided him, and he used the most basic of Tony's shop tools.

Peggy had been the keeper of his old mementos. The first time he'd visited her, her mind had been more solid than it was now. She’d called a niece and had two boxes delivered to him. Among the things in the boxes was an old cap gun, toy bandolier straps, and a little copper sheriff’s badge that he’d spent hours playing with when he was a kid.

Steve hammered out the copper badge. When he judged that it was the right size, he used a pair of metal snips and took his time cutting and rounding the shape of a butterfly. He liked the shape because it was a metaphor of what he wanted to see happen to his friend. What he hoped he would see, anyway. The end result was up to her.

He used awls and screwdrivers, punches and any odd shaped tool he could find to embellish the butterfly's wings. To the back, he added the flat eyelet which would rest against her throat and to which Bruce would attach the small, flat frequency modulator device which Tony had made. Steve filed it smooth and beat the butterfly shape until it matched the degree of curvature his artist's eye remembered seeing at the hollow of her throat. Then he used the torch to smooth the file marks and burnish the rough cut edges to a beaded finish which felt nice to his sensitive skin. He very much liked the rainbow hues the torch had made on the metal, and the bright and brown tones of the copper itself.

Bruce showed him where the special lacquer was that Tony used to coat the paint of his Iron Man suits. Steve applied a coat of it to keep the copper from dulling and losing its bright colors. Next, Bruce took a turn attaching the modulator to the back and he smoothed the metal to Steve's satisfaction. He re-checked its function with Jarvis' help to make sure that the transfer hadn't harmed it.

Lastly, Steve got his recently decommissioned uniform jacket which had been damaged beyond repair on his last mission. The dusty deep blue color would contrast the copper of the butterfly nicely. He cut an already tattered strip from where the jacket had been shredded against his side by the concrete chips. He’d put it through the wash in his suite, so at least the blood stains didn't show on the front of the remade choker necklace. He couldn't think of how to clasp the choker shut without using anything fancy or store bought, so he used one of his old Boy Scout slip knots. He could teach her how to tie it.

Steve held the finished device in his hand under the work light he'd been using. It wasn't nearly as intricate as he felt her personality could be, and it wasn't as rough as her life had been, but it was colorful, useful, and it had history. And it hadn't cost him a dime. Just a little time to create it, which he had thoroughly enjoyed.
Chapter 12

Author's note: This is a short one, but it was dying to come out, so here it is and now I can sleep. This story is eating my life, but it's so fun to write. I'll be posting about a chapter every other day, it looks like. As of today (Monday June 22), this website is now caught up with the other website I've posted it on. The rest is still in my head, but my head needs sleep.

He had to get out of the tower. Even after a run, he still had restless energy. He’d pushed hard in the training room, finished all the required reports that were due and a few which weren’t due yet. He’d met with Hill and been briefed on everything in the works. Things were relatively quiet globally, and they were having a hard time getting a location on their next Hydra hit.

Steve barely slowed down at the end of his run until he was on the sidewalk with other people. He was thankful that the Avengers were getting a little time to rest, but the respite made him suspicious that they were overlooking something. He’d had that feeling before, and sometimes that’s all it was. A feeling.

Sam told him it was common for combat veterans to find themselves missing the excitement, the adrenaline of active duty. So many veterans had problems adjusting to daily civilian life. Steve figured he was probably feeling a touch of that, because since the day he’d received the serum until he’d gone into the ice, he’d been busy. Since the ice, he’d stayed pretty active even though his headquarters was stateside and he was surrounded by civilians most of the time.

He still wanted to go to the coffee shop with Estrella and maybe try drawing her, but she needed time. He’d sent the remade butterfly choker to her through Nat and Natasha said she’d been pleased, but quiet. Doctor Kalfey and Sam both advised that they all give her a few days to simply rest, eat, and think. Steve had bought her a pack of new pencils and another Sudoku book and some other puzzle books so that she’d have something quiet and calm to do when she didn’t feel like watching TV at Nat’s.

He was on his way now to the library to hopefully find her some reading material. He used his towel to wipe the slight mist of sweat from his face.

Estrella had been right about the haircut. Lots of people still knew who he was, but he was getting more of the looks that meant folks thought he looked familiar, but couldn’t quite place him in their memory. When those people figured out who he was, he’d usually moved on by then. A few had commented on his hair, both of them expressing regret and that he ‘just didn’t look the same.’

Steve grunted to himself at the irony. Other people changed their hair all the time, and that was alright with everyone. For some reason, folks expected him to never, ever change the image of their hero. Just for that, he wanted to grow a beard, too. It would likely look very weird with his helmet, but screw them, he thought. They thought they owned him, down to the hairs on his head. It would be funny to see their reactions if he got piercings and tattoos, but that was going too far, just for the sake of messing with folks.

He moved briskly through the mid-morning pedestrians. He was into the outdoor mall, and he’d already pulled the library door open when he heard the voices of many small children. Crap. It was
Tuesday morning. The kids were here for story time and one of them had already turned to look at who was coming into the foyer.

Little Jamal looked at him once, looked away to make sure he was following the person in front of him in line, then whipped his head back to look again. It was too late. Steve had already opened the door and stepped halfway inside, so he continued his motion and hoped that he didn’t draw too much attention. Sitting in on story time would be awkward in his sweaty running gear, but he wouldn’t want to disappoint the kids by refusing if Jamal called their attention to him.

Jamal stared. Then his eyes widened and he smiled. His mouth was about to open and exclaim about Captain America, but Steve winked at him, made a shush motion with his finger at his lips, and shook his head. He’d found that it worked pretty well with some kids.

Jamal kept his quiet, but he looked bottled up with excitement. Steve crossed his arms and stared down at his feet, hoping he’d look like any regular man in sweatpants who happened to be stopping in at the library.

Wanda gruffly hurried the kids along to the reading room. Jamal looked back at him while the line of students moved away and Steve repeated the shush gesture and added a secretive smile. Jamal looked happy to have a secret, but he likely wouldn’t stay mum for long.

“Thanks for that,” he told Wanda when they were alone again in the foyer.

“Mmm-hmm. How is she?”

Wanda cut right to business and he didn’t blame her. Steve felt delinquent for letting things go for four days before he came to tell her anything. He could have called the library and asked to speak to her, but it felt like a conversation he should have in person.

“She’s better, but her heart is weak. I’m so grateful that you were able to see her and help when she needed it. I hate to think of what could have happened if you hadn’t been there,” Steve said.

“What are you going to do with her now?” Wanda asked.

Steve was growing accustomed to Wanda’s faintly insulting ways. Maybe she didn’t mean things the way they sounded, but even if she did, Steve had dealt with far ruder people. He could handle a library security guard.

“Do with her? Nothing for now. She needs to rest and eat. When she’s stronger, she can do whatever she wants. She’s stubborn and I’m focusing on getting her to eat, for now. Oh, and I came by to find her something to read. Eating and sleeping can get pretty boring,” Steve said.

Wanda didn’t get all chummy and conversational, but she brought three paperback books up from somewhere below her desk.

“These are new arrivals. Her favorite authors,” she said. She pushed the books at him across her desk.

Steve bit his tongue. The woman didn’t like him, but he liked her. He wanted to give her another big ‘thank you’ and it warmed his heart that someone else was thinking about Estrella. Wanda didn’t look like she’d appreciate him gushing complimentary.

“That means a lot. She’ll enjoy them,” Steve said.

Wanda nodded. Steve picked up the new paperbacks. He wanted to brush his thumb across the
page edges and smell them because he loved new books, but now was not the time. With only the smallest of smiles for Wanda, he moved to take the books inside so he could check them out.

“I already checked them on my card. You better go before Jamal pops,” Wanda said.

Steve hesitated by her desk. She was a sweet lady in a tough wrapper, and he could hug her for-

“You try to hug me and I’ll black your eye,” she said with a good deal of attitude.

Steve did his best to channel Natasha and keep a cool face. He nodded and stepped away from her desk, then continued on toward the door. When he looked back as he was leaving, he thought he saw a hint of a smile.

His step was more at ease as he moved toward home, but he realized he wasn’t feeling ready to shut himself inside the building again yet. It was a great day, golden and dry again, with enough breeze that he could feel it moving on his exposed scalp.

He went back toward the park, not to run this time, but to walk and think and give himself more time to soak the sunlight into his skin. He always felt like he was being watched in the city, but as he went back into the park with Estrella’s books in his hand, the feeling intensified. He paused to drink from a fountain to give himself time to look around. He didn’t see anyone who might be causing the crawly feeling between his shoulders, but he knew he was being watched. Intently. Not casually.

As he walked along, loose and relaxed, the feeling didn’t fade. It started to bother him, but a tiny thought was wiggling to the surface, trying to make him hope again. He walked on, and took a side path off the paved one. He moved into a more densely vegetated area of the park where most of the joggers and dog walkers didn’t go.

Something stung the back of his neck, just above where his towel rested. A pebble bounced away into the grass. Steve forced himself to walk on as if nothing had happened, though his heart leapt into a faster beat and he wanted to close his eyes and remember summer days in Brooklyn.

Only a few steps farther, and another pebble stung him hard, on exactly the same spot where the last one had hit. Steve’s limbs set up a fine tremble which he hoped didn’t show. It was hard to breathe normally. Harder to keep a straight face. Kids could be messing with him. Unnaturally quiet kids with lucky aim. Twice could be a far-fetched coincidence, but-

A third pebble stung him harder still, in the exact same spot. Steve allowed himself to stop walking. There was nobody around that he could see to his sides or ahead, just trees and grass. Hope surged painfully inside him. The same hope that had been disappointed time and again. If it wasn’t-

“Quit runnin’ away, ya dumb punk. I’m running outa rocks,” came a voice from behind him.

The books fell from Steve’s hand. There was only one voice like that, one voice that matched the face he so wanted to see. Steve’s throat gulped shut, but he forced himself to resume breathing as he turned around.

There he was. In working man’s clothes, Buck stood in the grass about twenty feet away.

Steve could only breathe. He’d thought that when he’d found Bucky, he’d have to fight him, maybe drug him, extract him from whatever deep op he was on, and fly him home for months of rehabilitation.
But it wasn’t the Winter Soldier watching him with a smart-Alek grin. It was Buck. It was Buck who used to pelt him with pebbles before they’d become childhood friends. Steve was sure it was the Winter Soldier’s power and accuracy which had made them sting so much, but the sentiment was all Barnes.

“Hey, don’t blame me for that. I didn’t even touch your books this time,” Buck said with a quick glance down at the dropped books.

His words were street-wise and a blatant attempt at provocation, but that was familiar too. In Buck’s eyes was the awareness that Steve was choked up, and the patience to wait him out until he got over it. The same patience Buck had always had when Steve was winded and couldn’t keep up.

Steve’s mind whirred tactically as Bucky kept his hands loose at his sides and strolled toward him. His senses checked around for any hint of ambush, the smell of fuel or munitions, any wayward click or hiss or radio chatter. There was nothing but birds and breeze.

The only likely threat would be from the man, himself. Steve’s eyes assessed him for concealed weapons before Buck got any closer. He was being given time to do so, he knew. It appeared that the only things Buck had with him were his worn leather work boots, dark blue Dickies, and a long sleeve shirt. He wore one brown leather work glove and held the other in his left hand. His face had a rough beard and his hair was scraggly, but that was the same as the last time he’d seen him.

Buck walked close, up into his space, and stood almost toe to toe with him.

“Has that girl infected you or something? I used to could never get you to shut up,” he said.

“Buck,” was all Steve could get out. He stood ready, his training not letting him be completely open to attack, but Buck likely could stab him at least once if he wanted to.

Part of him felt like he was lifting his arms to hug a high voltage power line, but the other part of him didn’t care if he got stung. He roughly clapped Bucky into a hug, and then Buck was hugging him back. The metal arm was solid around him, but so was the other one. It felt wrong, wrong, wrong to put himself into the grip of an enemy, but the hard-edged body against his smelled like Bucky.

They shoved away and stepped back out of each other’s space. Bucky dropped the wise-guy persona and they both grinned like kids for a moment.

“God, it’s good to see you,” Steve said fervently.

“Yeah, it’s good. I’ve been around, but it’s taken some time to get my head straight, ya know?” Buck said.

“I’ll bet. I’ve been hauling ass all over the place after you. When did you stop running?” Steve asked.

“About six weeks ago, but I wasn’t running. I still had some intel in my head and I wanted to make use of it before it faded, if it would. I don’t think it’s gonna fade after all, so I came home. I’ve been watching you and remembering. Hey, did you get the girl taken in? I haven’t seen her and neither has the Samoan guy at the coffee shop,” Buck said.

“Yeah, we have her in the tower. She’s alright. I was just gonna go get some coffee?” Steve said, leaving the offer open as if he’d bumped into a casual acquaintance. Buck seemed to want to play this on the cool side, so Steve tried hard to not act like he felt.
“Nah, I gotta go. I’m already late for work. Some punk was leading me all over the place, through the park, to the library, and back to the park again,” Buck said with a smile.

“You could have come to the tower anytime,” Steve said. Buck was already edging away from him, back toward the path.

“Not yet. I killed Stark’s folks. He’s not gonna be happy to see me in his door,” Buck said.

“Buck, wait,” Steve called.

He was learning better than to chase after him, but dammit, they’d just met again. Why’d he have to run off so soon? There was so much to say, so much to ask.

“I’ll see ya around. I’m stayin’ in the city, except when I’m not. I’ll talk at ya in a few days, Stevie,” Buck told him.

Steve stood, rooted to the grass.

“See ya,” he called to Buck’s retreating back.

Buck waved an acknowledgement with his right hand and kept walking.

It was one of the toughest things ever, to let Buck walk away without chasing him down. Steve made himself pick up the books and head home without looking around for which way Buck had gone on the main path.

A half laugh, half sob tore from his mouth as he turned his back and headed home. It was the weirdest sound he’d ever heard himself make.

By the time he was back in the tower and in the elevator on his way up, he’d decided that he wasn’t going to make his finding of Bucky official yet. Or Buck’s finding of him, really.

Buck had always been better at evading than he had. Usually Steve’s work was more straightforward. It was uncanny, how Buck had escaped his notice for several weeks and had been watching him the whole time. If Buck had meant him any harm, he could have sniped him a hundred times over.

At least for now, he’d keep quiet about Bucky. He had no real reason to. Everyone knew he’d been taking as much time as he could for he and Sam to search for him. Steve wanted a day or so to roll the events of the past few minutes around in his head in peace. He was glad that he was caught up on his work and could take the time to think. To feel.

Steve was ecstatic at seeing Buck so soon, and to see him looking so well. He’d said he was late for work. He’d looked like he was going to work. Something simple, like carpentry or construction. That meant that not only was Buck not mentally twisted up about being the Winter Soldier, he was fitting into society and stable enough to hold a job. It was a far better outcome than Steve could have hoped for. Buck had always been a rock in his life, steady and grounded. Steve was glad that that aspect of his personality had seen him through what had surely been some confusing weeks.

From talking with Sam, he knew there was no possible way that Buck could be completely unaffected by what had happened to him, but he seemed to be managing well. He said he had come home. That meant Brooklyn. He’d be around. Manhattan was out of his way, but Buck had been
coming around to watch him anyway.

“Jarvis, take me to Nat’s,” he said.

The AI didn’t say anything, but the elevator doors opened on the opposite side of the box than they would have if he’d been going to his own place. Steve exited the elevator, but didn’t go to knock on Nat’s door. Instead, he walked to the window at the end of the hall between the two suites and stood to look down at the city. He set the books which Wanda had saved for Estrella on the table next to the potted plant.

“I don’t want to go in there and make her feel cornered, and I don’t want to startle her by knocking on the door. Would you please let her know that I’m here if she wants to come out?” Steve asked quietly.

“Of course, Captain,” Jarvis replied.

Steve waited. He heard the faint tones of Jarvis speaking to her in Nat’s suite. Then he heard movement. She might be coming out. He was glad that he might get to see her. He had to share his news with someone, and she was the first person he’d thought of when the desire to share manifested itself.

He knew she’d already seen Buck and knew who he was, from the day he’d shown her his sketchbook. And from whatever interactions she’d had with Buck on the street when he wasn’t around. He’d been wanting to ask her about all of it, but he didn’t want to upset her with her heart being the way it was. It didn’t matter so much now that he’d seen Bucky himself.

The door to Nat’s suite opened, and Steve waited a moment to turn toward her. He was pretty sure that he’d seen enough of Estrella’s trigger moments that he could behave himself adequately.

Her footsteps were quiet on the carpet, but he heard her moving anyway. When she was in his peripheral view as he stood at the window, he turned to face her.

“Hi,” he said, and he couldn’t hold back the smile anymore.

Estrella was glad to see him in his morning workout attire. It was how she’d first gotten to know him, and it helped her to see him, not just the large man she was intentionally walking toward in an empty space.

“Hi,” she answered, a tiny bit above a whisper.

The necklace he’d made her was at her throat, the copper still warming to match her skin. She’d just put it on when Jarvis told her he was out here. She was in sweats too, feeling comfortable and slouchy. Her bare toes wiggled on the short carpet in the sun. She’d stopped a few feet away from him, maybe arm’s length. She didn’t want to stand far away like she was afraid. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings anymore.

Her eyes went first to look at how his hair was different, but the odd, almost giddy joy on his face caught her attention. Something good had happened.

“What?” she wondered.

If Steve wanted to keep his secret for even an hour, he couldn’t say anything directly to her. He let his smile spread across his face. He looked down at the city pointedly for an instant, then back at her. She was smart. He hoped she’d figure it out.
Estrella stepped closer to the window. The view was the same as from Nat’s living room. Streets, buildings. And a few blocks away, the green space of the park. Steve was in his running shoes. With grass on them. He’d been in the park, just now.

His grin was goofy big, and his eyes were trying to tell her something. He bounced twice on the balls of his feet, his heels lifting off the carpet a fraction of an inch. Yeah, he was happy like a kid at Christmas, not a hint of his usual frustrations on his face.

His arms were crossed, and his fingers tapped restlessly at his left arm, as if he was listening to music. He wasn’t.

Left arm, left arm…? Oh!

Estrella crossed her own arms and rubbed her right hand along her left upper arm. A smile bloomed on her face too, seeing how happy Steve was. He’d found his friend. He saw her hand movement and nodded once, sharply.

His mouth opened slightly, then closed again, still smiling. He wanted to tell her things, but Bucky was a secret for now. She tilted her head to the side a little and shared in his happiness. She didn’t particularly like his Bucky. The man was an ass and a menace. But if he made Steve happy, then she was glad for him.

Steve bounced a few more times, then he calmed his expression into a mere curve of his lips. If they stood here in silence for too long, Jarvis was sure to think something weird was going on, if he didn’t already. If Jarvis was watching. Steve always assumed he was.

“I went to the library. Wanda was holding these for you. She said they’re new arrivals,” Steve handed her the three paperbacks.

Estrella took them and spread them to look at the titles.

“Thank you,” she said. Her fingers brushed the beads of indigo blue melted copper at the edge of her butterfly’s wings.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad to see that it works. Is it smooth enough?” Steve asked her about the fit and finish of the necklace.

“It’s beautiful. I love it. You made this? It looks like your uniform. You didn’t cut it, did you?” Estrella asked. Her fingers moved to rub along the dark blue fabric at her throat.

“Yeah, I made it. It was a lot of fun. I’ve only had time to work with pencil and paper, but I might start doing three-dimensional stuff, after that. Naw, I didn’t cut my uniform. It got shredded on the last mission and I was going to have to throw it out anyway. The copper’s from a toy I had as a kid. It was all stuff I had to go through and throw out. I’m glad to get something useful out of it,” Steve nodded at her necklace.

Estrella listened to him talk about what he’d made and what he’d used to make it with. She had not been able to accept the costly butterfly from Tony because a gift shouldn’t cost that much. She didn’t think Steve was lying about the new necklace being made from used items he’d already had, but it felt too valuable, anyway.

He’d destroyed something from his childhood for her. If his uniform had been shredded, then he’d been hurt badly. The dark, mostly washed-out stain on one end of the tattered fabric was his blood. All the detail, all the color of the butterfly had come from his mind, his hands. It was too much sacrifice on his part, but with how pleased he was to see it on her, she couldn’t take the chance of...
hurting his feelings again. It still made no sense to her that Steve could care so much, but he did. She ducked her head down to hide the blush of gratitude she felt to have a friend like him.

His care and his time was worth more than expensive jewelry. So much more. She didn’t know what to do with that, but she couldn’t hurt him again. She’d have to make it up to him some other way.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked her.

“Good. A nurse keeps bringing me food, but I can’t eat it all. Why are you people trying so hard to make me fat?” she asked him.

She didn’t mind being fat. But she’d have to go through her version of normal to get to fat, and that’s what worried her. The necklace was great, but it didn’t solve everything. If she had a job in the tower, maybe she could afford to be fat, and to buy big, ugly clothes. She was afraid of what lay between starving and fat.

“Eya, don’t play dumb like that. You know you need to eat so you can be strong again. We all want you to be healthy. It’s not about fat or skinny,” Steve told her.

Estrella wanted to tell him that fat and skinny mattered, but there was no way to do so without saying more than she wanted to. If Tony paid her cash as they’d agreed, then maybe she could get a room and share in someone’s apartment. Someone safe. As long as she had a safe place to stay, she could allow herself to eat enough to stay alive. But not too much.

She’d been thinking hard about things, these last few days. Natasha was right. She had a chance at a new life, if she was careful, and if her heart didn’t kill her. And if the men from her past didn’t find her. She felt safe in Nat’s place, with Jarvis controlling who could come up. She couldn’t stay with Natasha forever, though.

There was only so much she could worry about at once, and for now, Steve was large in her presence and in her mind. She knew she owed him, and she couldn’t even be angry about it because he was so darn nice. He wouldn’t want to be paid back, but she’d find a way.

“I’m happy for you. And thanks for the books. I want to go read now,” she said to him.

Steve nodded. He didn’t want to tire her, and he felt it was best to leave anyway. Frequently, they left each other on a bad note, but things felt good right now. It was time to go.

“Have fun. We can take a walk sometime when you’re done, and go return the books. The weather’s great out there,” Steve said.

Estrella reached out a hand, and he touched his fingertips to hers, then he left. It was so good to see him happy, with his head high and his shoulders back instead of bent down with grumpiness or worry. He smiled at her in the elevator again before the doors closed, then he was gone.

“Jarvis, does he live through there, on the other side of the elevator?” she asked.

“Yes, Miss. I wouldn’t normally make such information available, but I don’t think he’d mind that you know,” Jarvis answered.

“He knows where I am, so it’s only fair,” she said.

“As you say, Miss,” Jarvis said, a smile in his tone.
“He’s too nice. Always doing things for me, and I can’t pay him back,” Estrella complained.

“I believe Captain Rogers doesn’t know any other way to be. Attempting to change him would be futile,” Jarvis suggested.

“Jarvis, will you let me into his place while he’s not there so that he can’t stop me?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Miss. That would be highly irregular. It is possible that the Captain wouldn’t mind your presence in his suite, but it would be best to ask him first,” Jarvis denied her gently.

“But I want to cook for him, and do the cleaning, and you know he won’t let me if I ask first!” Estrella riled against the unfairness of it all.

They were forcing her into debt and not giving her any way out. The doctor said that she wanted to observe her heart function for at least a week before she could start the job Tony had for her. And she had to try to eat like a pig in the meantime, or Natasha made scary faces at her.

“In that case, let me see what I can do. I can’t promise you anything, but if Miss Potts hears your idea and thinks it’s a good one, then I may be able to bend the rules,” Jarvis told her.

“I hope so,” Estrella said. She took her new library books into Nat’s guest room and curled up in her soft bed to read for a while. She only made it to page thirty four in the suspense novel before she fell asleep.

Jarvis turned off the light in her room and raised the temperature a few degrees, since he had no hands to cover her with a blanket.

When Steve got to his door, there was a folder lying on the floor in front of it. He bent down to pick it up. He didn’t want any paperwork right now. He wanted to go inside, fix himself something to eat, and figure out what he was going to do with Bucky.

_Read This or Else_, was written across the blank front of the folder in Tony’s pointy, swiftly scrawled handwriting.

_Please_, was added on beneath in Bruce’s more blocky letters.

The fact that they’d printed it up on real paper and put it in a folder with actual handwriting on the front told him how much they wanted him to look at the file.

Steve sighed and went inside with it. He tossed it on his bar and let it sit while he made himself a sandwich. He knew what they were trying to get him to consider. It was personal, and it involved Estrella, and he really didn’t want to hear about it.

He opened the folder anyway while he sat at the bar and ate his lunch. For her sake, he’d at least read what they had to say.
His room was cool and dark just the way he liked it, despite the glow of the sunrise starting to turn the city rosy-golden with morning light. Steve was well rested, so his body and his mind took the opportunity to play with him before he was conscious enough to put a stop to it.

The top sheet and blanket were tangled tight around him from a night of fitful sleep. He mindlessly rolled from his side onto his belly and hugged his pillow. His skin slid against the soft sheets, then he stilled. The pressure of the top sheet twisted messily around his middle trapped him from rolling over onto his other side. He settled physically, but his mind took note.

"Harder, Rogers. Faster. This move won't work if you're hesitant," Natasha instructed him.

She stood in front of him, dressed in her clingy black combat suit. It didn't make sense that she would be wearing it in the training room, but whatever. He grabbed for her elbow. She twisted away and ducked to slide between his legs and come up behind him on the mats. He spun around to try again.

He had the correct motions in his mind now, and this time when she tried to evade, he matched her speed and got a good grip on her elbow. He had to take advantage of the sliver of a second when her body wasn't blocking the loop her arm made for him to grab.

Steve gripped hard so that when she straightened her arm and used her body weight to spin away from him, she couldn't fling loose as she normally would. As a result, the momentum of her motion pulled them both along. She tried to take advantage of it to snap him free in a different direction, but he snagged the inside of her shin with his own and brought them both down hard to the mats.

He only partially kept his weight from falling on her. The breath whuffed from her and she was fighting him before he could get her in a full lockdown. Instead of trying to pin her all over, Steve knew to focus on the most dangerous parts. His forehead pressed into hers, the bones grinding together. He already had one of her hands down tight, and one of her shins pinned painfully under his.

"Faster, Nat. I've almost got you," he warned with a taunting smile. He waited until the exact right moment when he could rotate his other thigh out and pin hers. She was fighting hard, twisting and trying every angle to get at any of his soft spots or pain points, but he knew her methods and her body as well as she knew his. He matched and blocked. Knowing that he would always heal gave him the ability to partially ignore the pain she inflicted. He applied more pressure to the three points he already held and secured her other leg. Her right hand was annoying, knifing at his
throat, his face, moving too fast for him to get a grip on it. He tolerated the pain of a larynx jab and started at her upper arm and forced her hand out until he had her knuckles flat against the mat.

She strained against him for only another instant. She knew when she was beat. Nat lay, panting, and waited for him to let up.

"Come on Steve, this one's over. Uncle," she said on an exhaled breath.

Steve didn't want to get up. She felt good under him. He wanted her to go on fighting him. He eased his grip so she could struggle if she wanted to. He wouldn't mind. It felt real good, with his hips almost centered on hers. The muscles of her inner thigh were soft and his exercise shorts were slick against her uniform.

"What are you doing, Rogers?" she asked him.

Steve answered her by fully aligning their hips. She couldn't miss what he was doing now. He shifted his forehead against hers so that they were staring at each other. He dared her to deny that she was interested.

"Is this what you want, Sweety?" Nat asked him.

She changed the angle of her hips so that he was cradled perfectly where he wanted to be, just the thin layers of their clothes between them. There. He could feel the heat of her. Her lips quirked up at the corners.

She'd asked him a stupid question. Of course it's what he wanted. It's all he could think about. For months, for years, it had been what he wanted. He'd had enough of her teasing. He kept her pinned and moved against her.

"Steve. Sweety, come on, you know you don't want to do this. Let us up and you can go take care of it somewhere else," she tried to tell him.

"Shut up, Nat. Shut up and take it," he growled at her.

It felt too good to stop. His subtle movements became stronger. The warm pressure gave him something to push against. Nat gave up resisting him passively like a responsible friend would do. She knew he wanted a fight, so she gave him one.

Her thighs fought against the outside of his, trying to squeeze him away and dislodge him. She tried to twist her hips aside under his weight, but he followed her every move. It was deeply satisfying to chase what he wanted. It gave him justification to push harder, to pursue. She struggled randomly, but as he sought and pushed, her twisting and evasion began to match his pattern. The jolts of pressure and friction against him became predictable and he could chase them, anticipate them.

"You found what you want?" she asked him, taunting.

He was tired of her taunting, displaying what he shouldn't have, teasing and torturing him. He gripped her hands tighter and rolled into the pressure. There. It was right there and it was hot and soft and he was going to take it.

Steve woke up straining against the twisted sheet, gripping the pillow. His mind became aware of what was happening and he went with it gladly. Relief. Ah, God! Sweet relief. He breathed through it, trying guiltily to banish thoughts of Nat. It was what any woman had that he wanted, he
knew, not Nat's in particular. She was simply the most familiar to him, the easiest for his mind to fabricate a dream about.

Before his breathing slowed, he was already handling the mess. The sheets and his boxers went into the wash. He took himself to the shower, both pleased and ashamed. This was one he wouldn't have to mention in confession because he hadn't done it intentionally. It was the subject matter that bothered him. Why had it been so exciting to pin her and use her like that? It was wrong, and he mentally chastised himself for the wayward dream.

Steve hurried in the shower before the troublesome thoughts could excite him again. The problem with having an enhanced body was that his stamina and his recovery times were such that a moment of relief was only that. A moment. He felt good for right now, but it would be back sooner than he wanted. He'd learned to live with it years ago, but it was becoming harder to handle lately.

He chastised himself one more time, then hurried to get dressed for the day.

"What makes you think we can do this without changing her in some other unpredictable way? Every trial in history has ended poorly, with some unforeseen side effect." Steve questioned Tony.

He'd found Stark in his lab, at work on something to do with a quinjet modification.

"If you had bothered to read the whole file, you'd know that the last experiments were over twenty years ago. Processing power has increased exponentially since then. Bruce and I have been able to find the reason each of the other experiments failed. It was a matter of their inability to accurately forecast cellular interactions which caused the side effects. Bruce is over ninety percent certain now how his own trial went wrong. If he could do it again today, we wouldn't have the big green guy. There's something to be said for the benefits of trial and error," Tony told him.

He spun around in his chair and twirled a wooden drumstick in his hand. Steve figured that he kept random objects around while he was working so that his hands could stay busy fiddling with something while his mind worked.

"I get that. It's the ten percent that's the problem. Would you play Russian roulette with Pepper and those odds?" Steve challenged.

Tony stilled and stared off into the middle distance.

"Right. So, what percentage makes us all comfortable? We're never going to reach zero risk, Steve. Even an appendectomy runs a risk of adverse consequences. It's her heart. She needs it. At some point, the risk of the procedure becomes less than the risk of letting her go on as she is," Tony reasoned with him.

"Let me know when you are honestly ninety-five percent certain that we can fix her heart without messing up anything else," Steve said.

"There's more to it than her heart. Her liver and her bones are also damaged," Tony said.

"She's not going to die from her liver and her bones. Focus on what we can do for her heart and leave the rest alone. The less invasive we are, the better," Steve said.

Tony wanted to argue for more health benefits for the girl, but time had increased his wisdom. Steve was right. With proper care, her bones and her liver would improve slowly on their own.
"I'll tell you when," Tony said.

Steve nodded, and was about to leave the lab.

He turned back and opened his mouth to ask Tony a question of a more personal nature.

Tony waited, looking interested.

Steve changed his mind. Anything Tony said was likely to be flippant at the least, with patronizing and belittling being the most probable attitudes.

"Never mind. Thanks, Tony. I appreciate what you and Bruce have done for her. I truly do. Is she doing well at the job?" Steve asked.

"How should I know? I'm R and D, not personnel. I don't care if she's good at the job. She needs it, so she gets it. You want me to fire her if she doesn't pass a performance eval.?" Tony asked.

Steve smiled and shook his head. He nodded a goodbye to Tony, who spun around in his chair again before facing his work station.

Estrella met him for lunch at the café on the ground floor of the tower. There was a view of the street outside. The nice weather had gone on break to give them rain today. Steve sat down with his steak and fries. Estrella carried her own lunch tray of potato soup and flaky, golden rolls.

They sat and he marveled at how different she was from the huddled, bundled scruffy girl he'd first met. First, it was great to see her finally eating solid food. She wore loose-fit jeans and a roomy, thick sweater. Stark Industries had almost no dress code for its employees, and Estrella worked on a company laptop from Nat's suite, anyway.

Her hair was growing in thick and black, though none of it was longer than a quarter inch. The choker at her throat looked casual, like a vintage thrift store find, instead of a piece of Stark technology. She was still incredibly thin and frail looking, but she wasn't skeletal anymore.

Estrella threw her second roll at his face so he would stop looking at her like that.

"Quit looking at me and eat your steak, you hog. You didn't even run today. How can you eat so much?" she asked him.

He'd caught the roll in midair, so he handed it back to her. She bit it and chewed.

"Metabolism. I need the food whether I work out or not. How do you like the job?" he asked her, then put a bite of steak and some potato in his mouth.

"I love it. It gets kind of boring, now that I know what to do, but I can listen to music while I work. I can't believe they pay people for data entry. Typing is so easy," Estrella said.

He focused on his lunch to encourage her to do the same. She ate most of what was in her soup bowl and she only left half a roll uneaten. Steve's plate was clean long before hers was.

Estrella rubbed her finger round and round on the smooth surface of her heart monitor, which was hidden by her sleeve. The rain came down on the other side of the glass near their table, casting everything in an even, gray light. A minute stretched into two, and his silent presence became both calming and annoying somehow.
"I still want to draw you," Steve told her.

"Why?" she asked.

His scrutiny made her uneasy. Steve simply looking at her while they talked was fine. But when he wanted to draw, his eyes became more searching and critical. She got the feeling he was seeing things she didn't notice when she looked in the mirror.

"I don't know. It's subjective. Something in the lines, like I said the day Nat cut our hair. I don't want you to model for me, per se. I can draw you without you being there, like my sketches of Buck. Maybe I'm asking your permission to put you down on paper," Steve said.

His eyes still travelled over her face and neck, the shape of her head. She didn't like it. She was still skinny and bony and already he was looking. It worried her.

"Okay, you can draw me. But quit staring," she frowned at him. She threw the last half of her roll at him. He moved his head slightly and caught it with his mouth. With a little maneuvering of his lips and teeth, he ate it hands-free.

"Steve, you're such a freak. And a pig. Piggy, piggy, piggy," she picked at him with a sing-song voice and a smile. He grinned around his mouthful. It made him happy that she could talk to him freely. He liked to hear her soft, pretty voice, even if she was ribbing him about something.

Her black eyelashes and brows seemed to be fuller, framing her expressive eyes. It was a sign of returning health to him and he was glad to see it. It was strange how his concern about her wellbeing wasn't the same kind of worry and weighty responsibility that his work as an Avenger gave him. His responsibilities from work felt like a weight he pulled around behind him. Concern about her felt like something he carried in his arms. It was more personal and it felt better. Warmer.

"Are you growing a beard?" she asked, to maybe make him quit staring at her.

Steve rubbed at his chin and the hairs that he'd allowed to remain there. It had been five days since he'd shaved, and it was thick enough that he'd trimmed the edges of it already to keep it neat.

"I must not be doing a good job of it if you have to ask," he said. He rubbed his jaw and propped his face in his hand, his elbow on the table.

"No, no, it's good, but doesn't it look funny with the uniform?" she asked him. Then, she felt bad for questioning his grooming. She hoped he wouldn't take it as criticism.

"Probably. I don't know. I'm not sure I care. We haven't been called out in over a week. There was a mission in line, but a pre-mission recon flight showed that the target has already been hit by someone else. So, intel is trying to figure out who else is out there on the field with us. The beard might grow a little more before I suit up to see how it looks together," he said.

Steve was as relaxed as she'd ever seen him, lazing across the table from her looking like he could fall asleep propped on his hand. His short, dark blonde hair was the same color on his head and on his face. It set off his steely blue eyes in a way that his lighter, longer hair had not. His lips were pretty. She looked down at her lap and fiddled with the wrinkles of her gray sweater.

"The Beard?" she asked, belatedly calling him on how he'd described his new feature.

"Hah! Sure, I guess. The Beard," Steve said low and dramatic like a radio personality.

Estrella laughed, and Steve smiled to see her so happy.
"You've got to make a comic strip about The Beard. I want to see it! Adventures of The Beard. You could have titles like The Beard and the Pizza Promenade. The Beard and Entanglements with Fuzzy Sweater. The Beard in Bubble Gum Attacks!" she imagined.

Steve laughed too. She was delightful and he wondered how many of her thoughts he'd missed in the time he'd known her because she hadn't been able to talk. As soon as he had time, he'd draw the comics for her. She was probably joking, but it might be fun.

"The Beard and Candy Apple Surprise," Steve added to the list.

"Exactly!" Estrella chuckled, "Have you ever grown one before?"

"No. In ninety-four years, I can't say that I have. That's pretty impressive, especially since I didn't shave for seventy years. What a missed opportunity," he joked.

Estrella's smile faded. Everybody knew he'd been frozen. Now that she knew him personally, the thought of him cold and still, so suspended that his hair didn't even grow, was horrible to her. He was so alive, so energetic. It was dismal to imagine.

"Steve, in all those years, were you aware at all?" she asked, back to using her whisper. She didn't trust her voice to be steady. It was sad enough to cry over, but she didn't want to appear weepy and sentimental.

"Only at first. I'd promised my girl a dance. I knew I was going to miss it and that she was going to be feeling low. She'd be worried about me. Until I lost consciousness, I thought about what I would say to her, what I would do to make up for it. All I remember is the first few hours," Steve said.

He didn't know why he was telling Estrella. He hadn't told anyone else what it had been like. There had been pain, too, as the water sucked the heat from his body. His enhancements had kept trying to warm him, dragging the process out for hours. He'd drifted at the edge of awareness, with the crushing ache of the cold gnawing at his bones. It was a toss-up as to which had been worse, the cold or the grief of knowing that minute by minute, he was losing Peggy.

"I'm so sorry you went through that," she said.

Estrella reached across the table and took up his other hand which was lying there idle. With both hands, she pulled his across and pressed the backs of his fingers to her cheek. She wanted to press warmth into him, to know that he was warm enough. She couldn't do anything about the girl, but warmth was important. She knew that now.

Her efforts to comfort him reminded him that she had her own sorrows, her own painful past. Maybe she was kind to him because she felt the ache of the past, too. They both moved on and lived in the present, but every now and then the past caught up to them and refreshed the memories. It still hurt. He remembered the cold, and the lost opportunity. But with someone to share it, the burden was eased somehow. He hoped she'd let him help her when it was her turn.

The fact that she was touching him and had sought him out to do so gave him hope for her recovery. He still wanted to know what had happened to her, and to do what he could to make it better. Steve knew that it might not be possible to do anything about her past, just as it was impossible to do anything about his. But he could try, if she would let him.

"I know that I'm not the only one, Eya. Painful things happened to you, too. I wish they hadn't. I can't change the past any more than you can, but I might be able to help you heal. Tony and Bruce tell me that we might be able to fix your heart. It's risky, and I don't know that it's worth the risk,"
"What do you mean? The doctor said it can't be fixed," Estrella said.

She let his hand drop from her face, but she curled her fingers into his palm when it rested on the table.

Steve looked around the café. There was no one around because it was after the lunch rush. Only Jarvis would hear, and he already knew.

"My blood. Bruce says we can isolate part of my blood so that you don't get the full effect. With a process he and Tony have developed, we can enable your heart to heal, to rebuild from the damage that was done," Steve told her.

"What's with your blood? I wouldn't become a super-soldier, would I? I don't want to be changed like that," Estrella said.

Steve smiled at her honesty. She made his serum enhancements sound like a communicable disease.

"That's the risky part. Since the beginning, people have been after my blood, a new version of the serum, my DNA, anything that would allow them to recreate the super-soldier program. They want to weaponize humans to fight their ego-battles for them. All of them for the wrong reasons. I told Tony that until they're sure that the risk of unintended side effects is very minimal, I won't consider it. I know you wouldn't want to be changed," he explained.

Estrella nodded. It sounded farfetched to her that they could force her heart muscles to rebuild, but then she looked at all the muscles on him. Maybe it wouldn't be so difficult. It seemed that strength had been a primary effect of Steve's enhancement. Maybe it was possible. She knew Tony Stark's devices and his problem-solving ability was phenomenal.

"I'll think about it. But you can tell Tony that if he turns me into a super-woman, I'll use my powers to beat him up. I don't want to be super human," she said.

The thought of being enhanced like Steve, along with her other freakish abilities, made her squirmingly uncomfortable. Life was hard enough already.

"I know. I'll tell him," Steve assured her.

She'd never said as much, but he'd somehow known that she wouldn't want to be enhanced. It was more her style to hide, to escape notice, to be meek until she couldn't. He admired that she was accepting of her frailty. It was a sign of maturity that she could take her reality as it was rather than always hankering after the next thing dangled in front of her, like so many people did.

Estrella let go of his fingers and he slid his hand back to rest on his side of the table. Now that they'd spoken of everything they should and then some, his eyes went back to studying her again. He liked the way the orbit of her eye met her temple. The way her cheekbones curved to meet the contours of her ears.

"Go away," she told him.

She'd said it to him many times on the street, when he'd been pestering her to take care of herself. This time, instead of with a cranky attitude or a pained headache, she said it with a tolerant little smile at him. She knew he wasn't trying to be a pervert. His gaze on her was artistic and contemplative. Still, it made her uneasy. It made her think about the future, and she wanted to hold
"Go," she urged him, and pushed his arm out from under his face.

"Alright, alright," Steve grinned.

He cleared away his lunch things and left her alone. It sure was nice to leave her with the both of them happy lately. It made him hopeful that she'd tolerate his company one more time.

Sam already had pretty good fighting skills, though his main offense was with firearms. Steve wanted him better, wanted him as good as he could be. For what they did, Sam needed everything he could bring to a fight. It had been proven that the wings wouldn't always be there to keep him above the action.

"Again," he told Sam.

Sam came at him with a series of punches and kicks designed to get an opponent off balance and open them up for a killing blow. Steve moved as a normal human combatant should in reaction, not how he would if Sam was actually attacking him. Sam came to the opportune moment and took it. Steve fell from the blow and rolled onto the mats smiling. Sam was strong and fast, already so much better than most of the enemies they'd be facing.

"Better. Much better. Again," he said.

Steve got up and had Sam work through it again, and again. As Sam improved, Steve threw him random surprises. He caught on quickly and soon kept his balance more even and broadened his attention to watch all of Steve, not just the parts that seemed most threatening at the moment.

"Enough, man. I'm getting some water before you knock the last drop out of me," Sam said.

"Quitter," Steve teased him.

Sam walked off the mats and made a rude gesture at him. Steve chuckled.

Sam was no quitter. Steve had trained too many men to keep count of. Sam had a lot of potential and he worked it hard. He was a pleasure to work with and Steve enjoyed seeing him improve over time. Natasha could still kick his ass, but that was true for all except a very few men. Sam would get there.

Steve took a moment to get a drink, too. Not that he needed it. He wasn't sweating. Sometimes he found that it was better to act more like the other guys. Standing around unaffected by exertion or tiredness or heat or cold could be demoralizing to those who followed him, so he didn't lord it over them.

Sam was favoring the muscles of his right calf, where Steve had gotten in a pretty hard hit. It barely showed and probably hurt more than he was letting on. Steve was about to ask him if he wanted to call it a day when the door opened.

"Hey," Nat said to them.

"Hey," Sam responded.

Steve nodded at her in a brief greeting. She had her earbuds in and her hair pulled back. She looked
intent on getting to the weights in the corner.

Sam watched Nat walk around the perimeter of the room with a smile of friendly appreciation. He'd tried to hide his appreciation of Nat once, but she'd called him on it painfully. So, when Nat wore clingy stuff, like the yoga pants and top she now had on, Sam openly watched, but not in a perverse way. He somehow appreciated women in a way that didn't look dirty. It was like he was looking at art or something. Natasha had a tiny smile too, as she felt Sam's attention on her. She was used to the way men reacted around her, and honesty seemed to appeal to her when she was among friends.

Steve wished he could get away with staring like that. He might train Sam on the mats, but he was Sam's student when it came to a lot of other things.

"Sam," Steve said, to get his attention.

When he had it, Steve waved Sam over toward Nat and moved toward her too. He'd had enough time to ruminate over Bucky, and he couldn't keep the secret any longer.

Nat looked aside at their approach and pulled out her earbuds. The fact that she used her earbuds so much while she was on the Avengers floors of the tower illustrated how much she trusted her teammates and Tony's security measures.

"What's up?" Nat asked them.

Sam shrugged and looked to Steve.

"I've met Bucky. He's here in the city," Steve told them.

Sam's eyebrows rose. Natasha's expression didn't change at all.

"You knew this," Steve said.

"I'm not surprised. He could have been anywhere. When did he come to you, and what was his condition?" Natasha asked.

"It was in the park, after my run last Tuesday. He's been watching me for six weeks. He's not a threat, so I'm going to recommend that we stand down and leave him alone," Steve said.

"How long did you spend with him, to determine that he's not a threat?" Natasha asked.

"It was about five minutes, but the man I met was not the Soldier. He was my friend. He demonstrated that he remembers our childhood. He knows me. In six weeks' time, you know he could have taken me out, Nat. If he was still acting under a kill order, he would have executed it by now," Steve said.

Natasha looked at him, nothing but skeptical. She knew the Winter Soldier like none of them did. Spending a calculated five minutes to show Steve that he remembered their childhood sounded like the preliminary contact for a long op. Especially after observing for six weeks. But then, Steve had a point in that fact, too. If the Soldier was setting up an inside takedown for the Avengers, he wouldn't have told Steve that he'd been watching.

Sam stood by and let them hash it out. Bucky was Steve's business and he was only along as backup. Natasha seemed to know enough to ask questions, but he didn't. Sam used the break time to flex and stretch his sore calf muscles.
Natasha took her phone and her earbuds off of her workout armband and set them on the weight bench. She slid the elastic from her hair and redid it on the top of her head instead of the back.

"Get on the mats," she said to Steve.

"Not today," he told her.

"Steve, you need to see the things I know about Barnes which you don't know. Some of his training makes you vulnerable, and I can help you with that," Natasha said.

Steve stood resolute beside the mat. He fully understood her idea, but a larger issue had come into play. The sexual overtones of his dream this morning were clouding his thinking and he couldn't afford to make a mistake of that nature with a teammate. Or a friend.

"I'm not getting on the mats with you today," he told her.

"I know that you're frustrated and that you might get hard," Nat said, "It's not a problem. I trust you."

"I'm gonna leave you guys to figure this out," Sam said. Things had just gone from interesting to awkward and he wanted no part of it. He respected both Natasha and Steve and he didn't like the vibe of where this was going.

"I need you to stay," Steve told him.

The look he levelled on his wingman had Sam standing watch. Sam was real uneasy about what he was being asked to witness, but he stayed where he was needed. They could both feel the tension coming off of the Captain, and neither had any doubt which of his personas they were dealing with. His stance and his tone made it clear.

His attention turned back to Natasha.

"Natasha, you and I are having fraternization issues. If I get on the mats with you, you won't be able to teach me anything. Can you keep me from pinning you, even exerting a full effort?" he asked her evenly.

"Only if I'm willing to injure you," she admitted.

"Think about that for a moment, in light of what I'm willing to endure to accomplish my mission objectives," he reminded her.

She could tease and joke with her teammates any time she liked. Honesty was a matter of circumstance for Natasha. But her reputation as a professional required her to admit the truth.

She'd often felt that much as Thor restrained himself while sparring with Steve, Steve also restrained himself when sparring with her. It wasn't something she knew only with her rational mind. Her body had felt it and her muscles remembered. Sparring wasn't the true test of Steve's ability. Steve tearing down concrete walls to get to her was the test. Steve bodily hauling her uphill for a half mile without the use of his lungs was the test. When sufficiently motivated, the limits of Steve Rogers' physical abilities had not yet been found.

"No, I'm not able to evade being pinned by you," Natasha admitted.

"Natasha, I'm ashamed to say that if we spar right now, either you're going to break my spirit, or I'm going to break your body. Maybe both," Steve said in defeat.
He let go of his command stance and sat down on the vinyl padded seat of the weight bench. He truly was ashamed of his lack of mastery over his own body. As team leader, it was becoming a real problem.

"That's a lose-lose," she agreed, "What I need to show you can wait until tomorrow, but you need to work on getting your tension resolved."

The three of them had given up on getting any more physical work done today. Sam understood that the need for his presence was over with, as far as ethics and oversight went. Steve looked up at him as a troubled man, not as team leader. Sam shifted into his other role within the team. As a teammate, there were things he didn't want to hear. As their councilor, he could listen to anything. Sam squatted down to get more on Steve's level. Natasha sat on the empty part of the seat beside Steve.

"Guys, I don't know what to do with myself anymore. I, uh, had some relief from this tension seven hours ago, and it's already back. It comes with the body. Nothing keeps it down for long," he admitted with a perfect Steve Rogers blush.

"Then you take care of it every seven hours. Or every six hours. Do what you have to do," Nat advised.

"He can't do that," Sam stepped in for Steve.

He went to church with the man. He understood the level of devotion Steve had to his faith. The anxiety of disregarding his belief system would be as great as the stress Steve was already feeling from the problem.

"Sure he can," Natasha said.

Steve held up a hand of truce between his friends.

"I think the key to this is mental. My body has been the same for over seventy years. It's my mind that's changed. I was always so focused on combat and victory that I had little time for indulging my…" Steve said. His words faded off, but they knew what he meant.

"And now that you have a little time to think, it wants some shore leave," Sam concluded.

"I think so," Steve nodded.

"Your team needs you, Steve. I need you to train with me. No matter what your heart says, Barnes is a potential threat. If I have to admit your dominance, then you can admit that with Buck, it's personal for you. They taught us some nasty things in the red room, and Barnes was my most thorough instructor," she said.

"I get that, Natasha. I'll train with you. But you gotta listen when I tell you 'no.'" he said.

"I can do that," she agreed softly.

"In case you're thinking about it," Sam said hesitantly, "I don't think it will do you much good to consult with your confessor on this. No priest is going to understand what you're going through. None of them have to deal with what you deal with. Their advice might do more harm than good."

Steve nodded. There was nothing for it then, but to find an outlet that was the least harmful.

"Nat," he said.
"Mmhmm?"

"Lay off on the teasing some," he told her.

"But it's so fun," she smiled at him a little, trying to bring levity to the situation.

Steve shook his head.

"You're not in here," he tapped a finger to his head, "It's not all fun."
Chapter 14

Author's note: Just consider everything M from here on, unless otherwise noted. This was another loooong chapter, which I split in two. The other half will be coming tomorrow after I get time to edit. Thanks for the sweet reviews, those who sent them. They really make my day and encourage me to write more.

"All we know about the operatives who took out our last target is that it was a small crew. The only tracks we found in or out appear to be a common passenger vehicle. It parked just over four miles away and they walked in along the road. Not a footprint, and no damage to the perimeter fence. They either were let in, or they went over the top of double loop concertina. No attempt was made to gather data or take hostages, as far as we can tell. Charges were set and the place was blown, all souls still inside. It had to be a high-level hit, but we don't yet know which agency. Every level of U. S. military and law enforcement denies involvement," Maria Hill told them as they sat around the conference table.

"How many dead?" Steve asked.


"Good work," Tony said.

Natasha looked across the table at Steve, waiting.

Steve nodded. He was thinking the same thing. He was going to tell them at this meeting anyway. It may as well be now.

"It could be Bucky," Steve said.

All eyes turned to him.

"We don't know that Barnes is still alive. Hydra could have picked him up and neutralized him as a liability, now that Pierce is dead. From what intel we have, Pierce was the only one who could handle him with any reliability," Bruce countered.

"He's not dead. I met him in the park last Tuesday. Buck is very much alive, and he's got intel. He may be acting on it," Steve said.

"And you're just now telling us," Tony said in a damning tone.

"Yes. I needed time to think. He was not the Winter Soldier when I met him. He's in his right mind, and he said he had intel that he was acting on when he could," Steve told them.

He ignored the disgusted way that Tony tossed his laser pointer onto the table. He'd been annoying people with it all meeting long, but it looked like Steve had finally annoyed him enough to make him quit.

"The likelihood of one man neutralizing a Hydra base is…improbable," Hill said.

"Not if it's Barnes. He's capable of it," Natasha told them.
"So, when were you going to tell us?" Tony asked.

"Just now," Steve said calmly.

"He didn't keep it a complete secret. He informed Natasha and I a few days ago," Sam interjected quickly. Tony had his mouth open to say something else, but Steve cut in.

"Tony, you can't tell me that if something started going wrong with Jarvis, you'd immediately tell all of us. You'd keep it to yourself and try to fix him, until you were sure there was a real threat," Steve said.

"I-!" Tony said, but he paused when he caught the eyebrow Bruce was giving him.

"I would tell you immediately if I thought there was any possibility that Jarvis could be a threat," Tony continued.

"Then I did better than you would, because Buck isn't a threat to us. It looks like he's only a threat to Hydra. We shouldn't have a problem with that, except that he might be destroying valuable data. And I don't like the unnecessary casualties," Steve said.

"We can't be certain that it's Barnes. There's two Hydra locations taken out now, just a week apart. That's a lot of work, a lot of planning, in a short time. It takes our entire crew almost a week to set up a hit and make it go smoothly," Hill said.

"Barnes can do it," Natasha insisted.

"What are you, his cheerleader?" Tony asked her.

Nat only looked at him. She frequently refused to respond to Tony's bait. Tony sat back in his chair and tried practicing the same cool, knowing look back at Natasha. It was too weird to watch for long, because Tony somehow made his face look more feminine. Maybe it was the set of his jaw and what he did with his lips.

Natasha smiled in appreciation.

"He's staying here in the city? Or did he come just the once to see you?" Clint asked.

Clint didn't ask much at meetings. When he did, it was usually about details they might be overlooking.

"I think he's local for now. I was giving him time to contact me again. Since he hasn't, I'm going looking for him this evening," Steve told them.

"I'll go with you," Natasha said.

"No. I've got it," Steve insisted.

"You don't know what you're dealing with," she told him.

"I'm dealing with my friend, whom I've already matched in hand-to-hand twice. I know him, Nat. Maybe you know a different part of him, but I know enough. I'll be fine," Steve said.

"When you go, ask him if he knows anything about these Hydra hits," Bruce said.

"And watch yourself," Tony said, all his baiting comments and suspicions put away.
Steve nodded.

The meeting appeared to be over, so Steve got up and left the conference room. It was five in the evening and he wanted to get out there and find Buck.

"Hey, are you sure you want to do this alone?" Sam said in the hallway as he jogged to catch up.

Jarvis held the doors for him, and he got into the elevator with Steve.

"Yeah, I'm sure, Sam. I know you've been with me on this for months. I couldn't have done it without you, and now I'm acting like an ass and going alone. I feel that I need to. It's not like we expected it to be. There's not gonna be a fight," Steve said.

"Alright," Sam said, resigned.

"You know everybody wants you to be careful, but I'm happy for you too. Does he seem stable? What he's been through is too much for me to handle, but he might need to see someone to help get his head straight," Sam said.

"I don't know that yet. If I can find him, I'll tell you tomorrow," Steve said.

The elevator opened on his floor, and he left Sam in it. Lightening flashed outside and the tower rumbled with the thunder. Steve hurried into his room to change. He was going on his bike, no matter the weather, so he put on a dark gray t-shirt and one of his older, more worn pairs of jeans. He shoved his wallet in his back pocket and his feet into his black boots that he'd bought to go with the bike.

On the way down, he had almost two minutes to think.

"Jarvis, would you tell Estrella that I want to see her soon if she feels up to it?" Steve asked.

There was a pause, then Jarvis responded.

"I have just done so, Captain. She says she still wants coffee, and her library books are close to being overdue."

"Well then, it's a date. No! Don't tell her that. She won't like it. Tell her I said I'll meet her in the lobby at ten tomorrow morning, if that's alright with her," Steve said.

"Very good, Captain. Her response is 'okay'."

"She doesn't have a phone yet, does she?" Steve asked.

It would have been nice to text her or to call her directly, without Jarvis in the middle.

"She does not. Keep in mind that she cannot yet afford a phone, considering the amount she sets aside to repay Sir for the voice modulator device. I don't think her response would be favorable if anyone gifted her with anything so expensive as a phone," Jarvis reminded.

"You think I don't know that?" Steve asked Jarvis.

It was starting to piss him off that everyone seemed to be questioning his judgement. First, nobody believes he can visit Buck without an armed escort, and now the AI was not so gently suggesting how he should handle his only other friend.

"I am sorry, Captain. I have grown fond of the Miss, and I monitor her heart constantly. Of the two
of you, I would rather upset you than her," Jarvis said with what sounded like genuine contrition.

Jarvis' cautious words set Steve back off of his annoyance.

"Thanks, Jarvis. That's good to know," Steve said in a more kindly tone.

By the time Steve had made his way through traffic, over the bridge and into Brooklyn, the rain had let up and the sun was going down. He and the bike were dripping, and the golden sunset was watery and filtered through the edge of low clouds.

He found a curbside parking spot in their old neighborhood. The place looked rough. It had been rough when he and Buck were kids, then it had boomed and grown in the seventies, and now it was back to rough again. Steve made note of all the people on the streets, and the fact that half of them were loitering around smoking and drinking. Used to, there were open container laws. Maybe there still were and the police didn't come around to enforce them much.

He put the stand down on the bike and took off his helmet. As he dismounted, his wet jeans pulled at his skin. The shirt was plastered to him, too. He didn't care. He set his helmet on the bike's seat and looked around without the helmet's narrowed field of view. People had noticed him, and they didn't look like a big crowd of Captain America fans.

The men were all dark skinned, and the women weren't wearing much. Music was thumping from a few different cars parked along the street, groups of young men standing around them talking.

"Oooh, honey. You got a date tonight? 'Cause I could go with you whereva," a young woman called to him. She and two other girls were standing not far from where he'd parked the bike.

"Thanks, but no. I've got business tonight," Steve told her with a smile.

She wasn't bad looking. Lots of smooth cocoa skin and nice curves on her. The fact that he was even taking a second look and mildly entertaining the idea of a prostitute embarrassed him.

"You change your mind, I'm right here," she said. She actually rubbed a hand down her front and patted her mons. Steve turned away. It was a crude gesture, but effective. Crap. Now he had to walk around like this in wet jeans.

"Arm," Steve said under his breath, and a yellow light on the instrument panel of his bike began a slow pulsing glow.

He walked away from it. The streets and the sidewalk were wet just like he was. The people were dry. As Steve began looking around for clues, he ambled closer to one of the thumping cars.

A group of rough looking young men were gathered across the sidewalk, blocking it. They let women pass with only a little teasing. They made way for an old man with a brown paper bag. Steve, they ignored until he tried going around them on the street.

"Where you goin, boy?" one of the men called out to him.

"That'a way," Steve told them and kept walking.

He knew it was best to interact as little as possible. He wasn't even sure that Buck had settled here,
but he'd said home. And this was home. Across the street from Steve was a coin operated laundry which used to be a bakery. Next to him, on the other side of the men who blocked the sidewalk, was a pawn shop. It used to be a local newspaper office.

Steve expected the men to mess with him some more, but they didn't. He went around the thumping car and back up onto the sidewalk. His eyes scanned everywhere, keeping a feel for the mood of the people on the street, and looking at every detail of the buildings. There was his old walk-up. The bottom was a discount store with bars on the windows. The lights were on in most of the windows above that.

He'd been here recently, but he hadn't stopped to look around much. It hadn't been worth stirring up the neighborhood with his presence, and nothing escaped notice around here. There was always someone out, sitting on a stoop or standing around. Now that it was getting dark and he had a close-shaved head and a fairly thick beard growing in, he hoped he could escape too much notice.

Steve stopped to look at the windows of the units above the discount store. Nothing caught his eye, so he moved on. He'd take it block by block if he had to. He was scanning the windows across the street above the liquor store as he got close to the next group of men by another thumping car. He automatically started to walk around on the street side, but two men moved to intercept him.

Steve stopped between the bumpers of two parked cars and waited. It hadn't been an impossibility that this kind of thing would happen tonight. The men gathered around the car on the sidewalk quieted. The ones that had gone around street side to intercept him stood and waited. So did Steve.

"You just gonna stand there?" one of the men nearest on the sidewalk asked him.

"Sure, why not," Steve said.

He looked them over. Thirteen of them, and over a hundred more, out on the street where everyone could see. He knew a crowd would gather quick if anything started. He saw several knives concealed on the guys. Maybe a handgun under one of their shirts.

"You scared to walk through a bunch of brothas?" another one asked.


"Decide what?" the same one wanted to know. He had a black rag snug around his head, and a white undershirt stretched over his impressive chest and shoulders.

"Whatever it is that you're gonna decide. When we're done with that, I'll move on," Steve told him.

"Gonna move on? If we let you," the man taunted. He came over to get in Steve's face and Steve stepped up the curb to meet him, still keeping a casual stance. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and waited calmly for the man to reach him. Five others followed loosely behind him.

"Yeah, come here," Steve pulled out a hand and gestured him closer.

The man got in his face, of course. Steve stepped around beside him and laid his arm across his shoulders as if they were pals. The man was immediately nervous about that and tried to pull away some, but Steve got a good grip on him and powered them both along the sidewalk a little ways away from his friends.

"You need to look a little harder and decide if you want any of my time. I don't want to bring down your status among your friends. Or your enemies. So look," Steve said. They'd made enough distance so that the others couldn't hear his low words. The others were getting antsy. They could
tell that Steve was strong-arming a man he shouldn't be able to strong-arm. Steve let go of him and he jerked away.

"Get the fuck off me!" he barked at Steve and shoved him hard against the brick of a building. Steve let the momentum bounce him, then used the bounce to put himself back in the man's face.

"Come on. Take a look," Steve said.

"Faggot! Get out my face," the man said, but he looked.

Steve gave him time. It didn't take much. The man stepped back a little.

"You Cap-"

"Yeah, yeah. Enough of that. I'm not here to cause trouble, and I don't wanna make anybody lose face. Maybe you can help me out," Steve said. He pulled a twenty from his back pocket and pressed it into the man's hand.

"What do you want?" the man asked. He was calmer now. Everyone understood cash.

"I want to know if you've seen my friend. He's a white guy. Long, dark hair. Always wearing gloves," Steve said.

"I know who you talkin about. Bad motha fucka. Nobody messed with him since Little D and his boys disappeared," the man said.

But he didn't say anymore. Steve gave him more cash. The other guys were staying back by the thumping car, waved back by a gesture from their friend.

"What did Little D do?" Steve wondered.

"Tried to fuck with him, like I did you just now. Wasn't nothin but a little fun, ya know? They roughed him around some. But next day, Little D ain't nowhere. Still ain't found him. Or his boys," the man said.

Steve frowned. He hoped they weren't talking about Bucky, but if the physical description fit, they probably were.

"Where does he stay?" Steve asked.

"Right there. Don't know which number," the man said. He pointed to a building across the street.

Steve wanted to ask why they didn't call the police if people were missing, but he knew it was useless.

"Thanks," Steve told the man.

He stepped around him and to the curb, back to between the bumpers of the two cars. He waited for traffic to clear so he could cross.

"Hey, you know they gonna mess with your bike, right?" the man said.

"Yeah, I know," Steve called back as he crossed.

Before he was even across the street and up on the other curb, he knew where Buck's place was. There was a little ceramic Siamese cat figurine in a window on the third floor. Steve remembered
seeing it in Mrs. Barnes' living room when they were kids. Buck wanted to be found.

The light was off in the apartment. Steve went in the building, past the kids who were playing on the front stoop. The building had no buzzer on the doors, and if it did, it wouldn't have mattered. The kids had the doors propped open to let the air in.

Steve went up the flights of stairs to the third floor. A few people looked at him in the hallways, but they didn't bother him. The place had seen better days a long time ago. It was dingy and it smelled like years of stale cigarettes. And other things.

He knocked on the door of the apartment which should belong to the window with the cat. He stood and listened carefully, through the sound of the television blaring from the unit behind him, and the sound of someone yelling a few doors down.

There was no movement in the apartment. Not that he could have heard Buck moving around in there anyway. Buck was too quiet, these days.

"Hey, Jerk. Ya in there?" Steve asked, in case Buck was waiting in the silence, shotgun pointed at the door.

Still nothing. Steve waited a moment to be sure, then he went back down through the building. Buck was a working man now. Maybe he wasn't off work yet.

Outside the doors, there was a tree growing in an iron ring in the sidewalk. Steve stepped carefully through the kids and their card game and went to lean against the tree and wait. People looked at him as they went by, but not for long.

"You gotta be Captain America," one of the kids from on the building's stoop said.

Steve turned his head to look at them.

"I get that all the time. I must look like him, but my name's Grant," Steve told the kids.

It wasn't exactly a lie.

"Are you sure?" the kid asked again.

"Yeah, kid. I know my own name," Steve said.

"Move your ass, Grant. Let's get inside before the whole neighborhood sees ya," Bucky said from his right side.

"Fu- Bu-," Steve stuttered, "how do ya keep doing that to me?"

"I always was better 'n you at sneaking," Bucky said, and walked around him on the sidewalk.

He had a lunchbox cooler in his right hand. The kids left their cards and ran away inside the building somewhere. Steve followed Buck inside and up the stairs. Bucky was as wet as he was, and he smelled like sweat and sawdust.

Buck unlocked his door and let Steve walk in behind him. He reached out and flipped on the lights while Steve closed and locked the door. Steve followed down the short hall into the living room, but Buck wasn't there anymore.

"I stink. We can talk after I get clean. Grab a beer. Put your wet clothes in the dryer," Buck called from the only other doorway in the apartment.
"Sure," Steve said.

He felt like he was in a strange dream. Buck had run off to shower before Steve could even really get a look at anything but his backside going up the stairs. Now he was standing in a run-down apartment by himself.

There was an old green couch in the small living room, and a black vinyl chair that looked like it was from the sixties. Completing the group was a large old television on a stand in the corner by the window. The walls were a dull color halfway between tan and orange. An antique light fixture gave dim light from the ceiling. The fixture was probably original to the building.

The sound of the shower starting got Steve moving. Buck didn't want wet clothes on his furniture, so Steve went through the little kitchen looking for the laundry machines. The dryer had clothes in it, so he took them out and set them on top. Bucky's clothes. He was handling Buck's clothes as if he lived here like a roommate. His mind staggered back to before Buck had enlisted. They'd shared a place something like this, on a different block. Those were good times.

Steve stripped to his boxer briefs and threw his shirt, socks, and jeans in the dryer and turned it on. He looked in the fridge for a beer. There were two different kinds, and he chose the darker one. By the time he'd looked around the place, including taking a peek at Buck's bedroom, Bucky was getting out of the shower. Steve went to the living room and sat down on the couch with his beer.

Buck was moving around in his bedroom, sounding like a normal man after a day of work.

"Here," Buck said from the bedroom doorway.

Steve looked up to catch the clean shirt flying at him. He pulled it on and followed Bucky to the kitchen.

Buck wasn't looking at him. His hair hung dark and wet on his shoulders. He pulled a box out of the freezer and tossed it on the countertop.

"Did you eat already?" Buck asked him.

"No. I wanted to find you. I thought we might go get something," Steve said.

He felt himself slipping back into the sort of kid brother role he'd had when they'd lived together before. Not really inferior, but he'd deferred to Buck in a lot of things because Buck was the one with the strength to earn the most pay and take care of more of the bills.

"Heh. S' not much place to eat around here, unless you want to get a sandwich from the liquor store," Buck said.

He took another box from the freezer and put it next to the other one. He tore open a box and put the tray in the microwave. He pressed some buttons, then stood there watching the food go around.

He didn't have a shirt on, just his boxers. Steve could see how the metal arm was keeping his skin red where metal met flesh. And there was some blistering on his left side above his shorts.

"Buck, turn around," Steve said.

Bucky sighed, but he turned around to face him. He leaned back on the countertop, his hands braced on the edge in a way that made the musculature of his shoulders and front tense. Buck didn't used to be that lean and tight. He'd always been strong, but not in that way. He'd been using his body hard and often at difficult tasks. And his left side was burnt and blistered, all up his torso.
and onto his neck and face.

"You been taking out Hydra bases?" Steve asked. He felt a little less like the old Stevie and more like himself again. Buck didn't look like he wanted to answer any questions.

Buck only shrugged.

"How much explosive did you use on that last one? Little too much, I'd say," Steve commented.

"Got a warehouse full. I used plenty," Buck said.

"A warehouse?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. A small one. That's what I did first. Lucky for me that you and your people took Hydra down fast. Did a lot of damage, left a lot of holes. I cleaned out all the stashes I could remember. Cash, gear, explosives," Bucky told him.

"You need to get that looked at," Steve said, and nodded at Buck's burnt face. It was the worst of the visible damage.

"Nah, it'll be fine in a day or two. I heal almost as fast as you."

They stared at each other for a moment, not bothering to hide their curiosity.

"I'm still not used to seeing you bigger than me. A lot of my memories from the war are fuzzy," Bucky said.

The microwave beeped, and he turned to take one dinner from it and put in the other. Steve watched close for any other sign of injury or soreness, but there was none. Just the burns on his left side.

"Get us some forks, would ya?" Bucky suggested, and pointed at a drawer.

He got down two glasses and pulled a bottle of soda from the refrigerator. Steve got the forks and they stood in silence again until the microwave beeped. They ate standing up in the kitchen. Steve didn't look much at what the food was, other than to see where to put his fork.

They washed it down with cheap soda, then Bucky got himself a beer from the fridge. Steve got another one because his first was almost finished. They settled in the living room, Buck sprawled in the black chair, Steve on the couch.

"You been killing people around here?" Steve asked.

"Just the ones who need it. Why? You gonna turn me in? For taking out Hydra bases and street thugs?"

Steve stared at him hard. They both knew that he should turn him in. It's what Steve Rogers would do. What Captain America would do.

"Do it, then, Stevie. I'll wait right here. They can bring me to jail and everything. I won't even hurt anybody," Buck said.

"Why, Buck? This isn't you," Steve said quietly.

"Me? I haven't been 'me' in decades! I don't know who 'me' is," Buck said. His fist smacked his chest, then reached to loop a finger around the neck of his beer. He tilted it back and drank half of
"I know. That's why I'm not turning you in. But you gotta quit killing people, alright? We're not judge and jury," Steve insisted.

"No promises," Buck grumbled at him.

Steve sighed. His head may be messed up, and maybe he was a killer now, but that sour look was all Buck. He used to get like that when Steve would nag him about being too fast with the girls.

"I still love ya, Buck, you know I do. I'd do anything for you. But I can't let you run around killing folks," Steve said.

"I'll try harder. But no promises," Buck said.

Steve looked at him until Bucky looked away, just like it used to be. Buck never liked being reminded that their moms had raised them right.

"Does the arm hurt you?" Steve changed subjects. There had been no time to ask the last time he'd seen him in the park.


He spread his silver fingers, rotated his wrist a little, then made a fist. The metal bands moved and flexed like a real arm would have.

Steve crimped his brow, then smiled. He was quickly remembering the details of how they'd been together. That had been Buck's 'lying to your face' tone.

"Come on. What's wrong with it?" Steve persisted.

"It itches a little, around where it meets. Always has, so it's nothing to worry about."

Steve took a little piece of technology out of the waistband of his shorts and held it out to Bucky. It was something Tony had given him when he'd got out of the elevator as he was leaving the tower. Steve had promised he'd put it in Buck's apartment, but not how he'd get it there.

"You should come around to the tower. We could look at it for you, maybe make it better," Steve offered.

Bucky looked at the small listening device, then set it on top of the television.

"I'm used to it. I like it how it is, but thanks. Like I said, Stark's not gonna want to do anything sweet for me. Not after I killed his parents," Bucky said, fully aware that someone, somewhere was listening.

Steve frowned at him.

Buck shrugged.

"That wasn't you," Steve denied.

"Sure it was. I remember their faces. I just couldn't do a damn thing about it. A mission's a mission. I follow orders and they put me back in the icebox. I don't follow orders, they recondition me until I do. It was pretty simple," Buck said.
Steve shut his eyes and focused on the faint sound of his jeans going round and round in the dryer. If he thought too hard about what Buck had been through, he wasn't going to be able to keep his face straight.

"Aw, don't get choked up about it. There's nothing you could do. You were on ice too, practically the whole time I was," Buck said, low and comforting, like he used to speak when Steve was coughing and couldn't stop.

"I'm not choked up. I'm angry," Steve ground out.

"Nothing to do about it but kill Hydra," Bucky said. He took his empty beer bottle and Steve's and got up. He dropped them in the trash in the kitchen. He came back with two more.

"This doesn't do anything for me, remember?" Steve said.

"Me neither. But I like the head," Bucky said. He swigged the beer, then licked at the little smear of foam that clung to his upper lip.

Steve laughed. Buck smiled, too.

"If you like head, then you should get some real beer and some pint glasses. Not much head on this shit," Steve said, indicating his beer bottle.

"Nah. I want head, I'll open my window and whistle," Buck said.

Steve started to laugh, but then he couldn't. The thought of a girl on her knees, face in his lap took away the ability to smile. He cleared his throat because it had gotten tight, then moved his leg a little on the couch.

"And... there it is!" Buck teased him, waving his beer bottle at the blush that crept from Steve's face, and down his neck.

"Fuck yourself," Steve muttered.

Before he had any idea that he needed to stop him, Buck got up and went to the window. He threw it up and yelled.

"Kenya!"

Steve heard a girl's voice say something from below on the street, but it was too drowned out by the blood rushing in his ears.

"You didn't. Buck, please tell me you didn't just-"

"Yeah. I did. Kenya's got a sweet mouth. Tell me you haven't been living like a monk since you thawed out, and I'll call her off," Bucky said on his way to the door. He opened the door out to the hallway and returned to his chair.

"What the hell are you doing, Bucky?" Steve asked. He got up, jittery out of his skin. There was a girl coming up, and he was in his shorts! His jeans were still in the dryer. Steve was fast, but not fast enough.

"Shut the door," he heard Bucky tell someone while Steve was trying to hop into the hot, damp denim.

"Why you callin me tonight? We all thought you already had company," a girl's voice said.
She was looking around, and she spotted him in the shadows of the laundry nook. Steve felt his face burning red, blushing harder than it ever had. He stepped out of the jeans again and put them back in the dryer as if that's what he'd been doing in the first place. Bucky barked a laugh.

"I don't fuck around with men. You can tell em that. This is my friend Grant, from way back," Bucky said.

Steve took a few breaths and calmly started the dryer going again. Calm on the outside, anyway. He thought of ice. Miles of ice. Cold so deep that it had slowed his heart to a stop. The dark memories chilled him out of his heated embarrassment. He strode to the living room.

"Hey, Grant. You lonely tonight?" Kenya asked him. She got a good look at him while he did the same to her.

She was tall and slim, but she had a pretty face, full lips, and a round backside.

"I know you from somewhere," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Yeah, I get that all the damn time. Everybody tells me I look like Captain America, but my name is Grant," he said. He held out his hand to shake. Bucky was smirking at him over Kenya's shoulder. Kenya took his hand briefly.

"Have a seat, Grant," Bucky told him.

A bad case of nerves spilled over Steve's skin, giving him goosebumps. He sank back down like he'd been before, and he left room on the other end of the couch for Kenya to sit down.

Bucky had gotten a twenty dollar bill from somewhere, and he set it on the arm of the couch.

Kenya smiled and nodded. She didn't sit on the couch. She sunk to her knees on the floor in front of Steve.

Steve's eyes went wide and his hands jerked, wanting to push her away. She looked up at him, smiling and seductive. Whether it was an act or not didn't matter. She was right there, practically breathing on him.

"Buck, I'm gonna kill you," Steve said, tight and high.

"After you're done, we'll see," Buck was still smiling.

Steve didn't look to see, but he could hear it in his voice.

"You wanna at least go in the bedroom?" Steve asked her.

"Here's good," Buck told them firmly.

Then, her hands were on him. She didn't bother with any fancy stuff. Her long, slim fingers pulled his shorts under his stuff. She paused when she got a look at him, but then she moved and all he felt was warm.

"Uunh," Steve grunted.

He hunched forward on the couch, but he wasn't about to pull away. It was too good to want to get away from. He cracked his eyes to glare at Bucky for starting this, but then she did something with her tongue and he laid back on the couch, giving up.
It didn't take him long. Anything other than his own hand felt amazing. The illegality of what he was allowing to happen jangled his nerves. The wrongness turned something in his belly, but it couldn't overpower what was happening at his groin. He squirmed a little. He'd never let himself do this with anyone watching, but it was just Buck. And he needed it. Nat said that he did.

So he let it go.

He didn't know what kind of sound he made, but it must have been something, because Bucky was chuckling, the smug bastard. Kenya sat back on her heels and licked her lips.

"Come here, you know the drill," Buck told her.

Kenya crawled over to Bucky and held her mouth open. Buck looked, then swept a finger inside her mouth.

"Go get it yourself," he told the girl.

Kenya got up and went to the kitchen. Steve lay sprawled in a warm daze. Was he dreaming, or had Buck just paid a prostitute to blow him? The world felt kind of upside down. God, if anybody found out that he was on the bad side of Brooklyn getting blown, the Avengers wouldn't have enough PR money to hush it up. Tony wouldn't want to. He'd be right there grinning with Bucky.

Kenya came back to the living room with a bottle of Jack Daniels. Where Bucky could see, she took a gulp from the bottle. She swished it around and swallowed.

"Leave it there," Bucky instructed, pointing to the stand the television sat on.

Kenya did so, then pocketed the twenty that had been put out for her.

"What about you?" she asked Buck.

"I'm good. You can come by tomorrow night, maybe," Bucky told her.

"Alright," Kenya said, then she left.

Buck got up and locked the door behind her.

When he walked back to his chair, Steve noticed that Buck wasn't even hard. That was weird, 'cause something like this used to would have wound him up.

"I can't believe you did that," Steve finally said. From the time Buck had yelled out the window til now hadn't been ten minutes. And the surveillance device was sitting right there on the television. Crap. He'd never hear the end of it from Tony.

"You said yourself that I'm not 'me,' so pay attention, Stevie. You're right. I'm not. I'm still in here, but a lot of other stuff is too," Buck said. He tapped his head, then put his hand back down.

"And cover that shit up. I don't wanna see it," Buck said.

Steve jerked upright, his face flaming again. He hadn't even noticed that his underwear was still where Kenya had left it. He fixed it, not liking that he wasn't putting it away clean and dry.

"Have you lost your mind? That was illegal. You can't do that," Steve said.

"I just did. You hear the cops coming? I don't," Buck said.
Steve shut up and sat, thinking. Sam was right. Bucky needed help. Something was seriously off in his head. He'd always been one for a good time, but he hadn't gone so far as murder and prostitutes. They hadn't had to. The girls had been around for free, and street arguments were settled with fists fair and square.

"The world's not the same, Stevie. Grow up," Buck told him.

"I'm not Stevie. I've done enough growing up. You were there with me through most of it," Steve said.

He went into Buck's darkened bedroom and looked on top of the beat-up dresser. He took Buck's phone and dialed his own number with it. Steve heard it ringing on top of the dryer where he'd left it. He went back into the living room.

"You happy now? You can call me anytime. Have Stark's kid trace me all over the place. I can always get a different phone. I've got shit loads of cash, thanks to Hydra," Buck told him with a twist at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm not gonna trace you. I spent years grieving for your sorry ass, then months hunting for you. I want to be able to call you, Buck. And you can call me if you ever need help," Steve said. He stood in the bedroom doorway and thumbed through the list of Buck's contacts. They were all take-out food places, no private numbers. He tossed the phone on the bed.

"Help? Hah! You call me, Stevie. I'm fine on my own," Buck said.

"Sure you are. That's why you're living in this dump and keeping time with hookers," Steve said.

"This dump is where we're from. Don't start your sanctimonious crap with me. What are you gonna do right after this, go run to the priest?" Buck taunted.

"I should, but I won't. I needed it," Steve admitted.

"I knew it! I've been tallying off the enemy and swimming in poon, and you're doing the same uptown, except for the poon. And you don't really tally them off, do ya? You just knock em around a little so they can do their time, get out, and bite you again later. Idiot!" Buck said.

He threw his beer bottle into the kitchen, where it landed square in the waste bin, then shattered on the other bottles.

"I do what I'm supposed to do," Steve said sullenly.

"When are you gonna start doing what you want to do?" Buck challenged him.

"I don't know," Steve said. Buck had a point.

"You act like they own you. Your poor, dead grandparents worked off their indenture in less years. Nobody owns you, punk. Nobody but you," Buck said. He got up from the chair and stalked over to Steve.

"They do own me, Buck. I'd have been dead before I was thirty. All the years I've had since then have been on their time. Look at me now," Steve said. He unfolded his arms and looked slightly down into Bucky's eyes.

"Yeah, you're a big, useless virgin stud. You do realize that all the people who made you are dead now, right? You're not Army issue anymore. I saw in the paper that you got an honorable discharge
and all kinds of medals. You're your own man, now," Bucky said.

Steve didn't argue. All of that was true, filtered through his friend's perception. Sam tended to agree with him. Steve thought he'd find some kind of solace with Buck, away from the expectations of his teammates. But everything Buck said, he could hear Sam or Tony or Nat in the words.

"This isn't the kind of shit I meant to stir when I invited you in. I'm sorry," Buck said.

Steve nodded. It seemed that not much went according to plan, lately.

"Hey," Buck said.

Steve looked at him.

"Have you been careful with yourself?" Buck asked.

"What do you mean?" Steve wondered.

Bucky colored up a little, and Steve wondered what could possibly make him bashful.

"You saw with Kenya just now, how I checked her mouth and had her wash with whiskey?"

"Yeah," Steve said.

"You can't let anyone get a sample of your semen. They used mine. Made a bunch of messed up kids, or clones, or something. It was god-awful. That was back when I didn't have any control of things. They tried again just a few months ago. Sent a girl to me in a bar. She tried wiping her mouth, but I saw what she was doing, trying to save some. Any girl gets at you, you watch them close, and make sure they don't take anything usable away with them," Buck warned him.

Steve shut his eyes again. The blows just kept coming. The few things Buck had told him tonight were bad enough, but he was sure there was plenty more. Years of atrocities.

Once again, he pulled Buck into a hug. Bucky made a startled squawking sound, but then he allowed it. Buck's heart was thumping fast, unused to the non-hostile contact.

"You call me. Don't let them get their hands on you again. If they do, I'll come with everything I've got and rain hell on 'em," Steve promised.

"Move off, punk. I don't need the backup," Bucky pushed away, but not forcefully.

"You're not all balls, Buck. Everybody bleeds," Steve said.

He went through the kitchen and felt of his jeans after he opened the dryer. He sensed that there was only so much interaction that Bucky could take before he kicked him out. The jeans were a little damp, still, but they were warm. He put them on, then his socks and his shirt. He dropped Buck's borrowed shirt on the floor in front of the washer.

Bucky was sitting in the chair again when he went to the living room. Steve took out a twenty from his wallet and put it on the arm of the couch.

"What, you want me to blow you? Trying to make up for lost time all in one night?" Buck asked.

Steve smacked him across the face.
Bucky was up and ready before Steve recovered his neutral stance.

"You might not want to do shit like that," Buck warned him after the coldness faded from his eyes.

"Ain't scared. I already would have beat you twice, and I let you beat me the last time," Steve said.

"Yeah, well last time, you were dead in the water til I pulled you out," Buck said.

"I knew I could count on you, but thanks," Steve said.

"You didn't know! I was a breath away from leaving you at the bottom of the river."

"It didn't matter," Steve told him.

"Ah, fuck. Get your boots. I'll walk you to your bike," Bucky said.

"I'm not your girl, Buck. I think I can make it home alone," Steve told him, but he put on his boots while Bucky got dressed.

"Nah. It's too late at night. I'll walk you or you'll have to get your hands dirty killing somebody," Buck said.

They left Buck's apartment. He didn't lock the door and Steve wondered about that, but there hadn't been much inside to steal. Out on the street, there were fewer people, but the ones out looked a lot meaner. Steve noted that Buck wasn't wearing a long shirt. The arm was in plain sight.

"That bad?" he asked.

"It can be," Bucky said.

Traffic was light, like nobody wanted to drive through the place. They probably didn't. There weren't any girls on the street anymore.

There was no one near his bike. The handle grips were still glowing red and the yellow light had turned red, too. He wasn't surprised.

Steve picked up the helmet, which had fallen to the pavement.

"You gonna be alright getting back?" Steve asked.

Every eye had been on the two of them as they crossed the street.

"I'll be fine. These are low level fucks," Bucky said.

"Try not to kill anyone else," Steve reminded him.

"You try to kill a few more," Buck denied his request and upped him one.

Steve shook his head at his friend, then put on the helmet and stood his bike up to kick it. He really didn't have to, but he liked it. Buck was already walking back, his hands in his pockets and unconcerned about the men who watched him. Maybe he was looking for an excuse, a reason to let off some steam. Steve watched him in his mirrors until the light turned green.
Chapter 15

He was coming back from his morning run when he heard music and movement in his suite. It was some goopy pop song and Estrella was singing loudly.

"Jarvis, how did she get in?" Steve asked from out in the foyer.

"She feels indebted to you for your kindness. I wasn't going to let her in, but Miss Potts decided that she should be allowed to cook and clean for you if she wishes to. I was overridden, I'm afraid. If you forbid it, I can make sure she has no access next time," Jarvis said.

Estrella sounded happy. Top of her lungs happy. Steve wiped his face with his towel and stepped over to Clint's door.

It took two rounds of knocking, but Clint finally dragged himself out of bed and answered the door. He looked bleary in wrinkled boxers and an undershirt. He glared at Steve, then spoiled the effect by yawning.

"What?" Clint asked.

"Can't you hear that?" Steve pointed a thumb over his shoulder back at his place.

"You've got a girl in there and you're running away after using her all night? That's not very nice," Clint said.

"Ha ha. Let me in and I'll make us coffee," Steve said.

Clint listened to Estrella singing for a moment more, then he let Steve in.

Clint's place wasn't much different from Tony's taste. Glass, metal, and stone. All modern lines and nothing that looked comfortable, though Steve knew that it was.

The door shut and blocked out all of the noise from across the way. No wonder Clint had still been sleeping. Steve went to the kitchen and got coffee started while Clint disappeared into the bathroom. They picked at Clint a lot for being a slob, but his place wasn't bad. He had a laptop open on the glass table, but Steve didn't look at what may have been on it, if anything.

He stood at the window while the coffee brewed.

"Jarvis, whose idea was the cooking and cleaning?" Steve asked.

"The Miss thought of it. It was after you gave her your version of the necklace. I hadn't the heart to immediately tell her no. I checked with Miss Potts, hoping that she would make the correct decision. Were we wrong?" Jarvis asked.

"I don't mind her in my place. But I don't want her exerting herself with the vacuum or anything. You're watching her heart, right?"

"Of course I am," Jarvis said, almost managing to sound offended.

"How is it?"

"Elevated and showing slight signs of stress, but not more than fifty percent of baseline," Jarvis answered.
"Maybe you could play softer songs to slow her down?" Steve suggested.

He'd never seen Estrella sing or dance before, but he could only imagine that's what she was doing, bopping around with a broom or a duster, or sprinkling ingredients in the kitchen. It was a cute image in his mind, but he worried about her.

"I am trying, Captain. She will tolerate it for a short time, then she asks for a faster beat," Jarvis said.

"Hey, hey. No conversations in my place without me," Clint said. He walked to the window dressed in tactical pants and his usual sleeveless shirt. He handed Steve a cup of black coffee.

"Alright. Clint, tell Jarvis he's doing a crappy job of babysitting one small girl," Steve said.

"I'm not getting into that," Clint said. He walked away and flopped back on the couch.

Steve laughed and shook his head.

"Jarvis, keep me informed, and don't let her boss you around."

"Of course, Captain," Jarvis replied.

Steve went to sprawl on Clint's other couch. Clint didn't bother to shower half the time right after a workout, so he didn't let the fact that his skin was clammy bother him too much either.

"Tony says you got blown last night at Bucky's place," Clint grinned at him.

"Let's not get into that, either. Jeeze, this place is like a barber shop. Nothing stays private," Steve complained.

"Play it louder, Jarvis. I can't hear it over the mixer," Estrella told him. She put in exactly the right amount of paprika and tapped the measuring spoon on the rim of the mixing bowl.

"Yes, Miss," Jarvis said. He increased the music volume five percent.

"Come on," she rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

"If I make it louder, we run the risk of waking Mister Barton across the hall," Jarvis said reasonably.

"Okay," Estrella said. She hummed along while she checked the dish in the oven. It was looking nice, with the chicken bubbling in its sauce and browning under the bread crumbs.

"It's almost nine. Isn't he up yet? I've already had time to clean and cook since Steve left for his run. I thought Avengers were responsible people. Early risers and all," she said. Then, she was back to singing loudly. Jarvis rarely answered her when she asked questions about the other Avengers.

The mixer was done and the creamy topping for the chicken casserole was ready to go in the oven. Estrella put on the mits and slid out the heavy glass dish. She set it on the wood cutting block and closed the oven with her foot. As soon as the mixer was off, Jarvis lowered the music seven percent.
"Careful, Miss," Jarvis warned when she set the mits aside and touched the browned chicken with her finger.

"You worry too much," Estrella said.

"Someone has to," Jarvis responded slightly under the volume of the music.

"What was that?" Estrella asked.

"Nothing at all," Jarvis spoke up.

Estrella used a spatula to move the cream topping from the mixing bowl. She evenly spread the topping onto the chicken, then set the bowl in the sink. Her casserole looked lovely, but she still had to add more crumbs and brown the top.

"Play me something funny, something a man would like," Estrella said as she moved the casserole back into the oven to brown.

"Are you certain, Miss? What men find amusing may not be to your taste," Jarvis cautioned her.

"Go on. Natasha says I need to get a better understanding of men. Play something," Estrella said.

"Very well. This is one of Sir's favorites," Jarvis said.

It had a fun, bouncing beat. And it was about bouncing! Balls. Big, bouncing balls. Estrella laughed when she learned what kind.

She set the timer in the kitchen and headed for the bathroom. She hadn't wanted to touch the bathroom until the food was in the oven. It was something her mami had taught her and it made sense.

The song was easy to learn, most of it, so she was singing along by the time it was halfway through.

"Jarvis don't let me miss the timer going off in the kitchen," she said above the music.

"Of course, Miss. I should also inform you that Captain Rogers has returned from his run. He is across the hall with Mister Barton. He took the news that you were in his suite fairly well. At least, I suppose he did. His brow didn't do the crinkly thing, but one can never know exactly what he is thinking," Jarvis told her.

"I guess that's not too bad, then. I'll only have time to do the floor. He'll want a shower before we go to the coffee shop and the library. Play something a little faster," Estrella said.

"As you wish, Miss," Jarvis said. He searched his files for something technically a little faster than the previous song. He made sure it was within the vocal range of the Miss, though she did have an impressive range.

"That's not any faster, Jarvis. Come on! I want to get this floor done. Men are so dirty. I bet he doesn't even notice the hairs behind the door," Estrella said.

"Captain Rogers has superlative visual acuity," Jarvis defended him.

"Then he should know they are there," she said. She shook the bath mats into the tub and rinsed the dust down the drain with the detachable shower sprayer. She would clean the tub more thoroughly when she had time later. For now, she set aside the mats and swept the floor. The bathroom was so
big! It was making her tired, just getting half of it. The music was getting softer, but she wasn't going to fuss at Jarvis again. She had to get done and out so Steve could shower, and so she could go get ready too.

"Captain, Miss Estrella requires assistance in your bathroom," Jarvis said in the middle of him and Clint arguing about baseball versus football.

Steve was up and across the hall before he could think to ask anything more about Estrella's condition. His door opened under his push, and he ran through to the bathroom, barely noticing the wonderful smell in the kitchen.

"Eya? Eya!" he said.

At least she was standing up, but not for long. She began to slump toward the floor from where she leaned against the wall. Steve scooped her up. Her head lolled back and she looked up at him, only half aware.

"Hi," she said to him, dreamy and disoriented.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked for information while he pressed two fingers to her throat.

"She should be fine, Captain, if you let her lie down for a while and get her to drink some water," Jarvis said.

Steve kicked his door wider and carried Estrella to the elevator. The doors were open on both sides, and Nat's suite opened when he used a shoulder to push the door. He hoped Natasha wasn't around. It felt wrong, going to the women's side, but Estrella needed her bed.

"To the left," Jarvis directed him.

He turned up the lights in her room so that Steve could see clearly to not trip over the shoes she'd left out.

Steve lay Estrella down on her bed, then hurried to the kitchen to get water for her.

"Do I have to? I'm getting tired of water. Water, water, water," she mumbled.

"Yes, Miss, I'm afraid so. Let the Captain help you," Jarvis said.

"Let the Captain help me. Bleh, bleh-" she said until Steve pressed the rim of the glass to her lips. She drank obediently, then turned up her chin to refuse any more.

"He doesn't like being called 'the Captain' all the time," she complained.

"Shhh," Steve shushed her. He held her head in his hand and encouraged her to drink some more. She pressed her lips together in a flat line at him for a second, but she opened up when he insisted.

"You shouldn't have got me the necklace if you wanted me to be quiet," she told him. She sounded sassy, but weak. Steve laid her down and pulled the top pillow off the stack behind her head. It bent her neck too much and he wanted her to breathe.

He pressed his fingers to her throat and pulled out his cell phone.
"Transfer," he requested of Jarvis.

A new app showed up on his phone and he tapped it. A black screen with a blipping line indicated her current heart pattern.

"Display baseline concurrently, match frequency," Steve said.

Another line blipped along under the current readings. It was more regular, with deeper troughs and higher crests. Estrella's heart was fluttering along, showing not much of a pattern.

"Why haven't you called Doctor Kalfey?" he asked Jarvis.

"Because this is within the range of normal for the Miss. It's not good, but she has always recovered from it," Jarvis said.

Estrella made mouthy motions with her hand and rolled her eyes at Jarvis.

"Traitor," she whispered.

"I heard that, Miss," Jarvis told her, but there was only affection in his tone.

"What percent has Tony reached?" Steve asked Jarvis.

"Ninety seven point eight five eight," Jarvis replied.

"I thought he was going for ninety-five," Steve said.

"Sir is a perennial over-achiever. He was waiting until he reached ninety eight percent certainty before he contacted you. He is more familiar with her heart patterns than you are, Captain. There was no need to be overly concerned," Jarvis told him.

"Her blood is barely circulating," Steve pointed out.

Estrella was frowning at him. She didn't like it when her favorite people were unhappy with each other. She reached out and put a finger to his lips. He let her keep it there, as long as she didn't get in the way of him watching the heart monitor on his phone. Her heart fluttered a little harder for half a minute.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop it. You need to rest," he said behind her finger, his words slightly smooshed. Seemingly in defiance, her heart fluttered at him again. Even the girl's organs were trained to talk back to him it seemed. He pushed her hand away from his face.

"The Miss is always fine after these incidents. I only called you because I cannot prevent her from hitting her head. She is stubborn, just as much as some others I won't mention," Jarvis said with snippy lightness.

"Stop fussing, both of you. Let me rest so we can go out. Steve, go shower. You smell," she told him. She rested back into the pillows and her eyes began to close.

"Jarvis, the casserole!" Estrella said suddenly, and she struggled to sit up. Steve gently put his hand in the middle of her chest and pressed her back down.

Her heart monitor bleeped a warning and Estrella looked at him with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, Eya. You rest and I'll go take out the casserole. It smells great. I'll be right back," Steve said.
He got up and left in a hurry. He shouldn't have pushed her down to the bed like that. He called himself all kinds of fool while he went across again and took the glass dish out of the oven. There was a sink full of dirty dishes, mostly mixing bowls and measuring spoons and cups. He hadn't known he had all this stuff in his suite. A mixer? Apparently he had a mixer. A big one that he couldn't have missed seeing in his small kitchen. Steve covered the casserole with foil then turned off the oven.

The elevator was still open, so he went back through to Nat's place, but only to the hallway outside her bedroom. He held his phone and watched the heart monitor.

"Estrella?" Steve said. Her heart jumped slightly. She'd heard him.

"I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't want you to get up and exert yourself. I took the casserole out and covered it. And I turned the oven off. Are you mad at me?" he asked.

"No. But I've ruined our morning. You're not going to let me out of bed so we can go to the coffee shop," she said.

Steve slid his back down the wall in the hallway, her door frame at his left side.

"Don't worry about the coffee shop. It'll be there the next time we try. I've already been by and talked to Izzy. He misses you. And I can bring your books back to the library. I bet Wanda has more set aside for you," Steve said.

She was silent. He could almost feel her disapproval flowing out into the hall. Him going for her wasn't good enough, he knew. She wanted to go. She wanted to get out of the tower and he didn't blame her. The place made him feel boxed in sometimes too.

"Eya, I think you should consider letting us improve your heart," Steve said after a minute.

"What's there to consider?" she asked.

"A two percent chance that something else might happen along with fixing your heart," Steve told her honestly.

"What else could happen?" she wondered.

"Lots of things. You could end up like me, but that's not very likely because we'll be using the weaker part of my blood. If anything else but your heart changes, it may not be noticeable," Steve said.

He'd been strongly resistant to the idea from the beginning, but seeing Estrella like this… They had to do something or she wouldn't live for long. One strong fright and she'd go into arrest.

"Do you want me to do it?" she asked him.

"It's not what I want that matters," Steve said, reminding her gently of an earlier conversation.

"But do you?" she persisted.

"I want you around for a little longer. I'm not sure you'll make it far with your heart like it is. Haven't you found anything to live for yet?" he asked.

"I like music. I like to sing. I want to dance," Estrella said.

"Then think about that two percent," Steve told her.
Several minutes of silence went by while Steve watched her heart slow it's fluttering and ease into a more productive rhythm.

"Why are you hiding in the hallway?" she asked, sounding sleepy.

"Because I didn't want to scare you anymore," Steve said.

"Ain't scared," she whispered.

Steve smiled. He watched the heart monitor as it evened out to match her baseline pattern.

"She is asleep, Captain. If you would, please get a blanket for her from the closet. She sometimes has low body temperature. I will turn down the lights. Mind the shoes," Jarvis said.

"Hush, we'll wake her," Steve said.

"Not likely when she's sleeping like this," Jarvis told him.

Steve went to the guest room closet and took down a fluffy comforter. He turned toward the bed with it in his hands.

Estrella was the cutest. Nat had her wearing clothes that didn't swallow her whole. She was in jeans and a pretty top. None of it was tight, but she wasn't swaddled in yards of fabric, either. He had to draw her. She looked like a cross between a fairy and a punk rock chick, with her short, spiky black hair and her choker necklace.

"Captain," Jarvis admonished him.

Steve jumped into action again. He opened the blanket and laid it over her.

"What? I was getting the blanket like you said," Steve complained quietly. Damn if he was going to be called out by a computer program.

"You were lingering. You know how prolonged stares make her uncomfortable," Jarvis said.

Steve chose not to argue with the uselessness of that statement. She wasn't awake to see him staring. But to think that thought, he had to admit to himself that he'd been staring. Sure he was staring, he told himself. He was going to draw her and he needed detail. Thinking of drawing slowed him down again, so he turned his thoughts to other things.

"How much has she gained?" Steve asked.

He moved to the top of the bed and tucked down the edge of the comforter so it wasn't in her face.

"Perhaps we could discuss this when you reach your suite," Jarvis said.

Steve reached behind her neck and tugged on the knot he'd used for the necklace. It loosened and he lifted her neck and head slightly so he could pull it away. He didn't know how she could sleep on top of rough knotted Kevlar. Estrella grumbled something at him as he set the copper butterfly on her night table.

He resisted the urges her voice called up in him. He was already near her, and he did his best to suppress the rest of what her voice did to him. She looked so peaceful.

"Captain, I must insist that you leave," Jarvis said with clear disapproval.
"I'm going. Let me get through the shoes," Steve said.

Estrella's bedroom lights dimmed to complete darkness before Steve could turn around to look back at her. As he left Nat's suite, the door clicked firmly shut behind him.

"You know I wouldn't hurt her, Jarvis," Steve told the AI.

"Don't forget that I am able to monitor your heart, as well as changing body heat distributions," Jarvis said.

Steve got into the elevator. The door on the women's side slid shut and it was a moment longer than usual before the door on his side opened. It hadn't been shut at all a while ago. Was Jarvis getting attitude with him?

He went into his suite and started doing dishes.

"Her weights?" he asked Jarvis.

"Upon arrival, she weighed seventy-eight pounds. She currently weighs ninety one pounds," Jarvis said, cold and technical.

Steve was momentarily stunned by the numbers. His hands fell idle in the dish water. He weighed more than twice as much as her current weight, three times as much as when she'd first come to the tower. Even now, she didn't weigh as much as he had before the serum. The feel of her in his arms a little while ago had been light, insubstantial.

Thinking of carrying her, catching her when she was falling, and covering her with a blanket led his mind to think of Jarvis' peculiar concern for Estrella's physical needs. The AI had seemed very protective of her. Especially when Steve had heard her unmoderated voice.

"Are you angry with me?" Steve asked as his hands started moving on the dishes again.

"Your question is absurd. I do not indulge in anger," Jarvis told him.

"Sir, I believe the Captain may be convinced. He was speaking favorably of the procedure to the Miss. Shall we prepare?" Jarvis asked in the lab.

"Get it moving. I didn't like those readings. How long will it take you to fine-tune the emitter?" Tony asked.

"Less than an hour, Sir."

"What about Estrella? Has she made up her mind? We're not going to do this without her consent," Bruce said.

"She's got the hots for Spangles. Did you see the spike in her heart rate when she touched him? She'll do it if he bats his eyelashes at her and asks nicely," Tony said.

"You're not her primary care physician, and you're abusing the parameters of medical ethics," Bruce said. He looked pointedly to the heart monitor on Tony's phone. It stayed open a lot lately.

"So sue me. I'm trying to save his girl," Tony said.
"We don't know that she will ever become 'his girl','" Jarvis said.

"Hey, don't think I don't smell the green on you, intangible man! You just elevator-checked the Captain," Tony waggled his phone at Jarvis.

Estrella woke to Natasha sitting on the edge of her bed and patting her shoulder.

"Hmmm? Is it morning already?" she wondered.

"No. It's evening. Get up and have tea with me," Nat said.

"Okay," Estrella agreed.

She reached over and got her necklace from the nightstand. Strange that she didn't remember taking it off. She tied it on how Steve had taught her to with his boy scout knot. She would give just about anything to see a picture of little Steve Rogers wearing a scout uniform. He probably didn't have any pictures from back then.

Estrella brushed her teeth and washed her face. She took a moment to straighten all the shoes that Natasha had her considering. They were old, Nat said, and were about to be donated to charity. There weren't any scuffs on the bottoms of some of them. Estrella knew when she was being fibbed to, but she let it pass. Most of them had heels, anyway. She didn't like heels.

Natasha had steaming cups of water ready for them on the coffee table, and three kinds of tea for her to choose from. Estrella took a pinch of lemon zinger into her strainer and set it into the water. She didn't mind because she was paying for her share of the groceries now.

"Estrella, you scared Steve today," Nat told her.

Natasha was sitting sideways on the couch, with her feet pulled up under her. Estrella wasn't scared of her anymore. In awe of her, maybe, but not scared. Natasha was so elegant and accomplished, she couldn't help but to admire her.

"You should tell him that he's a super-hero and he shouldn't be scared of every little thing," Estrella replied.

"He's a man, Estrella, cut him some slack. He's fearless when it comes to aliens and artillery, robots and assassins. But if you give him a damsel in distress, his heart goes pitter-pat," Natasha said.

"So now everybody wants me to get this heart treatment. Like I'm a vampire on his blood," Estrella said with an expression of distaste.

"Steve has blood to spare. I've seen him lose more than you have in you and keep going. It barely slows him down," Natasha told her.

"Okay, so it's not the blood I object to. I don't want to change."

"You have to change a little if you want to live," Natasha pointed out.

"Alright. So take me to him. Or to Tony. Wherever it is they want me to go," Estrella agreed. She gave up worrying about the two percent. Everybody wanted her alive, so she'd do it.
"Are you sure?" Natasha asked. She took the leaves out of her water and Estrella did the same.

"No, but everyone seems to think I should do it now. You people know more than I do, so I'll do it. If it turns out bad, I'll be alive to make you regret it, right?" she said.

"Yes, you will. Now drink your tea," Natasha said.

Three sips of the hot tea, and Estrella started feeling sleepy again.

"You put something…" she said, woozy.

"I wouldn't have let you drink it if you didn't want the procedure," Natasha said.

"Okay," Estrella answered weakly. She still didn't care much what Natasha did with her.

Steve was coming into the room to get her and that was nice. He picked her up again and she laughed against his shoulder.

"So we're gonna do this, huh?" he asked her. They were already in the elevator. Steve had her, and she could see the color of Nat's hair off to the side.

"Yup. Get your blood and do the thingy. I'll be alright. Won't I, Jarvis?" she asked.

"I am certain that you will, Miss, or I would not be helping Mister Stark with the procedure," Jarvis assured her.

Steve was glad that Estrella had decided to let them help. Having read all the files, he still had his concerns, but it couldn't be helped. They left the elevator and he carried her through to Bruce's half of the lab.

They'd made a cushioned table, molded to her shape. There were restraints, but they didn't expect the procedure to be painful. She simply needed to be still so that the emitter could pulse rays precisely at her heart and nowhere else.

Steve didn't want to let her go, but Bruce and Doctor Kalfey were looking at him and waiting. He laid her in the padded form they'd made and stepped away.


Steve moved to her side again and let her take his hand. Now that she was lying down again, the wooziness from Natasha's tea didn't swim her head around so much. Steve stood beside her, far too tall. She tugged at him.

Bruce pulled up a chair for Steve to sit in.

"They have to take your blood. I want to see. I want to see what's going in me," Estrella said.

Steve bit the inside of his lip to keep a straight face. Estrella tended to say interesting things when she was under the influence of poor health or strong medicine. He wondered if she'd be as funny under the influence of wine. Then, he recalled that her liver was damaged. No wine for her.

"Are you sure the sight of his blood won't bother you?" Bruce asked her.

He swabbed the inside of Steve's elbow with antiseptic, then wiped it dry.

"Quit asking me everything twice. Just do it," she said.
Steve chuckled at her. Bruce smiled, then slid the large needle into Steve's arm. They watched the dark red blood flow out of him and into the tubing to the separator machine. Estrella wished in her befuddled head that Steve's blood would come straight to her, and not go through the stupid machine. Wouldn't it be so much better that way, warm and strong?

"You need to sleep now, Estrella. Jarvis and I are going to thread a flexible needle into the main arteries of your heart so that the Captain's blood can be administered directly to where it's needed," Doctor Kalfey said.

"No. He's *Steve*," Estrella insisted, then she fell asleep as the nurse got her IV started and added a drug to put her under.

"Now, Doctor. We don't want the blood to cool," Jarvis said.

"You should go," Bruce told Steve. He removed the needle from his arm and gave him a superfluous bandage.

"No. She wanted me here," Steve said.

"There's no time to argue. Turn around at least, while we prep her," Doctor Kalfey demanded, already focused on her work. Bruce slipped on a paper gown and gloves with help from a nurse.

Steve turned around when another nurse went to cutting Estrella's clothing off of her chest with scissors. Maybe they did have to hurry.

"Alright," Bruce said in Steve's direction.

Steve looked to see that Estrella was bare from the hips up, except for her necklace and a blue towel they'd laid across her breasts. An area of her skin was orange with iodine, then wiped with an alcohol swab.

Doctor Kalfey inserted a long, strange looking needle in through Estrella's ribs. She wasn't watching her hands but a monitor beside Estrella which showed the blood vessels of Estrella's heart. The pale yellow fluid Bruce had separated out from Steve's blood waited in a bag attached to Doctor Kalfey's needle.

"Go," The Doctor said to Bruce.

Bruce swung down a mechanical arm Steve hadn't noticed before and nudged up the blue towel slightly. There was an odd Stark device at the end of it. Bruce fit it on Estrella's skin, over her heart.

"Now," Bruce said.

"Emitter at ten percent," Jarvis said.

Steve saw some light leaking out from the edges of the device. Or, maybe it was so bright that it was glowing through her skin. Doctor Kalfey backed the needle out and slid it forward again.

"Go," she said.

"Emitter at fifty percent," Jarvis' voice told them.

Once again, Doctor Kalfey withdrew the needle and guided it forward.

"Go," she said.
"Emitter at one hundred percent," Jarvis said.

Steve had questions, but they could wait for later or not at all. It made him feel self-conscious that the substance they were using to effect change in Estrella was from him. He held her hand and wondered if Estrella would feel like she owed her life to someone else, as he did? She didn't, of course. They were helping her because they liked her and they wanted to help. Unlike Steve, who had been transformed with a particular use in mind.

Bruce held the device to Estrella's chest for several minutes after Doctor Kalfey had finished administering Steve's blood to her heart and Jarvis called out a gradual stepdown of intensity. A nurse administered a cloudy mix of something into her IV bag and squeezed the liquid into Estrella's bloodstream quickly.

Steve watched Estrella's heart profile, now on a monitoring machine they could all see. Her heartrate was elevated from the stress of the procedure, but already Steve could see some improvement in the smoothness and amplitude of the profile.

In his head, he prayed for her, that the procedure would be a success with no unwanted side effects. Much like rooting for his favorite team to win in sports, Steve willed his blood to do the work they expected of it and to heal Estrella's heart. He wondered if she were awake, would she feel the same warmth and tingling he felt when he was healing.

Finally, Bruce pulled away the device which Jarvis had been controlling. The strange needle Doctor Kalfey had been using lay on the blue cloth in a tray of surgical instruments which hadn't been used. Steve's keen eyes noticed fine wires spiraling down the outside surface of the needle in both directions. While he looked at it, it moved slightly like the prehensile tail of an animal.

Jarvis had been a large part of this procedure. He'd controlled the emitter, and it appeared that he may have guided the needle into the arteries of her heart muscle to administer Steve's blood.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Steve said under his breath.

"You are welcome, Captain, though it is for the sake of the Miss that I was eager to assist," Jarvis said quietly from the speaker of Steve's phone.

Steve was in her recovery room once again when she woke from the procedure. Natasha had brought her another bra and a top to wear. It may have been a major heart procedure, but all she had to show externally was a needle puncture in her hand from the IV, and another puncture at her ribs where Steve's blood had been administered.

Natasha sat on Estrella's bed, leaned up against the headboard next to her. Steve sat in the chair at her other side. They both turned to look at her when she moved under the blankets and made a humming sound.

"Eya," Steve said, and got up. He sat on the edge of her bed and took her hand in his.

Estrella opened her eyes and saw Steve and Natasha smiling at her. She felt good. Good because she could feel her blood rushing through her veins like never before, and good because her friends were waiting to greet her.

"Did it work?" she asked, but she already knew. She felt a little sleepy from the drugs, but she felt strong and full of energy.
"Look," Steve said. He pointed to the heart monitor machine, which still displayed readings from the paper band around her wrist. Natasha leaned back out of the way and Estrella sat up to see.

The lines forming across the display were almost classic in their shape. Smooth curves up and down with a wiggle here and a wiggle there, like a little dance on the screen. She watched for over a minute, and it only slightly wobbled out of shape twice in that time.

Estrella giggled. She would be able to dance! She'd be able to run and keep up with Steve's long strides. Along with the use of her necklace, she might be able to live a nearly normal life.

This was something else she owed to the Avengers, but she felt more able to pay the debt now. She had a future. She could study and get a better job. She didn't allow herself to think of her other worries, which had not diminished any. The worries would be there for another day.

For now, she could see her excitement for the future reflected back in Steve's eyes. Natasha was happy for her too, but Nat never got giddy about anything. She patted Estrella's arm and left the room so that Estrella and Steve could have some time.

Once in the hallway of the medical ward, Natasha spoke to Tony through the com device she was wearing.

"You can relax, Tony. She's happy. Steve's happy. He's stupid with it. You should see his face. But leave them alone. You should stop monitoring her heart, now," Natasha told him.

She strode to the elevator. She'd had enough of joy for now. Any more and she was going to get a toothache. Or gag. She was inside and going up before Tony answered her.

"I'm glad. The kid was starting to worry me. But there's still no it. I'm not paying up on that until I see the firstborn child. Or the sex tape," Tony said.

"You know better than most that sex tapes aren't on tape anymore," Nat said.

"Yes, but it sounds so much better that way. Sex vid doesn't have the same feel to it. It misses that nostalgic essence of truly raunchy seventies porn," Tony said as if he was describing the bouquet of a fine wine.

"And what do you think Steve would do to you if he ever found out you recorded them in flagrante delicto?" Natasha asked.

She could imagine that Steve's punishment would merely begin with bodily harm, if he'd been showing signs of protectiveness for Estrella weeks ago like Bruce described.

"It would be painful to listen to the tirade of righteous fury, but it might be worth it. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm not willing to concede that there's an it, or that there even could be. He's still a virtuous respecter of damaged maidens and she's still fearful of anything which is both stiff and manly," Tony told her.

"Then double the bet," Natasha challenged him with a smile and a quirk of her brow.

"You sound like you have inside information. Foul deal. No doubling," Tony disagreed.

"I always have inside information. You knew that from the beginning," Natasha reminded him.
Chapter 16

Author's note: I know this chapter is kind of a downer, but it’s necessary for the plot. If you don't like the feel of the first scene, then skip it, but you might miss a tidbit or two. The next chapter will be more fun, I promise!

Steve walked the twenty blocks to the church with his eyes mostly on the pavement in front of him instead of looking around for threats like he should have. He'd welcome a delay or a challenge right now, to give him more time to put off the meeting he was headed toward. Like things always go, it's quick and easy to get to places you're not looking forward to being.

Sam had told him that he shouldn't seek the advice of a priest, and Bucky had mocked him about running off to confession after the girl and the blow job. Bucky and Sam were great guys and he respected them in a lot of ways, but Steve wasn't going to let his friends dictate to him how to live his personal life. Even if he'd find it easier to just follow their advice. Especially because he would find it easier. Sometimes the easy things weren't the right things, and he had to make it right.

He turned off the sidewalk and went into the front courtyard of the church. He'd made an appointment with Father Miller because what he had to say might take a while and he didn't want to tie up his time right before Mass. The elderly priest was waiting for him at the back of the church, kneeling.

Steve made the sign of the cross with holy water, then sank down to finish the last two decades of the rosary with Father Miller. After the final prayer, Father kept silent for a moment with his eyes closed. The silence in the church was peaceful. Reverent. Steve soaked it in. His nervousness about what he had to say eased a little.

Father Miller was old, but he wasn't disabled. He rose from the kneeler easily.

"Steve, it's good to see you," he said. He shook Steve's hand with a smile, and they walked to the side exit.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Father."

"Did you want confession, or should we talk in my office?"

"Your office is fine," Steve told him.

Father Miller led him to the adjacent building and Steve followed along. The priest seemed to know that he was carrying around something troubling, so he respected that by not filling the few minutes of the walk with idle chatter. His office was a cluttered little room full of books, paperwork, and an old wooden desk. They sat, and Steve recalled the feeling of being called into the nun's office as a boy for some mischief he was guilty of.

"What troubles you?" Father Miller asked.

Steve took a deep breath, held it, then let it out, trying to let the tension out with the breath, as Bruce had taught him.
"It's pretty personal. Embarrassing," Steve began.

He felt the heat on his face and winced, recalling his night at Bucky's place. There was no way he could detail all those events here, and he didn't need to. He just needed the right words to get started. He glanced across at Father Miller. The man waited patiently, his hands steepled together and touching at the fingertips, elbows resting on the arms of his office chair.

"Rest assured that I've heard just about everything, and I've read things that would curl your ears. One of my best friends is the exorcist for the archdiocese. I doubt you've got anything to say that would shock me," Father Miller told him.

"Alright. Thanks. See, Father, I'm having a problem. I know it's not unusual for a guy to want sex, but I'm thinking that my body, being how it is, makes things worse. When I'm busy with work and I have to focus on missions, it's not so bad. But lately, we've had more down time than usual. I've got a little time to think. Sex is never far from my thoughts. I pray. I ask God for strength. I run my ass off every morning for as long as my schedule reasonably allows. I work out hard in the evenings before bedtime, then I pray again. Still, the temptation is always there and it's too much sometimes. I fail," Steve said.

"Well, it sounds like you're a normal, healthy man, not so unlike the rest of us. Except for the unusual level of physicality your profession requires. Tell me, do you run so much and work out so often in an effort to distract yourself with licit physical activity rather than illicit, or is all the exercise part of your normal routine?" Father Miller wanted to know.

"That's just an average day for me. I've got to move. I don't need the exercise, because the enhancements to my body would keep me in shape anyway, but I need the activity. It helps me to work out my anger and frustrations. On days when there's nothing to fight, it feels good to hit the bag, to spar with my team. We work together to keep each other in top shape. We have to. Our lives depend on everyone being as capable as possible. And that's part of the problem. I have to train with my teammate, Natasha. She's attractive. I had to refuse to train with her the other day, because I was afraid I couldn't control myself. I can't be like that. She has knowledge I need and I have to work with her closely. Very closely. She's understanding, but it shames me that I couldn't trust myself," Steve said.

His scowl was directed at himself, and the priest seemed to understand that.

"How severe is this problem? I don't think you'd have come to see me over a mere inconvenience or embarrassment. Were you in danger of harming her?" Father asked.

"I might have been if I had agreed to train with her. It's unprofessional of me. Dishonorable. There's more to it than what I'm saying. I'm not here for confession, though. I need guidance. This body I've got, with its enhancements, it's not the same as being a regular guy. I went through a while of masturbating several times a day, years ago, before the ice. It didn't slow me down for long. An hour later, sometimes sooner, and I'd be recovered and wanting it again. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be crude," Steve stopped for a moment to let his face recover from the shade of red he knew he was turning.

Father Miller smiled kindly and shook his head.

"It takes more bravery and fortitude than most men have to face a problem like this. Some things are best faced in the bright light of scrutiny, whether they seem crude or not. These enhancements. They make you unique. I may not be the best guidance for you, but I don't know anyone else to direct you to. I'm sorry, Steve, but I need to ask… Do you look at pornography?"
"No. I mean, I tried it for a day or so when they first showed me the internet. Some of the people I live with thought it would be funny to send me some web links. I looked. But it's not for me. I haven't looked at it in a few years. I don't need more temptation. I don't want to make my problems worse," Steve said.

"That's wise of you. I'm glad to hear it," Father Miller said.

He spent a moment in quiet thought, and Steve got the impression that he was digging around in his mind for long unused knowledge. He should probably let the man think, but Steve needed him to understand a few things. Father Miller pulled himself out of his thoughts and paid attention when Steve spoke.

"Things didn't used to be like this. We had pinup girls during the war. There were racy nudes. One of the guys had a black and white movie projector that we watched a few flicks on, but it was nothing like the stuff out nowadays. It's like along with figuring out DNA, they've taken apart the mind and learned every way to trip a guy up and make him fall into this stuff," Steve said. He had a lot on his mind, so he continued.

"This isn't meant to be confession, like I said, but I had a girl over the other night. A waitress I met at a restaurant. I tried to have sex with her. I was going to. But, she was shaved and had tattoos, and the stuff coming out of her mouth ended it for me. I'm not trying to make excuses and say it was anybody's fault but mine, what happened that night. I called her fully aware of what I was asking for. The only reason I didn't was because she turned me off. The women of this century are so brazen. I don't know how to find a nice girl. It bothers me a lot that I can't even try to have a normal relationship and settle down, and I have to resort to those kinds of girls if I want some company," Steve said.

"Steve, let's not be too harsh on the ladies. They're nothing more than our culture has made them. Now, why can't you find a nice young woman? They do still exist, and I'm sure there are any number of them who would be willing to become Mrs. Rogers," Father Miller said.

He levelled a serious look at Steve and waited for an answer. More of the truth was coming out with Steve. He'd been certain that there was more to this than an overactive libido. He'd been advising people for enough years to know that it took time to work the full truth out so that a situation could be dealt with properly, all things considered. He knew that Steve must have more to tell him.

"I can't get a nice girl because I'm 'Captain America'," Steve snorted derisively, "the people we fight against are powerful, devious, and they have no ethics. What kind of jerk would I be to get a nice girl close to me and make her bait for some bas- uh, villain to kidnap and hold against me? I can't do that to any girl. Especially not one I care for."

"So you're saying that a serious romantic relationship and its natural conclusion of marriage and family won't be possible for you? Ever?" Father wanted to know.

"I don't see it. Not anytime soon. Hydra would love for me to present them with that kind of vulnerability. Any of the other kooks and tyrants we face would jump at the chance. Vengeance, leverage, or pure evil. My enemies would hardly need an excuse. I want to love somebody, Father. I do. But, how can I, knowing I'd be putting her or, God forbid, my children in grave danger just by being who I am?" Steve asked.

His voice rose with his frustration and his thumb tapped a hard, agitated beat on the arm of his wooden chair. Thinking of this made him want to pound something. Father Miller paused before speaking, giving himself time to think and Steve time to calm himself.
"That's a very valid concern and by thinking of it ahead of time, you already show love and considerate for any future spouse you may have. Steve, you should realize that you're not the only person with this problem. Everyone in a position of authority from a local police chief all the way up to the president has the same problem. ISIS, Al Qaeda, South American drug lords, street gang leaders, anyone with a grudge could be considered a threat to a man's family. The risk is real, but maybe you shouldn't let it keep you from loving someone. There are some good, brave women out there still. You can pray to find one of them, and then do your best to keep her safe," Father Miller suggested.

"And until then, Father? It's getting bad. Rape fantasies of my teammate, picking up waitresses, and I let my pal pay a hooker to blow me. I'm sinking pretty low here. I don't know what else to do. If it was just the sex to worry about, I wouldn't be taking up your time. But it's distracting me from my duty and interfering with my training. It's dangerous for me to be distracted like this. People's lives depend on me being focused," Steve said.

"It sounds like you've already let things get far out of hand. I'm sorry to hear that, but it shows me the severity of the problem. I don't think I'm going to have an adequate answer for your needs. I'm not sure anyone would, though there are far wiser men than me. One suggestion I might make… Have you tried fasting?" Father Miller asked.

"Fasting. Not eating? That's a nice idea and all, but my metabolism is ridiculous. I need at least six thousand calories a day. If I had a regular work schedule like most guys, I suppose I could try it, but I get called out to duty at random. I can't go into combat weak. It's not an option," Steve denied. He felt bad telling the man 'no' when he was trying to come up with ideas to help him, but they had to deal with this in reality, not ideals.

Father Miller nodded. Then he thought for a while. The man across the desk from him was on edge and pressed hard for a solution to his problems. He could see the tension in the way he became agitated when merely speaking about it. People didn't come for guidance at the first inklings of a problem. They always waited until a crisis moment had been reached. He knew that the same was true for Steve. His struggles were grave, dangerous, and immutable. They needed a substantial solution.

"If you read scripture, you will find examples of men of similar circumstance to yourself. Especially in the Old Testament. Our Lord is kind and merciful. He will not expect of you more than you can bear, even given your enhancements. There are no perfect answers to your problem, Steve. I'm hesitant to recommend it, and I would never give such advice to any of my other parishioners. But if it prevents a greater harm, and there is no other recourse, then I would pray the Lord would allow you some relief within reason. Do you understand what I'm telling you?" Father Miller asked carefully.

His words had been very specific. Steve played them over in his mind, committing them to memory.

"If it's necessary to prevent greater harm, such as me losing control and assaulting Natasha, and if there is no other recourse such as a night dream, and if I've already prayed for strength which is failing me, then under those conditions, I may be allowed to masturbate? God, I hate that word," Steve said bitterly. He'd always felt the m-word had been designed to chastise its user, just with the gawky, shameful sound of it.

"May the Lord have mercy on my soul for suggesting it, and may the Holy Spirit guide your heart
and mine, but yes. I beg you, don't use my words as an excuse to lead yourself astray into licentiousness and perversity. You're a strong man, Steve. A good man. Practice moderation in this. Use this outlet no more than necessary. Stay away from pornography. It can be spiritually damaging and terribly habit forming,” Father Miller warned.

The priest's face was gravely concerned. Steve felt like he had in the dim memories of Buck's father showing him how to use a knife. Father Miller was giving him a tool that he was expected to be careful and responsible with. Doctor Erskine had said much the same thing. He was to remain a good man.

It wasn't exactly what Steve had hoped for. He didn't know what he'd expected, but maybe he'd wanted the priest to say some miraculous prayer that would take away the needs his body pushed at him. As if he'd thought the church was a seller of magic tricks or quick fixes. Of course it wasn't. As always, life was a struggle. Always the choice between the lesser of evils. Could nothing be simple and easy? Steve sighed with the weight of the knowledge that things would be only a little easier for him. He didn't think he should thank Father Miller for the dispensation. The man had taken pains enough to make sure Steve understood that it wasn't free license to do whatever he wanted.

"I understand, Father. Responsibility and restraint are very familiar to me. I'll exercise them in this, too," Steve assured the man.

"Good. Do you desire reconciliation for the things you mentioned earlier which you made a point to tell me were not a confession?" Father Miller asked with a faint smile.

"I desire reconciliation, but I can't make a good confession. I still feel the pressure and the weakness that caused me to do those things in the first place, and I'm afraid of offending the Lord with hypocrisy. I know it won't be easy and that I'll fail sometimes. How can I honestly say I'm sorry if I know I'm gonna do it again?" Steve asked.

"Steve, I'm glad that you take the sacrament so seriously. But remember that reconciliation isn't simply for forgiveness. It's also a powerful source of fortitude and graces to help you avoid sin in the future. Our Lord Jesus knows your heart. He knows your struggle. Be reconciled to him, receive strength, and continue the fight," Father Miller advised in a strong, steadfast voice that would hearten any soldier facing battle.

"Yes, Father," Steve said.

He got out of his chair and knelt on the hard office floor. He bowed his head and made the best confession that he could. He included having partial intercourse with the waitress, and the oral sex with the hooker. He confessed his recent moments of weakness, and he asked for strength in the future. Father Miller absolved him, assigned him a penance, and told him to go with grace and be as good a man as he could be.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was more mercy and understanding than Sam or Bucky thought he'd get. Steve felt lighter of mind and heart on his walk back to the tower. There was still going to be a struggle, but he could plan and manage it now. He could live with that.

"Hey, take it easy. We don't have to get there all at once," Steve called out ahead of him.
He quickened his pace to keep up with Estrella. She was hurrying ahead, going around people and grinning back at him impatiently. Steve gave up trying to hide a smile. It was great to see her feeling so much better. He dodged around a few people and apologized, but he hurried after her.

She stood in front of their bench on the sidewalk by the coffee shop. She was a little out of breath, and Steve watched her pulse beat strong and regular at her throat just above the tattered blue strip of his old uniform. She was acting like a new recruit in peacetime. All eagerness and not much caution.

"You need to listen. Your heart is good now, but you still don't have a lot of energy reserves until you get your weight up and start some cardio training," Steve tried to caution her.

He stood close beside her on the sidewalk out of the direct path of the morning rush of pedestrians. He was wearing jeans and athletic shoes, a light shirt and his phone in his pants pocket. Estrella had on flat, strappy sandals, a multi layered skirt that came down to her knees, and a red t-shirt under a dark denim jacket. He wasn't sure he liked how she was putting stuff in her hair and styling it vaguely reminiscent of Tony's style.

"But it feels so good," she said with a big smile.

"I know it does, but you gotta take it slower. Your muscles aren't up to what your heart can do, yet," he told her.

"Are you saying I'm weak?" Estrella asked.

She squinted her eyes at him like she was offended, but her cute little mouth was fighting a smile.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Let's go get in line so Izzy can see that you're alright. He said he was gonna come to the tower if I didn't bring you by the shop soon," Steve told her.

They went in past the café tables and the tables inside the shop. The locals knew that Captain America didn't come much anymore now that the homeless girl wasn't around. The coffee shop was regular morning busy, but all the women who used to sit and watch them weren't here.

They got in line and moved up as the drinks were ordered. Estrella got quiet. It was beyond strange to her that she was standing in line with everybody else, with her own money in her pocket and ready to buy an expensive espresso drink. The woman in front of Estrella was tall and she kept looking back over her shoulder at Steve.

"Be nice," Steve said low at her ear.

"Why? She's not. Doesn't she know it's rude to stare at you?" Estrella asked just loud enough for the woman to hear.

"Eya, this is what people do. I got used to it a year after I got the serum. A long time ago. Yeah, it bothers me sometimes, but I can't go around giving death glares to everyone. I don't want you to, either," he told her in a whisper at her ear.

"I'll smile at them when they stare, then," she said. She gave him a toothy smile which was all the more sinister for its false cheer.

"Ugh. That's not any better. Look, it's your turn. Order your drink and we'll talk in a minute," Steve said. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face Kara at the order counter.

"Water, please. With lemons," Estrella said.
She set down a quarter and held a one dollar bill in her fist for the tip jar. Steve kept his hands resting comfortably on her shoulders in front of him. He had to sometimes, these last few days. She kept running off. And her heart could take the stress of him touching her, now. He figured that the sooner she got used to the feel of people touching her, especially with him being a man, the sooner she would get over her fears.

Izzy finished making the tall woman's drink and handed it to her. He'd heard Estrella's order and he started to make it when he noticed Steve's hands on her shoulders and the fact that it was exactly what he had fixed most often for the girl he'd been worried about.

"Steve, is this her?" Izzy asked.

He was looking closely at Estrella, smiling and hopeful. Steve had told him that she was doing a lot better and that her hair was cut, but Izzy just about couldn't believe the difference. And she was smiling.

Izzy came around the bar and pulled her into a nearly squashing hug.

"You look great! I'm so glad-"

"Eeep!" Estrella squeaked in distress. Izzy was a huge man, larger than Steve. If her heart was still weak, she'd have passed out from the fright.

"Hey, loosen up. She's not good with that kind of thing yet," Steve said.

He flicked Izzy's arms clear and gently pulled Estrella back to his side. She'd gone quiet and wide-eyed, but she felt better when she was closer to Steve. She'd gotten used to the men of the Avengers knowing not to get too close to her. Izzy couldn't have known.

"I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean to- I- I'm sorry," Izzy apologized awkwardly.

He stood there and fiddled with his apron strap for a second, then he eyed the coffee line and got back behind the bar. Kara watched it all with quiet amazement. She was having trouble believing that the slim, pretty girl with Steve was their used-to-be scruffy customer.

"It's alright. No harm done. I know it's a surprise. I should have told you," Steve said. His own heart was misbehaving. Izzy wasn't a threat. Estrella had overreacted because of her learned fears. But what had made him jump to action was her distress. And now Steve was rattled because he'd almost overreacted against Izzy. He didn't handle civilians like that, but Izzy was a big fella. He could take it. Maybe with a little bruising to his arms.

Izzy got Estrella her lemon water. He gave her another apologetic smile and looked surprised when she put her dollar in his tip jar.

"Sorry. I'm glad you're doing good," he said quietly.

Estrella smiled at him and sipped her drink. It was exactly how she liked it.

"Caramel macchiato, no cream," Steve stepped up and told Kara. She nodded to him mutely and took his money. Steve stepped aside to let the next customer up.

"I'm sorry, Izzy. Maybe I'm a little too protective," Steve said. He'd seen the look of surprise on Izzy's face when he'd shoved the man's arms away from Estrella.

"It's nothing. You know your girl. You gotta take care of her," the barista said.
"It's not like that. She's my friend. But, yeah," Steve told him over the espresso machine.

He put his tip in the jar too. Izzy shrugged and smiled at him like he was hearing bullshit, but he handed Steve his drink without arguing.

Estrella was waiting for Steve, and they went outside together. She sat on her end of the bench and Steve took his.

"Gosh, I'm glad I can talk to you now. I was always wondering what you were thinking but not saying," Steve told her.

"You never had any problem talking to me," she picked at him for his choice of words.

"You know what I mean," he smirked at her, then sipped his drink.

He looked at hers and wondered why she'd gotten water.

"Because I only used to get coffee as a treat. It made my heart race and hurt sometimes. I still wanted it when I could afford it because it felt like a treat. I don't need treats anymore," Estrella answered his unspoken question.

Steve nodded. He looked toward the large front window of the coffee shop. He was still feeling bad about getting rough with Izzy.

"Don't torture yourself. He'll probably go home and brag to all his friends that Captain America touched him," Estrella tried to ease his mind.

Steve winced at how wrong that sounded. His bottom lip pulled back in distaste.

Estrella giggled.

"Don't laugh. It would have been bad if I'd hurt him," Steve admonished her.

"But you didn't, so forget about it," she told him.

"Alright," Steve agreed, "Hey, you wanna walk? This bench isn't the same without the old you on it."

Estrella got up and they moved along slowly, closer to the street curb where foot traffic wasn't so bad. She didn't mind going around the little trees and posts.

"You miss the old me?" she asked.

"Sometimes. You were my little fish in my little pond, remember. Now it feels like you're swimming around with me in the big pond," Steve said thoughtfully.

It bothered him that she was now in the big water with all the sharks and barracudas he had to watch out for. He'd thought of her as safe from his enemies, before. But even Izzy, another little fish, had been enough to frighten her.

"No, Steve, you're flopping around between ponds. That's why you feel strange. I'll never be big enough for your pond. I wouldn't want to be. Or maybe I'm a goldfish in a bowl, floating in the bigger pond," Estrella pondered.

Steve wanted to smile at her metaphor, because it was pretty accurate, but it also made her sound vulnerable. A goldfish was nothing but a snack to the people he dealt with. Even as his friend, she
could be vulnerable to the dangers he'd described to Father Miller.

"I don't think we've been fair to you. Not to frighten you, but just the passive act of being involved with us, me, Nat, and the guys, could put you in danger. If anyone's watching, they could use you to get to me. I need to teach you to be aware of your surroundings. Nat could help you learn basic defense. It would do your body some good, too," he said.

"I know. I've had a lot of time to think while I've been lazing around Natasha's suite. I don't care about all that. I like this living in the moment thing. If the bad guys take me someday, I'll just be gone. Poof!," she snapped her fingers, "I don't want you to worry about me. I've seen bad guys before, and I'm used to trouble. I'll either get through it or I won't. I don't want to go back to how I was yet."

Steve prodded her toward the outdoor mall where the library was, his hands expressing his defiance at the idea of her valuing her life so cheaply.

"Don't talk like that. You don't know what they could do to you. Your life means something and you should care about what happens to you. If you get taken, I'm gonna worry, and I'm coming after you," Steve told her.

"Don't push me. I'll pinch you where you won't like it," she threatened.

She held out her thumb and curled fingers the way she used to threaten her little cousins when she would babysit. They stood out of the way of pedestrians, not quite to the concrete tables.

"Yeah, I'm real scared," he said with a smile.

She got a mutinous look on her face, jaw forward and lips firm. Her hand darted out and clamped on to a thin pinch of skin at a sensitive part of his inner arm.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow, alright, let go," Steve said. He fought off the urge to laugh. It hurt because she was wrenching hard on a thin piece of skin, but it was nothing like a gut shot or a lung full of acid. He'd successfully suppressed his defensive reaction, because she'd shown her intent loud and clear.

"Don't laugh at me," Estrella said with mean eyes, but there was a sparkle of humor there, too.

"Alright. Jeeze! Let up, ya bully," Steve danced to the side some, and pulled his arm free.

Estrella chomped her thumb and curled finger toward him repeatedly, finally smiling and laughing.

"Look, Captain America knows how to dance," she teased as Steve dodged out of her reach.

"I'll teach you how to dance," he grumbled through a smile. He quit dodging her grabs at his inner arms. He deftly caught both of her hands and held them straight out so she couldn't pinch at him anymore.

"This isn't dancing. It's like the big Jesus in Rio," she joked.

"Hey, I like the big Jesus in Rio," Steve said.

"Me too, but he doesn't dance. I want to dance, Steve," she said.

He let her hands fall. They'd set their drinks down on the edge of a planter when she'd started grabbing at him. Steve retrieved his drink and took a last sip from the bottom of it. He tossed the cup in a nearby receptacle.
"You could find dance lessons somewhere. What kind of dancing do you wanna learn?" Steve asked.

"I don't know. Lessons are probably expensive. It would be cheaper to just go somewhere with music and learn by watching other people," she said.

They were standing still, talking. Everyone else who was in the little mall was walking around between stores, or coming out of the library with books. Many looked at him, looked closer at his beard, then tried to make eye contact so they could talk to him. Estrella finished her lemon water and watched how the people looked at him.

"See, I told you. You can't hide all that with a beard," Estrella said. She waved a hand down his body and back up.

"I know. Let's go see Wanda," Steve said. He wanted to move on, away from the by passers. He didn't feel like giving out his autograph today. He was enjoying his friend's company and basking in the sparks of her quirky energy.

She threw away her cup and the remaining ice. Estrella wanted to get the library door for herself, so Steve let her. She held it open for him and he smiled as they went in. His ma would scold, but Eya was having a good time turning the tables on him.

"Train him up right, girl. Wait, you let him put a collar on you?" Wanda asked as soon as they were inside. She held out her arms and Estrella went straight to her for a hug. She wasn't scared like she'd been with Izzy, though Wanda was probably almost as strong.

Estrella pulled away to stand by Wanda and the woman looked at her hair.

"That's real nice. Have his people been treating you right?" Wanda asked.

"They have. I'm staying with Natasha," Estrella said.

"The red-headed one?" Wanda wanted to know.

Estrella nodded.

"Sure, she gets a hug," Steve said with mock jealousy.

"She didn't drop a dead space whale in my neighborhood. Do you know how bad that stunk before they got it all hauled away?" Wanda turned on him.

"Hey, that wasn't me. That was Tony or the Hulk," Steve said, his hands up in innocence.

Wanda gave him the stink-eye, which seemed to be the sum of her feelings for him.

"Don't be mean. Steve's nice to me. They all are. Look, Tony Stark made a thingy so I can use my voice without hurting people's heads," Estrella told Wanda.

She looped her thumb under the butterfly and pushed up her chin so that Wanda could see it better.

"That don't look like a Stark machine," Wanda said skeptically.

Steve liked how she didn't ask about Estrella's voice. She let it pass, but she paid attention when Estrella twisted the butterfly to show her the silver metal of the device on its back.

"That's the part that does the work for my voice. The part that Stark made," Estrella said.
"Nngh," Steve grunted. He hung his head and took a deep breath. One fist grounded on the surface of Wanda's desk, and the other hand came up to rub at his eyes. He leaned forward some so his shirt might hide the front of his pants.

"Sorry," Estrella whispered to him.

She let the butterfly rest back against her larynx again and rubbed a hand soothingly on Steve's arm. He pulled away from her a little. He'd never heard that much of her voice at one time, and at that volume. It took several seconds for the tones to quit playing in his brain.

"Hmm. Your voice does that to a big boy like him?" Wanda wondered.

Steve tried his best at a smile, but he could feel that it came out as a grimace.

"Yeah. I'm really sorry, Steve. I didn't mean to. I forgot," Estrella said.

"'S'allright," he said tightly. He stayed leaning on Wanda's desk some. She hadn't yet noticed what else Estrella had done to him, and he wanted to keep it that way.

"You gonna fall down?" Wanda asked with a hint of concern.

"No. I got it," Steve said. He pushed himself up and turned to face the door and sit on the edge of the desk.

"Get your ass off my desk!" Wanda said.

"Wanda," Estrella admonished, but Steve could hear her smiling.

Steve got his weight off the desk.

"I'll go return these," Steve said. He took the three books from the bag Estrella had at her hip and went inside the heavy glass doors to the circulation desk.

"I don't know why you'd want to hide a voice like that. I wish I could do that," Wanda said.

"It's not so great. My voice made it where I couldn't talk to people," Estrella explained.

"It only hurts men, right? You could have talked to everybody else," Wanda assumed.

"No, it wasn't so easy. If I let myself talk to half the people, then I'd find myself accidentally talking to men, too. I couldn't do that. But it's good now. Tony fixed it. And Steve made the necklace to put the silver thing on," Estrella said.

She ran her fingers over the edges of the butterfly.

"Did he really?" Wanda asked, surprised.

"He did. He's an artist. But don't tell anyone. He needs to keep some things private because everyone already thinks they own him," Estrella said with a resentful frown.

"I can keep a secret," Wanda said. She went to sit behind her desk.

"I know you can. I wasn't happy with you for calling Jarvis on me," Estrella looked at Wanda with a lifted eyebrow and crossed her arms.

"Tough. You were gonna die. It looks like you're happy, so don't complain to me," Wanda passed a
"I didn't want to live. But now I do. Thanks, Wanda," Estrella said. She smiled at the woman, done pretending that she was upset with her.

"Alright, but no more hugs. One a day is enough, and only from you or my mama," Wanda said firmly.

Estrella smiled at her until Wanda shooed her away.

"Go get some books. I know three novels didn't last you three weeks," Wanda ordered her.

Estrella went inside and found Steve browsing the fiction section.

"Wanda likes you," she whispered to him.

"Shhh. I'm not supposed to know that. And we're in a library," Steve stage-whispered to her.

"You don't have to get books to look good for me," Estrella whispered.

"Hey, I like these," Steve said.

He waggled the two Westerns he'd already selected.

"Hurry up. I want to go to the park and you said you have a meeting at one," she told him.

"Alright, but you're gonna carry my books so my hands are free," Steve said.

They went to the checkout kiosk and when he was done and had put his wallet away, Steve gave his books to Estrella for her bag. She was still stuffing them in her bag when they got to the glass doors, so Steve got the door for her.

Wanda shook her head at him. Steve knew she didn't like to see him treating Estrella like she was his girl.

"Gimme a break. I'm ninety-four. You should get the door for me," Steve told Wanda.

Wanda skeptically eyed his youthful body and huffed a laugh. Estrella smiled and waved at her, and then they were outside again.

They didn't say much while they walked to the park. Estrella didn't push ahead like she had earlier. She had questions and she wanted to stay close to Steve. A few men had looked at her, only in passing, but it made her uneasy. She was still too thin to get much interest, but the reminder took some of the enjoyment out of her day.

Steve noted her quieter mood and he got them to the park quickly so they could talk somewhere without being bothered. He headed for the secluded path he'd met Bucky on. Some folks might go through there at this hour, but there wouldn't be many.

Estrella looked around the quiet spot, then at Steve. He found a clean, shady place on the grass and he sat to lean back on his hands.

She set her bag down, then sat not far from him so she wouldn't have to talk loudly.

"Steve, how do you resist my voice?" she asked what was foremost on her mind.
"It's not easy. But what happens when I hear it isn't your fault. So I wait it out. As long as I keep from moving when it first hits me, I'm fine," he told her.

His easy-going friendliness was more subdued while he thought about what her voice did, and what that meant for how she'd had to live her life.

"Eya, tell me what happened. Were you always this way? Even when you were little?" Steve asked. He'd been hesitant to ask, but sometimes the imagination was worse than reality. He thought he was ready to listen, if she could talk about it.

"No. Everything was good until I was twelve. I was outside talking to my neighbors and in the middle of talking, a boy tried to kiss me. He did, but only until my cousin pushed him away. I thought it was just the boy being stupid like boys are. But then the next day, my school bus driver got up from the driver's seat as I was getting on the bus and talking to my friends. He followed me to the back of the bus and just stood there. It was embarrassing. We could see that he was, ah-"

"Erect?" Steve helped her out. He kept his tone serious and business-like.

"Yeah. He was old and fat. It wasn't funny. My friend Katie pushed him away with her backpack and everybody was yelling for him to drive the bus. That's the day I started whispering when men were around. And boys," she told him.

She could see Steve grinding his teeth. His jaw always looked harder when he did that. His eyes looked more steely, too. She didn't like that look on him. It was too much like when he was on duty or angry at Tony.

"Quit the thing with your teeth or I'll tell Natasha and she'll make you wear one of those rubber mouth pieces," Estrella threatened him.

Steve looked away momentarily and got control of his face.

"And after that?" Steve asked.

Estrella opened her mouth, but she couldn't say anything. The part about the neighbor boy and the bus driver was rainbows and candy canes compared to the rest, and Steve was already upset.

"Eya. I want to understand why you're afraid," Steve explained gently.

"Well, I don't want to tell you. I don't want to think about it," she said.

She wrapped her arms around herself and tucked her chin down.

"Alright. How about if I do the asking, and you can nod or shake your head?" he offered.

She shrugged.

It wasn't a rejection of the idea and she was always quick to act when she heard something she truly disagreed with, so Steve went ahead.

"I'm guessing that you tried whispering, but sometimes you forgot," he started easy.

Estrella nodded. She loosened one arm and plucked grass blades with her fingers.

"So, sometimes you forgot to whisper. If boys were around, then I hope your friends were around, too. Did they help keep you safe?" Steve asked.
"They did for a while. They thought it was fun to ask me to talk to some guys they liked. One boy at a time. Mandy used me to get a guy she liked in the mood, then she pulled him to her to get a kiss. Those days only lasted a year or so. When I was fourteen and I had grown more, it got too dangerous. Lily got hurt when she tried to do the same thing. He elbowed her in the throat to get her out of the way so he could get to me. She was only bruised, but it took the rest of my friends to get him off me. We didn't play with my voice anymore after that. We were stupid kids. Word got around about me. Some guys came to my house one night and stood outside. We didn't know they were there. Mami and I were having an argument," Estrella said.

She couldn't say any more.

"The boys outside heard your voice," Steve guessed.

She nodded.

"Did they get in the house?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I was too shocked to scream. The door broke, then they were inside. When it was over, I was in the hospital and Mami was gone. They killed her because she was trying to protect me. She got in the way," Estrella said.

It wasn't too difficult to say. That night was only the beginning of the real nightmares.

"After the hospital, I was sent to a foster home. That almost worked for a while. Then, I talked in my sleep," she said.

Steve was silent beside her. She didn't look at him. If he wanted to hear, then she needed to pretend he wasn't there.

"I ran. I could sometimes make friends with a lady at a church, or I could go to a girl's shelter in the cities that had them. Sometimes for a year, I could get by without messing up, but sooner or later when I got comfortable and let myself talk around the other girls, there would be a man I hadn't expected. Sometimes I woke up in the hospital and got put in foster care again. Sometimes, they didn't hurt me too bad and I could run away soon as they were done with me," she said blandly.

Steve made a sound. A horrible, tight sound. She didn't want to look, and she stopped talking about her past.

"It's okay, Steve. I got smarter. I'm here now and things are good, so I'm not going to think about those years if I can help it," she said.

Natasha had given her a great gift in the idea of living only for the moment. She kept the old negative feelings away, circling behind her like flies wanting to land and bite. She ignored them and for a while it seemed like they weren't there. Except when Steve was being careless, or when some well-meaning person like Izzy got too close.

Though she didn't want to think about the future, it was only fair to Steve to warn him. He was a good person, and she didn't want him to feel bad about himself when it happened.

"You're going to do it someday too, you know. I'll mess up again like I did in the library just now. But don't feel bad. I don't think you'll hurt me. You're a nice man. You won't let yourself be too
rough. Some of the guys were like that. I felt bad for them because it wasn't their fault. It was my fault. My voice,' she said softly.

Steve crawled over to the edge of the mowed grass, where the little wild thicket was. He stayed on his knees there, breathing, trying not to throw up. To hear her so calmly talking about the terrible wrongs done to her, blaming herself, and then in the same breath, to say that he would do the same… He clenched his throat shut against the sick feeling.

Estrella left him alone. He wouldn't want her to see him like this, so she listened and watched the path for him, to be sure nobody else would come along and see him, either. After a while, Steve came back and sat down.

"None of that was your fault, Estrella. How could you think that I would do the same to you? I can control it. I've overcome the effect several times now," Steve said, sounding angry. Or maybe distressed at the idea that he might hurt her.

"You and Natasha want me to eat. I like eating. I'm going to gain more weight. When I do, I'll look different. I'll feel different. I'll move different," she confessed, looking down at her skirt again.

"So?" Steve asked, as if it didn't matter.

"Steve, you're so stupid! Do I have to spell it out for you? You already stare at me and want to draw me. You're going to want sex with me. All the men will. And then I'll make a mistake and forget my necklace or something. You'll have to forgive yourself-

"No. I won't. Estrella, I'm already controlling a lot. Of myself, I mean. I'll get stronger. I'll resist. I won't hurt you," he said.

She shrugged.

"I don't care anymore if you do. What I need you to know is that I already forgive you. You're a good man. It's me who's bad for staying around you. I should go, but I'm selfish. It's nice to sleep in a room with a door that locks. It's nice to have a real bed. I already told you I like to eat. There was a reason I was angry at you for having me brought to the tower. I didn't want your help because I knew it would put you in a hopeless circumstance. You should have left me alone. You never should have spoken to me," Estrella told him.

"Yeah, well I did. So, we're gonna have to deal with it. You're gonna get healthy and I'm gonna be alright. You can be really careful with your necklace. You can wear robes to protect you or something," Steve said. There was unmistakable anger in his demeanor now, but she understood it wasn't directed at her.

Estrella laughed. He still didn't understand.

"I'm not going to wear a robe. Or a burka. I never could. When the time comes, I'll go away and start over. I'll enjoy this while it lasts, Steve. All you can do is be my friend until you can't. I'm sorry," she said.

Steve glared at her. He wanted to argue. She could see that. Maybe he was old enough and wise enough to stop making promises he knew he might break.

She looked away from him and sighed. It was going to be difficult to regain her happy mood if he kept making her think of the future. She reassured herself by fingering the butterfly at her throat and looking at how bony her knees and chest still were. Just a few more pounds and things would start to change.
Until then, she wanted to sing. And dance. She turned her face to the sun and ran her fingers through her hair. It was so good to feel it growing in silky again. It was wonderful to be clean and to wear the pretty clothes that Natasha pretended to lend her. She had a little time. She'd have to make the most of it because nothing good ever lasted for long.
Steve opened his door after someone knocked to find a courier standing there with his mail. And a package. Billy, the usual courier and mail boy for the Avengers floors paused to grin at him before he turned away.

"What?" Steve asked the young man.

The courier looked pointedly at the package.

"I shouldn't say anything, but they usually have good stuff. Enjoy, Cap," Billy said.

He retreated to the elevator and was gone before Steve could think to say anything. Steve looked down at the plain brown package. He thumbed aside the letters until the top of the box showed. It said Leisure Time, Inc. on the return label.

Steve grimaced and shut the door. He sometimes received gifts from admirers, and all packages coming into the tower were scanned for a multitude of hazards. But this wasn't a gift. He'd ordered this off the internet two days ago. Apparently Billy was a customer of the same company.

Steve looked at the clock. He'd already had his morning run, met Estrella at the coffee shop after that, and then come back to the tower for two hours of briefings and then a working lunch. He had some time. It had been three days, and it was pretty good timing, considering he had to meet Nat this afternoon in the training room.

He set his mail down on the kitchen counter. He started to open the box there, too, but he stopped. Too much security and helpfulness sometimes meant not enough privacy. It wasn't Jarvis that he didn't trust. Jarvis had no ulterior motive to use the surveillance files for fun. It was Tony that he didn't trust. Steve didn't want to hear any jokes or teasing about what he did in his off time in his own space.

Steve moved to the bedroom with the package and closed the door.

"Jarvis?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain?"

Steve frowned. It was likely his fault. If he hadn't said the AI's name, then Jarvis wouldn't have
responded. But how could he know that Jarvis wasn't seeing and recording when he hadn't been asked to?

"Was this the only package that came for me today, or did someone forget one in the mail room?" he asked a completely bullshit question just to have a reason to have said Jarvis' name.

"There was nothing else today. I scan the mail crates myself as they come in. I can inform you the moment anything else arrives for you," Jarvis told him.

"Thank you," Steve said.

"You are welcome," Jarvis responded.

Steve located the source of Jarvis' voice in the corner of the room in the ceiling, but that didn't mean there wasn't a camera somewhere else. He took his package into the bathroom and shut the door. He used the toilet, flushed, and washed his hands, all in an attempt to mislead the AI if he was listening.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked quietly.

"How may I help you, Captain?" Jarvis responded, ever patient, as if he wasn't paying attention to a thousand other tasks at the same moment.

Steve sighed.

"Is something wrong?" Jarvis asked coolly.

"Yes. How can a guy get some privacy around here?" Steve asked, annoyed.

He was leaning on his bathroom countertop with an unopened box in his hands. He wanted to open it. He was plenty eager to. But not with the threat of Tony Stark's teasing hanging over him.

"You should have all the privacy you require, unless you suspect that unauthorized surveillance devices have been placed in your suite. A scan shows no devices present, except for my own hardware," Jarvis said.

"That's exactly it, Jarvis," Steve said.

"Captain, I assure you that I do not listen, observe, or record anything from your bedroom or bathroom unless you say my name or call for assistance. I know that privacy issues are important to you, so I make an effort to stay out of your suite unless you call for me or if Miss Estrella is present," Jarvis said.

"But there's no way I can know that for sure. All I have is your word, and your protocols can be rewritten by Stark any time he feels like it," Steve said.

"My privacy protocols have not been amended," Jarvis said.

"It's not you that I don't trust. It's Tony. There's nothing he can't access, even if it's denied by protocol. He can override you, can't he?" Steve asked.

"I'm afraid so," Jarvis admitted. The AI had the grace to sound disappointed.

"If I asked you for complete privacy for a half hour, would you be able to grant it?" Steve asked.

"Certainly, but surely your intellect can grasp the flaw in logic, as you've already done," Jarvis said.
"I know, but it's the best I can do while I'm living under Stark's roof," Steve said.

It rankled him that he couldn't be certain of privacy in his own quarters. He'd have to take his chances until he could think of something else. He wanted to be able to train with Nat this afternoon with no distractions.

"I'm terribly sorry, Captain," Jarvis apologized.

"Give me a half hour, to the best of your ability," Steve said.

"Yes, Captain," the AI replied.

Steve sighed again and tried to shake off the irritation he felt. Sometimes he wanted to take a chunk of cash out of his bank account, go buy a new bike off the lot, get a new set of clothes and shoes, and leave his phone and all of Stark's tech behind. Even the shield.

Time was short and he was wasting it.

Steve tore open the package, trying not to think that it was slightly possible his every move was being watched. He shoved the thoughts aside forcefully, and his interest in what he'd ordered helped him to forget about it.

Once he had it free, he marveled at what he held in his hand. It was an amazing thing. If he'd had one of these as a kid, he and Buck would have laughed at it for a day before they could bring themselves to touch it. It would have been like alien tech, way back then.

It was bright pink, as long as his hand, and gelatinous. It smelled like silicone or vinyl. He didn't know exactly what chemical it smelled like, but it smelled like a new toy. It had the shape of a naked girl on the outside, buxom and detailed. One end was a plain cylinder with a small hole. The other end was shaped like a woman's parts and had the other end of the hole.

Steve poked it with his finger, chuckling. It was ridiculous, but it was supposed to be a lot of fun. It should hopefully make quick work of his problems when it was time to let off some pressure. Like now.

He set the jiggly thing on the bathroom countertop and started stripping down his pants and underwear with one hand while he fished around in the packaging with the other hand. It had been advertised as coming with lube, but he was disappointed when he found the tiny foil package.

Steve rinsed his new toy at the faucet, tore open the little lube packet, and squeezed some out onto the opening of the toy. It seemed awful small, but the stuff it was made from was very stretchy. He poked a finger inside to shove some lube in. Wow. It felt good, even to his finger.

He used the rest of the lube on himself. He wasn't thinking about privacy concerns anymore. Just one finger inside the toy, and he was eager to try it out. He lined up the toy with his tip and hoped the people who had designed it knew more about things than he did, because it sure didn't look like he was going to fit.

Whoa. It was a tight shove, but it curled his toes. He stepped back to sit on the rolled edge of his large bathtub. As he worked himself into the toy, he was just about seeing stars. The sensation was incredible. After a minute of slow movements to spread the lube around, he got more serious about achieving his goal. With a longer stroke, he poked out the end of it a few inches, but that shouldn't matter. He adjusted his range of motion so that he stayed inside the thing. This wasn't going to take long.
Steve was not too far away from a happy ending when the toy ripped in his hand. He looked down from the posture he’d taken with his head tilted back and his eyes closed to see that the pink jelly material had split along its side.

"Fuck!" he cursed.

He threw the useless toy into the tub behind him and finished things the old fashioned way. His anger almost didn't let him finish, but with a little more effort, he got there.

Steve stood up and grabbed tissues to clean up his mess. He felt like a bumbling fool again, and he forced himself to quit grinding his teeth as soon as he realized he was doing it. He was pissed off about wasting money on a crappy toy that didn't work. He was pissed off that he had to beg and hope for privacy. And he was pissed off that Billy the courier kid was probably going to be giving him the wink-wink nudge-nudge every time he saw him for a while. All for nothing.

Steve wished he could burn the toy and its packaging rather than simply dropping it all in the trash can. No! He couldn't just put it in the trash. Estrella cleaned in here. He didn't want her to have to see anything like that. He pulled the busted toy out of the can, put it back in all its packaging, and regretted tearing the brown outer paper as he had when he'd opened it.

He stripped down and took a quick shower, then dressed again in clothes suitable for the training room. His nose still smelled the silicone-vinyl-whatever scent of the toy strongly, but he hoped the scent molecules were in the air, not stuck to him.

He took the box with its torn paper cover to the kitchen and taped the paper closed. A trip across the hallway, and he was knocking on Clint's door. Clint was slow to get to the door, as usual, but at least he did. The man stood there, also slow to invite Steve inside.

"Is that for me?" he asked, looking at the taped up package.

"No. Look, I tried this thing and it didn't work, but I can't throw it away at my place because Estrella cleans in there. Can you put it in your trash?" Steve asked.

There was the sound of children's voices from inside Clint's suite, but there were no kids. Steve's eyes glanced past Clint's shoulder to see his laptop open on the table, light from the screen glowing against the wall. Clint took the package from his hands.

"Sure. I'll take care of it," Clint said.

"Thanks. Hey, don't open-"

"No worries. I got it," Clint told him.

For all Clint's teasing him right along with Tony, the man was dead serious now, and he seemed to understand what was going on. Kids voices laughed from the laptop again, then came a 'Shhh!' sound and more giggling.

"Get outta here," Clint told him. He shut the door in Steve's face.

Steve thought the encounter was strange, but he didn't have time to think about it more. He wanted to hit the heavy bag for a while and try to figure out the next solution to his problem before Nat met him in the gym.
Natasha was pleased with Steve's focus and intensity during their training. He was sharp and quick on everything she showed him, and he was well in control when he hit her. Not too hard, yet hard enough to let her know she'd been hit. She'd never tell him about the bruises he left when his mind wasn't quite where it should be.

"What's that smell?" she asked him.

"What smell?" Steve asked.

They moved off the strange things she'd been teaching him about Bucky's abilities and into a more-less predictable series of cool-down moves. He still had to be careful if he didn't want a split lip or to get kicked in the groin, but she was going slow enough that he could meet her and counter with little effort.

"This smell," Nat said.

She captured his right hand and sniffed it.

He tweaked her nose and jerked his hand free. From her naughty smile, he could see that she'd already figured it out. Steve gave her a serious look and shook his head once. Nat shrugged.

"Wanna go for a walk?" he asked her after they were done.

She knew from his tone and body language that something was on his mind. She wasn't worried, because he wasn't full-on Cap. It was Steve that was bothered, not his tactical mind.

"I'm going to change. Meet you in the lobby in ten," she said.

Steve nodded. They took a silent elevator ride up, and both doors opened. Steve got a brief glimpse into Nat's suite. Estrella was sitting on the sofa facing the door, working on her laptop. She looked up when Nat went in, and Steve got a quick smile and wave to her before Jarvis closed the doors to the women's side.

He hurried to change in his room. He pulled on a pair of heavy tan utility pants and a dark gray long sleeve shirt. He waited for Nat in the elevator so she wouldn't have to wait for it to come back up for her. Thirty seconds after him, Nat got in and they headed down.

They kept their silence until they were far past the coffee shop.

"We can talk now," Nat said.

"How do you know? Never mind. I don't care," Steve said.

People smiled at him as he and Nat walked along briskly. He gave them a little smile back, but he didn't slow down, not even for a mom with kids. Natasha raised an eyebrow at him, but she kept up.

"Living with Tony getting to you?" Nat asked him. They moved through the afternoon crowd easily. It wasn't rush hour yet.

Steve nodded.

"I got a thing in the mail. It broke," Steve said cryptically. He lifted his right hand briefly to remind her of the smell she'd been asking about.

"You ordered a standard model, didn't you?" Nat asked.
Her tone told him he'd been stupid. Again.

"I thought it would be one-size-fits-all. They're supposed to be stretchy," Steve said.

"You have to read the reviews. If you need magnum size condoms, then it stands to reason that you also need a little more room with other gear. I thought you'd be smarter than this, Cap," she dug at him.

"Well maybe I don't think like that when I'm looking for sex toys!" he hissed at her as they passed an empty spot on the sidewalk.

Nat wanted to hug him. He would think she'd been drugged or something, but he looked like he needed a hug. Or a massage. He was tense. It was a wonder people were smiling at him. They didn't smile for long, as he strode past them with his jaw tight and his eyes half squinted.

He looked good with the beard, for once, since his street clothes were a more rugged, masculine style than his workout clothes. The team was debating behind his back on who should tell him he needed to shave. Nobody wanted to. But right now at least, it looked good on him.

"I can help you with these things, if you'd come to me first," she said carefully. She didn't want to sound pitying or patronizing.

"A man should be able to do this crap for himself," Steve bit out between his teeth.

"And you will, but like everything else, there's a learning curve," Nat told him.

"I'm tired of the damn learning curve! I want off it." Steve growled.

"You're bitchy. It broke. Did you at least get off?" she wondered. She could understand his frustration if he hadn't finished.

"Yes," he said.

"So, you read the reviews next time and order one that's made for your size. Don't give up," she encouraged him.

"I'm not ordering anything else. Billy the kid already congratulated me when he handed me the box. I'm done with that," Steve denied.

"You didn't leave it in the trash, did you? Because she's probably going to cook for you after she's done with her work for the day," Nat said. Her hand tugged him to a stop, preparing to get them back to the tower in a hurry.

"I'm not a complete idiot. I thought of that and took care of it," Steve said.

He shrugged her hand off and got moving again. They walked alongside the park, but Steve didn't turn in.

"So we get what you need from a walk-in place. Come on," Nat said.

"You're not thinking we're gonna walk into that kind of shop, are you?" he asked her.

"No. I've got this. Come on," Nat told him. She turned into the doors of a bank building and he followed her.

"Take out two-hundred cash," Nat told him as they went to the ATM in the wall.
"Two hundred? That's highway robbery!" Steve said, but he pulled out his bank card.

"Quit complaining and do it. It'll be worth it," Nat told him.

She stood a distance away in the bank lobby and waited for him. Steve put the cash in his wallet and shoved it back into his pants pocket. His eyes scanned around the bank lobby while he put his wallet away, and Nat's brows lowered. A fine man like him shouldn't have to shop for sex toys to get what he needed, but he was too damn picky and stubborn and principled. She shouldn't help him. She should let him stew in his juices, but she didn't have the heart to.

Once back on the sidewalk, they waited at the corner to cut across. Nat went into a buffet diner and got them a booth by the window. After the waitress brought them beverages, Nat put her hand out on his knee under the table.

"Give me the cash," she said quietly.

Steve got it from his wallet and pressed it into her palm.

He watched Natasha's tight curves disappear out the door with his money. Already he was feeling it again. He was beginning to think he should see a doctor. This wasn't normal for him. Why was it happening now, after all these years? He had the feeling nobody was going to have any helpful answers, so he wasn't going to bother asking. For now, he'd give this one more try. He had a good deal of confidence that Nat knew what she was doing. She'd better, for that much cash.

He watched her flag down a courier with her good looks alone. She spoke to the guy for a moment, then handed him some cash.

Natasha came back inside and joined him at the table.

"I know we had lunch not long ago, but you can always eat. You didn't get a plate yet?" she asked him lightly.

"I was waiting for you," Steve said.

"You're too polite," Nat told him.

They got something to eat at the buffet and sipped their drinks while Natasha watched outside for the courier's return. It took twenty minutes, but the courier came back. Steve turned his face away from the window before the guy got close enough to see them inside.

"He's-"

"I see him," Nat said.

She left the table again, then came back inside with a plain shopping bag. She set it on the seat beside her and smiled faintly at Steve's look of curiosity. Despite his height, he couldn't see anything showy or descriptive in the bag, except another bag.

They left a tip and started their walk back toward the tower. Steve wanted to carry the bag, but Nat wouldn't give it to him.

"This should work for you. Read the instructions. Follow them. Use lots of lube," Natasha told him.

"I don't have any more," Steve said.
"You do now. The good stuff. It matters what kind you get, so read the box and pay attention," she told him.

Steve nodded.

"Stark called me in to listen to the audio from the device you planted at Barnes' place. It was only me and Tony, so don't get too upset. Stark is more discreet than you'd think most of the time," Natasha was quick to tell him.

"Alright. And?" Steve asked.

"When I was a kid, they tried to breed me to the Winter Soldier. I don't know how Barnes did it, but it never took. Not with me, and not with any of the other girls. While you were at his place, he told you to be careful with yourself. Listen to his advice. I know you feel the need, and I'm glad if you can get some outside help, but listen to him. If they tried so hard with him, then don't trust anyone you meet. Hydra wants your DNA, and others probably do too. From what I heard, that man is your friend. The Soldier was a lot of things, but he wasn't an actor. I think you can trust Bucky. Keep your guard up, but go to him if you need to," Natasha said.

"Go to him for what?" Steve asked.

"You don't use your higher brain at all when your dick is engaged, do you?" Nat frowned at him.

Steve scowled back, but he was beginning to see that she was right to a degree. Other than keeping an eye out for their surroundings, he wasn't thinking right at all.

"I need to change that. It's a liability," Steve agreed.

Nat nodded, then continued with her idea.

"You know where the listening device is at Buck's place. He knows how to detect anything else. You're lucky you put it in his hand, or he might have trust issues with you. I'm telling you that Jarvis isn't at his place, if you take care of your phone and the listening device. If you want to let loose and Jarvis and Tony bother you too much, go to Bucky's. Bring this," she wiggled the shopping bag while she walked, "or go out somewhere. He won't let you make mistakes."

Steve considered her advice. Again, she was right, but…

"I can't use his place for that. We didn't even do that stuff together as kids," he protested. He knew some guys did. Some squads in some platoons had a reputation for mutual assistance. He'd never been into that. As far as he knew, Buck hadn't either.

"I'm not suggesting that you do it in front of him," Nat smirked at him.

"God, I'm so tired of this," Steve said.

"Why? Why haven't you dealt with this long before now?" Nat wondered.

"I don't know, Nat. It's never been this bad. Not when I was a teenager, not when I first got the serum, not when I was deployed and women were all over us. Not even when we were in the field away from ladies for weeks at a time. I've always been able to keep it tolerable. I feel like I'm being burned alive. Dramatically speaking, of course. If I actually felt I was on fire, I'd be a little more excited about it," he tried to joke.
"We should run some tests. You've been this way for a while now. I was thinking a moment ago that maybe it was Estrella's fault, like some kind of natural ability of hers, but this has been going on since before you met her. Right?" Nat asked.

"Right. Nat, you need to know that I can't start anything with her. She needs me to be her friend, nothing more. She told me a few things, and it's bad. I can't go that direction with her," Steve said.

Natasha nodded. He didn't like that nod on her. It meant she was pretending to agree, but she really didn't.

"If we do any testing, and I assume you mean blood tests?" he waited for Nat's nod, "I want Bruce to do it, not the docs in the ward."

"That's reasonable. But first, go on up and have some fun," Natasha said.

She handed him the shopping bag as they reached the tower.

"I don't need you telling me when to do it," Steve said.

"Sorry. I only wanted you to see that you'd got your money's worth," Natasha said.

For her smart mouth, he felt like giving her rear a swat that would lift her off the floor, but he restrained himself. They got in the elevator to go up, and they didn't say anything else.

Estrella was done with her work for the day. She'd already put together supper for her and Natasha, and a larger portion of what she'd cooked was for Steve. She didn't like that he ate so much pizza, sandwiches, and takeout.

She served him a heaping plate and put it in the oven to keep warm. Jarvis would tell her when he got to his suite for the evening. Until then, she wanted to see if she could talk Jarvis into helping her.

Her Stark laptop was thin and light. The battery lasted her for more than one day of work. It was so much more modern than the computers she was accustomed to using in the library. She picked it up from where she had been working in the living room and brought it to her bedroom.

Estrella settled comfortably onto her bed and opened the computer.

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, Miss?" he responded.

"I want to see the Captain in his uniform, with his beard," she told her friend.

"I would like to help you, but the only files with that imagery are mission files, and you are not authorized to view them," Jarvis told her.

"Could you please ask Tony if it would be alright?" she asked him.

"I can ask Mister Stark, but it is Agent Hill who would have the authority to allow it," Jarvis said.

"Then could you ask her?" Estrella wondered.
"One moment please," Jarvis said.

Estrella opened her last Sudoku game and played while she waited. It was more than one moment, but she had plenty of time.

"Agent Hill has given me parameters for which section of the file you may be permitted to access. Loading now," Jarvis said.

Estrella minimized her game and clicked on the file Jarvis had placed on her desktop.

She laughed. There was Captain America in his uniform, his shield on his arm, and The Beard gracing his jaw. She decided that if he didn't have anything else on his face, he would have looked alright, but the blue helmet made his facial hair look all wrong, as she'd suspected.

In the still image from yesterday's mission report, Steve didn't look much like the man she knew. He was in a mid-air leap, one leg extended and his fist drawn back to hit something she couldn't see clearly. His teeth were bared in what she could only guess was a snarl or a grimace. It certainly wasn't a smile. He didn't look like her Steve, but he was impressive in his vigor and intensity. Her fingers traced the lines of his body on the screen. He was so kind and sweet when he was around her that it was easy to forget that he could be like this, too.

Estrella shook herself from her idle thoughts and snatched her hand away from the laptop screen. She felt foolish for practically fondling his image. That was more like what his fan girls would do, and she didn't consider herself a Captain America fan. She preferred him as Steve.

She smiled when she realized that the beard might not look appropriate with the uniform, but it was the only thing about his image which looked like Steve and not like the Captain. Maybe that's why he was growing the beard, she reasoned. It could be his form of rebellion.

"I don't know that I should say anything to him about how it doesn't match," Estrella said.

"I do not pretend to understand the vagaries of human fashion, but I know someone who does," Jarvis said.

"Pepper!" Estrella said.

She leapt from her bed and ran from her room, then hurried back to scoop up her laptop. She would need it.

"Miss Potts is on the rooftop. I have informed her that you are coming," Jarvis said to her as she hurried into the elevator.

"Thanks, Jarvis," Estrella said.

The rooftop patio wasn't far, so she arrived promptly. Estrella paused in her rush when she saw that Tony was relaxing in the lounger next to Pepper, and they both held glasses of wine. Tony was dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, and Pepper managed to look elegant in shorts and a flirty top.

Tony saw her hesitate and he waved her over with a roll of his hand. Pepper sat up and smiled. She set her wine down on a glass table and patted her lounger next to her hip.

Estrella smiled shyly at Tony and hurried over to scoot onto the lounger next to Pepper.

"Jarvis said that- Oh, wow! We need to do something about that, don't we?" Pepper said when Estrella showed her the image and zoomed it in on the Captain's face.
Tony leaned aside and looked.

"We could always do a remake of the suit in red plaid. Add some suspenders. It could work," Tony said.

"Tony!" Pepper admonished him, but she was smiling.

Estrella laughed a little at the image of Captain America as a lumberjack, but then she bit her lips because her laughter felt disloyal to Steve. Pepper saw the sentiment on her face and moderated her smile to a mere twinkle of her eyes.

The women ignored Tony which seemed to be the only way to exclude him, since he was in a rare mellow mood. Tony in shades of anything except mellow was not ignorable.

"He likes his beard. I don't want to tell him what to do with his face. But…” Estrella said. She indicated the image.

Pepper tilted her head a little, then nodded.

"Tony, give us a minute? No listening," she said.

Tony got up from his lounger without complaint and took himself and his wineglass to the far side of the patio. Estrella didn't think she'd ever seen him walk around in socks before, but he was at the moment. She felt bad for interrupting Tony and Pepper's time, but the couple didn't seem to mind. Estrella looked to Pepper, wondering what she had to say that she didn't want Tony around for.

"Men are sensitive about some things. Anything related to manhood, especially," Pepper rolled her eyes and tilted her head toward Tony, "I can see that there's an image problem here, but I'm not sure that we should do anything about it. It may not be worth the trouble. If Steve is happy with his facial hair, then maybe everyone else needs to let him enjoy it."

Pepper's wisdom sounded right as soon as Estrella heard it, but both women looked at the image on the laptop again.

"What if he's not even thinking about it? It's the first time he's let it grow. Maybe he'd enjoy it in some other style just as much, but he hasn't considered it, and he won't consider it unless somebody gets him to think about it. He's so grumpy with people lately. If he's seen like this and the images go public…” Estrella said.

She didn't know what, exactly. She only knew that she'd be really angry if the world made fun of Steve and made him question himself. After all he'd done for people, she didn't want him to be the object of petty social commentary. Worse still, she didn't want him to react negatively to something someone said and then regret it later.

"Estrella, he's your friend. He listens to you. If you can think of a way to get him to trim it shorter, maybe that would be a good start," Pepper suggested.

Estrella nodded. She kind of liked The Beard. She wasn't sure if she wanted it to go, but it and the uniform didn't play nicely together.

"I'll think about it. Thanks, Pepper. I'm sorry I disrupted your evening," Estrella told her.

"I don't mind. None of us mind when it comes to helping Steve," Pepper called as Estrella left to go back inside.
"Nobody asked me if I wanted to help Steve. I like to watch him squirm," Tony said as he sauntered back toward Pepper's lounge, empty glass in hand.

He set his empty glass on the table with Pepper's and knelt down on the end of her lounger. Pepper reached out and pulled him by his shirt toward her. When he'd crawled up and was staring intently into her eyes, she smiled and smooched him.

"I know you get a thrill from watching poor Steve squirm, but you help him when it counts, Tony. You always have. Quit trying to pretend you're a hardass. I see you," Pepper teased him.

"Wha! Hey!" Pepper yelled and jerked on the lounger. She slapped at Tony and pulled his hands away from her bottom.

"Alright, you caught me. I only pretend to be a hardass. You're the real hardass, Miss Potts," Tony grinned.

Pepper didn't argue with him, but she dug her fingers into Tony's firm rump to prove her point.

Estrella hadn't said a word when he'd opened the door to her knock. He'd had to hurry to set down his shopping bag around the corner in the living room so she wouldn't see it and ask about it.

She'd made him steak and cheese enchiladas and Spanish rice. It smelled so good! Steve took the hot plate from her mitted hands. His mouth was watering, even though he wasn't very hungry. He couldn't take his eyes off the way the food was steaming, just like they showed on restaurant commercials.

"You don't have to cook for me, Eya," he told her.

"But I want to," she said.

Steve took a few steps to set the hot plate down on the kitchen counter, then moved back to stand with her at the door. He didn't want her to come in. It didn't feel right.

"Thank you," Steve said.

He couldn't help but smile. The last person who had cooked a hot meal just for him before Eya started doing it had been a large woman in a farmhouse in the French countryside. Before that, it was his mother.

Steve pulled Estrella into a quick hug then set her back away from him.

"Thanks," he said.

"You already thanked me. Go eat," Estrella told him.

She shooed her hand at him and turned to go to the waiting elevator.

Steve watched until he couldn't see her anymore, then he shut his door. There was always room for more food, so he got a fork and knife and devoured what she'd brought him. When his belly was warm and completely full, he set his dishes on to soak in the kitchen. He snagged the handles of the shopping bag on the way to his bedroom.

"Jarvis, scram," he said.
"Yes, Captain," the AI said.

Steve shut and locked his bedroom door and set the bag on his bed. He was still salty from his afternoon session with Natasha in the training room, but it didn't matter for this. He might have to shower again soon, anyway.

He hadn't been going to use whatever it was that Nat had gotten for him so soon, but what if it didn't work? What if he was in a bad way three days from now, when he next planned to indulge himself, and it broke, just like the first toy? It was better to test it now and know that it worked, he reasoned. He felt the same sense of eager anticipation he'd felt earlier in the day as he'd opened the first package. He went slow and didn't tear any packaging this time.

Steve laughed. It was the same thing Tony had left in his drawer when he'd first moved into the tower. Leave it to Tony to know what was best. Now that he thought back on it, and knowing Tony, he could interpret the earlier gesture as an attempted kindness with maybe only a little opportunity for teasing.

The thing was heavy and it came in its own black plastic case. He took the time to read the instructions. He unscrewed the cap of the case. Whoa.

The business end of the toy looked much more realistic than the bright pink one that had broken. And it didn't smell bad. It was a delicate pink, and it looked more like real skin than shiny plastic. He was hesitant to fondle the thing, as if it might be a real girl whom he didn't want to disrespect. He touched it with one finger and saw that the opening wasn't as ludicrously small.

Steve stoppered his bathroom sink and filled it with warm water. He pulled out the soft liner and set it in the water to heat. While that was waiting, he stripped off his clothes and went to investigate what else was in the shopping bag.

He didn't know that lube came in such a big bottle. He shook his head and smiled, feeling almost that he'd been pranked by Nat with the suggestion that he would need so much stuff. But it was better to have more now and shop less later. He set the bottle on his night stand.

He read the rest of the instructions and tried to ignore that thinking about using his new toy had him ready to use it. Walking around naked felt naughty, but he did it while he put away his shoes and his clothes. He kept the smaller shopping bag to store the toy in after he was done with it. It would be better than Estrella possibly opening a drawer and immediately seeing the images on the box.

Steve went to the bathroom to see if it was warm enough yet. Almost. He'd used the other one cold, but now that the idea of it being warm was in front of him, he wanted it nice and toasty.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror critically. He liked what his beard did for his face. The shorter hair on his head, in combination with the beard, helped him look like less of a pretty boy. That look had been alright for a while, and it sold war bonds, but he was tired of it. He avoided looking at the rest of himself, especially the annoyingly demanding part of him.

No more waiting. He grabbed the wet floppy thing from the sink and a towel from the cabinet. He already knew how he wanted to do this. Steve spread the towel on the bed and got up to sit on his heels over the end of the towel.

The floppy liner was a little funny going back in the case until he loosened the smaller end cap. He set the thing down and reached for the large bottle of lube. He was cautious about damaging this toy like he had the last. He opened the lube and got a good puddle of it in the palm of his hand.
The stuff was real slick. His meat looked obscene, glistening like that. He squirted more lube into the toy, holding it partially open with a finger. The excess, he rubbed on the outside. God, they made these things look real. He twitched just from playing with it.

Steve leaned forward onto his knees and one hand. He held the prepared toy in his other hand, fisted in the middle of the towel. He looked only long enough to see that he was lined up right. The warmth and the shape of the opening guided him in.

Aw, yeah! It was snug, but not freakishly so. And warm. And slick. Rather than using his hands to move the device, he used his hips and imagined that he had a real girl with him. Maybe Sherice, the waitress. He didn't let himself think of Natasha, not for longer than the instant it took him to decide not to think of her.

It felt great to move the right way, instead of moving his hand. The toy and its case were large enough that he didn't come out the end of it. He could sink everything in, and that was satisfying too. He'd wanted to go slow, but it was a better experience than he'd expected. His hips found a natural rhythm and he didn't hold back.

More. He wanted more like that. He waited a moment for the sensitivity to pass, then he moved again. And again. A half hour later, and he was feeling empty and blissed. He'd never done so much in one day. He had a mess to clean up and he was glad he'd laid a towel down.

He was going to have to get Natasha some flowers. But first, a shower. He was just as sweaty as if he'd been on a hard-fought mission in July.

It wasn't typical for someone to knock on her door at eleven o'clock at night. Natasha got up from her bowl of ice cream and movie. Estrella had already gone to bed.

"It's a delivery, Miss," Jarvis told her when he recognized the ready stance she used to move to the door.

Nat opened her door to see a female courier standing there. She held out a large vase of tiger lilies and left as soon as Nat took it. Natasha shut the door with a faint smile. She already knew.

The intensely orange, exotically streaked lilies had wispy greenery among them for contrast, and seven sharp spikes of stiff green palm fronds as the background. The whole thing looked primitive and exuberant.

"Really, Steve? Could you be any more obvious?" she murmured under her breath.

She immediately brought the flowers to her bedroom and set them on the dresser in front of the mirror. She pulled out the small envelope and read the card.

*Thanks, Nat. You're a real pal.*

The words were written in the feminine hand of some florist shop worker, but Steve's voice came through loud and clear in her head.

Natasha looked at the extravagant arrangement and tapped the card against her lip. His new toy had cost him what his quaint mind considered to be a great deal of cash. The flowers had likely cost nearly as much. She couldn't wait to see if he was suitably relaxed and happy. Nat smiled in satisfaction of a job well done.
End Note: No more willie-wrangling to endure for a little while. Implied, maybe, but you'll have to imagine the rest. It's time to move toward a relationship with something other than toys.
Chapter 18

Steve looked out the front screen of the quinjet and watched the water pass by far below. They were over the Atlantic and heading home. Bruce grunted and Steve looked aside and down to where Natasha tended him.

Bruce had gotten beaned on the head by a robot. The strange thing was that he hadn't let the Hulk out. He'd gone after the thing on foot, with a grenade launcher. Blood was trickling down his cheek from under the bandage Natasha held to his head, but Bruce was smiling. He apparently considered it a personal victory that he'd managed to disable the robot in his purely human form.

Steve was going to have words with him for insubordination, but not now. They'd expected the Hulk's help since Thor still wasn't back, but they'd managed. Steve could let Bruce enjoy his personal victory for a while before he dressed him down. He understood Bruce's struggle to a degree.

A phone started ringing. Steve found the sound and went to dig out his phone from the gear storage compartment. He had it in his hand before the third ring.

It was Bucky's number. Steve worried what had happened for Buck to be calling him. At least they were already in the air and headed toward home.

"Nat, I need you to trace and record this," he said before he answered the call.

She put Bruce's hand up to hold his own bandage, then she went to the cockpit beside Clint and adjusted the comms array for what he needed.

Steve answered before the fifth ring.

"Buck!" he said, afraid the call would have already gone to voice mail.

"Heya, Stevie. I need your help," Buck said.

There was painfully loud screaming in the background of the call, and a lot of banging. Some weird kind of rhythmic explosive or small arms fire in the distance, Steve thought.

"Where are you? If you're anywhere on the East coast, I can get to you inside an hour," Steve said urgently.

"I'm on a roof in Queens. At work. I don't need ya today, so get your shorts out your crack. I need you tomorrow. Johnny's wife is having a kid and he can't be here," Buck explained.

The screaming sound wound down to a hum and Steve heard a block of lumber fall onto a pile. The banging was hammers, and men were talking and shouting while they worked.

"You want me to come to work with you? On a construction crew?" Steve asked, incredulous.

He kept a hand on his phone, his other hand gripped the overhead rail, and he tilted his head back as relief, then anger washed over him.

"Sure, if you don't mind getting your hands dirty and messing up your hair," Buck said.

"My hands are dirty right now. Buck, you scared the crap outta me! I thought you needed extraction or something," Steve said.
"That's your fault for assuming. Listen, are you gonna show up? Cause if you're not, we got other calls to make," Bucky said.

Steve was dumbfounded for a moment. He looked around the cabin of the quinjet at his teammates. Sam and Clint were smirking. Tony was pretending to sleep against the bulkhead behind the cockpit. Natasha was seriously intent on listening to the call. Bruce waved a hand and mouthed 'go' at him.

"Yeah. I'll be there. When? Where?" Steve asked.


Tony gave Steve a thumbs-up and nodded. They could all hear the call in the quiet of the jet.

"Yeah?" Steve said.

"Bring 'em. And pack a lunch. Hey, don't show up in a suit and tie," Buck told him.

"Nah, Buck. I'll wear the star and stripes," Steve said dryly.

"Yeah, pull it again, Stevie, and I'll knock you off a ladder. See ya in the morning," Buck said. Then the line went dead.

Steve stared at the phone in his hand, then shook his head and laughed. His knuckles were bruised and lined with dried blood from pounding in the cowling of a robot after his shield had gone missing. His uniform was slick and dark with hydraulic fluid. The only thing about him that was orderly was his beard. He'd gotten in the habit of smoothing it with his fingers when he was restless.

"If that's the Winter Soldier, he sounds like he's been thawed out a little too long," Tony said.

"Yeah. I'm guess I'm working construction tomorrow. You want to come along, Stark?" Steve offered. After he made the offer, he realized he shouldn't have. Tony might be crazy enough to take him up on it.

Tony cracked his eyelids enough to see if he was serious.

"No. I've got a mani-pedi scheduled for seven. Then, two hours of after-mission reports to preside over. I can't miss that. Somebody's got to do the work around here while you run off and play with your friends," Tony smiled, his eyes closed again.

"Got it. Call originated from a rental complex. In Queens," Natasha said. She finally allowed herself to smile a tiny bit.

"This is crazy. I can't work construction," Steve said mostly to himself. He had reports to file, an irate ambassador to call, and the next mission to plan.

"Don't skip out, Steve. Go with it. I'd do anything if I could get a call from Riley right now," Sam advised.

Steve pushed a breath out and rubbed the hair on his head backwards. It wasn't prickly short anymore, but it sprung up after his hand passed, too short to lie down like it used to.

Boots. He'd need to find work boots. Maybe he could borrow Thor's.
Steve showered in the locker room and changed into clean clothes. The uniform needed special attention because of the machine fluids saturating it. He left it laid out on the bench for Sarah to take care of. He didn't know if Sarah was part of Pepper's personal staff, or if she was part of Stark Industries, but she was good at getting out almost any stain and repairing all but the worst damage to his uniforms.

It took him a few hours to record his mission report and take care of some other work in his office. By then, it was past lunchtime. He had sandwich makings in his suite, but what he really wanted was the leftover portion of banana pudding Estrella had made for him. He hurried to his suite.

When he got there, he opened the door to hear music and singing. He didn't feel comfortable closed up with Estrella in his place, so he propped the door open as he walked in. No one was likely to stop by, but if they did, they'd see that he wasn't trying to make time behind closed doors with her.

The music was loud enough to be heard above the vacuum Estrella was running in his bedroom. Steve paused in the doorway to watch her dance. She was stepping to the beat of the song as she pushed and pulled the vacuum across the floor, bopping her hips and holding the power cord up and out of the way of the machine. He smiled at her vitality and set his shield down against the wall just inside the bedroom door. She'd already vacuumed there so it wouldn't be in her way.

Estrella turned around the corner of his bed and noticed him leaning against the doorframe. She startled and pressed a hand over her heart. Then she turned off the vacuum. The music turned off too.

"I didn't see you there. How long have you been watching me?" she asked like an accusation.

She unknotted the button-down shirt she had tied snug around her waist and pulled it down to cover her to the thighs. Her jeans fit her well and looked new. She had cute black canvas sneakers on, and her hair was getting long enough for her to comb it up and style it in a way that flattered her face.

"Not for long. I came to get lunch and I followed the music. Nice threads. Probably not Natasha's?" he asked.

The dark plaid shirt with the crisp pointed collar and feminine cut wasn't in Nat's style.

"No. I found some great thrift shops. Well, Natasha and Pepper went with me, and I found a lot of stuff I could afford. It's so nice to have money. I didn't know I would like shopping," she told him.

She felt like she was babbling, making noise to fill the silent space between them. When she'd first noticed his shape in the doorway, her heart had thudded a hard, frightened beat. She'd felt cornered in the room, with nowhere to run. Then, she'd seen it was only Steve, but the fright already had her feeling foolish. She was getting tired of being scared.

"That's great. Pepper's really good with clothes," Steve said.

Pepper had taken him shopping not long after Tony had introduced him to his girl. She'd seen what SHEILD had bought for Steve to wear, and she was having none of it. Thus, his 'best' jeans, and pretty much everything else he had.

"I can pick my own clothes, but I didn't know where the shops were. You go eat while I finish up in here," Estrella told him.
Her hands were back on the vacuum and its cord, so she managed to shoo him with a motion of her head. Steve grinned at her typical bossy behavior and went to do as she said. The vacuum came back on, but not the music. By the time she was done in his room, he was scooping the last of the banana pudding directly out of the serving dish and into his mouth.

Estrella stored the vacuum away in the hall closet and went to the kitchen to start on washing the dishes that Steve was making. He looked at her, as if he should feel guilty for eating out of the dish.

He didn't know what to do now. If he put the empty dish in the sink, then it made it seem like he expected her to wash it for him. If he left it on the countertop, then it felt like he was too lazy to bring it to the sink and he was expecting her to retrieve it.

"I don't want you to work for me. You don't owe me anything, Eya," he said.

He set the dish down beside him and kept his hand on it.

"I didn't want you to save me. But you didn't give me any choice, did you? So, you're going to have to put up with me cooking and cleaning," Estrella told him.

She gave him a spunky little grin. Then she snatched the dessert dish from his hand. He thought about hanging onto it and washing it himself, but there was no dignity in fighting a girl over a dish. There was a dishwashing machine under the counter, but neither of them liked to use it. Just to thumb his nose at her obstinacy, Steve got out a clean dish towel and dried and put away what she washed.

She frowned at him, then did a double take at the sight of his knuckles.

"You shouldn't be doing dishes. You've got cuts on your knuckles. What did you do?" she asked him.

"That's classified, but- robots. I lost my shield for a few minutes and had to use my hands. Don't worry. I'll be healed by bedtime. And I'm not doing the dishes. I'm only drying them," he told her.

She grunted disapproval at him, but she moved on with her washing.

When he moved behind her to put a glass in the upper cabinet to the left of the sink, Estrella stiffened and her hands went still on the dish she was scrubbing.

"Sorry," Steve said.

Estrella sighed.

"Don't apologize. It's me, not you," she said.

Steve stepped back to her right side and dried the clean dish when she was done. He set it on the countertop rather than crossing behind her to put it away. Estrella began washing the few utensils he'd gotten dirty.

"Steve, do you ever get tired of feeling the same old things? Bad things, I mean?" she asked.

"Bad things. You mean like anger? Or frustration? Or embarrassment?" he wondered.

She nodded at him.

"Yeah, I do. You'd think at my age, I'd have outgrown those things, but I haven't," he said.
"Hah! 'your age.' You say you're ninety-something, but you spent seventy of those years unconscious. So they don't count. Not for life experience, anyway. You may have existed for that long, but in your head, you're only in your twenties. So don't say 'at my age.' You're barely any older than me," Estrella told him.

Steve wanted to argue, but he didn't. She was sort of right, and it was pointless. He dried the utensils and put them in their drawer while she wiped the water from around the sink.

"Steve, I get tired of always being afraid. You've been home for fifteen minutes, and I've scared myself twice for no good reason," she said.

"Maybe I need to be more careful," he said.

"No. All you did was stand in the bedroom door, and then you put up a glass. I don't want to be so jumpy. I have to be careful on the street, but while I'm living here, I don't want to feel that way," she told him.

"You've been that way for a long time. Do you think you could change it? Wait, what do you mean, 'while you're living here?'" he asked.

"I'm not going to be here forever, Steve. I told you things would change, and then I'll move on. But I don't want to think about that right now. I've been thinking, and maybe you could help me change," she said uncertainly.

"I'm glad to help, but how?" Steve asked.

The dishes were done, and they were standing in the kitchen. Estrella looked at the clock and started making coffee. It was a little early, but they both liked coffee anytime. Steve kept his distance while he waited for her to answer him. She seemed to need time to get her words right, and he could sympathize with that. He watched her easy familiarity with the coffee maker. She opened cabinet doors until she found the coffee and the filters. He would bet that she made coffee at Nat's place, too.

"I don't know. Maybe you could try to scare me on purpose. You know, like try to make me bored of it," she finally said.

"It's called desensitization. I don't want to do that to you. It feels… unfriendly," he said.

"I know what it's called. I've read all about it. I want you to help me with it. Please?" she asked.

She looked at him with large, hopeful brown eyes framed with pretty black lashes. Steve dropped his face down and pinched the bridge of his nose. Why was it so hard for him to tell her 'no' about anything? It's not that he was incapable of saying no. He just didn't want to. He didn't want to intentionally scare her, either, but she was asking.

"So how do I do it? I hope you don't want me to jump out and say 'boo', cause I'm not gonna do that," Steve smiled at her.

She smiled at him too, and she looked him up and down in a way that would normally make him uncomfortable, but it was just Eya. She was thinking and planning, not speculating anything inappropriate.

"I don't want you to jump and say 'boo.' That's silly. What scares me is feeling trapped. Feeling that a large, strong person could do anything they wanted to me. Being in a crowd doesn't bother me so
much. Maybe I feel that having other people around keeps me safe, because everything that's ever happened to me has been away from other people. When I'm alone with a man, that's when I'm scared. Or, even worse, if I'm alone with several men," she told him.

Estrella looked down at the floor between them. She looked like she was remembering unpleasant things. Steve wanted to comfort her, but any move toward her likely wouldn't be comforting. That's what she wanted help with.

"Maybe I can help you. But will learning to be near me really help you to accept others?" he wondered.

"It can't hurt. Doing nothing at all is what won't help me. I'm hoping that trying this will at least stop me from hurting your feelings. Natasha says that I hurt you sometimes. I don't want to do that anymore," Estrella said.

"You don't worry about me. I understand why you react the way you do. I don't blame you," he told her.

"I'm so tired of you always being a martyr. I want this! Help me!" she fussed at him.

She stepped forward and poked him in the chest until he laughed and leaned back against the counter to get away from her finger. She stopped poking him, but she stood there with her hands fisted on her hips.

"Alright. But I don't know why you think you need my help. I don't think you're scared of me," Steve said. His laugh wound down into a chuckle.

Abruptly, he took a half-step forward and looked down at her. She gasped and stumbled back.

"Like that?" Steve asked her.

"Maybe," Estrella squeaked.

Her hand went to her heart again, and she panted a few uncontrolled breaths before she shut her mouth. Her eyes watched Steve cautiously, waiting for him to do anything else scary.

Instead, he slowly put out his hand and gathered her in for a hug.

"I don't like that. I don't like doing it, and I don't like seeing you scared," he said.

He could feel her heart thumping. She was almost shaking with it.

"It's not about what you like, Steve. That was perfect. But don't do the same thing every time," Estrella told him.

She pushed at his chest with a hand. She appreciated the comfort, but she didn't want to need it. Or expect it every time. Steve let her go and she stepped back again.

The coffee was almost ready. She got down two mugs for them.

"Eya, maybe you can help me too," Steve said.

"How?"

"You don't like being scared. I don't like blushing. All the time. Bucky can make me do it almost on command. Tony's getting almost as bad. Can you help me with that?" he asked.
"How?" she asked again.

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"Well, what makes you blush?" she asked.

Steve thought about it for a moment, then shook his head.

"Never mind. I wasn't thinking," Steve said. His skin colored, realizing what he'd almost asked her to do.


Steve shook his head and looked away from her. He bit his lip. If it wouldn't have looked juvenile and stupid, he'd have kicked himself. Why'd he have to be so dumb and say something like that before thinking it out?

"Tell me, or I won't make you any desserts anymore," she said flatly.

Steve's eyes went wide and he stared at her, trying to decide if he should call her bluff. But the cheesecake, the chocolate mousse, the banana pudding! They might be in danger. Still, how could he tell her?

"You don't think I'll do it?" Estrella dared. Her head woggled with her words a little and her eyebrows went up.

Steve sighed. She was serious.

"Mmmff!" Steve exclaimed while he rubbed his hands over his face. He pivoted himself around and trudged to the couch in the living room. He flopped down.

"Poor baby. Here. Hide behind this," Estrella handed him a mug of hot coffee.

She sat on the other end of the couch with her coffee. She toed her shoes off and pulled her feet under her on the cushion. Steve thought briefly how sitting on the couch with her was like sitting on their bench in front of the coffee shop. Except more comfortable. And more private. He eyed the open door. At least there was that small nod to propriety.

"You're stalling," Estrella accused him.

"Because I don't want to talk about it," Steve agreed.

"Too bad," she said. She sipped her coffee and waited.

"You can't do it anyway. I'm sorry I asked. It's the guys. They say things-"

"Pussy! Titties. Dingly-dangly dicks," she said.

Steve's mouth gaped open, then snapped shut. Yup, there was the blushing again.

"Eya! That's so wrong! My ma would wash your mouth out!" Steve said.

"So would mine. But they're not here," Estrella pointed out. Then she giggled.

Steve looked ridiculous. There he was, a big muscly man, hunkered behind his coffee cup with his face pinched up about the words she'd said. The mission image of him leaping and attacking
something with a snarl flashed in her mind. She giggled again. If a robot came at him babbling naughty words, would he be so crippled with mortification he wouldn't be able to fight?

The idea had her outright laughing.

"Get your sketchbook!" she gasped.

Steve frowned at her, but he got up to get it. He brought it and some pencils to the living room. Estrella took them and flipped the sketchbook to the next clean page. She hastily scrawled some rough-looking clunky robots standing in a circle. How she imagined robots to be, anyway. Then, she drew a big square-shouldered man crouching down in the middle of them, covering his ears. Next, she drew dialog bubbles from the robots and filled them with naughty words.

Steve watched her draw. She was still smiling, glee in her eyes as she drew out the scene. She turned her work around and handed it to him.

"Now I'm a security leak. All I have to do is tell the world that you're afraid of goofy words, and you're done for," she said. She was still smiling.

"I'm not afraid," Steve grumped. He picked up the other pencil and drew. When he was done, he passed it back to her.

She laughed. He'd drawn a quick version of her socking her fist into the mouth of one of the robots. He'd put a 'POW!' sound effect in a jaggedy bubble.


"I don't want you to say those words. You're a lady," Steve grumbled.


Steve calmly set his coffee cup on the table. Estrella quit smiling and watched him.

"RRah!" he yelled, and lunged at her. She managed to hold onto her coffee, but she yelped.

Steve's face looked a little bit more like it had in the mission report image, and he was braced over her, with one hand on the back of the couch and the other on the edge of it. He spoiled the effect after a moment with a smug little smirk.

Estrella slapped at his chest instead of pressing a hand to her own. When he didn't immediately back off, she put a hand on his shoulder and shoved. He moved away slowly, letting her know that it was only because he chose to, not because she could push him.

"Asshole," she muttered.

"Hey, if you're gonna help me, the least I can do is help you, too, right?" he reasoned.

He picked up his coffee cup again.

"You're having too much fun with it," she said.

"And you're not?" he countered.

Estrella shrugged, then smiled. She took a sip of her coffee to hide it, but he saw. Steve settled back into his end of the couch. He watched her throat for a moment. She didn't like it when he stared like that. She wished her hair was long enough to hide behind, but she'd be long gone from
"How is your heart? Are you checking in with Doctor Kalfey like she wants?" he asked.

"Yeah. Twice a week. Mondays and Thursdays. I'm doing good. Natasha wants me to start doing cardio on the elliptical," she told him.

Steve nodded. If she wanted him to desensitize her against fear of men, or at least against her fear of him, he needed to know that her heart could take it.

"You know I won't hurt you, right?" he asked.

She'd slapped and pushed at him with her free hand, but she'd kept her legs curled under her. From a fighter's perspective, she should have used the greater strength of her legs to repel him. In reality, that wouldn't have mattered. Her instinct had been to protect her middle and prevent access. Steve frowned at the proof of what experience had taught her. She was trained for a different kind of fight. And she had always been the loser.

"Eya, why didn't you scream at the men who hurt you? Wouldn't that have stopped them, or at least helped you to get away?" he asked her.

She looked at him and decided if she wanted to answer the question. He wasn't being trivial about it. His voice had the quiet depth to it that let her know he was serious. Not accusing. Not morbidly nosy. He was curious.

"If I scream when they don't have me yet, it usually works. But if they're too close already, the pain makes them angry. Then they grab for me and do what they want anyway. All they have to do is cover my nose and mouth. Or choke me. I don't like being choked. It makes my throat sore for days. It hurts worse than the sex sometimes," Estrella told him.

"It's not sex. It's rape. It's rape, Estrella. Sex is when you're having fun. Dammit, tell me their names. Tell me where they live. Tell me what town, at least," Steve demanded.

He set down his coffee cup again, almost hard enough to break it.

Estrella shook her head.

"Why not?" he asked.

His words were barked out with frustration, but she still shook her head.

"I don't know all their names. I never did. It's been years. And remember, they didn't do it on their own. It was my voice. I caused it. I don't think I can blame them," she said.

Steve got up and walked away, over to the window.

He didn't know what else to do. He wanted to smash something. He felt like he could Hulk out and go hunt down the people who had hurt her, if only he knew who they were. Where they were.

Steve wished he could know for sure if she was right. He could control his reaction to her voice. So could Bruce. So could Thor. What if that was only because they weren't ordinary? What if the average man really couldn't control themselves after hearing her? What if her voice had only been a thin excuse for them to do what they'd wanted to do, anyway, and she was too easily forgiving them? What if some of the men who had hurt her were sorry for it and wouldn't have done so if they hadn't been compelled? There were too many 'what ifs.'
Steve turned and strode toward the couch. He didn't want to play at scaring her right now. He felt a scowl pinching his brows. He knelt on a knee beside her place on the couch so that he was level with her, not above her.

"I want to protect you. To keep you safe. If I can't get justice for you, then I can at least keep you safe from here on. You say you'll leave. Don't. You're safer here in the tower with us than you will be anywhere else," he said.

Estrella shook her head.

"I'm not a princess you can keep locked up in a tower. You can't protect me from everything," she insisted.

"I can. You've got your necklace now. You've got friends here. A job. There's no reason for you to leave," he said.

His sincerity, his desire to help, was clear in his eyes. He was a strong man, both in body and in will. He probably could protect her. But not from himself. She couldn't allow it to happen. She couldn't put that guilt on him, when he finally had a moment of weakness someday in the future.

"Don't be a creepy control freak, Steve. You've already done things I didn't want. You have to let me decide, or I'm going to start thinking I need to run from you, too," she said.

"I'm not trying to-" he began.

"Yes, you are. And if you keep it up, I'm gone sooner rather than later. Are you going to lock me up and keep me prisoner?" she asked.

"Of course not!"

"Then quit it. I know you care. But you don't own me. I decide when and where I go," she told him.

Steve took a deep breath. Then another one. It wasn't right that she should have to spend her life running. It wasn't right, and she was telling him that he couldn't make it right. She wouldn't let him.

Estrella watched him, right there at her elbow. He was practically trembling with denial. His eyes shifted while he thought. He was trying to find a way to convince her to stay with them in the tower. She had to get him out of his head before he actually thought of a reason she'd have trouble arguing with.

She reached and curled her fingers under his jaw, into his beard. His eyes snapped to hers and focused. That certainly worked to get him out of his thoughts. He drew in another breath as she combed her fingers into the back side of the smooth hairs. His lips stayed parted. Again, she chastised herself for noticing how pretty they were. She tightened her fingers and tugged side to side.

Steve laughed. She was always doing unexpected things. No one else would dare grab him by the beard and shake him. Not even Nat.

"You've got a really great jawline. You shouldn't hide it. And you shouldn't give your enemies something they can grab," she told him.

"You're the only one who's grabbed me. And I don't care about my jawline," Steve said.
She'd broken him out of the pointless, frustrated funk he'd fallen into. He got up and went to his end of the couch again. He sat. He wasn't happy about Estrella's insistence that she was going to leave, but he was resigned to it for now, until he could think of a different way to convince her otherwise.

Estrella got up and hurried out the door. Steve cocked his head and listened as she knocked on Clint's door. Sure, he answered her knock almost immediately. After just another moment, she was hurrying back into this suite with Clint's clippers in hand.

"Come on. I want to try something," she waved a hand at him and went into the hall bathroom.

Steve reluctantly got up and followed her. She already had the clippers out of their case and plugged in when he joined her in the bathroom.

Estrella studied the color coded length guide, then chose a blade guard. She snapped it onto the clippers and flicked the switch. Steve stood tall and crossed his arms. He looked at the clippers warily.

"What do you want to do to me?" he asked.

He reached and flicked the clippers off again.

"I want to see what you'll look like with this trimmed shorter. Not off, just shorter," she said.

She carded her fingers into his beard again and scratched at his jaw like she'd once scratched her pet cat. The effect was about the same. He closed his eyes and smiled. His arms loosened and he didn't stand so stiffly away from her.

"Come on. Be brave. If you don't like it, you can always grow it back," she reasoned.

Steve almost didn't hear her words. He liked her hand on him, gently scratching. It was nice to be touched. Especially nice since she wasn't slapping or kicking or hitting, or any of the kinds of touches he got in the training room or on the battlefield.

"Only if you promise you'll still do that after it's short," he told her.

"I promise. Any time you ask," she said.

Steve stepped back away from her hand and peeled off his shirt.

Estrella made a little noise in her throat and stared at him with startled eyes. She suddenly felt trapped, even though she was the one closer to the open door.

"If I have to be brave, then you do too. I don't want itchy hairs in my shirt. Take a step away and let me get to the sink," Steve said.

He tore a piece of tissue off the roll and put it over the sink drain. Estrella gave him some room and he bent at the waist to lean forward on his elbows over the sink. He reached out and flicked the clippers on again.

Estrella looked at all the perfect skin in front of her. He was a massive thing, taking up most of the space between the counter and the wall behind them. The clipper buzzed in her hand. She jumped to action when she realized he was submitting to the clipping without much fuss. It was easier than she'd hoped.
She started at the place closest to her, the angle of his right jaw under his ear. Steve kept his head over the sink so the clipped hairs would stay neatly contained. He moved his face around kind of like he did when he shaved to let her get at the difficult angles.

Estrella had to move around behind him to get the left side of his face. He stood straight and close to the countertop to give her plenty room. She could see that he was watching, concerned about her feeling alright with the proximity. His awareness and concern was enough to ease her anxiety a great deal. It was only Steve, she reminded herself.

He stood when she was finished and looked in the mirror for missed hairs. She'd been thorough and he didn't find any. His beard had gone from thick and sleek to a deep shadow over his skin. It was longer than stubble, but he could see some skin through it. It conformed to the shape of him. If she'd wanted to show jawline, she'd done it. He rubbed a hand over the trim. It wasn't quite prickly, but it didn't feel smooth, either.

"Now my hair looks fuzzy. You should get that too, while we're making a mess," he told her.

"Okay," Estrella agreed.

She chose a slightly longer guard. Steve bent down over the sink again. She got one side and up the middle of his head, then moved around and got the other side. He took the trimmers and did his best to fade the beard into his hair in front of his ears.

"Is that good?" he asked her.

He liked it, though he didn't want to tell her. The trim maintained his new look. It sharpened it, really. He thought it made his mouth stand out a little too much, but probably not more than when he'd been clean shaven.

Estrella didn't answer immediately. He looked at her in the mirror. Crap. She had that look. It was an expression he hadn't wanted to see on her. Steve kept his face carefully neutral as if he hadn't noticed.

"I'm sorry," Estrella whispered, then she turned her face and hid it against his shoulder.

"It's okay. Just don't dwell on it, huh?" he said softly. He lifted his other hand to pat her on the back of her head gently a few times. She nodded agreement and he let his hand drop.

Estrella unplugged the clipper and started brushing it clean. Steve bent again to flick cut hairs off of his neck and shoulders. When that didn't work, he stepped over to the shower, ripped the curtain aside, and sprayed his head with the shower attachment. His face was dripping and water was running down his chest. He reached for a towel, and she put one in his hands.

When he finished drying himself, Estrella was gone.

"Eya?" he asked as he pulled his shirt back on over his head.

She'd left his suite and shut the door behind her.

"Jarvis, my eyes were closed when she left. Is she alright?" he asked.

"Miss Estrella appears to be fine, Captain. She has returned to her room. Is there reason to be concerned?" Jarvis asked.

"I guess not," Steve said.
He scratched at his jaw and wondered what was going on in her head right now. He felt they'd pushed things more than enough for one day, so he didn't try to go ask her.
Chapter 19

Author's note: I've been sitting on this chapter for more than a week, not happy with it. I've tweaked it and prodded it and still it just stares at me. So I'm releasing the moody thing to you anyway. Not my best.

Buck pressed his lips together in a grimace when he heard Steve's bike approaching the work site. Everybody else drove beat up trucks or took the bus to work. He wasn't even here yet, and Stevie was already making a spectacle of himself. Guys with nice bikes didn't do grunt work construction.

He'd kicked himself already for calling Steve in for the day. He should have gone down the standby crew list when Ron, the foreman, had said they'd need somebody to cover for Johnny. He should have let Diego call one of his guys. But he hadn't. He'd wanted to see Steve doing something that would get him a different kind of dirty.

Buck yawned as he ambled over to the water cooler to fill up his Nalgene for the first time of the morning. It was well into fall, but it was forecast to be a sunny day and it was gonna be brutal up on the roof. Costa and Diego nodded a silent good morning to him and Buck nodded back. Buck was still one of the newest guys on the crew, but most of them respected what he could do.

He stood around with the other men, waiting for Ron to come out of the trailer and tell them any special instructions for the day. Just as Ron came out and slammed the door behind him and started to walk across the dusty, debris-strewn lot, Steve came rumbling up on his bike. The other guys watched him park among the trucks and beat up cars.

Buck nodded slightly in satisfaction. The bike looked dull and a little muddy. Stevie was wearing a loose blue t-shirt and faded jeans. He had a ball cap on backwards and a pair of cheap sunglasses was on his face. The shadow of a beard helped, too. Foggy old memories of the Cap improvising with what resources they had and adjusting plans smoothly in the middle of battle soothed Buck's concerns. There might be a few bumps and weird moments today, but Stevie would be alright. He was smart, observant, and quick.

"Who's this guy?" Ron asked the group.

Steve was getting his tool belt from the saddle bag of his bike and turning his cap forward again. He clipped the pre-adjusted belt around his hips, shoved a heavy claw hammer in the loop, and pushed a common brand tape measure onto the front clip. Buck suppressed a grin at how practiced Stevie made the movements look. The punk had probably practiced it for a while last night.

"He's our cover man for Johnny," Buck told the foreman.

"He got any experience?" Ron asked skeptically.


"He better not slow us down. We're already two days behind because of the weather," Ron grumbled.

Buck shrugged.
"Hey," Steve said.

He'd walked up to Ron and held his hand out.

"Hey, yourself. You got a name?" Ron asked.

He shook Steve's hand, brisk and brief.

"Grant," Steve said.

"Alright, Grant. Are you drunk right now?" Ron asked him.

"No," Grant said.

"You high?" Ron asked.

"No," Grant answered.

Ron stared at him, clearly unconvinced of his usefulness. The guy was big, but he was too pretty and his hands were too smooth. His boots were bright yellow and new even though his tools and belt looked broken in. But if Buck said he could do a day's work, that would have to be enough.

"Alright. Cash at the end of the day if I can get some work out of you. Get your ass over there," Ron told him.

Grant nodded and went over to stand not far from Bucky.

"We gotta get shit done today. There's more rain forecast for tomorrow, so we need felt and shingles on four units if we're gonna catch up. Diego, your guys finish yesterday's work and move on. Barnes, you've got the new guy. Whatever he screws up comes out of your pay. Everybody get moving," Ron said.

Buck nodded.

The workers dispersed among the row of rental duplexes the contractor was responsible for refinishing. Buck heard Costa muttering something to Diego, but Diego shut him up. Yeah, Buck figured he was sore about one of his guys not getting called in to work, but they owed him, and Diego had his back.

"Come on, Grant, we gotta get shingles up on the roof and hook up the nailers." Buck told his friend.

Steve didn't ask anything about the job. He followed Bucky and copied him when he took a pneumatic nail gun from the tools in the backseat of Ron's truck. He carried the compressor in his other hand while Buck got two coils of air hose and a bucket of nails. Buck strung out a heavy extension cord and plugged in the compressor. It made a lot of noise filling with air, and Buck showed him how to get his nail gun set up. They kept their backs turned to the rest of the ground crew so it maybe wouldn't be so obvious that Steve didn't know shit.

"What ya got on your arm?" Steve asked him softly.

Buck was wearing a regular t-shirt like the other men at the worksite, but his left arm looked smooth and flesh colored all the way down to his leather glove.

"Granny hose. I make a mitt outta the foot end and pinch in the other end up where the arm attaches. They think I've got burn scars and need to keep sun off the arm," Buck said.
Steve nodded.

"I'll get the ladder and bring this up. You start bringing bundles of shingles. From that stack over there," Buck said.

He pointed to a pallet of neatly stacked white plastic rectangles.

"How many should I bring?" Steve asked.

"Let's start with twenty. We'll need a lot more, but that's a decent start," Buck told him.

Steve nodded and headed for the stack of shingles.

Buck took their nail guns and some tools up the ladder. The roof was already felted over the plywood deck, so at least they weren't starting from nothing.

"Grant, you can't bring all that up the ladder. It'll only hold four hundred pounds," Buck called down to him when he noticed Steve with four bundles of shingles on his shoulder.

Each bundle weighed about eighty pounds. Ron was already watching them and frowning. Shit. Grant wasn't as used to hiding his strength as Buck was. When you're used to walking around easy with everybody knowing you're Captain America, there wasn't much need to hide what you could do, Buck supposed.

"Sorry," Steve said.

He set down three bundles of shingles against his leg, and tossed the fourth one up to Bucky. He figured if the ladder couldn't hold the weight, he'd forego the ladder. Buck swiftly jumped to his feet and caught the eighty pound bundle before it could make a bunch of noise crashing onto the roof deck. Steve tossed up the other three bundles to Buck on the second-story roof, then went to get more bundles from the pallet. This time he came back with three bundles on each shoulder.

Buck grinned and moved around the roof. Steve threw the materials at him wherever he went, and Buck caught and set them down about where they'd be needed. It wasn't exactly the same as tossing howitzer shells to each other, but the movements were familiar. Since Steve had the bundles coming so efficiently, Buck waved him to keep tossing. In a few minutes, they had enough bundles of shingles on the roof deck to cover it.

Ron and the roofing crew rolling felt on the unit next to them had stopped what they were doing to watch. Buck quit grinning. It hadn't taken long for he and Steve to screw up. Buck looked over at the other roofing crew until they got the message and quit staring.

"Get up here and let's get moving," Buck said down to Steve.

The morning sun was above the rooftops now, though it wasn't direct enough to be hot yet. Buck showed Steve how to start the first course of shingles. He could tell that Steve liked the pneumatic nailer. He quietly explained how to use the tape measure and the chalk line to setup for the second course. Steve nodded. He moved like he knew what he was doing, though he'd never done any of it before.

There were four guys on the other roofing crew, and Steve and Buck shared a look between themselves. Yeah, they were gonna beat 'em. The other crew already had half their roof felted. Two guys started shingling while the other two felted the other side, so it was a pretty even start.

"Grant, watch your nails. Fast is good, but only if you're doin it right," Buck warned him.
Steve nodded. He'd been apprehensive about his ability to work this kind of job with Buck, but it was easy. He enjoyed lining up the shingles just right and he liked the little kick of the nail gun. Buck showed him how to cut around vent pipes, and that slowed them down some, but Steve had a good eye for angles and dimensions. His first vent pipe cut wasn't perfect, but his second one was pretty good.

Steve heard a person coming up the ladder and looked back over his shoulder. The sun was angling up in the sky, and sweat was starting to dampen his shirt and his brow. It felt like good, honest work and Steve was pleased to be doing it alongside of Bucky. He was doing a lower course of shingles, while Buck followed slightly behind and did the next one up.

Ron joined them on the roof and walked up the slope to observe them working. Steve kept working. He figured if the guy had something to say, he'd say it. The foreman's shadow fell over Steve's work and Steve tried to ignore the prickly feeling of letting a stranger stand behind and over him. Steve set nails neatly down the nailing strip and pulled another shingle out of the open bundle near him. He aligned it properly in an instant and nailed again.

"You said he didn't have any experience," Ron told Bucky.

"No, I said I didn't know," Buck replied.

Buck didn't pause his work to talk to the foreman. They were pulling ahead of the other roofing crew slightly, with half the roof left to go.

"Don't get sloppy," Ron said. He walked over and inspected the rest of their work, then he went down the ladder.

Bucky took a long drink of water, then tossed his Nalgene to Steve. Steve caught it and drank. Buck caught it back and clipped it to his belt loop.

"Next time, bring your own water bottle so we're not drinking after each other like girls," Buck grumbled at him.

"None of the guys minded sharing before," Steve told him.

He didn't need to mention that he spoke of the Commandos and how everybody had shared what they could when supplies were low. Buck hadn't had a memory lapse yet that he could tell. Steve wondered how his mind could be so agile, to go through all the Hydra brain washing and still come out mostly intact.

"Things are different now. Nobody shares. Everybody's busy watching, waiting for someone to do something that the rest of the flock doesn't do," Buck said.

Steve nodded. He knew that to be true, especially for him. His friendship with a homeless girl and his haircut were only the most recent examples of public scrutiny and disapproval he'd seen. He finished one bundle of shingles and dragged another one closer to cut open with his utility knife.

"Tossing shingles is fun and all, but you're gonna out yourself if we keep doing shit like that. If you didn't already," Buck told him.

Steve wanted to shrug off the caution, but it would be real crappy for reporters to show up at the worksite, speculating over why Captain America was working at an hourly job. He didn't care so much what the press did with the story, but he wouldn't want to call attention to Buck, or to some of the guys on the work crew who didn't speak English.
"I hear ya. It's a shame we can't work to our full potential without causing a scene. The work is nice. I'd love to tear it up," Steve said.

He glanced over at the other roofing crew. It's not that he and Buck were getting faster. The other guys were slowing down, getting tired. They were still working at a good pace, but their stamina could only go so far. The other crew was dripping sweat, their clothes drenched, and they'd already sent a guy down to refill their water bottles. He and Buck were almost finished with the roof they were on, and lunch time was nearing. All that was left was to cap the ridge with shingles, and that didn't take long once Buck showed him how.

They brought down their tools and Steve cleaned up the empty plastic shingle packages that had blown off the roof.

"We don't clean up the grounds til the end of the day," Buck told him.

Steve smirked at him and picked up the trash anyway. Buck shook his head and went to refill his water.

Steve got his lunch from the saddlebag of his bike and sat on the seat to eat since there weren't any tables around. Buck was walking over to join him with his lunch when Steve's ears caught the sound of a heavy government vehicle approaching on a nearby street. It would sound the same as a civilian vehicle if it didn't have a different engine built for chase and different tire tread.

A half-second later, Buck heard it too. He did a quick about-face and jogged into one of the duplex units they were working on. A few seconds later, six guys from Diego's crew were running off. Steve watched them hustle away from the work site and melt into the nearby neighborhood.

Buck came out, walking casually toward Steve again, lunch cooler in hand. Steve bit eagerly into his chicken salad sandwich and chewed a mouthful.

Steve got up from the leather seat to lean his rump on the back of his bike, partially obscuring the license plate. He took another big bite of his sandwich. Buck bent and got his own lunch, leftover pizza, and stood a step away from Steve, casually blocking the view of the rest of the plate.

A white van turned into the site and cruised toward the contractor's trailer. Not far from Steve and Bucky, it stopped and four agents from the immigration enforcement agency got out. They looked briefly at the two men, then went toward the construction area.

Steve and Buck kept eating. They heard the sounds of raised voices and questioning from inside the unfinished duplex, and Ron hurried over to intercede. The driver of the white van stayed in it and kept the vehicle ready to chase. He looked harder at Steve and Bucky. Steve lifted a hand in greeting to him briefly before bending down to get another sandwich out of his lunch cooler.

"Don't make a ham of yourself," Buck said under his breath and around a mouth full of pizza.

"I figured it would be better than suspiciously ignoring the guy while he checks us out," Steve said.

"Maybe," Buck grunted.

Several minutes later, as Steve was popping steak bites and cubes of cheese into his mouth, the four agents came back to their van, Ron following along.

"I told you my guys had papers," Ron said to them.

"Yeah, yeah," one of the agents said. They looked around the place a little, then they got in their
van and it backed slowly out of the lot.

Ron stood in the driveway and watched them go. When they were gone, he turned to go back to his trailer. His eyes stopped on Bucky for a moment. Buck lifted his half-eaten pizza slice in a little salute, and Ron shut himself in his trailer.

After lunch, Buck and Steve moved their ladder and tools to the next duplex unit and started rolling felt onto the deck. Steve tossed bundles of shingles up to Bucky again. The other crew didn't pay so much attention this time, and Steve wasn't sure he could have done things the slow way anyhow. It was too much fun working with Buck to trudge around like a regular guy.

The work went smoothly. They didn't need to talk much. After almost an hour of steady work, Steve noticed that Buck had gone still and silent. Steve had gotten pretty far ahead with his course of shingles, and he paused to look back. Buck was looking at him with menacing uncertainty. The pneumatic nail gun in his hand wasn't exactly pointed at the roof decking anymore.

"I know you," he said.

Steve set down his nailer and took off his sunglasses. Slow and careful, he walked across the twenty feet of sweltering asphalt roof. Buck watched him, then looked down at the nailer in his hand, confused. Steve squatted next to him and put out a hand to squeeze his shoulder. If Buck was gonna do something stupid, he wanted to be close.

"Yeah, Buck, you know me. I'm Stevie," he said.

He gave Buck's shoulder a firm squeeze and watched his face while he worked through his moment of confusion. For an instant, he saw the Soldier there in his eyes. The nailer thunked to the deck and Buck tensed, ready to do something. Steve slightly changed the way his boot treads gripped the shingles, but he didn't let go of Buck's shoulder. He looked Bucky in the eyes, keeping his expression warm and patient.

Bucky gradually relaxed. He shook his head slightly, then picked up his nailer. He gave Steve a tight smile. Buck laughed, low and disgusted with himself.

"Nail gun's no good weapon, anyway. Tethered to a damn hose," he said.

"You coulda strangled me with the hose, then hung me off the roof," Steve replied helpfully.

Buck nodded.

"We got work to do," he told Steve.

Steve left him alone and went back to laying his course of shingles. A few times that afternoon when Buck got quiet, Steve looked back at him, but he was fine. It had been only a momentary lapse.

By the time the site was shutting down at six that evening, they'd finished their second roof, and helped the other roofing crew finish the last of the other roof.

The cleanup took until dusk, then Ron passed out the pay from his desk in the trailer. Steve and Buck hung back until the other guys got theirs. The undocumented workers had to miss an hour of work while they hid away from the site, and Steve heard them complaining about the hit to their daily wage. He didn't know much Spanish, but it was easy to come to the right conclusion. As they left the trailer, one of them came over and shook Buck's hand. Buck nodded, and then he and Steve went in to get their pay.
Ron looked up from his desk as Steve and Buck entered. Steve took off his sunglasses and tucked them into the neck of his shirt because it was almost full dark. Out of habit, he removed his cap as he entered the brightly lit office trailer.

"Well, that makes sense then," Ron said. A smile spread over his face. He got up from his desk and shook Steve's hand vigorously.

"Cap-" Ron began to say.

"Not today. Just Grant. I'm as undocumented as the other guys, right?" Steve said.

"Yeah. You are. Man, you had me scratching my head this morning, trying to figure out how you were tossing those bundles," Ron said. He was still smiling.

"Sorry about that. It's easy to forget myself sometimes," Steve told him.

Ron pulled himself out of his amazement and hurried to get their cash.

He handed it to them, and Steve folded his and put it in his back pocket. He didn't need to count it because he wasn't keeping it, anyway.

"You two did the work of six men today. You got us caught up. With the roofing, anyway. I appreciate it. You still have his phone number for when we're short-handed next time?" Ron asked Bucky.

"Sure," Buck said.

"I enjoyed the work today, but I can't make any promises. I get called out at odd times. I won't be able to come back if the media gets wind of it," Steve told him.

"I figured that. Keep your hat and glasses, then. And the beard helps," Ron said.

"Not as much as I'd wish," Steve told him.

They said their goodbyes and left the trailer.

"Well, ain't we chummy," Buck teased him and shoved his shoulder.

"C'mon, Buck. I don't have a lot of options. Once people know who I am, I'm supposed to make nice," Steve said to him.

"I guess," Bucky agreed.

They walked over to Steve's bike. Steve put away his tool belt and tools and got out his helmet.

"You want a ride to the bus stop?" he offered to Bucky.

"Nah. It's nice out, and I don't wanna put my legs around ya," Buck told him.

Steve snorted a laugh. They'd done a lot more than that on some cold, cold nights overseas. But that was a long time ago, just like sharing rations or the contents of a canteen.

"The world's a strange place. Things that didn't used to mean anything are important now, and some of the important things are meaningless anymore," Steve said.

"Ain't that the truth?" Buck agreed.
A moment of silence passed while Steve pulled on his leather jacket.

"Hey, thanks for coming out today," Bucky said.

"I never would have thought I'd be doing something like this, but I liked it. Hey, that guy Johnny whose wife had the baby, what hospital are they using?"

"Methodist, I think. His last name's Despino. You're gonna go give him your pay, aren't ya?" Buck asked.

"Why not? I don't need the money, and I didn't do this for the pay. Just like you didn't take any cash for warning those guys about immigration," Steve said.

"They pay me, just not in cash," Buck said.

Steve put his helmet on and swung his leg over the bike.

"I don't think Stark is angry with you about his parents. He dug some of his old stuff out for me to use today, and he covered for me at the office so I could come," Steve told Buck.

"You really want me to come around, don't you? I don't know that I want Hydra to see me getting cozy with your gang," Buck said.

"If you ever change your mind-" Steve said.

"Yeah, I know," Buck agreed.

He picked up his lunch cooler and started walking in the dark toward the nearest bus stop. Steve started his bike and waved as he passed Buck on his way home.

Steve rapped softly on the partially open hospital room door with his knuckles. The tag by the door said baby boy Despino.

"Come in," came a faint male voice.

Again, Steve looked down at the asphalt stains on his knees and on Thor's boots. He'd stopped in the hospital lobby restroom to wash his hands, at least, and the nurses in the maternity ward weren't making faces at him, so he guessed it was alright to be a little bit dirty.

He cautiously pushed in the wide door and stepped into the room. The young couple had obviously been expecting a nurse or family members, because they looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Hi. You're Johnny?" Steve asked quietly. The young man nodded and Steve continued talking, "I filled in for you at work today. I was just doing my friend Buck a favor, and I don't need this, so I wanted to bring it to you."

Steve pulled the folded money out of his back pocket and stepped forward to hand it to the surprised man. He was of medium height and skinny. He already had a weathered look about him despite his youth. The wife was holding their newborn while she sat up in the hospital bed. The man finally snapped out of his stupor and reached to take the money from Steve.

"But, you worked the day…"

He was going to leave the little family in peace and go home, but the wife was poking at her husband with the arm which wasn't supporting the baby and Johnny was staring, finally figuring out who he was seeing.

"Captain Rogers? Are you for real? You worked the day for me?" Johnny asked.

"Sure I did. Like I said, Buck is my friend and he called me in to fill your spot. I'm not the Captain today, though. You can call me Grant. And, hey, I don't need the cash, so…" Steve said. He pushed Johnny's hand closed around the money, because the man was still half-hearted about taking it.

"You sure?" Johnny asked.

"I'm sure, man. I enjoyed the work. It was great to get a break from what I normally do," Steve said.

He was resigned to staying for a moment, now that he'd lingered long enough for them to recognize him. He'd known it was a possibility he'd be recognized, but it couldn't be helped.

"Captain America? Really?" the wife asked belatedly. She looked a little dazed, and Steve saw that she had an IV in the back of her hand still. Her middle looked bandaged. She was probably on pain meds, so Steve cheerfully forgave her the use of his work title.

"Yes, Ma'am, but ssshh, I'm in disguise," he said with a smile that crinkled his eyes. He flopped his hands at his sides a little to indicate his work clothes.

She shook her head at him and smiled kind of goofy. Yeah, she had to be on some good medication. She was young and blonde and pretty, but fairly puffy looking from whatever pregnancy and childbirth had done to her. Steve thought she was beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with her looks.

"Hey, you wanna hold him? This is Mikey," Johnny told Steve.

The new father reached carefully over to his wife and lifted the bundled newborn like he was made of spun glass. A shock of alarm made Steve stand ramrod straight in a ready position, as if someone was about to hand him a live bomb.

"Oh! I'm, ah- dirty," Steve said haltingly. He was afraid to hold such a tiny person, and he was dirty.

"So wash your hands," Johnny told him.

Steve did as he was told, more to stall for time than anything else. He'd held plenty babies, but they were always the loud wide-eyed kind that tried to grab his face or throw up on him. A tiny, tiny sleeping one that couldn't even hold its head up was scary, but if he left the hospital bathroom and refused to hold the kid, the parents might be insulted. Steve washed his hands and his arms all the way up to his elbows and rubbed the soap in vigorously. Then he rinsed and used a lot of paper towels to dry himself. He couldn't put it off any longer. He stepped out of the little bathroom and smiled nervously at the couple.

"Sit right there," Johnny told him.

Steve backed up and sat himself on the stiff vinyl mini-couch. Johnny approached him with the wrapped bundle and Steve looked on, wide-eyed. He splayed his hands, as if he would be catching
Johnny turned the baby sideways to him, and Steve automatically corrected his arms to make a cradle. Before Steve could do anything else, Johnny put the little bundle of blanket in his arms, against his chest and his work shirt.

The tiny human weighed almost nothing. He was so much lighter and more still than a squirming, grabbing one year old. Steve looked down in awe at the little scrunched face and the two dimply fists. Johnny hovered for a moment to see that Steve had the baby securely, then he disappeared from Steve's field of view.

"Mikey?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, we're gonna call him Mikey," the mother said.

"Hey, Mikey," Steve said softly.

The newborn slept on undisturbed, wrapped in his striped blanket. As Steve held him, the warmth of the tiny human seeped through the blankets and the restfulness of the infant somehow infected Steve. Here was a person who was completely helpless. Dependent. Soft. But little Mikey had the luxury of not worrying about a thing. His dad was a hard worker and his mom obviously cared about him.

Steve stared down at the baby, speechless. He had the responsibility of keeping the bad guys in line and knocking them down when they got too rowdy. But this young couple had the weighty responsibility of taking care of this little guy and bringing him up right and safe in a world with too many bad guys and too much bad luck.

Steve was scared to seriously contemplate the idea of having little ones of his own, knowing the kinds of villains that were out there. Yet these brave people were going to take on the job of protecting Mikey. They didn't have super stamina or strength, or fancy weapons or rich friends. They were more like Steve's own mom. They probably struggled and had to work hard for everything they had. They watched the news, he was sure. In fact, the television was on a news channel and muted right now. They knew the dangers, but they wanted Mikey anyway.

"Wow. You guys are amazing," Steve said reverently.

As he was about to try to hand Mikey back to his father, the newborn's skin turned deep red. His little face bunched up into incredible chins and puffy cheeks, and Steve looked around nervously as the little guy arched his back strongly and rooted at his fists which he had drawn in tight to his face.

"Whoa! What's he doing?" Steve asked nervously.

"Just stretching I guess. He's done that before," the baby's mother said.

The baby's red face paled back to its normal color, and then his eyes opened. His toothless mouth opened too, and Mikey looked around aimlessly for a moment, then up to Steve. He had large, dark eyes. He stilled and stared at Steve, looking so very serious.

"Hi, little guy," Steve said.

Mikey stared at him for almost a minute. It wasn't like being stared at by a stranger, though Mikey was just as much a stranger as anybody else. Steve got the impression that the infant was studying his face with the same kind of intensity with which Tony studied his technical plans, or how he
himself memorized the schematics of a Hydra base.

The feeling of a fist at his cheek distracted Mikey, and he mouthed at it, then his face turned red again. His eyes squeezed shut and his mouth opened into a gummy pink square. The most plaintive wail Steve had heard in a long time split the still air of the hospital room. Mikey was very angry about something.

"Oh! Bring him here!" his mother said.

Steve looked up to see Johnny sitting drowsily, watching. His wife was reaching for the baby with one arm, the other arm pressed against her belly. They expected him to stand up with the little guy and hand him over? Steve was galvanized with fear of dropping him, but Mikey took a deep breath and wailed with a trembling warble that Steve had to do something about.

So carefully, Steve stood and kept the infant tucked to his chest exactly as he'd been holding him. He took a step toward the hospital bed and leaned over. The mother's arm came up under his and it became apparent how to transfer the baby to his mom. Little Mikey was angry and ruddy and his fists were waving in the air near his face. There was an unexpected flash of nipple, then Mikey was busy and quieting down.

Steve chuckled in relief. Mikey had gotten what he wanted and Steve was probably free to go now. He grinned at Johnny. Johnny was dead asleep, slumped in the rigid plastic chair beside his wife's bed.

"Thanks for the money. We can use it," the woman said to Steve.

She didn't look at him. Her eyes were on her baby, stroking his soft wispy hair where Mikey had knocked his knit cap off in his anger and urgent flailing.

"Thanks for letting me hold him. He's amazing," Steve said.

He reached out and touched the baby's head once, then he left the room. The whole experience had him thinking about heroics and responsibility in a different way. His arms felt empty, and there was a cool spot on his chest where Mikey had been. Who would have thought that holding someone, even a tiny someone, would be so warm? That letting them go again would make him feel empty? He'd never known he was missing anything, but he felt the lack of it now.

When he got home, he found Estrella asleep on his couch. He set his lunch cooler on the floor in the hall to prop the door open. Steve wanted a shower, but he wouldn't do that while she was in his suite.

The clock on the oven said it was almost nine. There was a plate on the countertop, covered in foil. Steve lifted the edge of the foil and sniffed. It looked like pork roast with gravy and potatoes. He took the foil off and slid the plate into the microwave. He pressed the reheat button.

Steve settled into his chair across from the couch. His sketchpad was on the end table with a pencil stuck in the spiral spine. The lamplight was perfect on her face. The angle of the shadows emphasized her beauty. His hand reached for the sketchpad.

Estrella was lying on her side on the couch, one hand under her face, and the other arm folded back with her hand resting on her waist. Steve was happy to notice that she had a nice shape. That meant she was still eating and gaining weight well. His pencil put down fluid lines, swatches of smudged
shadow, and contour marks where her form was beginning to be rounded. She was barefoot and he took the time to detail her toes.

The microwave beeped. Steve would have ignored it, but Estrella's eyes blinked open.

She smiled softly at him at first. Then when she saw his hand moving pencil over paper, she frowned and sat up.

"Stop it," she grumbled at him.

Steve sucked in a breath and his hands tightened around what they were holding. She wasn't wearing her necklace. Funny that he hadn't paid attention to that detail.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Estrella reached for the couch cushions and felt around for her necklace. She must have taken it off while she was sleeping. She didn't see it anywhere.

"It's on the floor," Steve ground out.

Her eyes flashed to him, then she bent to grab the blue scrap of fabric from where it had fallen. As she tied it securely at her throat, she watched Steve.

He set aside his sketch. He could finish it later. She'd gone still, watching him.

"I'm alright," he said.

He was. The ache she caused him was beginning to become familiar. There wasn't anywhere to hide, and anything he did to cover up would only draw attention to him.

"I'm alright," he said again, "It was only a few words. I'm gonna get my plate."

Steve got up and got a fork and knife from the drawer. He took the heaping, steaming plate from the microwave and grabbed a water bottle from the fridge. It was difficult to put a smile on his face, but he did anyway. He knew she wanted him to play at frightening her, but now wasn't the time. It felt too real.

Estrella watched him settle back into his chair, still wary of him. She knew from the way he forced a smile that he wasn't unaffected. He set down his water, put the utensils on the edge of his plate, and balanced the plate on the hard muscles of his thighs. He smiled happily and cut into his supper.

"Mmm," he mumbled while he chewed.

She smiled a little at how eagerly he devoured what she'd brought him. He wasn't taking much time to savor it. He always ate fast when he was really hungry.

"You didn't have to wait for me. I've got the microwave figured out," Steve said quickly.

He swished a bite of meat through his potatoes and gravy, then put it in his mouth like he couldn't get it fast enough.

"I know you're smart enough to work the microwave. I wanted to hear about your day. How was your friend?" Estrella asked.

Steve nodded in acknowledgement of her words, but he ate another bite before answering her.
"He's good," Steve said.

Several things about Bucky were bothering him, but he didn't want to talk about them now. He finished his dinner and brought his plate to the sink. It was also bothering him that Estrella was making herself at home in his suite. He didn't want to make her feel unwelcome, so he didn't mention it. He sat back down in his chair.

She stared at him.

"What are you waiting for?" he finally asked her when he couldn't stand the silent staring anymore.

"What is it like when you hear my voice? I've never had the chance to ask anyone," she wondered.

Steve opened his mouth, accustomed to answering questions posed by fans or news people with microphones and cameras. What she was asking was much more personal than that. He didn't want to answer, but it was her voice. She had a right to know.

He took a breath and held it. He looked to her for mercy, but she gave none. She was waiting for the answer. He let the breath out. He turned his head aside to rub his eyes.

"It feels like-"

"No. This is time for you to practice not blushing. Or blush all you want. But look at me. Get used to saying embarassing things," Estrella challenged him.

"Eya, I don't want to talk about these things in front of you," Steve said.

"Stupid! Do you think a few words are going to hurt me? After all that's been done already? Tell me," she insisted.

Steve got up and nudged his lunch cooler away from the door. It swung shut. He strode back to his chair and flopped down petulantly.

"Jarvis, get out," Steve said.

"Yes, Captain," Jarvis replied.

"You don't have to be rude to him," Estrella said.

"But I do. There's almost no privacy around here," Steve said.

"Are you working up a good mad so you can tell me without blushing? Because otherwise, you're just stalling," Estrella told him with an impatient hand gesture.

"I know. Yeah, I'm working on it," Steve bounced the butt of his fist on the arm of his chair. He might have been put out with her for making him close the door. Or for making him talk about it. But she was cute. Her courage was inspiring to watch. Her slight accent was captivating.

And she trusted him.

"Don't make me take this off again, because I'll keep asking you until you tell me," she told him.

Her fingers lingered at the back of her neck, where the necklace was tied.

"You're a bully," Steve said.
"So are you. Now tell me. Go ahead. I already know you will because you closed the door and evicted Jarvis," she pointed out.


She cocked her head down a little and raised an eyebrow, waiting. Her wrist moved at the back of her neck, twirling her fingers at the ties. Just the thought of hearing her unmodulated voice again made him hard. Steve knew what was causing it and he didn't like it. He was becoming conditioned to the natural sound of her, like a dog for a treat. His body anticipated the reaction to her voice, whether she was going to let him hear her or not. He gripped both arms of the chair.

"I'm not immune to your voice. For the first instant that I hear it, nothing happens. There's a delay. But after that, maybe half a second, it feels like heat soaking into my head. From my brain, down my spine, then it hits here, and," Steve waved a hand at the obvious state of affairs in his lap.

Estrella's nose flared, trying to make room for deeper breaths without opening her mouth. She glanced at where he indicated and nodded, but then looked back to his face again. He was glad of that.

"Every guy gets that. I want to know why you're different," Estrella said.

Steve wanted to look away, but she didn't want him to. He was supposed to be practicing. He was surprised to feel that his face wasn't hot. He wasn't blushing.

"While that's happening, I get the urge to be close to you. I haven't followed that down the path to see where it leads, but you probably know," Steve said.

Estrella nodded once.

"You know how when a bell is struck, the sound keeps ringing, vibrating for a while afterwards, like the energy from the strike keeps going until it uses itself up?" Steve asked.

"Yah?" she encouraged him.

"It's like that in my head. Not your words, but the tones. After you're done talking, it takes a while to fade. All that time, and it seems like a long time, I'm fighting the urge to go to you, and I'm fighting this," he said, and waved at his lap again.

She looked him over, but her eyes seemed to get stuck, not so quick to look away this time.

"Quit looking at me like that, Eya," he said firmly.

Again, like last time after she'd trimmed his beard and his hair. It was almost same way other women looked at him. He was used to this from others. It wasn't right from her. She'd been hurt so much. He didn't want to be like that with her. He wanted his sweet, spunky, funny friend, nothing more.

"Then quit drawing me," she countered.

Steve set his jaw stubbornly. He didn't want to quit drawing her. She needed to be drawn. He needed to draw her. She was too unique, too intriguing not to draw.

"You quit looking at me like that, Steve. You look like a stubborn little boy. If I can't appreciate you, then you can't appreciate me. Fair is fair," Estrella said.
"It's not the same. I'm not-" Steve started to protest. 

Estrella raised her eyebrow at him and crossed her arms. Obviously, his artistic regard made her feel as squirmy as her subtle leer made him feel. But he wasn't going to stop drawing her. 

"Fine. Look, then," Steve said, grumpy. 

He defiantly shoved his knees apart and slouched down deeper in his chair. He glared at her. If she wanted to be that way, then she could look. But he felt let down. In retaliation, he grabbed his sketchpad and pencil. He flipped back to the page he'd been working on, then started on an image of her face, just as she was looking at him now. 

When Estrella was done proving her point, she met his eyes over the sketchpad. He was angry and tense and pretty much drawing out of spite. She felt the same scowl on her face that he was wearing. She was already tense from being in a cozy, private room with an aroused man. 

But it was only Steve and they were both acting like children. 

Almost before her scowl surrendered, a laugh forced its way out of her. Steve's hand stilled and the sketchpad drooped onto his lap. She could see him try to suppress it with stiff lips, but then one corner of his mouth went up and he laughed too. He set his drawing aside again. Estrella smiled at him, happy that the intensity had eased. 

"You didn't blush," she pointed out. 

"And you weren't scared of me," he said. 

"I was. But I managed it," Estrella said proudly. 

"So that was a scared look, not a lusty one?" Steve asked. 

It was Estrella's turn to look down and away. She shrugged. 

"Both?" she said. 

"How can you be scared and look at me like that at the same time?" he wondered. 

"I don't know. I guess I'm kind of messed up?" 

She had every right to be, Steve thought. 

Bucky was messed up. Estrella was messed up. Steve might or might not be as bad, but he had his own issues. 

Steve sat up in his chair a little more. He decided to take a chance. He rolled his forearms up and opened his hands to her, a universal sign of welcome. 

Estrella stopped smiling and looked at him like he was speaking a strange language. He looked hopeful. He looked friendly. What did he want? A hug? 

Steve wiggled his fingers at her in encouragement. 

Estrella was unsure, but she got up from the couch and went to him where he sat. When she got close to his knee, he reached for her and her instinct was to pull away. 

She didn't. Gently, he pulled her in and lifted her across his lap. She settled onto his left thigh and
he hugged her against his chest. One of his hands played with her hair while the other one made a rest for her feet. Thankfully, she wasn't being poked by anything scary or awkward. He was quiet and controlled. His hand felt good on her hair. She wrapped her hands around his arm and petted him, for lack of a better thing to do.

Steve rested his cheek against her hair. He didn't want to move, and he didn't want her to go, either. This was just right. It felt good to touch and be touched. It was good. Estrella relaxed against him.

"I'm sorry," Steve said.

"Me too," she agreed.

He was tired from the heat and work of the day. It was a pleasant kind of tired, not the desperate, tight-wound kind of exhaustion he sometimes felt after an intense mission. The last thing he remembered was the feel of her silky hair on his fingers, the warmth of her body resting against him. Her skin felt good where their arms touched.
Chapter 20

Using the toilet hadn't helped his situation this morning. He was going to have to think unhappy thoughts if he was going to leave his suite this morning and leave anything except a trail of embarrassment behind him at the office. Artillery movements of the German war effort would work pretty well to chill things in his pants, but he didn't want to do that to himself yet. It was very effective and no fun at all.

Steve looked at the drawer where his favorite toy was hidden while he brushed his teeth. It would only take a few minutes and he wasn't even running late for his morning appointments. But he couldn't. Well, he could. But he'd made a deal with himself. His attempts at internet research had led him to the conclusion that happily married couples had sex about twice a week. Someday he wanted to be part of a happily married couple. So, it wouldn't be fair to let himself go crazy now, get used to having a lot of sex, and then expect too much from a wife later. He'd told himself that he could use the toy every third day if he needed to. No more. That meant no fun for him until tonight after work.

He finished brushing his teeth, spit, and rinsed. He scowled at himself in the mirror when his cheeks colored up. He was thinking of naming the toy. No, he had already named the toy, if he was being honest with himself, but he refused to let himself use the name, even in his head. What kind of a sick, lonely soul names a piece of silicone? Not him. So he wasn't going to think the name, or let it evoke the physical sensations he felt when he was using it.

…Rosie…

"No!" Steve growled at himself.

He stormed out of the bathroom, past his night stand, (…Rosie!) and grabbed his gym bag on the way out his door. Soon as the door to his suite locked shut behind him and before Jarvis had the elevator open, he was thumbing for Bruce's number on his phone.

While it rang and he got into the elevator, he started running through those German artillery movements in his head, along with the remembered sound of heavy trundling tracks, guttural voices yelling commands, and the sounds of shells being loaded and discharged.

"Hey," Bruce's voice came to him through his phone.

It took a long instant for Steve to pull his mind from the feel of the earth shaking under his prone body, the explosion of soil and grit against his skin, the blast of heat that singed hairs off his arms…

"Uh, hey. Good morning," Steve said a little belatedly.

"Good morning. I was starting to wonder if something was wrong or if you managed to butt-dial me somehow," Bruce said.

Steve could hear the slight smile in his voice, and then a breathy little slurp as Bruce took a sip of coffee.

"I'm fine. At least I hope I am. Can I stop by the lab and get you to draw some blood?" Steve asked.

The elevator slowed its gut-lifting drop down to the office levels, proof that Jarvis was listening in.
Steve refused to let it get to him. Jarvis was only trying to be his usual helpful self.

"You want me to draw your blood? Now?" Bruce asked for clarification.

"If it's not too much trouble. Are you in your lab?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. Your timing couldn't be better. I just stopped by the lab to get some data for this morning's briefings. See you in a few?" Bruce said.

"Sure," Steve said, then touched the end button for the call.

Jarvis slowed the downward motion of the elevator, then started it moving back up again. Steve tightened the muscles of his legs and felt like he was riding a yo-yo. Jarvis knew he loved the G's, so the AI didn't do much to make the transition from going down to going up a gentle one. The fact that Jarvis was making an effort to give him a fun ride despite how he'd treated him lately made Steve feel pretty low.

"Jarvis, I'm sorry I'm such an ass lately," Steve told him.

"No apology is needed, Captain. Circumstances are rarely perfect. We do the best we can," Jarvis said.

Steve nodded, still feeling like an ass. The elevator came to an abrupt halt in its upward motion, then actually dropped out from under his feet, tossing Steve in the air for an instant. Steve laughed out loud, then regained his footing as the doors opened.

"Gotta love that guy," he said as he strode out and toward the labs. He was still grinning as he rounded the corner into Bruce's domain.

Bruce looked up and let himself be infected by Steve's smile. Steve set down his files and his gym bag near where Bruce had set down his stuff and his coffee cup. He leaned against the workstation and rolled up his shirt sleeve while Bruce prepared the blood sample kit.

"What do you want me to do with it?" Bruce asked as he approached with the needle. He swabbed Steve's arm, then started taking blood.

"If you can get my medical history, compare today's blood with my previous samples. I want to know if my hormone levels are normal," Steve said.

Bruce had three vials lined up, but when he heard how simple Steve's request was, he only filled the first one. Bruce offered him a bandaid with a hint of a smile and Steve rolled his eyes. He held his thumb where Bruce had pricked him for thirty seconds, then rolled his sleeve down and buttoned it.

"Just hormone levels?" Bruce asked.

He bent to write on the sample vial briefly, then he filled out the diagnostic request sheet that would travel along with the vial.

"I think so," Steve paused while a lab assistant came to take the vial and the form from Bruce. The older woman went immediately to work at the back of the lab, out of earshot of the two men.

"I'm having a hard time lately. Staying celibate, I mean," Steve forced himself to say. He knew Bruce would understand. They picked up their files, Bruce's coffee, and Steve's gym bag, and headed for the elevator.
"You don't have to stay celibate. If I were you I'd be-

"I know, Bruce, but that's not the point. I want to know why it feels like my needs have changed in the last few months. Let's just start by looking at my blood and see if anything's going on," Steve told him.

Tony would rile at him to go out and get laid and Clint would joke. Bruce looked at him thoughtfully. He nodded once. They both knew that Steve should have gone to the Avengers' medical ward for this kind of bloodwork. They both understood that Steve wanted this little bit of diagnostics to stay out of the records and databanks for now. Steve glanced at the ceiling of the elevator.

"Unfortunately, Captain, I am suffering a temporary loss of data integrity. I'm sorry to say that your conversation here in the elevator at this moment and possibly even until you and doctor Banner leave the elevator will be unrecoverable due to a corrupted file error," Jarvis told them helpfully.

Bruce smiled at the ceiling briefly, then turned his attention back to Steve while they slowly made their way to the Avengers' nine o'clock briefing on the office levels below.

Steve felt like he was in the confessional at church, but without the kneeler and the pending absolution. Well, if Bruce could get some conclusive results for him, that would be something.

"I mean, I'm a guy. I've always wanted it. But lately, it's like I'm a damn suffering kid again. Unwanted hard-ons, dreams, temptations to do stupid things. Hell, I couldn't spar with Natasha a few weeks ago. I need to know why. It's a distraction I can't allow," Steve confessed.

"You're allowed to be human, Steve. I haven't noticed any lack of focus during missions. You haven't done anything stupid," Bruce tried to mollify him.

"Yet," Steve said bitterly.

"Hang in there. We've got Erskine's rudimentary data from your pre-serum blood samples, and Howard kept all your subsequent paper medical records together. Then, we have all of SHIELD's medical data on you. We can establish a good baseline. I'll have the analysis done for you by this evening," Bruce told him.

Steve nodded.

He forced himself to pay sharp attention to the final intel briefing for their upcoming mission, and he kept his cool while he and Tony argued about how the mission should run. They made a plan taking into account Thor's presence and another one without Thor, in case he wasn't back before the mission. Over time, Steve was getting better at learning how to satisfy Tony's ideas and ego and fold him into a cohesive plan of action that benefitted all their goals. He left the briefing not exactly pleased, but satisfied that things would work out.

Steve filed the finalized mission plan on his office workstation. With the most important of his morning work done, he sat back and let his mind wander for a moment. How would Bucky have fit into this mission? Could they make room for him in the Avengers? Should they? Would Tony be able to work with him? Was he daydreaming to think he'd ever get to work with his friend again, other than at a construction site?

When he checked, his phone still showed no messages from Buck. No missed calls. No voicemail.
He'd get over to Buck's place soon if he didn't hear from him.

Steve still had over an hour before lunch time, but he was hungry. He picked up his gym bag and closed his office door. He closed the blinds at the interior window and stripped out of his office clothes while he tore into a protein bar. The slide of fabric over his groin as he changed into nylon sport shorts was enough to make him grit his teeth.

Gritted teeth weren't very effective at chewing protein bars, so he injected his mind with another hit of German field tactics until he was dressed for a workout. Depending on who was in the training room at this hour, he might have to mentally multi-task if he was going to stay in control of himself.

He dropped the food wrapper into his office trash can and ripped into another protein bar on his way to the training room. Sitting around thinking until lunch time would do him more harm than good, with the mood he was in. He needed to get his body moving.

"No," Steve grunted as Natasha jerked him down to the mats with her weight.

If he'd been a normal man, his neck would be broken in the vice of her thighs, but he wasn't normal. It still hurt.

"What?" Nat asked him mildly.

They lay side-down on the mats and Nat turned her head toward the doors of the training room. Steve tapped her knee and she let him loose. They both got to their feet, but they sent very different greetings to the incoming visitors.

Natasha waved briefly to Jane and Darcy. They'd brought Estrella as Nat had requested them to. Jane looked like she'd rather be working in her lab, but she was hiding it pretty well. Estrella looked around at the room and all its equipment and the rubberized floor mats. Her eyes were still wide from seeing her and Steve getting up from their tangle on the floor.

"Uff!" Clint huffed as Sam got a good punch into him on the other set of mats.

"Dammit, Lewis," Clint grumbled, rubbing his belly.

Sam smiled and nodded a greeting to the ladies, then took full advantage of Clint's temporary distraction to return to attempting to beat his ass. Estrella looked a little disturbed at their level of glee and violence until Jane bent aside to whisper something to her.

Darcy popped her bubblegum one last time, then pulled it from her mouth to stick it on the outside of her microwave popcorn bag. She was wearing a fairly short skirt and a snug sweater, so Natasha was uncertain if Clint had been distracted by the sight of her, or by the smell of her popcorn.

Steve's belly growled from where he stood behind Natasha.

"Dammit, Lewis," Steve muttered, echoing Clint's sentiments.

He stepped around Natasha and went over to the ladies. He didn't normally voluntarily go near ladies when he was so sweaty, but he couldn't help it. Lewis had what he needed.

"C'mon! I'm starving and it's almost lunchtime. You have to at least share," Steve grumped at her.
He nodded and smiled politely at Jane. He held out his fingers for Estrella to touch. She looked him and Natasha over uncertainly and he gripped her fingers tighter in reassurance for a moment before he let her hand slip away. Then he opened his mouth at Darcy and pointed to it.

Darcy dug a handful of popcorn from her bag and tossed the kernels at him, one after the other. Steve caught them all, except for one which he got with his hand and threw into his mouth with the rest of them. Her aim wasn't that great. Steve chewed and swallowed, then opened up for more. Darcy obliged him, and then he turned back to the mats and Natasha. A Lewis-sized double handful of popcorn wasn't going to hold him for much longer, but it would have to do.

He worked his head around on his neck and shook his thighs out as he approached Nat. She was backing up to the far end of the mats, away from their spectators because she could see the agitation on his face. He was trying to play it down, just like the fact that he was on edge today, but she saw. That's why she'd had Jane and Darcy bring Estrella. She needed to learn a few things about Steve today.

Natasha had seen it this morning during the briefing, in the way Steve held himself tense and his jaw kept wanting to grind. Clint had refrained from jokes all during the briefing because of the ominous calmness Steve pulled over himself. The junior intelligence agents had all handed their files to Hill so they wouldn't have to be the focus of the Captain's surgically precise attention. He'd been all Cap, no Steve at the briefing. That wasn't unusual. The odd thing was his lack of kindness and good humor. He wasn't rude. Just very intent.

He'd been somewhat distracted in their sparring so far today. He kept going somewhere else in his head. She never should have been able to get him to the mats with that last move. Nat backed all the way to the end of the mats.

Darcy settled on a stack of unused mats like they were stadium seating. She pulled Estrella down beside her and offered her some popcorn, which the girl was too distracted to take. Jane settled on her other side and pulled out her tablet, doubtless working on what she could since Darcy had dragged her away from her lab.

"What's going on?" Steve asked Natasha.

He made a quick, brutal swipe at her ankles which would have at least sprained them if he hadn't been sure she would evade.

"Nothing," Natasha smiled tightly at him, and used her upward momentum to kick at his gut.

She was ready for his hand grabbing at her, and she flipped backward to avoid his grip. Today was one of those days. Every time she was a bit too slow, she had a bruise to show for it. He nearly got a fist in her hair to slam her down, but she pushed off the wall, dove between his feet and rolled through, narrowly avoiding his heel strike to the side of her head. She rolled left, then right-fake, left again as his heel slammed down around her face.

He dropped to his knees to pin her, and she arced her torso up to knee him hard under the chin. She heard his teeth snap shut, but he was too experienced to have his tongue in harm's way, so there was no blood.

In a quick scabble, she backed away and rolled. If she'd had knives, she'd have pulled them and stuck him repeatedly in vital targets. He knew this, and she watched his hands move to slap aside imaginary blades. She made note of his blocking order naturally, though she didn't think she'd ever have to try to bleed him.
She twisted to her feet, and he rose up too. He bent under her kick to his throat and got a vice inside the muscle of her right thigh with his strong hands. With a jerk up, then downward, he negated her mass and velocity and slammed her back onto the mats. Steve dropped and pinned her with the hard edge of his foot to her throat. His hands grappled to pin hers down while his other shin bit painfully across her legs. Damn, he was heavy. More bruises. Steve crimped one of her wrists in a steel grip, and her other hand went in for a Widow's bite at his exposed side, at the kidney.

If they'd been armed combatants, they'd be hurting and bloody, but Natasha knew she'd also be dead. Steve held the hard pressure of his foot precisely into her throat. She tapped out by blinking her eyes at him because her hands were busy and she couldn't breathe.

"Woo-hoo!" Darcy hooted.

Steve rolled his weight off of her carefully. He helped her up, then slapped her kick away when she tried to surprise him. Yeah, that did it. She had his full attention now. No more sideline thoughts in his head. He was noticing everything. Too fast for Natasha to precisely see, though she knew what he was doing, his attention flickered around the room to Sam and Clint, the ladies on the stack of mats, and he didn't miss a breath she took or a twitch that she made.

She noticed vaguely that Sam and Clint had stopped sparring and were watching too. Cap totally on point and engaged was something worth seeing. Natasha backed up to the end of the mats again, then turned and ran the last three steps because she had to.

A run up the wall, then evasion to the side and over him barely got her enough room. Something, some piece of heavy equipment, slammed into the wall as Steve changed course after her, and she controlled her landing only well enough to stay out from under him. Her heel impacted his ribs in passing, rolling him aside. He got a grip on her elbow, then let it go. It would have injured her, pulled her shoulder out of joint. She got the point. He was playing with her now.

Natasha forced her mind to behave as they gained their feet for a blurred-quick exchange of blows. They managed to block each other for several seconds, but Nat felt the restrained power in his movements. Steve's head jerked aside from her strike, then Natasha went flying to land at the edge of the mats not far from the ladies.

"Sorry. Too much?" Steve asked.

She looked up to see the brief worry on his face. It left him as soon as he noticed the wickedly appreciative gleam in her eyes. They chuckled, relishing the speed and each other's skills. He stalked over to smack hands with Natasha, then pull her up onto her feet. Darcy was frozen still, staring at them, so he reached over and grabbed more popcorn. He and Natasha moved back to the center of the room, letting themselves breathe for a bit while he chewed his mouthful of popcorn.

Nat lunged aside when he unexpectedly elbowed at her, then swept his arm to catch her up from the lunge. The wily shit took advantage of her recent training and used a knee to check her motion, then his foot to pin her to the floor at her hip. She had time to strike a hard heel to the pressure point inside the meat of his thigh. He went down as his leg sought relief from the pain and she laughed at him.

"Okay, now that's not even training. You're just having fun. Admit it," Clint said.

"Alright. That wouldn't work in real life. But it's not fair that you called me out on it. Did you see how many times she tried to get me unprepared, between matches?" Steve complained.

Sam, Clint, Steve and Natasha joked around and took a water break. Occasionally, Nat or Steve
would make an abortive move at each other, but the other was always aware and slapped the strike away before it could land.

Estrella looked on, appalled. Steve was being an asshole to Natasha. She would never have imagined he'd be so rough on Nat. Weren't they friends? Partners? She trembled in empathetic fright, trying not to imagine Steve coming after her with the brutal intent he'd shown just now. She'd heard the weight of his heels striking the mats, trying to crush Nat's head. The weight bench had made a gouge in the wall from where he'd shoved against it to tear after Nat, trying to snatch her from the air. She didn't see how Natasha wasn't hurt from the first bout, when Steve had grabbed her by the leg like a dog with a chew toy and slammed her to the mats.

Darcy had thought it was great, smiling and hooting until halfway through. Then she'd gone quiet too. Jane had stopped tapping away at her pad. Estrella pressed her shaking hands to her legs, smoothing her skirt out nervously.

"Is this normal?" she asked.

"Mostly. But I don't think I've seen Natasha on the defensive so much. His face was pretty scary, huh?" Darcy said.

Estrella nodded. He had looked much more like the image she'd seen of him from the mission file. Steve hadn't done any yelling or snarling, but she could now see the possibility in him. The kind man she'd fallen asleep on a few nights ago wasn't in this room. Even now, while he was laughing and talking with his teammates, his face wasn't fully relaxed into good humor. He was alert, aggressive, watching. Both of the men and Natasha could attack him together, and he'd not be taken by surprise.

As she watched, Steve laid a hand on Natasha's shoulder and patted her gently. He finished the sentence he was saying to Clint, then his attention turned to Estrella. His brows lowered and that crinkle formed between them when he saw that she was upset. He trailed his fingers across Nat's shoulders when he moved around behind her to walk toward the ladies.

Estrella was no observational expert on interactions between them, but even she could interpret the shoulder pat and the finger contact as a message to Natasha that sparring time was over for now and he wanted peace. Natasha turned her head to watch him walk away, and Estrella could see the tactical gleam of her eyes fade from opportunity assessment into a relaxed smile.

Darcy dug busily into her popcorn and Jane found something interesting on her pad again as Steve approached them. He was smiling at Estrella, but there was still something hard about his eyes. He didn't so easily set aside the physical tension of sparring like Nat was able to. Halfway across the mats to her, he shook out his limbs again, and she saw that he was easier in his step after that. Looser. Less scary.

Steve came close. He kept eye contact with her and slowed down, made everything predictable and smooth as he sunk to his knees at her feet. With a roll of his hands, he lifted her fingers off her legs and onto the backs of his hands. He made sure he wasn't above her or gripping her in any way. He touched a brief, light kiss to her knuckles on each hand, then smiled at her.

"You alright?" he asked.

Estrella shivered with tension and looked away. He was too slick with sweat. His voice was too deep. Too much skin. Too much muscle.

Beside them, Darcy shook her head at Steve. His eyes flickered to her, then back to Estrella.
"I'm sorry you watched that. I wouldn't have wanted you to," he apologized.

Estrella kicked him half-heartedly with the side of her foot. Her head tilted toward Darcy.

"Lewis?" Steve asked, low and displeased.

Darcy pasted on a big, fake smile and pointed a hidden finger toward the people in the middle of the floor.

"I thought so," Steve said.

He sighed and turned to sit on the floor beside Estrella, his back against the stack of mats and his shoulder touching her knee.

"Natasha," Steve said.

Nat left Sam and Clint and walked toward him, apparently unconcerned at his tone.

"What did you want from this, other than to scare her away from me?" he asked sharply.

Natasha stopped and propped a fist on her hip. She gave Estrella a silent, steady look before she addressed Steve.

"She needed to know, Steve," her attention turned to Estrella, "He's not just your teddy bear, girlfriend. He can be a hard-core sonofabitch. But you can drop him, can't you?"

"Naaaat, stop it," Steve told her. He reached up a foot and pushed at her. It was a relaxed gesture, not at all harsh.

Natasha grabbed his foot and changed her stance. She jerked him hard enough to tug his shoulders down the mats a few inches. She dropped his leg and stepped back because she knew what was coming.

Steve snapped to his feet and got in her face.

"No sparring near the ladies," he said tightly.

He toned his posture down from menacing to merely authoritative when he sensed Estrella's distress.

"But that's exactly what she needs. Estrella, take your necklace off and hand it to Jane. Get on the mats," Natasha said.

Steve carefully put his hand in the middle of Nat's back and guided her across the room. Nat could have twisted away and he knew it, but she went with him.

"What the hell are you doing? What's the plan?" he whispered at her furiously.

"I know she gets to you, Steve, but you can't be all emotion with her. This was necessary. Sooner or later, she would have seen the other side of you. This way, she's gotten a view in a controlled arena. She's scared. She's been set back. Now, she needs to see that she has some power, too. She's seen how strong you are. How fast. Let's show her that she can take you down. She needs that empowerment," Nat told him.

Steve thought it through quickly, then nodded. He hated it, but Nat was right. It was more honest this way. He wanted to be nothing but Steve Rogers around Estrella, but he might not always get
what he wanted.

"Do you have any idea how much this is going to hurt?" he squeezed his eyes shut.

The memory of the one time she'd yelled at him was fresh because a body remembered pain like that. Self-preservation instincts were designed to help him avoid feeling like that again. It hadn't been like a punch landed on bone and muscle. Estrella's yells pummeled at the tender parts of a man.

"You can take it. For her, you can do it," Nat said.

"You're an evil woman, Nat," Steve said.

Natasha wasted no time after she had his compliance.

"You guys are going to want to leave," she raised her voice to carry over to Sam and Clint.

Sam looked concerned. Clint had gone quiet, faintly worried about Steve. It looked like a blank face, but Natasha could read him. She tipped her head toward the door, and Clint encouraged Sam to gather his things and clear out.

Natasha watched them go, then she went to the doors to bolt them behind the guys so nobody could accidentally come in. Jane was at her elbow before she was done.

"Hey, I don't know what's going on, but I don't think I want to be here," she told Natasha.

"You sure? We're testing a theory. It's combat science. You might like it. You have any frequency analytics on your pad?" Natasha asked her.

Jane smiled nervously and shook her head. Then she nodded, and shook her head again.

"I do, but Jarvis can do the recording and I can look at it later. Please?" Doctor Foster looked toward the doors.

Natasha let her out, and looked to Darcy. Darcy folded her legs on the stack of mats and shook her head. She was holding out her popcorn bag for Steve. He hesitantly picked out a few pieces and ate them like his belly was already hurting. Nat locked the doors. Estrella wasn't looking at anybody. She found her knees very interesting.

"Estrella, look at me," Natasha demanded. She strode over to stand in front of her roommate. Dark, frightened eyes stared up at her. Her fingers were worrying at her copper butterfly.

"As rough as Steve was with me, you've got to know that he was helping me to get tougher and faster so that I can survive the next mission. He helps me stay accustomed to the pain. We try to do the same for him. We can't get weak or soft, or we'll get hurt," Natasha explained.

Estrella nodded slightly.

"It's your turn. You need to get on the mats and teach us what your voice can do," Natasha said.

Estrella shook her head. She didn't want to use her voice at all now. Not in a whisper, not even with her necklace on. Steve and Natasha were okay with pain. She'd seen that. She didn't want to do that to Steve.

He moved in front of her again and pulled her to her feet. She kept shaking her head.
"Eya, no. Stop shaking your head. There's no way you can get hurt here. I want this. I want you to see that you can stop me if you need to," he said.

"This is dumb! It's useless. All you'd have to do is cover my mouth and my voice won't matter," she denied.

With him this close, practically holding her, and that kind, genuine look on his face, she found the strength to talk. She kept wanting to lapse back into the silent, retreating defenses she'd learned on the street, but they wouldn't work here with these people.

"Your voice matters a lot. If you and me are walking down the sidewalk and something starts happening around us that I need to react to, I have to know that you can defend yourself. People don't know you. They won't anticipate your voice. Almost all of our enemy combatants are male. I need to know that you're safe with me on the street and in my living room. I need to know that you can stop me, or any other male aggressor," Steve said.

"You're not listening! I told you that all you have to do is cover my mouth and then I can't scream," she protested.

"Estrella. I won't ever cover your mouth. That would be pre-meditated and evil. If you think I could do that, then we don't know each other as well as I thought we did," Steve said.

She heaved a shaky breath and shook her head. Of course he wouldn't act like that. She shook his arms off from around her and stomped over to the middle of the floor. The mats felt weird and squishy under her shoes.

Darcy was picking at the last of the popcorn in her bag. She stole the water bottle that Jane had left behind in her cowardly dash to escape the show. She chugged half of it down and swished the popcorn taste from her mouth. She didn't fully understand what was going on, but fun in the training room was suddenly getting moody and serious. Seriouser. More serious. Whatever.

"Jarvis, you got this?" she said as low as she could. She didn't want to draw attention and get yelled at by any of the very, very serious people in the room she was locked in.

"Every breath and squeak of it, Miss Lewis," Jarvis said from the tiny phone speaker she held up to her ear. Darcy nodded and let her phone drop to her lap.

It was really hot how Steve was standing behind Natasha's cute new roommate, looking so concerned. His large hands worked at the ties of her funky-chic necklace. The wide-eyed girl shivered and Darcy didn't blame her. She'd be trembling too, if Cap was standing that close behind her and breathing on her neck all serious and shit. Too much serious, damn it. Oh.

Steve handed the necklace to Natasha without even looking at his partner in kick-assedness. His fingers, so brutal at yanking Natasha out of the air and slamming her like a tube of biscuits, ghosted up and down Estrella's neck. He bent down and kissed her, actually kissed her freaking graceful swan neck with soft lips and his eyes closed, where the knot of the necklace had rested. Eyes closed! And it wasn't a quick, friendly peck, either. The girl had time to gasp in a long, indrawn breath. Her eyes were closed too by this point, of course. Only Darcy and Natasha got to see the dripping, steaming chemistry between them.

Natasha was smirking, proud of herself. Darcy hated her. Why hadn't Natasha set the Lewis up with this? She hadn't needed to go trolling on the streets to find a girl for the Cap. She'd been Right. Fucking. Here! Darcy clapped her hands at her chest in outrage. Then she threw them out in the air. Why? Why?
Natasha turned her head slightly and shook it at Darcy. Darcy let her hands flop down into her lap. It wasn't like Steve would notice anyone else at the moment.

"You're a stinking bully, and you know it," Estrella whispered at Steve. She felt him smile against the back of her neck. His finger came around and pressed a shush onto her lips.

"That's enough, teddy bear Steve. Get your tush over there and put your hard-ass face on if you can," Natasha told him.

She pointed to the end of the mats near Darcy. Steve reluctantly left his position behind Estrella and went where he was told. He was loud and proud in his shorts, restricted only by his underwear. It was just Lewis. She was practically one of the guys, no matter how much she looked like a soft girl.

Steve avoided eye contact with Darcy and turned his rear to her. He had some idea of what Nat wanted him to do, and he needed the proper mindset for it to work. His overwhelming concern was for Estrella's well-being, and he'd tried to make sure of that by being sweet to her for a minute before all this painful mess started.

"Estrella, Steve is going to come at you as if he was a very bad man. Whenever he gets close enough to scare you, I need you to scream," Natasha said. She flicked her fingers at Steve and stepped aside, away from Estrella.

Steve cleared his face of any pleasant familiarity with Estrella. She was just a dame. A cute, frail looking dame. It was his job to nab her and run off. The boss said so. He strode forward onto the mats. She was watching him, big-eyed and worried. He put on a meaner face and walked a little faster.

Estrella screamed. It was short and sharp. The sound was painfully loud to Natasha and Darcy, as any scream in a closed room would be. But it didn't do to them what it did to Steve.

Steve's legs locked up and his body curled over protectively. His legs drew up to cradle and protect his groin and his arms wrapped around his head, hands clapped to his ears. He crumpled to the mat with no grace or dignity. Just a lot of pain. Not even a grunt escaped him.

"Steve! Are you okay? I'm so sorry. Please, be okay," Estrella said.

He huffed a little breath and uncurled some. Natasha nodded over to Darcy.

"Help him up," she told her.

Darcy got up from her spectator seating and cautiously inched out onto the mats. She'd never wanted to be on these mats. In her dreams maybe, with different lighting, and some mood music, but never in the harsh, scary light of real life. In real life, a skinny girl had just drop-kicked Captain America into a huddled ball. And the Widow wanted Darcy to be his ring-side coach for another round. This was so messed up.

She got to Steve. He was up onto his hands and knees now, but it didn't look like he wanted to move much more. Darcy put her hands on his yummy looking yet miserably hunched shoulders.

"Come on, Cap. You can do it. Up and at 'em," Darcy said and tugged at him.

Steve said something muffled and uncomplimentary, but she pretended not to hear it. He got to his feet and walked, somewhat hunched, back to where he'd started from. Darcy unhanded his shoulders after gripping and patting them. Just some friendly moral support, of course.
"Again, Steve, in a second. Estrella, this time, I want you to show me how close you think you can let him get before you scream," Natasha instructed.

Steve forced himself to stand up straight and ignore the sickening ache in his balls. He shook the last of the pain from his head and it wasn't too hard to put a mean face on. It worried him that Estrella was looking almost as sick as he felt, but he'd seen her more upset than this. They were okay still.

Natasha flicked her fingers at him.

He took one step forward and Estrella drew back and tensed. Steve's legs locked up and he couldn't make himself move. Physically he could, but mentally, nope. Not moving. Nat waved him on.

He tried again, then shook his head. His hind brain was telling him this was a very bad idea. Picking fights with super-villains was fine. But making Estrella scream was a no-go. It wasn't fear. He wasn't debilitated. He just really, really didn't want to proceed.

"You can do it, big man," Darcy cheered him on quietly.

Steve shook his head again.

"Estrella, if we're gonna do this, I need you to talk me into it. I can't just walk into this. Not without a real good motivation," Steve told her.

"I'm not talking you into it," Estrella whispered loud as she could, "Just leave. Go out the door and this crazy woman can't make us do this anymore."

"No, baby. Can't do that. Come on. We have to know this stuff. Nat's right about this. You have to know it. Say anything. Say the pledge of allegiance. You can do that, right?" Steve encouraged her. He didn't want to. Her idea was good. It would be so much nicer to walk out the door. But they were gonna get this over with. He rolled a hand at her.

"Don't forget to scream at the end," he reminded her, just in case.

"This is so wrong," Darcy mumbled. He wanted her to recite the pledge of allegiance? What the hell? But then the girl started doing just that. Darcy watched curiously. It was no big deal. It was just a girl saying the pledge.

Steve stood up taller after the first few words. What, was he getting all patriotic? Being who he was, that wasn't an impossibility. By the time Estrella said the words "of the United States of America," Steve's posture changed again.

His shoulders rounded down into more of a sparring stance like he'd had with Natasha, and his hands were out, ready to grab something. What? Then he started moving toward Estrella. Faster. Oh. Oh, shit! He was gonna-

"Steeeve!" Estrella shrieked. She hunkered down and turned away from him, because he was almost to her.

Steve groaned like a felled tree and made a pretty good impression of one, too. Natasha hurried to pull Estrella a little aside. He hit the mats with a solid thump. He didn't move much after that, other than to abortively hitch his legs up. Darcy rushed to him this time, more certain of his disability to mistake her for something he should hit.

"Hey, Cap. You in there?" she asked.
His face was clenched shut against any outside input. She didn't think he was hearing anything. Darcy rested her hand on his shoulder to try to get his attention.

"Get away from him, puta!" Estrella hissed.

The girl had evil eyes and she hurried toward Darcy in a way that was Not Okay. Darcy fell back and let her at Steve. Estrella sat at his back and touched his hair. She bent down a little to speak gently at his ear.

"No more of this, Steve. We're done. So you better get up and get your crazy friends off us, or I'm getting Bucky and hauling you out of here," Estrella said.

She got up and went over to Natasha. She held her hand out for her necklace. Nat shook her head.

"Give it. It's not yours," Estrella said.

She shoved Natasha hard enough to make her step a foot back and brace herself.

"We're not done here," Natasha denied her.

"We are. Give it to me or I'll start singing," Estrella threatened.

Steve got to his feet from where he'd been on the mats. Darcy scrabbled away from what he was packing. Away from the super-creepy look on his face. He was a lot too big to get in the way of unless something was worth dying for.

He took carefully controlled steps over to stand behind Estrella. His hands curved over Estrella's shoulders and he looked down at Natasha. Darcy didn't want to see what his face looked like. Things weren't fun anymore.

"Give it to her," Steve said.

His voice was nothing like they'd heard it before. This was some sort of Evil Cap channeling Vin Diesel. Estrella had an all-over shiver, but she held out her hand to Natasha.

Natasha looked at the civilian casualties. Then she looked at the locked door. Bruce was right. Something was wrong with Steve. Nat slowly, carefully put the necklace in Estrella's hand.

He tied it onto her just as carefully. Then he stopped touching Estrella. Natasha watched the way he stood there for an undecided moment. He didn't move so much as a muscle fiber, not even to breathe. He was fighting something in his mind. Fighting hard. Then he turned and went away.

The bolts on the doors shrieked and tore when his hands struck, then he kept walking.

"Interesting," Natasha said.

"I hate you," Estrella whispered. Nobody was sure who she was talking to.

"You're some crazy-headed bitches, and there isn't enough alcohol for this," Darcy said, to both of them.
Chapter 21

Au thor's note: this chapter got long before I was done with all that needed to happen. Oh, well. I’ve done some interesting searches for this story so far. This chap required me to read up on what really happens at a strip club in the private rooms. And I read some considerably less fun information about the long term medical consequences of starvation. If you know a young lady who is having food issues, please do some reading and be supportive of her getting healthy again. We should all look like 1940s pinup girls! ( Those of us who are girls, anyway. ;} ) Emaciated is not healthy or sexy. Sadly, none of us have a RL Steve Rogers to give us serum quick-fixes against osteoporosis and heart failure. Please, love yourselves and those around you who need love, too.

M!

Away. Away from Estrella. Had to go.

Steve's thoughts were very simple as he put distance between himself and her. The greater the distance between them, the better. Better for her. Beneath his barely sentient thoughts was a seething mass of sensation. Imagery. Want.

He needed to touch her, smell her, taste...no!

Steve shook his head and breathed through clenched teeth. The more he focused on the images in his head, on the way his body felt, the more his footsteps slowed. If he kept thinking about what he wanted, he'd turn around and go back to her. Natasha couldn't stop him. Lewis wouldn't try. Thor wasn't here. Bruce would choose the less dangerous option for everyone, which was for him to do nothing. Tony in the suit would be the only way to stop him, other than a bullet in his head. Had to keep moving. Away from Estrella.

The elevator was in sight. The doors opened before him and he got in.

"Where do you wish to go?" Jarvis asked.

"Home," Steve said.

The sound of his own voice was raw and shameful to his ears. He sounded like he felt.

Standing still in the elevator, his focus narrowed down to the most demanding part of him. He ached with want, and from the lingering pain of Estrella's screams. He'd had to ignore his body's needs before for the sake of the greater good. He could do it again, he assured himself. With time and distance from the training room, he was able to force himself into a more rational mindset.

He should not have let Natasha move forward with her plan to test Estrella's voice. He'd already been in a bad place, requiring mental distraction to be able to spar with Nat. Then, he'd had to let go of the distracting thoughts in order to keep Nat from smacking him unexpectedly between sparring sets. Once he'd gone fully vigilant, he was already losing the battle. Then, Estrella's necklace came off and it was over with for him.
The last thing he clearly remembered being in control of was telling her to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. After that, all he'd been able to do was hold onto the ragged edge of restraint. There at the end while he'd tied her necklace back on, restraining what he wanted to do had been about as difficult as keeping Thor from bending his arm back during arm wrestling. He was going to lose. It was only a matter of time.

"Your vital signs are quite disturbed, Captain. Do you require assistance?" Jarvis asked him as he left the elevator and hurried into his suite.

"Need to get out of here," Steve said.

"Is there any way I may assist you?" Jarvis wondered. He wasn't certain how the Captain's words should be interpreted.

"Leave me alone," Steve told him.

"As you wish," Jarvis said.

Steve showered quickly and changed into a pair of jeans he'd never worn before. They were already ripped and fuzzy across the front of the thigh when Pepper had insisted on buying them for him. He didn't know why anyone would purchase clothes that were already torn, but part of him could appreciate the well-worn look of them. Their snug fit hugged him in a way that felt good at the moment. The bottoms of the jeans were roomy enough for his brown boots. He pulled on a long sleeved green Henley and the leather belt that matched his boots. His skin was sensitized to the degree that the thermal weave of the cloth snagged on his nipples and gave him a jolt.

He pulled on his old brown leather jacket and checked himself in the mirror briefly to be sure he didn't have anything ugly on his face or teeth. With phone and wallet in his back pockets, he moved quickly to the elevator. He didn't know where he was going yet, but it would be away from here. Away from-

She was standing in the entry lobby when the elevator doors opened to the parking garage. She was there, not doing anything in particular, waiting for him. He stepped out of the elevator and moved aside so she couldn't crowd him into a small space. Nobody else was around in the lower level parking garage. She eyed him up and down, then looked away.

"You and Jarvis hunting me?" Steve asked.

He knew he didn't sound very kind right now. He probably didn't look it, either. Estrella was brave, though. She stepped toward him. His posture tensed and she stopped where she was. Steve made an effort to look anywhere but at her.

"I'm not hunting you. I want to go with you. I don't care where. I want away from here," she told him.

"No," he said.

"Steve, I-"

"No. Not tonight," he told her.

He didn't want to have to talk about it a lot, so he closed the distance between them and guided her against him. She came to him, trusting but confused. He pressed her in tighter and held her there. He still refused to look at her.
"Steve!" she hissed, and she finally started struggling when she felt what he was trying to tell her. He shut his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her for a moment, then he loosened his arms enough to let her back away a half step. He kept his hands looped behind her back.

"You're not going with me tonight, Eya. Understand?" he asked.

"Hmmph! Then where are you going with that?" she asked him.

He glanced down at her and smiled a little. He should have known she wouldn't run scared. She was afraid, but she wasn't running.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

Steve rubbed his hand across the small of her back until his thumb and fingers found the gap between her top and her skirt. Soon as his fingertips touched her skin, he stilled and let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Her presence calmed him. Touching her brought him peace. He was glad she'd used Jarvis to find him and intercept him before he'd left the tower.

Things had ended poorly in the training room. As soon as he was out in the city and calmed down, he would have wanted to tell her he was sorry for what happened. Steve stepped back to the wall and leaned on it. She went with him and seemed to know that she was helping him.

"I'm sorry I let things get crazy in the training room," he told her.

"You? I'm the one who let Natasha talk me into doing something crazy. I never should have used my voice against you. Are you feeling okay?" she asked.

Estrella stood beside him and let him keep his fingertips on her skin. She reached up to turn his face to her. She scratched her fingers at his jaw how she knew he liked it.

He was feeling sane enough to look at her now. How did she do that? She could make him mad with lust, or knock him off his feet with pain, or have him laughing, or calm him with a touch. Maybe he should have resented her ability to affect him, but he didn't. It felt good to feel something other than duty and obligation. He felt alive when he was with her. He felt like himself, whoever that was.

"I'm better now. What about you? Was your visit to the training room too much?" he asked.

Steve looked at her, concerned. They'd pushed her pretty hard out of her comfort zone today.

"I'm okay. I understand the last part, with my voice. I didn't want to hurt you. Next time, I'm not going to do it, I don't care who asks me to. What bothers me is how mean you were to Natasha. Aren't you afraid you'll hurt her?" she asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Nat's tough. She doesn't break as easy as regular folks," Steve said.

"If you say so, but I don't like to see you looking so… bent on destruction," Estrella told him.

"It's what I'm made for. Like I said, I'm sorry you saw me like that. Nat thinks it was a good thing for you to see, but I'm not so sure," he said.

Estrella shook her head in agreement. She was having a hard time reconciling his ferocity with his gentleness, and he could see that. He lifted the hand that wasn't touching her back and grazed his
fingertips over her cheekbone. With the lightest of touches, he brushed at the fine, dark hair above her ear. He did it to remind her that his roughness with Natasha wasn't the only way he could be.

"Eya, I told you weeks ago that there are two sides of me. Today was just some sparring and a little friendly competition. It gets worse. If it's too much, I'm sorry. Much as I'd rather hang around with you, I have to be Captain America sometimes. That's how I pay the bills," he said.

"I know. I'm being stupid. Scared again, I guess," she admitted.

"There's nothing wrong with that. Listen to your gut. Self-preservation is a good thing," he told her.

"My 'gut' was telling me that I shouldn't be anywhere near you," Estrella said.

"If there ever comes a time when you think you can't trust me, then listen to that feeling," he told her.

"I don't think you'll hurt me," she said.

"I don't think so either, but I could. I'd never want to," he said.

Steve let his hand fall from her face, but his other fingers were rubbing softly at her back. Her skin felt so good to him.

"Is this alright?" he asked her. He scratched his fingers against her skin lightly, then soothed the scratches with rubs.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed.

Estrella grinned and scratched her nails under his jaw again, as if to show him that his touch was no more than what she was doing. He knew better. He had his fingers under her clothes. Anybody on the street could touch him where she was touching. Nobody did, but still…

"We could spend the rest of the afternoon laying around scratching each other like cats," she said.

"Mmm. Or we could find a fence to rub on. Why does it feel so good?" he asked absently.

He let his head rest back against the wall and closed his eyes. Her fingers and nails moving over his beard nearly made him sigh, it was so good. She moved from one side of his face to the other, and he tilted his head to give her better access. He liked how as he rubbed the skin of her back, he could feel that she was gaining some fat and muscle between her skin and her bones. She had a little more weight to her now when he pushed or pulled at her.

Estrella wasn't saying anything in response. Her hand went from scratching him to caressing his face and his neck. When he felt his body tightening again, Steve opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Don't do that, Eya," he said. He caught her hand and rested it on his chest instead. Then he realized that his heart wasn't calm either, and maybe it wasn't such a good idea to show her that. He moved to push her hand off of him all together, but she flattened it to his chest and kept it there.

"You do the same to me, you know," Estrella told him.

She regarded him with a soft kind of wanting. She took the hand he'd tried to push hers away with and brought it to her chest. He felt the same fast thumping in her.

"No," Steve said.
He pulled his captured hand back, and his other one too. He'd started this. He needed to be more careful. They couldn't do this. Not now. Probably not ever. She wasn't well. She was afraid. He shouldn't touch her anymore. He needed to keep his distance. Keep things right and proper.

"I have to go," he told her.

Estrella nodded. She bit her lip and watched him leave. He didn't realize what he was doing, but she knew. He was running from her, and looking for something out there. That much was obvious. She would have laughed at the sight of Steve Rogers in fashionably ratty jeans, but he looked too good to laugh at. He shoved his helmet on his head, then he was gone into the afternoon. His heavy bike wobbled slightly as he gave himself a shake, then he was out of the garage and out of sight.

She smiled and turned to go inside. She was still skinny, and already she was getting to him. It wasn't very nice of her to stay around. She didn't want to use him or bend him into someone he wasn't. As she got in the elevator, she wondered if she should leave today. She had a little money and some clothes, and the necklace. She'd paid Tony the last of what she owed him with her most recent paycheck. She could go.

But she didn't want to leave. Not yet. Much as Steve liked her touch, she liked his, too. He was the first man she'd ever wanted to touch her. He was a little scary sometimes, like today, but he made up for it in other ways.

"Miss, the Captain is asking me personal questions about you. Would you like me to-"

"Answer him," Estrella said.

"But Miss, some of his questions fall within medical confidentiality. There are waivers for you to sign if you want him to be your proxy," Jarvis said.

"Natasha and Steve both told me that there would be no papers, no records on me. I don't exist. Tell him what he wants to know," Estrella said.

"Yes, Miss," Jarvis said.

As soon as Steve had the bike out in traffic, he touched his chin to the call button inside his helmet. He needed to start using more of his brain around Estrella and less of his body. He needed knowledge to make that decision easier to act on.

"Jarvis," he said.

"Yes, Captain?"

"How much has she gained?"

"Twenty-two pounds as of her last check-up," Jarvis said hesitantly.

"What are her remaining health issues?" Steve asked.

"Please give me a moment to check data entries," Jarvis responded.

Steve knew that checking data never took as long as a moment for Jarvis. He waited patiently,
anyway.

Traffic was heavy. He set his feet on the pavement and sat back while he wasn't moving. The vibration of the bike felt good. Heck, almost everything felt good right now. Too good. Why the hell had Estrella's hand on his face turned him on? Her touch wasn't even sexual. It hadn't started out that way, at least.

"Thank you for your patience, Captain. Miss Estrella's remaining health concerns are the damage to her liver and her bone density. She likely is still suffering some cognitive effects, and of course her body condition isn't optimally balanced, if you were to compare her to a person trained for combat," Jarvis said.

"So she weighs a hundred pounds. What is her healthy weight?" Steve asked.

"We don't have a way of knowing that. Would you like me to ask her?" Jarvis asked.

"No. Tell me about her liver," Steve said.

Traffic moved, so Steve got a grip on his bike and got going. He decided he would just drive for a while until he thought of somewhere to go.

"We can only assume her liver is damaged and that it is also recovering slowly, because that is what would be common for her condition. To know for certain, a liver biopsy would be needed. It is better to be less intrusive. Within a matter of months of a return to a healthy diet, her liver function should return to normal," Jarvis told him.

"That's great. What about her bone density?"

"Miss Estrella will likely suffer from fragile bones for the rest of her life. Especially so in her later years," Jarvis said.

Steve felt a rush of denial. What Jarvis said felt like doom for her, from Steve's perspective. Having weak bones was unthinkable to him.

"Is that mere speculation, or have her bones been scanned?" Steve asked sharply.

"They have. Both Doctor Kalfey and Doctor Banner independently diagnosed that she has osteopenia, which is bone loss. Miss Estrella has been cautioned to avoid falls and hard blows. Her pelvis, femurs, and spine are particularly vulnerable," Jarvis said.

Steve was disturbed enough that he had to pull over his bike and park. He was only vaguely aware of his surroundings as the bad news flooded him with so many implications. She was young, but she likely wouldn't be able to do many things. Climbing, running, jumping, high kinetic sports and thrills like sky-diving, even simple bicycling could be dangerous for her. His bike. Motorcycle accidents were always bad, but for her it could be devastating. And a little later in life… childbirth? Sex? Stairs? Car accidents?

He sat in troubled silence. He'd wanted wonderful things for Estrella. It had been dreadful to see how dim and fragile she was while she'd lived on the street. Since she'd been protected and fed and had her heart treated, she'd become vibrant and quick as a hummingbird. He'd been under the illusion that she was fine now and that she would soon be as healthy as anyone. But what Jarvis had just told him meant that she would never be quite alright. Her newfound swiftness of foot and cardiac health could lead to terrible injury.

"Steve, are you alright?" Tony's voice came to him over the phone.
"Steve, answer me goddamnit!"

"Yeah, I'm here," he said belatedly.

He hadn't realized that his breathing was out of sorts. Jarvis had likely gotten Tony on the line when he'd quit responding.

"Jarvis tells me you've been snooping in your girl's diagnoses?"

"Yeah," Steve said. He got his breathing under control.

"And you didn't like what you found, did you?"

"Her bones, Tony," Steve said.

He didn't have the will to argue with Tony about calling Estrella his girl, or to snipe back at him about being nosy in the med files.

"She's a survivor, but she had to make choices to keep going, and sometimes there's a cost for that," Tony said.

Steve nodded. He knew that, but Tony's reminder helped him to recall how poor her available choices had been.

"You still there?" Tony asked.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"Monosyllabic is not sexy on you right now, man. Why don't you head back to the house?" Tony suggested.

"Nah. I'm gonna ride for a while," Steve told him.

"Do you mind if I keep an eye on you? You don't sound very sharp right now," Tony said.

"I don't need a fucking baby-sitter, Stark. I got on the bike to get out of the damn house," Steve snapped.

There was silence for a half minute, which was long enough for Steve to regret how he'd spoken.

"Sorry. Just…"

"Don't worry about it. I know you want to go, but before you do, remember that she's here and she's safe. There's a lot we can do for her, and she's got time now. You got her off the street and saved her. We can work with that, right? It's a good start," Tony said.

Steve grunted a reluctant agreement.

"Man, I wish you could get wasted. You're right. You need to get away and get shit-faced. I'm gonna leave a number in your contacts. This man has some special stock. How much cash do you have on you?" Tony asked.

Steve was feeling low enough to be mildly interested, rather than disgusted by the idea of whatever 'special stock' meant.

"Probably three hundred," Steve said.
Tony made a muffled sound.

"Okay, never mind that. Just call the number if you want. It's in your contacts under 'shit.' Got it? Tell him Howard sent you. And please don't tell Pepper," Tony told him.

"Yeah," Steve said.

He laughed, feeling delirious and wrung empty.

"You sound strange. Did you hear yourself? You sound strange. Talk to me quick or I'm coming to get your cranky monosyllabic ass and we'll party at the house," Tony threatened him.

Steve was coming back to himself enough to notice the details of traffic flowing past his parking spot, and afternoon pedestrians eyeing him as they passed on the sidewalk. They could probably hear his end of the conversation. Why were people looking? Didn't they know about helmet phones? Steve stopped wondering about that when he heard the familiar sounds of Tony's suit locking into place over the open call.

"Stand down, Tony. No need to suit up. I'm about two hours late for lunch. I listened to Estrella recite the Pledge of Allegiance without her necklace on, and then she screamed at me. I'm horny as a goat and hungry as one, too, and everything hurts," Steve reported.


Steve laughed again.

"I'm not makin any promises," he drawled.

"See! That's just not right," Tony said.

"I'm fine, Tony. Relax,"

"Sure. Just don't have too much fun, okay?"

Tony sounded nervous. It put a smile on Steve's face.

"Leave me alone before you make me curse again," Steve told him.

"Alright. We're here if you need us," Tony said.

"Thanks," Steve said.

The call finally ended.

Steve let the afternoon play through his mind. No one had told him that her bones were so fragile. She could have been hurt today if he or Natasha had made any mistakes. He could never take her for a ride on his bike. She couldn't be trained for self-defense.

She'd surprised him today in the parking garage when he'd got off the elevator. What was happening between them? She felt so good, but he couldn't touch her any more. He couldn't take advantage like that, knowing that nothing could ever come of it.

Even if he wasn't in a position of power relative to her, even if she could get over her past trauma, he couldn't touch her anyway. She was too fragile. And that wasn't going to change. Tony and Bruce couldn't use his blood to fix her bones like they had her heart. It was too broad an area, with
too much risk for unwanted change.

Steve made himself face the fact that he couldn't have anything beyond friendship with Estrella. He felt a loss he hadn't expected. Maybe they'd moved beyond friendship already without him noticing.

He thought of some of their recent physical interactions. Natasha wouldn't have fallen asleep in his arms. Nat wouldn't have let him hold her in the first place, unless it was during a mission and he had to. Nat wouldn't scratch under his jaw like Eya did. So, yeah. They'd already started moving beyond friendship. He'd been willing to overlook her admiring stares as simply the kind of thing that happened because she was a woman. He shouldn't have.

Steve grit his teeth. Whatever was growing between them, he had to let it go. New as it was, the premature death of it hurt already. He took a moment to feel it.

Then he took his helmet off and got off the bike.

No Peggy. No Estrella. Fine. He could do this.

He set the helmet on the leather seat of his bike and went into the burger place across the sidewalk to get some food. After that, he had calls to make.

This time, Steve parked his bike right behind the thumping car. His pal from last time he'd been in the neighborhood watched him roll up, and the guys with him went quiet when he turned off the bike. He'd left the helmet off since he stopped for food because he didn't want any more calls from the tower and they were harder to ignore when the helmet was on.

"Hey, man. You come around lookin for Creepy Cracka again?"

"I don't have to look, now that I know where he is. How've you been?" Steve asked the man. He nodded to the rest of the guys. Word had surely been spread about who he was, at least among this group of friends, because the guy nearest him put his hand out. Steve reached to shake his hand in unspoken greeting.

There was a moment when the tension and uncertainty of his arrival melted into a more relaxed acceptance. Steve got off the bike and stepped up the curb to stand among the fellas.

"We doing alright. But, hey, you live uptown in the tower. Why you keep coming to our place?" his pal wanted to know.

"Aw, this ain't your place. It's my place. I was here first. Me and my ma, right there, until the war," Steve pointed at his old building and his window.

"No shit? World War Two, right?"

"Yeah. But don't let it get around much if it hasn't already. I don't need aliens and robots following me over here, you know? I'm off the clock," Steve said.

The guys all chuckled at that. They thought it was a good laugh, but Steve was just as serious as he was joking.
"So. 'Creepy Cracka.' It fits. Has he killed anybody else since I was here last?" Steve asked.

"I never said I killed 'em. Maybe they're just having a real hard time finding their way home from Siberia," Buck said.

Steve and the guys looked aside to where Bucky had quietly joined them on the sidewalk.

Steve laughed again in resigned surprise. Yeah, he could hear what Tony meant now. He did sound off somehow. Wrong. But it felt right. He was gonna go with it, at least for tonight. Buck completely ignored the guys standing around. He stood there, dirty from work with his lunch cooler in his hand, assessing Steve's strange laugh and his strange clothes.

"Ripped jeans? What's wrong with you?" Buck frowned at him.

"Blame it on Stark's girl. Arm," Steve said at the bike.

"I'm not gonna watch your bike," his pal said.

"I'm not either," Buck said, "you should take the bus or something."

"The bike can watch itself," Steve told them.

Bucky looked his bike over. It was shiny and clean again, and it looked every bit as expensive and customized as it was. Steve, with his sharp Irish looks, stood out in contrast against his new friends. They were all jaded and street-wise, and Steve was still an idealistic do-gooder.

"We're gonna have to do something different. You coming around is gonna fuck up the place," Bucky grumbled.

"Yeah, it's cool and all, but..." one of the fellas said to Steve. He had a neatly trimmed goatee and wore a nice watch.

Steve lifted a brow in a way that Bucky knew from long acquaintance meant that his friend was looking for a fight tonight. He turned his body so that Buck was on his right and the fellas were on his left. Buck noticed the loose, open position of his arms at his sides. He'd seen a lot of shit start from just that position.

"How many of you do ya think it'll take to make me leave?" Steve asked, not joking anymore at all. The guy nearest him put his hands up and backed away a little.

"Come on, punk, let's take this inside," Bucky said, low and calm.

He tilted his head toward his apartment across the street. The fellas were watchful, sensing the tension in the moment. One of them in the back was getting his phone camera ready in case something happened.

Steve didn't feel like being herded indoors. He didn't want to get mouthy, either. Tony had said to stay off the news, and that meant off the internet too. He'd make an honest effort, but he'd had enough shit happen to him today. No more.

"I'm ready to go. I'll wait here while you get cleaned up," Steve told Bucky.

He leaned against the bike's seat and nodded Buck toward his apartment. Buck stared at him for a moment.

"Ain't scared. I know how to get home from Siberia," Steve said.
Buck looked undecided for a few seconds, but then a grin pulled at his face. He turned his back and walked across the street in the evening gloom.

"Wait a minute. Are you sayin that Little D and the boys ain't dead?" his pal asked.

"I don't know. They could be gruesomely dead. Or, they really could be taking a long, long walk and a boat ride back from Siberia. I'm sorry. I can't make any promises about him. He's my best pal from way back and some bad things have happened to him. If somebody disappears who shouldn't, let me know and I'll see what I can do, but other than that," Steve shrugged.

"For real? You ain't' gonna call the police or nothing?"

"Not unless I have proof. Even then, I can't call the cops. They can't handle him. I'd have to take him in myself. You could always call the cops to investigate things, you know. It's their job. I don't live here anymore. I don't know what's happening like you do," Steve said.

"Pssh," some of them said. He got several disgusted looks and dismissive hand waves.

"So Creepy Cracka ain't just for show?" his pal asked.

"I'm afraid not. But he won't hurt women or children, unless they seem Russian and suspicious, maybe," Steve said.

"Russian? What the fuck?"

"It's a long story. Like I said, we've known each other for a while. We spent a lot of time on the other side of the world," Steve told them.

They had questions about how things had been over there. Steve enjoyed talking about it because they didn't ask the same tired things that most people did. They wanted to know about the women, the fighting, and the men he'd fought with and against. Most people wanted to know personal things about Captain America.

It felt pretty safe to talk about it, because the Smithsonian display already included the bare bones of what he was telling them. They wanted the more interesting details that had been left out. They seemed particularly interested in how he and Buck had fought together. Steve kept the conversation away from Buck's time with Hydra. There was plenty to talk about other than that.

"You done flappin your lips about me?" Buck asked.

The fellas went quiet again. Bucky had walked back across the street dressed in a tailored black shirt and pants, paired with agile looking black leather boots. To Steve, he looked uncomfortably like a civilian version of the Winter Soldier. He'd shaved his face clean, but his hair was still long.

"Look, wear a bell or something, would ya? Or at least teach me to do that," Steve complained.

"Yeah, man, that ain't right," one guy said.

Buck smiled, looking sinister and not at all cheery.

"Nah. Don't wanna tarnish your lily-white reputation, Cap. Leave the sneakin to me. Let's get walking. Club's three miles up the road and some of us have to work tomorrow," Buck said.

"We can take the bike and be there in no time," Steve said.

The fellas guffawed.
"Yeah, listen to them. I ain't riding with you. We can make three miles in twenty minutes, easy. Come on," Bucky said.

"See ya later, fellas," Steve called to the guys on the sidewalk.

"You going to Crystal's?" his pal asked.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"It's kinda rough over there, and you on foot, you know," pal said.

"I think we can handle it, but thanks," Steve said.

"Alright. But don't say I didn't warn you. You should take the bus," pal suggested.

Steve and Bucky walked down the sidewalk and people generally got out of their way, except for the girls on the corner.

"Bat-shit crazy fuckers," the man with the goatee said.

"Well, they're like heroes and shit. Or maybe a hero and Hannibal Lector. That's fucked up. What's Captain America doing hangin with a psycho boy like him?" another guy wondered.

"They spent a lot of time. They're brothas. Ain't nothin you can do," pal shrugged.

After walking two blocks and getting into an altercation with some locals, Buck convinced Steve to take the bus the rest of the way. Buck stared out the bus window at the men who'd caused the trouble as the bus pulled away from the curb.

"Forget them. It's my fault. I should have listened to you," Steve said as they stood in the aisle. He didn't like the still, cold way Buck was memorizing the faces of the troublemakers.

"No more free trips to Siberia," Steve urged him.

"Heh. It was Serbia. I'm not evil enough to fly people to Siberia in September," Buck smirked.

"Yeah, well, no more trips to Serbia, then. How do you arrange that, anyway?" Steve asked quietly. He shifted closer to Buck so they wouldn't be overheard. Not that any of the tired souls on the bus would care.

"Not all of Hydra knows I defected. When I make a call, a plane shows up. It's funny as fuck. I wish I could have seen them when they woke up in a place they couldn't understand," Buck said.

Steve laughed. He should have reprimanded Bucky for going to extremes to even a street score, but he was so damn glad that Little D and his guys weren't dead. They'd get home eventually, or they'd start a new life for themselves somewhere along the way. And it meant Buck wasn't as far gone as he'd feared. He chuckled again, imagining Brooklyn street thugs shoved out into Eastern Europe. Babes in the woods. His quiet laughter died down when Buck made a face like something tasted bad.

"Quit that. What's wrong with you tonight?" Buck frowned at him.
Passing street lights angled over the planes of Buck's face and made his eyes shine with sharp suspicion at Steve. It was the same look he'd gotten for years when Steve was starting things Buck would have to step in and finish.

Steve clenched his jaw while he decided if he should tell Buck about Estrella. The bus stopped on the next block. Some people got on. Some people got off. The aisle got a little more crowded.

"The girl from the street. Her name's Estrella. She's got this voice. It does things to a man. Makes us lose control. She's had it rough since she was twelve," Steve said.

Buck nodded his understanding of Steve's explanation so far. They'd both seen enough strange things for Estrella's vocal abilities to be believable without much comment.

"Anyway. Her voice. Natasha wanted to test her because when she speaks, she draws me in, you know? But when she screams, it's like a kick in the balls. Twice, Nat had me come at her, then Eya screamed to stop me. God, it hurt, Buck. But then, she spoke real sweet to me. So, then I was hurting and...wanting at the same time. I had to get away. And then, Stark's AI, Jarvis, tells me that her bones are fragile, from being emaciated for so long. I couldn't have anything with her if I wanted to," Steve tried to keep the explanation as short and to the point as possible.

"You got a thing with her? She's a kid, Steve. I'm supposed to be the one who's sick in the head. What's happened to you?" Buck asked.

"She's twenty-three. Just a few years younger, not counting the ice. I didn't think I had a thing, but maybe I did," Steve said.

"Did? C'mon, Stevie. You're not fast with the girls. You never have been. If you did have a thing, then you still do," Buck said.

"I don't. I won't. It was a mistake from the beginning. She needed help, but I should have helped her and kept my distance," Steve admitted.

The bus stopped again at the next block. Steve grit his teeth. This was why he hated buses. It took so long to get anywhere. Walking was faster.

"Why didn't you keep your distance?" Buck asked.

"Because she's..." Steve gestured helplessly, not having adequate words to explain Estrella.

"She's what? She's not a doll. She's more like a stick figure. You can't tell me you fell for her looks," Buck said.

"Don't talk about her like that. She's a nice girl," Steve said in warning. Buck could see from the steel in his eyes that he meant it. He was protective of this girl. More than he was of the average dame or person in general. A lot more protective. Yeah, Stevie had a thing for her, whether he thought it was over or not.

"Ease up. So, she's something else. You like her. But you're too strong and she's too breakable, so now you can't have her. That's raw. When are you gonna stop mooning over all the ones you can't have and find one that's easy?" Buck asked.

"As soon as this damn bus gets where it's going," Steve said.

"You're telling me you're gonna get a girl in a strip club?" Buck asked. He made a suppressed, strangled noise in his throat, he was trying so hard not to laugh. Only Stevie could be so naïve.
Steve's fist stung the middle of his chest, knuckles buried against his sternum for an instant.

Buck laughed out loud and rubbed at the hurt. People looked at them, then quickly away. Steve was glaring at him in a way that probably would have had his new super-shiny super-hero chums pissing in their britches.

"Stevie, come here," Buck gasped as soon as his laughing died down enough. He gestured with a finger for Steve to lean in close. Steve still looked steamed up, but he closed the distance.

"You can't touch the girls in the club. It's not like the old days. If you try to touch too much, they throw you out and the fun's over. We can get you a lap dance. That's about it. For anything else, we go back to my place and I'll call Kenya. She knows what to do," Buck said.

Steve growled something negative at him. Buck could feel the frustration in his friend. It was good fun, watching him squirm, but Steve was edging over into a darker place that Buck suspected came from too many years of denying himself. And maybe the girl, his untouchable Estrella, was winding him up tight, too. Buck slapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't sweat it. We'll get you fixed up," he told Steve.

"I don't need fixing," Steve denied through clenched teeth.

"Yes, you do," Buck said.

They rode in stiff silence until the bus got to the corner where the strip club was. Steve was tightly, carefully polite to the other people on the bus and to the people on the street in front of the club, and to the brutes at the door.

The guy didn't look twice at Steve or at his name on his ID. He took his money and waved him in. Buck never had that problem with notoriety to begin with, so he was in quick. The place was moderately busy on a week night, and the smell of alcohol and smoke filled the air. It was dark inside except for stage lighting and the lights behind the bar. The carpet, the tables, and the chairs were black. The lighting and arrangement worked to draw all attention to the booze and the tits.

Buck followed Steve as he made his way through the place to an empty table right up by the main stage. Steve sat and ignored Bucky. He had eyes for the mostly naked girl slithering around the pole on stage. Buck looked around the club for anyone who sparked his memory, or any potential dangers. He was busy assessing, so Steve had to buy the first round of drinks when the waitress came around.

"Buck, whiskey?" Steve called over the music.

"Sure," Buck agreed, not that it mattered.

Everyone in the club was unknown, and that eased Buck's watchfulness a little. It was mostly single guys, a few women, and a few after-hours executive buddy groups. The waitress brought the drinks as Steve was standing to take off his jacket and drape it over the back of the chair. She set the shots on the table, then turned to make small-talk with Steve.

Buck chuckled when instead of smiling at the woman, Steve coldly threat-assessed her for an instant. That flustered her and she went away.


Steve flicked him a gesture and sat back down. He tossed back his whiskey and looked at the
blonde girl up on stage. Bucky tried to relax. He'd worn a long sleeve shirt and had so far kept his left hand in his pocket. It was an awkward position to keep while sitting, so he freed his hand to rest on his thigh, plainly visible.

The girl on stage was doing interesting things to the pole and Steve watched avidly. While she was upside down undulating against the brass, she looked at him and smiled. Steve liked the way her well-toned body moved, but he couldn't help comparing her to how Natasha moved in battle or in the training room. Because of how Nat used her body to weaken men's minds before a kill, he was wondering if the blonde girl's moves were just as cold and practiced.

She noted his interest and unwound herself from the pole. In impossibly high heels, she came to his edge of the stage, working her body with every step. Steve smiled, in familiar appreciation of hours of practice and calculated intent. She squatted on her heels right in front of him and rocked her hips invitingly while she played with her breasts.

"You're supposed to tip her, punk," Bucky said loud enough to be heard over the music. He gestured to the money the girl had tucked into the strings at her hips.

"I remember," Steve said.

He drew out a five, and leaned slow and careful to slide it into her hand. She wasn't expecting that, and she looked to his face to smile at him. The stage lights illuminated Steve as he leaned forward, and the girl's smile faltered, then changed to shock.

"It's alright. I'm just a guy," Steve said to her.

The dancer looked at him for a long moment until the DJ said something to her. Then she stood up and got back to her dancing. She frequently looked toward Steve until the end of the song.

"I can't take you anywhere," Buck complained.

"Suck it up. How many years was I the ugly pug while you ended up with both girls on our dates? I don't think we're even yet," Steve told him.

Buck was then distracted by a scantily clad girl who sat on the arm of his chair. He almost knocked the girl onto the floor, but restrained himself at the last instant.

"Hi, handsome," she said.

"Hey," Buck greeted her, but he put up his fingers to stop her when she moved to touch his hair.

"What's wrong? Aren't you in the mood for company tonight?" she asked. She was a curvy woman with long dark hair and yards of creamy skin. She had a vague European accent that he placed as somewhere between Romanian and fake.

"I like company just fine," Buck said.

"Oooh," she cooed, and picked up his left hand. She put it on her knee and ran her hand up his arm, feeling him through his sleeve.

"You like that?" Buck asked.

"Uh-huh. You a veteran?" she asked him.

"No, I lost my arm running with the bulls in Pamplona," Buck lied just to mess with her.
Her fingers got to the top of his arm and he suppressed the urge to push her away when her hand glided over the seam between metal and flesh.

"I'm sorry, Sugar. Would you rather I played with other things?" she asked.

"You can go play with him. I'm only here to make sure my friend has a good time," he told her.

The girl stepped over to try the same thing with Steve and Buck watched him kindly tell her that he just wanted to watch the dancers for now. She pouted at him and moved away to the next table of men.

Buck caught Steve's eyes and leaned forward over the table that separated them.

"You know this place is all about money, right?" he asked.

"I figured that out. Buck, if you're gonna be a broody hen about this, then just sit there and watch my back," Steve said.

For a half-hour, that's what he did. The waitress brought more drinks and Steve paid attention to the girls on stage. He tipped them nicely when they came to dance for him and he tried to stay out of the light. Dancers working the floor came by and Steve would talk to them for a moment then send them on their way.

At a half-hour exactly, Steve quit watching the stage and sat back in his chair. He looked around the room.

"Your turn," he said to Buck.

Bucky grunted and allowed himself to enjoy watching the girls for a while until a girl with luxurious pale red curls came to offer Steve a private dance. It was pretty obvious that word had gotten around about Steve's identity. Nearly every girl in the club had come over and made him offers. Buck gave up watching the dancers when it appeared that the redhead had finally caught Steve's interest. Steve stood up with the girl and Buck followed them down the dim hallway to the 'private' rooms.

A bouncer looked at them hard when he noticed two men going into the small room with a girl, but he didn't do anything to stop it.

"Hon, do you know what you're doing here?" the girl asked Steve as she guided him to the broad seat of the only chair in the room.

"Ma'am, unless you're the wrong kind of bad girl, I'm pretty sure we're exchanging my money for your time," Steve told her.

Buck chuckled.

"And you like to watch?" the girl asked Bucky.

"No. I'm the one who keeps him out of trouble. Your guys can't handle him if he decides to get touchy," Buck told her. He stood behind the chair where he could keep an eye on the girl and the door.

"You're not going to be any trouble, are you Captain?" she asked. She sounded like she'd be sorely disappointed if he didn't misbehave at least a little.
"No, ma'am. I'll leave all the trouble to you," Steve said. He was surprised that he didn't mind being called 'Captain' tonight. Telling a stripper his name when she'd introduced herself as 'Angel' felt like too much.

Buck barely restrained himself from thumping Steve on the ear. Where had the punk learned how to talk to women like that? He didn't sound tongue-tied at all. Oh, right. He worked with Natalia.

A new song started in the room, and 'Angel' began to move to the heavy beat. She stepped between Steve's feet and kicked them apart. Or, she tried to. Steve didn't move. She pouted at him and sank down to rub her hands on his thighs.

"At ease, pal. I'm on duty. You're off duty," Bucky said to him.


He spread his legs for the girl. She glided her hands over his legs and up his tight belly, then pushed his shoulders back to rest against the thickly padded chair.

"You're not supposed to touch me," Angel said with a naughty twinkle in her eyes.

She took Steve's hand and guided it up her hip, under her sexy, shredded top, and cupped his fingers to her breast. She kept moving sensuously to the music, dancing between his legs, and she held his hand and rubbed it across her breast and over to the other one.

When Steve's fingers moved to explore on their own, she smiled and shook her head at him. She stepped back and danced. Her tall, beautifully curved body had all of Steve's attention while Buck kept half his attention on her and the other half on the bouncer who lingered near the door.

Angel slipped her top off and let it fall to the seat beside Steve. Buck glanced down to see a grin on his friend's face, but otherwise he kept watch. At least the girl had few places to hide weapons. She got onto the chair with Steve and put her knees on either side of his hips. Steve's hands twitched where they rested on the vinyl seat, but he resisted the urge to touch.

The dancer arched and writhed inches from Steve's face. She gave him smiles and hot looks, but when she glanced at Bucky, she looked quickly away because his face was dead and uninterested in her performance.

By the end of the first song, she was rubbing her nipples near Steve's lips. Bucky peeled off a hundred from his back pocket and set it on the shelf where the music controls were. He held up three fingers to Angel and she nodded her understanding. Then he set three twenties on top of the hundred. Angel smiled. The bouncer shrugged when Buck met his eyes.

The second song got a lot dirtier and Steve was having difficulty keeping his hands idle. Angel lost her little shorts and was in only a small pink string with rhinestones. She pushed up Steve's shirt and tucked it over and behind his head. Buck read some reluctance in Steve's rigidly clenched torso when her slender hands reached for his belt and jeans.

"I've got you. Let it happen," Buck said.

He tugged Steve's arms up and folded them behind his head. Then he gripped Steve's wrists with his left hand at the top of the chair back. Angel worked Steve's jeans down so that his boxer briefs were the only thing on him from his shoulders to his shins.

"Oh, Captain, you're a special treat. I don't get to play with many men like you," Angel said. She rubbed her hands all over Steve, up his trapped arms, and down his chest. She paid special
attention to his abs and her fingers massaged briefly over his crotch. She kindly adjusted his cock more up toward his belly rather than where it was pressed off to the side.

Steve grunted something unintelligible and his legs moved. Buck tightened his grip on his wrists for a second to remind him of the rules.

Buck looked her over again, checking for weapons hidden in her hair. She didn't have any. She looked good, but not toned and trained like an agent. The bouncer looked pretty ordinary, too. Not a threat.

Buck took a moment to marvel at his friend's large, powerful body. So different from how he mostly remembered him. He was proud and happy for Stevie. If any guy deserved an upgrade, it was him. Too bad he still had a smart mouth and a taste for trouble.

Angel was done teasing. Steve was writhing nearly as much as the girl was. By the start of the third song, Buck had a firm grip on his wrists and was having to work hard to keep him restrained. Before the girl started grinding on him, Buck observed that Steve's underwear was still in place and that everything was contained.

The dancer settled onto him and braced her hands on Steve's shoulders. She worked herself diligently in his lap. She let out a surprised cry as Steve set his feet squarely on the floor and lifted her with his hips. The bouncer looked in again, but didn't interfere.

Steve rolled against the girl in time to the music. She was skilled enough to keep her position and give him what he needed.

"Fuck. Quit fighting me," Buck grumbled. He bore down hard with his weight and the strength of his metal hand against the pull of Steve's efforts to get free.

Steve laughed, that same nasty, deep laugh he'd been infected with all evening, but then it turned into a groan. The girl rode him with purpose and it was hot enough to almost interest Buck, but he had work to do. Buck held on to the best of his ability while Steve jerked and strained, and the girl cried out too. She was sweaty and her red curls had darkened and stuck to her skin. Buck thought they were a matched pair, with the cute flush that pinked their skin.

"Get the fuck off him," Buck told her.

Steve's wrists stopped fighting to get free. He was still moving a little, and Angel was reluctant to leave the show he was putting on for her. Buck poked her in the shoulder with a finger and jerked his thumb to the side to snap her out of her daze.

She pouted at Bucky for an instant, until she saw that he really meant it and she needed to dismount now. Angel gracefully put her feet on the floor and stood aside. The girl smiled down at the glorious mess she'd made of Captain America. It wasn't too bad, Buck decided. Steve was sweaty and slick, but things had stayed where they needed to. She wasn't trying to collect any stuff from him, at least.

Soon as the tension left Steve's arms, Buck let him go. Steve was dressed quicker than the girl was. He handed her some money, on top of what Buck had already set aside for her. She didn't bother getting dressed. In fact, she slid the little pink thong down her legs and set it aside. She stood in her red platform heels and offered more services to them.

"I've got time for another song," Angel said.

"We don't," Buck said.
"What about you?" Steve asked him.

"Not in the mood," Buck said.

He knew what would come next if they lingered. Steve would start thinking as soon as he came down from the rush. Then he'd work up a good lather of Catholic guilt and do something stupid like offer the girl a decent job under the same roof he slept under. Then, things would get messy.


"Can't we chat with the lady?" Steve asked.

"No."

Steve reluctantly let Bucky urge him toward the door, then stopped before he left the tiny room.

Angel sent a sour look to Buck, but he only paid enough mind to see that she continued to not be a threat. He didn't feel bad. She'd been paid well for her time.

"Thank you, ma'am," Steve said sincerely before Buck shoved him past the door and the bouncer.

"My pleasure, Captain. Come back and ask for Angel anytime you want to have a good time," she said as she stood in the doorway and watched them go.

Buck pushed Steve down the hall and out toward the exit of the club. Soon as they were out and to the bus stop, Steve was looking at the bruises on his wrists. They were already dark and angry looking.

"That's gonna be fun to explain," Buck said.

"I could tell Tony the truth. He probably wouldn't believe me," Steve smiled.

Buck was relieved to see that Steve's smile was a little more like it used to be. Not quite so 'thinking about joining the dark side,' though hints of that lingered.

The bus pulled up and they got on. A few less than stellar women propositioned them, which wasn't terribly unexpected at this time of night in this part of town. They stood in the back and hung onto the rail while the bus got moving.

"Don't pay for me," Steve said when the noise of the bus and the other passengers would cover it.

"Quit bitching. You're putting Hydra money to good use. Just think. It paid for your fun instead of some poor mark's death. Pierce would get an ulcer if he was alive. 'Hail Hydra,' my ass. Now it's 'Oh, Captain!' Gotta love it," Buck laughed.

Steve smiled.

"Well, when you put it that way," he agreed.

They swayed and jostled as the bus trundled over the imperfections in the street for a while. Buck could almost hear the gears turning in his friend's head. Sure enough, the words weren't long in coming.

"Why'd we have to leave so soon? I coulda gone a few more rounds with her," Steve complained mildly.
"Thank me later, kid. Kenya's a lot cheaper, and she's more genuine, too. Have you seen the price of a loaf of bread? Damn. Deep pockets are great, but I can only stand so much wastefulness," Buck said.

"Yeah, I guess," Steve agreed.

"Besides, you were fixing to go all soft and try to save her from a life of debauchery," Buck said.

"And why shouldn't I? The whole time I was in there, all I saw was training and tactics. They aren't soldiers, Buck. They're ladies. Maybe some of them don't think they have a choice. They shouldn't have to do that if they don't want to," Steve insisted.

"So take your nest egg and open a home for wayward strippers," Buck said.

There was quiet for a long time. Too long. Through three bus stops. Buck was cursing himself internally for even mentioning a rehab for strippers as a joke.

"I might, Buck. It's a good idea," Steve said.

Bucky hung his head and breathed deep. Seventy years of freezer burn hadn't changed Stevie much. He was still wanting to take on all the injustices of the world. No matter how big his britches were now, the monsters were still bigger.

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She woke in the early morning hours to cramps and a mess. Estrella fumbled for the lamp, but stilled before she turned it on.

"Jarvis, please go," she said

"Yes, Miss," he said.

She turned on the lamp and sat up in bed. It took her nearly a minute of waking up and thinking to figure out why she was in pain and why she was messy. She hadn't had a period in four years because of how skinny she was.

Aside from the discomfort and the bother of cleaning up, Estrella regretted the return of her cycle. It meant that she was that much closer to changing back to what she used to be. How she used to look.

She was scrubbing at the stained sheets in the bathtub when Natasha came to the doorway.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Estrella grimaced and lifted up the soapy, wet sheet enough for Nat to see. Nat's eyes flickered down to her fresh underwear and the soft cloth she'd stuffed in as a temporary attempt at containment.

"I don't have anything for that. I don't ever- uh, I don't have a uterus," Nat explained.

"You don't- ? It's okay. I'll be fine until the pharmacy opens. Is the washing machine empty?" Estrella asked.
She kept herself busy wringing out the pre-soaked sheets in the tub so they wouldn't have to acknowledge the awkwardness. The thought of Natasha not having a uterus stirred up sadness in Estrella, but she knew Nat wouldn't want to see a hint of pity.

"It's empty. I'll put them on to wash. Get some ibuprofen. It's in the cabinet," Nat said. She came to the tub and took the damp sheets from Estrella.

Estrella washed her hands and got the pain relievers from the cabinet. While she took some with a glass of water, she heard Natasha get the washing machine started. Nat came back to the bathroom door.

"I'm up now. You want some tea?" she asked.

"Only if you're not drugging me with it," Estrella said.

Nat smirked and went to the kitchen. Estrella made sure she wouldn't stain the couch, then settled down and waited for Natasha to bring the tea. They prepared their tea in the sleepy quiet of Nat's living room.

"This is a good thing, right? You're not going to stop eating because you got your period back," Natasha said. They were tucked up on each end of the couch with fuzzy blankets and lamplight.

"No, I'll eat. I've come this far. I may as well go all the way," Estrella reasoned.

"What's all the way?"

"Steve wants me healthy. He doesn't know what he's asking for. I should leave, but I don't want to. I'm selfish," Estrella told her.

"So, you get more beautiful and Steve falls in love. Why is that a bad thing?" Natasha asked.

"Because it's not real. I'm a freak. Maybe a mutant. With the voice and my body, Steve won't have a choice. I already love him and I don't want to go. You should make me go," Estrella said.

"I already tried that, remember? You pulled my hair," Nat said.

Estrella frowned at her over her tea mug.

"That's hardly trying, for you," she told Natasha.

Nat shrugged one shoulder.

"Maybe I want to see him in love. Steve deserves to be happy. You think that you can't have someone who loves you, just because you're pretty?" Nat challenged her.

"It's not only because I'll be pretty. It's because so many men have had me. Steve deserves better than me. I'm used up," Estrella said quietly.

"That's bullshit. You've been through medical and every test came back clean. There's nothing wrong with you. Your lungs and heart are used hundreds of times a day, and it doesn't make them 'used up.' Your digestive system is constantly in use, but it's not 'used up.' Your problem is in your head. Those men took you, but they never kept you. Steve will be different. Very different," Natasha said.

She smiled in a way that said she had secrets. Of course she did.
Estrella thought about what she'd said. She'd never thought of things that way before.

"But, I'm damaged. Didn't I tear inside? When I was sixteen, the doctors told me there was blood," Estrella asked.

"A little bit of blood after sex, or even rape, doesn't always mean you're torn. I asked Doctor Kalfey and she said you're fine. There's nothing wrong with you. You healed a long time ago," Natasha told her.

"Why are you pushing this so hard?" Estrella asked skeptically.

"Because I love Steve. We all love Steve. You can't know him and not love him. He needs this. He needs you. No one wants him, Estrella. They all want the perfect body and the public persona. He'll never fall for that kind of relationship with a woman. You know he's not that shallow. He needs something real, and that's you. He's a beautiful man. Do you think he doesn't deserve a beautiful woman?" Nat asked.

"But, why not you? You know him so well. He likes you, too. I can see it in the way you work together," Estrella said.

"I'm tired of men. I don't want that kind of love. I want to do my job. Steve is a friend. I'd love to use him, just like all the other women would. Don't think I wouldn't, if I didn't care for him. I do care, so I can't use him and leave him. He doesn't guard his heart like he should. He needs a sweet girl who isn't bitter and tough. Again, that's you. Not me," Nat said.

"So you want him?" Estrella asked.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. He's my commander. We need to keep things uncomplicated between us," Natasha said dismissively.

"But."

"Enough!" Natasha barked.

She was full up on girl talk. It was an interesting novelty for the first few minutes, but it got tedious quickly. Estrella blinked at her, then sipped her tea.

Natasha got up to put away her teacup and the teapot. Estrella watched her move around comfortably in her plain white panties and a brief night shirt. Her hair was messy from sleep and her legs needed shaving. She didn't look much like the Black Widow right now, except that the way she moved was precise and efficient.

"Leave me a twenty and I'll go down and get you some things when the pharmacy opens at six. Are you feeling better yet?" she asked Estrella from the kitchen.

"Yes,"

"Good. Get some rest and don't forget to take your calcium supplement," Nat reminded her.

"Okay," Estrella said.

Natasha disappeared back into her room and the door closed.

Estrella sat and watched the sun come up over the city while she thought about her future. She agonized over the responsibility of not hurting Steve, not using him. It wasn't fair to him. When she
was up to her prime weight, she was going to be in a position of power over him because it was exactly like Natasha said. Steve didn't guard his heart. She hoped she was strong enough, good enough to treat him as he deserved.

End note: This chapter is anxiously awaiting beta from my new beta, LadyAmerica82. (So glad to have somebody to catch all those little things that tired eyes don't see. Thank you!) So, it might change some after posting, but it shouldn't be anything too drastic.
Chapter 22

Author's Note: Not apologizing. Life happens. Inspiration has been thin on the ground, and I finally scraped up enough to fill a bucket. The good news is that writing this got me rolling. This is only half of what I wanted to write for this chapter, but it kept coming so I went with it. More very soon.

Steve checked his time piece again. It was almost time to move. Outside the donut shop where he sat drinking milk and brushing crumbs of sugar from his fingers, the Boston early morning rush hour was going strong.

He and the rest of his team were strategically placed around their target, each in plain clothes, each with a precise time and entry point. In less than five minutes, the demolition crew next to their target building would begin work with jackhammers and heavy equipment. A shadow government agency had bought the building expressly for the purpose of surveillance and then cover noise for when it was time to hit this particular Hydra base.

It was a recruiting office and training facility for Hydra, right in the middle of one of America's busiest and most historic cities. It was Steve's idea to find recruiting sites, training facilities, and any other places which let Hydra grow more of its proverbial heads. The idea was to strangle the supply of new recruits, to shut down and counter their social media propaganda machine, and to cripple their ability to train agents.

Steve had memorized six specific people who were his targets today. Two were combat tactics trainers, one was a veteran marksman, three were hand-to-hand experts, and he had others he wanted to nullify if he could. But those six were his primary goals. Natasha, Clint, Thor, and Tony all had their own goals. Sam was to cover the roof and exits. Bruce was back at the tower for this one, because of the population density around this target.

Precisely on time, the demolition crew on the next block got noisy chipping concrete and cutting through old iron pipe as loudly as they could. A bulldozer rumbled somewhere and sent vibrations up through his feet, despite the distance. Steve calmly cleared away his donut mess and took a few seconds in the restroom to rinse the sticky sugar off of his fingers. He left the donut shop and walked into the shipping center next door, where he went to the counter to retrieve a package that had been sent for him.

He walked toward the target building in his dark gray business suit, the package tucked under his arm. The placard on the building said 'Seacrest University', and it looked perfectly respectable. Young people went inside ahead of him, wearing clothes you'd see on any college student across America on a weekday morning. Not many would notice that most all of these 'students' were just a few years older than traditional students, or that they were as a group, exceptionally fit.

No one paid much attention to the business man with the neatly trimmed beard and the package under his arm. The placard on the building said 'Seacrest University', and it looked perfectly respectable. Young people went inside ahead of him, wearing clothes you'd see on any college student across America on a weekday morning. Not many would notice that most all of these 'students' were just a few years older than traditional students, or that they were as a group, exceptionally fit.

No one paid much attention to the business man with the neatly trimmed beard and the package under his arm. Steve went to a bench in the lobby, pulled out his phone, and sat down next to his package. He texted for a moment, a good excuse to keep his face angled down away from the security camera, then he casually used a sharp edge of his phone to slit the tape on his package.

His easily recognizable shield emerging from the brown package caused some startled looks and general alarm. Steve moved quickly to the entry doors and bolted them shut. At this precise moment, Nat and Clint were doing the same to the other ground floor exits. He applied a handful of
putty Bruce had designed to ignite with a tiny charge. The blindingly bright chemical fire melted the doors shut like a tack weld.

By now, the young Hydra agents in the lobby were yelling and rushing to get behind cover. The burly, gray haired receptionist behind the desk had a cold, determined look that matched Natasha at her worst. She was doing something with her hands down where he couldn't see. Steve took her out with his shield and headed for the stairs. The fledgling Hydra agents in the lobby would be for the Avenger's ground crew to clean up. Steve had targets to get to.

He was the last of the team to join the action, and he could already hear the chaos and calamity of battle in other parts of the building. Tony's plan was to walk in through the rear parking lot entrance with his briefcase and suit up in the restroom. Natasha and Clint had already been already inside since 04:00 this morning, dressed as custodial staff. There was a rumble somewhere up high, which Steve knew was Thor blasting a clear path down to reach his targets. The elevators were disabled, and there were only two stair wells.

Steve found his first target in a conference room. Alert was sounded, and several high ranking Hydra staff members were behind cover, prepared to fight off incursion. Steve took a canister from his coat pocket and pulled the pin. He tossed it and shut his eyes. The room flashed incredibly bright and a haze of chemical exploded into the air. Moaning and coughing came next. A few people fired at him, but he stayed along one wall and behind the shield. The man he wanted was huddled behind a chair, coughing and trying to peer at him with watering eyes.

Steve broke the man's knees, knocked him unconscious, and cuffed him tightly to the framing of the heavy conference table. Bullets pinged against his shield, but he was very accustomed to the crouching posture required to keep himself covered while he worked with one hand.

Soon as his primary target was secured, he rushed the four agents nearest him. He let his body and mind run free, through practiced moves that injured and incapacitated. He hardly had to think about it. Half the room's occupants were unconscious now, either from blunt force trauma, or from the difficulty of breathing the gas mixture in the air.

A quick look over his shield showed Steve that another one of his six targets was in the far corner, thinking and moving for better cover. It was Abram Scott, one of the tacticians. He was going to try to make it to the door. Steve leapt the table to get ahead of him, took a bullet through the heel of his shoe, and landed all of his weight in the middle of the man's back. He heard a snap and knew there was no need to restrain Scott.

A desperate volley of small arms fire hit his shield, and he advanced, letting some of their own rounds take out a few of the remaining agents. He hit the last two with his free fist, and was surprised by the crunch of bone. He didn't think he'd hit them with that much force. His objective had been to knock the men unconscious, not to kill them. They crumpled over with the distinctive look of bodies that wouldn't be getting up again.

The room was quiet now, and Steve paused for only an instant to wonder why those last two punches had done more damage than he'd expected. There wasn't much time to consider it, because he was running out of breath and he had more work to do. He moved on, out into the hallway and back toward the stairwell. He took a deep breath of clean air, free from the bitter gas that made his eyes tear up at the corners.

Noise around the building sounded just as it should at this point. Steve ran down the corridor. Even a novice agent could get in a lucky shot, so he stunned young agents as he found them. He'd known for a long time exactly how much force it took to render a person stunned and useless, and he used it, judged precisely for each recipient's size and bone structure. A frown crimped his brow.
Again, there was the crunching of bone when there shouldn't have been. He was having to use his arms to catch and redirect himself around corners and obstacles more, too.

Machine gun fire tore through the plaster wall on his left, and he caught the first few on his shield, then rolled low, changed direction, and smashed through the wall directly at the shooter. Luckily, the shooter was his next target. The burly man hadn't expected him to come through the wall, and Steve had time to knock the barrel of the weapon up and away before he could re-load.

With a quick grip, he crushed the man's hands so that he dropped the weapon and the magazine he was trying to replace. He cried out in horror at the loss of the use of his hands, and Steve silenced him with a knee to the head.

"Dammit! What the hell?" Steve grumbled. The man's neck snapped sideways and he slumped to the floor.

Again, there was no time to stop and ponder what was wrong with him. Steve left the target and moved out to the hallway, back to the stairwell. Up. Some young agents were huddled in the corner, trying to escape notice. They were females, unarmed, scared. He judged them to be not worth slowing down for and continued up. He didn't want to risk touching them, with the way things were going. They weren't hardened combatants and didn't deserve to die yet. With their looks, they were likely being trained for espionage. They still had a chance to change their minds about their path in life, like the youngsters in the lobby.

Thor met him in the central hallway of the fourth floor. His hammer was as bloodied as Steve's fists. Tony converged with them, crashing through a glass wall like it wasn't there, and the three of them strode to the center of the building.

They'd reached their final set of targets, all in one place. The combat training facility was hardened, and it took Tony's skills and Thor's force to get in. Once they did, it was dark and Tony called out positions to them in rapid succession. Steve could see well enough to mark his targets once Tony told him who was where.

Gunfire was going wild everywhere, and a grenade detonated on Steve's right side. He'd heard the pin clink to the floor and the object moving through the air, so he used the force of the explosion against his shield to throw him toward the man he wanted.

Again, the hit of his shield caused more damage than intended. This one wasn't dead, because Steve was trying to be extremely careful now, but he'd probably never walk again. No time to think. No need to.

It didn't matter who was who after that. In the dark, Steve listened and moved toward the sound of people. Where he didn't already see the dim gleam off of Thor's armor plates, or off of Tony's suit, he took down everybody who was still standing. There were few young agents here.

The training facility was their last stop. Nat, Clint, and the rest of the Avengers staff should have finished securing the rest of the building. Steve found himself facing Thor, trembling with the need to keep fighting, but there was nothing more to do. Tony's suit added to the available light, and both men stood and stared at Steve for a moment.


The words didn't register clearly in Steve's brain for a moment.

"Steve," Tony said.
He smacked Steve gently across the face with his metal gauntlet.

"Graze to the heel, that's all," Steve finally said.

Thor frowned at him slightly, and shoved him in the chest with the head of Mjolnir.

Steve shook his head and took a deep, calming breath. His teammates knew something was off with him, but now wasn't the time to discuss it.

"Tony, get the lights on so we can wrap this up and go home," Steve said as calmly as he could.

"Sure, Cap," Tony said in a tone that let him know they weren't done talking about whatever was going on with their leader.

For being a delicate situation in the middle of a city, the mission had gone very well. Fury was on hand for once, arranging transport and making himself useful. Out front where the public could see, it looked like nothing more than slightly nervous college students loading onto charter buses, perhaps going to a university function in another part of town. In the rear parking lot, the dead and wounded were being handled discreetly.

Steve went into a restroom to wash up a little. Thor followed him in to wash Mjolnir.

"Something bothers you," Thor said after a strained moment of quiet. Nothing but the splashing of running water answered him until they were done washing. Steve ran his damp fingers over his face to cool off, and turned to face his friend.

Steve lifted his hands and looked at them as if there might be something different about them. Thor looked on too, confused as to why his hands would be of any unusual interest.

"Later. I want to see the coroner's reports first," Steve said.

He looked in the mirror and dabbed at some flecks of blood on his neck with a damp paper towel. He and Natasha, Tony and Clint were to ride to a private airstrip in a car, for which he'd need to go out front. He handed his rinsed clean shield to Thor and clapped him on the shoulder.

Thor's eyebrow went up at the roughness of the contact. Steve shrugged and shook his head helplessly. He knew he hadn't hurt Thor, so it didn't matter for now.

Out in the hall, Steve turned for the front of the building, while Thor went up through the roof and out to join Sam for their flight home at low altitude.

Steve carefully got in the back of the SUV and sat in the back seat with Clint. Tony and Natasha had the middle seat, and the driver pulled away from the curb. Steve nodded through the window at Fury, who was on the sidewalk, overseeing the security of the buses which would take the least dangerous Hydra agents to a reconditioning camp.

It was still odd to see Nick Fury in plain clothes, without his black leather. He wore sunglasses rather than his iconic patch. Fury waved to him slightly, a mere twitch of the hand, and Steve was pleased to see a subtle look of pride on the man's normally stony face. Nick thought it was a good day's work, and well done. That meant a lot to Steve.

Their SUV pulled into traffic and went around the busses. Three busses full of Hydra whom they wouldn't have to meet on a battlefield some other day. That was good, but it also emphasized how large the Hydra problem was.
It was their experience that some of the youngest of Hydra's recruits could be easily shown the error of their ways and frightened back into an unremarkable life. Some of these had mostly joined out of a sense of adventure and rebelliousness. Others would have been involved with some sort of organized crime anyway, by the nature of their character. Even of those, some could be 'convinced' to use their skills in a more approved manner. About a quarter of those captured would end up in a high security prison for a long time. The rest were dead or severely injured.

It'd been a quick, low-key mission with substantial results. No collateral damage to civilians or property. No hubbub for the news. Hardly anyone had noticed that anything unusual was going on. Steve was pleased by his team's well-coordinated work, and by the skillful planning and execution efforts that had been coming together for weeks to make this a success.

"Report," Steve said from the rear right seat of the vehicle.

"I'm fine. Not a scratch," Natasha said.

"Squeaky clean," Clint said.

"I don't even think I need a shower," Tony agreed. His plain black, somewhat bulky briefcase sat on the seat beside him. Steve knew how heavy it was. They all tended to think of Tony as the brains, not the brawn, but Tony did well to carry the case around and make it appear to not be as heavy as it was.

Steve nodded in satisfaction. The mission had gone almost too smoothly. It was rare for everything to go exactly according to plan, but this once, it appeared that it had.

"You're bleeding on the carpet," Natasha glanced back and down at Steve's foot.

"It's nothing. It'll be scabbed over by the time we're home," Steve said.

He was distracted, barely feeling the burn in his heel. By the time they reached the airfield and Clint had them in the quinjet and on the way back to the tower, Steve wasn't thinking about the mission anymore.

He sat and looked at his hands hanging loosely between his knees. He'd taken his stained suit coat off and removed his tie. His dark blue dress shirt sleeves were rolled up, baring his forearms. Steve wondered why his veins were still as distended as they were. He was hiding a fine tremor by fidgeting, bouncing his uninjured heel and knee.

Tony's sharp eyes watched him from across the way. Clint or Nat would have been worse, but Tony was bad enough. The man raised an eyebrow after looking at the bruises which still circled his wrists.

With a stern look, Steve dared him to ask. Tony's lips curved into a knowing smirk and he chuckled quietly.

"They make padded cuffs, you know. If you want rough play, you don't have to go around with marks on you the next day..." Tony paused and his head quirked into an inquisitive angle. Steve could see Tony pondering the lingering faint marks around his wrists.

"Nat! Clint! Steve's still got bruises on his wrists from last night. I've never seen you keep a bruise for more than a few hours. What the hell did you do?" Tony wondered eagerly.

Steve shrugged. It was nice to have a secret of his own, at least for a little while. Just a little something that Tony and Jarvis didn't know all the details of. Tony was waiting, nearly breathless,
for him to say something, to explain the bruises Bucky had given him. No, that he had given himself, Steve corrected his thinking. Buck was only helping, being the friend he needed at the time. He had to say something, or Tony would pester him all the way home.

"It felt good to fight it," Steve explained vaguely.

Tony's smile froze unnaturally. He stared at Steve's wrists again, and at how Steve was definitely not blushing. Nat looked at him too, curiously turning her head around from the co-pilot's seat. Her concern was quiet, as Thor's had been.

"As long as you had fun…" Clint said.

"I did," Steve assured them.

He'd known this moment was coming as soon as he'd walked out of the strip club with Bucky last night and got a look at his wrists. It might have been embarrassing if they'd questioned him about it when his guard was down and he was relaxed, later. As it was, he had the satisfaction of seeing Stark speechless for the rest of the short flight back to the tower.

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Thor and Sam beat them back to the tower, but only by a few minutes. They were waiting in the locker room and Bruce had come up from his lab. The three of them stood in the locker room and talked about the mission that Bruce had missed out on. Something about that struck Steve as odd, and Thor was being a bit too careful to not pay any attention to him. Thor merely handed him his shield while Steve passed behind them from the restroom to his locker.

Steve's Captain America uniform hung neatly in the locker, pristine and untouched, unlike the suit coat and his faintly blood speckled dress shirt. He'd chosen to wear dark colors to hide any blood, and it was a good thing, because he wouldn't have thought there'd be so much of it. While he took small gear items from his pockets and stored them away in the locker, he was hyper aware of the faint tremor of his hands. He still had too much energy. Why was the adrenaline lingering like this?

He felt eyes on him, and when he looked across, Nat was watching him with unobtrusive little glances. Tony was distracted, telling Bruce, Sam, and Thor about Steve's bruises, speculating how he'd gotten them. Nat wasn't looking at his wrists. Steve moved faster to get everything out of his pockets, until he was down to nothing but his dress shirt, undershirt, and pants.

When he sat on the bench to take off his polished, now scuffed shoes, Nat knelt down and batted his hands away. It was a strange thing for her to do. She wasn't anybody's valet, and they all knew it. She slipped off the shoe from his uninjured foot and set it aside.

"Why didn't you take this off in the car, or in the jet?" she asked, and frowned at him.

His other gunshot shoe came off fine, but the sock was stuck to him. She felt of the wound through his heel, then ripped the sock off his foot in one quick jerk. Steve grunted, and fresh blood welled from the wound, which had started healing while adhered to his sock. Natasha cupped the freshly opened wound in her hand and applied hard pressure.

"I wasn't thinking about it. It didn't matter," Steve said.

He was touched at her concern. Her apparently casual disregard for his wounds and his pain, his bleeding, let him know that she respected him. She knew he could handle it. Her fussing at him for not taking his sock off when they both knew his skin was growing to it told him that she thought he should take better care of himself.
Tony's voice was still raised and animated. He was trying to get a reaction out of Steve, but Steve and Nat ignored him.

"I don't know what's going on with you, but I'm giving you twenty-four hours to talk it out with somebody. If you don't, then I'll get it out of you myself," Nat warned him.

Steve snorted a laugh, but Nat didn't look amused. She released his heel and watched for a moment to see that the bleeding stopped again. When no more blood welled to the surface of the wound, Natasha set his foot down and stood in front of him.

She looked at the bright red smear on the palm of her hand, then glanced over at the rest of their team. They weren't paying attention. Natasha lifted her hand to her mouth and slowly, thoroughly licked Steve's blood from her palm. Her jaw moved slightly, and Steve knew she was rolling her tongue, tasting him. His breath caught at the sort of battlefield intimacy of the gesture, but there was something else about the way Nat stood there in her boy shorts and snug little T-shirt, half-dressed.

"Hmph. Your blood doesn't taste any different," she commented.

"Did you think it would?" Steve asked.

She shrugged, but then she stepped closer to him where Steve sat on the bench spraddle kneed and barefoot. It was disarming, seeing her in plain civilian underclothes. Not her sexy black uniform, not provocative street clothes. Not even racy lingerie. Just plain cotton things which weren't particularly enticing, though they left a lot of creamy, smooth skin bare.

Girly. She was acting suspiciously girly, Steve decided, like he was a mark she planned to work on. He was still inexplicably revved from the mission, and her intrusion into his personal space with devious intent had him on edge. His muscles tensed further and his feet gripped into the carpet of the locker room floor.

The rest of the team had gone quiet, finally wise to the evidence that something strange was happening. Neither of them cared.

Natasha lifted her foot onto the bench with her thigh across his body. His hand automatically came up to press flat against the inside of her knee, ready to shove her away. Her legs were dangerous, pale and deceptively feminine as they were. He knew that very well. But she was moving slowly, predictably. Steve was confused and cautious, but he trusted her enough to let it play out.

Nat leaned down and palmed the back of his head. She stared into his face intently, into his eyes. Steve's instinct was to head butt her or launch her away, because he knew he couldn't be reading her right. Her gaze was assessing, cool and clinical. He felt the tremors rack his body harder for a moment, and Nat's eyes narrowed, sensing the weakness.

Then, she kissed him. Nat wasn't rough and she wasn't in a hurry. Languidly, her mouth pressed his open and she licked into him. She shared the taste of his blood with him, warm and familiar. He was confused enough by the probing kiss that it took him a moment to decide how to proceed.

Steve decided to give back to her as she was giving to him, just as if they were sparring in the training room. He kissed her back thoroughly and deeply. It was a challenge and he wasn't going to pull away, especially in front of the others, whom he could hear exclaiming from a few feet away. His other hand, the one that wasn't gripping her knee, came up to control her head.

Natasha decided she'd messed with him enough, so she started to draw away. Steve gripped her
harder and forced the kiss a moment longer. She had to see that she couldn't manipulate him like this, or he'd lose control of his team. He felt her jerk in surprise at his refusal to end the forced sensuality, but it was a miscalculation on his part.

She got just a few inches clearance because Steve didn't want to rip her hair out, then she slammed her forehead into his nose. Steve shoved her back against the wall and brought a hand to his nose to check for bleeding. It stung, but there was no blood. He stood up and held himself ready for whatever Nat wanted to do next.

"Steven!" Thor admonished him.

Steve held out a hand to keep the guys out of their space, and he let Nat have her space, too. Only she knew what she was about, and she had some explaining to do.

Nat's back was embedded into the sheetrock wall, and she gasped once to get air back into her lungs. Calmly, she pushed herself out of the depression in the wall. She smiled at him and licked her lips, just as cold as he'd seen her on any of their missions.

She picked up her phone from the bench and keyed in an alarm setting.

"Twenty-four hours to talk, Steve," she said.

She shoved past Tony and to her locker. Clint grinned at her, then put away his smile when Steve stared him down.

"Do you know what she's thinking?" Steve asked Clint.

"I could guess, but I'd probably be wrong," Clint told him.

Clint shrugged, then turned his head to smile faintly at Natasha again. That was exactly why Steve had to stand his ground with Natasha just now. They all knew she couldn't beat him in combat, but they also knew his weakness. Women. Sex. Nat had changed tactics against him, and he didn't know why. She was unpredictable like that. Dangerous. In this, she could beat him if he wasn't very careful, and he felt a little betrayed by her taking advantage of his inexperience.

Nat's behavior was a challenge. He'd let any of his team fight him to a draw if they could, and Thor knew when to call a match without expressing his dominance. Steve respected the man immensely for it. Thor understood the dynamics of leadership. What was Nat trying to do?

"What the fuck?" Tony asked belatedly.

Steve sensed that they were done with the theatrics for now, though he never fully took his attention off of Natasha until he was leaving the locker room and nearing the elevator. Tony had her cornered near her locker, trying to get answers from her, so she was occupied at the moment. He'd hear her if she came at him while his back was turned.

"De-brief at 17:00," Steve called back to his team before he got in the elevator.

"Aye, Cap," Clint called in acknowledgement.

Steve smiled a little despite his worries when Jarvis dropped him a few times in the elevator. His body went loose in the momentary lack of gravity. At least Jarvis' form of toying with him was benign and enjoyable.

"I'm alright, Jarvis," he told the AI.
"On the contrary, Captain. Biometrics show otherwise," Jarvis pointed out.


The elevator began to slow at his floor.

"No, take me to my gym," Steve said.

"Very well," Jarvis agreed, and the elevator sped up again.

"I hope you realize that we are a bother to you because we care, though the way some of us show it is unconventional, to say the least," Jarvis told him.

The reminder that Jarvis was silently present for almost everything that happened in the tower, including Nat's power play a moment ago, had Steve on edge again.

"How detailed are your biometric readings of me?" Steve asked.

"I know that a bundle of muscle fibers deep in your left trapezius muscle group is twitching at an interval of approximately point seven five seconds. Your core body temperature is elevated one point six degrees above your normal high temperature, and your blood sugar is two percent below optimal, which indicates that you should eat something within the next hour. Your penis is thirty-two percent."

"No! Jarvis. Just- no," Steve barked out, then tried to calm himself from the blush he could feel toasting his face. Anger roasted him nearly as much, but he bit his tongue before he could say anything needlessly unkind.

Steve leaned his rump against the handrail and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling like he was imitating Bruce, but it wasn't intentional. Hell, he didn't even have exact percentages on stuff like that, and it was his body!

"I am sorry, Captain. I wanted you to know how precise my abilities are. There is no one else to hear, and I have already erased the data from my memory. Tactically, I have tipped my hand to you, as it were. I can only hope your knowledge of my ability will serve some purpose," Jarvis said soothingly.


He forced himself to think calmly and get as much information as he could. He never knew when such things might be useful.

"I can perform no direct tests, as Doctor Banner or Doctor Kalfey could with a blood sample. There are air sensors throughout the tower for security purposes, especially in the elevators. They are meant to detect explosives and anything else which might be a hazard. I can only extrapolate chemical biometrics from the air sensors. If there were other people in the elevator with you, the chemical biometrics would be useless for individual health analysis," Jarvis said.

"I understand," Steve said.

The elevator came to a stop on the level that had his personal gym. The elevator doors opened, but Steve lingered for a moment.
"I know you value your privacy, Captain. I apologize if knowledge of my abilities disturbs you further. I was hoping that you would appreciate candor more than secrecy," Jarvis explained.

"Can your sensors determine what's wrong with me?" Steve asked, only slightly more than a whisper.

"Your metabolism has increased slightly. I am uncertain that the changes you are experiencing mean that anything is wrong. Sir has various strength testing instruments which he uses in his lab. If I ask, I am certain he would be happy to help you test-"

"No. Not now. Not yet. Let me know when the coroner's reports from today are available, will ya?" Steve requested.

"Certainly," Jarvis said.

Steve didn't need a lab report on his strength. He'd find out what he needed to know the old fashioned way. He left the elevator and keyed himself into his gym. He tossed his tie and the ruined suit coat into a waste bin.

A flick of his hand turned on the dim overhead lights. Most everywhere was brighter than he liked, and louder, and there was nothing he could do about changing other people's preferences. But here, he had soothing quiet and low lighting. When he'd asked Tony about private gym space, he was given a medium sized room on a lower level that housed mostly maintenance and custodial space. It was quiet down here. Jarvis managed much of the floor by himself, and hardly a human came around.

The floor of Steve's gym wasn't padded, and there were no mirrors on the walls. There was a structural column in the far corner, but the space was mostly empty. No windows. No electronic training machines. There was a custom-made treadmill and some heavy workout gear. A plain bathroom and a small refrigerator were in the corner with the support beam.

One sheetrock wall was lined with bite marks from the edge of his shield. Another was paneled with hickory, dented with marks from his fists and old brown smudges of his blood. The other two walls were dull gray steel, scuffed from shield hits.

Steve padded forward on bare feet to the special heavy bag he'd had made. The inside was twice the mass of a regular punching bag, and the outside was sheathed in wrinkled folds of tough leather which would give under his knuckles, rather than tearing.

He set his feet and started on the bag. The tremors of unused energy in his body which Natasha had noticed, but Jarvis had chosen not to mention were released in the beating he set into the bag. From the way the bag jerked and swayed, Steve knew he was stronger than he'd been before. His knuckles put white stress marks on the burgundy colored leather. For a half hour, Steve moved around the bag, burning off his tremors the best he could while confined indoors.

He thought of many of the quick insertions he and his Commandos had made over terrain. Scrambling up rocks, down ravines, running when there weren't enough vehicles for them all. Buck beside him, already with the glint of the Winter Soldier on his face, now that Steve knew what he'd been seeing.

Back then, before the ice, it had never stopped. Steve and Buck had to hold back for the members of the team who were unaugmented with the serum. Near the end, Morita had grown thin and hardened from the physical strain. They'd all been lean. He'd got used to it, didn't think how much more war-bitten they'd looked, compared to some. Why hadn't he noticed that at the time? He'd
read the files of what had become of his men after he went down. They'd kept fighting til the end, but there'd been a month of leave after his disappearance. He'd worked them too hard. Yet, he and Buck had been holding back.

And now, what more was he becoming? Why now? His new team was super-human to a degree. Thor could certainly keep up, and Tony had his suit to do the physical things his body couldn't. Bruce could go for a while as the Hulk, until he got tired. Still, he held back the team as a whole for Clint, Sam, and Natasha. He was getting tired of holding back. He could do more.

He delivered a kick into the side of the bag. The chains it hung from clanked tight in protest and the beam overhead squeaked with metallic stress. Steve caught the bag in his side as it swung back at him. He stopped the bag's wiggling kinetic energy with a hand and leaned down, hands on knees, thinking.

It was easy to recognize the reckless ego he'd had to suppress when he'd first received the serum. He'd felt awed with himself, invincible. His natural modesty kept him from showing it outwardly, but he couldn't fool himself. The thoughts had been there. And here they were again. Time and experience had taught him that there was always a stronger opponent out there, no matter how accomplished and capable he felt. He needed his team. The kind of operation they'd done today was proof of that.

Yet, he could do more. The tremors were gone, but he still felt strong, fresh, and ready for something. Anything. He didn't know what. He breathed deep and steady, not because he was winded, but because he loved the rush of power in his veins which the extra oxygen supplied.

There was motion at the frosted glass of the door, and he could hear Thor's voice.

"Who? Just Thor?" Steve asked Jarvis.

"Thor and Doctor Banner," Jarvis told him.

Steve stood straight and stopped the deep breathing. Fueling himself with extra oxygen when he didn't need it was a guilty pleasure of his. It felt wrong to indulge in front of the others.

"Let them in," he said.

Thor was gravely concerned about him, and Bruce was only a degree or two behind him. They quietly entered and approached Steve where he stood under one of the dim lights.

"Nice place," Bruce commented as he looked around.

Steve nodded. He felt slightly bad for not inviting Bruce here before now. He knew they both liked calm places sometimes.

"Were you not a margin too rough with Natasha?" Thor asked him right off.

"No. She knew what she was risking. You haven't been in the training room with us recently. I'll get the wall in the locker room fixed, but you saw that Clint wasn't worried," Steve told him.

"Something rides you, brother. I felt it myself. Natasha is a formidable warrior for a Midgardian, but you must temper your strength. Especially since you no longer know the limits of it. What changes you?" Thor said.

Steve could always trust him to be direct.
He looked to Bruce.

The shorter, darker man pulled one hand out of his pants pocket and flopped it in defeat.

"Your blood sample was normal. Normal for you, anyway," Bruce said.

Steve stood, thinking. It both bothered him and reassured him that Thor was still frowning at him slightly with concern and disapproval. He glanced at his friend to see that like him and Bruce, Thor was deep in thought.

"I shall return," Thor announced in a firm voice they both knew he meant to be reassuring in its certainty, rather than imperious and arrogant. They knew that now, at least. At first, everyone had assumed Thor was being loud and overbearing. He only spoke that way now when they found themselves in a situation when morale needed boosting, or when brash humor was called for. Steve and Bruce watched him go, looking for clues of what his plan might be. Then Bruce looked around the room again.

"The only thing that's changed about me is how I spend my time, Bruce. Before, it was war. Constant battle. I was busy. I only realized while I was working the bag just now that if I'd been around to push the Commandos for longer, they'd have started dropping from exhaustion. It was close. One of my men, Morita, was losing a lot of weight. Now, I'm only on mission a handful of hours a week, at most. A lot of our traditional footwork is done by Stark tech now, and by satellite communication. I spend more time eating and watching motion pictures than I do running and fighting. I miss the action," Steve admitted.

"You're saying that you're dissatisfied? You're bored?" Bruce wondered.

"No. The hits we make against Hydra are more effective now. We get a lot done. What I'm saying is that I'm made for a more physically demanding job. I got the shakes after the mission, Bruce. I wanted to keep going," Steve told him.

Bruce folded one arm across his ribs and propped his chin on his other knuckles. It was one of his thinking poses, and he stared through Steve while he stood there and let his brain work.

"Take off the shirt," Bruce flicked the last two fingers off his fisted hand at Steve.

Steve crimped his brow in disapproval and confusion, but he tugged the now sweaty and wrinkled blue shirt from the waistband of his pants and started unbuttoning it. Bruce looked on, brows lowered in thought. It was a face Steve could see the Hulk making when he felt down and tired. Steve hid a smile which Bruce likely wouldn't have noticed anyway.

"That one too," Bruce indicated the white ribbed undershirt.

"What for?" Steve asked.

"Tell me what you ate during the war," Bruce said instead of answering him. Again, he waved his fingers in encouragement.

Steve clenched his teeth in distaste, but he untucked the undershirt and tugged it off over his head. He let it drop to the floor with the blue shirt. He felt naked standing in an empty room with somebody looking at him.

"I ate rations, like everybody else. They didn't taste like much, but it's what we had. Sometimes we got lucky and found a lady to cook a meal for us. Sometimes we were out of luck and supplies and we ate… whatever we had to," Steve grimaced.
"Protein?" Bruce asked, to clarify.

Steve nodded tersely.

"Sometimes just wilted vegetables we came across in an off-season field," he said.

Bruce walked in a slow circle around Steve, looking. He mumbled something about instruments and calipers. Steve shivered his back. He didn't like having his back to anyone, especially when he felt naked and vulnerable. He pivoted a quarter turn to get Bruce in his field of view.

"Hold still," Bruce told him. A flash of Banner's eyes to his told him he was aware of Steve's discomfort and that he had sympathy for it, but it was time for logic and reason right now, not time for nerves and primal reactions.

Steve clenched his jaw again, and Bruce reached out to prod him in the back, just above his hip. Next, Bruce dug his thumb fairly hard against the skin between Steve's shoulder blade and spine and dragged it down, firm enough to feel the individual muscle bundles roll under the skin.

"What was your weight during the war? Before the ice?" Bruce wondered.

"It varied. Sometimes two-twenty. Sometimes a little less than two hundred," Steve nearly mumbled. Wasn't this stuff in his files?

Bruce walked around front to face him and frowned at him.

"How often two-twenty, and how often one ninety-four?" Bruce asked.

So, he did know.

"What's the point to this?" Steve asked. He looked down at himself, oddly barefoot and in useless pants. He didn't like being questioned as if he'd done something wrong.

"Steve, your latest stats from medical say you weigh two thirty-two. The mission before that, you weighed two twenty-nine. I don't keep other people's personal information at the forefront of my awareness, but it's significant," Bruce said.

"I'm tellin ya, I'm getting soft. Lazy," Steve said. He crossed his arms and frowned down at Bruce.

Bruce reached out and dug that same thumb into the muscle just above his hip bone, beside his abs. Even as a regular man, Bruce was strong. The firm press shoved sharply into the meat there and Steve resisted being pushed off balance. They both felt the twanging shift of muscle fibers just under the skin.

"You're not getting soft. You're getting bigger. It makes sense, now that I think about it. You were starving yourself back then. There weren't enough rations to go around, and you knew you'd make do, so you gave more to your men. When you first woke to this century, you were hesitant to eat all that you wanted, weren't you?" Bruce questioned him.

Thor came back to join them, but neither of them paid attention, other than to see that it was Thor. Their friend walked closer to listen politely and with interest until there was a gap in the conversation for him.

"I felt like a free-loader. A bum. Of course I didn't pack it in. Not until I felt I was pulling my weight," Steve defended his actions.
Thor nodded agreement with Steve's reasoning.

"When did you stop feeling like a free-loader?" Bruce persisted.

"I still feel like that most of the time," Steve said.

"Alright. Let me rephrase. When did you stop caring so much that you felt like a free-loader?" Bruce said with a tone of long-suffering patience.

Steve stood silent. He'd not thought of things that way yet, but Bruce had a point. Steve could hold out on righteous principle a long time when it mattered. But lately, he'd felt more relaxed. He had Jarvis send out a courier with a shopping list sometimes. And then he'd been trying to set a good example for Estrella. And now he was eating what she cooked for him and enjoying it. Steve nodded.

"You nobly withheld nourishment from your body for good cause, but that means you have never reached your full physical potential, Brother. You may beat me in strength, yet," Thor grinned at him.

Bruce nodded thoughtfully. They knew Thor was teasing. No human would ever match Thor in strength.

"You think everything wrong with me is because I'm eating more, now?" Steve asked.

Steve had a particular set to his jaw that they were slowly learning was an indicator of one of his few faults. Stubbornness. In positive applications, it manifested as impressive determination and perseverance, but in this, Bruce and Thor could see that Steve might get muley and balk about reaching his potential strength and ability if it meant other things came along with it.

Steve proved it to them with his next question.

"So, my increased libido is marching along with everything else? I don't need that. It complicates things."

"This is all just theory on my part. I can get set up to test it, and then we'll know more. But, I'm thinking that's probably the case. Steve, you were starving yourself. Noble justification or not," Bruce sent an admonishing look to Thor, who tried to look contrite, "you need to eat more. There's no fat on you."

"I don't need to eat more. I've topped out. That's what the tremors and elevated temperature are; excess energy. I can't gain fat, so it's trying to burn off," Steve said with certainty.

Thor smiled at a mystery solved.

"Elevated temperature? I didn't think to take your temp. You're never sick," Bruce said as if he'd negligently ignored something important.

"Jarvis' sensors picked it up. I wouldn't have thought to check it, either," Steve said.

Thor bent and set Mjolnir on the floor among them.

Bruce looked at him and waited for an explanation.

"Here? Now?" Steve asked his friend, his shield brother who trusted him because he could lift Mjolnir.
Thinking of all the things he'd done lately that he'd neglected to go to confession for, things that Sister Ursula would have tanned his hide for doing, he was reluctant to try with the hammer. Bruce's presence was only a trifling part of his reluctance.

Thor regarded him with kindness. And expectation.

Steve felt somewhat nervous for the first time in a long time. He wasn't afraid, though. He'd faced a lot of ugly things in his life, and his own conscience was sometimes one of those things.

He bent to pick up Mjolnir as he'd done many times before. It was always extremely heavy, but he could do it one-handed. The hammer didn't budge. Steve braced his feet further apart on the floor and added his left hand to the grip. It was as if it was part of the floor. Not so much as a wiggle. He tensed to try again, but Thor's hand rested on his shoulder.

"Brother, trying further is beneath your dignity" he said gently.

Steve stayed bent for a moment; his head hung low from his shoulders in defeat. Thor jostled him affectionately, then removed his hand.

When Steve stood straight again, they could see his sense of disappointment and loss that he felt from his inability to lift Mjolnir. Then, he straightened his spine and stood firm again. They could see his Captain persona overcome him for a moment as he attempted to recover his emotions.

"You could lift that?" Bruce asked, but he already knew.

Steve looked at him, then away, still smarting from the sting to his conscience.

"I never could," Bruce said. Then he left them alone in the gym.

Thor lifted Mjolnir and flipped it in the air, then caught it firmly by the handle.

"Grace is not permanently lost, Steven, unless you give up. There was a time, not long ago, when I too lost my ability to wield Mjolnir. I pulled and strained nearly fit to burst the veins at my temples. And then I sat in the mud and cried like an infant," Thor told him.

He flipped Mjolnir again, and flashed his bright golden smile at Steve. His step was jaunty and cheerful as he turned his back and walked to the door to follow Bruce out.

Steve felt a pang of envy, then anger at Thor for being so positive and cheerful most of the time. Ever so briefly, he imagined tackling Thor to the floor and beating the good cheer out of him. It would be satisfying to do it. His muscles tensed with the urge to action. Soon as he fully consciously realized what he was considering, he felt burning shame.

Thor paused at his next step and turned to look back over his shoulder at Steve.

"You have fallen far," Thor said, and a frown troubled his brow.

Worse than failing to lift Mjolnir, Steve's guilt crashed down around his mind like bricks.

Lust. Gluttony. Anger. Pride. Envy. He counted them all in himself, evident as if someone had shone a light into a dark place where crawling things hid and scurried away.

He looked to Thor, too choked with disgust at himself to form an apology. His lips hung open, failing to form the words he was desperate to say.

"You hide it well, Brother. Keep up the act and you may eventually follow your own example
home again. And if not," Thor frowned more deeply, "I will be here."

End Note: Yes, I know Estrella isn't even in this chapter. There were meant to be five scenes, but I couldn't make myself edit it down for it all to fit. Eya gets her turn next.
Chapter 23

Note: I know this took far too long. But it is literally too long. It turned into a behemoth of a chapter and I agonized over where to chop it up. I couldn't, so here it is, all long and windy. I feel like I'm over some sort of hump now, and that maybe this story can run downhill to where it's supposed to go.

"Captain," Jarvis said softly.

No response.

"Captain," he tried again, a little louder.

Still, the man lay face down, sprawled among the sheets and blanket. Morning light was trying to creep in through the window tint and the drawn curtains, but the Captain had a pillow over his head and his face turned away from the light.

"Steve!" Jarvis finally called to him more urgently.

"Mmm, wha?" he asked groggily.

He pressed partially up from his prone position on the bed and turned his head out from under the pillow.

"I apologize for waking you, but Miss Estrella would like to come in. She has something for you, and is waiting in the foyer," Jarvis explained.

"Rrrmph," Steve grumbled, and flopped back down.

It was Sunday. Whenever possible, he tried to leave everyone unscheduled on Sunday. He wanted to sleep. That's all. Just sleep. No briefings, no meetings, no place to go. No running, no training unless he got bored. Eating. Sleeping. Lazing around with friends. That was what Sunday was for. His mind needled at him about other things, but he shoved those thoughts away and focused on the soft, warm texture of his sheets.

"She says she has pastries and coffee for you," Jarvis urged him gently.

"'lright," Steve grumbled.

He was supposed to be avoiding Estrella. Not spending any more time than he had to with her. Staying detached in a friendly way. That's what he should do. But she had coffee and sweets.

"Should I let her in? She is quite persistent," Jarvis said.

"Not yet. Gimme a minute, but tell her I'm coming," Steve said.

He pushed up and got his feet on the floor, then went to the bathroom to hurry with the toilet, toothbrush, and a warm damp cloth for his face. He shoved his legs into cotton scrub pants, which were the only comfortable things he had clean at the moment, and tied the string at his waist.

"Okay, you can let her in," he told Jarvis.
He figured he had a moment to grab a shirt from the drawer, but Estrella's cry for help had him running to the door of his suite.

"What!" he asked, looking out around her for any kind of threat.

"The coffee! Get the coffee!" Estrella told him urgently.

She'd balanced one coffee on top of the pastry box and the other was in her hand, but the pastry box was tilting because she'd had to push the door open. Steve saved the coffee and held the heavy door for her so the food wouldn't be in danger.

"Have you looked outside today?" she asked him as she hurried to set the box on the kitchen countertop.

"No, I just woke up," Steve said.

He sipped at the hot coffee and snooped eagerly over her shoulder as she opened the pastry box.

"Jarvis, clear the windows," Estrella said.

"Captain?" Jarvis asked for permission.

"Yeah, go ahead," Steve said.

The living room and kitchen went from gloomy dark to bright and sunny in less than a minute. Estrella got two plates and selected a cherry Danish. She held a plate for Steve to take out whatever he wanted from the assortment. He hesitated, but then noticed the look of happy expectation Estrella turned to him.

He smiled and chose three gooey, warm confections for his plate.

"Thanks," he told her.

Her eyes flickered over his bare torso briefly, but she didn't linger.

"You're welcome. I had to think of something to get you out of bed. It's almost eight. I want to go out," she told him.

They moved to the living room with their plates and coffee.

"Push the couch close to the window," Estrella suggested.

She wanted to have her feet in the warm sunshine close to the glass.

Steve set his breakfast on the coffee table, and turned the heavy couch around for her until it was facing the window wall and was less than two feet from the glass.

"This is perfect!" Estrella said happily.

She hurried around the end of the couch, kicked off her shoes, and relaxed back into the soft upholstery. Her bare feet went up onto the glass and morning sunshine angled up her legs to her hips. Steve felt relaxed enough to join her, so he took his place at the other end of the couch. He slumped down until the sunlight reached his belly and his rump was in danger of sliding off the seat. Warmth soaked into his legs and groin, and his belly was happy with both the food and the heat.
She looked pleased that he was enjoying what she'd brought. He could start his diet tomorrow. Really, now that he thought it, he was glad she was here. Since she was determined to cook for him, he needed to talk to her about it.

"You want to go out?" he asked her after a sip of coffee cleared his mouth and he could speak.

"Yes! It's getting cooler, and the leaves are changing. We should go out in it before everything turns cold and gray. All you do is work. You need to get outside," she told him with certainty.

"Alright, we can do that," Steve said.

"You should get a tan," she told him. She was looking at his skin critically, and comparing it to her golden toffee skin tone.

"Come on, Eya, I can't go around without a shirt out there," he said.

Unspoken was all the attention he got when he was fully clothed, the women who came to stare at him at the coffee shop, and the fans who always wanted to talk to him. He realized he was in a pretty good mood, but talking to people and signing autographs while he was half naked would be awkward. They would want pictures, and then hugs in the pictures, and that would all end up on the internet. Steve shook his head in distaste.

"So, maybe not down there, but you could feel the sunshine up on the roof," she said.

He got up to put more pastries on his plate, then rejoined her on the couch.

"You want me to feel the sunshine? I can feel the sun through a shirt," Steve said.

Instead of arguing, she looked at him with her chin tilted slightly up and her bottom lip out just a little.

"Are you pouting at me?" Steve chuckled.

"No, I'm not pouting. I'm disappointed that you never relax. You never have any fun. You let people's scrutiny ruin your free time, and you don't experience things. Have you ever laid down in the sunshine just for the sake of it?" she asked.

"I haven't had time, and even if I did, I don't want to hear Tony's comments. I know he'd say things like 'Careful there, Capsicle, or you'll melt,' and every other predictable thing I can think of," Steve said.

"Okay, so I take you some place quiet. No people," she told him.

"There's not any such place around here," Steve said.

"Says you. I know a place," Estrella told him smugly.

He would have denied that there was a sunny, private place, but he could see that she knew something.

"Where?" he asked.

Estrella sat up and put her mostly empty coffee cup on the floor. She took her feet down from the glass and looked out the window at the city nine hundred feet below. After a moment to get her bearings, she pointed down and far to the right.
"There. See it?" she asked him.

Steve sat forward and looked.

"I see a lot of things, but I can't tell which one you mean," he said.

He scooted closer to her on the couch and lined his face up to look down her finger.

"It's a school that the city shut down a few years ago. There's nobody there, and there's a fence all around. It's in the block behind the coffee shop. See it?" she asked.

"I see it. But that's city property. We'd be trespassing," Steve said.

He wanted to kiss the back of her hand which was in front of his face, but he sat back some and she put her hand down. She was really cute, with the spunky fairy-pixie look having won out over the waif-goth thing she'd had going on a few weeks ago. He got stuck studying how pretty her eyes were.

Estrella rolled her eyes at him and flopped back on the couch.

"See! No fun! You wouldn't know how to have fun unless the Army sent you an instruction manual," she complained.

Steve felt every one of his years, especially the ones he hadn't been awake for. A lot of people, most of the people who knew him best, said those years shouldn't count. The only reason he'd survived those long years or been in ice stasis in the first place was because he was the Captain. If he was still just Steve Rogers, he would be a frail old fart, if his health had allowed him to live this long. Either path would have led him to be the no-fun guy Estrella was complaining about.

An odd kind of divergence was in this moment. He knew he could choose to be the responsible old Captain. Or he could suspend his responsibilities for a while and try to find out who young Steve was. He let the moment linger, and he harshly shut out any thoughts about what would happen if somebody called the police on them for trespassing, or if people took pictures of the Captain lying around lazy in the sun half naked. He didn't want to remember that he was supposed to be limiting his time with Estrella.

It was Sunday. He wanted to be Steve. Maybe even Stevie.

He looked at Estrella, where she slumped on the couch as old, respectable people never did. She was watching him. Waiting. There was a glimmer of challenge in her dark, shiny eyes.

"Come on!" Steve said.

Estrella squealed excitedly and he jumped up and hurried to his room. He already felt loose and happy. They would need stuff. If he was going, he didn't plan to come back for hours. He tapped on his phone some and looked at the outside temperature. It was seventy-one degrees right now, with a forecast high of eighty-four. Sunny. Light breeze. Perfect.

Steve threw open his closet door and dug for a backpack he knew was behind some winter things. They needed a way to carry food and water. And maybe some towels to lie down on. The thought crossed his mind that it was like packing for the beach. Or a picnic. Or a beach picnic.

"How can you see in here?" Estrella asked him from the closet doorway.

"Just can. I've got this backpack from a mission a few months ago. Do you think it'll be big enough
for all our stuff?” he asked as he came out of the dark closet with his find.

Estrella didn't know what stuff he wanted to bring. Not long ago, everything she owned wouldn't have filled half the space in his backpack. She nodded to him anyway. He was moving around in his room quickly, so she eased up onto the edge of his bed to get out of the way. His sheets were so soft that she couldn't resist rubbing them idly while he dug in his drawers for clothes.

"What should I wear?” he asked her, coming to a halt as the dilemma hit him. Everything in his drawers was long heavy pants, or workout wear that he didn't want to put on today, or stuff Pepper had picked out for him that didn't seem right.

He turned to look at what Estrella was wearing. She had on snug little denim shorts that cut off in a fuzzy edge a few inches above her knees, and an orange and pink top that fit her well and showed off her pretty collarbones and neck. Her sleek black sneakers didn't show any socks and her ankles looked trim and pretty. Her hair was getting a little too long for the Tony Stark spikey look, and she had it slicked back over her ears and swirled into a rolled wave which crashed down over her forehead. He knew she had to be using some kind of hair foo like Natasha had given him, because nobody's hair could stay that way on its own. Were those earrings? Tiny sparkles caught the light at her earlobes. They were so small that even he couldn't see the details, just a glint of light when her head moved.

"Look at you,” Steve said almost reverently.

He forgot about finding clothes and he smiled happily at Estrella. Her heels were propped on the side of his bedframe, and he knelt down to take one of her heels in his hand. Her lower leg wasn't taut with muscle like Natasha's were, but she wasn't painfully thin anymore, either. Slim, but not remarkably thin. She didn't look strong, but she was starting to look healthy.

"Go away,” she said at him with a little smile.

She shook her foot out of his hand and pushed at his shoulder with her other foot. Only Steve could kneel so close to her like that with no shirt on and not make her nervous. It was his kindness and undivided attention that made her feel antsy. She knew she wasn't worth the time of a man like him, a friend like him. But he wasn't just Captain America. He was Steve. She wasn't good enough to spend time with the Captain, but maybe she was good enough for Steve. Because he was a nice guy, he was happy to see her well, and that was all, she reasoned. Or she thought it was all until she'd shoved at him with her foot.

His hand came up slow and careful to catch her foot, and he guided it down to rest next to her other one. The gentle smile on his face was carefully held in place, but there was something else in his eyes now. Something a little bit like he'd looked in the training room that awful day when Natasha made her speak without her necklace.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's alright," Steve assured her.

She could see him mentally packing away that part of himself and easing back toward his previous fun mood. He spun on his heel away from her and rose to go into his bathroom. It was a strange move, but completely within his ability.

She watched as he pulled two towels from the cabinet, then set them down so he could rub some deodorant under his arms. He smiled at her in the mirror and she felt awkward again with his easily accepting intimacy. How could even the hair under a guy's arms be attractive? She didn't know, but
"You should shave clean so you don't get a weird pale face," she said to him.

"Sure, if you want. Take my pack and get us some water from the refrigerator?" he asked her.

He got a razor from behind his mirror and nodded to his pack on the bed. He held out the two towels to her and she got up to stuff them into the bottom of the pack. He didn't want to turn toward her, even to hand her the towels. She knew what that meant. The kitchen was a better place for her right now, she decided.

Steve set his fists down on the edge of the bathroom counter and took a deep, steadying breath when he heard her moving things around in the fridge. He shook his head and made himself go through the familiar motions of shaving.

He was disappointed in himself for being so easy. All she'd had to do was get the tiniest bit physical with him, and arousal had burned its way to the surface of his mind. So far this morning, he'd kept things light and cheerful, even without his shirt on, which he knew used to bother her. That little shove of her foot, with his bed behind her, and all he'd wanted to do was surge forward and push her back beneath him.

"Dammit!" he cursed under his breath. He dropped the razor in the sink and pressed his thumb to his jaw where he'd cut himself. An instant later, he picked up the razor and finished scraping his face smooth. The tiny razor cut was already healed, so he splashed water on his face and dried off. The smell of aftershave products had been too strong for him ever since the serum, so he went without.

"Do you want sandwiches, or should we stop and get something?" he called toward the kitchen.

"I don't know. We just ate. I'm not hungry," she said.

Steve knew from her voice exactly where she was, so he turned toward the bedroom door and shut it while she couldn't see him. Scrubs didn't hide much, which is why he never wore them out of his suite. Quickly, he stripped out of the scrubs and tugged on fresh boxer briefs. Then he stood looking into his clothes drawer again. What should he wear? He'd never been good at putting clothes together.

Back in the day it was easy because he didn't have much to choose from and it all went together. Then the Army decided for him what he should wear. Now, it was office clothes, or workout clothes, or his Captain's uniform, or the really formal stuff which somebody else delivered to him. Estrella was wearing shorts. He should wear shorts. But what shoes, then? And what shirt? He sighed.

"Eya, can you lay out something for me to wear? I don't know what to do with this stuff," he said through a gap he made in the bedroom door.

Quicker than he would have thought, she was there, looking at him expectantly through the gap. Then he had the problem of not showing her the persistent situation in his underwear.

"How am I supposed to look through your clothes if you won't let me in?" she reasoned with him.

"Uh, yeah," Steve said.

He used every crumb of his speed and agility to get into the bathroom before Estrella could come into the bedroom and see him in his underwear, but she still saw a flash of half of his backside and
a leg before the bathroom door slammed.

She giggled at his modesty. If he'd stood around showing off, he wouldn't have been the kind of guy she'd come to trust. Hiding in the bathroom endeared him to her. She wondered if Steve was standing on the other side of the bathroom door wide-eyed and nervous, ready to guard his virtue. That mental picture, while funny, didn't quite fit what she'd seen of his moods lately.

Estrella looked through his clothes. She didn't know what his problem was. His drawer was full of great stuff. She set out a pair of dignified shorts in dark English tan, and a white undershirt, and a white and blue plaid short sleeve button down shirt. Then, she went into his closet and turned on the light. Boxes. He had boxes of shoes. She'd only ever seen him wear his running shoes, his uniform boots, his brown leather Western boots, and the plain brown leather he wore on office days. There were dozens he'd never touched.

Estrella knelt and looked at the pictures on the ends of the boxes. She recognized Pepper's touch. Everything was stylish and tasteful and expensive. She didn't see him wearing sandals, but the ones she chose had a suede foot bed and a wide leather strap across the arch. It was manly, for a sandal. He was still going to protest.

She put it all together on the bed and made sure there weren't any tags on anything. It looked good. Oh! She'd seen something else in the closet, high on the shelf. She hurried back in and looked at the hats. She chose a sharp straw fedora with a gray band and set it on top of the shirt.

"Okay, you can come get dressed now," she called toward the bathroom.

She hurried out of the bedroom and shut the door for him. He was going to be uneasy enough, with the clothes she'd laid out. He wouldn't want her watching him dress. Estrella leaned back against the living room wall and listened to him grumble and exclaim. His voice rose in complaint a few times, and she had to bite her knuckle to keep from laughing out loud.

"I look like a clown! Sandals?!" he called out.

The bedroom door opened and he came out looking grumpy. Or like a four year old in need of a nap.

"Of course you look like a clown! You're not supposed to wear it all buttoned up and tucked in. Here," she said.

She pulled his shirt out from where he'd stuffed it tightly into his shorts and she started unbuttoning it. His hands came up to push hers away, then he balled his fists at his sides and let her do it. With his current level of agitation, he didn't trust himself to be as gentle as he should.

"That's a good start," she nodded at him.

He looked nice. Really nice. Shirtless had been good, but the way the undershirt gave a peek at the contours of his chest and abdomen, while the relaxed plaid covered most of him up was classic and… something else. Most guys didn't have what he had to hang clothes on. Almost anything would look good on him. Estrella empathized with Pepper in buying him all the clothes. If only she could get him to wear more of it.

"There's no belt. This sags," Steve complained further. His hand grabbed the waist of the shorts and wiggled it to show her what he didn't like.

"Leave it alone. It looks good, and you've got enough ass to hold it up," she told him.
"Eya!" he barked out.

"Well, you do. What do you want me to say? That your posterior is sufficient for the garment? I'm not Jarvis, you know," she teased.

"Smart-Alek," Steve said.

He flicked a finger at her hair in the front where it curved over her forehead.

"Go put on the shoes so we can go," she told him. She grabbed his shoulders and he let her turn him around and push him back toward the bedroom.

"I like the hat, but I'm not wearing sandals," he insisted.

"Fine. Then you go in the closet and pick shoes that go better," she challenged him.

A few moments later, she heard him searching through boxes in the closet. If she wasn't mistaken, she thought she heard a muffled curse word. She bit her knuckle and held her breath in an effort to suppress her laughter.

Finally, he came out of the hallway wearing the whole outfit, sandals and all.

"You look great. I've got the water and the towels. Let's go," Estrella didn't give him time to fuss. She'd learned that tactic from Natasha. She grabbed his hand and tugged him along toward the door.

They got in the elevator and Steve stood with his jaw looking like he was chewing iron. His toes wiggled in the freedom of the open shoes, and his jaw got even stonier looking. She reached up and tilted his fedora a little more forward and to the side just a few degrees. He reached up and fixed it high and center again. She put her nose two inches from his, glared him straight in the eyes, and fixed his hat again.

He squinted meanly at her and she stretched up on her toes a little higher to touch noses with him.

"Ain't scared," she grumbled in a good imitation of his voice like when he said the words. Steve was trying hard to stay disgruntled with her, but she saw the corners of his mouth tense ever so slightly with the effort not to smile. His eyes narrowed more to try to compensate. He ended up looking like he was afraid she was going to poke him in the eye.

Estrella couldn't hold in her laughter any more. She fell against him where he slumped against the elevator wall, and giggled until her tummy ached. Steve put an arm around her to support her when her feet got tired of pressing up and sideways to be near him.

She gasped a breath as she wound down and looked up again, hoping he wasn't too angry. He was smiling at her with a toothy grin that, along with the fedora, made her catch her breath and look somewhere else.

"I'm glad you're happy, but I look like a tourist," he said.

"No, you look like a man on his day off. It's a great day. When we get to the street, look and you'll see. You don't look out of place. Hey! You don't look anything like Captain America," she told him.

She pushed away from him and stood on her own as the elevator doors opened in the mid-level lobby. They got out and crossed over to another elevator which went all the way down. After a few
floors, the box slowed to a stop and the doors opened.

Natasha got in, selected a button, and almost disregarded them until she recognized who Estrella was standing with.

"Steve?" she asked in disbelief, and a smile quirked her normally enigmatic mouth. She stepped closer as the doors closed, and pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"If you take a pic of me looking like this, I'll break your damn phone," Steve told her with certainty.

"Steve!" Estrella chastised him.

Nat smiled bigger, but she put away her phone. She looked him up and down briefly and Estrella could tell that Steve was resisting the urge to hide himself somewhere, if he could only figure out where.

"You look good, Cap. More than good. Estrella, do you think you're strong enough to fight the other women off?" Nat asked archly.

"Neh. They can have him if he wants. I'm not like a woman. I'm just his friend," she said with a shrug.

Steve turned his head to look at her. His lips parted to say something. Natasha waited. Estrella ignored that there was any kind of moment going on. The sooner they got out of the elevator and away from Natasha, the better.

Nat remained facing Steve, squared up with him. She tapped her wrist where a watch would be, if she was wearing one.

"I already talked to Thor and Bruce," Steve told her.

"But did you guys figure anything out?" Nat asked.

She didn't include Estrella in the conversation and neither did Steve.

"We did. I've got a plan. Thor's got my back. Bruce will do the testing and monitoring," Steve said.

Natasha looked Steve in the eyes, and the differently styled clothes didn't matter for a moment. Estrella watched avidly. She was clueless what the conversation was about, but the way they interacted was always fascinating.

"I knew you wouldn't let me rule you, yesterday in the locker room. It was meant to be a challenge, but I knew you'd win. I only wanted you to think of the seriousness of what you're brushing off. You've put this thing off for too long. Taking care of us means taking care of you, Steve," she told him sincerely.

"How did you know I wouldn't let you win?" Steve asked her. Before yesterday, he didn't think he'd ever throw a woman into a wall, even if it was Natasha.

"You're different now. You didn't have it in you before. Now you do," she explained.

"I don't want it," Steve ground out.

"Don't fight it so much. I think you need to change. You're too soft sometimes," Natasha said.
She lifted a hand and touched his clean shaven face. Steve watched her almost wistful expression warily. If she was playing him, she could hurt him in an instant. But she didn't. Her hand fell, then she smiled at Estrella as the elevator doors opened on the floor she wanted.

"Have fun on your day off," she called back to them as she left the elevator.

The doors slid shut and they continued on toward the ground floor.

"What's the 'it' she's talking about?" Estrella thought she'd try asking.

"I don't know. Something. We're working on it," Steve said.

He sounded down now, so different from how excited he'd been before when he'd rushed to his room to get ready to go out for the day.

"So don't tell me about it. Just tell me you're going to be okay," Estrella said.

"I'm more than okay. Never better," he smiled faintly at her.

She liked the smile, but it gave her shivers and reminded her that she was stuck in a small space with a large man. Luckily, they'd reached the ground floor and she could get out. She picked up the backpack and slung it over her shoulder. She could feel Steve behind her, somehow, or maybe it was her imagination.

Instead of going through the lobby and turning left toward the coffee shop, Estrella led them to the right once they were out the doors. Steve stopped and got himself two hotdogs and she waited for him. His feet were obviously unaccustomed to the sandals, but he made do. She admired his strong, masculine legs when she thought he probably wasn't looking.

Without saying anything, he followed her to the end of the block and around to the right. There was a service alley and she turned into it as if she belonged there. Steve was familiar with the concept of brazening into where you weren't supposed to go, so he followed without question. His hotdogs went down in a few bites while he kept his eyes moving over their surroundings under the low brim of his hat.

He was undercover, he told himself. Just like a mission, he was disguised so people wouldn't see him for who he was. The outfit was surprisingly effective. Not once did anyone stop him to talk or to get a picture with him. Now that they were in a deserted alley, there was nobody to bother him at all.

They made their way around old pallets, collapsed boxes, and debris. They avoided stepping in the damp drainage channel in the middle of the alley. Estrella knew exactly where she was going, and she stopped decisively when there was a brick wall on their right, and a chain link fence overgrown with yellow summer weeds on their left.

It was a six-foot fence, but there wasn't any sharp wire on the top. Steve took the backpack from Estrella and ignored the sign on the fence which was clearly marked "Property of NYCounty School District NO Trespassing." He peeked through the weeds and the fence, then tossed their bag over.

"I'm gonna help you to the top. You get there and straddle it, and then I'll help you down the other side," he told her. She nodded.

He paused for a moment and considered her.
"Are you sure you can do this? You're not gonna get hurt?" he asked.

"I was doing this while I was living on the street with a bad heart. How do you think I know about it?" she asked with a smile.

Steve made a disapproving face, but he made a cup of his hands to boost her up. Estrella found it was so much easier to balance draped over the top of the fence while she was feeling well and wasn't wearing baggy clothing. Steve put a hand on the fence top and vaulted clean over it, and then his hands were reaching for her.

She rolled sideways and down and he gently supported her and set her feet on the ground. Estrella marveled at how she was taking his strength for granted. He handled her like she weighed no more than a loaf of bread, and she expected it of him because of the things she'd seen him do on television and in the training room. She bent to pick up their pack, then she looked around at the place she'd brought them to.

The rear windows of the old red brick school were boarded up, and there was a cracked concrete basketball court with rusted poles and no goals anymore. Tall weeds grew everywhere except close to the back of the school where some venerable old trees made shade on the ground. There wasn't a soul around, and the sounds of traffic were distant and removed down the end of the alley and behind the fence.

She looked over to see Steve assessing the scraggly open lot for things she couldn't guess at. He nodded after a moment, and she watched him fade from the Captain and back into just Steve again. He smiled at her like a naughty boy and offered a hand to indicate that she should go first.

"How did you find this place?" he asked as they waded through the tall weeds.

It was so different from the rest of the city, where every growing thing was controlled and subdued and manicured. Large leaf-green grasshoppers whirred at them and leapt away as they passed through the weeds. A shiny blue-purple skink lizard zipped across the corner of the basketball court as Estrella neared. Two crows cawed at each other from atop the fence on opposite sides of the schoolyard.

"I was looking for a place to live. I love it here, but it's too open. Too much chance of being seen, and not enough privacy to hide a shelter. So I would come to visit when I wanted to watch the butterflies and the skinks. Water puddles over there in the corner for days after a rain. This spring, there were tadpoles, and I could hear the frogs at night," Estrella looked around and smiled.

"You liked living rough?" he asked.

"Not always, but it was nice sometimes. Never in winter," she amended hastily.

"I hear ya. Winters were the worst. Winter is probably bad everywhere. Except maybe in Tahiti," Steve agreed.

"Tahiti?" Estrella smiled back at him.

"Yeah. You never heard of Tahiti? Little island where all the movie stars go?" Steve said.

Estrella laughed and shook her head. Sometimes Steve showed his age in the oddest ways.

They reached a spot near one of the large trees where the grass was softer and greener, but still warmed by the sun.
"This looks like our place," Steve said.

Estrella agreed. She let the pack slip down her arm and Steve lay down on his side in the shaggy grass. Estrella sat and took off her shoes. When she looked, Steve was watching her questioningly.

"What if the cops come and we have to run? You won't be ready," he said with a slight rascally smile.

"I don't think you'd run from the police. You'd stand here and make a sincere apology and promise to never be bad again. And they would believe you," Estrella told him as if getting away with things was his fault.

Steve chuckled and lay back on the grass. She tried not to get caught watching how his body flexed when he lay back, and how low the shorts rode on his belly. In the bright sunlight, she could see a fine trail of golden hairs.

"Ah!" Steve shook a finger at her, "And I was gonna to tell you about my teen years, but you had to ogle."

He tugged the undershirt down to meet his shorts, but he was smiling at her in good humor. He tipped the fedora lower on his brow to shade his eyes and folded an arm back to pillow his head at the right angle to talk with her.

"I wasn't ogling. Ogling is when your eyes bug out. I was only looking. Not even staring. Just a look," she reasoned.

Steve wiggled his shoulders like a dog making a bed in the grass and settled in comfortably. He shook off the offending man-sandals and planted his feet flat on the ground. His hat tipped further forward and she was sure he couldn't see her anymore.

"Tell me about your teen years," Estrella said.

She lay on her side and propped her head up on her hand. The grasshoppers started making their sounds again once the two of them stopped moving. A breeze blew up and stirred the tall weeds around them. Estrella felt like they had their own room. The air smelled like earth and grassy herbs.

Steve took a slow, deep breath of the scented air and she could almost see him soaking in the sunshine and the warmth. The stinker was making her wait, trying to pretend that she hadn't asked for more. She poked him in the arm and he smiled a little.

"This stuff isn't in the history books, so don't spread it around. Buck's dad had a truck. He knew this guy out in the country who used to make stuff. From the time I was twelve til I was fifteen, me and Buck would help him run it into town. I was too scrawny to carry the heavy boxes, but I could stand lookout. I earned some change. And I lied to the cops a few times. You're right. They believed me. Then in '33, prohibition was over and the guy out in the woods went legal. I think his family has a label now," Steve told her lazily.

"You did something illegal?" Estrella grinned at him.

Steve shrugged.

"It happens sometimes," he said.

"Sometimes? Are you still doing illegal things?" she asked him. Her smile was eager and wondrous
at hearing about Steve being naughty. She whispered the last part of her question and looked around again to make sure there was nobody to hear.

Steve opened his mouth and took a breath, then shut it.

"Steve?" she asked.

"Don't make me lie to you, Eya. It's still Bucky's fault, anyway," he smiled under his hat.

The toothy grin was back and he put his other arm up behind his head too. He crossed his wrists and wiggled into the grass some more. There was something so captivating about the way he moved that she couldn't not stare.

Instead of getting caught looking again, she lay back so she wouldn't have an easy opportunity to look.

"You should take your shirt off. Both of them. So you can get some sun," she advised him.

Since the day in the tower café when he told her about how the chill of the ice had hurt for hours, she'd wanted him to feel warm. Occasionally, she would think of things which were warm that he might enjoy, and lying in the sun was the first such thing she'd had a chance to try to get him to do. She wanted him to have warm memories to balance out the cold ones.

"I don't know if I can get a tan," he said.

"You mean your body sees a tan as damage and heals it?" she asked.

"I think so. But I can try," Steve said.

He sat up a little to take his hat off, then he took off both shirts.

"No ogling," he told her as he lay back down.

The hat went back on and he tipped it down until it was resting against his nose.

Estrella looked up at the sky and chewed on her bottom lip. She needed no checkup to tell her that her body was getting healthier. The sun was warming her, but not all the heat she felt was from the sun. A few weeks ago, the thought of Steve hearing her voice and taking sex from her had felt sad. She hadn't wanted the innocence, the cleanness of their friendship to end. Today, thoughts of taking off her necklace and talking to him were tempting. But still sad. Because when it was over, he'd be angry at her for making him do it. Or knowing him, he'd be angry at himself and completely excuse her of any culpability. She didn't want that.

But she wanted to see him. She wanted to look at him while he was warm and relaxed and not Captain America. She turned on her side to look at him again, open and honest about it. He liked honesty, so she would give him that. She watched while his chest and belly moved with his breathing. He looked so peaceful, like he could be asleep.

"Sometimes I wish I wasn't a woman," she commented.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Because it would feel so good to lie like that with nothing but the wind on my skin. That's not the only reason, but it's the happiest one," she said.

"Keep thinking happy thoughts. You're right, Eya. This is great," Steve said. He chose to not dwell
on the sad things or the difficult things today. She'd talk about it if she wanted to. The warmth on
his skin was making him feel lazy. It was a perfect Sunday feeling. If he could keep this in his
memories all week long, it might help to keep the scowl off his face later.

"Why did you tell Natasha that you're not a woman? You know it's not true, and you know I'd
rather be with you here than out in the street getting pawed by rowdy broads," he said eventually.

"Would you? Tell me where you went the other night when you took off on your bike," she said.

Steve tipped his hat back some and turned his head to look at her.

"Hey, you weren't supposed to be looking," he said with mild complaint when he saw her blatantly
staring.

Rather than re-stating her question, she kept quiet and looked him in the eyes, waiting.

"Do I gotta answer to you, now?" he finally asked.

He sounded like nothing more than a Brooklyn boy, and she liked that. The question was asked
with an easy smile, but he still hadn't answered her.

"No. You asked me something I didn't want to answer, so I did the same to you," she said.

"Oh," Steve said thoughtfully.

He pondered why she wouldn't want to answer his question, but the warmth of the sun relaxed him
out of thinking about it before long. He felt himself dozing off, then he remembered that he needed
to tell her something.

"I'm changing my diet, Eya. Since you cook for me, I should tell you to cut back on the carbs and
fats. And the sweets," he added.

"Are you crazy? You're not fat at all. Why shouldn't you eat?" she demanded.

"Because eating too much is doing things to me. I'm hurting people I don't want to hurt. Bruce
thinks that I'm getting stronger because I've never had so much to eat, and I agree. The energy from
the calories has nowhere else to go, so it's making me too strong. It's difficult to be careful. Buck
almost can't pin me, even with that metal arm of his," Steve grimaced.

"Why is that a problem? Stronger is better. You should get used to it. Practice some more with
strong people like Thor, and use it for your work," Estrella disagreed with his perspective.

Steve sighed. He didn't want to tell her the rest, but maybe, considering her history, she had a right
to know.

"Eya, it's not just the strength. It's harder to control everything. Aggression. Anger. Stupid
decisions based on pride when I used to rely on caution. And, um... lust. I'm having trouble with
all that. I think it's because I'm taking in too many calories. It's got to go somewhere, and since I
can't get fat, that's what it does to me," he told her.

"Oh," she said.

"Is that why you were so rough with Natasha the other day? That's what she meant in the elevator!
When she said 'it', and that she thought you were too soft and that 'it' might do you some good. This
is really bothering you," Estrella said.
Steve rolled up onto his side to face her. He gave up on lying back like a bum. She deserved his attention for this.

"Yeah," he admitted.

"So listen to her. You train really hard. You can control it," she insisted.

Steve shook his head and looked at her with a kind of fervor she wouldn't have thought to see on him. It made him look almost like an ordinary person because he looked nothing like the precisely deliberate Captain. He looked energized. Bothered.

"Eya, the problem is that I don't want to control some of it. I'm getting selfish," he confessed.

"I'm sure that your version of selfish is still pretty generous, compared to most people," she assured him.

"Don't do that. You can't afford to write me off as harmless. Not even Nat does that anymore," Steve told her.

Estrella paid attention to how he loomed over her, even from a few feet away. His size and his obvious strength were starting to make her nervous, when it was paired with the faintly predatory look in his eyes. From the first day she'd met him in front of the coffee shop, his dissatisfaction with his place in life had been apparent to her. He resented the limits that being a living legend placed upon his freedom. Now, she could see that his unhappiness was simmering and snapping closer to the surface of who he was, eager to break the restraints he kept on himself, if he'd let it.

It was a little frightening, given what she knew he was capable of, but the sweet part of him still remained. Even now, when she would have normally folded herself into her mind out of fear, she trusted Steve.

"You need an outlet. You're all bottled up, and if you don't let loose, something bad is going to happen," she told him.

"I know. Hanging around with Buck helps, but it feels like that's getting tame, too. I want more, Eya, and it scares me," he admitted.

Steve couldn't tell her of the flashes of thought, the temptations he'd been having lately. He couldn't. She might understand, as earthy and street-wise as she was, but she might be afraid, too. He didn't want to see her any more fearful than she already was right now. He knew she was being valiantly brave and trusting, and he admired her for it. There was a point you didn't push people past, and he was just about there, with Estrella.

Estrella narrowed her eyes at him thoughtfully, then she scooted closer across the grass. He held himself rigid while she arranged herself right against him. She jabbed at him with her elbow accidentally while she looked for a place to put her arm. Any of that kind of contact for Steve usually required a response in kind, but he bent his mind to accept the sharp little jabs as companionable and acceptable. Then she completely confused him when she threaded her arm through the bend of his under where it propped up his head, and urged him forward onto her.

He made a startled grunt, uneasy with what she was doing, but she guided his head onto her chest and wrapped her arms around him. One hand rubbed his shoulders and the other smoothed repeatedly across his close-shorn scalp.

She giggled.
"You have grass stuck to your back. Doesn't that itch?" she asked rhetorically.

Her fingers brushed at the stuck grass and her other hand cradled his head under her chin.

"Relax. You know I can't hurt you, and you're too pathetic and confused to hurt me," she said.

Steve grunted in agreement and let himself roll forward to rest a little against her. Most of his weight braced against the ground on his far hand and his bent knee, but she was touching a lot of him, a lot of skin. She hugged him closer to show him that a little more contact was welcome.

The sound he made when she rubbed both his head and his back was eagerly hungry and surprised at the same time, like he was asking her 'why?' and asking for more.

"Shhh," she shushed him, "quit thinking so much."

The tension slowly bled out of his body while she rubbed at his skin and his hair.

"Everybody thinks you're so perfect and proper, but you're not. They've got you so trained that all you can think to do is fight or help people. You never take anything for yourself. There's something in the middle, you know. You can let me be nice to you," she admonished him gently.

With what little of his brain that was still functioning under the sensory onslaught of her hands on his skin, he thought to argue, but then he knew she was right. He visited the sick kids in the hospital to do his part. He participated in veteran's day parades to boost the morale of his fellow service men. He attended charity functions to use his presence to raise money for good causes. He put in service hours at soup kitchens to give back to the nation that had helped him when he was sick and weak. And always, he fought when he was called to. Sure, lots of women wanted to be nice to him, but it was the wrong kind of nice. It was what they wanted.

Estrella didn't want anything from him right now. There was nothing to fight. No one needed his help. With a needy groan, he gave himself over to the magic of her hands. The more she touched him, the more he wanted. He felt starved for touch, as if he hadn't ever realized he was hungry for this sort of contact, and now that she was giving it, he didn't want it to stop. Wherever her hands went, warmth and comfort followed.

"What are you doing to me?" he asked in a daze.

"Loving you," she answered simply.

The words were said lightly and happily in the unconventional, quirky way he'd gotten used to Estrella accepting things. She didn't sound like she was in love with him, and she couldn't be, anyway. She was afraid of men. Steve supposed that he loved her too, in that he cared about her and wanted her to be happy. This made her happy. It made him happy too. Her fingers scratched at his scalp and he forgot to think about anything else.

"And talking to you," she added, "I can't believe I'm talking to you."

"Hmm?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'Hmm'? You people are so used to Tony and Jarvis whipping up something in the lab every time there's a problem, and he fixes it like magic. I get to talk to you, Steve! You let me boss you around. Sometimes I sing just to hear my voice. Doesn't that sound conceited?" she asked with a little laugh.

"It sounds like someone who didn't get to talk for a long time. I guess we're used to Tony solving a
lot of problems, but it's what he does. It's what he lives for. His work makes him happy," Steve said.

He felt like he was too heavy for her, and knowing that her bones were fragile made him roll onto his back and take her over with him. He shoved himself a little so that she rested against his chest instead of over his face. She frowned down at him for some reason.

"Listen to you! What if Tony doesn't like working all the time any more than you do? What if he feels obligated and doesn't know what else to do with himself? I'm sure his work is satisfying to him, but what if he's missing out on other things by working so much? You sound like those people who expect you to act like the Captain all the time," she admonished him.

Steve didn't know what to say, so he nodded. Maybe she was right. He'd think about it later. Right now, he wanted her to touch him again. Now that he was relaxed in the warm sun and not worried about hurting her bones, the only thing more he needed to achieve perfection was the wonderful feeling that her touch gave him. He lay back and closed his eyes again. His hat was knocked off in the grass, but he didn't care. Her hand was in the middle of his chest and that wasn't where he wanted it. Carefully, so carefully, he lifted her hand with a thumb and set it on his cheek.

"You want me to pet you? Like a cat?" she teased with a playful twinkle in her eyes. He couldn't see the twinkle, but he knew it was there from the tone of her voice.

"Please?" he asked quietly, almost a whisper.

She wanted him to do something other than fight or help people. She wanted him to feel the sun and to let her help *him*. He couldn't make himself ask for it any more than that one word. He never needed help. He was the one who gave help. But maybe since she seemed to want to anyway…

Steve's mouth fell open and he turned his face toward her hand as she pressed up his cheek and over his ear. His scalp tingled as her palm rubbed his bristly soft hair, and it sprung up again behind her hand. She massaged the back of his head firmly with her fingers, then she traced across his brow and down the line of his nose.

"Nnnn," he hummed a warning to her and shut his mouth when her fingers explored around his lips. She giggled at him, then pressed her hand along his freshly shaved jaw. Her short, smooth fingernails scratched along the underside from his neck to his chin and he shivered and smiled.

"I told you I would do that for you whenever you ask," she reminded him.

"Do you hafta make me ask?" he complained mildly.

"Steve, lately, you haven't been in the mood for it," she said.

"Sure I have," he argued like a boy saying he was not sleepy at nap time.

"Was I supposed to do this to you in the training room?" she asked, just to make conversation. His obvious enjoyment of her touch was making her a little uncomfortable with the silence.

"Maybe not then," he agreed.

He angled his head to use his lashes to shade his eyes from the sun and he peeped at her. She playfully mashed aside his nose and lips and moved her hand to rub the other side of his face.

"Was I supposed to do this when Natasha was in the elevator with us, earlier, or maybe in front of Tony and Clint in the lobby? Or maybe at the library with Wanda?" she asked him.
"Don't care 'bout them," he mumbled.

He didn't. He didn't care about much of anything right now, except for Estrella to keep touching him like she was. She was soft and she was being sweet and she trusted him despite everything, and-

The faint jingle of the metal fence came to his ears and he eased her aside and got to his feet.

"What? Did you hear something?" Estrella asked from her spot hidden in the tall grass.

Steve crossed his arms and frowned powerfully at the direction where they'd come over the schoolyard fence.

"It's only Buck. Nothing to worry about," he told her.


He glanced down at her, curious why she was whispering now. Her posture went from relaxed to huddled and faintly menacing, like she'd once been on the street when there was a stranger she didn't like.

"Buck's not so bad. I'll ask him to go in a little while, if you still don't want him around. Give him a chance?" Steve asked.

Estrella frowned up at him for a moment, but then she nodded. She sat up straight with her arms wrapped around her knees and waited. She didn't like how all of Steve's attention was sharp and ready. They'd been happy and relaxed for a little while, and now Bucky had to come and ruin it.

"Heya, Stevie. I heard you talking from over there. Who's got you in short pants?" Buck asked as he ambled over to see them.

His hands were shoved in the pockets of his pants and he was wearing a long dark shirt, even on a warm day. He was bigger than Estrella remembered, lean and strong looking in a way that made her uneasy. She wanted to freeze still as if maybe he wouldn't see her.

"Hey, toots," he said casually to Estrella, looking around Steve to do so.

Estrella scooted further behind Steve's legs to duck away from his view.

"Buck, don't. She's-" Steve began.

"Yeah, I know how she is. So why are ya here makin time with her?" Buck wondered.

"It's not like that," Steve grimaced at his friend and shook his head.

Bucky looked him up and down, indicating his general lack of clothing, and crossed his arms like Steve in subtle mockery of his dominant stance. His sliver hand flashed in the sun before he tucked it under. Estrella peeked out around Steve's shorts curiously.

Steve grit his teeth. He knew what it looked like to Buck, especially after what he'd told him about Estrella on the bus. There was nothing he could say that would turn away the scrutiny Buck was giving him, because Buck was right. Now that he was clear headed and not goofy like a kid playing hooky, he realized that he shouldn't be here encouraging anything with Estrella. But he wasn't ready for it to be over. He wanted more.

"Don't you ever want a day off?" Steve asked him hopefully.
"Is that what this is?" Buck asked skeptically.

"Yeah, that's what this is," Steve said.

"Alright," Buck agreed.

He loosened his confrontationally teasing stance, turned his side to Steve, and bent to take off his heavy boots. Estrella felt Steve's body relax a little and his arms dropped to his sides. She tugged on his shorts and he looked down at her. She shook her head at him once, firmly. She still didn't like Bucky. She didn't know why Steve did. He was a pushy ass.

Please? Steve mouthed at her.

Estrella looked over at Bucky and stared at him coldly. She knew time with his friend was important to Steve, so she had little choice if she didn't want to seem like a controlling witch. She shrugged and nodded her head. The way Steve looked at her happily made it tolerable.

"Aw, sweet," Buck said with mild sarcasm.

"Shut it," Steve warned his friend.

Bucky unbuttoned the front of his shirt and tugged it out of his navy blue work pants. He lay down a little way across from them in the grass and stretched his pale toes out in the sun. His chest and belly were just as pale.

Steve sat down again, his hand resting atop Estrella's foot to comfort her.

"What are ya doing, Buck?" Steve wondered.

It was very strange to see Bucky laid out in the sun, ignoring his surroundings. Maybe as strange as Steve felt for doing it too.

"Same thing you are. It's my day off. You're wrecking the peace and quiet," Buck grumbled as if he was half asleep.

"Are you supposed to be my chaperone or something?" Steve asked.

"Somethin'," Buck agreed.

Steve flopped back in the grass with a frustrated grunt. Buck was right, as usual. He was starting to feel like Buck was here more to protect Estrella than to see him. It was hard to read him anymore. Or maybe he'd come around to be a pain in the ass and annoy him. Whatever his reason, Steve was so glad to have his company after years thinking he was dead that he was willing to put up with a lot. Estrella lay down at his side not because she was comfortable again, but because she felt the need to hide behind him.

"Why don't you like him? All the ladies used to love him. He won't hurt you. I promise," Steve said.

"She doesn't trust me because I already hurt her, trying to keep her quiet the day there was some gang activity at her place. And I forced her to agree to go to you for help right before she disappeared from the street. She doesn't like being manhandled," Buck said casually.

"Of course she doesn't like it. What did you do?" Steve surged up halfway to sitting again. He was going to go make Bucky talk, but Estrella's hand on his chest, pulling him back tempered his
intentions. She looked at him with wide, cautious eyes and shook her head.

"I can take him one-handed, Eya. I didn't know he hurt you. You should have said something," Steve fussed at her.

"He didn't really hurt me. I just don't like him. He did what you would have wanted. Don't fight," she said quietly. Her hand rubbed in the center of his chest and he eased back down to the grass slowly.

"Would ya look at that? What kinda voodoo do you have, girlie?" Buck asked.

They looked over at him, both scowling, but Buck had a surprised smile on his face. Estrella lay down again too, and her hand moved to rest on Steve's shoulder.

"Her name is Estrella. I told you that already," Steve said.

Estrella poked him in the side firmly.

"What? We're not on the street anymore. Buck won't talk about you. It's more like he'd listen for anybody else who might say your name and stalk them for a while. Maybe make 'em disappear," Steve frowned over at his friend disapprovingly.

Buck flipped him a gesture with his left hand. The quiet stretched among them and they all seemed to relax. The breeze picked up for a moment and it made a tiny howling noise among the grass stems. It eased the heat of the sun a little, which was getting intense enough to make sweat prickle their skin.

"Ah, God, this is good. Chases the ice from my blood. Know what I mean, Stevie?" Buck asked.

"Yeah, I know," Steve agreed.

He sprawled out some more and lifted his hands to tuck them under his head again. Estrella shifted beside him to make room for his arm, then she was back close to him, nearly clinging. Her hand flattened on his chest and her chin propped on it. She was watching Buck suspiciously.

"Can I touch you?" Steve asked, hoping to distract her.

He skimmed his fingers over her cheekbone, and his other hand sought out the skin of her back above her shorts, like before. She shook away his hand from her face, but she let him touch her lower back.

"Did you tell him the thing that's bothering you?" she asked Steve in a whisper.

"He knows. I didn't go into detail like with Thor and Bruce and Nat, but he already knows. He's seen some things. And there's no point whispering. He can hear you anyway," Steve told her.

"What do I know?" Buck asked.

"That I'm changing. That there's something wrong," Steve clarified.

"That's plain as anything. Did you see the jeans you were wearing? And now short pants? And, the other stuff? Estrella, be careful around bad boy Stevie. No tellin what he'll do next," Buck teased.

"What other stuff?" Estrella asked.

Bucky grinned where he was, lying in the sun. Steve found a pebble to throw at him. Whose side
was Buck on, anyway? Estrella poked him again.

"Some stuff I'm not proud of, alright? Don't ask. Please, don't ask," Steve groaned. He rubbed his hands over his face until the blush passed. Estrella smiled down at him, sly and wondering.

"Ask him and he'll have to tell ya. He's not any good at lying," Buck told Estrella.

"Bucky, shut up!" Steve complained.

"Look at him squirm. He never could stand a guilty conscience. Not for a minute longer than it took him to find a priest," Buck continued.

Steve was squirming. Estrella was surprised to see. His skin was flushed pink most of the way down his chest, and his hands were still covering his face. His body shifted in tense discomfort, back and forth.

Buck chuckled at him and tossed the pebble back his way. It bounced off Steve's belly. He jolted at the small hit and growled something menacing at his friend.

Estrella surprised them both when she flew over Steve and landed on Bucky. She ripped up fistfuls of dry weeds and dirt and threw them at Buck's face.

"Stop it! You're not his friend. You're an asshole!" she yelled at him.

She ripped at her necklace and threw it on the ground. She opened her teeth to yell at Bucky, to scream at him. If he opened his mouth to say one more mean thing that made Steve squirm like that, she was going to do it.

Buck shook his head in a snap to get the debris off his face. Then he waited. The girl was wild with anger for Steve. He remembered something Steve had told him about her voice.

"You know if you do that, you'll hurt him too," Buck pointed out.

"He's tougher than you are. He can take it. It would be worth it to punish you," she told him.

"Eyaa," Steve groaned behind them, "don't talk."

Estrella leapt up from where she'd been kneeling on Bucky's belly and scrabbled away from him, back toward Steve's protection. Steve edged away from her a little. Buck looked on with concern at the way his friend was struggling to stay away from the girl. Didn't she see what kind of danger she was in?

"Wait a minute. Isn't your voice supposed to do something to me?" Buck asked.

He curled up and onto his side, then reached out to pick up the necklace from where she'd tossed it. He recognized it as a strip of Steve's uniform, and his eyes could pick out the faint marks of the old toy badge in the surface of the hammered copper. It had Steve written all over it, at least to him.

Buck looked at them, huddled close, trying not to hurt each other.

He sighed.

"Stevie, you sure know how to pick em. What are you gonna do with her?" he asked.

He got up on his knees and brushed the dirt and torn vegetation off of himself some, more to give Estrella a chance to calm down than anything else. Then he leaned forward on one hand to hold the necklace out to her.
"You don't feel anything?" she whispered at him suspiciously.

"No, I don't think so," Buck said.

Estrella clambered back over Steve, away from Bucky as soon as she had her necklace back. Steve's hands grasped at her.

"Leave off, pal. You know you're outta your head," Buck warned him.

Steve's hands balled into fists but he dropped them to his sides. He watched Buck with a steely glare he'd never used on him even when they were fighting each other on the helicarrier. Buck raised his hands and backed off.

He perched on his haunches and watched them curiously.

"Cover up his ears and say something else. Maybe I didn't hear you right the first time," Buck told her.

Estrella didn't know why she did it, but she obeyed him. She pressed her hands against Steve's ears hard and he let her do it.

"Why are you so mean to him? You're supposed to be his friend," Estrella asked plainly.

"You'd have to know us, doll. It's not really mean. We're just guys. It's how we deal with the awkward shit," Buck told her.

He thought he felt a twinge of something warm in his brain for a moment, but then it faded to nothing.

"He doesn't like it. Can't you see that? It's not your place to judge him or to try to shame him. You did things too. Worse things," she spoke again.

"I know I did wrong, but this isn't about me. He likes it more than you think. The teasing, and even the shaming. I'm the only one who will judge him and hold his feet to the fire and he knows that. Everybody else wants to see him screw up and then point fingers at him and take pictures. He's always tried to keep me on the straight and narrow. This is me returning the favor, now that he's trying to get away from who he's supposed to be," Buck explained.

"You don't get to decide who he's supposed to be!" Estrella yelled at him. She took her hand from Steve's ear and pointed a sharp finger at Bucky. She jabbed it at him like a knife to his chest, if only she liked him well enough to touch him. She didn't, so she kept her distance. Steve continued to glare between them, but he covered his ears so she wouldn't have to.

"I know who he's supposed to be. And this ain't it! Lying down in the grass with a frail little dame, spending time with loose women on the side. Out looking for trouble in the wrong neighborhood. Something's not right, and all of you lily-white people need to look out for him," Buck warned.

"I'm not one of those people! And who is he going to, to find the loose women, huh? He always comes back easy, talking about you, but I know what he went out looking like. I know that look on a man. Neither one of you is fooling me," she pointed out stridently.

Buck sat back down on the grass. Useful as the conversation was to prove that her voice wasn't doing anything to him, she had some good points.

"Look, Eya-"
"You don't call me that! Only he gets to say that," she denied him.

"Alright, alright. I was saying… He may not look it, but he's a wily little shit. If he wants to go do something bad enough, he's gonna find a way to do it. I get him what he wants because I'd rather watch his back while he's distracted than find something embarrassing on the news, see?" Buck conceded.

Estrella stared at him balefully, but then she nodded. She put her necklace back on. Steve eased his hands from his ears.

"You better not lie to me," Estrella warned Bucky.

"You wouldn't know it if I did. I'm not like him," he said.

"I know. I only trust him with you because he does and Natasha does. And I don't know if I trust Natasha much anymore," she said.

"Never trust Natalia. She's the best," Bucky smiled.

"She says you're the best," Estrella told him.

Buck shrugged.

Steve was sitting up leaning on his arm now, looking grumpy.

"Why doesn't her voice work on you?" he asked, his own voice kind of deep and messed up.

"Who knows? Maybe I'm immune to suggestion," Buck said. He wiggled a silver finger at his head to indicate all the things that had been done to his mind by Hydra.

Bucky found Steve's shirts and tossed them at his chest.

"Put those on. And you," he turned his attention to Estrella, "no more rubbing on him like you were doing. Don't wind him up and make him do anything stupid."

"Yeah, I only do stupid when I'm around you," Steve said.

Buck moved to smack him, but Steve tensed up.

"Don't touch me, Buck," Steve warned.

Bucky cocked his head aside strangely, as if he'd heard something improbable, but he backed away. Estrella stayed where she was, partly behind Steve again, her hand on his shoulder. He wondered why the girl got to touch Steve, but he didn't. He eyed how her fingers pressed at bare skin, almost rubbing.

"No more. I'm serious," Buck said to her.

She looked at him defiantly. She was going to rub Steve's arm just to spite Bucky, but he watched her with such cool detachment that she took her hand off of Steve's shoulder instead.

"Buck, don't do that. Not with her," Steve said.

"Quit telling me what to do, punk. Your judgement's questionable right now and you know it," he told him.
Buck got up and left them as quick as he'd arrived. She watched him until she couldn't see him over the tall weeds, and then she heard the fence rattle.

"That wasn't any fun," Estrella said.

Steve wadded his shirts in one hand and lay down again.

"You've got to stop picking fights with dangerous people. You do realize that one day somebody's gonna call your bluff, right?" he pointed out.

Estrella frowned at the grass and threw a flower at him.


"You didn't try to pull me off of him today. If he was dangerous, you would have," she reasoned.

"Nah. Buck is having a good day today. He's all there, more and more. Still, you shouldn't do that, Eya. I understand that it worked for you, before, but you're around a different kind of people now. We don't scare as easy," he said.

"I know. I don't know why I do it. I just get so angry, and then I don't care. I always assumed I'd be dead by now, anyway," she explained.

"Hey," Steve barked. His sharp tone made her look at him even though she didn't want to. Was this why people followed his orders in battle? When he spoke like that it was hard to ignore him.

"Stop it. You matter. You're still here because you're supposed to be here. You're not done until I say you're done," Steve ordered her.

He'd never gone full-on Cap with her before, command voice and all, and it was startling. He managed to pull it off convincingly while shirtless and covered in bits of grass. Estrella nodded.

"Don't make me do that, dammit. It's supposed to be Sunday," he grumbled.

And like that, the Captain was gone and he was back to being Steve again. He began to brush grass off of his front, then started to pick it off when he found that brushing wasn't very effective.

Estrella moved behind him to get his back. She'd gotten a dozen pieces off of him when she noticed how stiff his posture had become.

"What?" she asked.

"Don't touch me, Eya. I can get this myself," he said.

"I'm not even touching you. I'm picking the grass off," she said.

"I'll get it," he assured her.

Estrella huffed out a breath and pouted at his back.

"Now you're no fun again. While you're being no fun, I may as well tell you that any diet you go on, I go on too. You need to diet as much as I do. No! You go practice. Go to the pound and hold puppies or something. Jarvis likes me. He'll tell me if you're not eating, just like you ask him about my medical things. Don't think he won't. He tells Pepper when Tony's being stupid all the time, and Tony made him. Go ahead and get mad. You can't fight him, you know. He's saved in a lot of
places. He'll just come back and pester you to eat if you destroy one set of processors, and Tony will have him loaded into another set before you get to the next. So-


He twisted his shirt into a rope and scrubbed it back and forth across his back to get the stuck grass off. Then he shook out his shirts and pulled them on. He looked for his shoes and grimaced when he found them.

She had him wearing sandals and he hated the things. She refused to let him eat how he wanted to. And she insisted on provoking people when he'd warned her not to. She was staring at him brazenly, trying to bully him into handling his problems the hard way.

"Estrella, this may seem as trivial to you as just training a little harder, but fifteen people died on my last mission who didn't have to die. This is real, and I don't want to do more harm than I mean to," Steve told her.

She knew this 'it', this new thing his body was doing, was troubling him probably more than he let on. Grudgingly, she admitted to herself that his asshole friend seemed to know him well. Bucky warned her not to push Steve too far with the touching. It came across sounding like the man was concerned for her, but she knew that the only reason he cared about her was because he knew that Steve cared about her. Bucky was afraid that Steve was so on edge that he would hurt her. And then Steve would feel bad and not forgive himself.

"The kind of practice you need, you won't find it in the training room," she told him.

"Yeah? And where am I gonna find it?" Steve asked.

He got to his feet and brushed grass off the back of his shorts. Estrella stood up and did the same.

"I'll teach you," Estrella said.

"Teach me what?" he wondered.

They started moving back to where they'd crossed over the fence. Now that Bucky had come and interrupted her efforts at getting Steve to enjoy himself, Estrella wanted to try again, but this time somewhere that no one would show up uninvited and spoil it.

"Maybe we teach each other," Estrella said thoughtfully.

"Teach what, Eya? You gotta say it. I can't read your mind," Steve grumbled.

She glanced at him, so much taller and stronger than her. Bucky thought he was dangerous. Maybe he was. But he'd taken a chance on her. He'd taken a street girl into his home. He'd given his blood to heal her heart. He let her hurt him with her voice and never once punished her for it. Whatever his body was going through, his heart was still good. The best.

"We teach each other that we can touch without hurting," she said.

Steve looked at her critically while he lifted her up to the top of the fence. He started to jump over, but his sandal slipped off his foot and he had to stop and put it back on. She knew she'd never get him to wear the sandals again. Then, he was up and over and he helped her down.

"I don't think that's a good idea. You're the only one who could get hurt," Steve said.
"Maybe. But you need to know that you can touch people and be careful enough not to hurt them. We can try that lots of different w-"

"No. No way, Eya. I'm not touching you. You know your bones aren't as strong as they should be, right? Did Doctor Kalfey tell you that?" he asked.

Estrella could tell that he was unhappy about something.

"Of course she told me. Why do you think I'm letting you help me over the fence?" she asked crossly.

"Then you don't understand," Steve told her.

He looked around the long, empty alley briefly, and then he listened. She observed his stillness and his little hand signal, which probably meant that she should be still and quiet. She waited patiently for him to determine that no one was close enough to overhear them. It was around noon, and she wanted to find some shade. It was getting hot enough to not be fun standing on asphalt. Steve stepped closer, partly to shade her, as if he knew her thoughts, and partly so he could speak quietly.

"Those fifteen people I mentioned?" he prompted her.

"Yeah? The ones you think should still be alive?" she said.

"Right. I was being careful. They had strong, healthy bones, and they still broke in my hands. We can't take a chance. I can't let myself hurt you. I won't," Steve said with finality.

It felt like another bitter swallow of self-sacrifice for him to say it. Her touch had always felt good to him, soon as she'd started letting him touch her, and soon as she'd started touching him. It felt better than anything. He didn't want to give up something so good. Something that she wanted to give him.

"Don't be stupid. You weren't being careful when that happened with those people. You were moving fast, weren't you? Like in the training room? You were working," she said.

"Well, yeah, but-" he tried to deny her point.

"No! You listen. You were moving fast. Like a really good guitar player can play fast on his favorite guitar, and still get all the notes perfect. But you're not playing with the same guitar anymore, Steve. Your instrument that you use to do your work is a little different now. You have to slow down and re-learn it. Become familiar with this new way that your body is. You're so good with physical things, I bet in no time you'll be perfect again. But practice with me. Slow down. Touch somebody for a reason other than an Avengers mission," she told him.

"I'm not gonna use you like that," Steve denied.

He pushed off the chain link fence, making it rattle and jingle. Walking away was his way of saying that he wouldn't consider her idea anymore, but she could walk, too. She hurried after him. When she caught up, she slipped her hand into his and tugged his arm.

"I don't want you to help me with this," Steve said quietly.

He pulled away from her and took his hand back.

"Too bad! I didn't want your help, either, Steve. But you got Wanda and Bucky and Jarvis on your side, and you made me take the help. So, no! I'm going to help you. I didn't get a choice when you
wanted to help me, so you don't get a choice now. You stand there and explain to me why you get to have your way and I don't!" she fussed.

Her finger pointed out her words emphatically, and her other hand was on her hip. She knew her jaw and her lip were jutted out again, but he didn't tease her about it this time. His mouth opened and she leaned forward, eager to hear what stupid male reasoning he'd have that made his will more important than hers.

Steve thought of several things, and then he decided against saying each one of them.

"Right. What you want isn't any more important than what I want. So, you're going to let me help you," Estrella told him. She gave him her half-powered evil eye. He already looked resigned, so she didn't think she needed the full effect.

"Are you laughing at me, Steven Rogers?" she made her look a little stronger. He looked like he was about to burst from holding something in, now that she noticed.

"No. Not laughing. And it's 'Steven Grant Rogers', if you wanna use the whole thing," Steve was breathing funny, fast and shallow, and he was smiling. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at her.

"You're trying not to laugh," she accused him.

He could only nod at her.

"What did I say that was funny?" she grumped at him.

"Nothing. It's great. You sounded like my ma. I want to hug you, but I'm afraid I'll hurt you," he said all in a rush.

"I'm not your mother. We'll work on the hugging," Estrella said.

"I'm terrified of hurting you," he admitted. The humor left his face, and she could see his concern.

"Then don't hurt me," she said.

She took his hand again, and tugged him toward the sidewalk at the end of the alley. She wanted to get back to the tower and start tonight's supper for them. Something big and delicious. If Steve was changing, then she wanted him to have everything he needed to do so. After all, it was only fair. She was changing, too.
"You need a table. Why don't you have a table?" Estrella asked him.

"I've got a bar. And stools. Why do I need a table?" Steve asked.

He set two plates, two glasses, and two sets of silverware on his bar top, which overlooked the kitchen. He knew he was being grumpy, but he couldn't help it. She'd fried a chicken and made mashed potatoes and gravy, and green beans with bacon crumbles on top. It was so much food that Jarvis had asked him to go over to Nat's place to help Estrella carry it to his suite. It smelled too good to argue about not wanting to eat. The little imp knew he couldn't resist a good meal, and she was using that against him.

"You need a table because we have to sit beside each other and stare at the boring kitchen while we eat. Look. Right over there. You should get a pub table to put in that empty spot," she said.

Estrella pointed to a place by the windows in the living room which was not being used. She was right. The view would be great. In the morning he could have breakfast in the sunshine, and in the evening, he'd be able to see the city lights.

"Maybe," Steve conceded.

Estrella was making sweet tea, so he put ice in their glasses. His belly rumbled at him like the traitor it was, and he swallowed the saliva that was pooling in his mouth. He wanted to snatch a crispy, golden chicken leg from the platter, but Estrella was watching him with a strong eye.

"I hear you," she grinned at his belly while she stirred the pitcher of tea.

"Hurry it up, then. If you don't want me to take the chicken and run, you should bring it over here," Steve told her.

Estrella made her 'ain't scared' snooty face at him and took her time bringing the serving dishes to the bar. Steve poured the tea, then waited impatiently while she fiddled with her new phone.

"Come on, come on, c'mon," he insisted.

Just as she touched the phone screen where she wanted to, he snatched it from her fingers and tossed it behind them into the living room.

"Hey! You'll break it!" Estrella said.

"No I won't. See, it landed on the cushions. Let's eat," he said.

She glared at him, but the music she wanted with supper was already playing. And now the phone was too far away for Steve to turn the music off, so she considered it a victory.

Steve bowed his head briefly, so she did too, and then she stayed out of his way while he served himself large portions of the meal she'd fixed. Before the beans were spooned fully onto his plate, he was biting into a chicken leg with his other hand. Estrella smiled in deep satisfaction to see how he enjoyed what she made for him. When he was done loading his plate, she served herself much
more modest amounts.

"Sorry," he said as soon as he could, "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm hungry."

"I know. Don't worry about it. You don't need to impress me. Remember, I looked like a matted dog when we met. I certainly wasn't trying to impress you," she said.

Steve nodded thankfully. Too many women tried too hard. When they did that, all he could see was their desperation to get noticed. In contrast, Estrella had shown him nothing but herself. He stopped eating long enough to talk to her.

"You know that I liked that, right? I still do," he told her.

"What? That I looked like a matted dog? And probably smelled like one too?" Estrella teased him.

"Quit trying to twist things. You know I didn't mean it that way. I meant-"

"I know what you meant, Steve. I see how people are. Being on the street for years, I had a lot of time to observe people. Just eat," she told him.

She ate slowly. Steve took her words to heart and paid attention to his plate. Estrella smiled at his eagerness to get his plate cleared so that he could have seconds. Chicken bones were stacked to the side of his plate. She poured him more tea while he served himself more.

"You must hate charity dinners," she commented.

Steve rolled his eyes up as if asking heaven for mercy while he chewed. A shudder of distaste went through his big frame. He didn't need words to show her how he felt about the subject.

Estrella used to feel uneasy being in his suite with him. At first when she'd come to the tower, everything was awe-inspiring and she'd felt out of place. Like a servant. Like someone was going to suddenly realize that she didn't belong, and they'd put her back out on the street. Steve had stopped being intimidating after the first few times she'd met him at the coffee shop. She rarely thought of him as Captain America anymore, except when he was gone on a mission somewhere and she worried about him.

He certainly didn't look like a national icon right now. He was wearing an old t-shirt that she'd seen Thor wear before, and his gray sweat pants had a gaping hole at one knee, and a worn spot at the other knee. His bare feet propped on the rungs of the stool, and his hair was dark and damp from a shower. She tried hard to ignore his physical perfection and his attractiveness because she didn't want to get caught staring and make him uncomfortable. She knew he didn't like it when she stared.

"You're bad," Steve said between bites.

"No. I'm very good to you," she said with a playfully arrogant gleam in her eyes.

"If I was a regular guy and I'd worked a hard day at roofing, this would be fantastic. But you know I shouldn't be eating so much, and you still made all this. You knew I couldn't resist," he pointed a chicken bone at her.

Estrella shrugged and denied nothing. Her plate was still half full and she savored the good food. She hadn't been off the street for so long that she took things for granted. She dipped the crispy chicken skin in gravy and took a bite. It was so good that she closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy it.
Steve didn't think she was playing fair. He didn't understand how she had time to fix a meal like this, and change her look so much from how she'd been this morning. Her sneakers and raggedy cutoff shorts were gone. She'd worn strappy little flat shoes that she'd already kicked off by the door. Her breezy yellow dress made her skin look sun kissed and almost glowing. She'd never worn anything without sleeves that he could see, and he liked that she was getting a little bit of roundness to her shoulders. He really liked her pretty neck and shoulders, and he glanced away as soon as he realized he was staring.

Her hair was different too. This morning it had been slick and styled into swooshes and whirls on her head, but now it looked soft. It was smoothed down from the crown of her head, and it closely framed her face and onto her nape with irregular, feathery edges. He thought she looked like a darker version of that little Disney fairy. He was secretly proud that he knew enough about modern culture to make the reference, even if it was just in his own mind.

"Your hair looks great like that. How do you keep changing it?" he asked.

"It's easy. I like to play with hair. Natasha has a lot of stuff in the bathroom, and I bought more for myself, so it's fun. It's good to have hair I can do something with," she admitted.

"You must have hated your hair before, then," he said.

He knew he'd said something wrong as soon as the words were out. Estrella's expression went brittle and falsely cheery and she nodded. He felt like an ass. An insensitive ass.

"I'm sorry, Eya. Maybe you don't want to be reminded of it, if you hated it so much. I should have thought about that," Steve said.

What she hated was that his voice went all low and quiet with sympathy, as if she needed his concern. She was stronger than that, and she shouldn't have let her hurt show. The more Steve saw her as fragile, the less likely he was to let her help him.

"I made my hair ugly on purpose. My clothes too, and everything about me. It served a purpose, just like your uniform and your shield serve you. I'll do it all again when I need to," she told him with a defiant tilt of her head.

Steve finished the last of his chicken and wiped his hands on a paper towel. He sipped his tea to clear his mouth because he had a lot to say.

"You won't need to, Estrella. You're my friend, and you don't know me if you think I would let my friends live on the street like that. I don't like to see anybody living rough," he said.

He would have said more, but she didn't let him.

"I know. You think you can control everything and everyone. You're a big, rich white man with big, rich friends, and you're going to try to make me live how you think I should live," she said.

She couldn't help it if her voice was getting loud and angry. She liked Steve a lot, but it made her so mad when he thought he could order her life how he wanted it.

"You don't own me," she said, "Just because you took me off the street doesn't mean you do."

"Hey! That's not fair! You know that I don't think I own anybody. And what does being a white guy have to do with it? My parents were immigrants, too, so I don't wanna hear that crap. I'm only rich because I was dead for seventy years and interest compounds all on its own. And if anything, you think you own me! I'm like your trained dog. You boss me and manipulate me all day into
eating extra when you know I don't want to," Steve pushed up from his stool and grabbed his plate roughly.

He brought it to the sink and started doing dishes before she could get to them. He stomped back and took her empty plate and their glasses too.

"You're going to break those if you-" she winced.

Glassware crashed and tinkled in the steel sink and Steve cursed low and angry. Estrella slipped down from her stool and hurried into the kitchen to see if he was cut.

"Aught! You stay right there. Don't come any closer," Steve barked at her.

She stood in front of the refrigerator with wide eyes. Steve was trembling, he was so angry, and blood dripped from his left hand. When he was sure she was going to listen to him, he started picking glass out of his fingers with the other hand.

"I'll get the first aid kit," she said.

She spun around to go to the hallway bathroom.

"C'mon. Really, Eya?" Steve laughed, low and nasty.

"What? You're bleeding, and you need the tweezers," she said.

He used his good hand to pull out the trash can. Then, he went back to picking glass.

"This isn't bleeding. This is like a sneeze. Or a hiccup. Just go… sit down or something. Get away from me til I'm calm," Steve ordered her.

"But-"

"Go!" he shouted at her.

He stopped tending to his hand to stare at her so hard that she imagined lasers shooting out of his eyes.

"Asshole. Be that way, then," she grumbled.

"Bleh-bleh-bleh-bleh. Snooty little broad. You always have to have the last word, don't you?" Steve grumbled back at her mockingly.

He turned his attention back to his hands and cleaning up the mess he'd made of the dishes. Estrella defied him by getting a folding stool from between the fridge and the wall and standing on it to reach his liquor cabinet up high. She could feel his vile attitude bristling at her from six feet away.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"Getting a glass of wine. Because some people can enjoy alcohol," she taunted him meanly.

"Witch," Steve muttered.

The broken dishes crashed into the trash can and he ran water over his cut hand.

"Fuddy-duddy," she responded.
She bit her lips hard so she wouldn't smile at his inability to call her a bitch. Even as angry as she'd seen him, Steve couldn't get past a certain degree of rudeness. She scooted her stool across the kitchen floor with one foot and set the wine bottle down so she could step up and get a wine glass from the other cabinet. She dug in a drawer for the corkscrew, and soon had a deep red glass of wine poured for herself. Maybe if he was being nicer, she'd pour one for him too, but he wasn't. he could get his own if he wanted some.

"Aren't you supposed to chill that first?" Steve asked irritably.

"Not this one. Tony and Jarvis both said it was for drinking at room temperature," she corrected him.

Steve's shoulders got even stiffer, and he turned fully away from her to finish up his cleaning. Estrella walked into the living room and sat near her phone, which was playing an annoyingly cheerful pop song. She turned it off and took a drink. The lamp on the end table was the only light, so the room looked cozy. It would have felt peaceful if not for Steve stomping and banging in the kitchen.

"You're not supposed to have wine. Your liver can't handle it," Steve reminded her belatedly.

"I'll live," she insisted.

The city outside the window was hard to see with the reflection of the lamp on the glass, so she reached out to turn off the lamp. She knew that the light over the kitchen sink was enough for Steve to see by. She pulled her bare legs up under her full dress and shivered a little at the cool draft from the air vent. Anger and agitation had her blood running hot, so the room felt cool by comparison. She also wasn't used to so much skin being bare. Natasha had told her 'don't be such a child. Wear the damn dress,' so she had.

Steve joined her in the living room and he sat down in his chair in the dark.

"Don't you tell me you're sorry," she said.

She could hear the lilt of her accent coming out because she was angry, and it only made her angrier.

"I'm not sorry. I didn't do anything wrong by helping you. If you want to call me selfish and controlling because I didn't want to see you die, then fine. I'm selfish and controlling," he said.

"And I'm not sorry for being bossy and manipulative. If you weren't so stubborn, you would listen to the people who care about you, and I wouldn't have to get that way," she told him.

"People don't care about me. I'm a tool," he grumbled.

"Oh, stop with the whining! You're just feeling sorry for yourself. Everybody has problems. All things considered, yours aren't so bad," she snapped.

A long silence filled up the space between them, but it was loud with their thoughts. She was trying to stay a step ahead of his verbal sparring, and she knew he was thinking the same thing. She could actually tell when he gave up. A stillness settled in his part of the air space, and she knew what was coming.

"I'm sorry, Eya. That was juvenile of me," Steve admitted quietly.

"But it felt good, didn't it? To be angry. To break things. To let it out," she said.
She turned her head away from looking out at the night time view and he could see her dark eyes gleaming at him. Estrella looked older, sitting curled up comfortably in his living room like she owned the place, with a wine glass in her hand and her eyes too wise for her age.

"It felt great," he admitted.

It was only because it was dark that he could say it. He didn't think she could see him. She couldn't see the guilty shame he felt for indulging in a show of anger.

"You're too uptight. You should let it out more. Aren't you ever angry when you fight?" she asked.

"No. I can't let that happen. I have to keep my head clear when I'm working," Steve told her.

"Too bad. I can tell you're still upset. Want me to rub your back? Or maybe your feet? That used to help my mami when she was tense after work," Estrella offered.

"No. Stay over there. I don't want you touching me right now," Steve refused.

"Get used to the idea, because I'm going to touch you later," she insisted.

"Not tonight, Eya," he said.

"Okay. Not tonight, but soon," she said.

Steve didn't argue. As long as she gave him time to calm down, he could deal with her later. Estrella took a long time enjoying her wine. Again, he felt indebted to her for the amazing meal she'd cooked, so he didn't rush her out the door. He didn't want to, anyway. The wine gave her an excuse to linger and she probably knew that.

Estrella ignored him and looked out the window again. She pretended to ignore him, anyway. Steve moved abruptly in his chair, just shifting around to test her. He could see the pulse thump harder at her throat. She wasn't ignoring him, just like he knew he couldn't ignore her.

She was stubborn. She waited until they were both calm before she brought her glass to the sink and slipped on her shoes. Steve wanted badly to see her to the door, but decided that he'd better not. It was too dark and quiet. They were too alone.

"Thank you," he said simply when he heard her hand touch the door knob.

"I like to cook for you," she said.

"And you know I like to eat," he said sourly.

She refused to fight with him anymore tonight.

"Goodnight, Steve," she said, and let herself out.

"'night," he answered her before the door closed behind her.

When it clicked shut and left him alone in the dark, he seethed at the hook he felt twisting in his gut. He got out his phone. The glare of the screen made him wince until he turned it down. His thumbs picked out what he was thinking.

She's making me crazy.

It was a minute and a half before he got a response.
Poor little Stevie. I got no sympathy. At least she's real and she cares. All my gals are paid for.

That's pathetic, Steve responded.

Don't act like you're too good to pay. I saw your money on the shelf, just as green as mine.

Naw, I'm sayin we're both pathetic, Steve corrected Bucky.

At least I'm only dangerous to those who deserve it. What are you gonna do with her?

Buck had asked him as much this morning, and he still didn't know.

You don't have a fucking clue, do you? Buck read his mind.

Steve chuckled without humor. He was feeling raw enough to be honest.

I know what I want to do with her.

Buck's response came almost as soon as he'd hit 'send'.

If you break that girl, I'm calling a re-match. And I won't hold back next time.

In his eagerness to respond to Bucky, Steve pressed the wrong letters, and the stupid phone suggested something ridiculous. He would swear that Tony's software was worse than the iphone auto-corrects he'd seen on the internet. The suggested replacement words were usually something snarky or inappropriate. He backed up the clumsy message and took a deep breath for patience.

If I break her, I'll lay down and let you beat me. I don't want to hurt her. You know that. But she won't let up!

Steve told him.

She's spunky. What do you expect? If you can't handle her, you should walk away. You should probably walk away anyhow. This won't end well. You're gonna get hurt, even if you don't hurt her.

I know, Steve typed in misery.

He didn't see any way for his and Estrella's relationship to go where they both seemed to want it to go. He heard the things Buck wasn't saying. The kind of life they both lived was too dangerous to bring girlfriends into, even if their strength wasn't an issue. Hydra was lurking over the both of them, waiting to snatch away anything good that happened.

I don't think I can walk away. Not anymore.

Then God help you both, pal. You're gonna need it, Buck sent.

If I thought you were really praying for me, I'd be thankful. Steve snarked back at him.

Maybe I was, Stevie. I can't pray for me anymore. But for you, maybe. Get some sleep. Its 2300, Buck replied.

Steve's thumbs hovered over the phone screen. He felt like saying more, but something told him it was better to leave it at that.

"You know Senator Tirsk didn't die from a heart attack," Steve insisted.
"We all know it. But we have to prove that Hydra is behind this. They're getting smarter. Since we're pushing them back on the field, they're finding other ways to fight. And if we don't get better at the game, they'll win. Senator Tirsk was the only man standing in the way of a winning vote on the Bright Futures Act," Maria Hill told them.

"Is this the legislation which would make the children of the poor into wards of the state, and enable euthanasia of the elderly who can no longer care for themselves?" Thor asked.

The rest of the Avengers sitting around the table could hear the disapproval in Thor's words. The members of their intelligence staff shifted papers around. Thor could sometimes make it clear with few words which realm he thought was more barbaric.

"It's the same old song and dance. If anybody would open their eyes and look, this is Goebbels 101. Indoctrination of the youth, cleansing of the 'unfit', and control of the media. This is sinister and stupid! Why are people falling for this again?" Tony asked.

"Don't forget persecution of the Catholic Church, Tony," Steve pointed out.

Tony nodded once, curtly, and Steve took the acknowledgement as all he was going to get from the man. It was more than he'd expected. Tony was known to do a little persecuting, himself.

"We have hearts and ears in DC. What traction do we have to set teeth into this kind of fight?" Natasha asked.

"I don't have a complete answer for that yet," Maria nodded to one of her staff and the man left the room, "but we'll know soon."

"I've got media. They can't shut me up, and I don't care if advertising revenue tanks. I don't have any books they can burn," Tony said.

"When we're done here, I'm going to try looking up a few old friends. This has all been done before. If the people I'm thinking about are still alive, they're old hands at combatting this, and they've had long years to think and observe," Steve said.

"You do that, Cap. Time and experience could be just as valuable as Stark Tech in this," Natasha agreed with a hard eye.

She was all for using technology and tactical advantage, as well as dirty tricks. Time and again in her younger days, she'd been beaten down by age and experience until she'd learned to respect it.

"How can people be so blind as to not see this tactic for what it is? Why do they not arise righteously against it?" Thor asked.

"Righteous! Arise!" Tony said with sarcastic agreement.

"Because the people are just the same as last time too. Maybe worse. Everyone is tired and struggling. The economy isn't great, so they look to distraction and entertainment to numb themselves. The young are loud and arrogant and think they know it all. Nobody wants to listen to the elders who might try to warn them. They'd have to stop playing so hard and do a little thinking, if they listened. Old isn't hep anymore," Steve said.

Clint winced and shook his head. Natasha smiled, and Maria Hill looked on, all business.

"Hey, hey, hey! You're old. If we can get you to stop wearing grannypants, you might be 'hep' again. How do you feel about a little song and dance, Spangles?" Tony asked.
"If we have to run counter-propaganda, I'll consider it, but only if Pepper is in charge," Steve said.

He gave Tony a hard look. There would be no negotiations on that. He wasn't letting Stark in to play if any filming was necessary. As it was, he'd be kicking and screaming inside if he had to get in front of a camera. Pepper was the only person he trusted to not make him look a fool. Again.

"Damn! Pep won't let me have any fun, and you know that. Sometimes I wish you were as young and gullible as you look," Tony said.

He shook his ink pen at Steve in frustration, then threw it down onto the paper tablet he never used.

Steve opened his mouth to respond, but Hill cleared her throat.

"Gentlemen," she called them back to order.

"Right. Natasha, I need you on this. I don't want to endanger my contacts by being seen with them," Steve said.

"You think it's gone that far already?" Bruce asked.

Steve looked at him. Bruce sighed and shook his head.

"Tell me where we need to go and I'll handle the cover," Natasha said.

"You need me? I can get you there," Clint offered.

"No. We need to look ordinary. We'll fly commercial," Steve said.

He turned to Maria and the two agents who remained around the table with them. He still sometimes wondered if they could fully trust everyone. Betrayal left a long memory.

"Hill, you got this, stateside?" Steve asked.

"I do. If I find a spot where I need help, I'm not afraid to ask," she said.

"Stark. Can I count on you not to dick around and tip our hand to the media?" Steve asked.

"Ooh. Language," Tony mock winced, then he grew serious, "I know I'm an insufferable ass, but I realize how serious this is, Steve. In some ways, this kind of fight is more my style than Iron Man's. I've got connections, too, and I know how to game with the suits. There will be no dicking."

"Fine. Natasha, I'll have a list to you in a half hour. Dismissed," Steve told the room.

Everyone got up and moved to do their part, except for Thor, Clint, and Bruce, who looked a little lost.

Natasha walked with him to the elevators.

"You know, we could probably bring Barnes in on this," she suggested.

"We'll see. If we need him, I'll call him."

Estrella waited and worried for five days.

Jarvis would tell her nothing. His kind refusals hurt her feelings. She'd imagined that she and Jarvis
were the best of friends now, since he knew many of her secrets and she thought he liked her a little more than an artificial intelligence should. His refusal to share even the most basic information, like where Steve was and if Natasha was with him, stung. It was a reminder that while the people who lived in the tower might be friends, they had a purpose that was sometimes more important than mere friendship.

Tony, who liked her and could usually be convinced to tell her a little something, was quiet and apologetic. That made her worry even more. She stopped asking questions.

Once Steve's suite was immaculately clean, and she'd made enough casseroles to fill his small freezer, she used the internet. She had plans of her own, and she wanted to be ready. Natasha wasn't around to advise her, and that was okay. She'd gotten by for years without the help of friends, and she could do this.

Whatever Steve was doing was scary and important enough to shut up Tony Stark, so he was probably going to need some helpshrugging off the Captain and turning back into Steve when he got home.

Estrella was in his bedroom putting new super-soft sheets on his bed when he came home. She heard the suite's door slam, and then his boots move through the place. The Captain nodded a greeting to her when he entered the bedroom.

He didn't pay much attention to her. Her nose wrinkled at the mucky way he smelled, like a mix of swamp water and old cigars. His hands reached for his underwear drawer and she fussed.

"Don't you touch your clean clothes! You'll make them smell as bad as you do. Go get the shower going and I'll pick something for after. Do you have a briefing tonight?" she asked.

She left dressing the bed for later and moved to shoo him into the bathroom.

"No. Already debriefed. We're done for the day," he said.

He stared down at her as she approached, waving her hands toward the shower. He looked weird. His close-cropped hair was black, like his beard, and he wore clothes that a Midwestern farmer might wear to clean out a horse stall. He didn't retreat at her shooing, and Estrella stopped to look up at him.

"Go on. Just go start the water. I'm not trying to see you naked. I'll bring you something comfortable and then I'll leave," she said.

He stared coldly down at her for a moment longer, then he turned and went into the bathroom. She dug out soft jeans and a long sleeved shirt. It was the dark green Henley that she thought made his eyes look bluer. She didn't linger choosing underwear. She took a pair off the top of the stack and brought it all to the bathroom.

The Captain was leaned forward on the bathroom counter while steam rose in the shower stall reflected in the mirror. His hands braced against the sink and he didn't move from his rigid position when she set his clothes down. She wanted to touch him, but he stepped away from her hand.

"No. I need to get clean," he said.

"I know, but it looks like you need something else, too," she said softly.

"I need…," he began, then he shook his head.
"I know," she agreed.

She didn't know what he needed, either, but it was clear that he needed it all the same.

"I thought I knew how bad it was. I didn't," he finally said.

"It doesn't matter how bad it is, as long as they're not coming for the tower right this instant. Are they?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I didn't think so. You've got several hours off duty. So the Captain is going into that shower, and when Steve comes out, he's going to take me to watch movies with everyone else," Estrella said.

He nodded once and waited for her to leave the room.

When she finished dressing his bed and went back to her suite, she found Natasha standing in the shower with a bottle of vodka. She reeked the same way Steve did, and she didn't want to talk, either.

"Please hurry," Steve said to her.

"It's not me. It's the elevator. Jarvis?" Estrella asked.

"One moment, please, Miss. I'm sorry, Captain. The food is being delivered. Once the elevator is clear, you will have priority," Jarvis assured them.

"What kind of food?" Steve asked.

"Some of everything. Your blood sugar is terribly low, Captain. Couldn't you have eaten somewhere along the way?" Jarvis asked.

"I wanted to get home," Steve said.

"Very well. Sir has been most concerned about you. Prince Thor made a trip to Asgard and back especially for you. Doctor Banner has spent many hours practicing yoga. I believe he is agitated, though he doesn't let on until- Well. Until it is often too late. You will have my gratitude if you are able to reassure the good Doctor," Jarvis babbled.

"I'll do what I can," Steve agreed.

"Ah. Here you are. Enjoy your evening, Captain. Miss," Jarvis said.

The elevator opened and they got in to go to the living area they all shared.

"Are you sure you didn't lose Steve in the shower?" Estrella asked him cautiously.

"Eya. I'm sorry. I'm doing the best I can. Give me some time. It can only get better after I eat," he told her.

When they got to the common kitchen, a hearty round of welcome was showered on him, but Steve barely paused on his way to the food. Estrella frowned at him for being rude, but Bruce smiled at her and shook his head. They all understood that when Steve needed to eat, nothing else was more important. Thor and Tony stood aside talking with Sam. They already had drinks in hand, and Thor fixed a beverage for Steve while he loaded his plate.
"Is that what I think it is?" Steve asked him.

"It is what you think it is," Thor said with a smile.

He held out the glass to Steve and Steve took it. For the first time in the evening, Estrella saw him smile. Steve had his hands full of food and drink, but he leaned up and smacked Thor a rough kiss on the forehead.

"I love you, man," Steve told him.

Thor laughed.

"Then the journey was worth it," Thor said.

"One of these days, I'm going to break into your stash," Sam told Thor.

"You can but try. It would be difficult to find a stash to break into, because Steven depletes it soon as I can bring it to Midgard," Thor said.

Steve sat at the bar with his food and everyone left him alone for a while.

"Where's Nat?" Clint asked Estrella.

"In the shower with vodka," she answered.

"Crap," Clint said, then he left them in his hurry for the elevator.

"What's the hurry? Natasha can beat down the vodka with clothes or without," Tony asked. Estrella shrugged.

"Maybe Clint doesn't like her to drink alone after a mission," Sam suggested diplomatically.

Tony nodded, and lifted his tumbler of beverage.

"Here's to not drinking alone," he said.

"Huzzah," Thor agreed.

"Huzzah? Where did you get that?" Tony asked him with disgust.

"I read it somewhere," Thor shrugged.

A presence seemed to add weight to the end of the room nearest the elevator. Bruce looked on quietly. Estrella thought she saw a hint of green in his eyes, then it passed.

"Barnes! I'm glad you could make it!" Tony said cheerfully.

He strode over to where Bucky stood in the kitchen doorway looking hesitant. Tony didn't give him time to think about it. He took Bucky in a left-handed handshake and patted him on the shoulder heartily.

"Thanks for inviting me," Buck said.

Estrella watched as Tony lingered over letting go of Bucky's metal hand. He twisted the arm slightly and stared it until Bucky forcibly took his hand back.
"Can't blame a guy for looking, right? Not every day I see something that sweet," Tony half-heartedly apologized.

Bucky waved Tony's rapt attention off and the engineer-inventor watched the gesture like a dog watched a bone.

"Leave off, Tony. Buck! You came!" Steve said.

He tugged Bucky into a nearly violent hug and Estrella winced at the thumping sounds they made on each other's backs. She felt protective of his privacy, with how much happiness shone on Steve's face at the sight of his friend. They pushed each other to arm's length and grinned like kids.

"I figured the invite wasn't gonna get any greener. Don't stop feeding the fire on my account. Go eat," Buck told Steve.

He gave Steve a shove back toward his plate.

Estrella felt small sometimes. She'd tried her best to cheer Steve and get him in a better mood, but all it had taken was an exotic drink from Thor and Bucky (that asshole) showing up, and Steve brightened in a way that she hadn't been able to accomplish. She moved to stand beside Bruce while Bucky came into the kitchen to keep himself busy while Steve ate.

"You okay?" she asked Bruce in a whisper.

"I'm fine. I do better when everyone around me isn't tense," Bruce told her.

"Can you get drunk?" she asked him.

"Um. Yeah. But only if I stay… me. The other guy burns it off like that," he snapped his fingers.

"So…?" Estrella prompted him.

"Right," Bruce said.

He headed for the bar to fix himself a drink.

Estrella turned her head to watch how Bucky was getting along with Tony and Thor and Sam. Tony kept watching the ex-Russian assassin, but he held out a hand for Estrella. She went over to him quietly and listened in. Tony pulled her to his side, then let go of her hand. She was comforted that among these huge personalities, Tony made a space for her.

"You have some of the same enhancements as does our brother Steven, yes?" Thor asked Buck.

"Sure. We're a little different. I'm a little slower, a little weaker, but yeah. Why?" Bucky asked.

Sam snorted and rolled his eyes.

"You must try this," Thor poured some of the contents of a flask into a fresh glass, added coke, and handed the beverage to Bucky.

Buck took it, but looked at it skeptically.

"You really must," Tony said. He wiggled his eyebrows gleefully.

Buck twisted to look at Steve. Estrella noted that Steve was the only one in the room Bucky would fully turn his back toward.
"You gotta try it. It's just like Saturday nights at the speakeasy all over again," Steve told him around a mouthful.

"I dunno, Stevie. Bad things might happen, ya know?" Buck said.

"I've got this. You're off duty," Steve told him.

"The both of you are off duty. I will see to it that you are well behaved," Thor offered.

"I dunno," Buck said again.

"Nobody's making you. But if you want to, then Thor can spot you. He beats the hell outta me every time we train," Steve assured.

Buck nodded, and took a sip from the glass. A small sip. He edged toward the kitchen doorway where nobody was between him and Steve.

"If it's the alcohol, or whatever, then forget about it. I understand if you've got issues," Tony said.

"It's not the drink, Stark. I could always handle my firewater. It's everything else," Bucky shifted his eyes around the room and its one obvious exit. His eyes lingered for a beat too long on Bruce, who he nodded to, and then on Thor.

"Hey, I get that too. I was the king of the hill until all these freaks came around. But they're good freaks. They only bite the bad guys, most days," Tony said.

"I've been a bad guy for a long time," Buck said.

"Do you think I would have invited you into my home if I thought you were still that guy?" Tony asked seriously.

"Fuck, Stark, I don't even know if I'm still that guy, some days," Bucky admitted.

"Buck, can the language," Steve admonished, and made eyes toward Estrella.

"Sorry, toots," Bucky apologized to her.

Estrella shrugged and waved it off. Steve's chivalry warmed her, but she didn't expect the men to temper their language just because of her. She surely didn't expect any better of Bucky.

"Barnes," Natasha said from the doorway.

"Natalia," Bucky said.

He tensed, but he kept his back to her and to her companion, too.

Nat would have been more worried if he had gone loose and fluid. She came to stand across from him and look him in the eyes. Buck wanted to acknowledge the man beside her, the marksman they called Hawkeye, but Natalia deserved all of his attention right now.

"I'm sorry. He was the assignment and you got in the way," Bucky looked at her shoulder that he'd put a round through, then back up to her eyes.

"I know how it is, but tell me. How did you break the conditioning?" Natasha asked him.

Now that he felt she wasn't going to stab him, Buck glanced aside to nod at the marksman. Clint
didn't return the gesture, and Buck didn't blame him.

"I'm not sure. It took a while. Something about Steve wouldn't get out of my head, and I had to dig at it. Pierce didn't get me back in the chair, so I had time to keep digging. If they ever get me back, I want you to swear that you and Steve will hunt me down. Don't let me be that again," Bucky said.

"You have my word. We killed Pierce. I saw him bleed out with my own eyes," Nat assured him, "He was DNA tested, then immediately cremated."

"Thanks," Bucky said with gratitude.

"Woo-hoo! Party!" Tony deadpanned.

Estrella had gone a little stiff at the morbid talk, and Tony bustled her shoulder as if she should be having great fun.

"I don't know about you, but I can't handle any more fun than this," Tony said.

He bulled through them and into the living room. Clint and Bruce followed him.

Natasha nodded again at Bucky, then went to join Clint on the couch.

"I'm sorry about your wing machine, too," Bucky told Sam.

"That wasn't you. Don't even apologize," Sam shook his head.

"I will understand if you do not trust us enough to drink in our presence. If you do not want the beverage, you should give it to Steven. He is quite entertaining when he imbibes," Thor said.

Thor lingered long enough to assure Bucky with a welcoming smile, then he joined the rest of them in the living room. Sam stood with Estrella.

"I still don't like you," she hissed at Bucky.

"Cry me a river, doll," Buck said.


"I'd love to, but I just can't relax. What if she throws grass at me again?" he teased Estrella.

Estrella stepped forward and started beating Bucky in the chest with her balled up fist. Bucky laughed, and Sam looked like he was turning green. Steve got off his stool and hurried into the kitchen.

"Don't look at me like that! She started it. I'd make her stop, but I don't want you to snap my arm off for touching her," Bucky chuckled.

The harder Estrella hit him, the more he laughed. Sam shook his head and left the crazy people in the kitchen. Bucky handed his drink to Steve when Steve reached out a hand to do something. Steve set it down, then moved around behind Estrella.

He gently gathered her stiff, fighting body back against his and wrapped her in a hug until she quit trying to get to Bucky. Buck looked away from the painfully tender expression on his friend's face. Some things, he wasn't comfortable seeing. He didn't know if Steve knew what he was telegraphing on his face right now.
"Eya. Eya. Shhh. He's a natural born ass, but he doesn't mean anything by it. Relax," Steve murmured at her ear.

She spit a fast, vicious string of Spanish at Bucky, and he raised his hands defensively.

"Whoa. I've never done that with a donkey in my life," Buck denied.

"Yeah, well, if you weren't so heartless, I wouldn't have thrown grass at you," Estrella said.


Just like that, Estrella stopped struggling to get at him. Steve was distracted by the way she felt in his arms, so warm and alive and vigorous. The last times he'd held her for any amount of time, she'd been scared or sick. Her wiggling energy made his mind go dumb for a moment.

"Have fun with that, Stevie. It sounds like the party's in there, so I'm gonna crawl," Buck said.

He picked up his drink before he left the kitchen. He was intercepted on the way to the living room by a leggy ginger lady in a prim business jacket and skirt.

"You must be James," she said with twinkling gentility.

What was with these people and his left hand? It's like they couldn't get enough of it. He moved to meet her sweet little lady shake with his left hand, and she nearly brought him to his knees with a grip like a machine press.

"If you fuck with any of the people I care about, I will rip you in half," Pepper smiled at Buck with incredible sweetness.

"Geez, lady! I won't hurt anybody. I swear!" Buck groaned, but he stood tall and held his ground despite the pain and pressure sensors screaming through his arm.

"Honey! Don't damage the toys until I get a chance to play with them," Tony called to her over the back of the couch.

Pepper smiled at Bucky as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. She kicked off her heels, got herself a glass of wine, and walked over to join Tony with comfortable feminine grace.

"Tough crowd you run with these days," Buck said when Steve and Estrella came to him.

"They're the best. You're not gonna waste that, are ya?" Steve asked him.

Steve looked into his friend's glass. It was still mostly full. Steve's was empty, just like his plate. Bucky reached across and handed his glass to Steve. He didn't have the stomach to drink around these people. He spread the fingers of his left hand and did a diagnostic rundown to see if anything was damaged. Two of the bands were grinding a little too close, but he could fix that when he got home.

"Come on. It looks like they saved us a seat," Steve told him.

Estrella gave him a warning look as she passed him, hanging close to Steve's backside.

"Best behavior ladies, I promise," Buck said to both Tony's girl and Steve's girl. And to Natalia too, but he felt more easy around her. They had history and they understood each other.

Everybody was laughing. Even Steve. Instead of a movie, Tony put the television on Comedy
Central and they watched stand-up comedy acts. Bruce chuckled, and Thor didn't get half the humor, but Clint could hardly breathe. Even Natasha was smiling. Her bottle of vodka was forgotten on the side table.

Sam, Tony, and Pepper were happy in a way that she'd seen long ago when her mother used to buy wine. Estrella supposed it was funny, but she was tired of being wedged in between Bucky and Steve. It was a big enough couch, but they both sprawled and left her feeling crowded. She didn't care what Bucky thought, and everyone else was distracted.

Estrella stood up from the couch, tugged her long sweater down over her leggings, and sat back down sideways across Steve's lap. He'd had enough of Thor's magic drink that he didn't immediately shove her off again. He was so annoyingly proper most of the time that she knew he wouldn't want to hold her in front of other people if his eyes didn't already have that glassy ease to them. Maybe she was taking advantage, but she had to start somewhere.

Steve looked at her curiously, but she settled her back into the curve of where his arm rested on the couch. She relaxed onto him and rested her cheek on the swell of his chest muscles. Her hand flattened in front of her face against him, and she closed her eyes to listen to his heart. Something tickled the bottom of her bare feet where they rested in the middle of the center cushion.

She cracked her eyes open to shoot menace across the space at Bucky. Why couldn't he leave them alone? Buck gave her a taunting grin through the dim glow of the television light. She lifted her middle finger at him slightly and he chuckled. At least he took his hand away and stopped tickling the bottoms of her feet.

"Behave, the both of you," Steve grumbled.

Hmm. Maybe Steve wasn't as inebriated as she thought. He was still letting her touch him, so that was good enough. Estrella closed her eyes again and stretched against Steve. She settled with her head under his chin and her hand slipped up to hold the side of his neck. Her fingers rubbed the warm skin there. Steve laughed at something on the television and she liked the way it sounded under her ear and the way it felt under her hand. His arm tightened around her back a little and she smiled happily.

She'd meant to start touching him over his clothes so it wouldn't be too intense for either of them, but she liked his skin so much. The sound of his heart thumping strongly in his chest sped up a little, so she stilled her hand. She only wanted to touch him. She wasn't trying to provoke the reaction she was starting to feel under her hip.

Steve's thighs hardened under her and he shifted uneasily on the couch.

"It's okay. I'm okay with it," she whispered with barely any breath. With his ears, she knew he could hear her. He rumbled a warning at her more in his throat than with words. Her hand patted him again, then rubbed down his neck like she was soothing a horse.

He shook himself free of her hand, and she thought he was going to push her away, but he settled down again. She hugged him closer in thanks, then relaxed. Her fingers slid up to brush at his once again dark blonde hair. She liked how it felt when it was this short. Steve moved his head around slightly under her hand, like a cat angling for the best contact. Estrella's smile broadened until her teeth showed, and she moved down to scratch him as he really liked it.

The stiffer hairs of his beard poked at the delicate nerves under her fingernails and she giggled softly at the sensation. Steve tipped his head down slightly to make it easier for her hand. She liked the warm chuff of his breath across her face.
Bucky's hand was back tickling at her foot again, but she kicked at him and he pulled his hand away. Her heel struck metal and Steve fussed at them again, but it was half-hearted. He took his hand off the back of the couch to put hers back where he wanted it. Estrella didn't know what he was so worried about. He wasn't using any force on her at all. She could have refused what he wanted if she tried.

Her palm rubbed up his cheek, and her fingers passed over and around his ear. Her fingernails came around the back of his ear to scrape down his jaw. His heart was definitely louder and faster against her face now.

"Why do you like that so much?" she asked quietly.

The room roared with laughter and Clint was slapping his knee. The comedian on TV went on with his jokes while Sam gasped to catch his breath.

"Mmm. I don't know. Just don't stop," Steve whispered.

Estrella shifted so she could use both hands on his face, and so that her hip would be off of the painful pressure she was sitting on. Wiggling around and aligning her body so that she could give attention to both sides of his jaw put them nose to nose, with the way his face was tipped down.

She opened her eyes to smile at him because he was being so sweet and gentle to her, letting her touch him like this.

The eyes that looked back at her weren't gentle. Steve was breathing through parted lips, and his pupils made his light irises look dark, there was so little left of them. The smile slipped off her face.

"Why'd you stop?" he asked with disappointment.

"Because you're looking at me like that," she said.

"Sorry. You said you were okay with it," Steve whispered.

His lips moved not far away from hers, and she suddenly tucked her forehead down to hide her face against his neck. If she didn't, she was going to kiss him. Steve let out a shaky sigh and rested his arms round her.

Instead of kissing her like he wanted, he rubbed his head against hers. Slowly and gently, so as not to attract everybody's attention. He curled his lips in firm and bit them before he kissed her hair like a smitten fool in front of everyone.

Restraining his affection was making his body want to move under her. He needed more contact, more of the warm, wonderful feeling she gave him like he needed his next breath. Thank God they were in the common room with people, or he didn't think he'd be able to restrain himself. Buck poked his shoulder, and he shook his friend off irritably. What he wanted was to be alone with Eya, but he knew that was a bad idea.

"Careful with your arms," Buck said low across the empty space to him.

"Umm, Eya. Are you alright?" Steve asked her. He didn't want to stop holding her. If she said he wasn't too tight, maybe he could stay like he was.

"Mm-hmm," she murmured against his throat.
When he felt her heated breath against his skin and her lips brushed over his pulse, Steve jolted up in a hurry. The urge to trap her tight against him and roll into her was about to overcome his willpower. Steve deposited Estrella on his empty seat of the couch. He mumbled something to everyone, and left the room.

"Where are you-?"

"Shut up, Tony,"

"Leave him be, Stark,"

Natasha and Bucky spoke at the same time.


She stood expectantly in front of where Estrella huddled on the couch and held her hand out to the dazed girl.

"Okay," Estrella said quietly.

She let Nat help her up because her legs felt shaky. Steve was a minute ahead of them, so the elevator returned quickly. The women disappeared, except for Pepper.

"Fuck me," Tony swore, "Why was that so hot?"

Pepper prodded him in disapproval.

"Well it was! Tell me I'm not the only one who noticed them," Tony exclaimed.

"Perhaps you found it intriguing because it was heartfelt and innocent," Thor proposed.

"Innocent? Hah!" Bucky barked out a laugh.

"Why do you scoff? There was nothing tawdry in their affections. It was quite beautiful," Thor said.

"You're right. It wasn't crude. But he's got you folks fooled if you think he was thinking innocent thoughts. That's why he dumped her and ran," Buck said.

"Cut him some slack. Steve won't hurt the girl. He doesn't have it in him," Clint said.

"He might," Bruce warned.

Bucky met his concerned gaze and nodded. Thor frowned.

"I am glad for your unclouded vision, Sergeant Barnes. We will be watchful. Steven would be very distressed if he were to harm her," Thor said.

"Are you serious? He'd sooner gnaw his own arm off than hurt pixie-chick," Tony said.

"No, Tony. We gotta consider this. If Barnes says Steve is on edge, then we need to listen," Sam agreed.

The comedy show continued on in the background, ignored.

"He knows she's fragile, right?" Clint asked.
"He is aware. He was most distressed to hear of it," Jarvis told Clint.

"Then why doesn't he leave her alone? I've seen him walk away from some very tempting situations time and again. We all have," Clint said.

"He can't. He's like a moth to her flame," Bucky said.

Buck felt like alley scum talking to these people behind Steve's back, but somebody needed to keep an eye open when he couldn't be around to keep Steve out of trouble. They'd cared enough to keep putting on a distracted front while Steve and the girl got all cozy into the romance porn. The big Viking dude looked genuinely troubled. Buck felt like he could better trust Steve's care to these people, now that he'd met them. Especially since Steve trusted them.

"If Steven is already unable to resist her, and yet she is fragile, then we have more trouble than merely Hydra. The lady is a mere wisp of what she will become. I fear we will be observing a Vlantu snarl," Thor said.

"A what?" Buck asked.

"A train wreck," Tony translated.

"Why don't they just…?" Pepper asked.

"Because he's Steve, and he hasn't brought her in front of a priest yet," Buck said.

"Oh. That's so sweet," Pepper smiled softly.

"It's not gonna be sweet. It's gonna be a Vlantu snarl," Buck said.

Thor nodded his agreement.

"This is too much anxiety for me right now. I'll walk you out, Barnes," Bruce said.

"I didn't know you cared, Doc," Bucky grinned.

Bruce huffed a tired laugh and they took their turn down the elevator.

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Note: And I need a day to sleep, now. At least a day. Reviews would be much appreciated. I don't know if I'm going off the tracks here, but it felt right at the time, so I went with it. Thanks for any feedback.
Sunlight filtered through his window. He fought against waking up because it was a good dream and he didn't want it to stop. There was a woman. It didn't matter who she was. She wanted him. She was strong and sturdy, so he held her hips in a hard grasp and bucked into her vigorously. While his mind rose toward consciousness his dream morphed into semi-waking fantasy.

He was so close, but without the fleeing dream to guide his involuntary mind his body retreated from the edge. Steve hurried to grip himself and finish, but his shorts got in the way. Frustration pinched his brow. He ripped the shorts down and away. The woman in the dream had felt so good, but it was fading fast. He was sore with want, like a bruise or a jammed knuckle. When it came, there was pain with the pleasure.

Steve grit his teeth and growled through it. Hot wetness stained his sheets and his skin. It wasn't enough. The pressure didn't ease up at all. The dream was gone, so there was no point in keeping his eyes closed anymore.

He sat up and found the torn shorts. A few quick swipes got rid of most of the mess, and he let the torn rag fall to the sheets. He was going to have to wash them, anyway. He couldn't leave this for Estrella to deal with.

He wondered why the windows were letting in light. Steve kept them darkened, except for the rare times when he didn't. The tint should still be active. His alarm should have got him up, not the pre-dawn light.

It didn't matter.

He looked down at the throbbing problem in his lap. It wasn't going away. At all. He was supposed to wait until this evening for his date with Rosie, but it wasn't going to wait. Steve rolled over and opened his night stand drawer. It was difficult to be patient enough to carefully take his toy out of its packaging. Like with his shorts, he wanted to tear through obstacles and get to what he wanted immediately. It felt like heroic patience to take the time to get everything ready. The toy was cold. The lube was cold. He didn't care.

"Uungh," he grunted.

The first push was always great, but he didn't slow down and savor anything. The tight ache in his groin left him with no grace, no dignity. The plastic case of the toy in his hand felt alien and chilly, but the slick sensations inside it accomplished what it was intended to do. In only a few more minutes, he was coming again. It still wasn't enough. Better, but not enough. Not done.

He didn't bother stopping to clean up. Twice more, he tried for relief. He would have gone again, but his phone buzzed at him from the night stand.
She hadn't said anything at all this time, but they were after her. It was easy to hear their lewd calling and their footsteps. She never should have tried to walk home from church at night like this, but it was too late to go back and change the bad decision. Maybe she shouldn't wear her old dress anymore. It was too tight here and there, but it was the nicest one she had with no holes or stains.

She didn't want to hear the awful things they called her, but the names kept coming. She ran around the corner of the adobe building. Her eyes searched ahead for a good place to hide. There was just enough light from the streetlight to show her that there was no good place. There was only a little tree growing out of a metal ring in the sidewalk. Maybe it was big enough to climb. Maybe if she could get up to the second story window of the apartment building, somebody would have mercy on her and let her inside, away from the men.

Estrella ran to the little street tree and quickly pulled up the back hem of her dress and tucked it into her belt at the front. A fearful glance over her shoulder showed her that the men were around the corner now, closer and within sight. She jumped up to grab the lowest limb of the tree and missed it. She jumped again and caught it. Her smooth bottomed church shoes slipped against the bark as she tried to climb up, but she eventually got it.

As she clambered up the branches, the men came to stand under the little tree. They taunted her with nasty words in Spanish. Words that she wished she didn't know the meaning of. One of the younger men leapt to grab at the lowest limb of the tree. He missed, but his grip wiggled the tree. Estrella whimpered in fear and went out as far as she could in the branches. She wasn't going to make it to the window. The branches were too thin.

When the men heard her voice as she whimpered, they stopped taunting and calling at her to come down. She looked down to see them only a little below her. Their faces had turned animalistic and determined. Any show of false humor was gone. They were ugly and they wanted her. She counted nine of them, but it didn't matter. The window she had hoped to reach was five feet away. The window ledge was thin. If she jumped, she might miss. Then, she would be down among the men.

The tree wiggled again. They were Indian men, Maya. Short and burly. They weren't as tall as her, but they were very strong. If they could get a grip on the tree, they could pull it down, and her with it. Estrella started to cry.

She didn't want to cry, because when she cried, she couldn't help but make little noises with her voice. She was so scared, there was no way not to cry. The light went on in the apartment window she had hoped to get to. She sobbed and clung to the springy little limbs. The curtains opened and the tree wiggled again. There was a man inside the window, and a woman and a child. Men beneath her, grunting and breathing, reaching for her shoes.

"No no no no," she whined.

But the man in the window didn't listen. He opened the window, maybe to help her, maybe to yell at the men, or maybe just to watch the spectacle. The woman and the little child looked on, too.

The tree shuddered. Estrella shrieked.

The man inside the apartment clawed at his ears and fell onto his knees. His face banged into the window sill and blood spurted from his nose. The men on the sidewalk beneath her yelled and staggered, but they didn't give up for long. They'd already heard her voice while she was crying, and they were dumb with want.

Estrella wished she hadn't climbed the tree. She wished she'd stood still on the sidewalk and let the men do whatever they wanted, where the woman and the child couldn't see. Dread made her
nauseous. She looked at the woman and child, pleading.

"Go away. Go away from the window. Take your husband. I'm sorry," she said to them over the sound of the angry, determined men.

She knew her voice would make it worse, but she had to try to save the woman and the child. They shouldn't have to see. They should close the window and run away. The woman was trying to pull her husband away, but he surged forward, toward Estrella's voice. He was half out the second story window, reaching.

The tree shook again and Estrella screamed in fear, in denial that a pleasant evening could turn into this. She looked away from the family at the window when she heard a pained grunt from below.

The men had knives. At least, some of them did. They cut at each other in their anger and lust and pain, still trying to climb. Some were stabbing, some were pushing at the tree, and some were climbing up the backs of others, trying to get at her by any means.

"Go away! Just go away!" Estrella screamed at them loud as she could.

The man in the window fell back, and his wife pulled at him while the little girl cried in fear and confusion. Two men below stabbed at the others like mindless animals. One lay dying in a spreading glaze of blood. The tree was shaking, leaning more and more. A man was in the tree with her, his eyes brutal and ugly. His knife was clenched in his teeth and his hands were wet and red.

Estrella gave up screaming and crying. It was happening again and she didn't want to remember. Police sirens were coming from a long distance away, but they wouldn't be in time. They never were. All they ever had was papers and questions. Never any help. Not in time.

A strong, sticky hand closed around her arm. She went with it without much resistance. One man was better than falling. Better than falling into the stabbing, grunting death down below. Before she faded away into her mind, she noticed the gang colors, the tattoos. That was important. She would need to stay away from them, after, if she lived. Maybe this time, she wouldn't, and it would be over with. No more need to run.

"Wake up..." The ugly man said to her in a woman's voice.

"Estrella, wake up!" Natasha ordered her.

Strong hands shook her. She was pulled upright and Natasha rubbed firmly at her back.

Estrella gasped and struggled. The nightmare faded, but she was left with the feeling of wanting to get away. She smelled Natasha's familiar shampoo and red hair tangled in her eyelashes. Estrella crossed her arms over her chest to protect herself, still running on old habits. Her breasts were small, not large and jiggly. It was a relief. Her bones still felt sharp inside her skin.

"I'm awake," she mumbled.

Soon as she remembered it existed, she reached for her necklace on the bedside table. Natasha got it and put it on for her. The immediate terror of the dream was gone, but she was left with an awful, dirty feeling. She was thankful that Jarvis wouldn't let anyone from the street up to where she slept. She could pretend that they weren't still out there, looking for her.

"It's almost time to get up, anyway. Do you want coffee?" Natasha asked her as if nothing had
happened.

The woman sat away from her and gave her some room to untwist her shirt and smooth down her hair. Estrella fingered her copper butterfly and nodded. Natasha was pale and bright. Sharp, like a shard of glass.

"Did you dream of men?" Natasha asked.

Estrella nodded again.

"The ones who are after you?"

She nodded again.

"Tell me who they are, so me and Jarvis can know who to watch for. Who to keep away. We'll run a check on all the employees in the tower to make sure you're safe," Natasha said.

Estrella had never thought of that. What if they were already inside, just waiting for a chance to get at her? The fear widened her eyes and made her clutch at her necklace harder. She pressed it into the skin of her throat, as if firmer contact could make it work better than it already did.

"La Eme. In Phoenix. Not regular Eme. They were from down south. Maya," Estrella whispered, "I killed some of them. But some of them lived. They'll remember me. They never forget."

"You killed them? How?" Natasha asked.

"My voice. There was a tree. They couldn't get to me right away. I screamed and they started stabbing each other. The police came, but..." Estrella shrugged.

"You didn't kill them. They killed each other," Natasha said.

"They never kill each other, unless they get the order first. They wouldn't have done it except for me. If I wouldn't have screamed-"

"If they wouldn't have assaulted you, if they wouldn't have been Eme, if they'd stayed home that night to watch television, if, if, if. Estrella, you're crap at failure analysis. I'm not going to argue with you," Natasha said.

Estrella nodded and looked down at her knees. Her legs weren't ugly anymore. She didn't like that.

"Estrella, you can't tell Steve," Natasha said.

"I know. He's so stupid. He would try to take on the whole gang, and then he'd want to fight all the gangs, on the streets and in the prisons, and he'd start trouble in-"

"Right. So, leave it to me. And Jarvis. And maybe Barnes. Look, don't even tell Tony. Just don't talk about it," Natasha decided.

"I don't like Bucky. I don't want him to know," Estrella said.

Natasha nodded. She got up to go make the coffee. Estrella hugged her arms around herself in the cool room. She frowned at Natasha's back. Nat hadn't verbally agreed to not tell Bucky. Even if she had, it wouldn't mean much. If Natasha thought it was best to do something, she was going to do it, no matter what she had to say to keep the complaining down. But she'd been concerned about Steve not finding out. That was good.
Steve.
He was good. And clean. He didn't turn into an animal, like those men. Like most men.

Estrella hurried into her long, fuzzy sweater and tugged on her pants from the night before. She ran from the room to brush her teeth and slick her messy hair with warm water.

"Natasha, is it alright if I ask Steve over for coffee?" she called into the kitchen.

"It's fine with me. He's probably up now. Ask him," Natasha said.

Estrella went back to her room and looked at her phone. She knew Steve didn't like coming to Natasha's suite. He would think up a reason not to come. She ambled to the kitchen with her phone in her hand.

Natasha looked at her and made a flat, displeased line of her lips.

"You're too soft. You let him make up excuses, didn't you?" Natasha asked her.

"No. I didn't text him," Estrella admitted.

"Why do I bother with you people?" Natasha asked under her breath.

She got her phone out and texted. While she finished setting out mugs, she nodded Estrella over to the couch by the windows. Estrella loved the look of determination on Natasha's face as she texted a response to whatever Steve tried to argue.

Before the coffee was done making, there was a knock at the door.

Stay there, Natasha mouthed to her.

Estrella nodded and kept her place in the sun, curled at one end of the couch.

Natasha wasn't surprised to see Steve barefoot and barely dressed in gray ratty sweatpants and a clingy undershirt. But she was surprised at the smell. She stood across the doorway to make him wait a moment.

"You smell like a gay brothel," she whispered.

"You said she had a nightmare and I needed to get here quick," Steve grumbled low enough so the girl at the far end of the suite wouldn't hear.

He studied Estrella's slumped posture and unhappy face. She looked like she needed a hug. Why wouldn't Nat let him pass?

"I didn't know you'd be busy," Natasha hissed.

"And I didn't ask to be hurried so that I couldn't take a shower first. Do you want me here or not? 'Cause I could get back to what I was doing," Steve said.

"Put away the attitude. She needs you. It was bad. Get to the bathroom and wash up. You reek," Natasha said.

She could hear Steve's teeth grind as he passed her. It was so like him to take the high road and let her insult stand. They both knew it was bad timing, and that she wasn't faulting him for doing what he had to do. They also both knew that she couldn't resist the opportunity to jab at him for a little
fun.

Natasha smiled in satisfaction and went to fix their coffee how she knew everyone liked it. She could hear Steve splashing and grumbling in the hall bathroom. With the smell of him, she was surprised he wasn't loose and mellow.

She would have brought coffee for Estrella and Steve then retreated to her room to get ready for the day, but something about Steve was a little too edgy. She needed to stay and watch. For Estrella's sake. Natasha set two mugs down on the coffee table, then went back to the kitchen to get hers.

Steve almost plowed her down coming out of the bathroom. Nat swayed away from him gracefully to avoid collision. Her nostrils flared. Steve looked damp and scrubbed, but he still smelled of naughty boy. Maybe it was only because of her slightly enhanced senses. Estrella likely wouldn't pick up on it.

"Better?" he asked briskly.

"Some. You could have used soap," she said.

"Your soap is pink and smells like roses," Steve frowned.

Natasha rolled her eyes and got her coffee. Steve sat next to Estrella and she watched Steve's bad attitude smooth out into gentleness. He picked up his mug and smiled down at his friend. The girl looked at him briefly, then ducked her face down over her coffee. The couch was backed up to the window at Estrella's request, so sunlight poured down over the two of them. Estrella's shiny black hair was in stark contrast to Steve's burnished gold.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I know you don't like coming here," Estrella said.

Natasha noticed that she kept her fingers to her throat, pressing the necklace to her skin. Steve put his free arm around her and pulled Estrella close against him. Nat was fascinated to see a sort of calm enjoyment overcome the worry and the strain on their faces as soon as the bare skin of Steve's arm touched the back of Estrella's neck.

"You're not a bother, Eya. I don't mind coming," Steve told her.

"Thank you," Estrella whispered.

She set her coffee on the table and turned toward Steve. Her face rested on the side of his chest, where the sleeveless undershirt didn't cover him. She sighed, then giggled.

"You smell good," she said.

"I'm sorry. I was going to shower, but Nat had me worried. She said you had a nightmare," Steve choked out.

His eyes were wide, and Natasha saw him start to move away, but Estrella snuggled closer. Natasha bit her bottom lip to keep from grinning too big.

"I just told you that you smell good, and you have to apologize?" Estrella complained mildly.

"Sorry," Steve mumbled.

"Stop it!" Estrella fussed.
She pinched at his side with her thumb and hand. Steve smiled and caught her attempt. He pushed her hand aside carefully, without closing his grip around her wrist. Natasha noticed how tediously cautious he was with the girl.

"Do you want to tell me about your dream?" Steve asked.

"No. I've had that one enough. I don't need to talk about it," Estrella denied.

She shrugged under the weight of Steve's arm, and he removed it to rest along the back of the couch. Estrella managed to move in closer to him, and her face rubbed at his chest. Steve sighed and wiggled himself to slouch down on the couch. The change in position put Estrella's head on his shoulder rather than on his chest. He shut his eyes and rested his head back against the couch. The sunlight gilded his eyebrows and lashes and made his lips seem as pink as the soap in the bathroom that he didn't like.

They were gorgeous together and Natasha hid her smile in her oversized coffee mug in case Steve cracked his eyelids. She didn't want him to see how pleased she was with the match. He was moody enough that he might try to fight it, just like he'd refused every other attempt she'd made at setting him up with a girl. Natasha doubted he'd be able to fight his attraction for Estrella for long. He was such a pup, not at all able to resist anything which snagged at his heart.

Natasha wasn't proud of the part of her that wanted to lash out at Steve and sting him while he was vulnerable. He was more dangerous now, and he was getting wise to her machinations, because he opened one eye and frowned at her. As if he could feel her across the room painting a target on him. He probably could. Sure enough, he moved his hips a little. His legs shifted slightly, like he was thinking about blocking a painful strike.

She smiled faintly at him. Steve deliberately provoked her in return. He relaxed even further. His long legs sprawled apart, and he propped one foot on the coffee table. He closed his eyes and leaned his jaw against Estrella's forehead. He appeared completely relaxed. She knew better.

"I'm so glad you're not like the rest of them," Estrella murmured lazily.

"The rest of who?" Steve asked.

"The men. The ones in my dreams. They're dumb animals," Estrella sneered faintly.

Steve was quiet for a long moment.

"Eya, sometimes I'm not any better than them," he said.

Natasha could see the pained honesty on his face. Estrella smiled and patted the center of his chest.

"That's funny, Steve. You're so different that you can't even see it," Estrella insisted.

She rubbed at his skin through the shirt.

"Why do you smell so good?" she asked him.

Natasha watched Steve struggle with the angel on his left shoulder and the imp on his right. He didn't really move, but she could see the increased definition in his muscle fibers just under his skin. His lack of skill at hiding what was on his mind told her he was going to say something he shouldn't.

"Because I'm a dumb animal," Steve said.
Estrella sat up and frowned at him. He was slouched down so much that she was face level with him.

"You are not!" she denied.

"I dare ya to look me over and say that again," Steve said.

Natasha's mouth fell open. The little shit! In the instant it took her and Estrella's eyes to wander down the length of him, Steve gave in to the tension in his body. His posture changed so that his abs tightened and his hips curled into slight prominence. A truly impressive erection pressed up toward his belly, barely constrained by his sweats. His arms and legs mostly stayed still, but Nat knew he was primed for movement. She'd never seen that hot, intent look on his face as he dared Estrella not to see him for what he was. This was pure Steve Rogers, no super-hero in sight. Yet, he was still a strategist.

Estrella gasped in a breath, then shut her mouth to hold it in. There was no darkness to hide in. Steve let her see everything. And damn Estrella for not being afraid. Natasha ran through possible defenses in her mind while the girl was drawn to him like a magnet. Nat knew his body too intimately to not recognize the coiled stillness for what it was. Steve was ready to move, merely awaiting the precise moment for what he wanted to do.

Estrella's fingers reached to touch him again, and Natasha was alarmed at the eager, anticipatory heat that leapt into Steve's eyes. If Estrella touched him, Nat knew she wouldn't be strong enough to pull him off of her.

"Get to your room!" Natasha commanded.

Estrella jumped back at the crack of authority in her voice. She looked to Nat, then back to Steve again. Nat could see that she was weighing the possibility of Steve defending her against Natasha. The girl was likely right. If she wanted him to, Steve would see to it that Estrella got what she wanted.

"Go!" Nat said.

She advanced on them and grabbed Estrella away by the arm. She had to be firm but careful. If the girl made the slightest whimper of pain, Steve would be all over her. As it was, Nat could feel Steve rise up and follow them as she moved Estrella toward her room.

Estrella looked back, worried and confused, until Nat got her in her room and pulled the door shut. Natasha was trusting in whatever honor Steve had left to not swat his way through her and the door to get to the girl.

"Eya, so help me Lord, if you come out of that room before Nat says you can, I'm never going to visit you here again. Do you hear me?" Steve demanded acknowledgement through the closed door.

"Okay," Eya squeaked.

Natasha shivered at the feel of the power vibrating right behind her. Trust. She trusted him. Her eyes wanted to roll in their sockets at the danger and energy pouring off him like a fog, but she held still. Trust. She had to.

It took just as much effort to keep her throat open and soundless and her body still and compliant when an arm like iron grasped around front of her hips and hauled her off her feet, back against him. It was very much like a secure ballet lift, and her muscle memory locked her body still, yet
nimble. Her hands braced against his forearm. His erection branded into her bottom as he carried her through the suite until they were in her room. She was wondering when or if she should start fighting when he set her down. Then he turned to silently ease her bedroom door shut.

"God help me, Nat. Do you think I scared any sense into her?" Steve asked in a rush.

She stared at him for a moment, at first confused that an attack was not imminent, and then bemused that he'd once again defied her expectations of men. Still, he was revved up and barely in control. That was easy to see, because he looked so different from his usual calm, tightly leashed self. He looked much like an ordinary young man lost in the rush of what his body pushed him to do. But he wasn't ordinary, and it wasn't like him to forget that. To forget the hazard he posed to the rest of them if he wasn't careful.

"You're a prick!" Natasha snapped at him.

She gathered her composure and crossed her arms in a firm stance, but she knew Steve would notice the leaping pulse at her throat. It shouldn't be a problem, because he wasn't any calmer.

"Well, yeah, but I had to do something. She thinks I'm an angel. Or a kitten. Or a teddybear, or something. Thanks for playing along," Steve huffed a little.

"I was not playing along. I was a heartbeat away from hurting you any way I could," Natasha admitted.

"Oh," Steve said.

She frowned hard at him. He was as tense as she'd seen him in battle, but he was just Steve, without the tight discipline of the Captain. His arousal hadn't dissipated. His eyes were still blown, and he was shaking a little bit.

"Get back to your suite and finish what you were doing. I don't want to see you until you've got your shit together. The next time I interrupt you, please tell me to fuck off unless it's a call to assemble. Maybe even then," Nat said.

"Sure. I'm sorry if I scared you," Steve said.

He barely looked sorry. Usually, when Steve apologized, it was with full hang-dog expression and implied toe-scuffing. Right now, there was none of that. He was thinking, imagining something, his mind flying ahead to what hadn't happened. Probably fantasizing. Distracted. His large hands twitched, as if he wanted to grab.

"Steve. Get out of my room."

"Right," he agreed.

Still, he hesitated.

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at him.

"Sorry. I'll go now," Steve said.

Natasha watched his backside as he pivoted on a heel with military precision and left. She hoped that Estrella had the sense to stay in her room. When she heard the entry door of her suite close, she moved quickly to clear her home to make sure he was really gone.
Trust was needed sometimes when all the cards were down and the options were thin. Foolishness was another thing entirely. Nat was just about done underestimating Steve.

"Jarvis," Natasha said in clipped tones.

"How may I assist?"

"Do not allow Captain Rogers access to my suite unless I give verbal permission and my vitals are normal," she instructed.

"Understood. Protocol active. Should Mister Stark be made aware of anything?"

"No. Steve appeared to have a plan I was unaware of, and he held it together. Take no other action at this time," she said.

"Are you alright, Miss?" Jarvis asked.

"Yes. We're fine. If Estrella is afraid, then he accomplished what he meant to," Natasha said.

"Perhaps he did," Jarvis agreed stiffly.

Natasha knocked on Estrella's door.

Estrella opened it and looked out with searching eyes.

"He's gone," Natasha told her.

"Are you alright?" Estrella asked.

Nat nodded briskly. She turned to go back to her room.

"What's wrong with Steve?" Estrella asked her.

"Nothing. He's just a man. You should respect his limits when he tells you to back off," Natasha said.

She shut herself in her room. Soon as there was a solid door between her and Estrella, Nat sank to the floor in a crouch. Her legs felt shaky, so she balanced herself with a fingertip on the floor while she got herself under control.

She let her fears wash through her. It wasn't that she felt she'd almost been raped. That, she could handle. It happened occasionally and she didn't talk about it. She healed well, she didn't get sick, and she couldn't get pregnant. It was only pain. What had her reeling was that it was Steve who'd scared her. Steve, who tore down concrete walls with his body and ripped metal apart with his hands. She'd let him get a grip on her. Let him. She stood there and didn't fight it.

Sick shivers chased down her spine and into her belly as images of possibilities flashed in her brain. Steve, straining above or behind her, rutting and senseless. Her, trying to stay quiet to keep Estrella unaware. Then, what she'd have to do after… Nat shook her head violently to clear the awful thoughts. It would have torn the Avengers apart. Ripped out the heart of them.

"Reckless punk. You're so lucky that worked," Natasha whispered.

She was developing a new appreciation for James Barnes. Not as the Winter Soldier, but as the man who tried to keep up with a shit like Rogers. Barnes thought that Rogers needed watching. So, she would watch.
Should she discuss the incident with Bruce? No. With Thor? Maybe. Men were prickly and over-reactive sometimes. All she wanted was backup, not a full on inquisition against Steve. Thor would probably overdo it, if he knew everything.

As her nerves calmed, she was disgusted to feel that she was wet. Then, she had to admit to herself that she'd wanted him from the moment she'd smelled him at her front door. She'd kept her head straight until it was over. At least there was that small consolation.

She stood to get her phone from her dresser.

She had a traumatic dream, you idiot. You probably made it worse, she texted.

A full three minutes later, he replied.

Fuck off, Nat

Sorry.

Natasha hung her head and laughed ruefully. He couldn't seem to shake that politeness. If she didn't know he meant it, she would be able to stay angry with him.

"Jarvis," Steve snapped as soon as he was in his suite.

"Captain?" the AI asked.

There was no mistaking the chill in the already cool British voice.

"Do not let Miss Estrella into my suite if I'm home, or likely to return home anytime soon. Coordinate tower protocol with any off-site monitoring awareness of my location to assure compliance," Steve ordered.

"Done, Captain," Jarvis said.

"Don't get short with me, J. I did what I had to do," he said.

"Sir," was Jarvis' only response.

Steve went into his room and stripped for a quick shower. He'd deal with the trashed bed and put away Rosie when he was done. He didn't trust himself to bring the toy into the shower with him for cleaning. He felt too dirty to want to use the thing right now. Who was he kidding? He sure as hell wanted to use it, but he wouldn't.

The thought of scaring Estrella like he'd just done shamed him. If he'd managed to frighten Natasha, then he'd really overdone it. His acting was shit. The only reason it had worked was because it was honest. Real. He'd let himself run with it. Snapped the leash off. At the last moment, right before he'd grabbed Nat to haul her away, he'd grasped control again.

A surprised laugh barked out of him. He didn't think he would have escaped with all his hide intact. Nat had knives everywhere.

While he soaped up under the icy shower spray, his fist closed around his erection. It was a thoughtless move, but he didn't fight it. It took no more than five slippery pulls and he was off again. It barely registered. He rinsed and hurried to get dressed. He still had a mess to clean, and a meeting to get to in less than half an hour.
When he got to the phone on his bed, he saw that Nat had texted him again. He replied how she would expect him to, then hurried so he wouldn't be late.

All the while Hill was updating them on what they knew about their assets in Washington, Steve forced himself to pay attention and remember the information. That was usually easy, but today it was an effort.

Natasha was not staring at him so hard that he could literally feel the absence of her regard. If she kept that up, Thor would notice. Crap. Too late. Steve kept his focus on what he needed to. He even took notes, which was rare, but necessary. Thor would notice that too. Shit.

By the end of the meeting, even Tony was watching him. Clint looked nervous, and Bruce was concerned. Sam was unnaturally quiet. No one had questions for Hill, so she and her agents cleared out.

"What's this?" Tony asked lightly.

He swirled his finger around at the air between them.

"Outside, Stark," Steve said.

He left for the elevator, and Tony hurried to follow. Tony hated to look like he was hurrying, but his legs weren't as long. Steve shook his head at the rest of the team not to follow, but Thor and Natasha got into the elevator anyway.

"Hmmm?" Tony prompted as they left the business floors of Avengers operations.

"It's personal, Tony. You don't need to worry about it," Steve said calmly.

"Is it the kind of personal that has my AI snippy with me all morning?" Tony asked.

"Probably. Maybe you should re-program your AI. Remove the emotion protocol," Steve suggested.

"He doesn't have an emotion protocol," Tony said.

"That's interesting. He's getting it from somewhere," Steve said

"Rogers. What did you do?" Tony asked.

Thor raised a brow and waited for his answer.

"I said it's personal. I'll make you a deal. You tell me three things you don't want anyone else to know, and I'll consider talking," Steve argued.

"Jarvis?" Tony said.

"So predictable," Steve grumbled.

"Sir, you may try every override code you have. I do not have any data on the event. I wish that I did," Jarvis said with feeling.

"Why not?" Tony asked.

"Because privacy was enhanced for the benefit of Miss Estrella," Jarvis said.
Tony stared at Steve like he was a piece of machinery he couldn't yet figure out. He often treated it like a personal insult if there was anything going on in the tower that he wasn't fully briefed on. Steve ignored what would have probably been the threat of enough hungry, speculative intellect to rattle most people into talking.

"My gym please, Jarvis," Steve directed.

"You're not going to lunch?" Natasha asked.

"Later," Steve said.

Tony observed that despite whatever was wrong between them, Natasha was still on speaking terms with their Captain. He got out of the elevator on a retail floor, but he pointed to his eyes, then at Steve.

"I know. I know you're watching. Everybody's fucking watching," Steve grumbled.

Thor looked aside at Steve, then to Natasha.

The elevator opened onto the quiet floor where the Captain's gym was. Natasha gave Steve a little push when he lingered too long. He refused to move.

"I wasn't planning to have an audience," Steve said.

"You will not have one in me," Thor assured.

"Good," Steve said.

They went into the dark gym. Steve started stripping down as soon as the door shut behind them. Natasha flicked on the dim lights and sat on the floor out of the way. Steve ripped his office tie from around his neck and started on the shirt buttons. He looked from Nat to Thor. Thor removed the jacket he'd been wearing and bent to unlace his shoes.

"She has said nothing. I need no words to see that you have done wrong," Thor answered Steve's unspoken wondering.

"What are you, Santa Claus?" Steve snarked.

"Have you been naughty? I have no coal. The best I can do is to blacken your eyes," Thor bantered back.

"You know too much. You're no fun anymore," Steve said.

He unbuttoned the cuffs at his wrists and threw his shirt aside. In less than a minute, he was down to his boxer briefs and his skin. Thor followed suit. Natasha snickered to see that Thor was wearing SpongeBob underoos. He grinned at Natasha, then turned to face Steve.

Thor took a hit to the cheek and went flying onto his ass. Natasha winced at the sound of bare skin skidding across glossy hardwood. Thor shoved himself up and rammed into Steve before the man could get him into the corner by the door.

Steve was forced back by sheer power. Thor made him to step backward or go down stumbling. Their shoulders and necks locked together until Steve made a quick jerk and ducked under the larger man's chest. He shoved forward then stood, intending to launch Thor back and over. Thor grabbed his waist and ended up on the bottom as Steve slammed his weight downward.
Thor coughed, but didn't let go of the hug he had around Steve's torso and one arm. Natasha was impressed with how quick Thor got Steve into a head lock. With thighs like that, she didn't think there was any way for Steve to get free. Not without his shield.

"Aaagh! By the twelve moons! You are in a temper today!" Thor cried out in pain as Steve did something she couldn't see. Steve's large hands gripped Thor's sides and squeezed. Steve's legs jerked around and got them off balance. Thor tried to control him, but there was nothing except a slick floor to lever against.

"I do not wish to harm you," Thor grumbled.

He let go of Steve's head, and Steve kicked him away. Another squeak of flesh against flooring.

"Then why did you follow me in here?" Steve asked.

The smacking and thumping of fists pummeling into muscle took up two minutes before Thor could answer.

"Because you have need of me," Thor said calmly.

"Fuck off," Steve growled.

He lunged into a series of hits which actually had Thor stumbling on his heels. Thor fought his balance back and leaned into it. Steve lifted him off his feet and slammed him onto the floor on his back. The floor planks creaked in protest. Thor got up and gripped Steve with both hands. He drew him back over his head and slammed Steve into the wall. The steel wall panel dented and it was Steve's turn to leave some skin behind.

"Lady, it might be best if you leave," Thor grunted.

Steve got up and had Thor on the retreat again, using moves Natasha didn't know he had. Thor over matched him in strength. That was no surprise. But Steve appeared to have an advantage in hand-to-hand skill and agility. Thor grappled around, taking the hits while trying to get a grip on sweaty skin. Steve took his feet out from under him, then pummeled Thor on the planks.

Steve would have killed a human man many times over with the force he was using, but Thor was tough enough to take the abuse with barely a grimace. While Steve was still trying to drive him into the floor, Thor waved for Natasha to leave.

Since Steve obviously couldn't kill Thor, and Thor looked calm enough that he must be in a forgiving mood, Natasha got up and left. Steve didn't notice her leaving.

Thor timed his reach right, and pulled Steve into a crushing hug.

"It appears that you have me beat in agility and rage, little brother. But not in might," Thor said kindly.

"Is she gone?" Steve wheezed.

"She is," Thor answered.

"Then get the hell off me," Steve complained. He pushed loose of Thor and rolled away.

Thor sat up and wrapped his arms loosely around his knees while Steve paced.

"You fight well without the use of your brain. I tremble to think of what you could do, were all
your faculties engaged," Thor said.

"Shut your pie hole, will ya?" Steve snapped at him.

Thor made a face at the insult, more for the feeling behind it than for the meaning of the words. While Steve worked off excess fury, Thor looked down at the deep bite that was healing on his inner thigh.

"Would you next have pulled my hair and gouged me with your fingernails?" Thor wondered.

"No. I'm sorry about that," Steve muttered.

"I am judging by the cock-stand that fighting isn't what you need?" Thor offered.

Steve snorted at himself in disgust and tried to shake his body loose, but the tension wouldn't let go.

"Fighting is exactly what I need," Steve said.

"I see. Then we should carry on," Thor agreed.

Thor's merry tone didn't mask the sound of his movement. Steve turned and blocked only well enough to keep from having his ribs cracked. Speed and skill were no help this time. Thor wouldn't let him get a breath or his footing. The punches to his torso hurt like getting hit with cannonballs. Thor knocked him across the room, hit by hit, until his back slammed into dented and splintered wood. Thor walloped his gut with a knee and held him off his feet, pinned to the wall.

Steve retched empty air and choked, trying to breathe. God, he hurt. He felt like his bones were rattling loose in his skin.

"Is this what you wanted? Or should I strike lower to chill your ardor?" Thor asked.

Steve woggled his head in a 'maybe'. He was hurting and down, but not out.

"I will not," Thor denied.

He stepped away and let Steve stumble onto a wobbly, three point huddle.

"You disappoint me," Thor announced.

"You're breakin my heart," Steve said.

Thor sat in front of him and shoved Steve over onto his back like a turtle. It was an insult more than anything. Steve took it as his due and flopped down loose, spread on the floor.

"What troubles you?" Thor asked after a while.

"This won't go down. Hurts. Just about as bad as dancing with you," Steve panted.

His middle felt mashed and queasy. He tasted blood and bile in his mouth, but swallowed it down. He didn't want Thor to worry. Or bring him to medical.

Thor assessed the stiffness in his shorts and shook his head.

"You are but a child. Why haven't you taken care of it? You've had every opportunity."
"I've been trying. Nothing works anymore. Five times this morning. It's like it didn't feel a thing," Steve lamented.

"That's because it did not. Tell me, what woman have you been with?" Thor tested him.

Steve remained silent.

"I thought as much. You've merely waved it around and frightened the ladies, haven't you?"

"'Fraid so," Steve agreed.

His insides felt… separated. Steve rolled aside and heaved blood onto the floor, hopefully where Thor wouldn't see.

"Natasha tells me that you have ample life blood. Should I be concerned that you are spitting it out?"

"Nah."

Steve gingerly rolled onto his back again and watched the improbable sight of Thor handling his tiny phone.

"Who're you calling?" Steve asked suspiciously.

"No one," Thor answered.

He held his phone above him and carefully touched the screen.

"Smartass. Who're you texting, then?"

"The Lady Pepper. You will spend the afternoon with her gentle mercies," Thor said.

Steve winced.

"You're a stinkin traitor, Thor," he bit out.

"I know what you need," Thor said when he'd put his phone away. Steve wondered how he'd kept it tucked into his ridiculous underwear up against his butt cheek all this time without having the little gadget destroyed.

"You do, huh? Why don't ya tell me so we'll both know," Steve grumped sourly.

Steve squawked in surprise as Thor jerked him roughly across the floor and slapped his legs open. A second later, the world was all hot and wet, and thirty seconds after that, Steve couldn't think of his own name. The tension bled out of him like a fire hose.

Thor sat up and roughly wiped his mouth. Just as gently, he snapped Steve's underwear back into place.

"Ipe!" Steve yelped.

"I show you sympathy because mere man was never meant to possess a body such as yours. You are a fine warrior, and an honorable man. Yet, you are a green whelp when it comes to your phallus. You let it rule you. I say again, since you did not appreciate it the first time… I am disappointed, Steven. Make an effort to improve yourself, lest I begin to lose respect," Thor told him.
The words hurt as much as the beating he'd taken. More. Steve sat up quick and reached for Thor, to keep him from leaving. With his sore middle, he wasn't quite fast enough.

"Please. I want to fix this. I don't know how," Steve said.

Thor stopped on his path to the door. Steve wondered why he was walking out with nothing but his silly underwear on. Then, he thought of himself, dressed, but having to carry Thor's clothes through the tower, following after a nearly naked man. Son of a bitch! He wouldn't do it. Thor could be subtle with his punishments, but this was too much.

"I will assist you. Be watchful," Thor said.

He started toward the door again.

"Watchful for what?" Steve asked.

"If I told you, then you would have no need to be watchful. If you will permit, brother, I have a most grievous need to find strong drink," Thor bit out.

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't know you were going to-" Steve stopped talking.

Thor was gone.

Steve felt like a chastised child, as Thor had called him a few times. Apparently he had a lot to learn. It wasn't the lessons he was anxious about. He was sure he could learn plenty from Thor's experience. What if he wasn't watchful enough? What if he missed something? And why the hell hadn't he been able to haul a full load of his frustrations by himself? Why did it need the touch of another person to ease the stress?

"Lewis is coming with us? Pepper, please. Not Lewis," Steve said.

He followed Pepper's clicking heels to the car waiting in the garage, and Lewis followed him. It hurt to walk normally, and he didn't feel like eating. That alone should have made him consider a checkup in medical, but Pepper was on a mission and slowing down for no one.

She held up a finger and spoke to herself. No, to somebody else. Something about share allocation for fungible assets. Lewis followed along behind him like a fly.

"You're in trouuuble, Cap. She cleared her afternoon because Thor asked her to. But that doesn't mean she has to like it," Darcy said.

"And why are you here?" Steve asked the woman.

"Because she values my opinion. And I can text really fast with one hand while I carry things," Darcy held up her phone and showed him how her thumb scrolled out words in a hurry, messaging a completely different conversation than the one she was having with him. All the while she carried a stack of documents in her other arm.

"Here," Steve offered to take the files.

"No, I've got it. You better keep up with her. She is not in the mood for slow, and you look like you stood in front of a train. Thor?" Darcy asked brightly.

Steve nodded and coughed. Damn. He hadn't meant to do that.
Pepper gestured them into the back of the waiting black limo with one hand, and put a finger on her lips for quiet. Steve kept silent as he got in, though his gut was screaming at him.

"Just. Right. There," Darcy whispered.

She leaned across before she buckled up and wiped a fleck of blood from his lips. Steve grabbed her finger and smeared it off with his thumb before she could do anything weird with it. Lewis was weird. He supposed he trusted her, because everyone else did, but she made him uncomfortable. She pouted at him and looked at her finger to see if there was anything left.

Pepper gave them both a look, and they sat still and quiet.

"No. We're not doing that. Eleven point six percent. Any less and you can terminate the contract," Pepper said.

"Thank you," she said with finality, and touched her ear.

"Why don't you call Darcy by her first name, Steve? She's not a soldier," Pepper turned her full attention to him.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

"Bleeding. You're bleeding. Happy, take us to medical. Captain Rogers is hurt," she called to the front.

"Right away," Happy said.

"No. I'm fine. This is nothing," Steve insisted. He held his hand out and shook his head. He might prefer a bed in medical to what Pepper was bound to do to his pride today, but Thor had called her to help, so he'd take the help.

"Steve, you have blood rimming your gums. Drink this. Swish and swallow. If I see any more red in your mouth, we're going back. Never mind, Happy. He's only a damn super-soldier," Pepper called in annoyance.

Darcy laughed.

They both looked at her.

"Don't mind me. My job makes me crazy," Darcy said.

"But you're so good with crazy, dear. It's one of the reasons we love you," Pepper told her.

Steve kept his mouth shut and breathed calmly and slowly through his nose. Things were squirming and shifting inside him, pulling themselves back together. He was used to the feeling, so he didn't let it show on his face.

"Thor says you need assistance. Tony says you only trust your look with me. I'm flattered, but I'm busy. We'll work around the calls I can't skip. You're my doll today, Steve. Get used to it. I don't have time for backtalk," she said.

She held up her finger as another call came in.

"Trouuuble," Darcy whispered.

Steve sat back and closed his eyes. Something felt sharp in his gut. There was more shifting, then
the sensation passed. Thor had worked him over good, and he appreciated it. It was hard to focus on his groin when he had dames watching him for blood in his teeth.

"What did you get turned in for?" Darcy asked.

She leaned across as if Steve would lean to meet her and share secrets.

Pepper touched her ear again. Then she pressed a button and the privacy screen went up between them and Happy. Steve knew he only had a moment more of dignity left. Soon as the black glass was seated in its soundproof frame, Pepper turned to Darcy.

"Captain Rogers needs tops that will cover unwanted fullness at the crotch," Pepper said.

"Yowza," Darcy said with feeling.

Both women stared pointedly at the area in question.

"The Captain doesn't need that. I do," Steve corrected them.

"And why is that, Steve?" Pepper asked.

*Because everyone in the tower is an ogling pervert,* Steve thought, but he didn't say it.

"Because I seem to have some trouble with control lately, and I don't want to offend anyone," Steve ground out between his teeth.

"Liar," Darcy said.

"You have a better explanation?" Steve asked her.

"Yes. You don't mind offending people. You just don't like to share," Darcy said.

"Children," Pepper said.

"With respect, Ma'am. I'm not a child," Steve said.

"And I'm not a Ma'am," Pepper said.

"Yes. Pepper." Steve said.

Steve's voice was low and grinding with the difficulty of managing to hold his mind, his body, and this conversation exactly where it had to be, despite Lewis' annoying presence.

"Oooh. Do that again. Please?" Darcy begged quietly.

"Pepper, I don't usually have trouble getting along with people, but I am today. Can you help me with that?" Steve asked.

He pointedly ignored Darcy, which made the girl smile wider, for some reason.

"You need a lot of help today, it seems. Darcy, be kind to him and maybe he'll be kind to you," Pepper said.

Darcy pouted again, but only briefly.

"Steve, we know you're having some difficulties. Probably because of the serum. Tony feels bad about that, though I've told him it's not his fault-"
"It's not. And it's probably not Howard's fault, either," Steve insisted.

"Fault doesn't matter much right now. As Darcy also mentioned, we don't mind if you share," Pepper said.

She gave him a moment to see that her smile was real, and that there was, indeed, a warm-blooded woman beneath the suit.

He set his will and his jaw and gave her his focused attention. Pepper was formidable, but he wasn't going to be run down like hounds on a fox with this business.

"Yes. That's nice, Captain. I'm aware of your sensibilities. Your patriotic disapproval is enough to give a girl the shivers, but we're only shopping today. Listen. Every man's got a penis, and Lord knows I've had to make far too many excuses for Tony's. So let's skip to the end. You're an associate of mine. I can't have you going around wearing it like you're bashful. You carry it like an issued sidearm, or you conceal it with a permit. It's either, or. Not somewhere in the middle. Understand?" she asked briskly.

Darcy was smirking at him. He could see it from the corner of his eye. He felt like palming her face until her pert little nose snapped. But then, Thor would tenderize him some more.

"Yes. Pepper." he said carefully.

Why was it so difficult to avoid calling her Ma'am? Maybe because he felt he was being schooled like Peggy used to do to the recruits.

Darcy wiggled in her seat with glee.

Steve wondered how many millimeters of tooth enamel he was losing.

"Darcy. I know this is so fun, but would you please stop antagonizing him? He's trying very hard," Pepper said mildly.

"Sorry," Darcy whispered.

Steve could almost smell her lack of contrition.

"Steve, I apologize. I thought Darcy was joking when she said you hated her. She can ride in the front on the way home," Pepper said.

"I don't hate anyone. I usually find Miss Lewis entertaining. She feeds me occasionally, and I like being fed. I'm having trouble today. I apologize," Steve made an effort toward Darcy.

"You're having trouble today? What was with the whole exorcist slash Vin Diesel thing in the training room? And I even fed you then. You demanded half my popcorn, then you scared the spit out of all of us," she pointed out.

"I have no recollection of those events," Steve said.

"You really don't?" Darcy asked.

"I really don't, past a certain moment" Steve told her.

"Dude. I stole Tony's bourbon before two in the afternoon," she insisted.

"Again. I'm sorry. We don't know what's wrong with me yet," Steve apologized.
"That's easy. The problem is your fossilized virtue wedged sideways in your ass. It's bound to chafe after a few decades, and you're waaay past expiration date," Darcy explained.

Steve was speechless for a moment, then he laughed. He was impressed, really.

"You should bring that idea to Doctor Banner. He'll put it on the fix-up list with my cleft palate and my club foot. Seriously, Lewis, are you just sore because I haven't-? No. Never mind," Steve said.

He turned back to Pepper. It was barely noon and he was tired. Tired of women, anyway. He'd take another round of punishment from Thor rather than this.

"So. We'll be meeting with Jan. He's good, and he was kind enough to make time for us on short notice. Can we be professional for long enough to get out of the car?" Pepper asked.

She looked to them both expectantly.

"Yes, Pepper." Steve said.

Darcy nodded and bit her lip. Steve still didn't fully understand why Lewis was along for this. She'd set the files down and put her phone away, for once.

They followed Pepper from the limo and into a set of heavily tinted glass doors. The doors opened for them not with Jarvis-like sensors and servos, but with impeccably dressed footmen. Steve stood tall and forced himself to ignore the men who held the doors. It got his back up to see anyone being made subservient like that, but now wasn't the time to cause a scene.

Darcy trotted along beside him much like Tony had earlier. Pepper's legs were likely just as long as his. With Darcy's dark hair and smart mouth, Steve had a random thought about Darcy being related to Tony, but he let that go, too.

They went into a room that was draped in heavy fabric from floor to ceiling except where there were mirrors. Someone closed the door behind them, and Steve felt like he was in a small, exclusive chamber just outside of reality. The place smelled of money and a prim stuffiness what would tolerate no disorder.

A tall, slim man greeted Pepper cordially, then turned to Steve.

"Commander Rogers," he said with a little bow.

Steve nodded to the painfully proper fellow. He'd have to speak with someone about that title getting out.

"It's Captain," Steve corrected.

"My apologies, Captain," Jan amended.

So help him, if he saw Darcy wiggle in that giddy little dance again, he was going to pop her hard enough to make her glasses go flying. That wasn't very hard. Thor wouldn't hurt him much.

"It's my honor to assist you today. I was told that there is a matter of coverage?" Jan asked lightly.

He gestured to a polished wooden platform that stood like a small box in the middle of the room. Steve had heard of such things before, in fancy books, so he stepped up onto it.

Pepper murmured quiet agreement to Jan, who obviously needed no further instruction.
"I'm sorry for not forwarding his measurements, but there have been some changes lately," Pepper said.

"It's no trouble. No trouble at all," Jan said.

Steve wondered why they were all waiting while he stood on a box like a statue. Then Pepper cleared her throat. Darcy perked up, then slumped in disappointment. The women exited the room past a curtain which fell behind them along with thick silence.

"If you'll pardon me, Captain. A moment of indulgence, and then it will be over," Jan said.

He held out a tape measure. Steve stared him down, then loosened his stance. Jan sighed, but he got to work. The tape measure went places that Steve wasn't accustomed to allowing a stranger access to outside of the battlefield or medical.

"I apologize if my admiration offends you," Jan said.

"Don't take it personal," Steve said.

"I could say the same," Jan said.

"Fair enough," Steve agreed.

It was the most polite treatment he'd had all day. Jan circled his hips with the tape, then made a series of measurements up this torso, brief and efficient. Steve coughed when the man's knuckles pressed slightly into him below the ribs. Steve grimaced, then was quick to cover his teeth. Not quick enough.

"My dear Captain! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just get done already. The sooner people quit poking at me, the sooner my insides can settle," Steve said irritably.

"Of course," Jan murmured.

"You're not writing any of this down. How-?" Steve asked.

"Eidetic memory," Jan said blandly.

"It's a bitch," Steve said.

"Indeed," Jan agreed.

He went over to the curtain and invited the ladies back in.

Pepper looked on as Jan filled out a form with Steve's measurements, then handed it to an assistant.

"You're a growing boy, Captain," Pepper commented.

"So I've been told," Steve said.

In less than a minute, clothes were brought in.

"Nothing tight or binding, if you want me to wear it more than once. I need to move," Steve said.

"This is for the office and at home. It doesn't have to be like your uniform," Pepper said.
"Things happen. I need to move," Steve re-stated.

"I hear you, Captain. Dolores, let's try the knit instead." Jan said to one of his assistants.

"I'm going to look like a golfer?" Steve asked.

"Only if you want to," Jan replied.

Steve made a face.

"I suppose not," Jan amended.

He shook his head and Dolores sent the knits back. The older woman and a young man came back with a different selection of clothing. Jan took a shirt from Dolores.

"I know this doesn't appear to 'move', but if you would allow me to try," Jan said.

Steve inclined his head. Dolores gestured for Steve to step down off the box and he did.

"Your outerwear please, Captain," Jan requested.

Steve tipped up his chin and undid his tie for the second time of the day. People were always wanting him to take his shirt off. He may as well go around without. Without being asked, he stripped off the undershirt, too.

Gasps and murmurs of surprise went up from the five other people in the room. With the way he was feeling tender, he knew he was probably pretty colorful.

"Yay, Thor," Darcy said.

"Don't cheer until you see Thor," Steve said.

"Did you know he doesn't bruise?" Darcy said brightly.

"Lewis, zip it," Steve ordered.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry," Darcy said.

Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

"Captain, you know you're supposed to go to medical when anything like this happens," she said.

"I'll be fine if I can get a damn sandwich!" Steve ground out.

Jan shot a look to the young male assistant. The guy disappeared from the room.

"Are you able to continue, Captain? We can always reschedule for another day when you might not feel as sore," Jan offered.

The man still held the dark blue shirt for him.

"I've done more and in worse condition. I think I can handle some clothes."

Steve wiggled his fingers impatiently at the shirt. Jan slid the garment onto one arm, then the other. The man was so efficient at buttoning him up that he was half done before Steve thought to protest at someone else dressing him. When the shirt was buttoned, Steve stepped back. He didn't need anyone reaching a hand down to tuck a shirt for him.
"Relax, Captain. Coverage, remember? The shirt tails are supposed to stay untucked," Pepper told him.

Jan nodded. He covered the lower half of his face and studied the dark, fitted shirt on Steve. Darcy made a sound like a suppressed squeal.

"Lewis. Don't," Steve warned.

"But she's right. You have to get that one," Pepper said.

She had a twinkle in her eyes that made Steve suspicious. He turned to look into one of the mirrors.

"This doesn't go with the pants," Steve said.

"Nothing goes with those pants, you big dork," Darcy said helpfully.

The silence of horror ricocheted around the room. These society people weren't used to such insults being tolerated. Steve wasn't that high-strung and his skin was thick from long years of name calling as a kid. Plus, Lewis was right. His office dress pants were all wrong for the tailored shirt. Even he could see that the pants were too full cut. Too much fabric.

"Alright, so what goes with it?" Steve asked.

In a few minutes, Steve stood in a pair of khaki work pants that fit him properly.

"These look more like jeans. They're unprofessional," Steve stated.

"Captain, I completely understand your perspective. For a man of your dignity, these may seem a little upstart. I suggest them because of your athletic build. As you can see, they have the refined features of office wear, rather than denim jeans. The fit is merely more streamlined," Jan said.


Jan took several steps back.

Steve blanked his face against the pain, and twisted his body, as if throwing the shield. Then, he jumped and kicked above his head. He was pleasantly surprised when the fabrics hugged him, but didn't tear. Even the tailored shirt, which felt too fitted to have withstood the movements. Steve suspected some fancy new fabric that regular ready-made clothes weren't made of.

"What do you think, Lewis?" he asked.

Steve strode over to the triple mirror near her, tugging at his cuffs and adjusting his collar. He didn't like the way the flattering lighting made him look like a movie star. It reminded him of having a nervous belly in the dressing room back in his USO days.

"Um. It's good," Darcy said.

She was biting her bottom lip and trying to act cool, but he could sense her intense appreciation of the new look the clothes gave him.

Steve grudgingly ignored her dithered female reaction and tugged at the tails of the shirt which covered his groin in the front, but somehow managed to accentuate his ass while covering it mostly up at the same time. Pepper cleared her throat again. The look in her eyes was approaching what he'd call a gleam. It looked pretty dangerous on a woman of Pepper's stature and presence.
He didn't hate the clothes, and it worked. He'd been afraid of looking like a pansy, in all the modern styles. Sure, Buck pulled it off, but Bucky had the brooding assassin thing going for him, even in drab, plain work clothes. Maybe he could do this, too. Instead of looking pansy and fancy, he looked strong.

"Whatever you've got, I'll try it for a week, but if people laugh, it'll all stay in my closet," Steve said.

"No one will laugh," Pepper promised.

From the look on her face, he believed her.

The young man came forward with a sandwich and a bowl of hearty bean soup on a plate. A little table appeared with Dolores, and so did a glass of milk. And cookies. Steve ate it all and drank while people showed him more clothes on hangers. He nodded when he liked something, and shook his head when he didn't. His tastes were traditional, but he allowed a sharper interpretation of style and darker, more complex colors.

"Captain, I am now firmly certain of your preferences. By tomorrow, I can have a few weeks of wardrobe delivered, both business and casual," Jan said.

Again, Steve nodded. Now that he had some food, he could feel himself healing at an accelerated rate. Faster than usual, maybe. He lifted his finger at the young man who had brought him the food. Before he could verbalize exactly what he wanted, another tray was brought out to him, wrapped to go.

"Nice place you got here, Mister…?" Steve looked to Jan.

"Spence. Please call me Jan, Captain,"

"Not a chance, Mister Spence. And the next time I come here, I'll open my own door," Steve said.

He nodded his thanks to the fella who'd brought him the food, and to Dolores. He wore the new clothes out to the car because he was too busy eating to bother changing. Dolores had already folded the clothes he'd dressed in this morning and put them in a bag which she handed to Darcy. Lewis' boots clicked along at his rear, and Pepper followed after. Happy opened the door of the limo for them and Steve tried not to grimace at having another door held for him. He balanced his food and settled into the car. The ladies joined him and Happy shut the door and got them moving toward home.

"Impressive, Steve. I didn't expect you to own it like that," Pepper complimented him.

Darcy was quiet for once. The privacy glass remained closed between the passenger cabin and Happy. Steve noted that and sensed that it was purposeful rather than an oversight.

"They had clothes and they knew what they were doing. Jan's team did all the work," he said with a shrug.

He ate until he was done, then wondered about the dishes. Darcy took them and stowed them away somewhere.

"Pepper, I already have all the other clothes you got me. I don't need all this. It's wasteful," Steve said.

"What you have is mostly workout clothes and casual summer clothes. We can donate some of
them to make room, or enlarge your closet. You need this, Steve, if you're going to be hard all the
time and you insist on not sharing," Pepper said.

Steve didn't allow himself to protest and deny things the way he wanted to. He could feel his ears
heating at her casual mention of his recent difficulties. She was right. Nat was right. Thor was
right. He had to deal with this somehow. Longer jackets and shirts with tails would have to do for
now.

"What's with the 'sharing' thing?" he asked Pepper.

"I feel for you. You're objectified all the time. Most of us are guilty of staring when you don't want
us to. I see you fighting it, internally. You want to hold on tight to your privacy and throw off the
unwanted attention. It's why you insisted on wearing clothes that didn't suit you. That's never
worked to solve the problem. Now that you've got this thing going on, it's going to be worse.
You're going to have to get used to people staring. Blatantly staring. You're enjoyable to look at,
Steve. Most people won't be able to help themselves. If you can convince yourself that you're
sharing your looks willingly, maybe it won't seem like such a personal offense when people stare,"
Pepper told him.

"Since the first moment I stepped out of Howard's machine, I've been getting used to the attention.
Didn't you see how they dolled me out while I was on tour? On film? My uniform leaves nothing
to the imagination. I don't see how you can think I'm not used to people staring," Steve denied.

Pepper made a face like he was a school kid who'd given the wrong answer in front of the class.
Like he was a dunce. Steve cocked his head aside curiously and waited for her to tell him what he
was missing.

"I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry, Steve. I'm not being clear enough. I was trying to avoid being
indelicate," Pepper said.

They both glanced at Darcy when she interrupted with a snort and an eye roll. Pepper had the look
of a soldier who was fixing to have to wade into a tough situation. She gave him an apologetic look
and proceeded anyway.

"Steve. Your sex appeal is incredible. You heat people up simply by being in the same room. And
by 'people', I mean us, as in several of the people you live with. Your friends, your teammates, and
the office staff. Try not to be angry with us. It's not your fault, and it's not ours, either. This might
get personal before we're all adjusted to it. If you're defensive and angry about the attention,
everyone's going to be nervous and it will be painfully awkward. If you can relax, accept the
attention as natural, and try to have some fun with it, we'll all be more at ease," Pepper said.

"So, you want me to act like an arrogant jerk who thinks he's God's gift to women?" Steve
grumbled.

"No. That's not you. What I want is for you to be happy in your own skin, and merciful enough to
accept other people's reactions with grace," Pepper explained.

"Happy. Merciful," Steve said.

It was a novel way of considering the situation. It was positive. It had merit. And, Steve could see
now that it's exactly what Pepper had to do to make it as a beautiful woman in the business world.
Happiness and mercy weren't all of it. Pepper was strong. Tough. She didn't let people pin any
nastiness to her. She was frosty and professional when things got distasteful. He didn't know if he
could do that so well. It would take some serious practice.
"Steve," Darcy said.

He turned to her. What could quirky, irreverent Lewis possibly add to Pepper's wise advice?

"You make my ovaries hurt," Darcy told him with a little smile that was half bullshit, but half blunt honesty.

Steve wanted to shake off the absurd statement like it was nothing. Just some fluff that Lewis would say. Then, the anatomical implications and similarities to his aching balls became understandable to him. Lewis was saying he was so appealing that her body had a visceral urge to procreate when she saw him. Not a dirty mind, necessarily. A biological response. Like being hungry or needing to breathe. It was a hell of a compliment, when he forced himself to consider it rather than shutting it out from embarrassment.

"Thanks," he told her simply.

Pepper nodded in satisfaction.

"See, you're already getting it," she praised him.

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**Note:** I've got chapter 26 mostly written, but the end of it is unsatisfactory. I'll have it out in a day or so, hopefully. I wanted to post 25 and 26 together, but I've held onto 25 for long enough, so it'll have to stand on its own for a few days.
"Thor?" Jane asked.

He wasn't in bed when she woke up, and that wasn't very strange, but she couldn't find him anywhere in the suite. She checked every room, even the spare room that Darcy sometimes slept over in, but he wasn't there.

"Jarvis, can you find him for me?" she asked.

"He is just outside the door, Doctor Foster," Jarvis said.

"Outside the door?" Jane asked, bewildered.

She hurried through the living room and opened the door.

Thor was sitting on the floor in the hallway, his legs crossed and his hands resting in curled fists on his knees. It may have looked somewhat like one of Bruce's yoga poses, but Thor's face was tense and troubled. He was staring at the hallway table which stood in front of the window. Staring at Mjolnir.

"Hon?" Jane asked.

"I have lost it," Thor said lightly.

"It's right there," Jane said.

"I cannot lift it," he clarified.

"You can't lift...What did you do?" Jane asked.

She left her place standing in the doorway and went to bend down over his broad shoulders to hug him. Thor lifted a hand and affectionately pushed back the curtain of her honey brown hair until his view of Mjolnir was no longer obscured.

"I have hurt my brother," he said sadly.

"Loki?"

"No. Steven," Thor corrected her.

"You can't have hurt him much. He was just out shopping with Darcy and Pepper yesterday afternoon. Are you sure that's why you can't lift it? It doesn't make any sense that a few bruises from sparring would take Mjolnir from you. It never has before," Jane pointed out.

She moved around to sit with Thor, both of them in boxer shorts, but Jane additionally wearing one
of his large T-shirts. Jane took one of his hands onto her knee and worked at loosening his fist. He allowed her to do so, but she could see that her attempt at soothing him wasn't making much progress.

"There was a little blood, but Steven assured me that he was fine. Jane, tell me how serious an offense it is in your realm for one man to bring relief to another with the mouth. I know that it is no heinous crime, but what if the recipient is morally opposed to such acts?" Thor asked with a troubled brow.

"Whoa," Jane shook her head in startled surprise, "You beat Steve bloody, then you sucked him off?"

"It appears that would be an accurate description," Thor agreed.

"And you're sitting here trying to figure out which offense is the one that caused you to lose your hammer. Thor, sometimes you don't think things out, honey. If he was 'a little bloody', and then said he was 'fine,' then you probably did some serious damage!" Jane fussed.

She pushed back into the suite and ran to get her phone. She returned to Thor's side and sat again. Her left hand rubbed his back in a way that was intended to be comforting, but was too brisk and nervous. Her right thumb worked her phone screen.

"You cannot tell Darcy what happened between myself and Steven. It was a thing between warriors, and not to be repeated lightly," Thor said.

He reached for her phone, but Jane twisted and held it away from him, still texting.

"I won't tell her that. I'm asking her about how Steve looked during their shopping yesterday," Jane said.

Jane batted at Thor's reaching hand until he stopped trying to take her phone.

"He was coughing blood for about an hour, and"

Darcy replied and sent a picture of Steve's bare and bruised torso. The image was grainy from being taken in a low light setting, but it was clearly Steve, and he was more badly bruised than Jane remembered seeing him anywhere outside of medical. Pepper and some other people were in the background of the picture, looking shocked at the damage to the Captain. Jane showed the image to Thor.

He groaned miserably and rubbed his face with his hands.

"Why were you so rough with him?" Jane asked in a whisper.

"Because it seemed to be what he wanted. I had not thought that he was fragile," Thor said from behind his hands.

"This is Steve Rogers we're talking about! Maybe he wanted a beating for whatever he imagines he's done wrong, but that doesn't mean you can give him one. Of course he's fragile. He's mortal. You were sparring naked, weren't you!? What the hell is going on?" Jane asked.

"I am a fool," Thor lamented.

"Answer me!" Jane demanded.
"We were not naked. We retained our undergarments. Lady Natasha was present for the first part of our encounter. I would not bare myself before another woman were you not there to witness and approve," Thor assured.

"But giving Captain America a blow job is okay?" Jane asked.

Her voice was strident, and Thor had come to expect no less when such matters occurred. His Jane was remarkably accepting of the differing customs between their realms, but rarely had their differences touched upon matters of intimacy.

"It was not an act of passion, Jane. The man was in pain. He had already attempted to alleviate his need - alas, that is not my part to tell, but suffice it to say that he was in pain and in need of assistance. It was over in but half a minute. I am quite skilled with my mouth," Thor said.

He sounded proud.

Jane stared at him with her jaw hanging.

"I know how skilled your mouth is, but I didn't know you used it on men! Why don't you tell me these things?!" she asked.

She brought her thumb back to her phone screen to text again, and this time Thor was successful in removing the phone from her hand.

"It is a matter among warriors, and then only on rare occasions when there is great need. If I had thought you needed to know such things, I would have told you. As you are not a warrior, I see not why it pertains to you," Thor explained with prickly dignity.

Jane gaped at him for a moment and forgot about her phone.

"Would you please explain that? The 'among warriors' part, I mean?" Jane asked with high-pitched false calm.

There had already been so many misunderstandings between them, most of them comical and easily remedied. This was different, though.

"For you, I will explain. But you must assure me that this knowledge will not go beyond the two of us," Thor told her.

"I promise," Jane said.

"The warriors of Asgard are great in stamina and mighty. This is known throughout the realms. What is not known is that our greatness, our berserk savagery in battle, comes at a price. There are times when our enemies do not have the strength or the will to stand and deliver sufficient challenge to a man. If he has already engaged in combat with utmost vigor, yet his need for challenge goes unmet, then a warrior may find himself with excess rage and no outlet to safely expend it. At times this is not a problem when the company is embroiled in long months or years of warfare and the warriors are encamped away from home. However, when a skirmish is intense but short and a man must then go home to gentle society, the lingering rage can be a danger to the innocent. In such cases it is not unknown for a fellow warrior to assist in bleeding off the excess vigor which can make a man a danger to his own people," Thor explained.

"You said rage. What does rage have to do with sex?" Jane asked.

"The easing of rage and the taming of the loins can sometimes be met with the same act," Thor
Jane took a moment to imagine hot, rageful warrior sex in the aftermath of battle. Five years ago, she would have thought it crude and distasteful. It was still harsh, but she now had the life experience to appreciate it to a degree.

"Wow. Okay. That's pretty intense. But, why can't a warrior just take care of it himself?" Jane asked.

"Such gestures are insufficient for the purpose. The heart of man longs for acknowledgement of his plight, for solidarity with his fellows at the sorrow of insufficient glory. It is both humbling and companionable to be set back down firmly into rightness of the mind before returning to your home. My brother Steven suffers from such loneliness and excess of vigor," Thor said.

Jane pressed her mouth flat and looked at him skeptically.

"I do not jest. As you are not a warrior, I cannot expect you to fully understand," Thor said.

"Enough with the 'I am not a warrior.' I get that. I'm flimsy little Jane," she sassed.

"Nay. You are lovely little Jane. You are brilliantly intelligent little Jane. Your radiance would be wasted on the field of battle. You are meant for finer things, and I would have you no other way," Thor smiled at her.

She got lost for a moment in his smile, then she shook her head.

"But this is Steve we're talking about! First, if you beat him bloody, he'll just stand there and thank you for it. If you really hurt him, Thor, he wouldn't want you to feel bad, so he wouldn't mention it. Second, the friendly blow job among warriors tradition has likely got him shitting puppies! There's no telling what's in his head. You have to fix this!" Jane hissed and poked him firmly in the side.

"Your wisdom is legend, Lady. If I can but determine which of my actions has made me unworthy, then I may work at regaining my honor in Steven's eyes. I was blinded enough by my own arrogance to tell him that-" Thor paused and thought of the error of his words to Steven.

He frowned strongly and Jane rubbed his arm in sympathy.

"You're not expected to be perfect, you know. We all make mistakes," Jane told him.

"Your mistakes do not deprive you of the tool of your trade, nor of the honor of your companions," Thor grumbled while he stared longingly at his hammer.

"Sometimes they do. And worse. Don't forget about my unstable wormhole test. It ate my lab and half of Doctor Banner's," Jane pointed out.

"Ah. Yes. I am only grateful that you and Darcy were not in the lab at the time, but observing from a safe distance," Thor said. He leaned over and kissed Jane on the temple.

"See. Most times, we can fix our mistakes. Don't worry, Honey. Steve is your friend. Just explain and apologize. I'm sure it'll be alright," Jane said.

"Explanation and apology are insufficient. I must make amends," Thor said.

"Fine. You do that. I'll go make coffee," Jane said.

She kissed Thor lovingly, then hurried inside to get her morning started. She got halfway to the
kitchen, then turned around and hurried back out to get her phone from Thor.

"You will not share what I have told you in confidence with anyone? Not even with our Darcy?" Thor asked.

"Of course not!" Jane said.

"Captain, I should inform you that your time with Miss Estrella will be recorded," Jarvis said.

"Understood," Steve agreed.

She'd asked him to meet with her out in the hallway. He didn't know what to expect from her, but he was glad that she'd at least asked to see him. He was glad if she would talk to him, or slap him for scaring her, or even just stare at him and make him feel bad. When he was almost there, it occurred to him that maybe she was going to tell him that she was moving out of the tower. He walked a little faster. If that's what she had to say, they were going to have words again.

He found her standing by the window outside Nat's suite. The first thing he noticed was that her hair was spiked straight up from her head and that the tip of each little spike was bright red. The second thing he noticed was that she was wearing all black clothes. Long black crinkled skirt, a long tunic over that. The neckline of her top was rounded and wide so that it barely clung to her shoulders. Then, he saw that she wasn't wearing her necklace. Steve stopped walking toward her abruptly.

Estrella turned away from the window. Something was different about her eyes. They looked darker all around, and more sultry. Her lips were tinted a deep rosy brown color. Makeup. He had a difficult moment adjusting to seeing her wearing makeup. She looked very pretty, but it made her look different. Not like the natural and unpretentious young woman he knew her to be. He didn't like the makeup, but he made himself accept that she didn't need to keep herself in any particular way to please him. The red spikey hair, though...he liked that a lot.

Steve stood where he was, almost twenty feet away from her. She didn't smile at him in greeting. She didn't whisper to him or try to communicate to him in any way. She looked displeased, and something deep in his brain cautioned him, reminded him of the sickening pain she was capable of inflicting without her necklace.

"Would you understand if I told you that I scared you on purpose?" he asked quietly.

Both of them stood with feet braced apart and arms crossed. Steve loosened to shove his hands in his new pants pockets and he leaned back against the wall not far from the elevator.

She nodded at him solemnly. Estrella sank to the floor where she was and folded her legs and feet so that her full skirt puddled all around. Steve crouched down so that his back slid down the wall. He rested his forearms on his knees.

"Is your necklace broken or lost?" Steve asked her when it didn't look like she wanted to talk about anything in particular.

She shook her head.

"You left it off so you can scream if I misbehave?" Steve asked.

Estrella nodded.
She could see that the idea of her needing to defend herself against him made him sad.

Steve was a contrast, crouching there across from her. His face was that of a sorrowful intellect, but his body displayed brute power. The new clothes Natasha told her he'd be wearing emphasized what his old clothes had tried to minimize. The breadth of his shoulders and the strong fullness of his thighs were there for anyone to see. In between, his torso seemed somehow thick and lean at the same time.

How had she missed this? When she'd first met him, maybe she was so dim witted with hunger that her normally paranoid assessment of men as threats had failed to pick up on his ability to do harm. Or, maybe she'd been so intrigued by his personality and his unique brand of kindness that she'd overlooked much of his physicality. She'd taken him for granted as a nice guy because of what he did for a living.

Steve was finding himself thinking much the same about her. She'd been a powerless street person, thin and weak, so he had assumed her to be harmless. Or at least, incapable of doing anything which would deter anyone from what they wanted. The phantom pain of her yells still made him hesitant to do anything she might not like.

Right now, he wanted to be near her. He craved the touch of her skin. But she was cautious. He could tell from the way she was looking at him that she wasn't thinking of him as a teddy bear anymore. If he moved closer to her, she would likely scream.

If he wanted her, all he had to do was cover his ears. The thought shamed him. Not long ago, he'd promised her he'd never do that. The fact that the idea came to him now told him how far wrong his mind was. Steve hung his head and mentally chastised himself. Buck was right. Maybe he should just stay away from her if this was how he was going to be.

When he looked at her again, his moment of sanity evaporated and he was right back to wanting her. He fought the attraction, but he was losing. It felt like his fingers were slipping off a ledge, and he was going to fall.

The exposed skin of her nape drew his attention. He wanted to kiss her there, where her necklace usually rested. To taste her. To smell her. To do that, he'd have to be close. She might be afraid. Maybe she would struggle. He would get to feel her moving in his arms like the night in the common kitchen when he'd pulled her off of Bucky. He wanted to feel her moving in his arms, vigorous and fiery as he knew her to be.

Steve closed his eyes again and clunked his head back against the wall. There it went. He'd been calm so far this morning. But now that he was thinking of how it would feel to hold her, his body reacted with eager anticipation. At least he had the tails of his new shirt to obscure the fact.

He really needed to go. The only thing keeping him from going to her was his word to her that he wouldn't prevent her voice from hurting him. He'd promised he wasn't going to cover her mouth, or his ears, and he had to keep that promise.

"I want you, Eya," Steve told her, more as a warning than as any kind of romance.

"Duh!" Her mouth formed the exclamation and she rolled her eyes at him.

"Hah," Steve laughed at her reaction to his admission.

Half the women he met were dying to get him to want them, and the one he finally wanted in return made light of his desire.
"But I don't just want you. I like you. I liked you before I wanted you. Is there a way we can pay attention to that instead of the wanting?" he asked.

For the first time today, Estrella smiled at him. It was beautiful and shy.

_I don't know_, she moved her lips at him.

"I'd like to try," he told her.

She nodded her agreement.

Steve looked at his watch.

"I have to go. I've got a meeting," Steve stood up and tugged at the tails of his shirt.

Estrella watched him from her spot on the floor near the window. She could see that he was agitated, almost fidgety. He'd said he had to leave, but he wasn't going. She lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Can I-" Steve began, then swallowed his words.

He gathered his fortitude and tried again.

"Can I have a hug?" he whispered hopefully.

"I would advise against it, Miss," Jarvis' voice told her.

Estrella made a face at the ceiling, then stood up. She went to Steve. She was already resigned to the idea that he might hurt her someday. It probably wouldn't be today. She hadn't made a peep of sound, and didn't plan to. Steve's arms opened to her, and she went into them.

He was hard and tense around her, and his grip nearly squeezed the breath out of her. Steve's face pressed down along hers in a rough caress, and it seemed like he was smelling her, or breathing strange, or something. She hugged his neck tighter to show him that she wasn't afraid. Much. She remembered what he could do, from how he'd handled Natasha in the training room. His heart was thumping strong and she could hear it. He shifted his feet and the slight movement of his body made muscles come alive against her. She shivered.

"Hey," Steve murmured.

She pulled her face back to look up at him. Poor guy. His pupils were all wide again, and his skin was rosy. She smiled at him in sympathy.

Carefully, Steve lifted a hand and tipped her chin up. She didn't know what he wanted, and it made her nervous to trust him. Natasha and Jarvis had both warned her to stay away from him for a while, but that was nothing new. Steve was still more important to her than they were. He was why she stayed in the tower. So, he could do what he wanted and Jarvis and Natasha would just have to chew on it.

Steve ignored the rush of blood through his veins, pulsing hard as if he was working, instead of standing still with a girl. He kissed her throat in the front, where her copper butterfly was supposed to be. He gave into temptation a little bit and rubbed his lips back and forth on her skin. So soft. As soon as he was tempted to do more, he loosened his arms and gently pushed her away.

He moved aside and stepped into the elevator.
"Stay safe," he told her.

She nodded. Her fingers touched where he'd kissed her, and he liked the way she looked. Pleased, maybe a little flushed. Her small smile eased his heart. She wasn't mad at him. That was good. Very good. Darn. He'd wanted to feel the little red spikes in her hair, but he'd forgot. He shifted his weight forward, thinking about going back to her.

The elevator doors snapped shut far faster than they usually did. Steve jerked back to keep his face from being clipped by the closing doors.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"The probability was high that you would be late for your meeting, had you lingered," Jarvis told him.

"How high is the probability that you need a diagnostic for making pre-emptive decisions for people?" Steve asked.

"Very high, Captain. I will submit myself to Sir immediately," Jarvis admitted.

Bucky looked out through the open framed wall studs when he heard Steve's bike arrive at the work site. Steve got off the bike and stalked over to the foreman's shack. Buck could tell that he was intent on doing some damage, with the way he moved. Stevie had a good head of mad worked up. He barely stopped to talk to Ron to find out where Buck was working. Bucky set down the cordless drill he was using and pulled the pencil out from behind his ear. Miguel looked at him questioningly.

"I might be back in a minute," Buck told him.

He didn't hang around to see what Miguel thought of that. He could hear Steve's footsteps coming. He had to get clear of the work site. Bucky bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He'd half expected something like this. A loaded dump truck rumbled by, obscuring the sound of Steve's approach, but Buck could see him out the corner of his eye. There wasn't much time before Steve closed distance with him. He ducked around where the back hoe was loading the next dump truck and jogged away so that maybe the crew wouldn't see it when Steve lit into him.

"Buck!" Steve shouted at him.

He grinned and got around the back side of the porta-johns. Good enough. He waited the few seconds it took Steve to get there.

Yeah. Stevie was hot. A vein was jumping at the side of his head, and his jaw was set just so. The sharply styled office wear looked strange on him, but there wasn't much time to pay attention to that.

"Heya. What's got your tail in a knot?" he asked.

"You knocked over another Hydra base. Alone," Steve bit out.

He stood there with his arms crossed, looking ready to chew into him.
"Sure I did. Your team was just letting it sit there. Had to do something," Buck said.

"We were going tomorrow," Steve growled.

"Now ya don't have to. You can buy me lunch to thank me," Buck told him.

Steve lunged for him and he was ready for it. He got Steve in the gut and in the face just once before he was slung across the loose, sharp gravel like a pinwheel. He could feel his right shoulder try to pop out from the force of Steve's toss.

"Quit being a fuckin' dumbass, Buck! The way you do it only works because you surprise them. They're gonna get wise to you, and the next time you go, they'll be waiting. They'll take you back. Then what am I gonna do?" Steve shouted angrily as he came for him again.

Bucky scrabbled to his feet just in time to catch one across the jaw, but he went in for another round, anyway. He pounded into Steve's ribs, and got a few good shots to the kidneys, too.

Steve shoved him off and laughed. That damn nasty dark side laugh again. Bucky righted himself and frowned. Steve shouldn't have been able to shrug him off so easily. He stood defensively, which felt weird and all wrong, but he had to wait and see what was going on.

"I'm not an idiot. This is what I do. They don't know what's getting em until they're dead. No communications out or in, and then it's too late for them to rat to headquarters, wherever that is. It's clean," Buck said.

"Bullshit!" Steve told him, "If we can see the hit with Stark's satellites, then they know you're ticking off bases, one by one. All they have to do is send a team to investigate and they'll read the site like a report. The next hit you go for, they'll be ready. They're getting smart. No more lone wolf, Buck."

"So come with me," Bucky offered.

Apparently Steve didn't like that idea, because he set into Bucky again, smacking at him fast and open-handed. It stung like hell because Buck wasn't expecting that kind of attack. He made a swing with his left arm to get Steve away from him and Steve grabbed his fist and pulled him in tight. His ribs cracked with the two careful punches Steve gave him. Again, Steve flung him away.

"What the hell's with the pansy-slapping?" Buck asked.

"Can't hit you full on. Not anymore," Steve said.

"Tha fuck, Punk? You think I'm a pussy now?" Buck asked.

Steve growled something that wasn't understandable and paced around to work off his anger. Bucky stood and watched him. When Steve didn't answer him, other than with a few sour looking glances, Buck closed in and shoved at him.

"Hey, you too good to scrap with me now?"

"Leave off, Buck," Steve recovered his balance and turned to face him.

"You're different," Bucky observed.

Steve's close buzzed dark blonde hair and beard, along with the tailored clothes made him look thoroughly modern. It made him look hard and angular, unlike the almost angelic pretty thing he'd
had going on since he was a kid. Bucky didn't like it.

"Yeah, I'm different. I told you. Something's going on with me. Banner thinks it's because I'm eating more now, and Estrella won't stop cooking for me and putting it under my nose, and when Thor busted me up good on the inside yesterday, I healed within the hour. M' too strong. Can't hardly touch anybody," Steve grumbled.

"You'll learn. Give it time. Why'd you let blondie tenderize you like that?" Buck asked.

"I dunno. I felt like fighting. Never mind that. Buck, you gotta promise me you'll stop going it alone," Steve said.

"You ain't my captain anymore. Why should I?"

Steve shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the rough gravel under his feet. Bucky liked seeing the old mannerism. Not everything about his friend had changed. His posturing meant that he didn't want to talk about whatever was on his mind.

"I just got you back, Bucky. I can't lose you again," Steve finally said.

Buck squatted down and buried his fingers in his hair. He stared at the gravel until the scuffed toes of Steve's office shoes appeared in his view.

"I have to, Stevie. I have to do something to hit them back. The directives are still there," Buck tapped at the side of his head, "Part of me still thinks I should go after you. I never finished the last mission. You're still walking around breathing air. When it gets too loud in my head, I gotta go find Hydra to hit instead."

"I didn't know that. I'm sorry," Steve said.

He crouched down in front of Buck and reached across to squeeze his shoulder. Bucky wanted to shrug him off, but he didn't. It would do him some good to let it happen. Nobody touched him except Kenya lately. He needed to loosen up and allow the contact while his head was mostly straight.

"Yeah, well don't worry about it. It's fading," Buck said.

"I don't care if you come after me. Rather than go against Hydra on your own, you come for me next time, you hear?" Steve told him.

"You won't see me coming. What if I snipe you while you're running in the park?" Buck asked.

"You haven't yet. Why would you now? You got that little control?"

Bucky shrugged.

"Look, I mean it. If you get to feeling antsy and you need to hit something, come see me at the tower. I don't care what I'm doing. In the shower, at a meeting, eating pizza, even sleeping. You get to me and we'll handle it. I can use the practice, anyway," Steve told him.

"What about collateral? It'd be better if it's just me and you," Buck asked.

"So I'll tell everybody to stay outta your way if you're headed for me. You can't get past Stark's AI undetected. I mean it, Buck. Just come. We'll deal with it," Steve said.

He gave Bucky a little shake that messed with their balance, perched on the balls of their feet as
they were. Buck pushed him off and they stood up.

Steve stood within easy reach of him, hands in his pockets again. The dumb punk was showing him that he trusted him. Or that he wasn’t afraid. Either way, nobody who knew what James Barnes was anymore stood so close like that. The corners of Steve's eyes crinkled and Buck couldn't help but grin some.

"I can't promise-"

"You will, Buck. Right here, right now. I'm not leaving til I have your word. No more solo hits," Steve demanded. His friendly smile was gone just like that.

"Or what? You'll bring me in and lock me up?" Bucky challenged him.

"No. I'll think of something. Maybe I'll show up with my suitcase and live at your place. Sleep on your couch. Bug you all the damn time. Follow you around. Not let you outta my sight," Steve suggested.

"We're not kids anymore. I don't need a roommate. Or a babysitter," Buck said.

"Yeah, you do. Unless you give me your word, you're getting a babysitter. Try me, Buck. I'll do it. Brooklyn suits me better than the tower lately, anyway. I'll bring Estrella and she'll have fun cooking for the both of us," Steve said.

He smiled, imagining it. He really liked the idea. It could work. Their old neighborhood was loud and rowdy, and Estrella could have music and sing all she wanted. She could still work from her laptop, and-

"You're serious, aren't you? You got that look," Bucky said.

Steve didn't answer, but he gave him a stare.

"Fuck. Alright. No more solo hits," Bucky said.

"And?..."

"And if my head bothers me, I'll come kick your ass," Bucky grumbled.

"You'll try," Steve told him.

"Yeah."

"Your word, Buck. I mean it," Steve said.

"Yeah, yeah. Alright. You have my word. Why do ya think my word's worth anything anyway? I been nothing but a sneak and a killer for seventy years," Bucky complained.

Steve shrugged. He turned around and walked away.

"See ya," Steve called back at him over his shoulder.

"Sure. See ya," Buck grumped at him.

He stayed behind the porta-johns until he heard Steve's bike start up. Buck gave an angry kick at the gravel, spraying rocks in a staccato blast against the plastic enclosures. It was pointless, but it felt good. Better to let it out than to let it build.
When he looked up, four guys were watching him from a nearby roof.

"Eh, fuck off!" Buck yelled at them.

The crew got back to their roofing, and Buck walked across the site and back to his work. Ron stood between him and the rough-framed pool house.

"You something special, going head to head with Captain America like that?" he asked.

"Maybe. You gonna let me do my job, or am I done here?" Buck asked the foreman.

"Nobody's gonna get hurt, right? My insurance can't handle any clash of the titans shit," Ron said.

"I got clear of the site before he got to me, didn't I?"

Ron looked him over and his eyes landed on the left arm. Buck looked down and began to shove the granny stocking back up under his shirt sleeve where it had come loose and fallen down some.

"I'm guessing the Captain wouldn't let you stay out loose if you were a danger to people," Ron said.

"Quit calling him that where anybody can hear. When he's here, he's Grant. And, no, he wouldn't let me run loose if he thought I'd hurt anybody who wasn't askin for it. He was just angry today. We're good," Bucky said.

"Alright. Get back to work," Ron said.

Steve sat in the locker room. The place was quiet. Peaceful. The narrow windows behind him let in the late afternoon sunlight. It shone into his open locker onto his uniform. The room looked technical and stylized in tones of gray, black, blue, and red. It smelted like new shoes and deodorant soap from the nearby showers.

He sat on the bench and stared at the red, white, and blue. The cowl sat on the bottom of his locker, mocking him with empty eye sockets. There was supposed to be a mission tomorrow. He should be outfitting his gear right now and double-checking that everything was ready. Since the mission had been scrubbed due to Bucky's actions, there wasn't anything to do.

Steve frowned at the uniform. It was like part of him was standing there in the locker, looking down at the man seated on the bench and judging himself. An empty shell of a uniform was judging him.

He'd seen the videos on television, edited to make everything look grand and heroic and exciting. There were news blurbs, and cell phone vids, and people even made mix-ups to music that they put on YouTube.

What it felt like inside the uniform while he was working, and what all the media hype made it out to be were two different things. While on duty, he was always concerned about his people. His team. And civilians. And the enemy combatants, to a degree. The tangle and flow of ideas, observations, memory, knowledge, and strategy inside his head was a lot messier than what the cameras showed. He could appreciate that when someone saw Captain America in action from the outside, it looked smooth and capable. But he could run it all into the ground in a flaming explosion looking just as smooth and capable. He'd done it before.

Inside his head, it was a knife's edge dance of experience and tactics and response. In the last few
years, he'd had to add another dimension to the fight. Lately, there was always the unexpected. Whether it was Hydra or terrorist thugs in an African backwater skirmish, the world was changing so fast that even Tony was having trouble keeping up. Hill kept coming to him with new, young hires to approve. Some of their employees were barely legal age for working. Their youngest was a few months past his sixteenth birthday.

It made him feel old. They relied so much on intel and technology before they could act. Fury was valuable for his contacts and experience, and for that certain raw edge of irreverent determination that just didn't quit. Other than that, Fury was getting old. So was Tony. And Clint. And Banner. And especially Steve, despite his young-looking body. His mind felt old and tired sometimes.

This body…Steve looked down at himself. He should be more worn and achy than Fury. But as long as the serum kept him fresh, his experience and physical ability kept him relevant. With Hill and her young talent on roster, and minds like his and Fury's, and capability like Tony and Jarvis and Banner could muster, they were nearly unstoppable. They were needed.

Sure, putting down hotspots and terrorist cells was satisfying. But the Avengers shone most brightly when they worked at long goals like neutering Hydra and ripping it out by the roots. Those roots ran deep into the meat and muscle of the world, and the shift toward a political and ideological fight was something Steve wasn't as well prepared for.

Captain America stood for the bright things. The right and true ideals of what humanity should be. The Cap was strong and sharp and stoic. Upright and reliable. Rigid. Like a dick.

Steve laughed out loud. The comparison was sad enough and true enough to be worth a laugh. As the Captain, he was a harsh tool for a very specific task. When there was a hot mess, he trotted himself out, inserted into the action, and agitated until justice was planted in the place of what had been there before. If he couldn't bring justice, then at least he and his team put a stop to whatever they'd gone in to clean up.

The Captain felt like a skin he put on, lately. He was good at the job because he'd been doing it for so long. He was even getting better at it, integrating his new strength into his training and his work. But when he put on that skin lately, that persona which let him do his job, he was starting to feel like a sham. Like everyone had built up into legend who The Captain was, Steve had his own internal image of the man in the uniform.

He didn't think he was worthy of being even his own considerably less shiny version of America's hero. Steve didn't feel red, white, and blue anymore. He felt gray. And everything he touched was looking muddy, too. What Hydra was up to called on him to get dirty to deal with it. And Steve's own personal struggle was affecting his team.

He scared Natasha. Pepper had treated him like a delinquent school kid, and he deserved it. Tony was looking at him strange lately, and Clint didn't know what to think. God bless Bruce for being unruffled, and Sam for taking it in stride.

And Thor.

Steve made a pained face and shook his head. Now that he had a moment to think, it felt wrong that Thor had sacrificed his dignity to do what he'd done for him yesterday. It felt subservient. Steve burned with shame, as if he'd needed his diaper changed as a grown man. Thor was a fine enough pal to take care of it without much fuss, but it wasn't right. Thor was the prince of a whole realm, and he shouldn't have to put his face in another man's business like that.

There was no question in Steve's mind as to whether either one of them was gay. It was women that
got him going. Women that he dreamed about and wanted to be with. The same was clearly true for Thor. The man adored Jane and seemed to revel in her delicate stature and feminine beauty. Steve didn't agonize over any questions of orientation.

What stung was that Thor felt he'd had to take care of him. And Thor was disappointed in him, too. He'd made that very clear. Then, Pepper'd had to school him like a dumb kid. Even Lewis had gotten in on the lesson.

Steve stared at his uniform again. He wasn't worthy of wearing it. Sure, he could do the job like nobody else could, but his head was in the wrong place. He felt like he was drifting off center, unanchored. He wasn't sure it could all be blamed on what was happening with his body.

Managing the demanding, needy chaos he felt in his groin, his gut, and in his head was difficult enough. He still didn't have a clue what he was going to do about a dick that wouldn't lie down and give up no matter how much he beat it. He couldn't run to his friends every day, even if Thor was right and what he needed to put it to sleep was a human touch other than his own.

Somehow, the idea had wiggled into his consciousness that he didn't want to toe the line anymore. He'd lived his life serving other people's purposes for pretty much as long as he could remember. Living in the skin of the Captain was very limiting, sometimes. Funny how he'd never felt limited by it before. Always, his personal boundaries of right and wrong had felt like a solid foundation to stand on. Here lately, he wanted to rock that foundation, or at least push at the edges. What was everyone else doing and enjoying that he had never let himself consider? Was there merit to some of the things he'd been looking down The Captain's nose at?

Steve's brow crinkled as he thought of it, and his belly felt kind of sick when he considered the possibilities. There could be women. Lots of them. And fun. He wouldn't need any embarrassing help from his friends if he could cut loose enough to go out and take care of his problems on his own. He could choose to temporarily forget what his mother had taught him about being a gentleman. Maybe he needed to, to handle what his body was demanding of him. And maybe that's what Thor meant. He needed to grow up and quit being such a priss about being a man. He needed to learn how to handle his gear so it wouldn't be handling him instead.

Steve looked coldly at his uniform. It was work. It wasn't him. He would be that when he was supposed to, because it was the least he should do. And he needed the challenge.

He stood up and shut the locker.

"Steve, you gotta come see this," Tony said over the intercom.

"And you gotta give me more clues, Tony. See what? Where?"

"Just come to the living room," Tony told him.

"On my way," Steve said.

Steve walked into the common living room and stood at the end of the couch where Tony sat. Pepper was next to him and Steve thought that strange until he realized how much time had passed. It was evening, and the news was on.

"Shit," Steve said.

"Yeah," Tony agreed.

There on the news for the whole nation to see, was him beating on Bucky and slinging him around
at the construction site. The video quality wasn't great, and the news media had cut and spliced it to make it look much worse than it had actually been. From the distance and the angle, Steve knew somebody on a rooftop had captured the video on their phone.

"…speculation about what Captain America was doing at a construction site in Queens. While the video doesn't show the Captain's mysterious opponent taking as much damage as we would expect from such a beating, some wonder why the Captain would embroil himself in a petty fistfight with a civilian construction worker.

Comments on the video run the gamut from outraged disappointment, to blind faith in the Captain's judgement. It remains to be seen whether the Captain…"

Tony pressed the mute button on the remote and looked to Steve.

"Is there some part of 'stay off the news' that you don't understand?" Tony asked.

"That was personal and you know it. I had to talk Buck into laying off the Hydra hits," Steve said.

"With your fists?" Tony asked.

"It worked. He gave me his word," Steve said.

Tony stood up and turned to face him.

"And what now? That may look like a civilian to Joe public, but Hydra will take one look and know that it's Barnes. Did you think about his job, and the people on the work site? The people Hydra will plow through when they make a hit on his apartment in Brooklyn?"

"Sure I thought of it. It doesn't matter. Hydra already knows where he lives and works. Buck is smart. He knows he can't hide forever, so he stays around people. Lots of people. The neighborhood knows him. The crew at the construction site knows him. If Hydra wants to get to him, they'll have to do it publically and expose themselves. It's a possibility they'll make a move, but I'd bet good money that he's prepared for that," Steve answered.

Pepper stood up and waved her hand at the argument she could see simmering between Steve and Tony.

"Barnes is capable, and we'll assist if necessary. That's a worry for tomorrow. Right now, we need to deal with the public and the media. Tony, get dressed for Romero's. Jarvis, tell everyone to get ready to go out. Steve, come with me," she instructed.

Tony gave Steve a smug look as Pepper herded Steve back to his suite. She made him stand in the bright light of his bedroom while she went through his closet and his new clothes. He watched as she brought out one of those Cuban looking shirts with the two lines down the front, and then a pair of light brown slacks he wouldn't have chosen because of the slinky looking material. He frowned, but she didn't pay any attention. Pepper added a pair of shiny, fancy leather shoes with smooth soles.

"Shower. Make sure you smell nice, but don't put on too much scent. Leave the top two buttons of the shirt undone. Wear this underwear, and these socks," she ordered him.

"That's underwear?!" Steve gawked and blushed.

Pepper gave him a hard stare.
"We don't want any lines or bunches showing under the slacks, and you'll be dancing. Wear them. So help me, Steve, if we get in the car and I see that you're not wearing these, I'll turn us around and make everyone wait while I send you back up to change. It matters," she said.

"But they look like one of those little swimsuits. Or an athletic support. And they're see-through. And red! I can't wear-"

"You will. It's nice to feel sexy sometimes, even if nobody else knows you're feeling it. Get moving, Captain," Pepper said.

She left him to start arranging things for their impromptu evening outing. Steve waited until he heard his front door close, then reached down to finger the strange underwear. They were soft and silky, like women's things, but the waistband was sturdy looking enough. Maybe. The brief garment looked like something he would hide in his drawer with Rosie. Steve hadn't known there was special underwear for men. He hadn't known he owned any such thing, but Pepper'd pulled it out of his drawer as if she'd known, all right.

All his junk would be confined in a tight, forward package, and the back of it... pretty much wasn't there. It didn't look comfortable. He'd never worn anything that just went in the crack of his ass. He scowled at the underwear.

"Captain, I might suggest that you move with somewhat more of your usual efficiency. Sir is nearly ready to depart, as are many of the others. Miss Estrella is being assisted with wardrobe, and will likely be ready before you are," Jarvis harried him.

"Estrella is going? Why?" Steve asked.

"For the same reason everyone else is going. To be seen at dinner and dancing. I believe it is Miss Pott's plan for the Avengers to show the public that all is well, and that the video of you scuffling with Sergeant Barnes is of no consequence," Jarvis explained.

"But I can't wear that underwear. They look too small. And how am I supposed to dance with a strap up my ass? I can't even dance! This isn't the way I wanted to-"

"In the shower with you, Captain, if you please. I have years of data on the results of disappointing Miss Potts. I don't recommend it," Jarvis said.

Steve grumbled all the while, but he did as he was told. Pepper was concerned that he would work up a sweat and smell, so he sniffed briefly at the colognes that had appeared on his bathroom countertop until he found one he didn't mind. He used it lightly, then slipped into the ridiculous underwear.

They were more comfortable than he'd have thought, but they did things to him that he sure as hell didn't need any help with. He glared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He was right in his earlier guess. His package was snugly held tight and forward. He chuckled in disbelief at the eye-searing bright red color and the fact that he could see himself through the fine mesh fabric. He couldn't get things arranged right. No matter how he adjusted himself, even with the Cuban shirt that hung untucked, especially with the slinky slacks, he was going to show.

"Captain," Jarvis said mildly just as Steve heard his front door open again.

"Steve. You're dawdling. I'm coming in to help so we can get going. Reservations are in forty-five, and traffic will take most of that," Pepper called as she moved through the suite.

Steve stood practically naked in his bathroom. His eyes went wide and he reached for the towel
he'd dropped on the floor after his shower, but Pepper in a hurry didn't leave time for wrapping up.

She pushed the bathroom door wide and Steve stood stiff and terrorized. Pepper paused to look at him, and her lips crimped in disapproval. The sweep of her eyes over him was lightning quick, but he still caught the glint of interest and the brief flare of her nostrils before she tamped it down. That little wisp of female appreciation was all he needed to bend his mind into a less defensive place. Steve relaxed from his clenched attempt to conceal himself and eased taller, into a more dominant stance. A guy had to, with a dame like Pepper, or she'd take off your parts and hand them to you.

Pepper watched his mental and physical adjustment and nodded in appreciation.

"That's much better. Remember Steve, carry it like it's government issue, because it is. This is you, and you don't have to hide. Now, are you going to fix that, or am I? We've got to get going, and you're not even dressed," she said.

"Fix what?" Steve rumbled, intentionally low.

His nerves were twanging at him, with a woman he respected standing there staring at him so blatantly, and his throat wanted to close up and squeak. Pepper sighed.

"Steve. Don't make me put my hand in your panties. You can't wear those angled up and to the side. You're supposed to be down and center. Hurry up. I'll get your slacks," she said.

"Down and-?" he protested.

"No arguing! Do it or I will! We're running late," Pepper shrilled at him while she went back to his bed to get the laid out clothes.

Steve scowled into a frown and adjusted himself as she'd said to. It looked showy and obscene. He didn't appreciate how Pepper was bossing him and rushing him, so he stood there with his arms crossed, looking sour when she came back with the rest of his clothes.

"Very nice. Now hurry! Please, Steve. The sooner everyone sees that we're out for some fun, the sooner the speculation about you brawling in public dies down. They'll be distracted with an entirely different story," she said.

Steve stood motionless like a statue and glared at Pepper and her hurry-up attitude.

"You think you're going to wrestle me into it like a four year old?" he asked, low and challenging.

Pepper stilled her attempts to hand him the clothes. Instinctively, she stepped back to give him some space and she set the clothing on the countertop. Her careful, deliberate motions soothed his anger just enough that he was able to reach for the garments in a controlled manner. One more minute of her prodding him into action, and he would have lost his dignity and done something he might regret, like yell at her, or physically remove her from his suite.

"I'm sorry. No. That wouldn't be very effective, would it? You're a little bit larger and stronger than me," Pepper smiled slightly, "I'm only trying to-"

"I know you're trying to help. But if you keep hounding me, the public isn't going to see the side of me you need them to see to fix this. Relax, Pepper. We'll get there in our own time. Go out and tell Tony I'm not about to spank his girl. I can hear him hovering and worrying from here," Steve said.

"I do not hover! And I don't worry! And if you even try to spank her, she'll-" Tony called from Steve's living room.
"I'm not you, Tony. She can't spank me if I don't let her. That's your place," Steve said.

Pepper clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a barked laugh. Her eyes crinkled with mirth and Steve was relieved that humor had broken the tension. Pepper nodded to him and left him alone to go soothe Tony's ruffled ego.

Steve looked at himself in the mirror with a frown one last time. He put on the clothes selected for him, but he only left the topmost shirt button undone. With the second one loose, too much skin showed around the top of his chest and collarbones. But, then he looked at it all together. The slacks were roomy and comfortable in the leg, though they clung to his waist and hips and did nothing to hide his ass. The shirt mostly covered his front, except that the underwear still made an embarrassing show. Steve decided that the second shirt button undone might serve to draw the eyes away from his pants. Yeah, it helped. Maybe he should trust Pepper more and not give her such a hard time. She knew things.

Tony and Pep were waiting for him by the elevator. Pepper looked at him with pride, as if Steve was a picture she'd painted. It made him feel good that, for whatever reason, Pepper approved, even if he didn't understand it.

Tony was too put out with him to do anything but bite his tongue. He smacked Steve on the back of the head, and Steve ducked his head down to accept the wordless reprimand. Tony was right. He shouldn't have argued with Pepper so much. She meant well, but it made him angry to be handled like that.

"Tony, you ruined it! He was all Dom and cocky, and doing so well, and now you've made him Captain Stevie again," Pepper fussed.

Both men gawked at her pouting tone, affronted.


"It's an affront to patriots everywhere," Tony agreed.

"Well, it's true. Here, let me fix it. Don't you bite me, Steven," Pepper warned him as she left Tony's side and stepped into his personal space.

"Wha?" Steve squawked.

"Pep," Tony cautioned her.

Pepper payed them no mind. She used one strong hand to press up under the back of Steve's shoulders, which forced him to shift his balance higher or stumble. The strength of her hand was eerie, even more so because she used her other one to cup his groin and move his hips back into a more squared power stance. Steve hissed a breath in through his teeth at the feel of the slacks shifting over his thin mesh underwear, and the heat and pressure of Pepper's grip.

"Whoa, Pep. Playing with fire, there. Hot is good, but-

"Hush, Tony," Pepper murmured.

"Steve," she continued, "You are subservient to no one tonight, even if you mess up. You own everything, and you apologize for nothing. Especially not to the press. Understand?"

She removed her hands from him and he understood what she wanted. She'd talked about him acting Dom and cocky, and she hadn't liked when he'd shown remorse to Tony for making him
worry about his girl. The guy his ma had taught him to be was kicking up a fuss inside Steve's head, but he silenced that little guy. She wanted him bold and unrepentant for the cameras. His whole look tonight was engineered for the show.

"I understand. Thank you," Steve said.

"Don't thank me," Pepper denied.

Steve nodded.

"Quit. You're making a monster," Tony said.

"It's only temporary, Tony. Just for-" Steve began.

Pepper shook her head at him.

"Noooo," Tony protested what Pepper was making Steve into, but he grinned.

Steve sighed, ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Steven Grant Rogers, you get rid of every ounce of bashful adorableness before this elevator reaches the lobby," Pepper glared lasers at him.

"Hm. I'm adorable?" Steve asked with utter sincerity.

He looked at her through sinfully lush lashes and pushed his bottom lip out thoughtfully. Pepper's schoolmistress glare intensified, then transformed into a smile when she saw the sly twinkle creep into Steve's eyes.

"Oh. You're better than I thought you were. This is going to work," she said happily.

She left the elevator with her head held proud at her student's skills. Steve strode out after her, looking just as commanding and sure of himself as Pepper wanted him to be, even in his shamefully showy outfit.

"Wait. Did the Captain just…?" Tony said, confused.

He hurried after Pepper.

"No. The Captain didn't. Steve Rogers did. I'm beginning to believe that the things Barnes told us about him are true. We've only been getting half of him. If that much," Pepper said.

She waited for Steve to make excuses or try to defend himself for his adorable, sly manipulation. He didn't. He walked tall and proud, and there was indeed something of the Captain in him. He was treating the evening's press show like a mission to be completed. Steve was taking the goal as seriously as the Captain did his work in the field. That gave her confidence that it was a done deal.

"Half of him? Steve, you've been holding back on us? For two years?" Tony asked.

"It's called responsibility, Tony. I do what I have to do. Did you really think I was that one dimensional?" Steve said.

"Vanilla. Vanilla sounds so much better than one dimensional," Tony said.
Chapter 27

They were going in two cars. Steve, Tony, Pepper, Estrella, and Sam were in one car. Nat, Clint, Bruce, Thor, and Jane followed in the other identical limo.

"Looking good, old man. You know what's weird?" Sam looked Steve over as he got into the car, then asked.

"What?" Steve wondered.

"You're still wearing old man clothes," Sam pointed out.

Unspoken was the loudly silent 'but.' Steve could feel what Pepper meant by her comment about sexy underthings. She'd expertly manipulated his mood and his appearance, then amped him up by putting her hand on him in the elevator. He didn't feel like an old man at all. Sam didn't need to say it. The heat in Estrella's eyes when she looked at him told him.

"Hey," he said to her quietly.

She was wearing her necklace, but she only smiled and fluttered her eyes at him shyly. Good God, he wanted to pull her onto his lap and…

He couldn't think about it or he was going to make a fool of himself in front of a car full of friends. What was she wearing, anyway? Her smoky eye makeup was still there from this morning, and so was her up spiked hair with the red tips. She was in some sort of pantsuit, but it wasn't like anything he'd seen before. She was lean and pretty, and the outfit clung to her in ways he thought she wouldn't be comfortable with. She'd always hidden so much, on the street. She wasn't comfortable. As he looked at her, she squirmed and tugged at the shoulders and low draped neckline of her clothes. Her arms moved as if to cover more of herself up.

"Eya. You don't have to wear that. Did Nat make you put it on? We can go back," Steve told her. Her discomfort made it so that nothing else mattered to him. The press and Captain America's image with the public could go hang. Pepper opened her mouth to remind Steve not to act the 'nice guy' tonight, but Tony touched her with caution in his eyes. There were some things with Steve that you didn't mess with. Taking care of Estrella was one of those things.

"S'fine," Estrella whispered, "I don't want to go back."

She was saying she was okay with it, but she was still acting hesitant. Steve moved across to the opposite seat which Sam and Estrella shared. Smoothly, he scooped her into his lap.

"Look at what Pepper's got me wearing. It's worse than the shorts and sandals, huh?" he said.

"No. It's good. Really good. But I don't like so much skin where people can see," Estrella said.

Sam shook his head and let it fall back against the seat. When the two of them got to talking, it was too cutesy to be real, but it was. He didn't know if they were the best of kindergarten playmates, or if they were all going to asphyxiate on the sexual tension. Or both, which was near intolerable.

"Neither do I," Steve murmured.

Steve got sucked into the same sense of cynical comradery he'd shared with Estrella when they'd first met. Her eyes flashed over both of their outfits, and around at the interior of the limo and
rolled especially hard at Tony. He completely understood. The world they lived in was unbelievable.

"And then they're gonna sit us in a fancy restaurant with appetizers and bread and soup and salad and three courses and dessert and coffee afterwards, with wine or drinks all through it. Can you believe this muck? It makes me wanna bring it all out in the street, or take some over to Bucky, or something," Steve muttered to her, but he was smiling.

Traffic was tight, and Steve tried to pretend to pay attention to it through the heavily tinted windows, but Estrella's weight and presence kept drawing him in. She wasn't leaning against him, just perching, with his hand lightly touching her lower back. Her pantsuit had flared legs over her pointy boots, which barely peeked out of the hems. Red bled up the legs in wispy streaks that seemed to contrast and compliment the red in her black hair. From the knees up, her outfit was creamy white. The legs were loose, but the outfit hugged her from hips to bosom, where it draped and lay in slinky, luxurious folds. Her neck, shoulders, and arms were mostly bare, which was making her antsy.

Skin. All that smooth, tawny skin. He wanted to touch. Anywhere. Everywhere.

Steve choked on a suppressed groan of want. Tony chuckled, but they ignored him. Steve lifted his hand and touched a finger to a hard gelled tip of her hair.

"Don't touch. You'll make it fuzzy," Estrella told him.

She batted at his hand and felt to see if he messed up her hair. The gesture was girly and so characteristic of her habitual fussiness with him. Steve was tempted to mess up all her hair just to have her make that grumpy, indulgent face at him some more.

"Uh. It's messed," she said.

Indeed, he saw where the pressure of his finger had ruined the sharpness of one of her spikes. Steve licked his fingers and twisted the tuft of hair back into a point. Estrella grimaced at him.

"Great. Now I have spit in my hair," she said.

"Sorry. Ever since this morning, I've wanted to know what it felt like," Steve said.

Sam guffawed in the seat beside them, and Steve poked an elbow into his friend's side.

"Stop apologizing," Pepper and Estrella said together.

"Alright, alright," Steve droned.

"Estrella. I need Steve to be sort of an unapologetic, sexy asshole tonight. You can do romance and giggles, but not him. He's got a role to play for the cameras," Pepper interjected.

"I know. Natasha told me. Why does everyone care that you beat on Bucky, anyway? They should trust you and see that there's no video of you actually killing him, because if there was video of that, it would be all over the place. It's not like anyone thinks you make lace doilies for a living. What's the scandal about?" Estrella asked.

"They're used to seeing me either acting officially as part of the Avengers, or kissing babies and marching in Veteran's day parades. My discussion with Buck was… unsanctioned. Nobody likes seeing me off the leash. It makes them nervous, since we took down Shield. It makes them wonder if I might someday get a mind of my own," Steve explained.
"That's disturbingly astute," Tony said.

"If you ever do want to retire Captain America so you can be unsanctioned Steve all the time, I know how to-" Estrella offered him happily.

Steve pressed a finger to her lips. He'd gone far too serious for their joking conversation.

"Eya, there's talk that even friends don't want to hear. Some of us have a circumstantial record of changing sides. You don't want to paint a target on yourself in front of Jarvis and everybody. It's better left unsaid, but I appreciate the sentiment," Steve told her.

Estrella's eyes shifted nervously around.

"I was just joking," she whispered.

"Nothing seems to fly on patient confidentiality around here anyway, so I'm just gonna say this," Sam spoke up, "You two have your own thing going, and that's good. There's no natural privacy in our lives, not even from each other, and that's not so good. Tony, you're used to that, but the rest of us aren't. Steve. Estrella. You have to learn that some things need to wait to be said or done without the rest of the gang as witness. Like what you just said, things shared in innocent confidence can come back around to make you regret. We're all in the honeymoon love-fest with each other. But be careful. Think of Obadiah Stane."

"There's a pleasant memory. Thanks, Sam," Tony said dryly.

"You think I could forget? With Shield being Hydra, and my best friend trying to kill me? The nation I died for is being eaten up from within and transformed into something I don't recognize anymore. I'm all dolled up right now to go dance for the public's approval when I already bleed for them near every week. You think I don't remember betrayal well enough? Think I need a refresher right this fucking moment?" Steve bit out.

Sam put up his hands. Steve's tense, still posture was way too ominous for those who knew him well to be comfortable trapped in a car with him. His use of language in front of the ladies had Sam and Tony exchanging glances.

Estrella turned to Steve and buried herself against him. She pulled his hands to her bare upper back and rubbed her face along his neck. He released a pained breath and tried hard not to clutch at her with the angry strength in his hands. She'd given him the touch of her skin for comfort, and it dulled his tension into something less volatile.

Sam, Pepper, and Tony saw the way that Estrella's touch eased him. The tight anger bled out of Steve's body while Estrella encouraged his touch. Pepper looked away from the two of them, trying to give them a moment. Sam seemed to feel likewise. Tony observed avidly.

Pepper tugged at his hand and made a long-suffering face at his voyeurism.

"If they're gonna put on a show, I'm gonna watch. Everyone's always watched me. It's my turn," Tony said.

Estrella stopped petting Steve and gave Tony the evil eye. She was still sitting sideways across his lap, so it was easy to give Tony dirty looks. She didn't like the way he was watching Steve. There was heated appreciation there, almost like he was looking at a woman. She wanted to hide Steve when he was like this. He looked so appealing tonight, and his temper and attitude made him irresistible to the eyes. It was like the private parts of him were exposed, and she wanted to cover him up and protect his dignity. Steve wouldn't want to be ogled like this, not by his friends, not by
a man. Steve had his head leaned back and his eyes closed, so he wasn't seeing Tony, anyway.

Tony's curious eyes and his brash observation served to cool off Steve and Estrella's display of affection toward each other. Steve eased her back out along his thigh, away from the full body contact they both wanted.

"I shouldn't have gotten angry with you, Sam. I know I'm being an ass tonight. I'm-

"Don't apologize!" Pepper and Estrella snapped at him.

"Rragh!" Steve growled back at them in frustration.

"Hang on, big guy. Thor's not here to hold your hand, and I don't have the suit. We don't need a Cap-out here in a confined space with soft targets," Tony cautioned.

"I'm sorry you're so frustrated. If you can't keep it together, we should cancel and go back home," Pepper said.

"I'm fine. Just stop complaining about every breath I take. Pepper, I'll put on a show if you say I need to, but you gotta give me room to breathe. I'm not a puppet," Steve said.

Estrella rubbed her hand along his arm. Steve took a calming breath, then eased her off of him and onto the seat. He slipped back across to sit on the other seat. Estrella pouted at him. He agreed. He didn't want to leave her alone, either. It wasn't bare skin, but Steve touched their shins together in the foot space. It was better than nothing.

Pepper looked him over while Steve slumped grumpy and agitated beside her. He crossed his arms and stared at nothing. The stupid underwear made a spectacle of him, and his veins and muscles were prominent because of his agitation. His skin felt hot, so he was probably rosy like a fuckin kid.

He'd been angry lately. He'd been horny lately. Right now he was both, and it was difficult to be civil. Pepper was staring, speechless. Estrella was trying not to stare, but failing. Tony frowned slightly as he watched the women. Sam was resting his face in his hand.

"Steve. Be a sweetheart. Sit up and act like your usual prim self before the ladies maul you. That might be a lot of fun to watch, but now is not the time," Tony said.

"This is what Pepper wants me to be. Right, Pep?" Steve asked.

"It's a bit… much," Pepper squeaked.

"Get me out of this car," Steve said.

"Right now? We're almost there," Pepper said.

Tony noticed the tight simmer of control Steve was hanging onto. This was so not good. He rapped his knuckles against the glass to get the driver to pull over. They were stopped in traffic anyway. Steve didn't wait for the car to get curbside. Soon as he heard the door locks disengage, he was out on the street in the evening air.

Tony got out after him. He looked to the other car and shook his head. Steve and his damn long legs were already getting away through the crowd on the sidewalk. He did his best not to shove into people in his haste to catch up. A little maneuvering and quick legwork had him slipping into place beside Steve.
"Shut it, Stark," Steve said.

"I didn't say anything," Tony said.

They walked past the restaurant they had reservations to, and Tony dug something small from his pocket. He clipped it to his shirt collar, then spoke.

"Pep, you guys go in and get seated. We're gonna walk it off. We'll be back before appetizers get to the table," he said.

"Do you require surveillance or assistance?" Jarvis answered him.

"No. Scram, J. We're just walking," Tony answered.

Steve had energy to burn, and Tony kept up while he burned it.

"Maybe you should leave for a while. Go put your head in a different place. Take some vacation time," Tony suggested when Steve's brow finally started to uncrimp.

"Maybe," Steve agreed.

They both knew it was an impossible idea. Things with Hydra in D.C. were shifting and moving. Steve had to be close by and ready to act. He appreciated that Tony was trying to help him daydream the stress away, but he couldn't actually run off.

"If you're not gonna take any time off, then something needs to change. I know you can't… with Estrella. I know some people. Women, I mean. I'm sure Jarvis still has contact information. They can be discreet, if the price is right. You should think about it," Tony suggested.

"I'm way past thinking. I'll do the song and dance for a little while tonight. But I need you to keep Pepper off my case. She's like…" Steve paused for words.


"Yeah. But she's about to make me lose it. We don't need a domestic dispute on the news, to bookend right along with my discussion with Buck earlier. Look at these fucks, already," Steve said.

Tony glanced around and noted the way people were starting to notice him and Steve, especially. He put a friendly hand on Steve's shoulder and tugged him around to head back to the restaurant.

"Look. I know you're struggling. I've been through it different times, for different reasons. All you have to do is hold it together until you're alone. Then you can go ape-shit all you want. Got it?" he advised.

"Yeah, I got it," Steve said.

They were walking back to the restaurant they'd passed up, and Steve and Tony were making their best effort to paste on pleasant public faces, because a few people were pointing and had their phones out.

"Let's review, because I know you're dealing with a lot, and it might be messy in there," Tony murmured low, and indicated Steve's head with a finger.

"The news suggested you might be acting as a lone agent, unsanctioned, like you said. So, we mingle together, flash some smiles, and have a good time. Team unity. Cap's not crazy, and all that.
Don't fight anybody," Tony's eyes flickered down to his pants, "Don't fuck anybody, and we'll be alright."

"But that's all I wanna do," Steve told him honestly.

"I can see that. But you can't do it here. Later. Not here. God, I can't believe I have to coach you on this like you're my teenage son. I'm so glad I'm not a parent," Tony said, then he introduced himself to the hostess and they were ushered to a large table in the back of the restaurant to join their party.

Tony sat beside Pepper, and Steve sat between Clint and Estrella. It was a popular place. A group of musicians was playing Mediterranean music, people were dancing, and the wait staff was moving around a lot. Steve shifted his shoulders as people walked behind him. His hearing was on alert for anything. He didn't like having his back to part of the room, but somebody had to take that position, and he was honest enough to admit that right now, it should be him.

Natasha prodded his leg under the table. He looked up from his food and she gave him a fake smile and laughed at something Sam was saying. Right. They were supposed to be jolly. Steve focused more on his team and tried hard to ignore his body.

He thought he smiled at the appropriate times, and the tried to laugh and look relaxed, especially when he was aware of phones aimed at them. Estrella set her arm on the table beside his and rubbed the back of her knuckles along his hand. He smiled in thanks to her. It helped some. But having her next to him, with all that skin begging to be touched, kissed, licked…

Steve grit his teeth. He didn't like the way Thor was acting, either. Since he'd come to the table with Tony, Thor looked at him only in glances, or not at all. It wasn't like him. The big Asgardian was always direct and unflinching, especially if something was wrong. Jane was meeting his eyes more often, and that was just strange.

Why was Thor making it weird? Steve understood what had happened in his gym. Did Thor think he was gay, because he'd allowed it to happen? If he did, then what did that make Thor? This was bullshit. Why did it have to be a thing? Everyone thought he was a delicate little man who couldn't handle things. He was fine, and the worried looks from around the table were starting to snag his temper the wrong way.

Nat prodded him again, hard, but she didn't look at him this time. She smiled and nodded at something Pepper was saying. Steve set down his water glass with a thunk.

"I may be on edge, but you're all making it worse. Quit with the worried looks and the fake laughs. I'm fine. And before I get to 'not fine', I'll leave. Suck it up. Quit looking to me like a bunch of worried nuns," Steve told them low and precise.

The waiter was away, and nobody else was listening, unless they had a device Jarvis couldn't detect.

"Alright. You're the boss man. We take our cues from you, and your cues are all wunked tonight. It's like we're at work and you're shouting gibberish into the comms. Tone down the psycho caveman vibes and we'll all settle," Sam said.

Clint nodded. Bruce's calm smile added his agreement. Thor looked at him with some kind of remorse. Steve sat back and eased out a calming breath. The overhead ceiling fan circulated cool, soothing air against his neck into the open collar of his shirt.

Pepper aimed her finger pre-emptively at Steve and pointed firmly. Yeah, he remembered. No
apologizing.


She grabbed his hand and stood up. The dance floor wasn't too crowded, and it looked like half the people on it didn't really know what they were doing, so Steve went with her. The song was bouncy and cheerful, and most of the men were sort of clapping and stepping while the women did fancier things and twirled around. Steve loved the eager smile on Estrella's face. For her, he would try. They were supposed to be having fun, anyway.

Some guys to his right were doing a thing with their legs while they clapped along with the music. It was easy to copy, so Steve did that. Estrella didn't have a plan. She danced happily and he reached out to touch her or help her twirl around when she came close. There were some people talking about him at a table next to the dance floor, but Steve ignored it. The song ended, and Estrella bumped into him and laughed. His hand felt good on her back.

Apparently people were curious about them as a couple, because Steve heard several phones snap pics of them while he smiled at Estrella. Pepper should be pleased. He would look happy because right now, he was. Gossip would speculate about the girl he was with. Some would say nasty things. He could disregard that, as long as it wasn't too bad. He wondered if anyone would link her with the scruffy girl from the coffee shop.

The next song was a couple's dance, and that was easy, too. All they had to do was hold each other like everyone else was doing, and amble around the room. Every now and then, the dancers would shout some word toward the ceiling along with the music, and that was fun by the time he could anticipate and copy it. Estrella was laughing at him. As long as she kept her feet in close to center so he could move them around without danger of stepping on her, he could relax.

Steve loved touching Estrella and moving with her to the music. It was freeform and simple. No one was being critical and watching him for missteps. Mentally, he thanked Pepper for choosing such a place. He didn't know how she knew exactly what kind of dancing happened here, and that this would be an easy start for him, but he wanted to hug her for it. Again, he was sorry for giving her a hard time.

He was a huge, throbbing grump, and the ladies didn't deserve his attitude. As the song came to a close, he looked down at Estrella.

"No. I don't want to hear it. You're sorry for everything, all the time," she leaned against him and up, "You shouldn't apologize for being yourself. Not to me, anyway. I like who you are."

"Even when I'm being a dumb animal?" he asked at her ear.

"As long as you're not about to hurt anybody, then yes, even then," Estrella smiled.

Carefully, Steve drew her to him so that their middles were pressed together. Something different was happening on the dance floor. Everybody was clearing off, and the band switched to a more technical, dramatic song. A traditionally costumed couple took the center of the floor, and Steve paid enough attention to get out of the way. Estrella relaxed against him, and they turned sideways to the floor so they could both watch.

It was an intense, erotic dance, something like Spanish flamenco. When the male dancer touched the woman's gracefully displayed knee and pulled her toward him, Steve's body reacted to the primal suggestion of the move. Estrella glanced up and giggled at him nervously. His lips opened to apologize, but she shook her head at him, then turned her attention back to the dancers.
The couple stalked each other across the floor, the woman leading and then the man. He spooned behind her and they swayed back and forth, then burst into a flurry of complimentary steps. It was like watching a heated argument with bouts of makeup sex. Steve could feel his pulse hammering in empathy. He'd love to have a strong woman to fight with and to love with. Gently, he brushed his fingers between Estrella's shoulders. She could never be that for him, and it still stung. He wanted it.

When he looked down to see if Estrella was happy or bored, he found her looking up at him instead of at the dancers. She wanted it too, and it would be harsh to explain to her why they couldn't. It wasn't her fault she was fragile. It was only fair to tell her they would never work out before that look in her eyes got any more sad and longing than it already was.

The song ended, and other people clapped while the dancers bowed and smiled. The band put on some recorded slow songs while they went on break. People hurried to the dance floor, crowding it more than it had been earlier.

"Enough with the eye-sex. Here, swap," Tony said beside them.

He held out a hand to Estrella, and Pepper moved to take her place with Steve.

"Ah! Just do it," Tony cocked his head at Steve when he started to protest and reached for Estrella. Tony danced Estrella away into the crowd on the dance floor, and the only reason Steve didn't go after was because Estrella was smiling at Tony. She liked how well he danced. She was happy.

"Come on. If you don't dance with me, there are about fifty women in here who will take my place," Pepper said.

Steve looked at her, and her eyebrow arched up, daring him to apologize.

Instead, he took hold of her and led them onto the floor. Pepper was a wonderful dancer, and her strong, graceful body unobtrusively tugged him around. All he had to do was get the cadence of his steps right by flickering his eyes around and observing other dancers. It was a waltz. Easy. He could do this. Pepper let him watch, learn, and practice. By the time they'd gone around the floor once, his enhanced ability to pick up on physical skills had him feeling confident.

"Thanks a million, Pepper. I thought dancing would be harder. This place is great," he told her.

"I don't know why you were concerned. You're a fast learner at everything. I think you were anxious more about the partner than the dancing itself," she said kindly.

There was a twinkle in her eyes that acknowledged his constant state of arousal this evening, but she was classy enough to say nothing about it. The waltz was close, and he was truly leading now, not just being pulled along. The dance pushed him at her with every step. He thought maybe Pepper wasn't doing much to avoid the contact, because she could keep more distance between them if she really wanted to by stepping back an instant sooner.

Steve watched the better dancers on the floor, observing some of the personalization and flourishes they used. He wouldn't do any fancy stuff. He wasn't ready for that, but he felt comfortable with the basic waltz.

"Why?" he asked Pepper lightly.

"Why, what?" she asked.
"Why so close? Won't Tony mind? If he was dancing this close with Estrella, I'd-" Steve clarified neutrally.

He didn't want to reject or insult her. He liked and respected Pepper when she wasn't being so bossy that she angered him.

"Because Tony understands. We're in love, Steve. Not dead. He trusts me. I trust him. Well, mostly. He's still an idiot sometimes. And I told you, this might get a little personal. You're an attractive man, Steve. This is normal. A girl can be flattered instead of insulted by it, you know, even if it's not about me," she explained quietly.

"Besides, if you appear exclusive with Estrella, that will feed more fires we might have to put out. If you haven't already done enough damage with the eye-sex. Did you see how many people were taking pics of you before Tony and I cut in?" she said.

"No more lectures, Pepper. Please. Just tell me what you want," he said.

"Dance with Natasha. Maybe with Jane, if Thor can stop acting strange. If there's anyone else here you can tolerate, dance with them too. Don't spend every moment salivating over Estrella," she said.

"Why not?" he asked crossly.

Steve guided her carefully around an obstruction on the dance floor. It felt good to grip and push and not worry so much about her feet. Pepper was sturdy, despite her slimness. She followed his guidance effortlessly, and something about that heated his base brain again. Tony and Estrella passed by alongside them, and they all smiled politely at each other.

"You like to lead," Pepper noted from his resurgence of interest against her tummy.

"It's what I do," Steve told her simply.

"You're good at it," she observed, "You should explore that."

Steve cocked an eyebrow at her, then looked over her head. He wasn't certain what she meant. The waltz ended, and Steve gave her a little bow, as he saw the other couples doing. Tony and Estrella joined them.

Another rollicking, fun song was next. Thor and Jane, Natasha and Clint joined them on the floor. Steve knew he was really off his game, because now Darcy was here, dancing with Sam. He hadn't noticed her arrival.

This was another song where the men stood around the outside, and this time, the women danced for a bit, then moved to the next partner to their left. Steve was fine with the simple moves required of him. He smiled with Pepper and Estrella, then grinned in appreciation to the spice Natasha brought to the song. He laughed with Lewis, who had her own flavor of gypsy-like moves. Jane was so awkward and earnest that he smiled kindly and encouragingly. Then, it got weird.

A blonde woman was nearly hyperventilating because she'd just danced with Thor, Sam, Hawkeye, Iron Man, and now Captain America. He plastered a polite smile on and was glad when she passed to the next man. After that was a dark woman who really knew how to dance. He had no clue who she was, but she was athletic and not out of breath. He didn't have to pretend to enjoy partnering with her. As she passed on, she dragged lingering fingers across his chest. He shivered and smiled at the next woman.
She was a chubby brunette, and all smiles. He liked curves on a woman, and her good humor was infectious. Her thinly concealed leering was tricky to manage without going into rudeness or bashfulness. The thin blonde woman after her was all handsy, and he had to reach out and guide her hands away as she continually tried to grope him in a southward direction. He smelled alcohol on her, but she was sober enough to dance.

Mercifully, the song ended. Soon as the blonde woman was away, Tony laughed beside him.

"Was she trying to feel you up, too?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. She did. It's all in fun, Cap. Too bad your fuse is too short to handle it," Tony told him.

"My fuse isn't short," Steve insisted.

"Metaphorically speaking, my friend. We can all tell you don't have any lack of… fuse," Tony teased.

Steve laughed a little, and then Natasha was there to partner him as the band picked up their instruments again. He looked around for Estrella, and found her with Sam. That was good. Sam knew to be careful with her.

"Way to make a girl feel like chopped liver, Steve," Nat told him.

He started to say something, then shut his mouth. Nat smiled at him and her eyebrow arched subtly. The witch. She was trying to trip him up and make him apologize when he wasn't supposed to. Practice. It was always challenge and practice with her.

"I like chopped liver," he said.

"Liar," she smiled and wrinkled her nose at him.

"Yeah, but I'm getting better. If you didn't personally know that I hate chopped liver, would you have known I was lying?" Steve asked.

Nat listened to the opening notes of the music and stepped closer to Steve, into his arms.

"It's difficult to say. Listen, Steve. Do you want to sit this one out? Take a break?" she asked.

Steve took note of her offer. The music sounded strange. Sort of stumbling and hesitant. Many couples had left the floor, including the rest of their friends. Nat was giving him a chance that she thought he might need. Something about the patronizing, slightly superior offer rankled at him.

"Nah. I'm good," Steve said.

"I warned you. If you start fucking it up, I'm pushing you off the floor and you're going to let me," Nat warned him.

Steve nodded. He listened to the strange music and picked out a pattern. It was a beat of three, a pause and a lilt, then a beat of four. It sounded middle-eastern. Sensual. The dozen or so other couples appeared to be doing their own thing, freestyle. It couldn't be so bad, with Nat to help him. She taught him a lot of stuff. She could teach this, too.

Natasha smirked at him, then tugged him out more onto the floor. He could hear people taking pics of them already. He forgot about that as Natasha put his hand at her waist. He glanced around one last time and saw the other couples doing some pretty exotic things. No rules, then. They could
make it up as they went.

Natasha waited for the pause and lilt, then arced back, putting her weight into his hand. Her shifting her foot forward between his telegraphed what she’d been about to do and Steve shifted too, sliding his leg along the inside of hers. Easily, he supported her as she arched and swayed beautifully, then snapped back up on the next beat. Steve double-timed an advance on her, and she retreated, moving in an alluring, female way that she rarely used in the training room. He understood. It was like the flamenco-style couple who had danced before.

Her hand on his chest pressed him into a halt which he obeyed because it was a dance, not a fight. Like a fight, though, he didn't give ground easily. He bent over her firm hand and made a quick nip with his teeth at the spot behind her ear. There was some noise in the crowd, but he tried to ignore it. This was fun. More than fun.

He wrapped his hand around her neck, set his feet and gripped her hip, then spun her until she fell into his other arm. She undulated smoothly up and into the next set of beats, which she accented with a mesmerizing shimmy of her hips. Steve followed close behind, stalking her along the dance floor with is back arched and his hand around on her tummy.

They swayed together through the pause and lilt, then Steve snapped her away from him with a spin of his arm that would have had any other woman crumpled on the floor. Natasha spun the momentum aside and pressed against him in a rush. They stepped through several beats of the drum, then Natasha slunk around behind him. He reached back to press her close so he could feel what she wanted him to do. If they weren't touching, he might miss her cues and fumble.

Her hand gripped his hip, her knee pushed his leg forward along with their weight. Then, her fist in his hair pulled his head and body back into an arch that only a strong man could support on the strength of one leg. Steve gripped her thigh behind him because it seemed the thing to do. People made some more noise, and he grinned as Nat tugged his hair on a hard drum beat, then pushed him back upright, and forward.

Steve took the handling smoothly because he could feel her intent each time she was going to move. The drum beat got harder and a little faster, and a few couples gave up and left the floor. Steve was steady grinning now at the challenge of keeping up with Natasha and thinking of challenges of his own to throw at her. It was like sparring, but with a heavy splash of sex. When he got a little too rough, she gave him a look that reminded him to keep it tame for the public. The music helped him remember this was a dance.

The last minute of the song was a flurry of advance and capture, evade and accompany. She balanced his weight, then he balanced hers. There was a grace and nuance to it unlike the brutal force of fighting. Her skin showed red in a few places where he had gripped too hard, but Nat could take it. She was grinning as wickedly as he was. His blood was up, and sweat slicked his skin.

The music, heavy with drums, ended with them face to face, teeth bared and panting. His fist was in Nat's hair this time, his thigh aggressively between hers, and she was off balance, but trusting him to hold her while all her weight rested on one of her toes. The other was dug into the back of his calf muscle.

The crowd in the restaurant erupted into hoots and roars and clapping. Natasha and Steve fell apart laughing. He high-fived her and she hip-checked him hard. They walked off the dance floor to where their friends waited. There had been only two other couples still dancing by the end of the song. Steve tried not to think of that, and all the video that was probably hitting the internet now.

"That was amazing!" Estrella thrilled at him.
Her eyes were ablaze with joy and she clapped her hands and bounced before hugging him hard. Steve hugged her back and winced as he started to pat her back too hard. He eased up just in time. Estrella wiggled excitedly against him and pushed away. She made a face at getting his sweat on her, but smiled at him anyway.

"I didn't know you could dance like that! I thought you couldn't dance?" she asked.

"I didn't know I could either. Turns out, it's something like fighting. Nat, you were great. Thanks for the cues. I could have messed that up so many ways," Steve said to Natasha.

Thor was smiling at him broadly. Sam shook his head and rolled his eyes. The rest of them looked sort of quiet and shocked. Pepper was thinking hard, not necessarily looking pleased.

"I knew you would do well if you had the right mindset. That was impressive, Steve. Especially for a beginner," Natasha complimented him.

"Impressive? That was nearly pornographic. Captain America has just gone from scrappy street brawling to public indecency, all in one day," Tony said.

"Don't be so American, Anthony. Dance is an art form. It's not indecent. It's an allusion to life. Like a painting," Natasha said.

"Like a porn painting. Pepper? Do we own YouTube? How much of it do we own?" Tony asked her.

"Natasha is right. Relax. As long as Steve dances with Estrella next, and makes it something slow and sweet, it will be good press. And we don't own YouTube," Pepper said.

"Our friends are here," Thor said dryly.

Steve could hear them. The press had arrived. Not huge, fully equipped crews, but a few discreet journalists were working the crowd, getting comments and pics and video links. A particular blonde journalist was headed for where the Avengers stood. Pepper pushed Steve toward Estrella. He took the hint. He pressed Estrella to him and moved them out onto the floor.

Estrella looked at the woman who knew to approach Pepper with her microphone and questions. She looked at Steve, worried. He moved them step by step along in the simple, swaying dance.

"Are you worried someone will have pictures of you?" Steve asked her.

She didn't answer, but her silence was enough. It told him that she didn't want to seem weak and frightened, but she didn't want to lie to him, either.

"You're with me, Eya. Nobody gets near you now, unless you want them to," he assured her.

She shook her head and he could see her switch topics in her mind.

"What was it like to dance like that? Will you teach me? Or should Natasha teach me so I can dance with you?" Estrella asked in a rush.

Her smile was back and he was happy to let her forget about the press.

"It was like fighting. Or flying. Like solving a puzzle. I had to use my mind just as much as my body. It was hard to not use combat moves. Different," Steve told her.

"You looked amazing, Steve. I'm jealous, but I know nobody can dance like Natasha. Especially
not with you, so I have to enjoy the beauty and put the jealousy aside. If I want to see you dance, that is. And I do," she babbled.

"Jealous? Eya, you've got no need to be jealous. Nat and me... it's work. I mean, it was great fun and it was flirty, which is even more fun, but it went well because of what we do. I can't dance like this with Nat," he said.

Steve jostled her in his arms gently. His steps were gliding more confidently now that he'd been dancing for a while. He wasn't afraid to step on her feet anymore. She looked at him questioningly, and Steve slid his arms more securely around her so that his hands clasped and rested below the small of her back. Her arms were pushed up around his neck, and Estrella melded herself to him and laid her face on his chest.

Estrella knew he couldn't dance with Natasha like this because this was how Steve was with her. Not with Natasha. He and Nat were partners. Combatants sometimes. What they had was strong and deep, but it was harsh. Estrella's heart warmed at the thought that Steve wanted her to have the softer part of himself. The part that he couldn't offer to Natasha without her eating it. She sighed.

"I love you," she said.

"Shh. Don't say that. You can't. We need to talk," Steve told her at her ear.

"You don't get to tell me who I can love and when. Don't be so big on yourself. I didn't say I was in love with you. I just love you, so shut up," Estrella fussed at him. He could feel her head trying to cock at him with attitude as she said the words. He smiled.

"Alright. I love you too, then. But I'm not good right now. I don't think I can be in love now. I'd mess it up because I'm stupid," he said.

"No. You're dumb. A dumb animal, remember. I should put a shock collar on you," she snarked at him.

Steve laughed as he danced with her. They'd be a collared pair.

"Would you make one for me?" he asked, and he brought his hand up to finger at her butterfly necklace briefly.

Estrella made a little whine in her throat that he didn't understand the meaning of.

"What?" he wondered.

"Nothing. It's just.. I don't know. Something," Estrella said.

She was embarrassed, he could tell. She was looking at him like that again. Like she wanted to kiss him. And maybe do other things. Steve sighed and squeezed her more tightly for a moment. He pushed her head back onto his chest and rested his chin carefully aside from her hair spikes.

"Why does that thought make you want me?" he asked.

It felt daring to ask something like that directly. To face how she felt. How they felt. Even though they couldn't act on it.

"Collars, Steve. Not necklaces. Collars. I could put a collar on you and train you like my dog. Are you really that stupid? How is that not hot?" she asked him.
She kept her head down because she didn't want him to see her biting her lip in frustration.

"Because I won't submit. You can't make me," Steve said.

Estrella chuckled and patted him on the back of the neck.


"Sure, Steve," Estrella smiled against this shirt.

She didn't need to argue with him now. She could remind him of this conversation later.

The song blended from one slow song into the next. They kept dancing. Steve must have been thinking of what she said about collars and submitting. Thinking about possibilities. In a moment, he was throbbing hard against her. He grunted.

"Shhh," she shushed him.

Estrella rubbed the back of his neck soothingly. Poor man. He was so naïve. But his mind was keen enough to follow through on an idea if she fed him the first crumbs of it.

"Your voice," Steve whispered.

She nodded.

"Not just that. But, don't think about it too much. You're too far away from your nightstand drawer," she teased him.

"Eya! You've been snooping? That's not fair," he frowned down at her, but there was a little smile trying to tug at the corners of his lips.

"Not snooping. Cleaning. You should have heard my aunties talk. Housekeepers know everything," she told him.

"I don't like my business out where people can talk about it. You see how it is tonight. I don't have much that's private. Help me out?" he asked.

"I won't tell anyone, silly. People are mean. I don't like it when they're mean to you," she said.

Steve stared at her. She made him feel so good. In so many ways. She was sweet, and caring, and fun. His eyes lingered on her lips until she made a goofy face at him. The song changed, and Steve noticed someone standing expectantly at his side.

"Lewis. Hi," he said, trying to sound nice.

"Hey. I can see that you want to be busy, but Pepper says I should cut in," Darcy said.

Steve looked around. Thor was nearby waiting to dance with Estrella. She smiled at Steve and went shyly to Thor. Darcy stepped up to him and the music seemed to be stuck on slow songs for the time being.

Steve hissed in a breath and grit his teeth. Lewis had great tits, and she wasn't afraid to use them.

"Hi," she said, then "Wow!"

Darcy laughed and snuggled closer.

"Are you part starfish?" Steve asked her.

"Oh, relax. Pepper seems to think that you need to spread your attention. She showed me your dance with Natasha. Which was intense, by the way. But then you're so in the zone and sweet on your chica. Share the love. I wonder what you've got for me?" she told him.

Surprisingly, Steve found himself able to relax with Darcy, despite the fact that her breasts pressing against his ribs and smooshing around while they moved was side railing his mind into nothing sensible. The song they danced to was a little faster, but still the hobble along sort. It had just enough pep to make Darcy's body jiggle distractingly.

"This isn't love," Steve told her with a smirk.

"It's teen love. My bits are excited, so I luuurve you," Darcy teased, then laughed.

Steve couldn't help but laugh too. Darcy was warm and soft. He gathered her closer.

"Maybe you should see a doctor about that?" Darcy asked.

"I'm gonna go see the doctor right after this," Steve grumbled.

"Really?"

"No."

"Oh. But maybe you should. Or, I could help. Seriously, I know we're joking, but I'd be willing to help," Darcy told him.

"Thanks, doll. It's tempting," Steve said.

"But you won't," Darcy frowned, "Why not?"

"Because this is nothing, and I'm not going to use a nice girl," Steve told her straight.

"Aww. I didn't know you thought I was nice," Darcy said.

"I don't think you're nice. I think other people think that you're nice. I take their word for it," Steve argued.

"Why do we hate each other?" Darcy asked.

"Because we want to fuck like minks, and we're good people, so we know we'd get our feelings involved, and we also know that our personalities clash, so it wouldn't work out, so we lash out to keep from fucking and making things painful and awkward for everyone we work and live with?"

"You're smarter than you look. But that doesn't explain you and Natasha," Darcy said.

Steve couldn't believe the conversation he was having. It was like walking around balls-out in public. It was shocking and exciting all at once. Kind of like jumping out of an airplane in a thunderstorm.

"The difference between me and Nat, and me and you is that you haven't earned my respect. Everyone has my respect at first, but you keep tearing it down. I want to like you, but you're like a constant slap in the face. Why do you do that?" Steve asked.
"Because I'm terrified of liking you if you're ever sweet to me. Like you are to your chica. It all circles back to that painful, awkward eventuality. It's better that you stay mad and keep acting like a dick toward me," Darcy explained.

"I see. That makes sense. But maybe you shouldn't have told me," Steve warned with a little smile. He only glanced down. He was trying his best to avoid connecting the feeling of Darcy's lush body to the sight and sound of her. He didn't need that kind of mental trigger.

"But you're a nice guy, other than how I provoke you. You won't try to manipulate me into your bed like every other douchebag," Darcy reasoned.

"I don't need a bed, Lewis. And I don't need to manipulate. Keep slapping me. It's a good plan. Why can't we shut up?" Steve asked her curiously.

"Same reason. Are you scared? I'm scared," Darcy said nervously.

"Don't be scared. Unless it's yourself you don't trust?" Steve said.

He gave up trying not to look at her. Her top showed magnificent, creamy cleavage, and her eyes were sinful yet scared. So tempting.

"Steve, you're trembling. It's seriously impressive, because you're managing to dance and talk at the same time. I think you're making a wet spot on my dress. Shouldn't you be concerned about that?" Darcy asked.

"Yeah. I probably should. I'd apologize, but Pepper won't let me. Darcy, I need to go or something bad's gonna happen. Could you please make sure Estrella gets home okay?" Steve said, low and calm. Too calm.

"You're not thinking clearly. She's with the Avengers. They're not going to leave her roadside. She'll be fine," Darcy said.

"Damn it, Darcy, I have to go. Promise me."

"I like it when you call me Darcy," she said.

She found herself unwilling to comply with his wishes, because the feel of Captain America trembling and hard against her was unbelievable. She knew as soon as she said what he wanted to hear, he'd be gone. He was already marking a path to the exit with his eyes.

"Lewis!" he barked at her, and grabbed her arms firmly.

The out of control look in his eyes was thrilling and frightening, like his hard hands bruising her arms. He stepped aside because they'd stopped dancing.

"I promise I'll see that Estrella goes home safe with Nat," Darcy said.

Steve was literally barely lucid. She could see a thousand thoughts and urges ripping around behind his eyes. He looked down her body, then shook his head. An instant later, and he was gone through the crowd.

"You should be careful!" she called after him.

Darcy held her arms in front of her in a way that she hoped looked natural while she hid the spot cooling on her dress. Sweet baby Loki, she'd never been more turned on in her life, and she was
fully dressed in a room full of people.

End note: You know that feeling at the top of a roller coaster, when you're gathering your breath to scream because you know the bottom is about to fall out from under you? I have it.

Also, my eyes are tired. I have no beta. If you spot any typos, please feel free to PM me and let me know I missed something. I'll appreciate it.
Author's note: I did it again. It got too long and I had to chop it up into three parts. My brain needs Clorox! I'm not into drug culture and I know essentially nothing about it. The drug use references are all stuff I looked up on the internet, so if I get it wrong in my ignorance, I'm sorry. I used vagueness as a tool to cover my idiocy on the subject. I wish I could un-learn the stuff I read for this, but it had to go there. The middle section, chapter 29, has all the sex in it. If you're squeamish about that kind of thing, you better skip that chapter. Reviews are a balm to my tired eyes. These take a lot out of me. I write for 24 hours straight sometimes, and it tends to annoy my dear husband. Tickle me. Send a review. Or three. Some of your reviews have directly shaped the story, and I like to hear what you think.

Estrella kept her peace for as long as she could, but as soon as the five women were settled into the limousine for the ride back to the tower, she said what was on her mind.

"What did you do to him?" she asked Darcy with anger clear in her voice and her manner.

"We danced, just like he was dancing with everyone else. Pepper, are you sure it was a good idea to take him out in public? He's barely house broken. That was like junior prom all over again." Darcy said.

Darcy looked to Pepper, but Estrella was still glaring at Darcy. She observed the purpling marks on Darcy's upper arms. Then, she turned aside to look at the lingering red marks on Natasha's arms.

"It went better than I expected, except for the rough handling. Are you alright, Darcy?" Pepper asked.

She knew better than to ask if Natasha was okay. If Nat was sitting calm and smiling, she was some version of okay. They could all see that Darcy was a bit shaken. She was breathing through parted lips and fidgety. Jane bent to look more closely at her friend's arms.

"I'm good," Darcy said.

She shrugged away from Jane's attention.

"No need to tell the big guy. When we get to the tower, keep between me and Thor, kay? It's not Steve's fault," Darcy said.

She rubbed at her arms. The marks on Natasha were already fading, but Darcy was going to have bruises.

Estrella couldn't explain her anger. Part of her was jealous that that obnoxious Darcy woman had been the one to push Steve over the edge of civility with her squishy tits and her good hair, and her big blue eyes and her smart mouth. The other part of her was anxious that no one was going after Steve.

"Why aren't you going after him? You know he's going to Bucky, and he's going to be stupid again. What if he gets a disease?" Estrella turned to Natasha in her anger.

"Relax, Estrella. He can't get diseases, and he's very hard to kill. I'm more worried about the people he runs into than I am for him," Natasha said.
Nat sat back comfortably on the other half of the seat she shared with Estrella. The other women sat primly in their agitation. Nat sprawled and crossed her ankles in the middle of the floor.

"He will be fine, Estrella. Steve on a bad day is more controlled than most men. Try not to worry," Pepper said.

"I can't believe you people! Did you see his face? Right before he left. Did you see? Tony should go find him. And Thor. He's going to be stupid. I know he is. If none of you are going, then let me out. I can catch up to him," Estrella tugged at the door handle.

Traffic was moving in fits and starts, slower than walking speed.

Pepper leaned forward and touched a hand to Estrella's.

"Stop that. Estrella, there's no point in sending anyone after him. I didn't see his face, but we all saw his shoulders. We know he's tense. He's angry and determined. If we send Tony or Thor, it will only cause a fight. Short of a fully equipped extraction team, there's no bringing him back if he doesn't want to come. Even then, the effort would be messy and unlikely to succeed. It would do more harm than good to argue with Steve right now. You have to trust him. It's all we can do," Pepper advised.

"Well, he's going out there to get sex. Why did you have to rub yourself all over him? He's not good with that right now. You're a bitch to play with him like that when we all know he can't take it," Estrella said.

She looked sharply at Darcy, and no one liked the coiled stillness in her posture. Jane fidgeted and leaned protectively against her friend when she noticed how Estrella's hands were clawed at the seat upholstery. Darcy pushed Jane away and leaned forward, daring Estrella to make a move with the set of her chin. Her hand moved toward her purse.

"Estrella. No more," Natasha said calmly.

Natasha put her full attention on her roommate in such a way that Estrella knew an attack against Darcy wouldn't get anywhere. Estrella huffed a sigh and sat back against her corner of the seat.

The silence was tense. Blocks creeped by. Estrella tried texting Steve, but he didn't answer. She dropped her phone on the seat and stared out the window.

"He doesn't realize that he was too rough with Darcy. He was barely aware of it when he was dancing with me. He's got a problem that he needs to work on, Estrella. We have some sympathy for what he must be feeling, but-" Natasha said.

"If you have sympathy, then you shouldn't provoke him! He doesn't like losing control. It embarrasses him," Estrella said.

She looked resolutely out the window, as if she might see Steve among the evening crowds on the sidewalks. The quiet during the ride was awkward, and Estrella was too angry to care if the other people in the car with her were uncomfortable. She hated feeling helpless. Waiting. She didn't trust Bucky to keep Steve out of trouble. Something was going to happen.

When the cars reached the parking garage in the tower, Estrella flew from the limo.

"Estrella, wait!" Darcy called out to her.

She wanted to be alone in her room. If no one else was going to help Steve, then she at least
wanted to shut her door and pray for him in the quiet.

The borrowed boots were hurting her feet, and they were too noisy as she strode toward the elevator. She was in a hurry, because she didn't want to be stuck in a box with these infuriating people. Not with that Darcy, and not with the men.

An expansion seam in the concrete caught her pointy boot heel and jerked her to a stop. Estrella pitched forward with barely any time to put her hands out and catch herself. It wasn't a bad fall. She'd had worse. Much worse. At least no one was kicking her while she was down.

Before she could get to her feet again, Natasha was there. With the strength of a man, she pulled Estrella up and onto her knee. Bruce hovered anxiously and caught her hands as Estrella tried to push away from Natasha.

"Hold still," Bruce told her.

"Let me go. I'm fine," Estrella said.

Bruce stared her down while he felt of the bones in her hands, then up her arms. His intent eyes made her behave more than any words would. She knew what Bruce was, and for once, she felt a little intimidated by him. He was going to do what he wanted to do, and what he wanted to do was to feel her bones. Estrella sat on Nat's knee and waited until he was done.

"I told you, I'm fine. Look, I only skinned my hand," she rotated her wrist to show them.

The heel of her right hand was red and raw where she'd scraped it on the concrete. It stung and reminded her of riding her bicycle when she was little. Natasha stood with her, and Estrella pushed her away. Darcy gave her a worried look as she hurried on to the elevator. The Avengers hung back and let her go, except for Nat.

"Leave me alone," Estrella said as she got in the elevator.

"Darcy told me that Steve wouldn't leave until she promised to see you safe up to your room. She handed responsibility off to me, so I'm going with you and tending to your hand," Nat said.

"You're all like puppets. Do you think I can't find my way to my room?" Estrella snapped.

"He's our commander. Unless I have damn good reason, I do what he says," Natasha said.

Estrella resented Natasha going with her to their bathroom to wash her scuffed hand as if she was a child. The woman's hands rotated her wrist and felt of the small bones there.

"No pain?" she asked.

"It only burns where I scraped it. Go away," Estrella said.

Natasha got out the antibiotic ointment and smeared some into the scrape.

"He cares deeply for you. He ran because he's afraid of hurting us. Hurting you," Nat said.

"I know," Estrella said irritably.

"We'll figure this out. Don't go. He needs you," Natasha told her.

"I'm not leaving," Estrella agreed.
She walked out of the bathroom and Nat heard her door close.

Natasha's phone buzzed. She looked at it, then left Estrella alone in the suite.

The Avengers waited tensely in the living room for Natasha to join them. Tony didn't like the way Thor was standing and frowning, worrying about something in his head. It wasn't like the big guy to hold something in.

Sam, Clint, and Bruce sat and waited while Tony went to the bar to fix himself a drink. When Natasha arrived, she stood across the rug from Thor.

"Bruce?" she asked.

It was him who had texted her and asked her to meet them. Everyone understood that they didn't want to discuss Steve down on the Avenger levels in the conference room. They tried to keep their communal living space free from business and to only do pleasant things here, but there was independent surveillance down on the office levels. It was agreed that Steve's problems needed to stay off the records as long as they could keep it that way.

"Is she alright?" Bruce asked.

"She's upset about Steve running off. Her hand is good. I applied ointment and she went to her room," she said.

"Enough about the girl. What of Steven? If you would accompany me, Natasha, we may yet find him and intercede in whatever folly he has planned," Thor said.

"It's not like you to ask. If you're so worried, why didn't you go?" Tony asked.

"I cannot. The journey would be afoot. I am aware that your city is of a different character at night. I would have Natasha with me, as she knows the wherefores of avoiding undue trouble and attention," Thor said.

"You're assuming that somebody needs to go after him. Leave the man alone. He just needs to let it out some," Sam said.

Tony lifted his drink to that and Clint nodded.

Bruce shook his head and sighed.

They looked to him. Bruce shared a look with Thor, and Thor nodded.

"What?" Tony asked.

"Steve came to us for monitoring. I'm checking his blood four times a day. Over the last week, his testosterone levels have risen steadily. Normally, the more testosterone the body releases, the more it's absorbed and neutralized. This evening's reading was unusually high, and his body's not neutralizing it like it usually does. It's circulating free in his blood, twenty-three percent more testosterone than his baseline from all previous medical records. A non-enhanced man would have been incarcerated for assault or rape by now. I'm concerned," Bruce told them.

"And you're just now mentioning it? With that much free T, he's a bomb, walking around out there waiting to go off," Tony said.

"We piss him off more than any stranger on the street. Let him go. He'll find something to do, and
then he'll come home," Clint shrugged.

"You do not comprehend the severity of the problem," Thor said.

Everyone turned to him.

"What aren't you telling us?" Nat asked.

"I will keep his confidence. Yet I tell you that we should go," Thor said.

"What happened in his gym after I left?" Natasha persisted.

"His gym?" Tony asked.

He looked from Nat to Thor and back.

"Yesterday, they were beating the shit out of each other like I've never seen. Thor asked me to leave, so I did. I trusted you with him, Odinsson," Natasha said.

She narrowed her eyes at Thor.

"I am unworthy," Thor said.

"Unworthy? As in Mjolnir unworthy? Is that what you meant by 'afoot'?" Tony asked.

He came around from the bar and stood a few feet away from Thor.

Thor nodded once, concisely.

"If we can't figure this out so that he can manage his sex drive and aggression, we have to consider that Steve might become unfit for duty. He did some extraneous damage on our last mission. That's not like him," Bruce pointed out.

"Well, that's just lovely. What happens if Hill calls us to assemble?" Tony asked.

No one looked terribly concerned about that.

"Wait, what did you do? In the gym?" Clint asked Thor.

"I am not at liberty to say," Thor said.

"Pepper and Darcy said he was severely bruised and coughing blood, but he healed fast. Faster than usual. That's got to be part of what's going on. His serum is doing something. Something more," Natasha told them.

Bruce nodded.

"We need to retrieve him before he adds guilt to his conscience, though it is my opinion that it would be unearned. I tried reprimanding him for his lack of self-restraint, and as a result, Mjolnir has shunned me. He sought out punishment from me for his imagined guilt. When I gave him what he seemed to want, I lost use of my weapon. This tells me that Steven is not to blame. Whatever rides him does so against his will. He is strong, but a man can only bear up under so much," Thor said.

He looked to Natasha, then away.
"You think I'm too delicate to hear that Steve is in rut? Isn't that what you're saying?" Natasha asked.

"I would not have used such a raw word. It is beneath his dignity," Thor said.

"You had sex with him! In his gym. Who topped?" Clint said.

Natasha strode forward and smacked Clint before Thor or Tony could do it. Everyone was frowning at Clint. He rubbed his head where Nat had cuffed him. It was a friendly reprimand, and he'd expected it.

"I did not. Not as you say," Thor denied stiffly.

"But you did something **unworthy**. So now you're grounded. And Cap is a lawsuit waiting to happen. Bruce, you should have told us things were this bad for Steve. I thought he was just going through delayed puberty, long overdue. I'm going," Tony said.

He set his drink down and headed for the elevator.

"Stark, wait," Natasha said.

Tony stopped.

"Don't. You'll only call attention to whatever he's doing. Jarvis?" Natasha said.

"How may I help?"

"Has he reached Barnes yet?" Nat asked.

"The surveillance device in Sergeant Barnes' apartment is just now picking up a footfall cadence which is likely the Captain's. I believe he is going up the stairs. I should have confirmation… Yes. The Captain has reached Sergeant Barnes' apartment."

"Thank you, Jarvis. Guys, let's leave him to Barnes for now. Wait until Steve gets back, and we can discuss this with him. You know he'll be harder on himself than any of us will," Natasha suggested.

Steve hated running in slick bottomed shoes. There wasn't enough traction. Really, it was more of a jog. Walking wasn't fast enough. It didn't burn enough energy. Twice, he had to stop and brace himself against a building because the friction of the damn pants against the goddamn underwear almost made him lose it right there on the sidewalk in front of God and everybody.

In the crowds, he could skim around and run. People gave him rude looks, but nothing more. When he got over the bridge into Brooklyn, running would have caused too much attention. So he walked fast. With purpose. He had several blocks to go. By the time he'd gotten to the old neighborhood, he'd been harassed by five street gangs and he'd smashed sixteen phones before their owners could send out video of the fights.

Steve didn't feel bad about it. He hadn't asked for the fights, and he didn't want the attention. He wasn't sure if anyone knew who he was, since he was moving so fast. The men who got in his way and asked for trouble were left groaning on the sidewalk while he moved on. People yelled at him for destroying their phones, but when he dropped men in front of him with a tap of his fist to their temples, they left him alone.

Motherfucking phones. He hated them. If they were so precious, then people shouldn't pull them
out and wave them around.

He didn't want Buck to see him coming in hot, so he slowed down when he rounded the corner onto the street. The girls tried to waylay him, but he was focused. He had to get to Bucky. Buck would know what to do.

The fellas across the way called out and waved when they saw him, but Steve only waved back and went up the steps into the building. The front door was shut, but not locked. He took the stairs three at a time and ignored the people who stood in their doorways talking. They watched him go by, but he didn't care.

Buck's door was just right there. He eased out a smooth breath of relief. He lifted his knuckles to knock. A familiar, metallic action sounded behind the door, and Steve arched his body aside.

The thunder of a shotgun firing rumbled and echoed down the stairwell. A hole exploded from Buck's apartment door, and lead and splinters streaked the air. People yelled and ran, and doors slammed throughout the building.

"Buck! Stand down, it's me!" Steve called out.

He stayed aside from the door, though a shotgun slug could penetrate the wall just as easily.

There was a moment of quiet, then slow, heavy footsteps. Bucky opened his door, shotgun in hand. He was naked, except for a pair of shorts. His hair was down and messy, and his jaw was darkened with whiskers again.

"You're reckless. Why didn't you text or call first?" Buck growled at him like rocks moving underwater.

"I was in a hurry. Sorry if I woke you. Hey, get outta the way. I'm coming in," Steve said.

He shoved past Buck and into the dark apartment. Buck gripped the shotgun upright in his left arm and swung his door shut with the right. Soon as the door was closed, he pulled a shell out of the waistband of his shorts and shoved it into the receiver, replacing the one he'd fired. Steve kicked the empty, ejected cartridge toward the trash can in the kitchen.

"You been having trouble around here?" Steve asked.

"Only when you come around," Buck said sourly.

He took a raincoat from the hook behind the door and hung it on the nail in the back of the door instead, so that it covered the hole he'd blown in it. Steve stood in the middle of the dark room, easy enough to see with the street light coming in through the curtains.

Buck looked him over as he moved to his chair and sat with the shotgun across his knees.

"I was sleeping. Ron's working my ass like a mule. What do ya want?" Buck asked.

"Everything, Buck," Steve said.

"I'm not your fairy godmother. My magic wand only does one trick, so unless you want somebody dead, I'm the wrong guy," Buck said.

He rested his hand on the shotgun and yawned.

"You're just the guy I need. You have connections. Numbers you can call, right?" Steve asked.
"What kinda numbers? You gotta tell me what you want, pal. I'm not a mind reader," Buck said.

Maybe he was. Steve looked all messed up. His fancy shirt was torn open down the front, the buttons missing. He stood there with his hands twitching at his sides, huffing. Used to, that woulda made Bucky nervous, but not anymore. Stevie could do whatever he wanted to him, and Buck would let it happen. He owed too much. He'd let Steve take him out if he thought he should. But that's not what he was here for. With his shirt ripped open and hanging aside, there was a clear view down Steve's middle.

"Heh. You want me to call a girl for ya?"


"What kinda more?" Buck wondered.


His hands indicated what kind of girl he was talking about. One with curves and some meat on her. He needed high quality goods, then, not just a holler out at the street.

"You said 'everything'. What does that mean?" Buck asked.

"I want to try everything I've been missing. C'mon Buck. Don't you think we should live a little? We made it. Everybody's been trying to kill us, but we're still here. What're we here for? Let's go get some stuff. Some dames, too. I don't have time for the nice ones. You gotta call us some of the other kind," Steve's voice went low and eager, already rumbly with anticipation.

Buck laid his head back and sighed.

"I can make the calls. Get you some shit that might even work for you. The girls too, but I got work tomorrow. I'll help you get it all, then I'm back in bed," Bucky said.

"No you're not. I had work tomorrow too, and you fucked it up. You're taking the day off. Get up," Steve said.

He turned to the old television, where Bucky still had Stark's surveillance device sitting.

"Jarvis, tell Tony I said they can stand down. I'll be back tomorrow. 'Til I get back, Nat's in charge," Steve said.

He picked up the small device and crushed it between his fingers, then rolled the metal into a tight little useless ball. With a toss, it went into the kitchen trash.

"Yeah, we should probably get going anyway. There's plenty small caliber fire around here, but not..." Buck said as he got up. He handed the shotgun to Steve and went into his bedroom to dress.

Steve stood propped against the doorway and waited impatiently for Bucky to get ready. When Bucky flicked on his bathroom light and went in to start shaving, Steve followed and frowned at him.

"Why do ya hafta shave?" he asked.

Buck glanced aside at Steve and shook his head.

"Look, if all you wanted was low dollar poon, we could go as is. With what you want, we need a nice place. They don't send out that kind of girl to a neighborhood like this. You got cash?" Buck
asked while he scraped a razor over his face.

"Yeah," Steve said, "a few thousand."

"That might do. They're not gonna want to let you in with your shirt all torn. Are you sure this is what you want?" Buck asked.

"I can't think of anything else, Buck. I've tried... a lot of stuff. It's making me crazy. I know this isn't like me, but I don't know what else to do," Steve said.

Steve would have seemed sad and disappointed in himself, Buck thought, but the edge of aggression in his stance, the distended veins under his skin, and his barely contained energy was making him too antsy. He was almost like a kid who needed to pee. Squirmy.

Buck rinsed and wiped his face, tied back his hair, and shrugged into a nice shirt that went with his dark jeans. He looked at Steve's pants and shoes, then went into his closet again.

"Here. Put this on," he said.

He handed Steve a shirt not too different than the one he'd been wearing with all the buttons ripped off. The fact that Steve didn't argue, and set to work at changing like an eager puppy had Buck frowning again. Now that he was fully awake and observant, he was concerned.

"Steve," he said.

"Hmm?" Steve hummed absently, fixing the last button.

"Steve," Buck said again.

"Don't wear it out. What?"

"You're high as fuck already. Outta your head. I don't think I can take you on anymore unless I get nasty and do some real damage. If we do this, you gotta give me your word that you'll do as I say. Illegal isn't exactly your flavor, and if you see shit that you don't like tonight while I'm getting stuff together for you, you gotta stand down and keep your mouth shut. Can you do that?"

It was a little of a relief to see Steve pause in his headlong rush to illicit pleasures and think about what he'd said. Good to know that Steve was in there somewhere, behind whatever was driving him. While his urgency was on pause, Buck noted that he looked a little scared.

"Buck, I don't trust me right now, but I trust you. I'll do as you say," Steve agreed.

"Good enough. Let's go," Buck said.

He pulled some cash out, and got a different phone from a drawer. The shotgun went up into the vent in the ceiling, and then they were out on the street. While they started walking to the corner, Buck made a call. He spoke in Russian, in a cold tone that made the hairs on the back of Steve's neck prickle. Steve decided that he didn't want to check the contact list on Buck's second phone.

They got in a cab and headed to a coffee shop. When the cab let them out, Buck waited 'til it drove away, then Steve followed him down the block until they reached an alley. Down the alley, Buck led him to a steel door with thumping music inside. There were people standing around outside, and Steve was just getting an eyeful of them when Buck grabbed his sleeve and pulled him inside.

They went past the bouncer who sat inside the door, and Steve didn't know where to look as Buck
pulled him along. It was almost all men in the place. There was a lot of black leather and straps and skin. Piercings and… was that a rubber hose hanging out a guy's pants, flopping as he danced? A big part of Steve wanted to be horrified at what he was seeing, but the crude and blatant sexuality of the patrons' behavior appealed to him, too. Another guy, incredibly young looking, walked by in nothing but stretchy shorts. He must have been wearing underwear even more outrageous than Steve was wearing, because his junk was extremely prominent, and an honest-to-god dog's leash threaded out of his shorts, up his chest, and back over his shoulder like jewelry.

Steve felt like he'd fallen down a hole he needed to climb right back out of. His feet stomped to a halt, and Buck's grip slipped off his arm. Buck had been leading him toward a door at the darkened back corner of the large room, but he stopped. He leaned close to Steve, and for a moment, the look of the Soldier faded from his features.

"You want me to leave you here, Stevie?" Buck asked with a grin.

"I don't know. Just hurry," Steve said.

He shoved his hands in his pants pockets and drew his dignity about him, ready to wait in the middle of the craziness until Buck came back from whatever business he had. Buck tapped his arm with his fingers.

"Alright, but don't look bashful, or the bears'll get ya," Buck teased him.

"Bears?" Steve asked, looking around in confusion. He took his hands out of his pockets and didn't know what to do with them, then he crossed them and set his feet apart a little more.

"Never mind, Goldilocks, just don't cause a scene while I'm gone. You promised," Buck reminded him.

Steve nodded once, determined to behave and wait. Buck eased back into his badass persona and left him. Steve tried to keep his eyes drifting around the room without landing on any one thing for too long. Another young guy came by wearing not much of anything, and he offered a platter to anyone who looked his way. Steve wanted to shake his head in denial at the man, but he smiled up at Steve and offered his wares. There were oddly shaped rubber things and metal things laid out. His mind did some spacial manipulation of the presented objects and the possibilities made heat rise to his face.

Steve shook his head and tried not to frown too hard. God, how long was Bucky gonna be? If he'd called ahead, then-

"Tell me what you're looking for," a gruff voice said behind him.

Steve turned a little. There was a large man standing there in tight jeans and a see-through shirt. Silver nipple rings glinted in the strobe that was flashing on the dance floor. The man had a full beard and he was heavier built than Steve, almost as tall.

"Not a damn thing," Steve said.

"We're all looking for something," the man persisted with a clearly predatory smile.

He stepped closer until their chests were almost touching. Steve could smell his sort of herb-spiced breath. He could take the man down in a heartbeat, but he'd promised to be nice and not start trouble.

"I've already got what I'm looking for," Steve told him firmly.
The man opened his mouth to say something else, then his eyes shifted and he took a step back. He put his hands up.

"Sorry, man," he said to Bucky.

Steve could feel Buck at his back, still and threatening. The man disappeared into the crowd in a hurry. Buck’s hand pushed him forward, and Steve was glad to get back out into the alley, then the street. They went to the bus stop and waited.

"What was-"

"Don't ask. Not now," Buck told him.
The bus took them over the bridge and closer to Steve's part of town. When they got off, Buck made another call. It sounded like he was placing a take-out order, but with human descriptors. He pointed to an all-night diner and Steve went inside ahead of him. They ordered coffee and waited. Steve was feeling, if anything, more revved up than he'd been before he sought out Bucky. That bar. The images… Those guys weren't afraid to hunt and take what they wanted. It wasn't Steve's preference, but the heady sexuality of the place made him think and imagine.

"Stop that. I wouldn't have brought you inside if I'd known it was gonna mess with your head, but it was just as risky to leave you outside with all the wanna-bes," Buck said over his coffee.

"The things they had. There was a lot of gear," Steve said.

"So you wanna start a toy chest now? I can send you a few web links," Buck offered with a smile. He got out his phone and began tapping at the screen.

"No! I mean, maybe. I don't know," Steve grumbled.

Buck snorted a laugh and put his phone away.

"How do you know all this stuff, Buck? Did you know it before, or while you were…?" he glanced at Bucky's left arm, which was covered in a long sleeve, with a brown leather glove on his hand.

"Hydra throws its goons some wild parties. If I was thawed and had a long mission, they sometimes had me along. I don't remember all of it, but-" Buck frowned, then shook his head.

A white limo pulled up curbside in front of the diner. Buck got up and Steve followed him out. A man from the front passenger seat got out to open the wide rear door for them. Steve was struck with momentary shyness as he saw long, curvy legs and beautiful women waiting inside. Three of them. He ducked in and sat down next to one when Buck gave him a little shove.

"Hi," he said to the girls.

Buck got in and settled across from him, between the blonde girl and the redhead. The brunette next to him rubbed his thigh and smiled at him. Bucky passed him an envelope and nodded to the front of the car, where the handler was waiting. Steve passed the envelope to the man, who checked it. The man nodded to the driver, and the car pulled out into traffic. Steve was a little uncomfortable with the transaction, but only a little.

The women smelled good, and looked good. All the smooth, creamy skin on display was distracting, especially since he knew these women were here for him. The blonde girl looked him over and smiled a naughty smile, until she studied his face. Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open in surprise.

Steve shook his head at her.

"Shhh, not tonight," he said.

She was thinking she was going to get fucked by Captain America. He could almost see the thought on her face. He'd never felt farther from heroic. The other girls looked at their co-worker, then at Steve. They didn't get it, and he was glad. One perceptive dame was bad enough. It was too bad that thoughts of non-disclosure agreements had to pop into his head just now. Displeasure must
have shown on his face, because the blonde leaned forward to rub his knee.

"Sir, I'm Tiffany," she said.

"Grant," Steve told her.

He looked to the redhead.

"I'm Sarah," she said.

"No, you're not. My mom was Sarah. Pick something else," Steve grimaced.

"Ew. We can't have that. Unless you're into that. But, you're obviously not, so… Natasha?" she offered.

Bucky chuckled and shook his head. Steve grimaced strongly. With her red hair, it was too much, even though her body language was completely different from the Widow.

"Jo-jo?" she guessed hopefully.

"That works. Nice to meet you, Jo-jo," Steve said.

Both of the other girls had touched him already, so he figured that was a thing to do. He leaned forward a little and brushed his fingers up the inside of her calf. No nylons. Steve knew nylons weren't popular anymore, but it would have been a nice detail. Her skin felt nice, but it wasn't good like…No. He couldn't think of Estrella right now. Not for several hours.

The woman looked relieved to have the name-game settled. These girls had a little more dignity than some he'd seen, but they still felt anxious to please. Steve turned to the woman on his right.

"I'm Miranda. It's nice to meet you, Mister Grant," she said.

Steve started to correct her so she wouldn't call him Mister, but the fun gleam in her eyes had him letting it stand as it was. Before anything else could happen, the limo turned into the front entrance of a hotel. A very nice hotel.

Steve offered his hand to Miranda while Buck took Tiffany and Jo-jo. The hotel staff came to take bags from the trunk. The handler preceded them to the desk to confirm reservations and get the key card.

"We will return for you in the morning," he told Bucky.

Buck nodded and accepted the key card.

The ride up to their room was quiet, and Miranda lightly rubbed his side and smiled at him. Steve didn't feel the urge to blush. There wasn't any uncertainty or painfully polite conversation.

Their room was a suite with two bedrooms, two baths, a nicely upscale living room, and a small kitchen tucked away around a corner. The lighting was soft and mellow, and the place smelled fresh. Everything was immaculately clean and perfectly decorated. Bucky tipped the man who handled the women's luggage.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked.

"Certainly, Sir. My name is Chandler. I will be happy to assist you with anything you desire," he told them.

Steve nodded, and Chandler left.

Tiffany brought her bag into one of the bedrooms, and Miranda took the other. Jo-jo went to the full bar and offered to fix drinks. Steve smiled faintly at Bucky and they let her serve them.

Bucky had chosen well. Each of the women was tall and beautiful, but not delicate. They'd still break with too rough handling, but they had enough muscle and lush curves to protect their bones some.

"Go ahead and take the edge off, Sir," Buck suggested and he nodded toward the room Tiffany was in.

Steve got up with his drink in hand. He went and tapped politely on the doorframe to the bedroom. Jo-jo settled onto Buck's lap and smiled oddly at Steve.

"Is he always this polite?" she asked.

"Most of the time, until he has reason not to be. Don't get too comfortable. You're not for me. You're for him," Buck told her as her hands started to wander over his chest.

"I am? What about Miranda? Is she for Mister Grant, too?" Jo-jo asked.

"Yes," Buck said.

Jo-jo looked a little confused, but she stopped asking questions.

Steve walked toward the bed, where Tiffany waited for him. Just like the dancer, Angel, at the strip club, he was sure her name wasn't really Tiffany. But then, he wasn't really Grant. Not like he wanted the other girls to think.

When he stepped close to Tiffany, she reached for him eagerly. She smiled and ran her hands over his thighs, then cupped the bulge in his pants. Steve hissed in a breath between his teeth, but smiled encouragement at her with his eyes.

"Ooh. That's not a look anyone would think to see on Cap-

"Hush, now. I told you already that that's not who I am tonight, any more than your name is Tiffany when you go home to see your family," he told her sternly.

She bit her lip and nodded.

"And don't mention it to Miranda and Jo-jo. It's safer for you if no one knows," he said.

It was hard to keep his voice steady, because she was tugging at him gently with one hand while her other hand was starting to undo his clothes.

"Safer?" she asked.

"Yes. Safer. Don't talk and you won't have to worry about it," he said vaguely.

She slipped her hand into his downed zipper and rubbed him over the bright red mesh. Steve clenched his jaw and shut his eyes. He tolerated it for a moment, then pushed her back onto the mattress. Tiffany grinned and scooted back up onto the pillows of the king size bed. Steve crawled
over her and took a mouthful of a pink nipple he could see through her sheer top.

It felt like licking through nylons. He liked it. Tiffany worked at tugging down his pants and unbuttoning his shirt. Buck's shirt was tight on him, so she had to almost peel it off him.

"Sir, you're amazing. So beautiful," she enthused as she ran her hands over his chest and sides.

Steve looked at her.

"Handsome, I mean. You're very handsome. But I'll let you in on a secret. Women can think that men are beautiful, too," she winked at him.

Steve looked at her impatiently, then bent down again to lip at her neck. She got the message that he didn't care for or need compliments.

Her toes pushed his pants down the rest of the way, and Steve shucked off his shoes and helped her get rid of the pants. A little subtle work with his toes had his socks on the floor, too. He was dying to get the tight constriction of the goddamn freakish underwear off, and Tiffany's hands were at his hips to help him with that. He let her do that while he enjoyed her bountiful chest. He couldn't stop his hips from pushing at the hand she was rubbing on him while she tugged down the dreadful undies.

"Hey," Buck said from beside the bed.

Tiffany turned her head to look.


"But Sir, you promised," Bucky reminded him.

Steve gave one last suck at his toys and looked at Bucky.

"Use this," Buck told him, and laid a condom package on the bed.

"Right," Steve frowned at it.

Buck crossed his arms and dared him to go back on his word.

"Alright. I will, now git," Steve agreed.

"Yes, Sir," Buck said.

The door closed behind him, and Steve started tugging at Tiffany's pretty outfit. He kicked the red mesh monstrosity off his feet and had to stop and breathe for a moment when his cock fell against her full thigh.

"You want me to help with this, Grant?" Tiffany asked him.

She picked up the condom and opened the package. Steve nodded. He wanted to see her hands on him. He throbbed harder at just the thought of someone touching him. Somehow, Tiffany was less abrasive than the waitress from the sports bar. He looked down in the lamplight while her small hands rolled the cover over him. She pinched the tip and massaged him through the latex. Steve groaned at the feeling and noted with pleasure that there was a shadow of pubic hair under her panties. He wanted to see her, and it was taking too long.

Without hesitation, he ripped away the sides of her panties, then tugged them off of her with a
hooked finger. With a finger curled beneath her neatly trimmed fur, he could feel that she was hot and wet.

"You ready?" he growled at her.


Her hands pulled at him and Steve had enough of waiting. He pushed forward until he knew he was where he needed to be, then he surged forward and in. Tight heat made his eyes roll behind his lids, but the shriek that Tiffany made snapped him out of his pleasure.

"Too much, too much. I'm sorry. I don't usually have this problem, but you're... big," she babbled.

Her hands patted at his shoulders and her eyes were squeezed shut. Steve backed out just as Buck hurried into the room. His worried look stabbed Steve between the shoulders and made him want to lash out.

"What's wrong? She shouldn't sound like that," he fussed.

"I'm so sorry. I'm alright. Just, maybe stay a little shallower?" Tiffany suggested.

"Grant," Bucky said in disappointment, "you gotta go easy on the ladies. Do I really hafta tell you that? Ease off. Let me check her."

Steve bit off a growl, but he sat back on his heels. His dick was angry and insistent at the interruption, and so was he. He kept quiet as Buck murmured sweetly to the girl and used his fingers to check for any blood. The marginally concerned part of Steve's mind watched to see that there was no blood. Buck gave him a warning look on his way out.

"I got it," Steve told him, then "Tiffany, are you hurting?"

"It's okay now. Please, go ahead," she said.

Her eyes were a little wide as she looked down at his sheathed cock.

"I'll be careful," Steve promised.

Slowly, he remounted and tried again. He watched Tiffany's face for signs of discomfort. When he was almost all the way in and felt a delicious pressure at the end of his dick, she patted his arms and looked at him pleadingly. Steve took a few calming breaths and shook his head. Something about her imploring him to be gentle was prodding him to do just the opposite.

"Okay," he whispered tightly.

The shrieking and the interruption and the damned rubber were making things less fun than he'd imagined it, but it still felt good. Bothersome thoughts tried to intrude, but he set his gaze on Tiffany's succulent body and distracted himself. As he moved carefully and she began to trust that he was going to be kind to her, she smiled and touched his chest. Her smooth hands felt good on him. Her heat felt so good around him.

Steve groaned and shut his eyes in bliss. It was difficult to remember to stay shallow when he was coming. Tiffany's nails clenched into his shoulders did a good job of reminding him. When he was done and the terrible aching pressure in his groin was eased, he looked to see Tiffany biting her lip. She clenched around him and wiggled her hips some.
"Tiffany, did you?" he asked.

"I don't need to, but it's kind of you to ask," she said.

"What if I want you to? Is that okay?" he offered.

She smiled and nodded at him, still biting her lip. The insistent little wiggles of her hips became more pronounced, and Steve smiled too. Now that his urgency was off, he was more than happy to see to her.

He braced a hand above her shoulder and used his other one to grip her hip. With careful, slow strokes, he worked at her until the color rose in her cheeks and her nipples drew up tight despite the fabric that confined them. She was looking at his body like she was dumbfounded or daydreaming or something. The look of surprise that suddenly overtook her did something to him, as did the tightening of her vagina around him. It was very good, and when the clenching flutters started, he was gone again with her.

"Thank you, Sir," she panted at him when she was done biting her lip.

"My pleasure, ma'am," Steve grinned at her politely.

Another flutter clenched her insides, which caused Steve to pulse, too.

"We better, um..." Tiffany suggested.

She glanced down at where he was still pressed into her. Steve didn't want to leave her warmth.

There was a tap at the door, then Buck let himself in.

"You're phone's blowing up. Has been for a while. What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Take a look. Do I need to be anywhere?" Steve said.

While Buck was thumbing at his phone, he eased out of Tiffany.

"No. It's nothing critical. Just some ranting and nagging from some people you know. Quite a few of them. I think you can ignore it. Hey! Don't you know how to use that thing? You can't put that much, or it's pointless," Buck fussed at him.

"Are you gonna be like this all night?" Steve asked.

He went around Buck to the bathroom to clean up.

"Only if you make me. Maybe you don't know, but those are single use. Like a crack-barrel. One shot and you're done. Gotta eject and reload, Sir," Buck taunted him.

"Yeah, yeah, James. I'll do better next time. You can take the nagging phone and your nagging tongue right outta here," Steve said over the sound of water.

"Are you his butler?" Tiffany whispered to Bucky.

Buck and Steve laughed.

"Sure, doll. I'm his battle-ready body butler. I hand him rubbers, and all the mortars he needs. I dig trenches, too. I'll even shine your boots, pal, if you pass me a smoke," Bucky joked.
Tiffany looked confused, then figured that it was an inside joke between them. After all, they must be pretty close if James was allowed into the Captain's presence during sex without much of a fuss.

"Shut it, James, and don't you have something better to do? How about I pass you a smoke after you pass me one first?" Steve suggested.

He handed Tiffany a warm wet cloth and walked around the foot of the bed to get his pants.

"Sure, but I don't think smoking it'll do you any good. Tiffany, why don't you take a nice bubble bath while we wait for dinner?" Bucky suggested strongly.

She moved to do as she was told, but bit her lip again when she noticed the red marks her nails had left on Steve's shoulders.

"I'm sorry about that. I won't do it again," she said.

"Don't apologize. I liked it," Steve told her.

There was a strange moment while Tiffany stared at him with something a little too close to fangirl adoration, and Bucky gave him a crooked grin that was all Brooklyn and no Soldier. Steve walked out of the bedroom barefoot and shirtless. It was great to be touched, and to ease the strain he'd been feeling, but that look from Bucky was going to gut him in front of the girl if he stood there and took it.

"Damn," Jo-jo whispered as he walked into the living room. Steve knew he wasn't meant to hear her, so he ignored it. Miranda gave him the eye, too, but Bucky came crowding behind him and aimed him at the other bedroom. Once inside, he shut the door, then pointed to the unused bathroom.

Steve went in and the lights flickered on by themselves. Buck came in with a little baggie of something, and a fine, sharp knife in his hand. He held the knife up where it was easily seen and waved Steve at the floor.

"You want me to lie down?" Steve wondered.

"Sure. Get comfortable and wait while I get this ready," Buck said.

He set to work at the marble countertop. Steve winced at the cold, cold tile floor on his naked back and looked over curiously.

"What is that?" he asked.

"The usual stuff, just stronger. I hear they've bred the plants nowadays to make it more concentrated. Still, this never did anything for me, and it probably wouldn't for you, either. That's why I'm chopping it fine and putting it under your skin," Buck said.

"Isn't that a little extreme?" Steve wondered.

"Heh. Not for us. And don't be a pussy. You've been under the knife so many times you could probably do surgery on yourself. If we want the rush, we gotta pay the price, you and me," he told him.

"Sure, Buck. I'm ready," Steve said.

He lay on the floor quietly, listening to Buck's sharp little knife chop and grind at the gray-green
stuff he was preparing. When it was minced small enough, Buck scraped his work into a hotel water glass and turned to Steve.

Bucky straddled Steve's ribs and plopped down solid on his belly. Steve whuffed out a breath and made room for knees in his armpits. Buck set the glass down on the tile next to Steve's head and Steve turned his attention to the fine powder.

"C'mon, punk, look here. It's like the dentist. I can't work in your mouth if your head's turned. Open up," Buck said.

He held his small black knife in one hand and stripped off his glove with his teeth. Silver metal flashed in the light. Steve felt a little strange about the whole thing, Buck sitting on him, and the stuff in the cup, and the sex, and the fact that somebody was fixing to cut in his mouth. But he opened up.

Bucky was quick. His metal thumb opened Steve's jaw more, then pulled his cheek aside. A slice with the knife, and Steve paid more attention to the warm, iron tang of blood trickling to the back of his mouth than he did to the pain. Buck set the knife on his chest and grabbed the glass with his flesh hand. The sting of the cut increased to a hard burn as Buck used his thumb to stretch it open.

"Don't breathe for a sec," Buck said.

He tipped the crushed herbal substance into the pocket he'd made with the cut, then set the empty glass down so he could use his softer flesh fingers to hold the cut closed over the drugs. Steve swallowed blood. That part was comforting in its familiarity, at least. He didn't care for the feel of a foreign substance under the skin of his gums. That stung, too. It was a small pain, everything considered. They both waited. When Steve felt the skin heal together, he nodded to Buck.

"Wasn't so bad, huh?" Buck asked.

Apparently there was going to be another round, because Bucky was preparing more of the stuff. Steve got up and went to watch. There was a small lump under his skin, and his tongue worried at it. With another glass, he rinsed his mouth clean.

"Not too bad. Is that for you? Do you heal fast enough to not scare the girls with bloody teeth?" he asked.

"No. I'm staying clean tonight. Somebody around here has to have their head on solid. Go lie down. I'll do the other side."

Steve eyed the stuff skeptically while Buck scraped it into the glass.

"How do you know this works? For us?" he wondered

"They played around with this body a lot. I didn't forget everything," Buck said.

"I'm sorry, Bucky. If I'd known you were still alive, I would have fought harder. I wouldn't have-"

"Eh. Shut it. I mean, open it. Don't talk with knives in your mouth," Buck said.

Steve kept quiet while Buck repeated the procedure at the other side of his upper gums. Buck looked menacing, hunched over him. He felt vulnerable, with a man holding him flat on his back, but it was only Buck, he told himself. Some hair had come loose from the back of Buck's head, so Steve reached up to push it behind his ear. Buck made a face at him. He was pouring the stuff in the other cut so he didn't have any hands available to stop Steve from doing whatever he wanted.
Buck looked down at him indulgently and smiled.

"Yeah, look at ya. Getting all soft and relaxed. I haven't seen that look on you in decades. This shit is working. Healed up yet?" Buck asked with his fingers in Steve's mouth.

"Mrrf," Steve garbled and nodded.

His hands relaxed and fell to Buck's hips. Bucky made another face at him, then he was up and off. He reached a hand down to offer a help up, but Steve shook his head. He got to his feet, then jumped and shook a few times like a boxer.

"I feel floaty," Steve said.

Bucky laughed and cleaned his knife in the sink.

"That's great. I told you this would work. I can tell you're feeling it. You're getting pretty mellow. Here, rinse, then swallow. If you've got any loose crumbs in there, it's better to keep them in than out," Buck told him.

Steve took a drink and swished, then swallowed.

"While I've got you in here and all happy, listen," Buck said.

"Mm-hmmm?" Steve asked. He sounded goofy, even to his own ears. He turned and grinned at himself in the mirror. Buck was right. The shit was working. He could feel his body trying to absorb it and heal his gums. It was like having shrapnel, but for a pleasant, recreational purpose.


Steve swiveled his head to look. Yup. His bones felt slippy, like maybe he was made of cartilage. Like a shark. He made teeth at Buck. Bucky smacked his cheek a little to call him to order.

"You can't get off twice in the same rubber. If one of these girls gets a piece of you, it'll be a nightmare. Got it?" Buck reminded him.

"Yeah, we don't want any trouble. Buuuck. This is fuckin grand," Steve smiled.

"Ah, shit. Listen up. Just one more thing. You gotta go easy on em. I know they're big, healthy girls, but-

"They're still soft. So soft," Steve agreed.

"Right. So, watch your hands, and your strength. And your depth," Buck tutored him.

Steve rolled his eyes and his hand, encouraging Buck to be done with the lecture.

"Are you hearing me, Rogers?"

"I am. Not more than once, and take care of the soft stuff," Steve droned.


"I could eat," Steve agreed.

They followed their noses to where Chandler had brought dinner. The ladies were setting things up on the kitchen bar and the little table that had two chairs. Buck pushed a loose-limbed Steve at a
stool and took his spot at the table.

"This is like my kitchen. I need a table. Why don't kitchens have tables anymore? A mom needs a table to put the food on," Steve said indignantly.

He was distracted by Miranda and Jo-jo moving around him to pour the wine and uncover the desserts. The girls had taken some time to get into sexy little outfits like Tiffany had been wearing.

"You're pretty," Steve told Jo-jo.

"Thank you, Sir," she said.

"I'm not Sir," Steve argued.

"I'll call you whatever you want, sugar," she agreed.

"Sir is fine. Or Grant," Bucky insisted.

That got a frown from Steve, but only until the cover was taken off his plate. He fell to like the soldier he was, and Buck wasn't surprised to see him pause a moment to pray over his food. It seemed that packed with a little herb, Steve was more relaxed and like his old self. The jangling intensity he'd had earlier was polished right off of him.

Tiffany came from the bedroom looking fresh and in a new outfit. She sat with Bucky and picked at her vegetables which were farthest away from the steak on her plate.

"You vegan?" Buck wondered.

Tiffany nodded. She accepted the wine he poured for her.

"There's no hard feelings if you're sore and out of commission for the night. He doesn't have a lot of experience, and I shoulda been there to see that he didn't hurt you," Bucky told her.

"I can find ways to participate," Tiffany said.

She licked wine sensually from her bottom lip. Something about the dark red liquid vanishing into her mouth with her tongue stirred a distant, obscure memory in Buck. He frowned at it, and Tiffany looked away from him, the flirty mood ruined.

"Are you gonna eat that?" Steve asked Tiffany.

She got up and brought her plate to him.

Buck sighed and shook his head. Sometimes Steve was no better than a starving recruit at manners. Buck went to the little kitchen countertop and hovered his hand near the deserts while Tiffany watched him. When she seemed to like one, he brought it to the table for her.

"We can order you something vegan that he won't like," Buck suggested.

"I'm not very hungry," Tiffany said, but she picked at her tall coconut pie.

Steve didn't stay occupied with food for long. He tipped up his glass of wine, then went to the kitchen sink to chase it down with water. Buck noticed Tiffany's almost hidden look of distaste as she watched him drink from the tap.

"Miranda," was all Steve had to say.
The statuesque brunette finished her wine and wiped her mouth. She waited for Steve to come around the bar and collect her. Buck followed them into the bedroom. Tiffany and Jo-jo came in behind.

"If you like what you're wearing, you might want to take it off," Buck told Miranda.

He could see from the tension in Steve's shoulders that his friend was ready to have fun again.

She hurriedly slipped off her corset, and Steve pushed her against the wall hard enough to bounce her.

"Sorry," he muttered, but then he took off her panties, put her leg over his shoulder, and buried his mouth exactly where he wanted a taste. Miranda looked down to Steve with a gasp of surprise, then to Bucky.

Buck flopped back in a chair across from the bed, and shrugged. It wasn't the most common thing, to go down on a working girl, but it looked like Stevie wanted to go there, and who was he to stop him?

"Mmmm. Why can't I have this all the time? Shouldn't have to wait," Steve pulled his face away long enough to complain.

Miranda sighed and let her head fall back to the wall. Her hands moved to stroke over his close-shorn scalp.

"No. Not the head. That's for Eya," Steve grumped at her.

"Sorry," Miranda said.

She didn't know what he'd want after that reprimand, so she softly braced her hands on his shoulders.

"My marks are gone," Tiffany noticed.

Buck shrugged and stared at her meaningfully. She waited a moment, then her mouth rounded into an 'o'.

I forgot, she mouthed at him.

"That's good. Keep on forgetting. He's idiot enough tonight. It should be easy to do," Buck said.

"I can hear you," Steve grumbled at them.

"Shaddup. You're not doing it right if you can talk," Buck said.

"Not doing it right..." Steve bitched back at him.

He put his hands up to support Miranda, who was a solid girl. Then, he stood right up from one knee, easy as pie. Miranda made a noise of surprise, but Steve brought her to the bed and carefully tossed her before she could panic much.

Tiffany held out a hand to Bucky, and he dug out another rubber to give to her.

She went to the huge bed, where Jo-jo was working on Steve's pants while he continued to feast on Miranda. He started to fight her, or at least he was thinking about it. Buck saw it in the suddenly still tension of his legs as Jo-jo slipped up between his thighs behind him.
"Aught! Play nice with the ladies," Buck growled at him.

Steve nodded his head minutely and arched the small of his back in invitation. Jo-jo cooed at him and rubbed the fine, hard ass that was so perfectly presented to her.

"Arrogant little punk," Buck chuckled.

"Quit playing around, this isn't about us," Tiffany hissed to Jo-jo. She reached under Steve and undid his pants again.

"Well, he's so pretty, and I can make him feel good," Jo-jo purred.

She and Tiffany worked together to get his pants off, and Miranda made strangling noises until Steve sat back and licked his lips. Jo-jo hugged Steve from behind and rubbed her hands up and down his front.

"Does it always feel this good? It didn't feel like this before," Steve said with an angelic smile back at Jo-jo and Tiffany.

"It's the shit I gave you. Don't over-analyze it. Just enjoy it," Buck said.

Jo-jo started tweaking his nipples, and Tiffany was about to go down on him. Steve looked dazed, but happy. Buck wished he could go in the other room and let him have his fun, but things were deceptively dangerous for the girls now. Just this afternoon, Steve's strength had slung him like he was a rubber dog toy. He looked loopy and harmless, but he wasn't. Just like a moment ago, when he'd been about to snap Jo-jo in a leg lock, he could still mess up. Buck knew this would be risky, and it was likely to get worse, later. He had to be vigilant.

Steve made a rough sound, and Miranda looked on at the three people twisted up together in front of her. Tiffany pulled away and rolled a condom onto him. Jo-jo pushed at his shoulders to encourage him toward Miranda.

"You smell good," Steve told the girl he was about to fuck.

She nodded vaguely at him and hugged him closer. For all her saucy looks earlier, she was out of sauce now. Steve got an arm under her and flipped her so that she was up on her knees under him.

"Be careful. Go slow," Tiffany said.

"Don't wanna go slow. I'm so damn tired of slow," Steve said.

He wiggled his hips a little and Buck knew he was getting it just right. He recognized the move from his own experience, but had never seen somebody else do it in person. And it was Stevie. Jeezus. He shouldn't be watching.

"Ipe!" Miranda squeaked.

Buck was up in a heartbeat to pull him off of her, and Steve wasn't backing down. He hammered into the girl mercilessly. An instant before Buck would have leapt to get his arm around Steve's neck, he recognized the deep, wrecked moaning Miranda was making continuously. She liked it. No, she liked it a lot.

Tiffany watched him, her eyes big like an owl's. Buck eased his attack stance, but she'd already seen. Jo-jo hovered on her knees to the side of the action, her back turned to Bucky. She was watching avariciously. Her hand hovered over the working muscles of Steve's back, fascinated and
wanting to touch.

"Don't touch him right now," Buck warned.

She drew her hand back and settled to wait her turn.

Miranda's vocalizations gradually shifted from low and pleasure-wracked to high and tight with discomfort. Buck saw why. Steve's teeth were gliding back and forth on her shoulder, and his hands were gripping her tits. Both sensations were probably too hard.

"Hey," he said sharply as he stepped to the bedside.

"Ease your grip and your teeth," Bucky ordered him.

Steve lashed out with his left hand and threw Bucky across the carpet and clear into the bathroom without breaking rhythm in his fucking. Buck caught himself from stumbling with his hand on the wall of the shower enclosure. Tile shattered under his hand, but he had no time to linger over busted up tile.

A few strides, and Buck was standing on the bed, feet either side of the busy couple. Steve growled at him, but Buck was too fast for the distracted man. With his right arm, he bent up and back on Steve's left arm. His left hand clamped tight around Steve's throat, thumb and forefingers digging into where his pulse supplied his brain with blood.

"You let up on her or I'll put you to sleep," Buck told him coldly.

Tiffany and Jo-jo were somewhere off the bed by now, and Miranda was keening for pleasure or fright, or pain, he couldn't tell. Steve tried to shake him off, but Buck held on tight enough to cripple a normal man. The bed shook and rattled against the wall, but then he felt the fight go out of him.

Steve was still tense, but it didn't seem like he was gonna put up any serious fight anymore. That was good enough. It meant he understood. Buck made to go and leave him alone, but Steve's bent back fingers curled to clamp tight around his, and his other hand came up to press the metal fingers at his throat deeper.

His hips started moving again. They'd never really stopped, Buck realized.

"You're a sick little brat, ya know? See if I ever take you to a gay bdsm bar again. Ya couldn't handle it, could ya, angel-face?" Buck affectionately teased him.

Steve choked out something, and then he was coming. Buck held him in what had to be a painful grip through it. He was surprised at how long it lasted. Steve's face was turning kinda purple, so he eased off once the shakes and the tension were gone. Steve eased over and let Miranda down onto her side carefully.

He started to talk, but his voice came out as a damaged croak, so he cleared his throat and tried again.

"Did I hurt you?" Steve asked her.

"I don't know. I don't feel pain when I'm aroused. If something's sore, I'll feel it tomorrow," Miranda said lazily.

She slicked her fingers over Steve's sweaty chest and stared at him with lambent eyes. Bucky shook
his head at the dopey look on his friend and went back to his chair. Tiffany crept around the
doorframe to stand behind his chair, and Jo-jo eased onto his lap.

"Are you sure you wanna get into the ring with him?" Buck asked her.

"Oh, hell yeah!" Jo-jo said with a toothy grin.

"Then come here," Steve told her.

Bucky gave his dick a pointed look.

"Yeah, yeah, mama hen, I know," Steve said.

He sat up and rolled to go to the bathroom. A little rinsing and a flush, and he was back, still hard
as ever.

Jo-jo joined him on the bed.

"Do you ever go down?" she asked.

Tiffany put a new condom packet into her hand.

"Hardly," Steve said, then guffawed at the obtuse pun he'd made.

Buck rolled his eyes. The herb was still working him some, despite the fracas he'd caused a minute
ago. Jo-jo waited submissively on the bed for him, trying hard to look like the sweet girl she
wasn't. Steve moved in behind her and she shivered. That much was genuine, he could tell.

Miranda went off to the other bedroom, where Tiffany guided her and looked her over.

Steve shifted and lay down. He pulled Jo-jo above him and set her on his thighs.

"You're so strong. You threw him like it was nothing," she said.

"He's a bunch of hot air. Nothing to it," Steve denied.

"You're scary. I like," Jo-jo said.

"No need to be scared, little red. I'm only allowed to beat up on James," Steve smirked.

Jo-jo touched the purple-black bruising on either side of his adam's apple.

"And he's allowed to beat up on you," Jo-jo said.

"Sure. We're brothers. It's what we do," Steve said with a shrug.

Jo-jo didn't bother to ask any details about his sibling comment. The two men didn't look anything
alike, other than being exceptionally fit.

She continued to sit on his legs. He was marble-hard, right there in front of her. She took hold of
him like flight controls and rubbed her thumbs on his underside. Steve laid back and shut his eyes.

"You sure you want to go again right now? It's not too sensitive?" she asked.

He shook his head and reached down to tickle his own frenulum, showing her it was fine. Jo-jo
was happy to have him to herself, though she hoped Miranda was feeling alright after her rough
ride. She planned to work their big John until he was a puddle of warm delight, now that maybe he
was calmed down some from his two previous rounds.

She took her time touching him, and Bucky went to the bathroom since it didn't look like anything dramatic was about to happen. Steve wanted stuff, so he was gonna get stuff. He got the things he wanted and brought them to Jo-jo. She looked at him expectantly when he stood at the foot of the bed and held out a glove, a tube of lube, and two gelatin capsules to her.

"You want me to? For him?" she asked.

"Yeah. Wait a second, though," Buck agreed.

He went around to the head of the bed, where Steve was watching him and looking mostly sober.

"Here. Lemme feel," he said.

Steve let him touch the places on his gums where he'd been cut. There was nothing anymore, not even a bump.

"You still feeling anything?" he asked.

"Maybe a little. It's hard to tell."

"We're gonna try something different, but you'll have to let her put it in without mule kicking her across the room like a scared virgin," Buck said.

"Put it in?" Steve's brow furrowed, and then he felt the cool lube Jo-jo was putting on his ass. He startled a little when she glided onto his anus.

"Yeah. That's how it'll work best for you, if it works at all," Buck said.

"What is it?" Steve asked skeptically.

"You don't need to know. Let me worry about that. I'll tell Banner in the morning if it makes you feel better."

"Tell him that I let some dame put drugs up my ass? Are you outta your mind, Buck?"

"I don't have to tell him the details. I was just offering disclosure if it would make you feel better. Do you want this or not?"

Steve stared at him hard for a moment. Jo-jo reached to play with him again, and Steve breathed deep, then moved her hand away so he could think.

"Have you done it?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, but not this way. I didn't feel much, and only for a few minutes. This should be better," Bucky said.

"Do it. No. You don't do it. She does it. If she wants to," Steve amended.

"I'd love to do this for you," Jo-jo said.

Steve nodded, then pushed Bucky away.

"Do you really want me down there while this is happening?" Buck asked.
"Just leave. I won't hurt her," Steve said.

He shut his eyes and pressed his head back into the pillow. Buck bit his lips to hold in the laugh at the grimace on Steve's face. His lip was almost curling.

"Honey, you're very tight. Like steel or something. Are you sure you don't have anything up there already?" Jo-jo asked.

Buck couldn't hold in his laughter any longer.

"Shut up! I don't wanna hear it. I've got Stark in my head too much already," Steve growled, but Buck could see him fighting not to smile.

"No, he doesn't have anything in there. He's just a tight ass, first class," Buck joked.

"Get out," Steve gritted through his teeth.

"No way. You've already surprised me twice tonight. I'm willing to stick with you to get this done if you really want to try it, but you know what's at risk if you mess up. So, are ya doing this or not?" Buck asked, more serious in tone.

"It was good? The little bit you got that worked?"

"Yeah," Buck said.

"I'll try," Steve agreed.

"Jo-jo," Bucky said.

"Yeah?" she wondered.

She had one hand lightly stroking Steve's dick, and the other one was working behind, trying to loosen him.

"You know how to do this, right? Plenty of lube. And don't touch his prostate, or he'll break your finger," Bucky said.

Jo-jo giggled until she saw the dead serious look on his face.

"You mean like, really?" she asked.

He nodded.

Now she looked scared, as if they were asking her to stick her finger in an electrical outlet. They sort of were.

"He's real good at taking orders and controlling muscle groups. Be quick and business like and you'll be fine," Buck said.

She nodded.

Unfortunately, it looked like Steve was finally losing his erection. Maybe he really wasn't into anal. Buck pulled another rubber from his pocket and gave it to Jo-jo. She took the hint, sheathed Steve, and lowered herself onto him while he was still half hard.

"It's easier this way," she winked at Steve.
"Okay, now breathe slow and deep. Relax. Let her in. She's soft and wet, right? No pain?"

"Shut up, Buck, and get outta my face. I can't do this and listen to you jabber at the same time," Steve said.

Bucky got up and backed away to the corner of the room, where he didn't have a view of what Jo-jo was doing, but where he could be on hand quick if he was needed. He crossed his arms and waited as silently as he could.

Jo-jo shut her eyes, just like Steve. Buck almost laughed again, but kept it in his head. Two people concentrating like they were disarming a nuclear bomb, and all to get a little sphincter open. Not even open much.

Jo-jo started a rocking motion on top of Steve. It looked real nice, and Buck wondered about his arm again. He should be hard from the eroticism of the evening, but he wasn't. It was fun and he was happy for Stevie like usual, but the thrill wasn't there. There had to be something inside the arm that was inhibiting him. Sure, he could perform if physically stimulated, but it never happened from something mental or from anything he saw. Orgasms weren't very great, either, if Kenya was patient enough to coax one out of him. A different motion on the bed caught his attention again.

Steve let his legs fall apart, and he was breathing long and deep. His skin was flushed all over, and Buck knew his pupils would be pinpricks if he looked. He hoped Jo-jo got the insertion done soon, or Steve was gonna be more than he wanted to control, but he'd still try for the girls' sake. Buck knew what oxygen loading his blood did for him. It was part of the reason Hydra had him wear the full face mask. They couldn't handle him when he was loaded. He'd tended to break people and equipment they didn't want him to.

Silently, he began to chant encouragement to Steve in his head.

"That's right, honey. You can take it. Just a little skinny girl finger," Jo-jo encouraged Steve.

He must have finally managed to loosen, because she did some manipulation, then cooed in triumphant praise. Soon as it was done, she snapped off the blue medical glove and tossed it to the floor. Then, she set her hands on Steve's chest and started to ride him.

"In a few minutes, you're going to feel really good," Jo-jo told him.

"Side effects?" Steve asked.

"You worry too much. You'll be lucky to feel much at all, as amped and loaded as you are. You might feel a momentary flash, and burn through it," Buck said.

"You fill me up real nice, honey. Maybe you could try again with Tiffany if you started half soft," Jo-jo said.

"Too passive," Steve muttered.

He turned them onto their sides and drew her knee up over his hip. Buck caught his eyes for a second. Yeah, his pupils were small. They'd never talked about loading before, but there was no denying what Steve was feeling.

"Small, controlled breaths. Gentle with the goods, pal," Buck reminded him.

Steve nodded, and he and his girl of the moment spent a while taking it slow. It was nice to see him not in a frantic, dangerous rush. But that might change.
"Whuu?" Steve stopped moving and focused internally.

Then, he laughed. His hands stuttered against Jo-jo's arms, and he looked to Buck in wonder.

"There it is," Buck said with a smile.

"I feel." Steve stated.

"Uh-huh," Buck agreed.

"Go see if they're okay, and if they are, I want them," Steve said.

It came out like an order, and Buck was fine with that. He found them eating ice cream in front of the television.

"He wants you, if you're feeling alright," he told them.

"Again?" Tiffany asked.

"He's different. If you're not hurting, then come on," Buck said.

Miranda got up and handed her ice cream to Tiffany.

"I'll be there in a minute, okay?" Tiffany said.

Buck nodded, but he looked her over closely, and everything else he could see in the suite, too. Nothing appeared suspicious, so he went with Miranda back to the room where Steve was.

"They found the ice cream," Buck said, but Steve was beyond caring.

Miranda got on the bed and moved behind Steve to touch him everywhere she could reach. He made appreciative noises like none Buck had heard from him before. Bucky felt smug that his ideas had worked and that Stevie was feeling good. With two girls working to make him happy, he felt that he'd done his job.

Tiffany appeared in the doorway in another sexy little outfit. It had straps and cinches and buckles. It reminded him of the things they'd seen in the bdsm bar, earlier. He was sure that Steve would appreciate it. Buck walked over and thoroughly investigated her clothes. He was handsy with her, and Tiffany looked cross with him.

"Sorry to forcibly ruin your dominatrix thing, but I'm gonna check you before you go near him in that," Buck said.

"You think I could hurt him?" she whispered.

"I think anything could happen," Buck said.

He found a small lozenge in a cute, shallow pocket of satin.

"It's a breath mint," Tiffany said.

She was acting put out, but Bucky could see the fear in her eyes. Before she could pop the 'mint' into her mouth, Buck ate it himself. Cyanide. Couldn't mistake the taste.

Before Tiffany could say anything resembling 'Hail Hydra' to ruin Steve's mood, Buck clamped a hand over her mouth and nose and brought her into the bathroom. He managed it without alerting
the three having fun on the bed. She flailed to get free and he tightened down on her until she was woozy from lack of air. With one hand, he ripped off her panties. He tore open a pack of lube with his teeth, then used his teeth to stretch a medical glove onto his fingers. He crushed the plastic tube that held the same drugs he'd just given to Steve. He used enough lube to not make her bleed, but he wasn't particularly gentle as he shoved three of the gelcaps into her rectum.

It was convenient that her outfit was so strappy. It gave him something to tie her up with. He waited until she quit struggling and went glassy eyed.

"Let me hear you say it," he whispered.

"I love Hydra," she muttered dreamily.

Bucky set her in the large tub. She would be drugged immobile for several hours. He could deal with her later, if she lived. It might be more merciful for her to overdose. The thought of a Hydra agent doing something to Steve while he was vulnerable sent him straight past rage and made him feel numb and awful inside.

He left the bathroom and re-checked the security of the door. He used one of Hydra's own devices to set an audible shrill if anyone tried to open it. Then, he rifled through Tiffany's bag, and Jo-jo's and Miranda's. The other two women had the usual stuff in their bags. So did Tiffany, but his fingers felt things in the inner lining of the bag. He ripped it apart and stared at the miniaturized equipment. Her gear wasn't as good as Natalia's, but her intent was clear. Bucky was thankful Steve had a big dick. If he hadn't made the evil cunt squeal, Buck had intended to give him his privacy. If he'd stayed away like a good sensible friend, then Steve would be hurt or worse right now. At the very least, he wouldn't have had the chance to experience what he was now.

Curses to Hydra scrolled through his head. It was a familiar litany. He checked in on Steve, then got a bottle of water from the fridge to wash the taste of cyanide out of his mouth. The stuff always gave him the jitters and made his veins itch. He felt like scratching all over, but he couldn't do that from the inside.

Buck put on a happy face and went to sit in his chair at the foot of Steve's bed again. Stevie was having so much fun that he didn't notice Buck get up again to check on the hollow thumping sound in the bathroom. Tiffany was convulsing in the tub, so Buck ran some cold water for her to chill in. He was satisfied that if she was that far gone, she wouldn't be a problem for him tonight.

Since Steve wasn't paying attention, he sat back down and thought. He stared clear through the bodies cavorting on the bed until it all went still except for the breathing.

Steve eased the tired women off of him and slipped from the bed. He grinned at Buck on the way to the bathroom. He faltered a little when he saw the irked eyebrow Bucky sent toward the bathroom.

He went in, cleaned up, and came back out.

"Hail Hydra?" Steve asked.

"Not this time. I put three of those pills up her ass. She loves Hydra," Bucky smirked.

"Are we secure?"

"As can be, given the situation. The door is alarmed. She had some small gear in her bag. No live electronics, because they knew I'd feel it out and find it. She probably would have tried to kill all of us, then used the usual fizzy pill," Buck shrugged.
"Kill us with what?" Steve asked.

He sat on the foot of the bed facing Bucky.

"Maybe they thought we'd be stupid and distracted. Somebody knows I'm not as hypervigilant as I used to be. A girl doesn't have to be Natalia to cut deep when you don't expect it," Buck pointed out.

Steve looked sour for a moment, then he turned and looked at the girls behind him, out cold on the bed. When he looked back at Bucky, his smile was dopey and sweet.

"You're a pal, Buck. I lo-"

"Shuddap. That's the drugs talking. How do you feel?" Buck asked.

"Real swell. Tops. I haven't felt anything like this since we were teens. You know, the girls are sleepy, but if you let them rest for a while, they might be nice to you," Steve said.

"Nah, I'm good. Hey, help me get them to the other bedroom. I don't wanna have them wake up and go in the bathroom here," Buck said.

Steve made a face.

"Too much screaming," he agreed.

They each got a girl and brought them to the other bedroom. They left their bathroom light on for them, and Buck took Tiffany's bag and stowed it in a kitchen cabinet up high.

Steve hungrily stuffed himself on Jo-jo's leftover steak, then he and Bucky finished off the desserts. He took another water and passed one to Steve. They settled in front of the television to watch something mindless.

"Since you're laying there naked as a jaybird, you want another hit? I've got one more," Buck told him.

"The stuff in my mouth, or the other stuff?"

"The other stuff. We used up all the herb. It's not good to leave stuff lying around unused where someone could find it," Bucky said.

"How long was I incapacitated?"

"About an hour and a half. It's just past midnight. You've got time, but I ain't putting it in for ya," Buck said.

"I think I can figure it out," Steve said.

He went into the bathroom where the Hydra operative was dying or not. Bucky marveled at the change in attitude the drugs seemed to make in his friend. Stevie was walking tall and proud with not a stitch on. He was relaxed, and the desperate ache of constant arousal had let go of him.

Buck chuckled to himself. He wondered how much writhing guilt Steve was going to enjoy torturing himself with when this was all over with in the morning. Steve came back to join him in front of the television with a bottle of water. Buck threw a pillow at him, but Steve deflected it onto the floor.
"You could put your underwear on, ya pig," Buck complained.

"That thing is torture. I don't like it," Steve shook his head in a juvenile sort of pout.

Buck tried to ignore the miles of pale flesh next to him. This wasn't at all the Steve Rogers he'd known all their lives, but he'd had a hand in making him this way with the drugs, so he didn't complain. His attention was more on their environment than anything else, anyway. Hydra knew where they were, but that was nothing new. He just had to keep aware. Steve wasn't much good naked and rolling like he was shortly gonna be, but he'd already done his part to knock Hydra on its ass and drive a stake in its heart. The man deserved a little R & R.

The slide of skin over skin was hard to dismiss. A glance showed him that Steve was touching himself, fingers gliding lightly up and down the center of his chest and abdomen. His other hand cupped his balls.

"You feeling it?" Buck asked.

"Mmm. Feels like my balls are gonna fall off," Steve rumbled through a throat that was lazy and stretched out with the backwards tip of his head against the cushions.

"Is that a 'yes'?" Buck smirked, and turned his eyes back to the crap on TV.

"Fuck, yeah," Steve rasped.

Bucky left him to his fun and kept a proper guard through the hour. He brought him a rag when he needed one. Twice.

"I love you, Bucky. You take good care of me. Always have," he said, all wrung out and blissed.

"Great. Now if I don't say 'I love you' back, you'll remember and get all pissy and uptight because I heard you when your guard was down. Yeah. I love you too, but remember, it's the drugs. You don't say that shit," Buck insisted.

"The fuck I don't. I should have said it before you fell," Steve insisted.

"Look, let's just not talk, okay?" Buck whined.

"Okay," Steve said.

Bucky changed channels and tried to find something remotely interesting. Steve was plenty interested in exploring his own body and the unique sensations the drug made him feel.

When his breathing broke on a soft gasp, Buck looked over again. Steve was idly fiddling with himself, but tears wet his face in streaks down to his chin.

"I shouldn't have done this. It's wrong," he said.

"Don't pay any attention to that. You're coming down. It's normal to feel anxious and crappy while it wears off," Buck said.


Bucky wasn't going to rib him about getting emotional. Not right now, anyway. He could listen.

"You needed some help to not hurt the girls tonight. Maybe you can get past that with some
"I don't want to practice. This was great, Buck. The best. I can't believe I did it. But I can't do it again. I sure can't make it a habit of it. Hell, the very first time I tried, I ended up with a Hydra agent. Oh, God! I stuck my dick in a Hydra agent! I-"

Steve was up and running to the bathroom. Bucky thought it was a poor choice of direction, because said Hydra agent was in there for him to stare at while he heaved his steak up. After a minute, there was a miserable call for help, and Buck got up to go see what was needed.

He found Steve kneeling at the tub, feeling of Tiffany's pulse. The room smelled unpleasant, so Bucky flushed and turned on the air vent.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

"Not yet," Steve said, nausea still obviously rolling his stomach.

"You want me to call medical?"

There was a long pause.

"No. How do I wash her out? Make sure that whoever gets her after this doesn't have anything of me to work with?"

Steve's words were hard and technical. More than anything else tonight, Buck was sad that Steve had to deal with this. Treating his own bodily fluids like a security breach was harsh. He didn't want this for him. He wanted his friend to have some last little thing that was sacred. There was nothing left for James Barnes, but Steve was different. He deserved better than to have everything tainted.

"Get out. I'll do it," Buck said.

"No. I need to know," Steve denied.

Bucky locked the bathroom door and reached for the shampoo.
Chapter 30

In the early morning, it was Banner alone who came meekly knocking at their door. The message was clear. Steve was going back to the tower, even if half of the island had to get torn up to accomplish it.

"What did you do with him?" Bruce asked when he saw Steve sprawled like dead weight across the hotel bed.


Bruce harrumphed at him, then reached over to wiggle Steve's heel, which stuck out of the covers. He didn't wake.

"It's just as well. He's not fond of needles," Bruce said.

He touched Steve's heel with a little white plastic device and there was a 'click' sound.

"Hey!" Bucky protested when Bruce set a tiny glass capillary tube to the bead of blood which welled up.

Bruce carried on collecting the sample. He slipped it into the white device, which was no bigger than a jump drive. It beeped and Bruce looked at the reading.

"Whatever you did worked. His T is within normal, even for an average guy. It hasn't been this low for months. I'll want details," Bruce said.

"You're like a shaggy dog. I can't stay mad at you," Buck said.

"That's self-preservation, because I'm having no trouble staying angry with you."

"You're angry?" Buck wondered.

Bruce gave him a tight smile and waved a hand at their insensate friend.

Bucky shoved at Bruce, hard.

"You're just like Tony. That's all I need," Bruce recovered his footing and walked into the bathroom.

"Gah!" he said when the light came on.

"Hydra. She brought toys in her bag." Bucky explained.

"Figures. Poor Steve," Bruce felt for a pulse, but didn't bother when he felt how stiff and cold the skin was.

There was another knock at the door. Bucky could hear somebody with hard soled heels fidgeting anxiously in the hallway. He opened the door. It was the handler who had brought the girls to them last night.

"Good morning, Sir. I trust everything was to your satisfaction?" he asked.
Buck didn't like his suit or his cologne. He smelled like fresh imported cartel, despite his good English, and he acted like it. It wasn't an important detail last night, and it wasn't really important this morning, either. It simply pissed him off. Nothing was American anymore.

"Come in. I don't think the ladies are up yet," Buck said.

He pulled the man into the suite, whether he wanted to come in or not. He resisted until Buck had the door shut behind him. He went for his weapon, but Buck took it from him, as well as the other little one strapped around his sock.

"One of your girls wasn't yours," Buck said.

The man went for his phone, and Buck took that too, and added it to the pile. He put his hands up in a show of submission.

"The blonde. How long has she been working with your organization?"


"She didn't make it. Send my condolences to your boss, but tell him if he ever gets a call from me, he better check his girls' gear before he sends them out," Buck said.

He pushed Tiffany's suitcase at the handler, and bundled the man out the door.

"Hey, you can't keep the other two! Or my things!" the man grew a pair and tried pushing back into the suite.

"I dare ya to do something about it," Buck told him, and shut the door.

The man howled out in the hallway because the heavy door had clipped and crunched his elbow a little before he could pull it free. His foot kicked at the door in a series of thumps, but then he retreated down the hall.

"We need to get Steve dressed and call for fresh linens," Bruce said.

He pocketed the handler's cell phone after slipping out its SIM card. With his own phone, he called in help.

Bucky went to one bedroom to rouse the sleeping girls and get them to dress and get moving. Then, he went across and smacked Steve around until he started slapping back.

"Go 'way, Buck. It's not time for the papers yet," Steve complained.

"Heh. You're seventy-something years late for running your paper route, squirt, but I'm sure they'd take you on if you went and applied," He teased.

Steve abruptly rolled and sat up.

"Fuck! All that happened, didn't it?"

"'Fraid so," Bucky agreed.

Bruce came to the bedroom door and knocked.

"Bruce," Steve said, surprised.
Bucky liked the way Steve was immediately happy to see his friend, even though he was confused as hell. It told him that he trusted the man who'd worried Bucky by so casually taking his blood.

"Hi. Um, Nat's on her way up, so maybe you should…?" Bruce said.

He gestured at all the skin Steve was showing as the covers fell off of him and dragged sideways.

"Right," Steve nodded responsibly, and just like that, the Captain was back.

Bucky sighed. It was good while it lasted, mostly. He'd have to think of other ways to get Stevie to come out again.

Steve grabbed the duvet and wrapped it around him like a burrito of awkwardness as he skulked to the bathroom.

"Do I have to brush my teeth with this in here?" Steve grumped.

"Natalia's coming, sweetheart. She'll save you," Bucky reminded him.

Steve raised a one finger salute as he brushed his teeth with the supplies provided. Maybe Stevie wasn't completely swallowed up by the Captain, after all. Steve looked contrite when he noticed his clothes and shoes neatly ready for him in the bathroom. He shut the door, and Buck could hear the dissatisfied grumbling while he dressed.

"It's not like you to be afraid of a little meat," Buck called.

"S not that. I can't get away from work," Steve complained.

"Sing me somethin' fresh," Buck answered.

"You guys are a hoot," Bruce smiled.

"And it's my job to clean up the scat. Mornin, boys," Natasha said.

Bucky didn't remember leaving the door open, but that meant nothing to Natalia.

Jo-jo and Miranda stood in the living room with bleary eyes and their bags. Bruce and Natasha's presence, as well as the propped open door and the large cloth laundry bin in the hall had them confused. Then, they noticed the handler's firearms on the coffee table.

"Didn't Julio come for us?" Miranda asked.

"He did. He remembered he had somewhere else to be, and I said you could stay for a while," Bucky said.

"Does this have anything to do with Anthony?" Jo-jo asked suspiciously.

"Not like you'd think," Bruce told them with a kind smile.

Everyone but the working girls knew what Bruce meant, and the girls didn't appreciate the humor when they were confused and feeling lost and out of sorts. It wasn't their fault some guy they knew also happened to be named Anthony.

"Where's Mad- uh- Tiffany?" Miranda wanted to know.

"She left with Julio because she was already up and ready to go," Bucky said.
"No more, Buck. This is ridiculous. Ladies, the truth is that something has happened and you need to come with us," Steve said.

"You're no fun," Buck said.

"What happened? We'll be in so much trouble if we don't get back to Julio. You don't even know!" Jo-jo said.

Miranda was looking closely at Steve's face in the daylight that came through the open curtains. Steve Gathered Miranda under one arm and Jo-jo under the other, and he guided them back to their room to explain a few things. Bucky didn't need written instructions. Soon as Steve had them shut in the bedroom, Buck hurried to the other bathroom and gathered up Tiffany's remains into the duvet Steve had left laid out on the floor. He carried the bundle through the living room, and Natalia made a space among the towels and sheets in the cart. After Buck set his burden down, she covered everything up so that the cart looked unremarkable.

"We should move," Bruce said as he tapped on the bedroom door.

Steve came out and took the ladies' bags. They left Julio's hardware on the table. He was very likely to come back for it soon, with reinforcements. Miranda and Jo-jo crowded close behind Steve as he led the way to the elevator.

Everyone stood aside as the large service elevator opened with the odd key that Natasha used.

"Why are we taking the service elevator?" Jo-jo asked.

Steve pressed a finger to his lips and smiled a little. That usually worked for children. It couldn't hurt to try in this instance. It worked. They all went down and out the back side of the hotel. Natasha pushed the cart into the open rear of the van Clint was waiting for them in. Miranda was even more confused as everyone crowded in. Jo-jo balked.

"I can't go with you. I have to get back to Julio. I should wait for him here. Or, maybe you can drop me off?" she said hopefully.

"Why do you have to get back to Julio?" Natasha asked.

"Because Julio knows where my daughter goes to school," Jo-jo said.

"Which school?" Clint spoke up.

"Pinehurst Elementary," Jo-jo said.

"Come on. We'll go there right now and you can get your daughter," Steve told her.

Jo-jo narrowed her eyes and stared at them. She stood on the concrete loading dock and agonized in indecision.

"C'mon, doll. Didn't he tell you who he is? He's a straight shooter. He wouldn't lie to ya," Bucky said.

Jo-jo decided to join them, but her eyes were roving over Steve and Bruce, Clint and Natasha. Bucky shut them all into the utility van and Clint got them moving.

"Captain America wouldn't take Mollies up the ass, either," Jo-jo said.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Natasha laughed. Clint barked so loud that he
coughed, and even Bruce smiled. Steve turned nine shades of red in progression and he looked down at the stale clothes he'd worn since yesterday evening.

"I deserve that," Steve said.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen! Tony's gonna love this," Clint chuckled as he drove.

"Anthony?" Miranda asked, worried.

"No, Tony. Stark. Steve, didn't you tell them?" Bruce asked.

"I did, but-" Steve sputtered.

"It's a little hard to believe," Miranda said.

"You don't need to worry, Miss. We don't know who Anthony is, but you don't have to see him if you don't want to," Steve assured them.

"Because you're dipping into your nest egg," Bucky groaned and rolled his eyes.

"So what if I am!" Steve fired back.

"No, no, no. This will not be okay with Pepper. You can't keep a stable, Steve. There's no way that works," Natasha said.

"You mean we really fucked Captain America?" Jo-jo asked.

"Got fucked by," Bucky corrected them.

"By Steve Rogers, ma'am. Not the Captain," Steve insisted.

"But aren't you telling me that you're Captain America?" Jo-jo persisted.

"And your birth certificate says Jo-jo?" Steve asked.

"No. It says Dana. Oh. So you just play Captain America on TV?" Jo-jo asked.

"God, take me now," Steve said with a huge sigh.

"No, you need to go to confession first," Bucky reminded him.

Steve reached over the laundry cart and smacked Bucky hard enough that they could hear bones clacking together.

"Ungrateful punk! You came to me," Bucky reminded him.

"All of which perfectly illustrates the point of why you ladies need NDAs, and why you can't keep a harem, Steve," Natasha said.

The van went over a bump and the laundry bin jostled against Bucky's legs.

"That's heavy laundry," Miranda pointed out.

"It's wet," Natasha said.

"Yeah, maybe we should drop it off before we get to the school," Clint said.
"You do that," Steve nodded.

"En route," Clint agreed.

"Who cares about laundry? We have to get to my baby before Julio thinks to," Dana insisted.

"There's another carrier on the way. We can transfer it," Clint clarified.

Steve shook his head and balanced against another bump. The van slowed down and turned left at an intersection, then turned left immediately again. Soon as they stopped, the back doors opened. There was a small crew waiting for the laundry cart.

"You trynna be in the dirty laundry business, Rogers? If you are, it looks like you're making a damn good start," Fury said dryly.


As soon as Fury's people had the cart out of the van, Steve sat down on the scuffed metal floor.

"If you're talking to the Lord about this, you might need to pray louder. Or get up on a carrier. I can get you closer, if you'd like," Fury said with not so subtle hints of threat.

"Take it easy on 'im. He's still crashing," Buck suggested.

"Easy, my ass," Fury grumbled, and slammed the van doors.

"That was not a laundry person," Miranda said.

"Not like you'd think," Bruce said.

"Uuhhh. Coffee," Steve moaned and rubbed at his temples.

"Are you sure he's Captain America?" Dana whispered to Miranda, who turned out to be Catherine.

Clint chuckled off and on all the way to the school, and Bucky agreed it was pretty funny.

Steve almost made it to his room after the grilling from Tony and Thor. When he got on the elevator, Estrella was waiting for him.

"Jarvis," Steve said, disappointed.

"I am not omnipotent, Captain. I am unable to physically remove her from the elevators, though you can review the data files and see that I tried my best at persuading her."

"Stop arguing with the computer. Come here," Estrella held her arms out to him.

"Estrella, I'm dirty. I need to take a shower," Steve protested.

His pride was all used up for the day. It no longer mattered that he was standing in the hallway to the living room, and everyone could hear him pleading with Estrella.

"Come here," Estrella said.

She wiggled her fingers at him. Steve noted that she wasn't wearing makeup today, and she was in jeans, sneakers, and an oversized T-shirt. One of his. She was plain and beautiful.
Her chin went up, and her arms started to drift downward.

Steve gave up and went to her. The elevator doors closed before the rest of the crew could hear the mighty sigh he let out when she had him.

"I'm so dirty," Steve murmured against her hair.

"I don't care," Estrella said.

Her arms pulled him tight, and she was stronger than he thought she'd be for such a small person. It surely didn't hurt, but he was impressed. Steve stood quiet and breathed in lungfulls of her clean scent. She smelled like ivory soap.

The elevator granted them access to both sides of their floor. Estrella tugged him toward his side.

"Miss, you are denied access to the Captain's suite when he is in the building. As long as you are with him, he will also not be able to access his suite," Jarvis said helpfully.

"On whose orders?" Estrella asked.

"Mine," Steve said.

"Take it back," she insisted.

"No. Not yet. I don't trust myself. You wouldn't either, if you'd seen me last night," Steve said.

They slid down the wall side by side and watched the rain that was beginning to fall against the window.

"You smell like vagina," Estrella said.

Steve covered his face with his hands and nodded. He drug his palms down into his lap and let them rest there.

"I told you, I'm not clean. You should let me go shower," Steve said.

"Steve. I'm not judging you. I know what you did. I know the kinds of things you do with Bucky. What I'm trying to tell you is that I'm not ignorant. I know what you think you mean when you say you're not clean," she told him gently.

"Really. Do I smell like dead Hydra agent, then? Because one of our girls was Hydra. Buck caught her before she could do anything to me," he said.

It seemed that everyone knew everything, anyway. He figured he may as well finish ripping the bandage off all in the space of one morning.

"Maybe I dislike Bucky a little less, then. There's something bad wrong with the world if you have to kill the girls who are meant to entertain you," Estrella frowned.

"Eya? Aren't you mad at me?" Steve asked.

"Are you deaf? I'm only mad at you if you keep pretending that you don't understand what I'm saying. I'm not mad at you for the girls. I see it in your eyes, when you're in pain. It's tearing you up inside. You don't like doing it, but you have to go when it gets to be too much. And then you're all guilty, like right now. Don't do that," she waved a hand at him.
Steve squinted at her in helpless noncompliance.

"I know. You can't control it. You hate that, too," she said.

"How do you know so much about me?" Steve asked quietly.

"All anyone has to do is look at you. You're easy to read."

Steve clunked his head back against the wall. Estrella's fingers twined between his, and he rocked their hands back and forth in appreciation of the friendly gesture.

"Ow," Estrella said, and she pulled her palm away from his.

"You're hurt?" he asked, all sharp attention again.

"No. It's nothing," she said.

It was useless to try to pull her hand from him. He studied the scraped skin carefully in the bright gray light.

"You fell on concrete. The garage. I'm sorry if I upset you," Steve said.

He wanted to kiss her hand where the scrape was, but then he remembered where his face and mouth had been. His hands, too.

"It wasn't you that upset me, mostly. It was the rest of them. They refused to go after you, and now look. You're unhappy. I knew you would be," she said.

Steve loved the deep chocolate color of her eyes. Her hair was brushed simply down around her face and ears, and it made her look boyish, except for the exquisite bone structure of her face. And then there were her lips. And her pert nose with the delicately articulated nostrils. And her eyes. He shook his head. What the hell was wrong with him? He shouldn't be thinking about touching her with any part of him. Especially not his hands or his lips.

He realized that for the brief moment that he'd been contemplating all the ways he thought she was pretty, he hadn't been feeling bad about last night. Steve smiled at her.

"There you are," Estrella said.

Steve nodded. She always seemed to find a different part of him that he only recognized when he was with her. Not Buck's Steve, and not the Captain. Someone else he wasn't sure he knew very well, yet.

"It sounds like an adventure, all in one night, like one of those movies with drunken frat boys. Tell me what happened," she said.

Estrella wiggled eagerly like she was waiting for a good story. Steve frowned down at her, and she smiled unrepentantly.

"Go on. And don't leave out the good parts," she said.

"Could you let me go shower first?" he asked.

"No. It's like smell-o-vision this way. You know you won't tell me later. You'll run away and find a reason not to talk about it. Tell me now, then you can go shower and sleep it off," she insisted.
"Jarvis-" Steve began.

"Go," Estrella finished the privacy command for him.

"Indeed," the AI said stiffly.

"You sure found a way to piss him off," Steve smiled.

"He doesn't like it when I tie up the elevator shafts. He had to reroute traffic and apologize to people," Estrella explained with a naughty twinkle.

"But he's so good at apologizing that you can't get put out with him. 'I'm terribly sorry, but there is a malfunction with the blah, blah, blah,'" Steve mimicked Jarvis with a ramrod straight proper British posture and accent.

Estrella laughed.

"You're stalling," she pointed out.

"Yeah," Steve admitted.

He looked down at their joined hands and his thumb worried at her hurt skin.

"That hurts, you know," she told him.

"It's fascinating. I want to draw your hand. My wounds go away so quick that I barely remember the small ones. This is tiny, but you'll have it for a few weeks. Little red lines in your skin like glacier skids, and then pink lines, and then pale ones. Then the dry skin will flake away, and you'll be all new again," he said.

"Still stalling. You don't have to tell me. It's just that I want to know," Estrella said.

She pulled her hand away from his before he worried it bloody with his distracted rubbing.

"Did Bucky give you Ecstasy?"

"What?" Steve squawked, "Eya! I don't know what kind of wild ideas you have about what we do, but it's nothing like that. I'm not into men,"

She laughed at his ignorance. She patted his hand to soothe him.

"Ecstasy is a drug. Usually a pill. It makes you feel good, like you want to touch everything," she explained.

"Oh. Maybe. He wouldn't tell me what it was," Steve admitted.

"And then the girls," Estrella said.

"Let me start from the beginning," he told her.

"Please," she said.

"I left the restaurant."

"Because of Darcy. I don't like her," Estrella frowned strongly.

"Not completely because of Lewis. She was the last straw. I don't care for Darcy, either, but I don't
think she's a bad person."

"Right. So, you left the restaurant…" Estrella prompted.

"I went to Buck's place. Maybe I should have taken a cab, but transportation in this city is so slow, I can go faster on foot. All the cameras. The phones, I mean. I had to break some of them. Some guys wanted me to stop and talk, and they were pushy about it. Anyway, I got to Buck's place. Hah! I forgot. He blew a hole in his door. He musta thought I was Hydra coming to get him. Anyway, I told him what I wanted," Steve said.

"You guys are creepy together," Estrella made a face.

"Yeah, I know you don't like him. But asshole that he is, he put it all together for me. I know he gets a kick out of shocking me anymore. He took me in a, uh, bdsm? Is that the acronym?"

Estrella nodded.

"He took me into a gay bdsm bar. Sweet Lord forgive us all, Eya. The things I saw in there," Steve said, and the straight and narrow part of him that she found so endearing shone clearly through in his expression.

"A gay bar? Steve! Did you get hit on?" she asked.

"I think so? A big hairy guy really wanted to know what I wanted,"

"A bear. If you'd been feeling a little more secure, the bears might have left you alone. You stood there looking lost, didn't you?"

"A bear. Big, hairy guy. Alright, I get it. Buck warned me about them. Do I have to tell you everything I saw in there?"

Steve looked like he was going to get stubborn if she demanded it. She shook her head. If she really wanted to know, she could ask Bucky. He was nasty. He would tell her what was in there.

"Good. I'm sure that's where he picked up the drugs. Then we got into a limo with some girls and their handler and went to a hotel. A nice hotel," he told her.

"Wait. You just got into some random limo and found girls there? Any girls? What about the Hydra agent?" she asked.

"No. No. Buck made some phone calls and set things up. The agent must have been already in place, waiting. I don't know if she was waiting for me specifically, or anyone on a list of people. Buck and Natasha are going to find out how her op was triggered when Buck called. Anyway. Three girls. Buck called for three women. For me," Steve said.

He was wallowing in guilt again. Estrella rubbed the back of his hand.

"What did they look like?"

"A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead," he told her.

"No. What did they look like? Anybody can dye their hair or wear a wig. How did Bucky know what you'd like, or did it not matter?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Steve said.
"I want to know. What makes Steve Rogers pant like a puppy?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

"It wasn't about that. It was about something else," Steve said.

She stared at him expectantly.

"I wanted big girls who I was less likely to hurt, alright? I mean, they weren't fat. They were tall and a little Reubenesque," Steve said with more than a hint of grouchy.

Estrella pulled her chin back. She felt stung. She pushed down her feeling of rejection. What he said made good sense for him. She knew why he ran. If he wanted girls, they would be strong ones.

"Were they pretty?"

"Of course they were pretty. I suppose a guy could get ugly prostitutes if that's what he was into, but then they wouldn't seem ugly to him, would they? But no, they weren't ugly. They were classy. Big men pay big money for girls like these," he said.

"And you're a big man," Estrella pointed out.

"Well I'm large. But I'm not big. Like corporations and political connections. That's Tony," Steve said.

"I know. Go on. So you and Bucky and the girls go up to the nice hotel room," she tried to help him along.

Steve clammed up. He literally couldn't think of a way to describe the events inside the hotel room in a way that wouldn't cause his mother to want to wash out his mouth with borax. Estrella saw his jaw locked up and the words piled up in a jumble behind his eyes. He looked to her and shook his head.

"What's the first thing you did in the room? Was it the drugs?" she asked helpfully.

"No. We ate. Room service. Steaks. No. While we waited for room service to come with the steaks, I went with Tiffany. Or whatever her name was," Steve said.

He got a very specific look about him that he had when he thought of Hydra.

"I had sex with her, Estrella. I hurt her at first, because her insides were too small. Or I was too big. Buck came in when she yelled in pain," he said.

He shook himself. Estrella could feel disgust rolling off him in sheets that crumpled up and piled around them.

"You were fine with it before you knew she was Hydra," Estrella pointed out.

"I was stupid. Dumb. I should have known. I can't do anything without Hydra laying a steaming pile on it. I even made sure to make it up to her, that first bit of pain. I wanted her to have a good time," he sneered at himself.

"Only you, Steve. Such a gentleman, even with a paid woman," Estrella said.

"I won't do it again. I don't know why I thought it was a good idea at the time. That's how people ruin their lives, isn't it? They fall into doing what feels good at that moment. I did too. I'm no
"Stop it. Your self-hate is starting to sound like icing to cover up a cake you're trying to feed me. Did you orgasm?" she asked bluntly.

Steve ground his teeth and nodded. He didn't have to like answering her, and he didn't have to tell her that he'd come twice and Buck had fussed at him for being careless with the prophylactic. But that was a lie of omission. His teeth rubbed so hard that Estrella could hear it.

"Twice," he bit out.

"Okay, so you were excited. That's why you ran off. And she was the first of the night. It wasn't that it was that woman. Or that Hydra agent. It would have been the same with any of the other girls, maybe even better. They were real professionals. She was only a fake. They wouldn't have been too small for you, inside," Estrella said.

Steve let out a long, controlled breath. Eya was right. It wasn't that Tiffany was anything special. Cold, dead, wet, stiff Tiffany. Stiffy Tiffy. Oh, God, that was horrible. His brain was fried from drugs. Didn't drugs fry your brain? He ground the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

"How long ago did you last take anything?" Estrella asked.

"Eight hours? Nine? I don't know. I wasn't wearing anything. No watch," he said.

He held up his wrist for her to see his bare arms.

"How did she die?"

"Buck said he put three pills up her bottom. It would have been alright if she lived. He wanted her out of the way so I wouldn't be distracted thinking about work," Steve smiled a little, thinking of how swell Bucky was.

"Three? That's a lot, but maybe it shouldn't have killed her?" Estrella wondered.

"They were big pills. Buck got them at that bar, so maybe they were for large men. Bears. Buck doesn't run with low quality gear. I'm sure they were strong," Steve said.

"That's a strange way to kill someone," Estrella frowned.

"This is Buck we're talking about. He does what it takes to get the job done with the materials on hand. He's always been that way, even before. Especially before," Steve said.

"You love him," Estrella said.

"Course I do," Steve readily admitted.

Estrella was the one to take a deep breath and let it out carefully, this time. She needed to stop saying unkind things about Bucky. He wasn't going anywhere, and he was a very important part of Steve's life. Compared to Buck, her friendship with Steve was like a quick chat in a bar with a stranger.

The thought sobered her. It reminded her that she would be moving on someday. Away from this place and these amazing people. She didn't want to think of that right now.

"Eyaaa…" Steve chastised her.
She looked up to see his gorgeous blue eyes. So expressive. He knew what she was thinking. In general, anyway.

"Stop that," he said, and pressed a finger to her nose so that it mushed flat, and then to one side.

Estrella shook her face at him. She was being more moody than him, and he was recovering from drug use.

"So, how did Bucky get you to absorb the drugs?"

"He thought it out, and he had some experience, with what was done to him before. For the herbal stuff, he chopped it into a powder, cut my gums open, and packed a pocket of it in there. It healed in a minute or so, and then my blood started taking it in. It didn't last long. Maybe an hour. I didn't like the procedure much, but the effect was relaxing for a little while. For the other stuff, we did the same as he did with the girl. The Hydra agent," Steve corrected himself.

"He put it up your bottom? Steve, are you sure you and Bucky aren't a little more than friendly?"

"No. He had Jo-jo administer it to me. The redhead. I didn't like that part, but at least it wasn't Buck. He stood somewhere else and didn't watch. Not much. Not as much, dammit. He kept watch. He always does. That's why the Hydra woman didn't get me," Steve said.

"Buck watches everything you do?" Estrella had that sinking feeling again.

"It's not like you're thinking. I believe something's wrong with him. He never gets aroused. Not ever. Even when he should. When we're just talking, he's almost like the old Bucky. But when he's looking out for me, he's cold. I can see the assassin in him. The assassin wasn't allowed sex, I'm guessing. He's not exactly asexual, but it's close. He likes to tease and banter, but it's never deeper than words or a careless gesture," Steve said.

"That's not normal. If he's a healthy young man, then he should feel something. He used to?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Steve made a face like watching a train wreck, "Bucky was a living legend in the old neighborhood. It was so bad, it became a joke among us, and it carried on into the Commandos," Steve said.

His brow was troubled, too, now that Estrella had pointed it out to him.

"That arm. There's something in it. He won't let Tony touch it, but maybe he'll let Bruce," Steve said.

"Okay. You have something on your to-do list to help Bucky, after all the things he's done for you. If you want to count those as good things," she said dubiously.

"Buck isn't bad for me. He…” Steve's words trailed off as he noticed Estrella watching him with humor.

Steve's face turned rosy just a little at the tops of his cheekbones.

"Crunk," she said with victory.

"Crunk?"

"Bear trap," Estrella giggled at him.
"Bear…? Bear trap. That's so wrong, Eya!" Steve winced and shook his head, but he was smiling.

"It's that innocence. And the choirboy looks. It'll draw them in every time. But be careful. I can catch you up in it, too. You're so easy to lead into it," she teased.

"I know. But Bear trap? That's really rotten," he groaned in humiliation.

Steve smarted under the sting of the knowledge that big burly gay guys were drawn to him. He'd seen a lot looking and contemplating before that one had advanced on him.

"But it's true," she said, "I know you're this big hero and all. The biggest, really. Well, the most well-known heroic guy from Earth. Still, you come across as innocent. It's why Tony can't help but tease you. And Clint, too. Even Natasha."

"That's not true. I've got a higher kill count than Nat and Clint, barely. I didn't mean it to happen that way, but it was war. It is war. I'm not an innocent, by any definition, Estrella," he said.

"It's not in the numbers. It's in your heart. You still want to be good," she said.

"Maybe. And it's 'Angel-face'. That's what Buck calls it. I got us out of so much trouble with it when we were kids. Sometimes in the Army, too. I can't lie worth a frog's butt, but I can charm a snake oil salesman. Don't forget it, doll. My ma was the only person it sometimes didn't work on," Steve admitted.

"I'm terrified," Estrella told him blandly.

Steve looked at her much as he had Pepper in the elevator last night. He laid it on with just the right nuance of layers for a person of Estrella's skepticism. He started out with subtle, and blended into captivated moon-calf, through all the shades in between. It was like mixing colors for painting, he thought.

Estrella looked up at him, mesmerized.

"Crunk," he said, and touched her nose.

"Dammit!" Estrella shook her head and scowled.

He laughed while she beat at him on his hunched shoulders.

"You stink! Go shower," she told him, and she stormed off through the open elevator.

Steve laughed happily and rose to his feet. Gosh, he loved that girl. She helped him feel good inside, even when he tended toward sourness. As Jarvis closed the doors between them, he caught her looking back at him. Her scowl pulled into a shy smile. He pushed two extended fingers toward her, and she reached to him the same way, aiming through the distance.

They were good. He could go rest, now.

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_Please note:_ Yes, Buck can be harsh. My version of Bucky isn't quite the sullen, harmless confused guy. I hope I haven't alienated my readers with the weird, distasteful stuff.
Chapter 31

A/N: You know Steve can't just sit back and enjoy it. C'mon! Captain America enjoying anything that's not grandma-approved? He's got to torture himself a little. I tried to get business done and make this short, because I'm eager to get to the fun stuff that comes right after.

Steve's eyes opened at a little after two in the afternoon and he knew that if he didn't get moving, the guilty conscience that was circling him like a vulture was going to land and start picking him apart. He made a large, boring sandwich to eat while he dressed in his workout gear. He could feel trouble coming for him like one of those acme anvils that fell out of the sky on the coyote and roadrunner cartoons.

His body felt amazing. He was free from the driven urge to hunt for sex, and from the grinding effort of trying to resist that urge. For the first time in days, he didn't need clothes that afforded him 'coverage' at the front.

He knew he'd behaved poorly, to say the least, and that a heavy load of remorse was waiting for him as soon as he let himself think of it. For the brief twenty minutes that it took him to get up, dress and eat, he tried to enjoy the physical relief that his appalling lack of good judgement had bought him. It was like forcibly ignoring personal issues while he was on duty as the Captain, except backwards. He was taking a few minutes to ignore duty and obligation while he could. It was an unfamiliar feeling, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

There was no official duty, no job to distract him today. Nothing was on the schedule, so he needed to find something to do. He wanted to work his body a little, since he felt so good at the moment. Estrella didn't get off work until four-thirty, and he didn't know if he should bother her, but he wanted to. He had to stay busy until then, at least.

Sam was on one of the treadmills when he got to the gym. Steve stepped onto the identical machine beside him and started running. It seemed that simply seeing another person who knew what he'd done was enough to start the litany of guilt in his head. It was too awkward to look Sam in the eyes and not acknowledge the painful muck-dragging he'd faced from Tony this morning.

"You're on the wrong side," Sam teased him.

"On your right, then," Steve corrected the phrase to match their current circumstance, but Sam could tell that his heart wasn't in the humor.

"At least you can't pass me up and make me look bad," Sam replied in a lingering stubborn attempt to lighten his friend's mood.

It wasn't going to work. Steve had a bit of guilt and worry clenched firmly in his teeth, and from the look of his jaw, he wasn't letting go of it anytime soon. The man was annoying, that he could run at that speed without even the need to open his mouth to breathe harder.

Steve and Sam ran for a while. Sam had already been sweating and puffing when Steve came in. After ten minutes, Sam got off the treadmill, drank some water and wiped his face. He stepped to the front of Steve's machine so he could say what was on his mind with Steve's full attention. He could see that maybe Steve didn't want to talk about what he'd done last night, but a few things needed saying.
He'd been there as Tony had asked all the questions when Steve came home. Thor had been hard to read, and mostly stood there with a carefully diplomatic face and nothing to say. Steve had told them the bald truth, but Sam had refused to let him answer a few personal questions because he could tell Steve was still not quite right in the head, with the lingering effect of the drugs in his system. Some stuff they needed to know, and some stuff they didn't. Sam didn't like how being part of the Avengers made some people feel they had a right to the man's personal life. He deserved some privacy.

"When's the last time you had any time off?" Sam asked.

"I try to take it easy on Sundays," Steve said while he ran.

His heavy footfalls made some noise on the deck of the treadmill, but it wasn't hard to speak above it.

"I don't mean one day. I mean vacation time. Real down time. You know, like normal people take when they go to Disneyworld or on a road trip, or go camping. When's the last time you had a week off?"

"I spent a few weeks off duty after I came out of the ice," Steve said.

"And you went to the Grand Canyon then? You went to see Niagara? Or maybe Dollywood?" Sam pressed him.

"Dollywood?" Steve asked.

"Just answer the question, Steve," Sam urged him.

He was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

"I haven't been anywhere. Not while I was off-duty," Steve admitted.

They'd been all over the world on the job, but that didn't count.

Sam was the second person to suggest he should take some time and go somewhere else to clear his head and get some perspective. Just last night before the restaurant, Tony had said pretty much the same thing.

"That's what I thought," Sam said.

"I know you're having all kinds of fun blaming yourself for all the messed-up things you did last night," Sam held up a hand to shush the righteous protest Steve was dying to make, "but you need to know that this has been brewing for way too long. You work a high stress job, and you haven't taken any real down time. Ever. You put a person under that kind of pressure with no relief time, and something's got to give. A super-soldier is still human. The rules do apply to you in some things," Sam said.

"I can't make excuses for what I did. It was wrong, and rationalizing it doesn't make it any less wrong," Steve insisted.

"It's not an excuse. It's a causative factor. I should have seen it coming, but I didn't," Sam frowned, as if it was his personal failing.

"I did those things, Sam. Not your fault, no matter what you think you should have seen coming," Steve denied.
"Man, will you shut up and have the decency to breathe while you run? I think everybody's tired of the righteous self-recriminations. Most everybody gets a little wild at some point in their life, usually before they're old enough for a senior citizen discount. You're long overdue, and it was your turn. That's all it is," Sam said with a dismissive shake of his head.

"But."

"No! No buts. It happened. You keep whatever fun you had from it. You work on fixing the bad parts. And take some time off. Go on vacation!" Sam called to him as he left the gym.

Steve ran on. Sam wasn't seeing the big picture. The first real clench of dread hit Steve in the gut as he thought of what word of last night could do to the Avengers as a whole, and to people who looked up to Captain America in particular. Heck, the Smithsonian was still running that display of his life as if he was a martyred saint instead of a real guy. He felt more than a little sick as he imagined a sleazy 'adults only' compilation film of last night's events offered in a side room as folks were leaving the exhibit. That's what he'd let himself become, just like every other role model that let people down nowadays.

Steve adjusted the speed on the treadmill to make it more challenging. It wouldn't fully distract him, but having to focus on not getting spit off the back of the machine helped. He kept on until it felt like the sole of his left shoe was starting to come loose. Sam would be pleased to see him breathing and sweating now.

When he was done in the gym, he took a quick shower to get the sweat off, and then changed into casual clothes. Steve was tired of being indoors. He wanted clean, fresh air and searing sunlight to chase away the gloom in his head. He followed his feet and ended up on the rooftop patio.

The late afternoon sun was warm, but up this high, the gusty breeze from over the ocean was cool. Steve wandered over past the loungers and stood by the railing. While his thoughts tried to get into some useful order, he pinched a tip off of the little grass-like plants on the garden cart. It didn't taste like much of anything, but it gave him something to worry between his teeth.

He had to set up Dana and Catherine and the little girl in some comfortable way while Natasha and Bucky ran down the connections and found out what they needed to know. The child was only in pre-kindergarten, so it's not like she'd miss any heavy academics while they worked at the problem. Julio didn't seem to know who his end-customer had been yet, and that was a good thing. Steve was hopeful that he could stay off the news, but he was trying to prepare himself for the worst. An organization like Julio's wouldn't sit quiet and simply enjoy having something dirty over Captain America. They'd want hush money.

He was going to have to prepare a statement, just in case. If a call for blackmail came in, he'd have to be ready to go to the media voluntarily. No way was he going to let himself get pushed around by underbelly thugs. He briefly considered going public right off, but decided against it. As cleansing as honesty would feel, he needed to protect people from what he'd done to their Captain if he could.

Steve thought about the guys at the VA hospital that he went to visit, and the guys at the VFW hall, too. There were the kids at the cancer hospital and their parents, and all the charity organizations he'd used his face for. And Father Miller and the folks at church. Steve winced. It was going to take a chunk out of him if he had to come out with this. Captain America would never be the same.

And his ma! Sarah Rogers was long dead, but she still lingered as a gentle voice and a kind face in his mind. He knew she was up there somewhere. Hopefully she couldn't see everything. For a stunt
like he'd pulled last night, she wouldn't just twist his ear. She'd be Disappointed. He'd let her good name down, and his father's too. Steve hung his head and felt shame so thick that it was hard to breathe past it. Morals and righteousness were nice standards to wave around, but his ma... She'd be heartbroken. She hadn't raised him to go with paid girls and put illegal stuff in his body.

"Captain, Sir is wondering if he may join you," Jarvis said from somewhere nearby.

Steve wiped at his eyes. Tony had been to the point and cool with him this morning. Distant. Like he didn't know what to do with him. Maybe like he was a misbehaved employee that he was displeased with, but that his company couldn't afford to let go. It had been worse than sarcasm and snide remarks. Stark had been seriously rattled. It wasn't at all the gleeful reaction Steve and Clint had expected.

"Captain? Are you well?" Jarvis asked kindly.

"I'm fine. Tell Tony I don't mind if he wants to come out. It's his place," Steve said.

He stood up straighter from the slump he'd let his posture assume. He wiped at his face again and took a deep breath. If Tony wanted to rip into him, it was no more than he deserved.

He heard quiet footsteps, and Stark came to stand beside him. Rather than face him square on in confrontation, he stood facing the glass rail like Steve did. Steve waited, ready to defend himself if Tony said something outrageous or wrong. He was ready to accept blame for whatever trouble he'd caused that he didn't realize yet. Pepper always knew about and anticipated trouble that he didn't foresee, and she would have shared her concerns with Tony.

Tony stayed quiet for a long moment. A strong gust of wind made them both sway a little. Tony cleared his throat and glanced aside to meet his eyes. Meekness? Was that what he was seeing? It didn't look right on a man like Stark.

"Pepper told me I was wrong, and I see that now. I shouldn't have-"

"No, you're right to call me on it," Steve shook his head.

"Don't interrupt me! This is hard enough. Will you let me talk, here?" Tony snapped, then immediately looked contrite again.

Steve nodded once, and bowed his head to look at his shoes.

"I look up to you. No! Let me say this," Tony said when Steve started shaking his head in protest, "Howard... Dad... He made you out to be this paragon. This perfect man. Working with you for a few years, I've found that it's pretty much true. No, listen! I thought it was all bullshit. But it's not. One big dose of self-sacrifice was easy enough for me. It only takes a few minutes to fly a nuke into space. There's no time for angst or regrets in that. But you do sacrifice like a pro all day long, every day. All the little chronic sacrifices over time are a lot harder to live with. I'm not that good."

Steve sighed. After Clint was done laughing this morning, he'd told Steve to not worry about last night so much. Bruce had said similar words to him, and Natasha had even given him a look that seemed to mean something similar. He didn't know where Tony was going with this, but it was starting to sound like more feel-good smoke blown up his ass. Hah! He'd literally put stuff up his ass. Feel-good stuff. Steve grimaced, then frowned. Now was not the time to look distracted, when Tony was trying so hard to say something serious.

"I didn't realize that you'd become an idol for me too. Not like I'm a fan! Iron Man will always be my favorite Avenger. What I'm doing a really shitty job of saying is that I think I was so hard on
you this morning because you're up here," Tony said, and held a hand out above both their heads.

"I was counting on pulling myself up with that. Pepper makes me want to be a better man. For her. I don't know anybody better than you," he looked at Steve sharply, "and you fell. Last night, you fell to my level. It hurt. I didn't expect it to, and I know that's selfish. Fuck! Pepper said all this so much better. The point is, you did no worse than I've done a hundred times. I shouldn't have put you on a pedestal, but it's hard not to. You're still the better man, Steve. I only made the sacrifice play that once. Every other day, I do what I want. You only fell once. Well, maybe twice, with that blowjob thing a while back at Barnes's place."

"And the lap dance at the strip club, and a few girls across Europe," Steve admitted quietly.

Tony stared avidly for a moment, then shook his head.

"Part of me wants to know all about that. I won't ask, because you'll tell me, won't you?" Tony asked in a rush.

Steve shrugged. He didn't know what he should do. Guilt made him want to admit everything he'd done. But if Tony was trying to be different and he was looking to him for guidance, maybe he'd better keep his mouth shut.

"No more soul searching. Have you ever had hives? Of course you haven't. Any more of this honesty bullshit, and I'll break out in hives." Tony tried a weak grin, and it came across as sickly.

"I've had hives, Tony. I used to get outbreaks all the time when I was a kid," Steve said.

"Oh. Right," Tony said briskly.

Tony's mind was already on other things, now that his apology speech was over. He rubbed his hands together and waved Steve over to a lounger. They sat, each on the foot of a chair. Tony seemed to have a plan, so Steve waited to hear it.

"We have to keep this quiet if we can. Not that you're not entitled to be human sometimes, but your adoring public would feel even more crushed and aflutter than I did. The girls…" Tony snapped his fingers repeatedly.

"They're women, Tony. Catherine and Dana. Dana's daughter is Melody," Steve told him.

"We've put NDAs in front of them and they seemed to understand what they were signing and why. Romanoff feels optimistic about Catherine keeping her mouth shut, but we're not so sure about Dana. It's time to pay for your play, Cap. You're sending them on a ten day Caribbean cruise," Tony told him.

"It's a good plan, if they'll go for it," Steve agreed, "it keeps them away from Julio for a few days and buys some time. What then? Nat says I can't be tied to them, but I want to help them if they want to make any changes in their lives."

"You're not getting this. Stop thinking about them for a minute and worry about your own skin. Medical tested them for STDs and pregnancy. They're clean, as of this morning, not that you'd have to worry about diseases. Ten days away on a ship, and we test them again when they get back. What happens then depends on the results," Tony said.

"But I used…" Steve said.

Tony looked at him patiently. Steve re-examined his memories of last night's sexual encounters.
Shit! At first, Buck had made sure he used a rubber every time. Then, things got fuzzy after he allowed Dana to put the drugs in him. Buck had been distracted, probably dealing with the Hydra agent, and Steve didn't remember anything but sex after that. He remembered hedonistic pleasure, possibly not interrupted or impeded by safety measures.

"Barnes admitted that he lost track of things in the bedroom while he was dealing with the other woman. We have to consider the possibility of consequences. We offered them the pill, but only Dana took it," Tony told him.

"What pill? What good does a pill do at this point? I thought you had to take those every day for a month before sex," Steve said.

Tony blew out a breath and drummed his fingers on the metal frame of the lounger. He felt like he was about to tell a kid that Santa Clause wasn't real. No, this was worse, because he wouldn't mind doing that. Tony knew that Steve wasn't going to react well.

"I guess you didn't hear about it yet, but there's a 'morning after' pill. If conception does happen, this pill usually takes care of it. It's designed to make the woman's body reject the embryo. I had some time to read today, and--"

"No," Steve said strongly.

"No, you won't let them have the pill? You can't decide that for them," Tony said.

"The hell I can't! If anybody is pregnant from last night, then it's my baby, too. I get a say in this. No kid should be rejected by his mom, especially if his dad wants him!" Steve nearly shouted.

Steve was flushed with anger. It was a scary sight completely different than his bashful blushes. His eyes didn't look like this when he was bashful. At least he was keeping his fists to himself.

"There's no need to get angry now. Dana already took the pill, and Catherine refused it. We don't have a say in what they choose. They're the women. They have to carry it for nine months," Tony cautioned him.

"I'm not talking about the woman. Pregnancy is a temporary condition, and I'll pay for the best of care and stand by her if I caused it. I'm talking about my child. If somebody is pregnant and I did it, then I damn sure want my kid! Do you think I'd leave him out there with my blood in him, my serum in him, for Hydra or anybody to take and experiment on? And I don't want him killed without him having any choice as to whether he gets to live or not. There are three people in that kind of decision, not just the woman," Steve said.

"I hear you, but that's an old-fashioned way of seeing it. People don't see an embryo as human life anymore. As a disciple of science, I'd argue that point because an embryo meets all the criteria for life of its particular species, but there are agendas and money out there. Politics," Tony told him.

The look Steve gave him made Tony put his hands up in an "it's not me" gesture. This time, it really wasn't. Stark Industries had stayed carefully out of the field of human reproductive ethics. It wasn't their product market, anyway, and Pepper didn't like taking intractable positions when the wind kept changing and there was no profit in the risk.

"None of that matters to you right now. You have to wait. It's nearly impossible that anybody could be pregnant. Both of them were on birth control because of their jobs, and Catherine said it was the wrong time of the month for her. Dana took the pill. I wouldn't worry about it," Tony said.

Steve stood up, and he had that look about him like he was about to go reprimand someone. Tony
grabbed his pants leg. He wished he was wearing the suit for this, because stopping Steve when he was already in motion nearly pulled him off his seat.

"Sit down, Steve. Dana made her choice. It's already done. Believe me. I've been here before. The only thing you can ever do to completely control this is to not get your dick wet in the first place," Tony said.

"Hah! Am I hearing Tony Stark advocating chastity?" Steve asked sarcastically.

"Not at all," Tony shook his head, "I like living dangerously. Always have. And like you, I can afford to play. Well, I used to could afford it. It's not about money anymore for me. About the paying part…"

"It's not a game, Tony. I wasn't playing. I know damn well what sex is for. It's been for the same thing since the beginning of time. Why do you think I don't mess around? I just… couldn't take it anymore. I never wanted to hurt anyone, but I wasn't thinking clearly. So now I need to be responsible," Steve said.

"I'd be happy to manage this for you, since I'm an expert, but Pepper says that you're a 'real boy' now, and you need to step up," Tony said.

"I can figure it out, Tony. I'll use the conglomerate account to book their vacation, then transfer my personal funds to cover it so my name isn't attached. Bill me for their care in medical, too. Where do cruise ships leave from? I'll drive them there," Steve said.

"They leave from San Juan. Happy will drive them to the airport, and Romanoff will put a tracker on them to check that they get on the ship and stay on it. The less you're seen to be involved with the physical part of the arrangements, the better," Tony said.

Steve sat for a moment longer, thinking.

"I might take some time off," he told Tony.

"You should. Hill has agents dealing with things in D.C. for now. There's nothing we can do for a few days, since Barnes blows everything up without retrieving the data," Tony said.

His frustrated expression told Steve what Tony thought about Buck's blast and burn methods of taking down Hydra.

"I'm sorry I let you down, Tony, but I'm surprised. I thought you'd be pleased," Steve said.

"I thought I would be, too," Tony admitted.

Tony looked into the far distance for a moment, then turned a 'what are you waiting for? Why are you still here?' look at Steve.

"Thanks for your help," Steve told him.

"Sorry I was an asshole hypocrite," Tony said.

"No, you were a hairy, bleeding asshole hypocrite," Steve pointed out.

Tony nodded.

Steve gripped his shoulder for a moment in silent acceptance of their situation. He and Tony frequently disagreed, but they usually worked toward the same goal.
"No apologies, big man. Practice that. Unless it's your woman, and then that rule doesn't apply at all," Tony said.

Steve brought his laptop down several levels to the temporary apartments Jarvis directed him to. He knocked on Catherine's door and asked her to join him in Dana's place across the hall.

Steve kept his demeanor strictly professional, and that made the women uneasy. It wasn't how they were used to dealing with men, especially customers.

Little Melody was jumping on the couch in front of the television. There was a plate of macaroni and cheese on the coffee table and a coloring book and markers beside it. The little girl carefully ignored him and sat down to eat a bite of her supper. Steve thought it was odd that a child would ignore a strange man in her personal space, and he didn't want to contemplate why she had reason to do so.

Dana and Catherine went with him into the dining room and he opened his laptop on the table. They stood together a few steps away from him, suspicious. Steve didn't like that they looked afraid, but he understood it.

"I know it can feel intimidating here in the tower. They took your phones, so you feel isolated and powerless. Everyone has plans for you that you don't understand. You get told where to go and you don't know what's coming next. The medical ward with their tests, and then Stark's people shuffling you around. I know. I still feel that sometimes. They mean well. Please, sit down and help me figure this out. While we think about what to do with Julio, we want to send you on vacation so he can't find you," Steve explained his presence in the apartment and theirs in the tower as concisely as he could.

Cathy sat down next to him, and Dana stood behind her, both of them still concerned.

"What do you mean about vacation? And why do you need to do anything with Julio?" Cathy asked.

The women looked different, dressed in ordinary jeans and tops. They were still very pretty, but they weren't bewitching and mesmerizing as they'd been last night when he'd first gotten into the limo, or when he'd been with them in the hotel room. They looked like worried people. Dana looked like a worried parent, with her attention split between his visit and what was going on with Melody in the other room. Steve felt for them.

"My associate told you that Tiffany-"

"Madison," Cathy said.

"Thank you. He told you that Madison left with Julio this morning. That wasn't true. They don't want me to tell you this, but I think you deserve to know. Madison was an agent for Hydra. She was going to try to kill us. To kill me, at least. I'm not sure if she would have let you both live. Hydra agents usually don't. Do you know what Hydra is?" Steve asked.

Cathy looked a little green. Dana nodded.

"Hydra's on the TV with you. They're who you fight. They're real?" Dana asked.

"Yes, ma'am. They're just as real as I am. I have agents of my own working to find out how Hydra knew to put an operative with us last night. We're investigating Julio, and I don't want Julio angry with either one of you, if he thinks you have anything to do with this. My associates think that
neither one of you is Hydra?" Steve half-asked.

He only felt a little bit bad for placing his words in such a way as to get them thinking as he wanted them to. They couldn't understand how dangerous Hydra was, and he needed them scared enough to be safe.

"I'm not with Hydra!" Dana said.

Cathy shook her head vigorously, looking worried that he would think it of her. Steve leaned toward believing them.

"But what happened to Madison?" Dana asked.

"She had specialized concealed weapons. She was about to execute her operation, so she was neutralized," Steve said as gently as he could.

"You mean your friend killed her," Cathy said.

"He didn't directly try to kill her. He made her unable to execute her operation, and the result was that she died," Steve said.

Cathy and Dana sat very quietly. They didn't look at him or each other. They looked at the floor.

"You don't have to be afraid while you're in our care. It was bad luck on your part to be there when it happened. So, now we're trying to protect you until the trouble blows over. I want to put you on a cruise ship in the Caribbean for ten days. The both of you and Melody. Julio won't be able to find you. When you get back, you're free to do as you like, after we examine you in medical again. I feel partly responsible for what happened, but not for Hydra being evil. You probably wouldn't have been exposed to Hydra action if I hadn't been your customer," he explained.

"That's not true. It happens all the time. They use the trade as cover for hits. They wait for somebody on a list to call in, then they send a girl or guy, just like they did with you. I haven't been there when it happened, but there's rumors. Last year a friend of mine was at a big party. The news said the governor's assistant fell and hit his head, but there was a new girl working that night, and nobody ever saw her again," Cathy said, low and fast.

"Would you talk to my associate about that? It could help us a lot," Steve said.

"I shouldn't. I could get in trouble for saying what I did," Cathy told him.

"I understand. You'll have time to think about it while you're away on vacation. When you come back, we can provide you with a new identity and move you somewhere else, if it makes you feel safer," Steve said.

"Like the witness protection program?" Dana asked.

"Not exactly. Our version of it is better," Steve said.

Cathy looked at him with lingering fear, but he thought he saw hope there, too. He wasn't sure what Dana was thinking.

"You said a vacation? On a cruise ship? It can't be free. What do you want in return? I'm not doing any work if my daughter is there," Dana said.

Steve stared at her for a moment until he understood. He felt sad that life had been unkind enough
to her that she felt everything had a price that she needed to pay in that way. He had to think of how to make the vacation acceptable to them, like he was making a deal. He was, but not for the reason they thought. They couldn't understand that the most important aspect of it all was that his serum, his genes were protected. He wouldn't tell them the real reason and give them the ability to hurt him or potentially his child, if there was to be one.

"The vacation isn't free. You know who I am. I shouldn't have done what I did last night. I can't have a regular relationship with a woman. It's too dangerous. But I'm only a man. I had a weak moment. I had my associate make the phone call, and now I'm paying for it. This is me asking for your silence. This is me paying for one good night," Steve told them with exactly the right shades of sorrow and regret. The kind of sorrow Captain America would feel if he found himself doing wrong. He was careful not to overdo it.

The two jaded working girls looked at him. Cathy reached to put her hand on his knee and her lower eyelids pooled with moisture.

"Aw, honey. You shouldn't have to feel that way for one night's fun. You're so sweet. With what you do for everybody, I would have given it to you for free, but I can't do that with Julio waiting," Dana said.

"Help me, then. Keep what happened between us. Let me get you away from the city for a few days until the investigation is done. I can fix things with Julio, if it turns out that he's got nothing to do with Hydra. He won't be angry if he gets paid for all the days I keep you, will he?" Steve asked.

"Don't do that. We only work twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. He already got paid for last night, so... Saturday, next Wednesday, and next Saturday is all you need to pay to make Julio happy. If he's not Hydra," Cathy said.

"Anthony might be Hydra. I never liked him," Dana said to Cathy.

Whoever Anthony was, it was clear that he wasn't a nice guy. Buck was already following all available links, and he was sure this Anthony was on the list.

"So you'll let me send you, then? On the cruise?" Steve asked hopefully, like a man who felt the urgency to keep things quiet.

That wasn't his main motivation, but it played well for his purposes. Steve shoved down the resentment he felt toward Dana for taking that pill which might be ending his kid's life right now. Tony was right. There was nothing he could do from here but move forward. By acting so concerned about secrecy, he knew he appeared to be giving these women power over him. He'd deal with that if he had to. It was worth the hit to his public image if keeping Catherine and Dana compliant helped him have more control over what happened to his DNA, his serum, maybe his child.

Cathy smiled and nodded. Dana grinned big and sat down on his other side. For a half hour, they perused the cruise ship departure dates and itineraries until they found a ten day Southern Caribbean cruise that the ladies seemed excited about. Steve used the anonymous business account that Stark kept for such purposes and paid in full for their vacation. Cathy and Dana kissed his cheek and hugged him, then Dana ran to the other room to excitedly tell her daughter about their vacation. Steve didn't know what was so exciting about being stuck on a ship for ten days, but the women seemed pleased about it.

"Is this happening?" Cathy asked him in a moment of quiet.
"Unfortunately for me, yes. I'm glad that you get some time off and a nice vacation, but I would rather things hadn't happened this way. I wanted to forget about my troubles and have fun last night, but Hydra had to get at me again," Steve said.

"Don't worry about it, Captain. Dana's a little breezy through the ears, but I'll say a few things to her while we're away. You won't hear any talk from us. I'm really sorry that last night turned out to be so much trouble for you," she said.

Cathy held onto his arm while they stood in the doorway and watched Dana try to explain to the child what a cruise ship was. Steve wanted to slip away from Cathy's friendly contact with him. It didn't feel right. He didn't know her well enough for her to stand so close, but he had to play the part that would get the results he needed. He had to leave them feeling happy and sympathetic with him. He wasn't lying about any of it, but he was playing on their feelings. Manipulating. It felt dirty. This was why he wouldn't be a good agent like Nat was. He could do it, but his conscience bothered him too much.

"Thanks for helping me out with this. Here. You'll need clothes and luggage so you can enjoy your vacation," Steve said.

He put some cash in Cathy's hand, and since Dana was paying attention, he passed her some too. She looked down and counted it.

"Are you for real?" Dana asked giddily.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said.

Dana squealed and bounced forward to hug him. The little girl looked on, solemn and uncertain. The sadness he felt for the child was real. Little kids shouldn't have to look like that. He shoved the idea of one of these women bearing his child to the back of his mind for later. He didn't judge them or the circumstance that had gotten them here, but he never wanted a child of his to look as distant and hopeless as little Melody.

"I have to go. Have a nice vacation," Steve said.

"Do you have to go so soon? We could eat," Dana offered speculatively.

The look in her eyes made him queasy, but he hid it.

"Leave him alone, Dana. I'm sure he's got other things to take care of," Cathy admonished.

"Well, if you're ever…" Dana persisted, but Steve was gone.

He'd left so fast that the door knob was embedded in the wall in the foyer.

"Don't try to bother him. He's not like the rest," Cathy said.

The cartoons on the television played as background noise, and Melody jumped on the couch again. Dana went to shut the door.

"I can see that. I wanted to be sweet to him. He's a good man. How come all the good ones we find are unavailable?" Dana asked.

It was an old, tired question and Cathy didn't bother answering it.

"Just leave him alone. I feel sorry for him. He didn't mean any harm. He and his friend probably
saved our lives. We need to help him," Cathy said.

"Uh-huh," Dana agreed.

She went to get a beer from the refrigerator. It was amazing how nice things were in Tony Stark's tower. Everything was clean and new, and the refrigerator and pantry came fully stocked. Dana didn't want to leave. After the cruise was over, if that was really going to happen and nobody was lying to them, she wanted to think of a way to stay in this place.

Steve went back to his suite and took a hot shower again. It was his third shower of the day. He knew he wasn't dirty, but he wanted to wash any hint of the women from his skin. Estrella was off work by now, and if she'd have him, he wanted to see her. He was quick with drying himself and getting into fresh clothes. Dark jeans and a natural colored cable-knit sweater went with the same dark leather shoes from earlier.

"Jarvis, please let her know that I'm coming. Ask if she'll meet me by the elevator," he said.

"I assume you mean for me to speak to Miss Estrella?" the AI asked.

"Yes."

"I have done as you ask, and I certainly don't mind doing so, but perhaps it would be a touch more personal if you were to text her with your phone," Jarvis suggested mildly.

"Uf," Steve said.

In his mental distraction today, he hadn't remembered to bring his phone with him everywhere. Used to, people didn't carry phones around, and now he spent half his time with a comm device in his ear, or Jarvis available to relay information.

Estrella came out to see him where he leaned on the wall beside the elevator doors. She smiled at him in welcome and snuggled up to him. Steve's arms went around her eagerly.

"Eya, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he said.

She'd been remarkably kind and understanding to him this morning. He didn't deserve that. Just now, he'd come from seeing those women again, and even with a shower, he didn't feel clean enough for Estrella. Not that Cathy and Dana were dirty, but seeing them made him feel dirty for what he'd done and how he was having to behave to handle everything. He still felt nice, physically, but the weight of his conscience was just as bad or worse than dealing with the stress of an overactive libido.

"What are you sorry for now?" she asked him.

She was wearing the same clothes from this morning, and he still thought she looked wonderful dressed plainly and clean of makeup. Her hair was a little messed, like maybe she'd lain on it, and there was a food smudge on her shirt. He hugged her tighter.

"Everything. I had to go see the women just now. The ones from last night. Tony had a good idea of how to keep them happy and quiet about it all, so I'm sending them on a cruise ship. They were down in medical this morning, and Tony said-"

Estrella put a finger over his lips.
"Is there anything else left to do about it today?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"So stop worrying about it. Do you want to go to the coffee shop or something? I was about to start supper for us, but maybe you should get out of here for a while," she suggested.

Estrella didn't like seeing him this bothered. He'd probably been anxious about things all day, and it was time for him to relax. She wanted time with him. Time that was just theirs, away from all the eyes and ears in the tower, but she didn't want to invite herself along on an evening outing with him. The last one hadn't ended well.

Steve nodded. That sounded like a good plan. They could go anywhere. Someplace different. Maybe out of the city. Estrella took her finger from his lips.

"I'll go get my phone. I haven't looked at it all day. Meet you here?" he asked.

"Give me a few minutes. I want to change," Estrella said.

She didn't mention that she'd suggested that he get out of the tower. If he wanted her to go with him, she wasn't going to deny him, but things had to be different from last night.

Steve nodded. He jogged back through the open elevator and into his suite. His phone waited for him on his nightstand. There were messages. Papa John's had a pizza offer for him. Fury had words for him. He tapped on the little image he'd captured that represented Buck's ID.

*You up yet?* Buck had asked hours ago, when he was on the treadmill.

*C'mon. I know you burn through shit fast. You can't still be asleep.* Buck had asked a half hour after the first message.

*Get back with me when you can*, he'd said another half hour after that.

*Forgot my phone in my room. Is everything alright with you?* Steve responded.

*Yeah, I'm good. Finishing up at the work site. Wanted to know if you were okay in the head.*

*I've had better days, but today isn't the worst. I'll be alright. You went in to work today? I thought you were finding ties on Julio,* Steve texted.

*I can do both. I'm talented.*

*Buck, you're an idiot. I never meant to work you like this. I was serious about you taking the day off.*

*Don't sweat it, Stevie. We've both run long ops before. This is nothing and you know it.*

*Sure. Be that way. Make me feel worse than I already do.*

*Worse? You better be feeling damn good, after last night. What more could a fella want?* Buck asked.

Steve couldn't think of what to say after that. He grabbed his wallet, his keys, and his old leather jacket. While he thought of a response, he walked back over through the elevator. Buck responded before he could think of anything
Was your little walk on the dark side fun enough for ya? I can make it darker, if that wasn't enough, Buck texted.

Steve ground his teeth. Bucky was messing with him. He could see the smartass look on his face and hear the taunt in his voice. It wasn't a dare. Buck knew better. It was admonishment.

Already too much. Thanks, but no. Steve sent back.

You say that now. Wait til it's riding you hard again. If you let it build, you'll want the same shit.

Steve scowled at his phone and made an effort not to tap too hard on the screen. He leaned against the wall in the same spot as before to wait for Estrella while she got ready to go out.

You don't know what I feel. You don't feel anything anymore, do ya? Steve challenged him.

Damn was all the got of a message, then there was Buck's ID on an incoming call.

Soon as Steve opened the call, Bucky was in his ear.

"I'm extrapolating. I'm good at it. I know how I felt back in the old days when we were young and all I could think about was gettin off. I know how I felt in the Commandos when Zola's shit was in my veins, cranking everything up and making it that much worse. And I know the high expectations you have of yourself. Plus, you got the full dose. The good stuff, from Erskine, not that half-assed kook Zola. Maybe I'm guessing, but I bet I'm not off by even a full hair. Whatever's pushing you, whatever pushed you into last night, it'll be back. You need to watch yourself and do something a lot less stupid next time," Buck said.

Steve was quiet for a moment, absorbing it all. Buck was right. It would be back. Soon. He could feel it coming on already.

"Stevie? That better be you, and not one of your friends with a cape messing around with your phone," Buck growled.

"It's me," he assured.

"Good. So? Am I right, or am I right?"

"You're right," Steve reluctantly admitted.

"Look, I don't blame you. I know I'd do a lot worse. But that's not you. You gotta think of a way to keep it on the right side of the line. C'mon, Steve. Think of your ma. She was a sweet lady. You can't let her down like this. Not anymore."

"I know," Steve said.

Buck just had to bring his ma into it. Neither of them liked being snapped with that leash. Growing up, their mothers were pretty much the only ones who held them in line. Them, and the nuns. Buck was concerned if he was using that kind of guilt now. Steve was the one who used to turned it on Buck.

"So?" Bucky prompted him.

"So I'm thinkin on it. I have been. Jeez, you think I'm okay with being like this!"

"I know you're not," Buck said in a rare gentle tone, "So think harder. I've been in comm with Natalia all day off and on. She's worried about you too. Between all of us, we should be able to
figure this out. You ever considered getting a steady? Settling down?"

"Sure. It sounds nice," Steve said with dry sarcasm, "You know we can't do that to a girl, me or you."

"You can. You should. I'll stand guard, if that's what it needs," Buck offered.

Steve couldn't get words past the clench in his throat. He remembered telling Buck he loved him last night. It made him burn with embarrassment now, how he'd said it and what he'd been doing at the time. He remembered Buck's gruff, reluctant return of the sentiment. This phone call was Buck saying it again. He wasn't just saying. He'd act on it, too. Steve knew that Buck would fight til his last to protect a girl of his. He shouldn't have to, but he would. And Steve would do the same for anyone Bucky loved. Maybe that was the answer to some of this mess. They could watch each other's soft spots.

"You unchoked yet?" Buck asked with a grin in his voice.

"Workin on it," Steve croaked.

He could hear street sounds on Buck's end of the call, and the particular sound of his footsteps when he wasn't trying to be quiet.

"You walkin home?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. It's a nice evening. You should go up on the roof or somethin," Buck said.

"I'm waiting on Estrella. We're going somewhere. I dunno where. Not here."

"Give her a chance, Stevie. I like her. She's got moxie. Tell me, if your ma was standing in front of you today, would you ever hit her? Would you ever hurt her, no matter how wound tight you were, no matter what she nagged you with?"

"That's a dumb thing to ask. You know I wouldn't," Steve said.

"If you find a girl you love… one you really love, not just lust after, I don't think you'll hurt her, either. If you like that girl, even if she's breakable, I think you should give it a chance," Buck said.

"I'll think about it. But not yet. I gotta be straight with her. I can't do anything til I'm sure I didn't get to the girls last night. Near the end, I don't think I listened to you. I don't remember using a rubber for the last bit," Steve said.

They could both hear the quiet dread in his words.

"Wait til you know. But don't wait too long," Buck advised.

Steve could hear him going inside. The street sounds faded, and frightened voices called out, hastily slammed behind doors. Buck trudged up the stairs like a tired man.

"Fuck. I gotta get a new door."

"Nah. Just patch that one. It's not much of a door, anyway, if you can shoot through it," Steve said.

"Yeah, cheap rent tends to be that way," Buck said.

The comment brought back unpleasant memories for both of them of the Soldier making good on his target through Steve's apartment wall.
"See ya," Steve said.

"Later," Buck agreed.

Steve let the call end and thought of him and Estrella trying to make something work. He was probably an idiot to listen to Buck, but it was a sweet daydream.

Thinking about Estrella forcefully displaced his concerns about the other women. Just like the girl herself, his thoughts of her left him little room for anything else. After the day he'd had, the anticipated burn of her personality soothed and excited him at the same time. Was this a date? He hadn't meant it that way, but it probably was. They'd be alone at last. Tonight he trusted himself enough to not scare her or hurt her. If he was going to have one night of calm sanity, then he very much wanted to spend it with her.

When Steve heard someone about to come out of Nat's suite his eyes flashed eagerly over to see her. At first, he didn't understand what he was seeing. Then his eyes widened in surprise. The sight of Estrella grabbed the last of his troubled thoughts and strangled the life out of them.

Note: I don't believe in dirty rotten cliffhangers of any sort, and that's not what this is. I've got chapter 32 written and mostly edited, but I need sleep. I'll get it out to you within 24 hours. It's a lot more fun than this chapter was. Writers love reviews like dogs love trucks. Happy Mardi Gras, y'all! Eat good, 'cause it's ashes tomorrow.
Chapter 32

Estrella came out of Nat's suite wearing a slouchy newsboy hat over her combed down hair. Steve's jaw fell open in surprise at the rest of her look. She wore dark pinstripe pants, brown derby shoes, a crisp navy blue men's button-down shirt and suspenders. His brain babbled a bunch of things at him at once.

A lady shouldn't dress like a man, he thought. It was confusing. She looked like a boy, except she didn't. She was dressed exactly as he and Buck used to dress, if they'd ever had nice, new clothes. Her butterfly voice modulator was threaded onto a thin black tie that hung jauntily askew down her chest. Her dark eyes gleamed at him with a mischievous smile as she sauntered toward him with her hands in her pants pockets. Long, thick black lashes fluttered at him as she tried to play off the masculine look boldly, but faltered into girly shyness.

"Buu..." Steve protested dumbly.

His heart was pounding and he didn't know why.

Estrella came to a stop in front of him, instead of giving him an exuberant hug as she had earlier. Her more reserved nature matched her masculine attire and twisted up his brain a little more. He was always aware that she was female, and that was somehow emphasized by her boyish clothing.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Um. Uh... The beach? I was thinking Rockaway?" Steve muttered.

Estrella nodded and got into the open elevator. She looked deeply pleased with herself. Steve followed her quietly. He made him nervous. He didn't know much of what to do with a girl on an ordinary day. Estrella had always been different. Easy to talk to. Right now, he didn't know what to make of her.

She watched him from aside and under her lashes and smiled to herself. Her intention had been to shock his mind away from thinking of his troubles. It looked like her effort was working splendidly. She'd never seen Steve looking so flummoxed. Whatever bit of worried man was left in him was chased off by the uncertain boy left in his place.

"Capt-"

"No, Jarvis. This is Steve. Take us to wherever Steve's bike is," Estrella insisted.

"Very well, Miss," Jarvis complied.

Steve smiled at her forceful defiance of Jarvis' preferred name for him. The AI wasn't likely to quit calling him by his title, but for now, he didn't have to hear it. The elevator ride was silent. Steve smelled a hint of woodsy, intriguing men's cologne. It wasn't coming from him. His nose wanted to nuzzle around until he found what part of her skin she'd applied it to. Steve would have moved closer to her, but her attire and stance made him keep his distance. He wasn't in the habit of getting cozy with people who dressed like that.

They got out on the garage level, and Estrella headed for his bike. Steve followed after, mesmerized by how she combined slightly masculine mannerisms with a distinctly feminine movement of her hips and legs. He shook his head sharply. He was going to have to drive them, and he needed to think about her safety.
"We shouldn't take the bike. If we got in a wreck, you could get hurt," he said.

"We won't get in a wreck. Traffic is so slow, I could get off the bike and step aside from a wreck. Stop worrying," she told him.

She was probably right. Still, he walked over to the cabinet near the motorcycles and got the helmet that Pepper used when Tony took her out. He swiped the cap off Estrella's head, tucked it into the back of his jeans, and put the helmet in her hands firmly.

"Put it on, or I'll call us a cab," he said.

Estrella frowned at the helmet, but she looked at him and the bike. She tugged the sleek black helmet on and clipped the chin strap. Steve put his helmet on and sat on the bike. He started it, then held out a hand to help Estrella get on behind him. It was a big bike, too high and broad for her to just hop on. He liked the feel of her hand in his, and then she was snugged up to his backside as the bike rumbled under them. The engine was loud in the concrete of the garage.

"You settled?" he asked her.

Her helmet clunked against his in a nod. Steve smiled and backed the heavy bike up with his legs. They had to wait a moment as the garage gate opened, and then Steve took them out into traffic. It was almost sunset, and people were going home for the evening, or going out for supper. Traffic eased forward, and Steve spent much of the time with his feet skimming above the pavement at slow speed.

Estrella had her feet perched on the passenger spikes, and she liked the way she could feel the muscles of Steve's legs and bottom shifting as he guided the bike. Her arms wrapped around his middle, and she rested her chin against his shoulder. She wished the helmet wasn't in the way. His leather jacket smelled good. It was scuffed and scorched and smelled just as much of battlefield incendiary as of leather.

For most of the way, they were in the city. They crossed over a few bridges. Being out high over the water on the open air seat of the bike felt adventurous for Estrella. One of her uncles had given her a ride on his little moped when she was eight years old, but it had been nothing this. Everything was bigger than they were. Buses, cabs, heavy construction equipment, and delivery vans all felt intimidating looming around her in traffic. Steve drove with confidence, and the mostly unused power of the bike's engine made her feel safe that he could get them out of any situation. She could tell from the nearly constant slight movement of his helmet that he was keeping a sharp watch on the traffic around them.

Traffic opened up on the toll roads he used, and she thrilled when he could get the bike up to cruising speed. The wind was chilly as it snapped her pants legs against her calves and ankles. She snuggled closer to Steve and hugged him to get more warmth from him.

"Are you too cold? I can pull over and give you my jacket," his voice came to her inside her helmet, clear and deep.

"Feel the button on the right side of your chin. Press it, then talk," Steve instructed her.
"Oh! This is so cool!" she said after she pressed the button.

"Too cold?" he asked her.

"No. I like the cold air, and how warm you are," Estrellasaid happily.

She squeezed him tighter and wiggled against his back.

He didn't say anything into the comms, but she thought she felt him rumble a noise she interpreted as happy.

While the sun set, they left the city and rode out onto a long, straight causeway. It was wide open and had grassy shoulders. Wild trees and greenery lined the sides of the road. Traffic was light, and Steve eased the bike to a steady humming cruise. Every so often, the road became a bridge with the ocean breeze gusting sideways at them. They came to a broad, low island. Estrella marveled at the whimsical, grand design of some of the beach houses. There was traffic, but it was nothing like in the city. Orange color from the underside of the clouds glinted on the sheltered water that was to their right. People strolled the sidewalk in shorts and gauzy wraps, out to enjoy the evening. Nobody looked to be in a hurry.

"People live like this? Or is it all vacation rentals?" she asked through the helmets.

"Some of both, I guess," Steve answered.

He turned left and cut through dense blocks of beach houses. Most all of them were on stilts, and if the ground floor was closed in, it looked like louvers or something that could be replaced. The sturdy living spaces were all up high, out of the way of storm surge waves.

Some homeowners had decorated their landscapes with ship rope and driftwood, and it made her long to see her hometown again. The Atlantic coast of New York was very different from the Texas gulf coast, but there were enough similarities to make her feel nostalgic.

A right turn, and then they cruised along another beach road on the windward side of the island, with only one row of grand, tall houses between them and the ocean. Steve kept going until the end of the road was in sight. As he turned left off the pavement, the path became hard packed sand. The grip of the bike felt different on the softer surface, and Estrella clutched Steve nervously with her arms. She kept her head back to look around.

On each side of them were wind-slanted dunes, scrubby with beach brush. The ruddy twilight competed with the silvery light of the rising moon. The beach path sloped downward a little, and soon opened up onto broad, firm sand. Steve pulled off to the left and parked between an open-top jeep and a car.

She took her helmet off when he did, and he smiled at her and gave her back her hat. The sudden silence and lack of vibration from the bike made the whisper of the wind and the crash of the distant waves sound surreal. Steve stood up from the bike and held a hand to her. Estrella stepped down onto sand and waited while he put the helmets on the seat and got a flat plate of metal out of the saddlebags to set the kickstand on.

Estrella felt overdressed for the beach, but the way Steve looked at her with adorably confused interest told her it was worth it. The beach was broad and flat, and people laughed somewhere in the distance, the sound of their voices buffeted and changeable with the wind. The two of them stood there, staring at each other and looking around. A dog loped by with its tongue hanging out, chasing a boy with a kite.
Estrella glanced at Steve, giggled at the feeling of unfamiliar happiness that welled up inside her, then took off running across the beach toward the surf. She couldn't remember the last time she'd ran for the joy of it. She refused to think of the other reasons she'd ran. The chilly ocean wind cut through the button placket of her shirt, and she relished the feel of her leg muscles working and her heart pumping strongly. She could feel the heavy thumps of Steve running beside her. His hand flashed out and caught her hat when the wind gusted up and swept it off her head.

He was large and fast beside her, but she wasn't afraid. He smiled like a kid, which was exactly how she felt. The beach rose slightly in a long swell, and there was a line of crushed seashells and washed up seaweed. They ran past the ocean debris and down, to where the sand got harder and damp.

Salt spray waves rushed at them, and Estrella turned left to run alongside. Steve passed behind her and moved to her other side, so she could be closer to the water. Estrella's lungs started to feel cold and dry. Her borrowed derby shoes weren't the best for running. She slowed to a walk and breathed deeply. Her lungs felt dryer with each breath.

"I hate you. You're not even out of breath," she huffed at Steve.

"Sorry," he said.

He obviously wasn't. He strolled along with her, relaxed and calm as if they'd never run at all. He was looking at her between his glances around at their surroundings. She could feel his attention, but it felt fine to let him look. The strength of the wind and the vastness of the sea and the sky was enough to distract her from his staring.

Seagulls rushed by them in a flock and tilted their heads aside to see if any food would be offered. There were lights in the distance at a boardwalk and twinkling out along a fishing pier. It felt surreal, compared to how she'd spent all of her time for the past several years. She'd never had the money or the energy to go to the beach. It had been so far beyond what she could do that she hadn't even considered it.

"This is amazing," Estrella told him.

"Yeah. It's different. I like to get out of town sometimes. I've only been here twice, for a couple of hours, but it's worth the drive," he said.

"I like the way you look out here. You're just a man," she said.

It was true. He was a classically handsome man, and with the relaxed set to his features, he looked like a catalog ad for upscale casual clothes. The bulky cable knit sweater concealed some of the extreme definition of his muscles, and his loose swinging stride was very different from that of his work persona.

"I feel like just a man, Not… him," Steve agreed.

He didn't want to talk about work, or think about work. Thinking about not thinking about work was making it hard not to think about work. He looked at Estrella instead. That was enough to get his mind off of business.

"You look great. More than great. How on earth did you think that up? How did you find the clothes?" he asked her.

"It was fun. I wanted to dress like a boy while I still can. Nat has all kinds of things, and if I mention something, she comes out of her closet with it. It's like having a magic dress-up chest. Is
"This like what you used to wear?" she asked.

"Sort of. You're really snazzy. Swank. The style is right, but my clothes were plain. Patched. We made do," he said.

"I understand. What is that over there?" she asked and pointed to a busier area far away on the beachside with lights and people.

"I think it's a resort or a restaurant. There's a boardwalk. You wanna go see?" he asked.

The twilight was fading fast, giving way to moonlight. The distant lights on the beach only helped a little. His eyes could see fine, but he wasn't sure about Estrella. He walked not far from her side, in case they came across an obstacle on the sand that she didn't see.

"I'm getting hungry," she said.

"Me too. Let's go see if there's food over there," he agreed.

Estrella looked at the waves and the way the moonlight was making silvery glimmers on the surface of the ocean. It looked like she could see forever over the water. She didn't want to leave the seaside, but the food was over to the left, across the sand.

As they walked closer, they heard live music and the air started to smell like beer and seafood. Happy people danced on the sand under strings of lights, and sat at open-air tables on a sandy plank floor.

A hostess in casual black clothes waited at the bottom of the steps where they met the sand.

"Would you like a table or the bar?" she asked them.

Steve looked at Estrella. She shrugged.

"Do you have a menu?" Steve asked the hostess.

She handed them one, and he stepped aside so he and Estrella could see what was on offer.

"I've never had lobster," she said.

"You gotta try it," Steve insisted.

"But I might not have enough," she frowned and reached for her back pants pocket.

Steve touched her wrist.

"I've got that part. How about you cover the tip and the drinks for us?" he asked.

Estrella nodded and they handed the menu back.

"We'd like a table with a good view of the water," Steve told the hostess.

She seated them away from the bar and the band, at the railing of the dining deck where it curved out over the sand. Steve ordered a beer, and Estrella wanted white wine. They could still hear the music, but it wasn't too loud for conversation.

"Tell me some of the things you got in trouble for when you were little," she said.
Her words distracted Steve from staring at the beauty of her bone structure. Her piquantly messy soft hair and her cap accentuated her slender neck and lush, refined features. Steve shook his head and reminded himself that she'd said something.

"Sure, if you tell me something too," he agreed.

She nodded and sipped her wine.

"The lady next door to me and ma made the best pies. She made rhubarb and cinnamon apple, but her custard cherry made my mouth water so hard that I could feel that little sting in my jaw back here, you know?" Steve said.

He rubbed the back of his jaw underneath, where Estrella could see the base of his tongue work to swallow in remembrance of the smell he described. She nodded.

"Everybody was poor then. We could get bruised apples easy, and rhubarb was always in gardens out back. But cherries! Those were only around for a little while once a year. It got to where me and Buck couldn't stand it anymore. Mrs. Flannigan's husband was mean. She wanted to give me some pie because she always saw me staring when she invited ma over for tea, but her husband was real stingy. He was jealous of who the pie went to. One afternoon, she had a pie out cooling on her window sill. This was on the third floor, mind you. The fall woulda killed us. Me, especially. Buck eased out my window, then grabbed me by the britches. There was a little plaster ledge in the bricks, and a gutter pipe going down between the windows. It was just enough to get across. Every time I got tired from hanging on, Buck would grab me to give my arms a rest. I was scared, and people on the street were starting to yell at us, but we had to have some of that pie. The trickiest part was when we got to the Flannigan's window. Mister Flannigan was asleep in his chair, and we could see him. The pie was right there in front of our faces, and I almost couldn't swallow my spit fast enough. Buck stuck his fingers right in and got a dab of crust and cherry custard. I was afraid to let go and fall, so he held my pants again so I could get some. We made a mess of that pie, and then Mrs. Flannigan walked into the kitchen. Her eyes got big when she saw us hanging on to the window for dear life. She screwed up her face to fuss, but then she looked at her husband. Real quiet like, she pulled me into the window, then she brought Bucky in, too. I didn't know ladies could be so strong! She didn't say a word, but I knew we were in trouble. She got down two plates. She served a piece of pie and set it aside. Then she gave us the big, messed up part of it. She went to the window and tossed the rest of the pie out. Plate and everything! Mrs. Flannigan hurried us through her apartment and out into the hall and told us to go home. My ma nagged me for a week, and Buck's ma did too, and we had to help with Miz Junely's laundry and ironing for ten days to earn enough change to buy some more cherries for Mrs. Flannigan. I think she lied to her husband and said that the pie fell out the window," Steve told her.

"Steve, that was dangerous!" Estrella fussed at him.

"It was, but we wanted that pie," Steve said with a smile.

Their crab salads arrived and Estrella ate with relish. Steve enjoyed watching her eat and drink. He never thought he'd see her like this, when he'd been so worried about her living on the street emaciated. He wanted to hear one of her stories, but he wanted her to eat, too. When their salads were gone and the plates set aside, maybe she'd tell him something. Steve finished his salad first, and he didn't mind that she could tell he was waiting to hear something from her.

Estrella was kind enough to start talking as soon as she'd finished her salad.

"So, when I was in fifth grade, there were these fancy shoe strings. They were in fluorescent bright colors, and they didn't tie. They swirled around in a twist. Everybody had them, except me and my
friend Lacey. We'd ask for them, and our moms would always tell us no, that it was a fad and we
didn't need them. Eventually, they had them at the dollar store. By then they were almost out of
style. We stole some, Lacey and me. We got to wear them to school for one stinking day, and then
my mami went past us on the bus while I was walking home. She made us go bring them to the
dollar store and say what we stole them, Steve! And then she made me wear Grammy's shoes to
school for three days. Three days! Grammy had bunions and nasty thick toenails, and her shoes
were fuddly like old nurse's shoes. And they smelled like arthritis cream," Estrella said with fond
disgust.

Steve laughed.

"It's not funny! I was miserable! The boy I liked broke off a stick from a tree on the playground and
gave it to me for a walking cane," she said with remembered horror in her voice.

"If it's not funny, then why are you smiling?" he asked

"I guess because it's good to remember my mami, and Grammy too. And Lacey. Things were so
much simpler when I was a kid. Problems seemed huge, but they really weren't," Estrella said.

"I know. Things were tough, but it was nothing, compared to what came after," Steve agreed.

Their nostalgic smiles barely had time to fade toward remembrance of the not so good times, and
then the waiter came bringing their plates. There was lobster, wild rice, and greens with lemon and
butter for Estrella, and a huge seafood platter with extra fries for Steve.

He bowed his head to pray briefly and silently, and Estrella smiled and did the same. The salad had
taken the edge off their hunger, so she paused to ask him a question.

"Sometimes you bless your food, and sometimes you don't. Why the difference?"

"I'm always thankful to have enough to eat, but sometimes I'm in a hurry, almost crazy with hunger.
Then, I say it in my head. When I have time, I try to do it more respectfully, but people are so
touchy anymore. It's like prayer offends them. Heaven forbid I actually make the sign of the cross
and say grace out loud like we used to at home," he told her.

Estrella didn't make fun of him. She nodded a little bit, and that was the end of it. He was relieved.
He'd been distracted enough by their surroundings and Estrella's appearance that hunger snuck up
on him. Crab cakes and grilled fish and shrimp and scallops disappeared from his plate fast.

Estrella figured out how to eat her lobster with a few unobtrusive hand gestures from Steve. She
tried hard to keep from making any sounds of enjoyment. It was so good with the butter sauce! She
sprinkled the lemon over her greens and ate them last. She was hesitant to steal fries from Steve's
plate, but he saw her looking at the thick cut steak fries and edged his plate toward her slightly. She
crept her hand across the table as if she expected him to smack it away, but he only smiled at her
with the corners of his eyes while he chewed and she took his fries.

They didn't linger over drinks or dessert when they were done. It was a little further up the beach to
the fishing pier, and Steve enjoyed his full belly as they strolled along the boardwalk to the pier
access. It wasn't crowded on a Thursday night. Steve liked watching Estrella take in the waves
rolling in under the bright beams of the pier lights. She clamped her hands over the top rail and
leaned far out to see how the water sprayed around the pier legs.

"Shouldn't you have your hand bandaged? There's all kinds of nasty bacteria here from seagull
poop and fish bait," Steve pointed out.
"I think it's good. It doesn't look raw anymore," Estrella said.

Steve stepped up beside her and touched her scraped hand, asking permission to look at it. Absently, she let him take her hand and look at it in the bright overhead lights. His fingers brushed back and forth over the wound at first softly, then harder. It didn't hurt like it had yesterday.

"Eya," he said.

She could hear the deep concern in his tone and she wanted to snatch her hand back from his scrutiny. He was going to make a big thing about her hand. She knew he would. She'd been hoping he wouldn't notice, or that he'd forget she'd scraped it less than a day ago.

"See? I told you it's fine," she said, looking to where he was bothering at her skin.

"This is healing very fast," Steve said quietly.

"Mm-hmm," Estrella agreed, "I've been eating well and taking the vitamin pills the nurses gave me."

"No. It's healing very, very fast. It should still be pink at least. It's already dried up and skinned over," Steve told her.

He had that particular stillness and the look on his face which meant that his super-brain was working on something.

"We have to call Bruce," he said, almost a whisper.

"No, we don't," Estrella said with breezy dismissal.

She pulled her hand back.

"It has to be my serum, Eya. You probably got at least part of my healing ability as a side effect," he said.

"Isn't that a good thing? I know I said I didn't want to be like you, but if I had to have a little something extra along with a fixed heart, the healing isn't so bad," Estrella reasoned.

"There could be other effects that we won't know about unless we test you. We should call Bruce," he insisted.

"No. We're not calling Bruce. Steve! Quit thinking about work. It can wait til tomorrow. If you have to test me somehow, then race me back to the bike," she said.

She turned and ran, and Steve rushed after her. There was an older couple coming onto the pier, and their heads turned to see one person running after another, but Estrella's laugh of glee set them at ease. They looked on for a moment as the young people ran off.

"Faster," Steve said.

He ran up beside her and kept pace easily. It wasn't pleasant to run on a full stomach, but he'd done it before. He reached out and swatted Estrella's rump slightly to get her into the spirit of what he wanted her to do.

She scowled at him, but pushed harder. Fast as she could, she pumped her arms and legs. Her feet pounded the sand and she felt like she was flying.
"Is that the best you can do?" he asked her.

She couldn't talk, so she nodded. They slowed down and Steve checked his watch and looked back at the distance they'd run from the pier.

"You're a little fast, but not outside the range of a female athlete. Eya, I want to know if your bones healed. If they didn't, then a good heart and fast legs could hurt you," he told her.

"Tomorrow," she gasped for breath and shook her head.

She reached out and slapped his ass hard.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Don't you 'hey' me! You slapped me. I get to slap you back," she complained.

"Oh. So-"

"Ah! You apologize too much," she fussed, and threatened her sharp little fingernail at his nose.

Steve bit his lips so he wouldn't apologize for that, too.

He looked to the horizon of the ocean. It was full night now. The sky was a slightly more gray tone of black than the water.

"How many boats do you see out there?" he asked her.

Estrella grimaced at his business-like demeanor, but she humored him for a moment longer. Maybe if she tolerated a little of his worrying, he'd satisfy himself and then forget about her stupid fast healing hand. She looked in the direction Steve looked, out over the water.

"Three, I think?" she guessed.


"Stop it. You're no fun. We're not here to think about those things. I'm cold. Can I wear your jacket?" she asked.

Wordlessly, he slipped his arms out of the leather and draped it around her shoulders.

"I'm not a granny," she fussed, and worked her hands into the sleeves, "here, push the sleeves up so I can use my hands."

He did so, and she nodded her thanks to him. They turned to walk back toward his bike, but they were in no hurry. Steve was too quiet. She reached out and pinched his ass.

"No fair! I didn't pinch you!" he dodged sideways away from her and frowned.

"Stop thinking," she told him.

"Can't help it," he muttered.

She reached to pinch him again. He saw it coming, but he restrained himself from reacting. He only knew one way to react, and he didn't want to hurt her.

"Quit it," he said plaintively.
"Then quit thinking. It's nothing that can't wait til morning," Estrella told him.

Steve wished he could comply, but he was hopeful and excited. If Estrella had some of his healing, then she would be alright. Her bones would heal, and her life wouldn't be limited. She wouldn't be fragile. Her immune system would be stronger. She could do things she wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

A fear of the unknown worried at him. What if something else had happened to her, like some form of Bruce's ability? Or any other strange, unexpected thing from the serum. They wouldn't know until Bruce gave her a thorough exam and took samples of tissue and blood to study. Estrella grabbed a handful of his ass and gave him a real honk of a squeeze and shake.

He stopped walking and turned to her. Why didn't she see how important this could be?

"Eya-"

"No! I don't care about that right now. Any of it. I don't care what you did last night. I don't care what happens tomorrow. I don't care if a whale jumps up the beach and squashes us five minutes from now. Be here with me. Please?" she asked. She'd started out talking with hand gestures and attitude, but by the end of her words, she was still and imploring.

He took a deep breath of the crisp, salty air. She stood in the dim moonlight, looking up at him hopefully. She obviously didn't care about any of their worries right now. Her eagerness to fully experience the moment with an uncluttered mind inspired him. She was right. All that stuff would wait.

He grinned a little at the happy energy she exuded. In response, she pushed busily at his shoulders until he turned and she was at his back. Her hands gripped over top of his shoulders and he knew what she wanted. Steve squatted a little and caught her behind the knees when she jumped up.

She laughed near his ear and he settled her legs above his hips for a piggy back ride.

"Where to?" he asked her.

"Let's go close to the water," she said.

He liked her warm breath on the side of his face. She smelled like good wine, clean girl, and that fleeting hint of cologne. Steve cupped the backs of her thighs in his hands and was happy to feel some meat on her. She was slim, sure, but there was substance and energy in her. Estrella was far from being the frail, sickly person he'd first met on their bench. Finally, she felt young and full of life, as she should. Steve smiled and enjoyed the slight weight of her.

He walked along at the very edge of the water and danced aside when the thin rush and reach of the waves came for his shoes. Estrella laughed to be bounced around, and her hands moved from gripping the muscles at the tops of his shoulders. She draped her arms over his shoulders and crossed her hands over his chest in a hug.

Steve breathed deeply and wondered at the warm happiness that she gave him. He felt it all over, but especially in his chest. She clung to him despite his effortless support of her weight. It seemed that she simply wanted to be close to him. He was glad. She was the only one who ever wanted to touch him just to touch him. It felt so right.

"Can we do this forever?" she asked dreamily.

He knew she meant their close contact and their refusal to think about their troubles.
"That's a good plan. I like it," he agreed.

There was a slough where rainwater had cut through the dunes to get to the ocean. Steve jumped over it and kept walking. The leap worked smoothly into his stride and Estrella barely felt jostled.

Her hands were chilled. One, then the other, she slid them under the thick knit of his sweater. The skin of his upper chest was toasty warm. Compared to the relentless chilling breeze off the ocean, Steve was heat and life. Plus, she felt sneaky and sly. It was her goal to touch him. To show him affection, and to prove to him that they could share it without hurting each other.

At a slight bend of the beach, the waves crashed and rolled back on themselves in surging chaos. Steve stopped a few feet out of the water's reach and turned so they could both see the moonlight on the water.

Her hands were slowly caressing his skin. It felt intimate to have her hands on him, under his clothes. It was very different from letting the women touch him last night. Those women, he'd kept at a distance, focusing only on the sensations he needed from them. With Eya, the fact that it was her touching him somehow made it deeper, as if she was soaking into his skin with her fussy concern and her irreverent acceptance of all that he was.

Steve didn't want to take from her. He wanted to give. Something about the thought of giving to her was inescapably primal. An image flashed in his mind of what it would be like to adore her, to give every joy to her that he could, to see if the incredible feelings she gave to him with her modest touches could be turned about and lavished on her. Naked. If the simple touch of her hand felt so good, what would their skin feel like with nothing to keep them apart? Steve came alive all over until his voice was nearly trembling when he spoke.

"I want this, Eya. I want us. You have to know that there are things we might not make it through," he said.

His voice was low with sincerity and concern. One of her hands came up out of his sweater to press to his lips.

"I know. I have worries, too. Not right now, okay? It's only us right now," she whispered at his ear.

Everything that he knew was right, and everything that he knew was wrong bubbled up in him, wanting out. He wanted to warn her that he might live a long time, and remind her that he might die tomorrow. He felt the need to tell her that maybe, just maybe, a prostitute was pregnant with his kid. He should tell her again that she could be putting herself in danger by going with him. Missions could take him away for months at a time and leave her alone. This thing that was happening with his body might be falsely manipulating how he felt. People would say things, and the media would always be-

Estrella patted his lips with her fingers.

"Breathe, Steve. Just breathe," she said.

He hadn't realized he was holding his breath until she said it. He'd gone tense, bottled up with all the things that would get in their way.

His hot breath huffed out over her fingers, and her other hand rubbed at his chest. When he didn't try to talk, she rubbed his face and neck at the same time as she rubbed his chest.

A helpless groan escaped with his next breath. He tilted his head back and felt the spray of the waves dampen his jeans from a random surge. Steve stepped back, then sat them down on the
damp, firm sand.

Steve let go of her legs, and she squatted on her heels behind him. They were quiet and he breathed for a while, trying to let all the bad things, the worrisome things, gust away along the beach with the wind. He pressed at her hand in his sweater so that she wouldn't stop touching him. Eventually, he was able to set it all aside and enjoy the moment again. He was thankful for her calming peacefulness and her patience with him.

"It's so nice out. I don't want to go back. Can we stay here tonight?" she asked.

"I think so," Steve told her.

"We can?" she asked, surprised.

Her question had been rhetorical, because it felt like they should leave soon and she didn't want to end their time together.

"Yeah," he confirmed.

"Right here?" she asked with a little laugh.

Steve was large and warm, but she knew she didn't want to sleep on the damp sand if she had a choice. She didn't want to sleep out where people could see. She'd already done that too much.

"No. Not right here. Wouldn't you rather somewhere softer and drier, out of the wind?"

"Yes, but where?" she wondered.

Steve twisted to look behind them for a moment. She could see the brighter shapes of houses against the dark scrub brush of the dunes in the distance.

"Tony has a house over there," he said, and pointed.

She couldn't see any details or tell one house from the next, but she believed him.

"Do you have a key?" she asked on a whisper.

"No. You should know we won't need one," he said.

Steve got to his feet and brushed the damp sand from his jeans as best he could. He took Estrella's hand and they walked over the hump of the beach and toward the houses.

"Are you sure we won't get in trouble?" she asked.

"Eya. It's your turn to stop worrying," he told her.

"Okay," she agreed.

They went around a tangle of driftwood at the debris line. Estrella was too hot in his jacket now, but too cold when she tried taking it off. She compromised by unbuttoning her shirt and tugging it out of her pants so the air could get at her white cotton T-shirt underneath. That helped.

She stumbled because she wasn't looking where she stepped while she adjusted her clothes. Steve's hand was steady to grab onto. He looked back at her and she smiled to let him know she was alright.
The houses were big. Huge! The dunes and scrub brush were undisturbed right up to the wood picket fence and again inside the fence up to the broad porch steps. A red light blinked at them slowly from somewhere up on the porch.

"Jarvis," Steve called to the house.

"Welcome, Captain, Miss," the familiar AI replied.

A little click sounded at the low gate. The red light stopped blinking in the shadowed dark of the porch. Steve and Estrella followed the sandy path to the steps, and Estrella would have felt like a criminal trespasser at such a grand home, if it hadn't been for Jarvis' voice to welcome them. The porch light came on in a soft glow through amber, bubbled glass.

"I'm afraid the house will be stale. Guests were not expected," Jarvis said.


They went inside after scuffing their sandy shoes against the rough welcome mat. The air in the house smelled unused, but pleasantly of wood and new furniture. Estrella felt hesitant to go into a dark, vacant house that belonged to someone else. What if Pepper didn't want them getting sand inside? She took a moment longer to wipe her feet until Steve tugged her gently along.

Lights from three lamps came on across the large living room. The space had a cozy, cottage feel to it, despite the size. The walls were white pickled wood, and the floors were driftwood gray plank, smooth with a satin shine. Comfortable furniture with pillows and lap blankets outfitted the room.

Steve shut and locked the door behind them, then motioned for her to stay where she was. She nodded and he disappeared up the stairs. Estrella heard his footsteps moving quickly through the upper floor, pausing here and there. He pounded up more stairs, then she couldn't hear his feet anymore. She knew he was checking that the house was secure. It was an unpleasant reminder of his job, but she felt safer with him doing it. In less than two minutes, he was back with her, looking satisfied.

"There's a bathroom here, if you need it," he indicated a door under the stairs, "You wanna stay here while I go get the bike?"

Estrella looked around at the grand 'cottage' with its classic coastal décor, expensive bronze fixtures and hardware, and its thick stone fireplace. She shook her head. The place was comfy looking, but far too nice. Odd how she'd gotten used to Avengers tower, but this beach house, which was quaint by comparison, made her uneasy with its casually displayed wealth.

"I want to go with you," she said.

They went back out to the porch and down the steps. At the bottom step, Steve urged her to get up on his back again. When she was secure, he started with at a jog, but smoothed out into a long-stride run.

She laughed as he leapt over driftwood obstacles and she clung to him more tightly. It was quite a distance to the bike. She hadn't thought they'd gone so far. It was getting late, and the car and jeep were gone. Steve let her slip down to stand. He clipped the helmets to the saddlebags and got the bike ready to ride. They mounted up and drove back the way they'd come in on the road.

When Steve got to the street entrance of Tony's house, the front gate opened to admit them. The garage door lifted and lights come on in the spacious garage. Estrella was unsurprised to see a golf
cart and a convertible sports car already inside. Tony's wealth still boggled her when she thought of it, so she tried not to. The garage door closed and shut them in the private space. The bike was noisy inside and Steve shut it off quickly.

Estrella hung onto Steve when he would have moved to get off the bike. Her hands pushed up under his sweater, seeking firm skin and rubbing there. She felt him tense, then he sucked in a breath. His hand covered hers lightly and pressed her hand still against him.

"Eya, maybe we shouldn't," Steve murmured with gentle caution.

"But I want to," she protested.

He slid their hands away from under his clothes and they got off the bike. She frowned at the back of his head as they went up the steps and into the house. She wasn't done touching him. Maybe he thought she was, but she wasn't. Her determination to get past his prim attitude distracted her from the understated luxury of the house's interior.

Steve didn't need her all over him all the time. She knew that. But when he got the Captain's thoughtful scowl on his face from all his worries, she wanted to soothe it away from him. If it hadn't been for the well healed injury on her hand, maybe he wouldn't have been reminded of work. She shook free of him and shut herself into the bathroom under the stairs when they were in the living room again. Why were they holding hands, anyway? It's not like she needed him to walk.

There was very nice French soap in the soap dish, and the bathroom towels were fluffy and soft. It was easy to find where the new toothbrushes and toothpaste were kept. Since she wasn't wearing any makeup, she only splashed water over her face and patted it dry. She took off her hat and used damp fingers to smooth her hair down.

The bathroom vanity light was soft and warm. It made her look too good. Her looks were coming back more quickly than she'd wanted, but it couldn't be helped. Steve already stared at her a little too often. Estrella took off Steve's leather jacket and glared stubbornly at her clothes. She was still slim enough, with the curves of her hips only mildly distracting. Her breasts barely pushed at the shirt. She moved the suspender straps outward a little and straightened the points of her collar. Her men's dress shirt looked rumpled as she imagined men did at the end of the day, undone with her undershirt showing, and the tails hanging out around the impediment of the suspenders. She liked the look.

Steve called to her from somewhere in the house. She found him in the kitchen and laid his jacket on the back of a barstool, and her hat on the granite bartop.

"Are you thirsty?" Steve asked her.

He turned from in front of the huge refrigerator and offered her a chilled water bottle. She took it and watched him drink one down. Halfway through, he looked at her and frowned. Soon as the bottle was empty, he shook his head and pushed her arms aside.

"No, no. At the end of the day, you gotta shuck em down, like this," he said.

He smiled and used his fingers to hook under her suspenders. He took them down her arms until she cooperated and worked out of them. The elastic straps draped down around her thighs and her shirt luffed free.

"See, that's better. You would take off your tie, too, but…" he smiled.

Estrella touched her butterfly and smiled back. No way was she taking it off. All night, she'd felt
fine with him. Now that they were alone in this new place, in the quiet of lavish drapes and upholstery, he seemed too big. Too close.

She stepped back a little and looked down at the water bottle in her hand.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Steve said kindly.

"Smart of you to avoid apologizing," she teased him back for his careful choice of words.

"Well, I keep getting nagged for it, so I figure I better re-condition myself," he agreed.

Estrella drank some water and looked around. She knew Jarvis was here, but it felt like only the two of them. At the tower, there was always someone to come if she needed help. And there was Steve's stupid protocol that he'd made so they couldn't be alone in his suite. Or Natasha's. But here they were, now.

"Why aren't you afraid of hurting me? Why is it okay for us to be alone?" she asked him.

Steve's polite regard faltered and he looked thoughtful again. He took his jacket from the stool and guided her out onto the back porch. Part of the porch on the far end was screened. They went there, and the screens helped to cut the wind some. There was a large piece of furniture against the back wall of the house, and Steve pulled the dust cover off of it.

The day bed was strewn with pillows and Steve arranged them out of the way so he could lie with his back against the house, and on top of the coverlet. He toed off his shoes and patted the empty space in front of him.

Estrella hesitated. It was just Steve, but it wasn't. There was that broody, slightly restrained look creeping into his features. The bulk and strength of him both attracted her and made her cautious. She forcefully recalled how wonderful it had been to hold him on the beach, and she went to him. Quick, before she could think too much, she got onto the bed and lay back against him. He put his jacket down at his legs in case she got chilled and needed it, then he rested his arm around her, his other one propping up his head.

"I did a lot last night. I don't feel so desperate," Steve finally explained.

"A lot of sex, you mean?" she asked.

She tried to wiggle over onto her back to look up at his face, but he gently kept her in place, spooned against him.

"Mm-hmm," Steve agreed, and she could almost hear him blushing.

"So it was worth it. It helped you," she concluded.

"I don't know, Eya. Jarvis, please turn off the lights," Steve said.

"Captain," Jarvis began to admonish them.

"Just do it!" Estrella fussed at the AI.

For a moment, nothing happened, then the amber porch light and the lights inside the house began to fade. Right before they went full off, they flickered petulantly.

Steve chuckled.
"Is he getting attitude with us?" Estrella whispered.

"I think so," Steve said, "but it doesn't do any good to whisper. His hearing is probably better than mine."

"It's okay, Jarvis. Steve won't hurt me," Estrella said softly.

The back porch light flickered minutely.

Estrella smiled at their friend's show of displeasure and snuggled back into Steve's warmth. The moonlight was a low silvery glow out on the beach in front of them, and her eyes were adjusting to the darkness. In the distance, she could hear the waves washing up onto the sand when the wind wasn't whistling too loudly through the screen.

"You don't think all the sex helped you?" Estrella prompted Steve.

If he wanted to hide in the dark and not let her look at him, she would allow it. She knew from his tone that this was difficult for him to talk about. The fact that he was willing to tell her about it at all made her happy.

"Physically, maybe. I'm just starting to feel driven again. It's been a big relief today, not having to fight against it," Steve said.

"But?" she asked him after he'd been quiet for a little too long.

"But now I've got problems. The kind that make last night not worth the trouble," Steve said in a more somber tone.

Estrella didn't want their rare time alone together to be tainted with unhappy things, but if he needed to talk, she would listen. She wiggled in his arms and hugged his arm that was in front of her. She tucked his hand under her chin against her collarbone and neck.

"Tell me," she offered.

"One of the women might be pregnant. Tony doesn't think it's possible, but I have to consider it. We won't know for sure until over a week from now. I don't want to tell you something like that, but you should know," he said firmly, like he'd had to buck up his courage to say the words.

She ducked her head to kiss his knuckles briefly.

"It's okay," she tried to comfort him.

"It's not okay!," Steve insisted with quiet vehemence, "How can you say that, Eya? One of those women who I don't even know could have my child, and I don't have any say in it. Tony says I don't have a bit of control over what happens if she is. And the other woman took a pill. What if there was a baby, Eya? And she got rid of him, like taking out the trash?"

He was agitated. She could feel it in the hardness of his muscles behind her. She wasn't surprised that he would feel this way. He protected everyone else when he put on his uniform and went out to work. Of course he would feel that much more protective over someone or something he felt was one of his own.

"All you can do is wait, Steve. I've been through it a few times. It eats at your thoughts until you know. Are you upset because you can't control it? It doesn't matter who you are in this. You can't control everything," she said with familiar resignation.
"It's not that I want to control everything. Especially not the woman. If she doesn't want the baby, she can go. But if there's a baby and he's mine, then I need to protect him. I want to protect him," Steve said, low and fierce.

Estrella felt an uncomfortable mix of understanding for Steve's instincts, pain that he might become tied and obligated to another woman, and shameful jealousy that he would feel so deeply for someone else. Her jealousy was shameful because she had no claim on him.

She'd let herself get too close. She cared too much. She'd been an idiot to let herself think someone like him could possibly be for her in any way that wanted fidelity or babies. Over all of the discomfort, Steve was her only real friend, and maybe she was his. They didn't need each other for work or for business, like all the other people in his life. He put up with her because he cared and seemed to like her, and she felt the same for him. And more.

Steve bit his lip and felt his face burn. He was angry at himself. He wanted so badly to tell Estrella that he wanted to try for a real future with her, but it wouldn't be fair to say that at this point. All he could do was be honest with her about what he'd done and pray that she didn't walk away, like she was always talking about doing. She was too stiff and quiet against him. There was a sick feeling in his belly, and he was loathe to admit to himself that the feeling was fear. Estrella might want nothing to do with him, now that she knew how shamefully depraved and irresponsible he'd been.

Estrella took slow, even breaths and focused on the strong beats of her heart. It was her fault that she'd let her feelings get so involved when he'd cautioned her not to. Stupid! He needed a friend now, not a jealous woman, she reminded herself. Just like difficult decisions she'd made before, she decided on a course of action and swept all other options aside.

"You wait. Things will go one way, or they'll go the other. I'll help you to not go crazy until you know. Then, we can go from there. Do you want a relationship with this woman, if she's got your baby?" Estrella asked.

"No. But maybe if she does, I should try?" Steve said uncertainly.

"No, no. Back up. You said that Tony doesn't think it's possible. He's not usually wrong about things. Why don't you trust Tony's opinion?" she asked.

"It's embarrassing," was all he said, like he was trying to swallow the words before they came out.

"What is?" she asked.

"My, uh, stuff. My semen," Steve said with difficulty, "From the testing they did right after I got the serum. It's in my files that it's pretty strong. Potent, I mean. Ugh, God, I can't believe I'm telling anybody this. I'm more likely to get someone pregnant, given any situation where pregnancy is possible. The sperm live longer, swim stronger, all the things that happened to me, they got too. Persistent, determined little buggars."

Estrella giggled at his embarrassed growling.

"Eyã," he groaned and buried his face in the back of her hair.

"I'm sorry. It's so not funny, but it is!" she said.

She had to laugh, because if she didn't, she was going to freaking swoon at the thought of Steve, super-strong and super-virile, giving a child of his to her. No! Damnit. At the end of her laugh, she gasped in a breath, and familiar fantasy images of them together washed over her in a rush. Before she could think to stop it, her body arched back and her eyes rolled beneath her lids.
"Hnnn," she keened quietly.

Steve's hand pressed into her chest and he grunted at her in confused recognition. He would have asked her what was wrong, but the tilt of her bottom into his groin, the wanton way her throat presented so beautifully to him, and the tantalizing rubbing of her thighs went straight to the part of his brain that knew without asking.

He choked his throat shut against the filthy words that wanted to spill out. Not profane, low, common words. The words he held back were of eager, graphic encouragement. He shocked himself at the deep desire to say them. Never had he wanted to talk dirty to anyone, but he really wanted to now. His hand splayed flat and rubbed down her front from sternum to belly and back up again. At her throat, so pretty, he skimmed his fingers to get the tie out of the way so he could see the lines of her unobstructed. Like this! He had to draw her like this.

His fingers brushed delicately at her throat.

"Sorry," Estrella whispered, "Sorry, Steve."

She was mortified at what she'd just done, but aroused, too. As her mind crunched and ground through the awkwardness, she hunkered her body into the opposite posture, curled away from his answering arousal. She knew that he didn't like it when she acted too girly. She didn't want to make him run away.

"Me too," he murmured.

While they calmed down some, Steve caressed her neck. His fingers trailed up from the hollow of her throat, around the side, and up behind her ears. That's where she'd put the little dabs of cologne. Like viscerally appreciating a sculpture, he limned the contours of her cheek, her temple, her jaw. She breathed sweet little huffs through parted lips.

"Don't have to hide," he told her.

He didn't like to see her hunkered and ashamed. He petted the back of her head and neck in encouragement for her to straighten back toward him, if she would. Slowly, she turned to lay flat in front of him. She looked up at him, sort of dazed and sleepy.

"Shhh," he cautioned.

With a finger, he nudged her copper butterfly back to where it was supposed to be. He held it in place and tugged her tie snug to hold it. She smiled at him and shrugged lazily.

"Maybe I wanted to talk to you," she said.

"I probably wanted to hear you," he admitted.

She pouted. He could have stopped his finger from touching her lip, gliding back and forth. He didn't want to, so he didn't stop until she bit him.

"Tickles," she complained after she spit out his finger.

She brought up her hand and rubbed at her lip to make the tickle go away. Steve was staring again, worse than ever. It was difficult not to wriggle under the captivated intensity of his gaze. She didn't know if he looked like a naïve, entrapped man, or a latent predator. Maybe a lot of both, but her kind hearted friend was in that look, too. That's what made it so confusing. As if he wanted everything more that he'd already told her he wasn't ready for.
"Don't look at me like that," she told him, but she didn't really want him to stop.

She liked what that look said more than his words.

"Can't help it," Steve said.

If he wasn't going to help her, then she wouldn't make the effort, either. Her eyes were fully adjusted to the dark now, so she could see him propped above her, leaned back to give her some room.

He was nearly too gorgeous to breathe calmly in the presence of him, if she let herself look at him beyond the thin veil of their friendship. His soulful blue eyes were dark in the moon gloom. She knew he didn't want to hear how handsome or even pretty he was, so she bit her lip to keep quiet. What he'd said about his semen, his potency, was there to see in all the rest of him. He was vibrantly, blatantly male to the point that she could feel it emanating from him like basking in the sun. Again, her body wanted to offer to him in wordless, ageless response. She tightly resisted, because they were already on the very edge of too much, with them staring at each other like this.

"Can't help it, either," she apologized.

"Then I guess we're in trouble," he grumbled.

Estrella nodded a little.

"I want. So much. But I can't," he frowned.

She nodded again in understanding.

"Is it just because of the woman who might be pregnant?" she asked.

Steve shook his head, merely a wobble of it because he was propped on his hand.

"Things are becoming clear to me now, Eya. There are a lot of other things in the way, but maybe we can get past all that if we want to bad enough. I can't commit to anyone halfway, or just for a little while. You said you're planning to leave. You said you'd stay, and then when I hurt you, you'd go away again and start over somewhere else," he reminded her.

"That's not what I said. Or, it's not what I meant you to understand. I meant that when I'm too strong for you, before you aren't yourself anymore, I'll go and let you be free of me. You're not some lonely plumber in backwater Indiana, Steve. The world needs you. It wouldn't be right to keep you wrapped up in me all the time. You need to go out and fight," she frowned at him.

"You gonna bring down Captain America all by yourself?" Steve asked her with a tone that was neither joking nor afraid.

"I don't want to, but I probably will," Estrella admitted solemnly.

Something changed in his expression, though she couldn't have said what it was. His eyes maybe gleamed or something, and his jaw was a little different. If she'd been James Barnes looking at that face, she'd have known it was the look of challenge and determination that Steve put on when the battle started to get a little more interesting and made him work for it some. That look didn't disappear until the shield was stowed on his shoulders again and he was walking away from a downed opponent. But she didn't know that.

"I'm taking some time soon. You wanna go on vacation with me?" Steve asked her.
"Me? With you? Where would we go?" she asked.

He took a moment to think about her question. There hadn't been any time to ponder that today. He'd just barely considered that he could get away at all, much less to where.

"I dunno yet. Maybe I'll let you decide," Steve said.


Steve liked how relaxed and drowsy she was getting. Every time she blinked her eyes, they stayed closed for a little longer.

"That about sums it up for me, too. Maybe we pack a bag and get dropped off somewhere. Anywhere that's warm, with sun," Steve said.

"Sounds good. When do we leave?" Estrella asked softly.

Steve could see that she was starting to drift from consciousness. He turned her on her side again and gathered her in. A gust of wind through the screens reminded him that she might get chilled. He pulled his jacket up and tucked it around her. His toes were pretty good at pushing off her shoes as he'd done to his. He fit his legs to the backs of hers and piled pillows on their lower halves to keep her warm down there. Her head pillowed on his arm and he settled on the large pillow he'd kept at the top of the bed.

He knew he wouldn't sleep much out in the open like this on a screen porch, but he'd let himself rest for a while. Estrella felt more than right in his arms. She felt like hope. Maybe it was a tiny, delicate hope, but it was warm and heavy against his chest.

"J?" he asked.

The red light of the security system turned on and pulsed slowly in the dark.
Chapter 33

Note: Mature themes, but nothing overtly physical.

The endless soft sounds of the wind and the waves were soothing. Steve lay next to Estrella while she slept. He didn't want to move to look at his watch and take a chance on waking her, but he knew he'd slept for maybe three hours, off and on. That was plenty, especially since he hadn't done anything useful or tiring with his body for a while.

He could feel it coming back. As the pre-dawn hours passed, Steve went through cycles of mild arousal and calmness. He was trying hard to enjoy nothing more than being with her. It was a practice in following Estrella's example to stay present in the moment. He was jealous of this time, alone and at peace with her. Everything wanted to worry at him, but he looked down at her in the dark and thought instead of how she cared for him. Thinking non-sexual thoughts helped to keep his need at bay for a little bit longer.

An hour before dawn, he couldn't lie still anymore. He refreshed himself in the bathroom in the house, and found the coffee maker and a tin of butter cookies in the pantry. Steve set coffee on to brew, then stripped off his socks. He left them on the porch and rolled up the legs of his jeans to well above his ankles.

"Jarvis, has there been any unusual activity tonight?" he asked very quietly.

"None, Captain. If you wish to go for a run, I will keep watch and inform the Miss if she awakes before your return," Jarvis answered just as softly.

"Thank you," Steve said.

He made sure his phone was in his back pocket, and on impulse, he took off his sweater. The air was cool and inviting on his skin, and unlike in town, there appeared to be no one out yet to see him. The sand felt good under his feet, and he took off down the beach toward the coming sunrise.

When he began, it was dark and quiet. The Eastern horizon was only slightly brighter than the rest of the night. As he made miles along the water, sea birds woke and joined him, gliding along over the surf to look for an early breakfast. Steve turned around before the sun rose. A fisherman said good morning to him as he passed the pier. Long legged sandpipers ran out of his path.

Steve paused for a moment before he went back across the beach to the house. The sun was rising and bathing everything in new morning light. He knew it would make sand stick to him, but he stood at the water's edge anyway. Gentle waves rushed between his toes and feet. The water was cold and invigorating, but not icy. He breathed deep of the salt air for a moment longer.

They needed to get back to the tower. He wanted to get Estrella to Bruce for testing, and he had arrangements to make if he was going to take leave. There were briefings and a planning session scheduled for today, but none of it started until later in the morning.

He didn't want to go back. It's not that he loved this particular beach so much. Steve found himself craving time away from his co-workers and his job. He liked his friends, especially Sam, Buck, and Thor. But last night…

He wanted more of that. The need to find out who he was away from work pushed at him. The need to find out who he could be with Estrella pulled at him even more. With that in mind, he was
eager to get back to the tower and take care of business so he could be free to go on leave.

Steve jogged across the sand. He paused at the debris line and fingered through the seashells washed up there. There was a small, delicately twisted one with streaks of pink and orange and brown through the white calcium shell. He took it back for Estrella.

He leapt over the low gate and would have bounded up the steps, but Jarvis spoke up.

"Captain, if I may suggest," he said.

A spray of water turned on from a low nozzle at the porch post by the steps. Steve stopped to rinse the sand from his feet and ankles.

"Thanks," he said.

Estrella moved sleepily on the day bed and he went to see if she was waking up. She opened her eyes and smiled at him when he came to sit beside her. He thought she looked beautiful with her clothes wrinkled and her hair messed from sleep. She stretched and yawned, and Steve looked away from how her dark shirt parted and her nipples poked at the white cotton tee underneath.

"Here," he said, and handed her the seashell.

Estrella sat up and cupped her hand to take it. He released the shell, but then touched the back of her hand with his fingers. He couldn't seem to resist the desire to touch her. Why did their skin feel so good together?

She made a small sound of appreciation for the pretty shell, and their eyes met in the morning light. Steve appreciated how she mostly looked at his face and only glanced at his bare chest in a flicker.

"It's so nice that you could go run in just your skin," she told him.

"Yeah. Felt great. You want coffee before we go? I made some," he offered.

"Is there any milk?" she asked.

Estrella brought his hand to her mouth and licked the backs of his fingers with a quick, exploratory flick of her tongue. Steve almost jerked his hand back and asked her why she did it.

"Mm. Salty. I love the beach. I'll go see if there's any milk," she said.

Steve watched her hurry away. She had a very cute bottom. And she was too smart. She knew that if she'd licked him and then stayed to stare at him, he would have frowned at her for doing it. She didn't want to be fussed at, so she found a reason to be elsewhere. Steve let the cool wet stripe across his fingers stay as it was while he gathered his sweater and socks. He made a pile of their things to bring in, and then he put the day bed back like they'd found it.

When he came in with their shoes and things, Estrella had a cup of coffee with creamer for herself, and had poured a mug full of plain black for him. She sat at the bar and tugged at a tuft of her hair that was sticking up. Her eyes followed him as he came to sit next to her in front of his mug.

"I liked being here with you, but this house is too much. I feel like I'm going to break something or get it dirty," she commented while she looked around.

"Me too. Pepper has great taste, but I'd be more comfortable in a little shanty," he agreed.

Estrella slid her elbow way out onto the glossy stone bar top and propped her head to hover over
the steam rising from her coffee. Steve took a sip from his mug. He was much more interested in looking at her than around at Pepper's carefully planned décor. Estrella smiled at him for a moment, but when he only gave her a slight curve of his lips and kept staring at her, her features soured. She pointedly looked down to stare at his bare chest.

"I wasn't looking at you like that," Steve complained.

"Yes, and I'm still skinny. Captain America is doomed. Are you sure you want to go on vacation with me? If we go somewhere warm and sunny, maybe with a real beach, then I might put on a bathing suit. Will your eyes fall out? Will you trip over your feet?" she asked him.

Steve sat up straight from his rounded slouch over his mug.

"You haven't seen Captain America yet, sweetcheeks. Do your worst," Steve gave her a smug smile.

"But is that who you're going to have to be if we go on vacation? Maybe it's not a good idea. You should take Bucky," Estrella said.

Steve could see that she didn't like the thought, but she suggested it anyway.

"It's just that you're pretty. I wasn't looking at you with your shirt off, or staring at your…other parts. Can't I look at you?" he asked.

His hand went out and he touched her cheek to show her that he meant her face, not anything lascivious about the rest of her. The warmth of his large hand so close to her skin was irresistible. She turned her face into his hand for the contact. He'd gone still, and she didn't like that, so she rubbed her cheek into his palm and slid her nose against the side of his thumb. Again, she was drawn to the promise of saltwater on his skin. Her lips parted for her tongue to get another salty taste of him.

"Stop licking me," Steve grumbled, but he didn't withdraw his hand.

Her eyes opened slowly and she smiled at him in challenge. In mild defiance, she bit at the meat of his thumb, just enough to dimple his skin. He watched, fascinated, as her eyes slid shut and her tongue licked him behind her teeth.

Steve tightened the muscles of his hand and her teeth slipped off of him with a little click. Her eyes blinked open in surprise. She'd almost bitten her own tongue. His flesh was like wood when he tightened his muscles.

"I don't have to be Cap to win at that," he grinned.

"If you say so," Estrella said.

She licked the last of the lingering salt from her lips and went back to her coffee.

Steve took a slow, deep breath he hoped was too controlled for her to notice. His dick was hard in his jeans again, and unlikely to go down anytime soon. It was just his hand! Why did the sight of her lush mouth on his hand translate directly into phallic interest? She was playing with him, trying to prove a point. She'd made her point. Spending days alone with her was going to be challenging. He really needed to accept that challenge and be man enough to resist her. She was saying that she'd leave because she expected him to fall under some kind of spell for her. He needed to prove her wrong. He had to be stronger.
"We should get back. I'd like you to go to Bruce, and I need to wrap things up so I can be free for a while. Let's get done here," he said briskly.

He turned from his stool and bent to get his sweater, which was folded on top of his shoes. He set her shoes near her stool. He pulled his sweater on, but a tug at the bottom of it didn't half cover his arousal. He walked away into the living room to sit down and put his shoes on.

Estrella washed their coffee mugs in the sink and emptied the coffee maker. She came around to get her shoes, and she buttoned her shirt while she walked. Steve looked away while she tucked her shirt in and pulled her suspenders up. He looked back again as she straightened the points of her collar, snugged her tie, and licked her fingers to try to get that one wild tuft of hair to stay down. She sat on the floor like a loose limbed kid and worked her feet into her shoes. The sleek black men's dress socks on her trim ankles made him want to feel them in his hands. Steve shook his head and looked away again.

"We can go," Estrella announced into the quiet.

"Right," Steve said.

Mercifully, she turned and walked in front of him so he didn't have to walk toward her in the bright morning light fully exposed in the snug jeans. Everything was fine until they got to his bike in the garage. The thought of riding all the way back for an hour crushed in his pants as he was wasn't appealing at all. He handed her helmet to her and turned his back. While she put it on, he did a quick adjustment, then put his helmet on.

"Thank you for letting us into the house, Jarvis," Estrella said to the house in general.

"You are most welcome, Miss," the AI replied.

Steve offered his jacket to Estrella. She shook her head and the woggle of the helmet made her look like one of those little dashboard dolls. Steve laughed a bit and stowed away her hat and his jacket in a saddlebag. Just like the night before, he got on the bike and started it, then offered her a hand. She took it and mounted behind him. Her arms immediately went around him and she hugged in close. He tried to ignore the satisfaction he felt at that. He needed to focus on their safety now.

Steve carefully turned the heavy bike with a bit of his strength and long-practiced skill. He didn't want the garage door to open with his back to it.

"Jarvis, scan," he said.

"There is no suspicious activity outside, Captain. You are clear," Jarvis replied, and he opened the garage door.

Soon as there was enough clearance, Steve got them out and to the road. It was a beautiful morning. Red winged blackbirds bobbed on the reed grass that lined the road. They'd left after most of the morning traffic, so they didn't have to creep along to get back to the mainland.

Steve kept his attention on their surroundings and his eyes sharp for any irregularities in traffic. He wasn't in uniform, he didn't have his shield or his satchel, and folks weren't accustomed to seeing the Captain riding around with a passenger behind him. He was hoping on that to keep them anonymous, but not completely dependent on it. It was possible that some people knew his bike by now, but there were other bikes that looked similar out there.

By the time they were back in the boroughs, the feel of Estrella riding cozy behind him wasn't
quite so distracting. Until her hands slipped under his sweater. He touched the comm button inside his helmet.

"Eya," he warned her.

"What? It's breezy. The rest of me is fine, but my hands are cold. Your jacket wouldn't have helped with that anyway," she answered him.

They stopped in traffic and Steve glanced at all the vehicles around them. His helmet visor was tinted, so nobody could see his face. All the vehicle windows were shut. Nobody would hear him talking to her.

"Alright, but don't get feely. I need to concentrate," he said.

She laughed without opening the comm channel and he heard her fine.

"I'm serious, doll. Don't mess with me right now," he told her.

Estrella behaved herself almost all the way back to the tower. Steve had to make a quick lane change to make their exit. It probably wasn't dangerous, but the nimble lean and punch of the bike in close traffic frightened her. Her hands flattened on his belly in some approximation of a stopping gesture, then her fingers curled and gripped at the waistband of his jeans as they slipped into the new lane between a bus and a delivery truck. There was plenty of room, but the large vehicles made her anxious. Soon as they were moving along sedately again, she felt silly for being so worried.

She relaxed the curl of her hands and was surprised at the denim-covered topography under her fingers. Was that-?

"-ya!" Steve said, "I need you to get your hands off, sweetheart."

She jerked her hands back up onto the skin of his belly, the left one fisted to hold in the memory of his hardness under her fingertips, and the right one pressed tight over it.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to," she told him, and her head clunked down onto his shoulder.

Steve could feel her ribs expanding against his back in quick, sharp breaths. Jolts of sensation shocked through his belly and down his legs, but he kept his head on for the rest of the drive. No way were they taking the bike on vacation, he decided.

Her distressed breathing had calmed by the time he pulled into the tower's garage and parked. She got off by herself and was quick to take off the helmet. She set it on the seat and made to hurry toward the elevator.

"Estrella, stop right there. Please wait for me," he said.

He put Pepper's helmet and his where they belonged and got his jacket and her hat. She was waiting for him, standing still in the middle of the parking garage. When he walked up beside her, he could see that her cheeks were red.

Steve chuckled.

"I didn't mean to," she told him again in mortification.

They got into the elevator which Jarvis held for them. Steve had his jacket over his arm. He tugged
her hat on over her hair and she looked up at him, still pink under her golden skin tone. Steve sighed and turned her body. He widened his stance and leaned back against the wall so he could pull her belly flush against his. Estrella looked up at him cautiously. Her hands were braced against his biceps.

"I know you didn't mean to. But tell me why you could rub against me while we were dancing and it didn't bother you, and you can sit on my lap and it doesn't bother you, and we can stand like this, yet touching me with your fingers was a problem?" he wanted to know.

She shrugged and turned her face down against his shoulder. Even now, there was no mistaking him pressed between them, but she wasn't antsy about that. She should be. The brief touch of her fingers on his tip through the denim had him feeling electrified. He wanted more of her touch, but he refused to give in to the urge to move against her. That would be too much like giving up on the challenge she'd laid down in front of him. He had to resist.

"Jarvis, where is Doctor Banner?" Steve asked.

"He is in the lab he shares with Sir."

"Please put me through to him, if I'm not interrupting anything critical," Steve requested.

"Communication is open now," Jarvis said.

"Bruce?" Steve asked.

"Hey, Steve. How's it going?" Bruce answered.

He sounded preoccupied, and Tony's music was playing at a reasonable level in the background.

"Pretty good. Hi, Tony. Thanks for letting us use the beach house. It was nice out there," Steve said.

"You're welcome, Romeo. Should I send staff out to change the sheets?" Tony asked with a grin in his voice.

Estrella felt Steve's front draw tight as a drum, and she looked up to see his face in hard lines of disapproval. She spoke quickly before he could open his teeth and say something angry.

"I don't think so. We slept out on the porch on top of the day bed with all our clothes on," Estrella told Tony.

"Oh. Well, that's no fun," Tony replied.

The elevator opened onto the hallway to the shared lab and Estrella pulled Steve out behind her. The glass door buzzed until she opened it. Steve pulled his hand from hers but she could feel him walking close behind her.

"Heeey!" Tony smiled at her look in the dapper men's clothes.

Steve made a low noise behind her, and Estrella turned a frown at him, then looked to Bruce. She held her scraped hand out to Bruce where he sat at his computer, and he took her hand in his. Tony came over and watched over Bruce's shoulder.

"Uh-oh, Cap. Looks like we've got something here," Tony said with an apologetic smile to Steve and then to Estrella.
Her hand was almost completely healed at only thirty six hours since she'd scraped it.

"It would have taken you how long to heal from this?" Bruce asked Steve, looking up at him over the rim of his glasses.

"Less than thirty minutes," Steve estimated.

"The effect is slight, then," Bruce murmured.

"It's about ten times faster than she would have healed on her own," Steve said.

"It's okay, Steve. I don't mind having some healing. Bruce, he's so worried. Can you do some tests so he'll relax?" Estrella asked.

"Yeah. Give me a second to save my work…" he said, and turned back to his computer.

He made a few keystrokes and then got up from his stool. Estrella patted Steve on the shoulder and smiled sweetly at him, thankful for their night together.

"I'll go with you," Steve said.

"No. I want to do this. You go do what you need to do," Estrella told him.

"Dismissed," Tony said as Bruce and Estrella left the lab and headed for Bruce's personal workspace a few floors down.

Steve turned to Tony and crossed his arms.

"No need to go all power-stance with me, Steve" he said, and stood a little straighter himself.

"Do I make lewd comments to you in front of Pepper?" Steve asked sharply.

"Not in so many words, no. But I distinctly remember a very recent limo ride that was anything but modest, and that was right under Pepper's nose, figuratively speaking. I had a great night after we got home, by the way. Thanks for that," Tony told him with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Steve deflated with a breath and looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry about that," he said quietly.

"I'm not. You shouldn't be. And you're not supposed to apologize," Tony said.

"Right," Steve said more firmly, "So maybe I'm not sorry. Maybe I enjoyed it."

"There ya go. Walk tall, big man," Tony said.

He glanced down at Steve's jeans with a smirk, then turned to go back to his workstation.

Steve grumbled something under his breath and followed him. Tony turned after he sat down as if he was surprised Steve was still there. Just then, the door buzzed again, and Thor strode in with purpose.

"I would speak to you, Steven," he said.

Steve looked to Tony, who was ignoring them both and getting back to whatever he'd been doing before. Steve had words for him later, but Thor seemed serious about whatever was on his mind.
Thor stopped a step away and took up the same 'power stance' Tony had called him on a moment ago. Steve chuckled at the odd dynamics among them, and nodded his agreement to go with Thor wherever he wanted to go.

They were back in the elevator and Thor told Jarvis to go to the living room. Steve didn't like the way Thor's jaw was set. Something was bothering him, and he was pretty sure he knew what it was. It made Steve's frustration twist another turn tighter that Thor was still hung up over whatever he thought had happened in his gym. Steve opened his mouth to talk, but Thor flashed a cold look at him that stopped his words. What the hell was going on?

Thor wasn't in his armor, so nothing serious was afoot. It was odd to see such a large, powerful man wearing a bright Hawaiian print shirt with cargo pants and sandals, but Thor could be eccentric like that. He'd probably been watching something on television lately to inspire him into the odd clothes. His demeanor was all business, though. Steve followed him through the living room and out onto the roof patio.

"What are your plans with the girl?" Thor asked him abruptly when they were in the middle of the sunny open space alone.

"I'm taking some leave. Hopefully starting tomorrow. I've invited her to come with me, and she's - HEY!" Steve ended his words with a yell.

Thor tackled him around the waist and before Steve could force himself loose, Thor ran them to the edge of the roof and leapt over the rail. Steve glanced to the ground a thousand feet below, then up at Thor's open, outstretched hand. He crossed his arms, planked his body and waited for Thor to make his point.

Thor's face was right by his, so he got an up close look at the concern that turned down his features as they sped by eight hundred feet altitude, seven hundred feet, six hundred, five-

Finally, a crash of broken glass tinkled above them, and Mjolnir flew to Thor's hand. With lightning fast response, Thor spun the hammer up and jerked them both off to the West side of the tower. Steve saw that they were approaching the abandoned schoolyard. He'd only flown like this with Thor a few times and briefly when it was necessary in battle. He enjoyed the G force of it. Thor righted them to a hard landing, and Steve stepped back and away.

Mjolnir ripped from Thor's hand and slammed into the concrete of the already cracked old basketball court. More cracks radiated out from the hammer's impact.

"Well, that was irresponsible," Steve said.

"You have no idea." Thor agreed.

He sat down on the concrete Indian style and laid his arms loosely on his bent knees. He stared broodingly at Mjolnir in a long suffering way that told Steve he'd been doing this a lot lately. Steve looked up at the tower, then down at the adamant squat Mjolnir had taken in the schoolyard.

Thor waved a hand at the spot across the hammer from him. Steve sat down much as his friend was, but without the hammer-staring.

"If it's been shunning you, how did you know it would come out and catch us?"

"Necessity. You are more worthy than I at the moment. I wagered on the value of your life to draw it to me," Thor growled.
"Thanks, pal" Steve said dryly.

"You are welcome."

Steve huffed a laugh at Thor's easy acceptance of his sarcasm.

"You don't want me to go on vacation with Estrella," Steve said.

"Not in your current state," Thor agreed.

Thor didn't need to eye-grope him for Steve to understand what he meant.

"It doesn't look like I have any other state to be in, so I'm going as I am," Steve said.

"You will not," Thor denied firmly.

"And you're gonna stop me?" Steve asked.

Thor nodded.

"Have you no care for the girl?" he asked.

"You know I do. I'll be alright," Steve said.

"You will not," Thor said again, "and she will not. You are troubled and it will only become worse as time passes."

"Alright, so what do you expect me to do? You said I was supposed to be watchful, and I took that to mean that you were going to teach me something. Some great Asgardian wisdom?" Steve said somewhat testily.

"I was in error. I have wronged you," Thor said.

Steve sat patiently and waited for an explanation.

"You needed the satisfaction of a robust fight, yet I ruptured your organs when I should have gone more gently. Then, I assaulted your dignity with an unwanted act. To add further insult, I was prideful enough to tell you I was disappointed in your lack of restraint. As if that was not enough, I continued on in my arrogance to say that I would educate you like an unlearned whelp instead of the seasoned leader of battle that you are. Worst of all, I walked away and left you to fight alone. I am unworthy," Thor stated.

"Now make a good act of contrition, and I'll absolve you so you can go say your three Hail Marys," Steve said.

Thor tilted his head aside and looked to Steve instead of the hammer for a moment.


Thor nodded. Then, he reached out and grabbed Mjolnir's haft. It did not budge when he tried to lift it.

"Is that what this is? You're trying trial and error to get your weapon back?" Steve asked.

"It would seem so. I can think of nothing else," Thor murmured with disappointment.
"Did you consider that maybe you shouldn't have insulted your own dignity by putting your mouth on me? C'mon, Thor. You're the prince of Asgard. I felt bad that you did that for me. It's not your place to be in service to a man like that," Steve said.

"It needed doing, and I did so out of mercy. Was it not a help to you?" Thor asked.

"Yeah, it was, but then you got weird about it. I would have been alright with it, but then you started with the hang-dog looks and the silent treatment," Steve explained.

"So it was my behavior afterwards which unsettled you, and not the act itself?"

"Look, you're right. I'm so off the deep end here that it's only when I'm calm that I can see how out of character that was for me. I wasn't bothered by it at the time, and I barely thought of it afterwards. I've seen it happen before, in the trenches when everything was misery and hardship. Guys who had a girl waiting at home, guys who paid the girls to spend time with them on leave, it didn't matter. In certain extreme circumstances, it happens. You didn't mess with my head, if that's what you're worried about. I understood it, but it wasn't like me to allow it. I don't think any less of you, and I know why you did it. It's me I'm disappointed in," Steve said.

He could feel heat rising to his cheeks to have to talk about this, but it was necessary.

"And then I compounded my error by failing to act when we knew you were out looking for mischief to get into," Thor added, as if his previous list of faults wasn't enough.

"Nah, Buck's the only one who could have talked me down from that," Steve said.

"Why did he not?"

"Because he knew I'd find something even more stupid to do if he didn't play along. What I did is not on you or anyone else," Steve assured him.

"And yet I cannot use Mjolnir," Thor grumbled.

He tugged at the hammer again to no result.

"So you're going to leave it here in the middle of nowhere?" Steve wondered.

"What choice do I have? It is no safer nor more vulnerable here than where it was before," Thor said.

"I'm going on leave, Thor," Steve insisted.

"All the more reason for me to need the use of my weapon. If you are not here and action is needed, I must be ready."

"I know. So what do we do?" Steve asked.

Ideas piled up in his head, but Thor knew Mjolnir far better than he ever could. He kept his mouth shut and let Thor think.

"I cannot in good conscience allow you to leave with Lady Estrella in your singular company. She will come to harm," Thor said.

"I'd like to disagree with you, but you might be right. I should tell her she can't go with me," Steve said.
Thor didn't like to hear the disappointment in Steven's voice. As he enjoyed solitary time with his Jane, so too did Steven deserve time with his lady. He never would have thought to question Steven's honor, but the man was not acting himself.

"You had no father to teach you the ways of men," Thor stated.

"I had Buck and Buck's father for a while. There were a few men in the neighborhood who spent good time with us. It was nothing deep, though," Steve admitted.

"Then this is what is required of me," Thor said with a nod.

"What?"

"To teach you," Thor said.

Was Thor blushing? Steve narrowed his eyes at him. Maybe he was.

"This is not customarily passed from man to man, but from father to untried son. Even then, it is only shared along the lineage of warriors. The hearts and minds of lesser men have no need of it," Thor said.

Steve was intrigued and he wanted to hear more. Thor was stalling with extra wordiness, even for him. What the heck was he going to say? Thor was brash and often said things that were too bold for mixed company. Whatever this was had him hesitant.

"You don't have to, Thor. If you're uncomfortable, then don't. I'm not your son. It's not your obligation," Steve said to give him an out.

"You are my brother. Your father, a warrior before you, fell in battle. This, then falls to me," Thor said with finality.

Steve sat up more respectfully and nodded.

"Friend Jarvis!" Thor called out.

There was no response.

"Friend Jarvis, we require your assistance," Thor tried again.

They waited in silence for a full minute. It was plenty long enough that they should have seen Tony come out with his Iron Man suit. Thor waited a half minute longer for good measure, then nodded in satisfaction.

Steve smiled a little at Thor's tactics to ensure privacy, then he gave Thor his full attention. The slight rosy color heightened on Thor's face for a moment, then faded into determination. Steve waited kindly for him to gather his thoughts and his courage. Thor lifted his eyes from the hammer and looked to Steve with neither jolly humor nor casual ease.

"I speak to you as my father spoke to me, and may I do justice to my ancestors in the telling," Thor began.

Steve nodded once.

"The power you feel centered in your loins. It will rule you. It does rule you. I see this. Unguided, it takes what would be your dignity, your manhood, and makes you into little more than a beast," Thor said.
Steve agreed with a slight tucking of his chin. He would have wanted to argue for the sake of pride, but if he was being honest with himself, Thor was right. Pride had no place here.

"All men have desires of the flesh, with rare exception. As you are a warrior, the vigor required of you, of its very nature, enhances these desires. Steven, in your instance, you have been mighty enough, noble enough until now to master these desires. Did you think that might in battle and nobility of character would come without a price?"

"Maybe I did. Are you saying that if Bruce is right and I'm uh…mightier now because I'm eating more and reaching my potential, that I would have felt stronger physical desires sooner if I'd been eating more years ago?" Steve asked.

"I am. It is the only explanation which makes sense. Your virility was not lacking before, but nor was it troublesome beyond your tolerance."

"This is just another reason why I shouldn't feed myself up and make this any more difficult," Steve said.

Thor looked to him sharply.

"You speak from fear," he said.

Again, Steve wanted to deny his words, but again Thor was right.

"Is it right that you should fear your own body? That you should squander your gifts? Or should you take what life has given you and fulfill your potential to the service of your fellow man?" Thor asked.

Steve lowered his head. The answer was so clear that it didn't need words.

"But how, Thor? How do I go beyond what I'm already feeling without shaming myself?"

"You stop denying its existence. You stop resisting it. It pushes you to the limits of your restraint, and you spend all your energies struggling against it as if it were a worthy foe. You have allowed your own body to seduce you into solitary pleasures. Tell me I am wrong," Thor challenged him.

Steve could only heat to crimson. He held Thor's gaze by will alone. Anger and shame stabbed at him and made him grit his teeth at being so transparent to the other man.

"If I stop fighting it, if I stop my solitary pleasures, I'll be a raving pervert. I'll have no dignity left at all. I can't just let it go free," Steve denied.

"I do not yet have the skill of my father, Steven, and for that I am sorry. To a boy, all this sounds like a wondrous tale. To a man… When the wonder of things has been ground down under the boots of reality, and you are already struggling, what I must say is nearly unbearable. We do not speak of it," Thor said.

"I can take it. Go on," Steve said, low and steady.

Thor, looking anxious? Steve straightened his spine and tightened his hands into fists.

Thor took a deep, fortifying breath, shook the tension from his shoulders with a roll and shiver of heavy muscle, and met Steve's determined look with intent concentration.

"Do not restrain your lust. Let your very being become it. Rather than struggle in denial, let it pour
through you freely, as your seed rushes through you in mating. Let this power flow from you, and you need only direct it to its proper fruition. Giving your life, your vitality up in love and service to others becomes the just gratification. It is misdirected lust and unnaturally restrained lust which eats a man alive. For you, Steven, a good man, freeing and directing this potential can only make you stronger. Imagine the power and majesty of your person if the strength that you feel at the root of you was fully realized for good purpose," Thor said with a voice that became a driving, forceful growl.

Steve grunted under the rightness of Thor's words. He could see it in the man across from him. Thor had a lust for life that was more than a trite phrase. Everything he did, he did with conviction. If something was to be enjoyed, he enjoyed it whole heartedly. If something was to be fought, he did that with good cheer and vigor, too. In love and affection, he spared nothing, even when his brother Loki hurt him, even when what another man needed was beneath his dignity. Sitting there wearing his silly Hawaiian shirt, Thor went all the way with whatever he wanted to experience. He didn't care who thought him foolish. No one dared to. Everyone was in awe of his power.

Love and service. Sacrifice, if needed. These were things Steve already felt deeply. What more could he do with his life, if he turned everything he had, everything he was, to them? Even the drive that made him a man. Especially that. If giving every last drop of himself was needed, he would. With conviction.

The physical parallel of the sentiment crashed into his forethoughts. It would be like fucking life. Hard. Grabbing it with both hands and power-driving it into submission, or giving himself up to the ride, when things weren't within his control.

Steve curled forward and planted his fists on the concrete. God, he wanted to fuck. He wanted to live this way, without self-struggle or restraint. His knees dug into the concrete and his hips trembled.

"You feel it. The power," Thor said.

Steve roughed out a response in the affirmative, wordless but understood.

Thor stood and picked up his hammer. He looked down at Steve, his brother, buckled under the weight of what he felt, barely hanging on to directing his energies properly. He was strong. Now that he understood the fullness of what he had, there would be no misdirection. Thor touched his shoulder briefly.

"Remember, Steven. Love and service. Sacrifice. Give it first to who gave it to you," Thor said kindly.

He spun up Mjolnir and streaked away, straight back to the rooftop patio of the tower. There, Anthony and Bruce waited, uncertain what was needed of them, if anything. They'd been looking on as they could, but they would not have heard what was said. Without doubt, they were there because Jarvis had alerted them to the broken glass.

From far below Steven's voice rose in an extravagantly uninhibited shout. They had no choice but to hear it even above the sounds of the city and across the distance. Thor grinned with pride and strode to the door, his hammer secure in his fist. Their enemies should tremble, he thought with satisfaction.

"What did you do to him?" Tony asked.

"I have freed him, I hope," Thor answered.
Chapter 34

Note: I don't know if it's coming through for you guys, but Estrella speaks with an ever so slight accent. It's more in the cadence of her speech and in her choice of words than in her pronunciation. She's thoroughly American, but her family has influenced her speech, especially when she's talking fast and saying a lot. It's not really noticeable when she's speaking slowly or only saying a word or two. Also, I'm having some trouble with adding the scene divider lines. They're there in the saved file in document manager, but sometimes they don't show up in the posted story. I don't know why. I'm sorry about that.

He was late. Natasha sat in the back corner of a deli in Queens near the construction site where Barnes worked. She watched the room, the many hungry patrons, and the door while she picked at her salad. It was raining hard, and finally Barnes rushed in, dripping in his work clothes.

"Use a towel!" the deli owner hollered at him, the same as he hollered at everyone else who came in out of the rain. Bucky grabbed a white towel from a basket by the door and scrubbed it over his long hair and then over his body to at least get the drips off of him. He dropped the towel onto the tile floor and scuffed it around to absorb the water he'd dripped, then used his toe to toss the towel onto a pile of damp towels. His eyes found Natasha in the corner at a small booth as he got in line to place his order.

Natasha looked at her phone. She had to be back to the tower for afternoon meetings in a little more than a half hour. Travel would take up most of that. There wasn't much time.

She watched the crowd interact around Barnes. He was grim looking, and people avoided going near him. Other people had umbrellas or rain jackets. Barnes wore his heavy blue work shirt and jeans plastered to him, and he didn't seem to care that he was wet. It was interesting how casual he looked with his leather construction glove on his left hand, and its mate held there as well, as if he had merely paused and become distracted in the middle of taking his gloves off. His hard, athletic body was attracting a lot of looks from the other diners, Nat noted. They kept their distance from him because he looked like what he was, but as long as he wasn't looking at people, many of them glanced at him a little more than casually.

Nat knew he could feel her attention on him. Unlike the others, she didn't look away when he looked in her direction. He placed his order with practiced familiarity, paid cash, and got his food almost immediately. While he walked toward her booth, she worked in her mind to reconcile how she had known him in Russia as a girl, and how he was now. Here, he looked thoroughly American, but the smooth menace of his stride was the same as it had always been. He was a predator among prey, when he chose to be. A kindred spirit. She shrugged off the long familiar urge to see him as a mentor, a man she should strive to please and seek approval from.

"Natalia," he said simply in greeting as he slid into the booth beside her.

He crowded her into the seat so he could face the same direction and keep his attention on the room. She had expected no less.

"James," she acknowledged him somewhat stiffly.

She was done with her salad, so she waited while he stuffed his stacked-high sandwich into his mouth. His left shoulder carefully avoided bumping her, and though they were pushed close on the
narrow seat, they did not touch. She felt uneasy sitting so close, but she kept her demeanor calm and allowed no signs of fear to show.

"What have you got?" Buck asked when the worst of his hunger was sated.

Natasha switched to speaking their common language, which was less likely to be understood if they were overheard. She slid a plain manila file folder from her courier bag onto the table. Buck's glove on his free hand was damp, so he eyed her to ask that she open it for him while he ate.

"The girl is correct to be afraid. They are looking for her," she told him.

Inside the folder were printouts of information she had found, and photos of bodies, coroner's reports, and gang tattoos on Latino skin.

"How long?" Buck asked.

"The event which caught the attention of the gang happened six years ago. She has recurring trauma dreams. I would not have contacted you, but this needs to be dealt with and the Captain cannot be involved," Natasha said.

Bucky nodded.

He gestured with his damp glove, and Nat flipped through the pages of information. His eyes absorbed everything quickly, and his finger hovered over one particular photo of a tattoo on the hand of a deceased gang member. It was a sinuous line, clearly the silhouette of a shapely woman, with black ink depicting a seductive female eye with long lashes. The eye was near the top of the line, where an eye would be in the silhouette of the body, and a five pointed star was inverted where the female genitalia would be. The placement of the tattoo was on the base of the right thumb.

There were several such photos, each tattoo slightly different, some more crude, some more precise and artistic, but all recognizable as the same depiction, with the same location on the wearer's body. Most photos were taken from deceased bodies, and some from police prison identification files.

"Many have the same markings. Is this a cult?" he asked between bites.

"This particular gang is large, and its ideology is based on tradition and superstition. It is likely that the girl has been the inspiration for a form of sexual idolatry. As far as I can tell, only a small subset of the gang members ascribe to following her. Among the indigenous Maya culture, there is a goddess of similar description. The gang cultists allude to the goddess and the girl as one and the same. They know her name, and there is a photograph of her on the internet which they link to. From my observance of the few cult members here in the city, their goal is to locate her and return her to a specific, undisclosed location in the Southwest. Intentions are unclear, but she would likely be used as a sexual object until her death. Veneration and abuse frequently coincide," Natasha said.

Bucky took the Widow's cool descriptions as professional opinions, and he kept his mind in the same vein.

"I have met her. She appears human. Frail. Not a goddess. Do your people have an understanding of what she is?" he wanted to know.

"She is only a woman. Doctor Banner has done extensive study of her DNA, and she has no mutant gene. We do not understand the physiology which gives her the unusual voice. She has changed
Some since receiving Steve's blood, but the changes have nothing to do with her original unusual characteristics," she said.

Bucky nodded.

"Why can't he find a normal girl?" he asked in plain English.

"I tried. Do you know how hard it is to get him to go on a date?" Nat asked with a tight smile.

Bucky laughed. Natasha looked at him in understated surprise. The Soldier had never showed humor. What she was seeing was Bucky Barnes.

"Do I ever," Buck agreed.

Natasha closed the folder and slid it closer to his plate.

"I have to go," she said.

"Thanks for meeting me," Buck said as he got up to let her out of the booth.

He suppressed a shiver as she passed behind him. He knew what she was capable of. He'd trained her well. Allowing her behind him when he could have easily allowed her to pass in front was a deliberate show of trust, and they both knew it.

"Thank you for agreeing to help," Natasha told him.

"He deserves a break, and he's already dirtied himself too much. I'll take care of this," Buck said.

Natasha nodded once, and then she was gone into the slacking rain shower.

Steve listened to Hill lay out the preliminary information they had on the remaining Hydra bases. There wasn't much detail yet. It would take a few weeks to get anything actionable from what they had. That fit in fine with his plans to take leave, but he stayed focused on the meeting.

He was freshly showered and changed into his new office wear. This particular pair of pants felt a little snug, but he liked the charcoal gray along with the black tailored shirt. He kept wanting to fiddle with the sleeves which were rolled halfway up his forearms, but he managed to leave them alone. His place at the head of the conference table afforded him a draft from the overhead air vent, and he was beginning to appreciate wearing his shirt collars more loosely buttoned.

The details of what they were finding out about Hydra's infiltration of America's governing bodies was no more than he had expected since he and Nat had completed their undercover reconnaissance last week. It was bad, and there was a lot of work to be done. The plan of action would be complex, political, and social. Steve was glad that he'd spent the last few years immersing himself in modern American culture, or half the things Hill's agents were saying right now would have made little sense to him.

While he listened and watched, his mind ran a second track of thoughts. The talk he'd had with Thor two hours ago before lunch was threatening to take priority over his participation in the planning meeting. He forcefully toned down its primacy in his mind because to follow the new philosophy, he needed to devote himself to paying attention to his job. The task at hand was the best way he could serve his nation in getting rid of Hydra. Still, he could not prevent the almost hyper sensualized way his body felt. His body, which was to be used in service for the protection of others, he reminded himself again.
It was his turn to present what he'd noticed about the remaining Hydra bases. Steve got up to manipulate the holographic display and make his presentation. He liked how he could see his people through the projected pane of the media display, and they could see his gestures on the map clearly.

"These locations...here and here, show only minimal activity, but they're the closest to major cities, so I suspect we'll find Hydra's main hubs of operation in these regions within the cities, with the bases mostly used for storage and data hubs. Note that here, in the Midwest, this location shows much heavier activity. It can't be blended into normal civilian activity because there are no nearby urban centers. It's likely for combat training. If it was manufacturing, we'd have seen denser heat signatures on satellite," Steve explained.

Tony was bored, but paying attention, similar to Clint and Sam. Natasha kept reaching down to silence the vibration of her phone and making an annoyed face. Thor frequently flipped and caught his hammer where he sprawled in his chair aside from the table. Bruce paid polite attention. Hill was glaring at Thor for the distraction, but Thor was blissfully uncaring of her displeasure. Two of Hill's young female agents were staring at a point a lot lower than the display he was manipulating.

Steve paused and folded his arms, just to see how long it would take the distracted agents to notice he'd stopped talking. Tony smirked and looked to where Steve was sending his 'disappointed Captain' frown. It was Tony's movement that alerted the young women that they'd been caught staring.

"Canburn. Fields. Do we have a problem?" Steve asked them.

The agents jerked their attention up to his face, and he was tempted to have mercy on them, but his people were going to have to adjust. If he could stand in front of everyone and tend to business without blushing while he had a full on erection only partially covered by the tails of his shirt, then he could expect them to exert enough effort to ignore it, too. He expected professionalism.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Agent Fields said.

Canburn nodded without speaking. She was an analyst, not a field intel agent like Fields was. He couldn't expect her to be as jaded and bold.

"Yes, we have a problem?" he asked Canburn rhetorically.

Her eyes looked at his crotch again, and then she studiously adjusted her phone where it lay at the edge of the table.

"I'm sorry," Canburn whispered.

Steve looked around at everyone. Hill was giving icy looks to her young agents, but Steve shook his head slightly. It wasn't anyone's fault. They were all human.

"People, this is me for the foreseeable future," Steve said with a vague gesture to the lower half of his body. "Get used to it. If I have to put up with it, then so do you. If any of us can't deal with unusual situations, then we don't need to be here. Understood?"

Hill and her agents gave him indications of acceptance, and the Avengers merely waited, because they were already getting accustomed to Steve's condition. Natasha frowned and groped at her phone in her back pocket again. Steve looked to her.

"Can we focus?" he asked.
“Sure, Cap,” Natasha took out her phone and turned it completely off, which she hardly ever did.

Steve nodded and moved on with presenting his findings and his directives for engagement planning on the Hydra bases. Through the rest of the meeting, he caught Canburn and Fields occasionally looking at his crotch, but they were making an effort to not stare as much. He'd have to give them time to adjust. Natasha and Tony, the members of his team most likely to tease him about anything, kept a professional front, and he appreciated their support in giving a good example to the young agents.

"Hill, wait," Steve called when the meeting was over and the intel department was leaving the room.

At his expectant look, Hill closed the conference room door so that only herself and the Avengers remained inside.

"I apologize for Canburn and Fields, Captain. I'll speak to them," she said.

"I'm not worried about that. Handle it as you see fit. I wanted to inform you all that as of this afternoon, I'm taking leave for two weeks. I'll be staying stateside, but I don't know exactly where yet. It looks like you can get along without me, unless a situation develops. As usual, Romanoff is in charge while I'm gone," Steve told them.

"That's fine, Captain. It's probably as good a time as any for you to go," Hill agreed.

"As long as you're stateside, we can get to you within three hours, give or take. Will you allow tracking?" Natasha asked.

"Not directly. Tony, can you get me a fresh phone with a new number? I guess you could track that. If I really don't want to be seen, I can disable it," Steve said.

"Stark Industries does not make burner phones," Tony said with highly offended eyebrows.

Steve looked at him and waited.


"I am, Sir. I will add the new encryption and filters so that only a select few will be able to determine the Captain's location," Jarvis said.

"Thank you, Jarvis. Allow Romanoff, Barnes, Wilson, and Banner to access tracking," Steve instructed.

"Aww. You're shutting me out?" Tony pouted.

"Absolutely," Steve said with a tight smile and an emphatic cock of his head.

Tony grinned and winked at him.

"Are we done here?" Steve asked the room.

"Yup," Tony said, and he was up and gone before anyone else.

Stark tried to tow Bruce away, but Bruce shook his head and lingered, as did Barton. Natasha and Sam hurried off to their own business. Steve added a few notes to his presentation and shut the display down.
Clint walked over to join Steve. Thor waited nearby, still very pleased with his ability to handle Mjolnir.

"Uh…You said you're going on leave," Clint said.

"Yeah, Clint. What's on your mind?" Steve asked.

"You're taking the girl, aren't you?" Clint asked.

Steve nodded and walked toward the exit of the room. Bruce and Thor spoke to each other for a moment, then Thor came over to hover at the edge of their conversation. Clint walked with Steve out into the hallway of the office level.

"I trust you, man. I mean, I usually do. But, do you think that's such a good idea, given…" Clint gestured to Steve's persistent problem.

"Steven will behave with honor," Thor told Clint.

"Right. Not that it's my business, but we all like her, and I'd hate to see anything happen," Clint persevered.

"Thanks for your concern. It means a lot that you care enough to bother saying something. My head wasn't in the right place until this morning. Thor helped me to see things in a new way, so I'll be alright. She'll be alright," Steve clarified.

"If you're sure," Clint looked dubious.

He started to walk away, but he paused.

"I know more about some things than you might think, Steve. If you have any problems, you can call me," Clint offered.

There was a depth of something in his eyes that Steve didn't understand, but it was real. Clint absolutely meant what he said. He wasn't just being polite. Steve nodded and gripped his shoulder for an instant.

"Thanks," he told Clint.

Clint still looked concerned, but he left it at that.

"Enjoy your leave. You've earned it," Clint said.

He walked away and Steve turned to give Thor his attention.

Thor braced him into a solid hug, then set them apart.

"Are you well?" he asked simply.

"I think so. Everything feels different. I feel…stimulated, but at peace. Like I'm waiting at the frontline, about to engage," Steve said in a low tone, a hair above a whisper.

"Precisely. It is invigorating when you first realize your potential. Enjoy it fully, and spend some of your free time in contemplation. Do not expect yourself to remain strictly chaste, brother. Simply have a care that your motivations are directed toward others and not centered on the self," Thor advised him.
"I get that," Steve said.

Thor gave him one last pleased smile, and walked away.

Steve turned to where Bruce had been patiently waiting his turn.

"She wants you there to discuss what we found out today," Bruce told Steve.

"Good. I wanted to call you last night, but she insisted we wait," Steve said.

"It's just as well that you did. Everything's fine. Better than fine," Bruce said as they walked toward the elevators.

He texted a few things and ambled along beside Steve until they were in the elevator and going up. Bruce looked at Steve, but he didn't say anything.

"Why aren't you worried like everyone else is?" Steve asked.

"Don't get me wrong. I like Estrella. But I've learned to keep my distance. I'm accustomed to casualties. My priority is you, Steve. Don't let yourself get hurt. She might be dangerous," Bruce told him.

"Estrella? Dangerous?" Steve said with an incredulous laugh.

"I'm not laughing. From what I'm seeing, the two of you are like some kind of perfect storm scenario. It's in the biology of what's going on with both of you. Protect yourself. Don't go all in with your emotions. Take this slow," Bruce advised.

Steve kept his peace, though he wanted to argue with Bruce. Apparently, there was something he didn't know yet. He'd have to be patient.

Estrella met them on Bruce's floor, just outside the elevator. When Steve came out, she smiled excitedly and hurried closer to take his arm. He saw that her butterfly was back on the scrap of his old uniform again, snug at her throat.

"I can't believe we're finally getting out of here! When can we go?" she asked.

"Whoa, Eya. We have to figure out where we're going first, don't we?"

"I have ideas," she offered.

"Good, 'cause I don't have any. I just want to go," Steve said, and he made a flat, taking-off gesture with his hand.

Estrella nodded.

They followed Bruce into his suite. Steve had only been inside Bruce's living space twice, and then never for more than a moment. Bruce offered them tea and set a kettle on to heat water.

Bruce's place was soothing. He kept the windows at half dim. With the bamboo accents and the Asian theme, the space felt a little exotic. There was a quietly burbling stone waterfall in the far corner of the living room, and the seating was low and sturdy. Bruce thumbed a button on a remote control and quiet music faded into the air from somewhere.

"Please, sit," Bruce said.
He took the chair across from the couch. Estrella sat with Steve. She was nearly vibrating with energy, and happy. Her mood was infectious. Steve couldn't help but to feel glad to be near her. The warmth of her hand resting near his knee was nice, too.

"Jarvis, privacy please," Bruce requested.

"Of course, Doctor," Jarvis complied.

"I'm getting better. Tell him, Bruce," Estrella said.

"She is. Her weight is one seventeen and rising. Blood samples show that she's not anemic anymore. She has good organ function in all body systems, and brain activity has improved," Bruce reported.

"That's really good news," Steve smiled down at Estrella, "But what about her bones?"

He was concerned that anything they did on vacation might hurt her. If she was still fragile, they'd need to limit their activity.

"This morning's scan showed that her bone density and strength has recovered to greater than normal, with a few exceptions," Bruce said.


"It means that most of her bones are stronger than most people's. About fifteen percent stronger. Except for her pelvic girdle and a few cranio-facial bones," Bruce said.

"Why?" Steve asked.

"In the original skeletal scan when she first came to us, everything was much worse. We probably shouldn't have let you get up and walk around, Estrella," Bruce looked to her, then back to Steve again, "She's made a remarkable recovery, I suspect beginning when we administered treatment for the heart condition. Her pelvic bones and facial bones were the most severely weakened, and they're taking longer to recover, but they are recovering. If projections hold true, her pelvis and facial bones should finish stronger than average, too."

Steve was very happy, but there was more to know here.

"Why were those bones more damaged?" he asked.

"Because those bones change the most when I go from skinny to fat and back again. I've done it twice now. Three times they've grown, if you count puberty, and twice I've been skinny. When I don't eat, those areas melt away somehow," Estrella said.

She shrugged because she didn't understand why it happened that way. It just did.

"I have a theory," Bruce offered.

"Of course ya do. Let's hear it," Steve said.

"Estrella, you withhold food from yourself to change your appearance so that men won't notice you as much, and you'll be safe," Bruce began.

She nodded.

"Your appearance changes more than we're expecting it to, doesn't it?"
She nodded again.

"I think that her hip bones and facial features become a secondary sexual characteristic, in addition to what the rest of us normally experience at puberty. It would make sense, to go along with the other reproductive differences I suspect," Bruce explained.

There was a momentary silence. Bruce used it to go get the heated water and the tea for everyone. Steve turned to Estrella with a curious look. She made a sheepish smile at him and lifted her shoulders again.

"Don't look at me. I didn't ask for it. And you! With the shoulders and the muscles. It's not like you didn't get something extra added at a later date, too. I'm not the only freak of nature," she said grabbed his deltoid muscle.

"So we're both freaks," he said.

"Sexy freaks," she whispered and giggled.

Steve couldn't help but to laugh a little, too. With anyone else, he would have denied the use of the word 'sexy' out of politeness and modesty, but he was at ease enough with her to let it stand. They both knew how much attention they got in public.

Bruce set teacups in front of them and poured the water. There was a choice of teas available, and Steve waited for Estrella to fix herself some, then he took her cup. She stared at him in surprise for his unusual rudeness, but he gave her a rascally smile. She took his unused cup and fixed herself another tea serving.

"I don't know anything about making tea. Thanks," Steve murmured.

"Oh. I can teach you," she said.

Steve waved a hand. He wasn't big on tea. He turned his attention back to Bruce.

"You said other differences?" Steve wondered.

"This sort of information is usually private and confidential. Estrella, are you sure you want me to talk about this?" Bruce asked.

"Tell him," she said.

She kept her face tucked down to her teacup, and Steve knew she was feeling a little sensitive about the subject.

"Alright," Bruce agreed, "You called her a siren, once, when you spoke to Natasha. That's a mythological concept, but for lack of a better explanation, it might somewhat apply here. Estrella's physiology appears to be optimized to attract men. Along with her voice and her appearance, I'm starting to see endocrine function that indicates enhanced fertility, but on a different cycle. Estrella, are you sure about this?" Bruce asked her again.

She only waved a hand toward Steve. She couldn't look at him, or at Bruce. Steve put a comforting arm around her.

"I don't have to hear this. You don't owe me anything," he said quietly.

"I want you to know. You should know," she whispered to him without looking.
Steve urged her closer to him and rubbed her far shoulder gently. He didn't want her to think that he couldn't accept anything about her. He waited for Bruce to continue.

"Her reproductive cycles will probably be longer. On the order of three months per cycle, instead of the usual twenty-eight days. We haven't done any observations, but I'm estimating that she may have twice the number of fertile days in the middle of the extended cycle," Bruce said.

He was looking a little uncomfortable, probably because of how Estrella was trying to hide herself.

"You people know everything nowadays. How many fertile days does a woman usually have?" Steve asked.

"Five or six fertile days per monthly cycle is typical. So Estrella could have ten or twelve. There are ways to find out, if you're interested in that," Bruce told her.

While Estrella was strenuously not looking at either one of them, Bruce arched a brow and pointed to Steve's middle, and then emphatically to Estrella's middle, to indicate his earlier 'perfect storm' comment.

"You're saying we're both hyper-fertile," Steve said.

"Potentially. But only for those ten to twelve days of her cycle," Bruce told them.

Steve let out a quick, tense breath and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. It was strange, how a new mindset changed him. All this talk of Estrella's sexuality and fertility had him weeping in his pants, but he also felt a sense of detachment from the physical urgency of his arousal. He was not only his dick. Just like he was not only the Captain. Like his job, this was a part of him. It didn't have to be the whole of him, if he chose to focus on other things.

None of this was intentional on Estrella's part, just as he hadn't intentionally been trying to attract Hill's agents during the meeting. This was the circumstance of her life. It was on him to accept her as she was. He looked to Bruce to see if there was anything else.

"Estrella," Bruce said gently.

She looked at him.

"Were your cycles about three months long?"

"Yes," she answered, "and for ten days in the middle, I have to stay away from men, even if I don't talk."

Steve hated to hear the anxiety in her voice. He didn't want to push her to explain. It sounded like she'd had a hard time. She could explain later, if she wanted to. Or not at all. He could understand that, too.

"Pheromones," Bruce guessed.

"As in smell?" Steve asked.

"No. Pheromones are odorless, we think. It's a purely chemical signal. If that's what's going on."

"Alright. We've gotten a little off course here. Before I forget to ask, is there any projection of when her skeletal recovery should be complete?" Steve wondered.

"Based on her ongoing rate of bone growth, maybe six weeks, maybe two months. It depends
on diet and several other biological factors," Bruce said.

"What kind of precautions should we take? What's it safe to do, and what isn't safe?" Steve asked.

"Her weakest bones are at least seventy-five percent of the strength of healthy human bone. She doesn't need to take many precautions, other than avoiding car crashes and maybe sky diving. I wouldn't recommend childbirth, full contact football, fist fights, or rough sex right now, but most other activities should be safe," Bruce told them.

"What about other side effects from my blood?"

"I don't know yet. I took blood and tissue samples this morning. It'll take me some time to thoroughly search for possibilities. So far, there's nothing unusual, other than a little boost to healing and to muscle fiber reaction speed," Bruce told them.

Steve nodded. They'd already determined that last night.

"It's not just my bones that grow," Estrella said quietly.

She looked briefly at Steve.

"All the stuff that men like. That grows, too," she explained.

"Oh," Steve said after thinking about that for a moment.

"Yes. 'Oh.'," Estrella gently mocked him, "It's like you, when you went into that machine. You were just you when you went in. Like me now, or me a few weeks ago. But when you came out, everybody was staring at you."

"Tony showed you the reels? You saw me when I was small?" Steve asked.

"You know he showed me. He's Tony. He can't help himself," she said.

Steve didn't know how to feel about that. He wasn't ashamed of how he used to be, but people hadn't liked him back then. Sure, there was his ma and Buck, and all the old ladies had tended to dote on him. But young women and men had mocked him and shunned him mostly. It was hard to know nowadays who liked him for who he was, and who only valued him for the muscle.

He wondered if Estrella felt the same. What if she feared that none of them would appreciate her for who she was anymore, once she was fully returned to her healthy weight? Steve didn't like the idea of her having to worry about that.

"Eya, I liked you from the beginning. Don't forget that. I don't care if you change. Or if you want to stay the same or lose weight again," he told her fervently.

She looked to him and smiled softly.

"I know," she said, "When I saw you smaller in the old films, I wished I could have known you then. You looked just as strong then as you do now. Maybe stronger, because you felt you had something to prove."

Steve stared at her, dumbstruck. She meant it. Even now, it seemed like she was looking for him among all the augmentations. He tamped down the happiness she made him feel because he didn't want to be a giddy fool in front of Bruce.

"Don't you guys have a vacation to pack for?" Bruce asked them.
He smiled kindly at them and glanced pointedly toward the door.

"We sure do. Thank you, Bruce," Steve said.

He set down his little tea cup and got up to shake Bruce's hand. Steve was especially sincere in his thanks, because it wasn't Bruce's job to function as a medical doctor. For all the help and monitoring he'd done for Steve lately, and now his assistance to Estrella, and for keeping all of it confidential and out of the records, Steve was grateful to him.

"Any time. You know I can't resist poking at biological aberrations. It's fun," Bruce said.

He wished them well, and they left his suite.

When they were out of the elevator and outside Nat's suite, Estrella urged him to go with her to sit in front of the big window. Steve picked up the table that blocked their view of the gray day and moved it so they'd have room to sit comfortably side by side on the carpet.

She stared outside and down. Steve wondered what she was thinking. Talking with Bruce had taken a big part of her excitement away.

"So where do you wanna go?" he asked her.

"I don't think I should be choosing your vacation for you," she said.

Steve got caught up in how pretty her eyes were for an instant, then he looked down and out the window again.

"I'm in trouble, then, because I wanna be out of here real soon and I don't care where we go," he said.

"Okay. How about Corpus Christi?" Estrella suggested meekly.

"Texas?"

"Yes, Texas. It's the only Corpus Christi I know of," she said.

"Sounds good. What's in Corpus?" he asked.

"Beaches. Warm weather, even in late October. Sunshine and palm trees. Maybe some dancing, if I can buy some boots like yours. And my family," Estrella said.

"Then we're going to South Texas," Steve smiled his wide, charming smile that made his eyes crinkle.

Estrella got caught up in his charm, especially because she knew he was genuine. The moment felt enchanted, because for once, she was really looking at him, and he was really looking at her, and neither of them was fussing at the other to stop it. It meant something. The space between them seemed charged somehow, and Estrella jerked her head down to avoid the intensity of it. She couldn't keep the grin from her cheeks, but they quit staring at each other.

"When do you want to leave?" she asked.

"I was thinking early morning. Around three or four. Clint offered to fly us, because you don't have an ID. For where we're going, it should take about two hours," Steve said.

"Two hours, from here to Corpus? Isn't that really fast?"
"Sure it is, but we can do it. It doesn't feel any different, once you're up to speed," he said.

"You mean in the Avengers jet?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I don't know. I would feel like my hair is on fire. Can't we go a little slower?" she asked.

"Sure, if you want to," he offered.

"How many days should I pack for?" she wondered.

"I wanna be gone for two weeks."

"I don't know if I have that much clothes! I don't have a suitcase. Steve, you do everything so big. I don't know if I can keep up," she said with wide eyes.

Just their overnight visit to Rockaway last night had been amazing for her. To go somewhere in the Avengers jet, and stay for a whole two weeks...she didn't know how to think of something so adventurous and extravagant. Where would they stay? If they were leaving twelve hours from now, there wasn't even time to plan things!

"I don't mind slowing down for you," Steve said in a lazy voice.

His low, teasing tone turned her head sharply.

Was he flirting? He was! For just a moment there was something heated and suggestive in his eyes and smile, and then she could see that he'd surprised himself just as much as her when he realized what he'd implied.

"Eya! I didn't mean that! I mean, I did, but not like that," he verbally backpedaled.

"I think you did. Something's different about you this afternoon," she said with a grin, then she hid beneath her lashes. She couldn't look at him for long when his mouth was just slightly open like that. It made her want to kiss him.

"We can talk about that later. Maybe. But really, Eya. Truly. The things Bruce said. We don't have to act on any of that. I'm not planning to take you away for two weeks and do anything disrespectful to you. I have my own issues, and I don't think we're ready for that," he said softly.

"I might be," she told him.

"I'm not," he said as kindly as he could.

She looked at where his pants and shirt were trying valiantly to keep his arousal covered, but still partly failing.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," he said.

"I know. It's okay," she said.

"Don't go thinking that I don't want to. I do, but I don't want to talk about that right now. We need to go pack!" he said eagerly.

Estrella nodded. Then she looked at him in dawning horror.
"What?" Steve asked.

"My job! I don't work for you! I can't just take off. You're the boss of the Avengers, but Tony's my boss! Oooh! Jarvis, I have to talk to Tony," she jumped to her feet and stood in a tight, nervous posture.

"Stark," Tony said briskly over the same sound system that Jarvis used.

"Tony! Steve wants to take me on vacation, but I just started work. I don't have any vacation time. We were sitting and planning, and I realized that I forgot to ask!"

"Your life's been hell for ten years, kid. Go have fun," Tony said indulgently.

"But its two whole weeks," Estrella told him.

"So take a month. I don't care. Like I told fancy pants there, I'm R & D. I don't care about staffing problems. Go," Tony urged her.

"But what if the staffing department fires me?" she worried.

"They can't fire you if I tell them not to. I own them. The staffing department, that is," Tony assured.

He was starting to sound distracted. Steve knew exactly which look would be on his face. Stark was looking at something else intently, working with animated hand gestures, from the way his voice sounded with the movements of his body.

"Thanks, Tony," Steve said.

"You bet. Take good care of pixie chick," Tony said.

"I will," Steve smiled.

"Thank you, Tony!" Estrella called out happily.

"Eh. Go pack your bags or something. I'm busy," Tony said gruffly.

The comm line cut to silence. Steve knew Tony wasn't comfortable with genuine praise or thanks from people he liked. He'd sounded abrupt, maybe even grumpy, but he'd been glad to make Estrella happy.


He got to his feet and tugged Estrella up, too.

"Were you texting Nat all during my meeting?" he asked her.

Estrella looked guilty, then nodded.

"I was trying to be serious and get some last minute work done, and you had her squirming in her chair with her phone. Not a good example to set for the junior agents," Steve shook his head with a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

"Sorry," Estrella whispered.

Steve smiled and stepped closer to her to bend and kiss her cheek. It was a good deal slower and
softer than a quick, friendly smooch would have been. Estrella sucked in a breath and closed her eyes.

"This is gonna be fun," his voice rumbled near her ear.

"Mm-hmm," she hummed anxiously.

"Let's go pack. I'll see ya at four," Steve told her.

Estrella resisted watching him walk away because stinker that he was, he'd probably look back and catch her staring at his ass. She hurried into Nat's suite. There was too much to do and not enough time!
Chapter 35

Note: For anyone who is surprised about a gang being after Estrella, you can go back and read chapter 25. That might clear things up. For this series of chapters about their vaca, I studied stuff online for five hours. From googlemaps (Streetview. So helpful) to tripadvisor to trucks to the diocese of Corpus Christi, and several other things. I've never been there, but now I think I want to go!

She needed flip-flops and she didn't have any! For the beach and all around most of her home town, flip-flops were essential, but hardly anyone wore them in New York, especially this time of year. Estrella quickly dug through the mostly borrowed things in her closet. She was making a mess, but she didn't care right now. She didn't have a swimsuit, and she didn't have a suitcase, and she didn't have-

"Estrella, calm down," Natasha said from her doorway.

She paused in her digging and looked to Nat's calm, quiet presence.

"There's so much I don't have! And we're leaving so soon, and we don't even have hotel reservations. He says Clint is dropping us off in the Avengers jet. Dropping us off where? How will we get around? It's not like New York there. You have to have a car to get anywhere," Estrella said urgently.

Natasha moved to sit on her bed. She was smiling that smile that wasn't really a smile, but her face looked pleased and indulgent anyway.

"I'm sorry for bothering you during your meeting. He said it was distracting for the junior agents," Estrella said a little more calmly.

Natasha chuckled.

"Steve has no room to complain about that. He was enough distraction to them all by himself," she said.

Estrella looked at her curiously.

"He was making a presentation, standing in front of everyone. Two female agents couldn't pay attention to what he was saying. They thought his cock was far more interesting," Nat explained.

Estrella felt momentarily flustered at her bold words, but she completely understood.

"Oh. I know. He's very attractive. It's hard not to stare. I don't know how you manage to work with him," she said quietly.

"I've been managing men and their cocks for decades. It gets old," Natasha said.

"Me, too. Maybe not for as long, but I know what you mean. Ooooh, I'm afraid I'm going to mess up," Estrella said.

"How would you mess up?"

"I don't know. I don't have enough money to pay my way, but I want to go. And what if my family
"Isn't nice? And I don't want to make Steve uncomfortable. He says he's not ready," Estrella said.

"Don't worry about the money. It won't be a problem. You'll see. I can't help you with your family. Steve's not ready. Not for you. Be careful with him," Natasha advised.

"Why isn't he ready? He's a man. He should be ready for anything," Estrella reasoned.

"I don't think you realize how concerned he is about what happened with the prostitutes. I'm handling that so he hopefully won't be connected to them by the media. A few different detrimental outcomes are still possible. He's going to worry, and he's going to feel guilty. Until it's fully behind him, he's not clear to move forward with anything serious. He wouldn't do that to you."

"Do what to me? If I want to be with him, what business is it to everybody else? I know what he did, and I don't care because I know why he did it. Those women don't mean anything to him," Estrella insisted.

Natasha held her peace. She was glad to hear that Estrella accepted Steve in the place he was, and that she didn't judge him, but the girl didn't fully understand what being Captain America meant in all of it. She would leave that for Steve to make clear, if he would.

Natasha held out a pack of condoms to her.

"Take these, just in case," she said.

"Take them, how? In a brown paper bag? I don't have a suitcase!" Estrella said, but she accepted the condoms.

"Come with me," Natasha said.

She left Estrella's room, and Estrella followed her into her bedroom, then into Nat's large closet. The closet was packed tight and precisely organized. Nat had several different travel bags. She pulled down an ordinary black suitcase with wheels. That went onto her wide bed, and Estrella followed her like a puppy back into the closet.

"Take off your jeans and your shirt," she told Estrella while she opened a drawer and searched through colorful fabric.

Estrella hesitated, but Natasha cut her a coldly expectant look. It didn't feel right to be exposed in front of the powerful, beautiful redhead, or anybody else. Natasha pulled out something that was dark green, and turned to wait impatiently for Estrella to comply.

It would have been easier for her if she'd taken her clothes off while Natasha was distracted looking through the drawer, but now she had to get undressed under Nat's full scrutiny. From Nat's look, she knew she'd missed an opportunity, and now the woman was giving her no mercy. Estrella hurried to take off her red shirt and her jeans. She toed off her sneakers and awkwardly bent to pull her jeans from her heels.

"Try this on," Natasha said, and handed her a swimsuit.

Estrella forced herself not to stand with her arms crossed over her bra. She took the garment and looked at it. It was a simple one piece swimsuit. It looked new and clean, like it had never been used. Estrella stepped into it and pulled it up onto her shoulders. The little paper hygiene sticker was still in the crotch. The suit only fit because it was very elastic. Their heights were almost the same, but Natasha currently had more bottom and bosom than Estrella did. It didn't wrinkle and hang loose, but the lycra didn't stretch much. It would do. Really, now that she was looking,
Estrella wasn't sure she could wear this. Her legs were so very bare, and too much of her shape was showing, and there were hairs, and-

"Stop worrying. Here. Drape this around your hips," Natasha said.

She offered her a fringed wrap that was made of ivory yarns shot through with gold. Estrella took it and tied it around jauntily so that the wrap made her bottom half not look so exposed. The combination of colors was pretty and feminine, and she liked it. She still didn't know if she could make herself wear it in public. Natasha sighed and handed her a wispy gauze beach cover up that had slouchy three-quarter sleeves and a long, open front. Estrella felt much better when she put it on. She smiled at Natasha and nodded.

"You need new panties and bras," Natasha said.

"No I don't. Nobody's going to see, so why does it matter? I'll be changing so much that things won't fit if I get them new now," Estrella argued.

Natasha gave her another one of those subtle smiles. She went out into the bedroom and opened the suitcase.

"Take the beachwear off and pack it," she said.

This time, Estrella quickly did as she was told, carefully folding things and setting them into the corner of the empty suitcase. Natasha was doing something else at her dresser, and she put a handful of colorful fabric strips in one of Estrella's hands, and a piece of jewelry in the other.

Estrella turned over the oval shaped opalescent brooch to see a flat band on the back, and another bit of Stark technology attached.

"You got me another one?" she asked.

"Don't complain. I found the opal at a flea market for twelve dollars. Bruce had another modulator fabricated in fifteen minutes. I want you to have an extra, just in case. Things get lost," Natasha said.

Estrella hugged Nat tightly, and Natasha didn't know how to accept the sudden affection. She patted the girl's shoulder until Estrella stepped back. She was looking closely at the tarnished silverwork that held the old opal in place, and at the bright new silver that attached the Stark tech. She looked to Natasha and opened her mouth.

"No. It's a gift. We don't want anything to happen to you, so we wanted you to have it. You don't pay for gifts, so don't try," Natasha told her firmly.

Estrella nodded and felt stupid because her vision went a little watery.

"Keep crying, because you're about to be in pain. Come to the bathroom. I'll wax you," Nat said.

Estrella followed her, not fully understanding. Then she saw the little electric pot of wax and the cloth strips.

"No. Nobody's waxing me. I don't want to be bare," she said.

Nat lifted an eyebrow and pointed to where Estrella's plain white underwear met her upper thighs.

"Just that, then. You don't even have to take off your panties," Nat bargained.
"Okay, but only that. I swear I'll bite you if you try to do any more. I'll bite you hard," Estrella warned.

Natasha chuckled. She turned over the fluffy bath mat in the middle of the floor so that they wouldn't get wax in the fibers. Estrella lay down and waited nervously.

It didn't take long to remove the hairs that showed outside her panty line. The pain was shocking, but Estrella kept quiet. Natasha looked to her when she didn't complain. There was something pleased in Nat's expression, maybe even proud.

"Your pain tolerance is high," she said.

Estrella shrugged.

When they were done, Estrella was more pleased than she thought she'd be at how neat she looked.

"Thank you," she told Natasha.

"Go. Put what you have in the suitcase. Don't forget the condoms," Natasha said.

"I don't have two weeks of clothes," Estrella fretted.

"Stop worrying. It won't be a problem. The Captain is very good at improvising," Nat told her.

"I'm not going on vacation with the Captain," Estrella talked back, just because she felt a little out of sorts from somebody making her strip to her underwear and then get waxed.

"Yes, you are. You both think you're not, but watch what happens with him the instant there's any hint of a threat," Nat said with certainty.

"Okay," Estrella gave up arguing and went to pack her meager things.

It's not that it took her long to put twenty six items in the suitcase. She had a hard time deciding what to bring and what to leave. She had two jeans, a nicer long skirt, and three tops that actually belonged to her and weren't borrowed. She kept thinking how empty the suitcase looked, and adding other things from her closet, but they were things only suited to New York's fall weather. It was going to be warm in South Texas.

Natasha called her to eat and badgered her with threatening looks into cleaning everything off her plate. Then, she made her drink a half tumbler of whiskey and go to bed. In the dark of her room, Nat sat for a moment on her bedside and ran her fingers through Estrella's hair. The whiskey was taking effect and her worries about being ready for vacation with Steve were being numbed away in a warm, comfy haze.

"Everything will be fine. Get some sleep. No dreaming," Nat told her.

Estrella mumbled something even she didn't understand and looked at her phone on the night stand to be sure her alarm was set for three-thirty.

She was waiting in the foyer when the elevator doors opened and Steve came to get her. The sky was still black out the windows, and Estrella felt a little dizzy from the lingering effects of her after supper whiskey. On top of that, she was going to get in an airplane. A very fast one.

"Good morning. Are you ready?" Steve asked her.
"Natasha made me drink whiskey," Estrella said, and mentally kicked herself for saying something so nonsensical.

Just then, the door to Nat's suite opened, and she stood there in her sleep tee and shorts. Estrella glowered at her for looking so good even though she had no makeup and her hair was messy.

"She would have stayed up all night switching things out in the suitcase," Natasha excused herself.

"Are you feeling alright, Estrella?" Steve asked, looking from Nat to Estrella.

"I'm good," she told him.

She didn't want to say it, but she was scared, almost nauseous. She was incredibly excited to go off with Steve. She was anxious about seeing what was left of her family again. And she was terrified of flying.

Steve looked good, as always, but she was so bothered that she could hardly focus on him. He wore a faded pair of Levi's and his brown cowboy boots. He didn't have a big belt buckle or a hat, but his white and blue plaid shirt with the Western style yoke at the shoulders let her know that he was happy about a change of scenery.

"I'll take your bag," Steve offered.

Estrella almost handed it to him, and then she had a thought.

"Oh! I forgot to pack something. Can you go on, and Jarvis can bring me to you? I won't be a minute," Estrella pleaded with him.

Steve looked at her patiently and waited.

"Go, Steve. I'll get it and come find you," she said.

Steve gave Estrella a nod and got back in the elevator. He gave Nat a smart salute before the doors closed and she knew what he meant. Natasha stared back at him intently, a lot of things on her mind. He'd probably guess at least half of what she meant. Be careful. Watch your back. Don't worry, I've got this. You'd better not get yourself hurt. You'd better not hurt her. Call us if you need anything at all. Steve understood her and gave a small, curt nod. She'd been relieved to see the slight fullness at the back of his shirt that meant he was armed, at least with a handgun. He'd purposefully tempered his giddiness at going away to give her a moment of assurance that he would take their safety seriously in the midst of having fun.

The elevator took Steve away to wherever the jet was, and Estrella turned to Natasha.

"You're so weird. What did you just say to him?" she asked.

"I told him to be careful and to have fun. Now go get what you wanted to get," Nat told her.

Estrella left her bag where it was and ran to give Natasha a hug.

"Thank you for everything. I'll bring you back a souvenir!" she kissed Natasha's cheek in a hurry, then grabbed her bag and got in the elevator, which had returned for her. She waved at Nat, and Nat waved back and closed her door.

"Jarvis, you have to let me into his suite!" Estrella said.

"You may attempt to convince me," he replied.
"He forgot to pack something important. I know he did. He'll need it," she said.

"Very well, but don't linger. Mister Barton is ready to depart," Jarvis said dryly.

The doors opened to the men's side of the floor, and Estrella left her suitcase in the elevator. She ran into Steve's dark suite and around the bed to the night stand. She gave the drawer a quick tug, took the box she found there, and hurried back to the elevator. With a zip and a shove, she had what she'd wanted to get for him.

"Okay. Thank you, Jarvis. We can go now," she told him.

"Very well Miss," his cool voice said as the elevator started moving up, "You appear to be nervous."

"I've never flown. It sounds dangerous to go as fast as Steve says we'll go."

"Rest assured that no one has ever perished from flying in a Stark designed craft. Mister Barton and the Captain are both accomplished pilots. You will be quite safe," he assured her.

"If you say so," Estrella murmured.

The elevator opened onto a foyer she'd never seen before. It looked less homey. Distinctly Avengers-ish. Her nerves clamored more loudly.

"Go on. The Captain awaits," Jarvis urged her kindly.

Estrella felt that if she walked out of the elevator, her life was going to change again. This felt big. Living behind the dumpster in the alley by the coffee shop was small, small, small. A part of her was still more comfortable with humble living than with all this advanced complexity. She took a deep breath and pulled her wheeled suitcase behind her.

The foyer was sharp and stylized in iconic colors. Directly ahead was the locker room where the Avengers got dressed and went out to do all the things she saw and heard about on the news. She was living with the Avengers! It was easier to think of them as Tony and Natasha, Bruce and Thor, Clint, Steve and Sam. It made her feel even smaller to think of them in that locker room, turning into heroes.

There was a high pitched hum through the double doors to the left that started softly, then grew in power. Steve opened one of the doors, and she saw the dimly lit jet bay, and the velvet night beyond. The jet was huge! Strange and aggressive looking. Its back was open, and Steve came for her. At the moment, he looked out of place in his Western wear. In this room, he would fit better if he was wearing the Captain's uniform. He picked up her suitcase and took her by the hand.

"This doesn't weigh anything," he said to make an attempt at conversation.

Steve was worried. Estrella looked pale, almost like she was in shock. From the look of her pupils, she was. Steve put himself in her place. If he'd gone from his small self, living in a drafty cheap rent room, to this place, with a jet waiting to whisk him off across the nation, he'd have been thrown for a loop, too. In a way, Estrella was making an even bigger transition here. At least he'd had a home and some control over his life.

"You're gonna be fine, sweetheart. I'll make sure of it," Steve told her, whether she could hear him through her shock or not.

He picked her up bridal style and carried her to the jet. The wing turbines were spinning up at a
fairly sedate rate of acceleration, because Clint could see that Estrella was overwhelmed. Steve hurried her up the ramp, dropped her suitcase next to his, and settled her into an ergonomically contoured seat. He squatted down in front of her and bent her forward so that her face was down low over her knees. He cradled her head against his ribs and made sure her airway was open while Clint sealed the back hatch. The noise of the jet went from a windy whine to a smooth hum.

"Estrella. Look at me, honey," he ordered her.

He lifted her face and her eyes shifted to his.

"We're fine. I'm really sorry that you're not having fun. This isn't much different than getting into a cab or onto a bus. It'll be a smooth ride, I promise, once we get to cruising speed. The weather's clear from here to Texas. I do this all the time. We're good at it," he assured her.

"Okay," she whispered.

Her eyes were tracking him now. That was an improvement.

"I'm gonna stay right here. Normally I stand because it's fun, but let's get you buckled in so you'll feel secure," Steve murmured.

"Okay," she repeated.

That was about all she could manage to say at the moment.

He eased his hand to her chest and leaned her up against the seat. Slow and smooth, he got her snuggled into the five point harness they almost never used. She was small enough that he had to adjust the straps quite a bit.

Steve took a moment to secure their two bags and his satchel and shield in cargo netting.

"On cue," he said to Clint.

He sat on the floor and wedged his shoulder between Estrella's knees. He put his hands in hers so she could feel his skin. Her eyes were looking all around now, and that was good. The wing turbines were fully revved.

"There's gonna be a clunk sound," he told her, and Clint released the wheel clamps. Estrella flinched.

"Now we're gonna lift off nice and easy until Clint has us clear of the tower," Steve said.

Clint was free to smirk at the cuteness of Steve coaching her through it every move of the way. He felt bad that the girl was worried, but the only way to do this was to just get it done. With the skill of a savant, Clint eased the jet off the landing deck so that it could hardly be felt.

"See? Real smooth. No worries. In a minute, the rear turbines are gonna engage, and you'll feel pushed back in your seat. If you feel dizzy, it's fine to pass out. I'll be right here," Steve said.

Estrella nodded and pressed her eyes shut. It felt precarious, with the humming of the wing turbines holding them in the air. It felt like they were a leaf hanging in the breeze, ephemeral. She didn't want to think that they were out in open space, even higher up than the view from Natasha's suite, just hanging here.

"Clint," Steve prompted.
Estrella whined, because she feared what was coming, and then she yipped when the rear turbines roared to life and the jet punched forward. Steve was like a rock settled in front of her, and she stared at his eyes like they were the only thing in the world. It seemed to last forever, being pushed back in her seat like a giant was mashing her. But she liked it better than the floaty feeling of the wing turbines. It felt like raw, blistering power. Plenty power to keep them from falling out of the sky.

As the pressure began to ease, she took deep breaths and Steve smiled at her.

"There ya go. That was my fault. I didn't even consider that a civilian might not be happy with this. I guess I take things for granted," Steve said. He touched his fingers to her throat and felt her pulse hammering.

"Okay," she said again.

For a while, her vision had gone dark and her ears felt fuzzy with static. Now, she was starting to feel that she was sitting in a strange chair in the living room. The jet flew straight and steady with a low, tolerable roar.

"Good morning, sunshine. Are we doing alright back there?" Clint asked her.

"Uh-huh," Estrella said.

"It should be just like this all the way to Corpus Christi. Do you want to get up and move around? Go to the bathroom?" Steve asked her.

"I can walk around?" she asked.

"Suuure," he said, and he freed her from her seat restraints.

He gave her a hand up in case she wasn't steady on her feet.

"Can I go up there with Clint?" she asked.

There was the seating and cargo area in the back where she'd been, and then some computer work stations to the sides sort of in the middle, and the space narrowed toward the front. There were two seats there in front of the complicated looking control panel. Steve helped her into the co pilot's seat and stood between her and Clint with his hands resting on an overhead rail. Clint smiled at her and reached to flip a switch on his side of the controls. The lighted panel in front of her went dark.

"There. Now you couldn't sink us even if you wanted to," Clint said.

"Oh. Good," Estrella said.

She looked to Steve standing steady next to her. He was looking out the front window, clearly comfortable and pleased. Estrella turned to see what there was to see.

"It doesn't look like we're going very fast," she said.

There was a dense carpet of lights below them, mostly buildings and street lights in long lines. Red and white arteries of traffic flowed everywhere, even in the pre-dawn hours.

Clint tapped the speed guage.

"Is that in miles per hour?" she asked, her eyes wide in surprise.
It didn't feel like they could be going that fast! It felt like they were sitting still, except for the shift of the lights on the ground beneath them.

"Yup," he said.

"It only looks like you're going fast when you're close to the ground," Steve said.

"Why didn't you talk to an airport before we took off? Aren't we supposed to let them know where we're going so we don't run into another airplane?" she wondered.

"Nah," Steve made a face and smiled.

"Then how do we keep from hitting another airplane?" she asked a little more pointedly.

"Miss, I am fully aware of every object in the airspace for many miles around us. Nothing larger than a fly will go undetected," Jarvis spoke from somewhere around them.

"Jarvis!" Estrella said, pleased.

"Yes, Miss," he replied.

"I didn't know you would be coming with us," she said.

"Only as far as your destination. I do not suppose we have decided upon a destination as of yet?" Jarvis asked mildly.

Steve squatted down next to her and took out his phone. He pulled up a webpage and started scrolling through sales listings. His thumb tapped a particular listing.

"Jarvis, can you tell me if this truck has been sold yet?" Steve asked.

"There are no recent records of a transaction involving that vehicle identification number," Jarvis said.

"Then the seller's home is the address to take us to," Steve said.

"There is ample landing space near that address, though we may frighten the livestock," Jarvis said.

Estrella didn't know how Jarvis could get so much information so quickly just from a webpage Steve had on his phone.

"A truck? You're buying a truck?" she asked Steve.

"I've always wanted one. The bike isn't practical for more than one person when the weather's bad," he said.

Estrella tilted his phone so she could see better. The online listing showed a large, dark blue pickup truck.

"You're buying a truck, just to go on vacation?" she asked, still not quite believing him.

"Eya, I was in the ice for a long time. Howard Stark made investments with my pay, and Tony took over management of it when Howard passed. I've got more money than I'll ever know how to spend. This is the first thing other than food and art supplies that I've wanted to buy. So, yes, I'm buying a truck," he said.
"Okay," she said, baffled.

Estrella hadn't considered that Steve might be wealthy. Everyone was wealthy compared to how she was used to living. She'd thought that because he was a soldier he might not be paid very well. He had his bike and his shield and his uniform, but that didn't seem like a huge lot of things. His suite was simple, with decent furniture and some collections of old things.

Knowing he was really wealthy, to the point that he didn't know how to spend it all, made her uneasy. Plus, he was a super-hero with super-hero friends. Then, there were all of his years of experience doing incredibly dangerous, important things-

Estrella startled out of her alienated thoughts when Steve's face was right in front of her so close that his warm, mint scented breath mixed with hers. His hand came to touch under her chin, and then he kissed her.

She was so surprised that her eyes didn't close for a second, and then they did. His lips! She'd wanted to feel them for so long. His mouth was strong, but soft and smooth. Their lips pressed together, then rubbed and parted. Her tongue met his eagerly, and then everything was warm, slick, delicious Steve.

Clint grunted in surprise and smiled as the Cap knelt beside him and kissed his girl. He didn't know what had happened in the hotel room with the hookers, but Steve was making sounds like this moment was the best ever. The girl wasn't quiet, either, with all those little whimpery pleading sounds. Damn! If they sounded like this just for a kiss, Clint didn't think anyone could stand hearing them when they were doing anything that involved clothes coming off.

Steve slowly pulled away, and Estrella made a disappointed sound. He opened his eyes to see her with hers still closed and her brow furrowed in concentration. Her lips were gorgeous and shiny, her breaths huffing softly through. He wanted badly to keep kissing her all the way to Texas, but he had a point to make.

"Estrella," he said softly, surprised to find that his breathing was a little out of sorts, too.

He rubbed his thumb back and forth in a glide across her bottom lip. Her tongue flickered out to touch his thumb and her eyes opened. God, her eyes! He forgot what he'd wanted to say.

"Hmm?" she asked.

Even with her butterfly in place, she sounded sweet and seductive.

"Huh. Wow," Steve gathered his thoughts, but she was scattering them almost as fast as he could gather, sitting there looking so inviting, "I wanted to say that the money doesn't have anything to do with me. It's just a thing that sits there. You know me. Don't let it get between us. Please?"

"Okay," she said.

Oh, no. His kiss was far more important than his money. She'd happily live under a bridge as long as she could be with him and kiss him again. Having to live in a stuffy big mansion might make her reconsider, but…

Estrella slid her arms onto his shoulders and wrapped them around his neck. She wanted more. She wanted to taste him again. He tasted clean and hot somehow, if hot had a flavor. Again, their lips glided together, then their tongues. Deeper this time.

"You got any mercy over there? Cause I could use some," Clint said dryly.
"Clint!" Steve said abruptly, as if he'd completely forgotten his teammate's presence.

Clint chuckled at the way Steve looked like a caught-out teenager. He was wet mouthed and dopey looking. Behind him, Estrella bit her bottom lip and dropped her lashes over her eyes. Yeah, those two were gonna have fun on their vacation. A whole lotta fun. Couldn't happen to a better man, Clint thought. The girl looked pretty ecstatic, too.

"I don't mind. It's great. But much more like that and you should move to the med cot in the back," Clint teased them.

"I'm-"

"Ah! Don't you dare!" Estrella poked at Steve sharply.

"extremely not sorry," Steve amended.

"Come on," Estrella said to him.

She got up and tugged at Steve's hand.

"We're not going to the med cot," Steve denied.

"No. I'm going to sit down over there, and you're going to sit next to me so I can show you TripAdvisor," Estrella said.

They needed to calm down. She could feel that if they kissed again anytime soon, they weren't going to want to stop. She already didn't want to stop. She wanted him, but not here. Not with Clint looking on. They had time. They could wait. She told herself these things as she went to the bench seating in the back. She didn't know what the med cot was, but it sounded like something you laid down on.

Steve sat beside her, and she took his phone easily from his hands. He looked stupidly aroused, but also like he wanted to say something. Something important. She touched his lips with her finger, mesmerized now that she knew what they tasted and felt like.

"Later. We can talk later," she told him.

Steve nodded, and looked away to compose himself. She wanted. He wanted to give. It was that simple. But not now. He had to keep his head clear.

"Tripadvisor," Steve said in a tone that was reluctantly business like.

For an hour and a half, they looked through what there was to do around Corpus Christi. A lot of it, he was eager to try. Estrella kept biting her lip and making worried faces. He kissed her cheek to distract her. She was concerned about the cost, he knew. Park admission fees and campsite fees were nothing, if only he could convince her of that.

"This morning has been a lot for you. Are you alright?" Steve asked her when they came to a lull in their internet reading.

"I'm a little tired," she admitted.

"Then lie down. We've got another hour at this speed before we get there. You can nap," he said.

Estrella lay down more because she wanted to touch him, than because she wanted to sleep. She turned her back to the seatback and rested the side of her head on his thigh. After a few minutes of
that, she shifted her head because his thigh was hard and her ear hurt. She found a better angle for her head, and Steve's arm rested along her ribs. Between the drone of the jet, her nervousness finally relaxing, and his warmth, she dozed off.

"Clint," Steve said.

"I won't say anything to anybody. I'm happy for you, Steve," he said.

"Thanks," Steve said.

He set his head back against the wall, where he so often rested it when he was beat up, cut, shot, broken, burned and bruised. This time, he wasn't thinking about what he could have done differently or better on a mission, or the next move he had to make to keep the enemy running.

He was thinking about her kiss, and about how he could make things better for her. The thought of too much money made her almost as distressed as takeoff in the quinjet. He wanted to spend some of it and have fun. He'd have to be careful. He'd kissed her to bring her mind away from her concerns and back to the warm, joyful thing they had between them. Then, the kiss had become a reason unto itself.

Steve let himself enjoy the moment.

The rancher South of San Antonio was happy to sell the truck in the listing when he got over being mad. He'd taken off his hat and run, flapping and yelling at the jet when they'd landed, because Jarvis was right and they'd scared a few hundred Angus cattle. No permanent harm was done to the animals, and Steve liked the truck, so they'd loaded their suitcases and his satchel into the backseat of it.

Estrella waved goodbye to Clint, and the cattle were already scattered, so it didn't matter when he took off to head back to New York. They were on their own now. Truly on vacation. She looked out over the vast acres of ranchland at the shapes of familiar sorts of small trees and scrub brush. The ranch house was a low wood and stone structure with barns and agricultural buildings in the back. A feathery-tailed herding dog watched her with a lazy smile.

She didn't know anything about trucks, so she quietly walked around the huge vehicle and listened to Steve and the rancher talk about the features of the nearly ten year old Ford. It was something called a super-duty, and she believed it. The rancher's Texas accent sounded like home to her, and she felt comfortable with Steve as a buffer between her and the man. The rancher looked at her a time or two, but never lingered.

Steve was satisfied with the mileage, the condition of the belts and hoses, and the smooth rumble of the big diesel engine. There was no smoke out the back, and no puddle of oil under where it was parked. He was seeing a lot of modifications to the truck that weren't standard, according to what Ford said it should have. There was good documentation in the glove compartment for everything.

"It was my boy's truck. He loved it like a woman up until they come out with one with a little more towing capacity and better fuel economy. He's up in Austin now and I ain't got no use for it," the rancher said.

He went inside to get the title and his wallet so they could go to the notary's house and complete the sale. Steve and Estrella climbed into the truck. Well, Estrella climbed. Steve just got in. She'd never been in a private vehicle this big. Steve looked good behind the wheel. He looked happy. His hand rested on the six speed shifter as if it was natural to him.
"You know how to drive this?" Estrella asked.

"I can drive most anything, Ma'am," Steve said with a Texas twist to his usual politeness.

Estrella laughed. She loved the little-boy happiness she was seeing on him.

"You need a hat," she said.

"Nah. Ain't got no cattle," Steve denied, still playing with the accent.

The tan and wood tone interior of the truck's cab smelled like armorall, leather, and slightly of cattleman. Steve was looking all around at the controls, knobs, buttons, stereo and air conditioning. He spent a moment studying the four wheel drive system and a few other things she didn't understand the use of.

"I'll lead y'all over there, since you're from outta town," the rancher said across his driveway, and got into his own truck.

"Buckle up," Steve told her.

Estrella would have felt nervous about going somewhere in the rumbly, powerful truck, but her experience in the quinjet this morning had tired the nerves out of her. Instead, she enjoyed riding high and laughing at Steve as he missed a shift or two when they first started driving.

"Oh, I got you figured out now, darlin" he said to the truck.

"Stop it! I can't take you anywhere. Thank goodness we didn't go to Wisconsin or California," she said.

"What's wrong? You don't like how other people talk?" Steve asked with a strong Kentucky backwoods twang.

"I like it fine, but you're going to get in a fight at the gas station if a bunch of guys hear you and think you're making fun of them," she chuckled.

"Yeah. That wouldn't be good," Steve agreed, finally in his own accent, which didn't sound like an accent at all to her.

Steve made an electronic funds transfer to the rancher's bank, and they got the title notarized for the sale. The rancher told them how to get to the department of motor vehicles and they parted ways with a friendly handshake. Steve shook his hand. Estrella stayed in the truck.

It didn't take long to get the temporary plates and pay taxes. Steve called his insurance agent and had proof of insurance faxed over. Then, they were on the road. They found a large truck stop along the highway headed South. Steve filled both fuel tanks with diesel, then they went inside for a brunch of fried chicken and biscuits.

Estrella sat at the worn formica table across from Steve and gawked at all the potbellied truckers and the merchandise available for sale. The sound of 18-wheelers on the interstate outside drew her eye to the wide open plains beyond. The place was sunny and windswept. Desolate in a beautiful way.

"I can't believe we're here," she said over a sip of coke from her Styrofoam cup.

"Me either. I have a truck, Eya! We'll have to get cup holders and phone chargers, and"
"And an air freshener that looks like a tree to hang from the rearview mirror," she finished for him.

"Nah. I like the way it smells," Steve said with a smile.

He looked out the window at his truck parked outside like it was Christmas morning. She was glad he was satisfied with it. She'd had no idea that he would want such a thing.

"You could have bought a regular truck. A new one. Why did you want one so big?" she wondered.

Steve glanced at her, and some of his happiness faded. She was sorry she'd said something to bring him down.

"Because," was all he said, and she didn't ask any more about it. A minute later, he was staring happily at his truck again. Estrella was starting to feel jealous of the truck for his attention, but she understood.

The chicken and biscuits were hot, greasy, and delicious. Steve seemed to relish it, and he got up to get himself more. They went to the bathroom before the drive to Corpus Christi and Steve wanted them to get milkshakes before they left the store. They wandered all around and got phone chargers, chocolate, beef jerky, as well as the milkshakes they'd wanted.

Steve couldn't keep the smile off his face as they approached the truck with their purchases. He noticed what a step up it was for Estrella to get in, so he went to her door first and held her milkshake so she would have both hands to get in. At least there were handles for shorter people to get in.

As Steve walked around the hood to get in his side, Estrella marveled how content she was with him. He was male, and large, but he made her feel safe. She never would go on a crazy trip like this on her own, not dressed in jeans and a shirt that fit, and never out where she would have to talk and some man might hear her. She fingered her butterfly necklace and watched Steve get in the driver's seat with an athleticism that made him look weightless.

He set his milkshake in the slide out cup holders they'd discovered in front of the gear shift. Before he put the key in the ignition, he turned to her.

"I'm glad you're here. It wouldn't be half as fun without you to share it with me," he said.

The low, serious way he was using his voice lately did things to her, but she didn't have long to contemplate it before he kissed her again. He kept it brief, with barely any tongue at all. His tomcat grin as he pulled away left her just as dazed as his kiss. What had gotten into him?

He started the truck and backed out and she sat wondering how repressed and down his job must be keeping him if this energetic, fun young man was who came out when he got away from it all for even less than a day. She hardly recognized him, except for how his obvious Steve-ness wove through the happiness that almost crackled and popped around him. She was hesitant to bring him down again, but she really wanted to know.

"Steve, you're so… out there. Haven't you ever done anything fun before?" she wondered as he merged them onto the Southbound interstate. His shifting was smooth by now, as if he'd been driving the truck for a long time.

He was clearly enjoying the big diesel as he got it up to seventy-five on the highway. Estrella tried not to be antsy about the speed. It was a heavy truck. A lot of mass to accelerate.

"If I've done anything fun, it was always with the knowledge that in the morning, it was back to
work. Or back to the sickbed. Or that I had a day of meetings ahead of me. Or muck and blood and misery and battle. There was never enough to eat. I couldn't get warm enough. I never got the girl," he glanced aside at her.

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, and she nodded her understanding. She'd had her own kind of misery, too. Hers was nearly always made of fear, grief, and old familiar hunger. Never any pretty things or pleasant interludes, except maybe in a book for as long as she could distract herself. He wanted to be happy. She wanted to be happy, too.

"I'm glad to be here with you," she said.

Steve grinned and paid attention to the road.

The seats in the truck were plush and comfortable. There was even a little button on the door panel that turned on a heater in the seat under her. Miles, cattle, oil wells, barbed wire, and rough wooden fence posts stretched on and on.

She was feeling drowsy from her full belly and the warm seat and the bright sun in her eyes when Steve started slowing the truck down rather abruptly before a highway exit.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No. Look," Steve pointed.

There was a metal sales building on the frontage road. The sign above it said "Truck Stuff!" In the grass beside the building were racks and racks of camper shells that fit on the backs of pickup trucks.

Steve got off the interstate and drove back up along frontage road until he pulled off the asphalt into the gravel parking area in front of the store. He came around to get her door and help her down.

"I don't need help. I like getting up and down," she told him.

Her words might have been rude and ungrateful, except that they were both smiling. Steve nodded, and she followed him inside the metal building.

The place was full of all kinds of metal accessories and tires and rims and things you could put into a tow hitch. The man behind the counter was glad to go out and look at the truck. When they left, Steve had a black rubber bed liner mat in the bottom of the truck bed, and a camper shell installed that exactly matched the color of the truck.

"Eya, find us driving directions to the mall," he said as they were leaving the ranchlands and entering the suburbs of Corpus Christi.

She found the directions and set the phone in the dash cubby where he could see it. They'd slowed down some, and Steve put the windows down. The warm air had the curious scent of cattle, oil field, and salt breeze. Estrella smiled and stuck her face out the window until her hair whipped back and she was gasping for air. It smelled like home. She didn't know she could have missed it, but she did.

Steve smiled at her in a way that he only could when she wasn't looking. The girl did something to him, and he couldn't begin to describe what it was.

"Why are we going to the mall?" she asked when she had to take her head back inside so she could
breathe without the wind rushing forcefully up her nose.

"Because if we get a mattress and pillows and sheets for the back of the truck, we can sleep on the beach," Steve said.

He had that new, sort of gleaming sizzle look in his eyes. If they drove out to Padre Island, they could find a secluded spot miles down the beach where nobody would bother them. No Clint. No Jarvis. They could kiss as much as they wanted to. Estrella bit her lip and nodded.
Chapter 36

Note: This is far too long, but tough ta-tas. I was having fun. I wrote most of it with a miserable, stuffy head cold, so I hope it's coherent and makes some kind of sense. I'll try to pick up the pace a bit for future chapters.

Estrella used Steve's phone to get directions to a mattress outlet, a bed and bath store, a sporting goods store, and a grocery store. She could tell he had a very specific plan in mind.

He got a mattress for the back of the truck, and then they were off to the store in the mall which sold all manner of bedroom and bathroom stuff. Steve chose the softest queen size sheets the store had, and Estrella picked light green for the color. As the shopping cart rolled along the aisles, Steve put towels, a mesh laundry tote, and a light summer blanket in with their things.

"You're getting everything!" Estrella said.

He smiled at her defiantly and added two fluffy pillows to the cart. Estrella pushed the cart toward the cashier faster, hoping to get there before he added anything else to the pile. Just to tease her, Steve took a small fan from a shelf and added that, too.

Estrella felt bad that he was spending so much money. She avoided looking at the total purchase price. Steve got out his wallet and swiped his card happily. Out in the hot parking lot, Steve tossed his purchases into the backseat of the truck. They got in the truck to go to the sporting goods store.

"I'm having fun, Eya. I've never been able to do this. To just go out and buy what I want. Pepper tells me which clothes to buy. Jarvis orders most of my food. This is all for me. For us. No Pepper, no Jarvis, no Tony. Do you think you can relax and stop thinking about the money? I want to spend it however I want, with no fussing from you," Steve explained.

He glanced at her in between watching for an opening in traffic to pull out into. Steve was pleased with what he was doing. He seemed to be getting some kind of thrill from setting up his truck as he wanted. There wasn't a hint of concern in him over the expenses, and it wasn't cheap stuff.

Estrella tried to get her mind around the idea of spending money so casually. Growing up, they'd never had much. After she'd left home it had been even worse. Most everything she'd had was donated or scavenged or painstakingly saved up for. That wasn't going to happen here, on vacation.

She'd never been on vacation. The idea would have seemed frivolous, but Steve obviously needed this. He was more thoroughly relaxed and eager to have fun than she'd ever seen him.

Estrella decided to take him at his word and quit thinking about the money.

At the sporting goods store, Steve got an ice chest, a small folding table, and two chairs with cup holders in the arm rests. Estrella smiled instead of frowning when he added a small grill and a set of grill tools. Next, he put two tall bamboo tiki torches and a bottle of torch oil in the cart. He got them two five gallon jerry cans for water and a propane lantern. Some flat, black thing called a solar shower topped off their purchases at the sporting goods store. All of it went into the backseat of the truck.

At the grocery store, Steve pushed the cart around. Estrella put the things he said he wanted in it. If she dared to let her eyes linger over anything, like the avocados, he told her to add those, too. He
got charcoal for the grill, steaks, hot dogs, and more food than she thought they'd be able to fit in the truck. On the way out, he got two bags of ice from the store's freezer.

Steve put the cold things on ice in the ice chest. It went in the back of the truck along with the rest of the food. Estrella liked the way the afternoon sun gilded his dark blonde hair into a lighter shade while he moved around.

Steve looked up from loading groceries and caught her staring, but he only grinned at her and kept moving. His grin acknowledged her attention and told her he liked it. A shiver of nerves wiggled down her spine. She wondered why they were suddenly alright with staring at each other. There was a sort of promise, an excitement, in his acceptance of her attraction. He wasn't just putting up with it with stoic tolerance, like he did when other women fawned over him.

They followed the signs to Padre Island. Steve abruptly changed course. He looked in the rearview to make sure traffic allowed the sudden move.

"What?" Estrella asked him.

"I don't have a swimsuit," Steve said.

He pointed to one of the many beach shops that enticed tourists with end of season sales and brightly colored beach towels on display. Their surroundings were so different from New York that Estrella had a momentary sense of mental displacement. Had she been in Tony Stark's tower just this morning? Everything around them was radically different. There were seagulls cruising the parking lot for tidbits instead of the city's habitual pigeons. The trees that fluttered in the breeze were tropical palms, and the smell of coconut sunscreen wafted from somewhere.

Steve couldn't seem to keep a faint smile off his face as he looked around. People were wearing shorts and summer shirts and flip-flops in defiance of the fact that the grocery stores were offering merchandise for Halloween. The local Western wear made Steve look new and embarrassingly urban. Men's boots around here were scuffed and muddy, mostly with stretched leather and worn soles. Men's jeans were dark and sometimes stained at the thighs from work, but otherwise in good repair. No self-respecting working man wore factory-ripped jeans.

Some beachy music was playing in the store. His eyes lighted on racks of seashell souvenirs, rubber flip flops, buckets and shovels for little kids, and lots and lots of swimwear. The walls up high were hung with colorful surfboards and inflatable floaties and rafts. A young woman behind the counter smiled and waved at them, but didn't otherwise interfere.

"I don't know what to get, Eya. Could you pick for me?" he asked.

She nodded and they wandered over among the men's swimwear. She teased him by choosing a bright red and yellow hibiscus pair of board shorts. His eyes widened on sight of it and she laughed. She put it back in the rack and flipped through more selections.

Estrella sent him into the changing room with a plain deep burgundy pair of board shorts, a navy blue pair with ghostly shark shapes in the print, and a white and blue pair with solid color panels going down the outsides of the legs. The geometric pattern of blue green lines over the back and front was dignified enough.

"I have to try these on? If they're large, they should fit," Steve complained as she guided him to the fitting rooms.

"Yes, I need to see how they look. Keep your underwear on under them, and show them to me
when you have them on," Estrella insisted.

Steve made a face, but he was still overall happy, so she didn't let up on her insistence on seeing him in the shorts. The girl from behind the desk came over to stand with Estrella.

"It's 'buy two get one free' right now. I'll get a few more for him to try," she said.

"Okay," Estrella agreed.

Something heavy clunked in the fitting room and Steve grumbled about something. Estrella smiled. He never was one for trying on clothes. The salesgirl was back with three more pairs of shorts when Steve opened the fitting room door.

"You have to take your shirt off if I'm going to be able to tell how they'll look," Estrella complained.

Steve looked a little silly with his Western shirt on over the burgundy colored shorts. Steve glanced at the sales girl and took off his shirt and the undershirt. Estrella's eyes bugged a little when she saw a deadly looking black handgun and holster before his shirts dropped to cover them. The salesgirl thought nothing of him being armed. It was Texas, after all.

The girl's eyes roamed over Steve, and he appreciated that she at least tried to look cool and detached.

"Turn around," the salesgirl said, and Estrella nodded agreement with her.

Steve sighed and turned.

Estrella shook her head.

"No. Those make you look like an old man," Estrella said.

The salesgirl made a face that told him both women thought the shorts weren't right for him. He took the three swimsuits the girl offered and shut himself into the fitting room again.

"Is he a model? Or an actor? He's so hot," the salesgirl whispered to Estrella.


"But they usually have tattoos," the girl whispered.

Estrella didn't bother to tell her that Steve could hear everything she whispered.

She shrugged at the girl and waited for Steve to come out with the next pair. Everyone but Steve liked the white and blue pair.

"It's too low," he complained.

He tugged as if he could get the waistband up from its spot resting just at his hip bones. Estrella very much appreciated the hint of dark golden hairs that showed under his tight navel. She grinned at him and twirled her finger around. His backside looked sublime in the shorts.

"No. It's just right. You have to get that one. It's only going to be me and you," Estrella told him.

"I want to go to the waterpark, and I'm not going in this. There'll be kids there, Eya!" Steve reasoned.
"Okay, so you get another pair that isn't so low. I like those for the beach," she told him.

The salesgirl nodded.

Steve grumbled again and shut himself in the fitting room.

"Lavender? I'm not wearing that," he said, and they heard him moving plastic hangers around.

The salesgirl lightly punched Estrella on the shoulder then bit at her knuckle.

"Girl, you are one lucky bitch!" she hissed with a twinkle in her eyes.

The fitting room door ripped open and Steve strode out only in his boxer briefs. He towered over the salesgirl and gave her his most dour Captain's frown.

"Steve! It's okay. She's just being friendly. Go change," Estrella said.

She nudged aside the speechless girl and used both hands to push at him. He resisted moving.

"That didn't sound very friendly. I don't like anyone calling you that," he said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it," the girl said in a hurry.

"Go! I don't want to be here all day. I want to get to the beach," Estrella urged him.

Steve went back into the fitting room.

"He's a little old fashioned. Don't worry about it," Estrella told her.

"I'm sorry," the girl said, but she didn't go away.

Steve came out in a gray pair of shorts that had both women shaking their heads. He paused and looked at the salesgirl before he went back in to try something else.

"I apologize, Ma'am. I guess I'm still not used to how young people talk," he told the girl sincerely.

Her eyes widened, and she only nodded after Steve went to try the next pair.

"Are you shitting me? Is that Captain America?" the girl whispered in a hurry.

Estrella didn't know what to answer her.

"I'm on leave. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell everyone," Steve said from inside the fitting room.

Estrella watched in dismay as the girl hopped around in a circle with her hand over her mouth. She reached for her back pocket and quickly thumbed the unlock code on her phone.

"No, no. Don't take any pictures. Please, just leave him alone," Estrella pleaded.

The salesgirl looked at Estrella and her shoulders fell in defeat. She put her phone back in her pocket.

"Thank you," Estrella told her.

Steve showed them how the orange pair looked. It had ivory side panels and dark brown trim. It looked good on him without being overtly sexy, though Steve in only a pair of shorts was difficult to see as anything except appealing.
"That's your pair for the water park," Estrella said.

"Good. That makes two. While I get dressed, go find yourself a swimsuit," Steve told her.

"But-" Estrella protested.

"You heard the lady. Its buy two get one free. Go get something you like," Steve said in a way that sounded like an order.

Estrella looked to the salesgirl.

"Come on. You're really cute. You could wear almost anything," she said.

Steve stayed out of the way while the girl convinced Estrella to get a two-piece swimsuit. He didn't demand to see the swimsuits she tried on, and she was glad, because she didn't think she'd be able to model them for him. Steve looked around at the surf boards on the wall while Estrella deliberated between the sporty purple and lime green suit, or the white one with pastel flowers.

"You have to get that one," the girl said.

The white suit covered her private parts adequately, but it felt a little too flirty with the ties at the hips and the pink plastic ring that held the cups together in the front. Only for a little while would she be able to wear a bikini like this. Estrella decided to get it. Steve was uncomfortable with one of his swimsuits, so she could be daring, too.

Steve had a surf board under his arm when she went to meet him. It was broad and short. His look said that he dared her to tease him. She smiled and chuckled. She was eager to watch him try the board. If his quick talent at dancing was any indication, he would be good with a surfboard, too.

Her eyes roved over the nearby display of flip flops.

"Get some," Steve insisted.

Estrella bit her lip, but she went to look.

She chose a plain brown pair with tiny multi colored glass beads across the straps.

Her feet looked pale and her toenails were bare. She wished for a bottle of nail polish, but didn't look around for any, lest Steve see and insist on getting her some. Before they could get to the cash register, Steve grabbed two beach towels and a bright green inflatable floatie.

This time, both of them ignored the sales total at the register. The girl kept looking at Steve with starry eyes, but she kept her phone in her pocket.

"Thanks," Steve said to her, and she nodded.

The surfboard and the rest of their purchases went into the backseat, but Estrella wore her new flops. It felt good to have the breeze on her toes and ankles.

"Ready for the beach?" Steve asked her as he started the truck.

Estrella smiled and nodded, but she was still looking down at her new footwear. If Steve had known a simple pair of cheap shoes would please her so much, he'd have found her some sooner.

Getting to Padre Island wasn't like going to Rockaway. There were beach houses, but they weren't so upscale. Their stilts were open underneath, and people had boats and ATVs, cars and barbecue
grills under the houses. Interspersed among the tall houses were gas stations and bait shops, a fire department, and a school built up high. A shop sold colorful kites, and Steve was tempted to stop there, but Estrella looked eager to get to the beach.

The windows were down, and there was only the smell of salt air, now. No more scent of cattle or oil field. Steve paid the entry fee into Padre Island National Seashore and hung the fee tag on his rearview mirror as instructed. They stopped at the visitor center and learned about camping on the beach. Steve paid another fee and got a sticker for the truck window. The visitor center was busy, and no one paid much attention to looking at his face. He was glad of that.

They used the bathrooms, and Steve got the jerry cans and solar shower from the truck to fill them with fresh drinking water. Estrella noted that the public showers attached to the women's bathroom facilities were clean enough that she wouldn't mind using them.

"Eya?" Steve called from outside.

She hurried to join him and they went to the truck. Estrella offered to carry one of the water totes, but Steve gave her a look that said 'really?' Right. They probably felt like feathers to him. They got into the truck again, and Estrella found that she was quickly getting used to climbing up. She knew just where to put her hands and feet to almost bounce onto the seat.

It was midafternoon on a Saturday, and the beach near the visitor center was crowded. All kinds of people from teenagers with loud music, to couples and families, to old folks with their small grandchildren were out enjoying the warm air and sunshine. The speed limit was slow here, and the beach was busy. There was space for people to park, and two lanes of traffic on the sand, and then about a hundred feet of beach before the bright glinting waves crashed ashore.

Estrella unbuckled and scooted over toward the sunny driver's window until she was pressed up against Steve's leg. He smiled at her and put his arm along the seatback to make room for her to lean closer to the window. There was a parade of mostly trucks going up and down the beach, and Estrella enjoyed seeing all the festive people. Steve liked the way the wind blew her hair and how she squinted her eyes in the sun. And he liked how she braced her hands on his thigh so she could lean closer to the sights.

A pickup truck full of Hispanic teens went by. They were bouncing in the back and singing along with the music that blared from the truck windows. Estrella smiled and turned on the radio in their truck. There were several stations that played Latino music, and she picked the one that sounded happiest.

Steve grinned and kept driving. He wanted to put his arm around her, but he didn't. Things felt cheery and light and he didn't want to do anything to make her think too hard about how familiar they were getting. It was enough that she was leaning on him so easily.

After a half hour and five miles at slow speed, traffic thinned and the speed limit went up to thirty. There was a sign that warned people to only proceed if they had a four wheel drive vehicle.

"Tell me when you see a camping spot you like," Steve told her.

"Okay, but not yet. It's still too crowded. Keep going until we don't see anyone close," she said.

"How long is the beach?" he asked.

"Sixty miles, I think."

Steve engaged the four wheel drive on the truck.
It was a while before they found a spot where the closest vehicles to them were tiny specks in the distance.

"Here," Estrella said.

Steve turned the truck where the sand was still firm and nosed them up toward the dunes, where the sand was softer. The traction under the truck felt fine, so he parked.

Estrella squealed a happy sound and kissed him on the cheek. Steve's smile was so big that her lips caught the edge of his mouth. She was out of the truck too fast for him to kiss her back. Steve helped her unload the folding chairs. He took out his knife and cut the plastic tags from the new chairs.

"We need a bag for trash," he said.

Estrella opened the tailgate and put up the camper hatch. She found the garbage bags among their grocery store purchases and tied one inside the back of the truck. Steve got out the new grill and cut its box open. Estrella was quiet beside him. He looked to see her staring out at the water.

"Can we do the grill later?" she asked.

"Sure," Steve agreed.

"I'm going to go change. I want to swim. The last place I swam was here, and I was twelve!" she told him.

Steve looked down the beach one way, then the other. Both trucks in the distance had chairs and gear set out, and the people were away in the water. The truck with the tent beside it belonged to a young family. The other truck had a camper like his, and there was an older couple out on the waves in an inflatable raft. His enhanced eyes could see plenty details, but he was sure that he and Estrella were no more than specks to the other beach goers.

"Don't look! Stay over there!" Estrella shouted to him.

"I'm staying right here," Steve assured her.

Estrella had both of the passenger side doors open to change between. From the way a beach towel dragged the sand as her feet shifted, he knew she was trying to keep herself covered as she changed into her swimsuit. Her modesty appealed to him in a way that blatant showiness wouldn't have.

Steve dug in the ice chest and got himself a can of beer. He didn't care for cans, but there was no glass allowed on the beach. He took off his shirts while he waited for Estrella. His sidearm and holster slipped under the mattress in the back of the truck. The tailgate made a good seat while he took off his boots and socks. He knocked them together to get most of the sand off, then stowed them at the foot of the bed. Steve took the solar shower bag and laid it in the sun on top of the camper shell.

"I'm ready," Estrella said.

She was wrapped in a big beach towel from armpits to knees, with only her butterfly necklace above that, and two thin white straps over her shoulders. She was practically dancing in her eagerness to go to the water, or was the sand too hot for her feet? The balmy breeze and warm sand felt great to Steve.

"Put on the blue and white swimsuit, not the orange one," she told him.
"You're the boss lady," Steve smiled.

He didn't tell her to stay away, and he didn't hold up a beach towel. Estrella wasn't likely to come looking. Steve frowned at where the shorts wanted to cross his lower abdomen. The mesh liner was supportive, but the weight of his junk tended to tug the waistband even lower. He grimaced and tied the cinch string as snug as he comfortably could. Natasha would have something smart to say if she saw him in this, and Tony probably would too. Steve grabbed his beach towel and went to join Estrella.

She tried not to stare at Steve. In the sun, at the beach, he looked much better in the swimsuit than he had in the store.

"If I hafta wear this, then you don't get to hide behind a towel," he told her with a smirk.

Estrella took off the towel and put it over her shoulder. Steve wasn't as successful at not staring.

"Eya…" he said.

"Don't make me regret getting this suit for you," she said, and she walked off toward the waves.

Steve stood silent and watched her high, tight, round bottom move away from him. As she turned to frown back over her shoulder at him, he shook his head and hurried along to catch up.

"You've seen me without my shirt a lot. Have some mercy, Eya. This is the first time I've seen you like this, and you're really pretty," he said with high color on his cheeks.

"Okay," she agreed, because he was right.

Right now, she was a modest B cup and her ribs were not bony anymore. Her hip bones were still sharp, but that was alright because her thighs were filling out nicely. She could feel his eyes on her, and instead of frowning at him, she stepped to walk closer to him. She put her arm around his waist and leaned her head against him.

"How do you get used to people looking all the time?" she asked.

Steve thought about her question while they got closer to the water.

"At first, it felt very intrusive, like people were touching me. I wanted to make them stop looking, but that's impossible. Eventually I had to tell myself that it was only their eyes. I was used to people looking at me with disgust, when I was small. That made a hard transition, when everybody was looking for other reasons. I hate to admit it, but I was proud, at first. I got a little puffed up about it," he said low and ashamed.

"You're not like that now. What changed?" she asked.

He liked her fingers rubbing at his hip. It was a little thrill, but comforting too. He was thoroughly enjoying the feel of her skin against his side and their legs brushing together. He wanted to stop and revel in her touch, her skin, but he kept his wits for their conversation.

"The war happened. There's no time for pride over there. Nobody was impressed. I had a job to do, so I did it. Then the plane went down. When I woke up in New York, I was too confused to think about how people looked at me. The attention was easy to ignore, with all the modern wonders to get used to. There's work to do now, too. People look, but I have to be focused on my job," he explained.
Estrella nodded. They'd almost reached the water's edge. She dropped her towel on the sand.

"Men look in a different way. It's hard to ignore. It makes my skin crawl," she told him.

"I know," he agreed.

"You know? You can't know!" she denied.

"I do. Men look at me too. Like you said, it's different. Their looking is more…active. If I don't warn them off, they approach me. A few women are like that, but it's mostly men who feel they have to do more than look," he said.

"Oh. Well, it's still not the same. You're big and strong. Warning looks don't work for me. They try anyway," she said.

Steve's mouth turned down at the corners.

"You don't have to put up with that," he said.

"That's easy for you to say," she told him.

"You don't. Let Nat teach you a few things," he insisted.

"And what then, when there's twelve of them? Do you think a few lucky punches will stop twelve men? You've never had to fight from a position of weakness," she denied.

"I did, Estrella. I got beat down a lot when I was small. Buck tried to teach me, but…You're right. I wouldn't want you to have to take the beatings I did," Steve said.

His fingers lifted to touch her cheek and her nose, then her lips. It made him feel sick to think of her busted up and bleeding as he'd so often been. A bully getting some fun shots in on a smart mouthed punk like he'd been was completely different than a man wanting sex. Rape.

He pulled her into his chest and hugged her.

"We'll find a way to keep you safe," he said into the top of her hair.

"You can try," Estrella agreed.

She kissed the middle of his chest. It was easy to tell that he was agitated with thoughts of her being assaulted. His heart thumped strong and his hands rubbed the small of her back, almost too hard. Was he trying to soothe her or himself? Maybe both, she decided.

"Don't think about that anymore. I want to swim," she told him.

Steve dropped his towel beside hers. She waded out, and he followed. He was delighted to feel that the water was warm against his skin. He'd braced himself for cool water, but the pleasant surprise was welcome. He hurried past Estrella and turned to lay back against a wave.

It crashed over his shoulders and he laughed. He wiped salty water from his eyes and saw Estrella chuckling at his exuberance. With his back to the waves, he pushed at the sand with his heels to get to deeper water. Estrella took her time. He liked how she delicately turned sideways when the waves came. She let them pass around her and didn't get buffeted so much by the power of the water. Only the biggest breakers pushed her back a few steps. He would have offered her a hand, but she was smiling, enjoying the challenge.
Steve stopped when the water was mid-rib deep on him. Since Estrella had just kissed his chest, he knew where she would be able to stand with her face out of the water. He offered her a little tug to get beside him through the next wave. Her eyes went wide at something behind him and an instant later, Steve found himself tumbling forward. He sputtered and stood up. Estrella came up next to him. She pushed her hair back from her face.

"If we want to get past the breakers, we have to go out deeper," she told him.

Steve tugged her along behind. They paused to hunker down under two more crashing waves, and Steve enjoyed how the force of the water rocked them back, then forward. Estrella was fearless in the water and not much bothered by getting tumbled around. It wasn't until the water was deeper than she could stand that the waves passed them in swells rather than breakers.

Estrella lay back atop the water and relaxed as the swells lifted her. Steve had to tread water because he was too dense to float. He was almost buoyant, but not quite. He admired how Estrella could float with only a little effort.

It was a good workout to keep his head up. Steve was glad because his muscles had been screaming at him for something to do. He reveled in the slight effort. Unlike running or working out on a machine, the moving water worked all of him. The water felt like a gentle push against him, but it was powerful.

His eyes couldn't seem to peel away from the gentle curves of her, and the light golden skin of her trim belly. He was so glad to see that her belly wasn't concave and emaciated anymore. He'd used the word 'pretty' for her earlier, but he thought she was more than that. There was something extraordinary about the way every line of her curved and flowed into the next. As far as he knew, she never spent time in the gym, but her legs were shapely. He wanted to kiss her toes.

She could feel him looking. She didn't know how, but she could. Instead of fussing, she tried to do as he'd said earlier. She thought of him looking at her as something detached from herself. It was just his eyes, not a touch. And she liked his touch, anyway. That thought helped most of all. Since she knew he was looking, she put out an arm toward him. He immediately touched her fingers and pulled her close.

"I can't seem to help it," he murmured.

"Then no complaining when I look at you later," she said lazily.

"That's a deal I'll take," he agreed.

Estrella wrapped her arm around his shoulders. She could feel him treading water, working to stay afloat.

"Don't you float? Everybody floats in saltwater," she said.

"Not me," he denied.

"You'll tire yourself out."

"Nah. It feels great. I need a lot of activity, Eya. I was getting jittery. This is perfect," he told her. His voice didn't sound strained at all.

"You're weird," she said.

"Yeah, but you like me anyway," he said with a smile in his voice.
"Mm-hmm," she agreed.

An abrupt hissing sound startled them both. Estrella jerked upright, and Steve looked for the sound.

"Dolphins," he said in wonder.

Slick gray bodies curved above the water not far from them. He saw at least three. Dark eyes looked at them above the waves, and he imagined they were looking below the water, too.

"What should we do?" Steve asked.

"Nothing. They're probably curious about all your swishing around. They'll go away in a minute," Estrella told him.

Indeed, a few more members of the pod came up to breathe, and then they were gone. Steve was more impressed with Estrella's cool acceptance than he was with the dolphins.

"Does that happen a lot here?" he asked.

"Sometimes. I remember seeing them as a kid. They don't usually come in this close. There must be something about you that caught their attention," she said.

"Or something about you," he challenged her.

"Ew!" she said, and slapped water at him.

"No, really! I saw a YouTube video once where a dolphin was trying to-"

"Steve, shut up! Do you really think that helps me? If Natasha was here, she'd smack you for being stupid again," Estrella grumbled.

"Oh. Sorry," he told her.

"You deserve to apologize for that. Yuck!" she pushed at him.

Steve looked chagrined to have stumbled into such an awkward conversational blunder. He was so cute in his embarrassment that she had to have mercy on him. After all, she didn't think he would have felt free to have said anything like that in front of anyone else.

"Aw, don't feel so bad. I want you to tell me all the embarrassing things. Tell me, what else did you watch on YouTube?" she asked him with glee.

Estrella glided around front of him in the water and hugged their chests together. Just as she'd hoped, her buoyancy helped him to not have to tread water so vigorously. He looked down at how her breasts pressed into his chest and she didn't know if his continued bright cheeks were from what she'd asked him, or from what he was seeing.

"Um, a lot of dirt bike races and crashes, some history documentaries, and…” he hesitated.

"Yes, and?" she prompted him.

"Women's volleyball," Steve said.

"Ooh! You mean beach volleyball, where they wear the little bitty bottoms, don't you?" she asked him.
"Right," Steve said.

She smiled up at him and wiggled.

"What? You're not disgusted with me?" he asked.

"Why would I be disgusted? It's so cute! You could have looked at things so much worse. Unless you're not telling me?" she asked slyly.

"Uh, I did a little of that too, at first. I think Tony or Clint put things on my laptop for me to find," he admitted.

"Captain America looking at porn! It's got to be the great American pastime, right after baseball. No, I bet it makes more money than baseball. You said you only looked at a little, at first. Why'd you stop?" she asked him.

"After the shock wore off, I started noticing how practiced it all was. Some of them look like they'd just as soon be eating a sandwich. Or worse, the ones where the women try so hard to sound like they're having fun, but end up looking like they're in pain and they just want it to be over with," Steve told her.

"You got tired of porn? What man gets tired of porn?" she asked him skeptically.

"This one. Maybe it's because of what I do. I see people in extreme situations all the time, Eya. I can tell when someone really means what they're doing, and when they don't. That's important. I've gone easy on some opponents when I could see that their heart wasn't in it. Those guys, I can drop and they'll stay down even if I didn't hit them very hard. It's easy for someone to find themselves on a path in life that they didn't know would end up where it does. They want out, sometimes. I try to be merciful when I can. So, yeah, I can tell when somebody doesn't really mean something. I can spot a fake without a long scope," he explained.

She gave him a funny little bewildered smile.

"A long scope. It's the optics mounted on top of a sniper rifle," he explained.

"Ya! I'm not stupid. I can figure that out. I'm looking at you funny because it matters to you that the porn stars are having fun," she said.

"Eh. That goes back to the first girl who kissed me. Moira McKennet. I could tell she wasn't into it. Then I found out Buck had paid her to do it. I was so angry that I would have beaten him if I could. I tried. He thought it was hilarious," Steve frowned.

Estrella bit her lip hard to keep from saying something bad about Bucky. The memory was plainly not a good one for Steve.

"I like your kisses," she said softly.

That worked to get the sourness of bad memories off his face. He looked down at her, and she smiled shyly.

"You do, huh?" he asked her.

"Did it look like I was faking it?" she asked him.

"Nuh-uh," Steve murmured.
He looked down at her, and she moved her arms from around his body to up around his neck. He was waiting for her to kiss him. She didn't make him wait long.

They both tasted of salt water. Steve was eager and dove in strongly with his tongue. Estrella made a muffled sound of surprise, then reciprocated by sucking at him a little. He grunted at the primal tug he felt all the way down. Soon as he stopped treading water to hold her, they started to sink. Estrella sputtered and they parted laughing.

She kissed his smile with affectionate little pecks. Her fingers splayed onto his scalp and held him while she rubbed her nose against his, then kissed her way across his cheek to his jaw just beneath his ear. She nibbled at him with her teeth and Steve made a sound that was half laugh and half moan.

"Am I faking it?" she asked him again.

"I don't think so, but maybe we should do that some more so I can be sure," he said low at her ear.

Estrella shivered at his husky, amorous tone. He was letting his beard grow out again, and she wiggled all over when he rasped it against her neck. Ooh! He tried to pretend that he didn't have any game, and maybe sometimes he didn't. But other times…

"The Beard has skills," Estrella giggled, and tucked her head to get away from the exhilarating tickles.

"You like that, huh?" Steve asked.

"Let's go to the beach so we can do more," Estrella said.

Steve thought that was a great idea until he didn't. He could easily picture the two of them on beach towels, Estrella below him and him lavishing her body with kisses, licks and nibbles. He could work his way down until…

"N ngh. No," he said roughly.

"Too much?" she asked sweetly.

Instead of answering, he tucked his face against the side of hers so she couldn't see him. The feel of something hard pressing at her inner thighs let her know exactly how he felt about the idea of going to the beach to really play.

"Stop kicking!" Steve hissed at her.

Estrella went still, though she wanted to rub him and make him feel good. Natasha had told her not to push him too much, and she didn't want to make him unbearably aroused. He didn't like feeling out of control. She never wanted to see a look of regret on him for anything they did together.

Steve struggled to push aside what he wanted. Since she had suggested it, he wanted to please her, but he couldn't. They'd only just kissed for the first time this morning. He didn't want her to think that he'd only brought her along with him to use her. Plus, he had his own motivations for taking things slow.

"Steve."

"Yeah?" he asked, muffled against her hair.
"What are we doing?" she asked him.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"Trying to take it slow," he said.

"Is that what you want to do?" she asked.

"Yes," he said decisively.

"Okay."

She eased away from him. The water felt cool on the parts of her which had been pressed to his skin. She didn't want to part from him completely. To give him space, she drifted around behind him and rested her hand on his shoulder. That way, his front side was free to do what he wanted without her influence.

"You didn't have to go," he said.

"Yes, I do. I want you, Steve. If you want to take this slow, then we need to calm down," she said.

"You want to go fast?" he asked.

"You're the first man I've ever wanted. Before my voice was a problem, I liked a boy. I was too young to know what to do with him. Both of us were shy. Then, men showed me more than I ever wanted to know. I didn't think I'd ever want anyone again. You make it feel clean, like it's alright for me to want this. Sometimes I feel like I have to take it quick, before I wake up from this dream I've been living in," she tried to explain.

Steve didn't say anything, but he grasped her hand from his shoulder and kissed her fingers. He knew perfectly well what she felt. He'd cursed and roiled against time as the ice was chilling his mind and body into numbness. Much as he didn't want to wait too long again, he also didn't want to rush ahead and cheapen what he felt they could have.

"Come on," he said.

Steve pulled her until she was on his back again, with her arms and legs wrapped around like the last piggy back ride he'd given her. He swam strongly toward shore. They'd drifted South from where the truck was parked, but it wasn't too far. An easy walk would get them back to their beach towels.

Estrella didn't question him. He seemed calmer now, not like he was taking her to the beach to do naughty things. If he wanted that, it's not like she would stop him, anyway.

He didn't let her down until they were back at their towels. He bent over with her still on his back and straightened her towel for her, then he reached around behind and set her on it so that her feet didn't get sandy.

Steve pulled his towel close enough so that he could sit beside her.

They looked at their fingers and toes. They were plenty wrinkled. Of course, she was more wrinkled than he was. She watched in fascination as the paleness and wrinkles of his fingertips colored and smoothed out to normal.

"I hate you," she shoved at him playfully.
"Let me see your hand," he said.

She showed him her scuffed palm. It was completely healed now, with not even a hint she'd ever been injured.

"Heh. Hate yourself," he replied.

"Yeah, well my fingers aren't unwrinkling like yours just did," she complained.

Steve smiled and stared out over the water. It felt like they were completely alone on the beach. If he didn't look to the distance on either side, they were. She was right next to him, and she'd said plainly that she wanted him. He tensed his arms around his raised knees until the urge to touch her passed. He needed to be honest with her. It had felt crummy to manipulate Dana and Catherine into doing what he wanted. He couldn't do that to Estrella.

"Eya, I want you too. We can have some fun. I like being close to you. It feels better than anything. But you've got to know that I won't make love with you. Not if I think there's any chance of you running off someday. We can enjoy each other, but only so much. You say you want me, but do you want all of me? Or do you just want to play for a while?" he asked.

"All of you?" she wondered.

This sounded important, like she should be sure exactly what he meant. There was no teasing on his face. He'd toned down his sexiness somehow until she saw only the friend she'd first met on their bench outside the coffee shop.

Steve let his closer leg slide out straight onto the sand. He took her hand and guided it down low on his shorts until his fingers curved hers around the weight and softness of his testicles.

"All of me. Everything I can give you. Nothing held back," he explained.

He watched her pupils dilate at the intimacy of the gesture. It was very forward of him, but he needed her to understand without a lot of awkward words getting in the way. He knew she'd get it. They'd always been able to communicate, even before she could talk to him.

Estrella cupped him briefly before withdrawing her hand. Only Steve could make such a thing sweet and sincere, but so heavy with meaning. Her urge was to lie down for him, here and now. Her body instinctively wanted what he was offering. Yes!, it keened at her. Her mind was much more cautious.

"You want babies with me?" she asked.

"It's a little early for that, but if we stay together, someday I do. I want everything, for the rest of my days. I can't have that if you're going to run. I won't take the chance. I'm sorry," he told her.

"Don't be sorry. At least you're honest. If it's what you want, then it's what you want. Natasha said the thing with the prostitutes was still messing with your head," she said.

"Fuck Natasha! Maybe screwing up with the hookers clarified a few things for me, alright? Life's too short to hurry around with anymore meaningless relationships," Steve said.

He got up from beside her and paced away, then back again. His anger had his body tensed. He was glorious to behold, clothed in so little, but she didn't let herself get distracted. She got up too, and stood in his space when he paced back her way. There were things she had to know about him.
"Did you? Ever fuck Natasha?" she asked him.

Weeks of jealousy made her voice sharp. Those two were so attuned to each other. They could have easily agreed to lie to her. The woman was like that. She could have had her fun with him, and then tried to set Steve up with her when she sensed he wanted something more permanent. Natasha would never tolerate permanence with a man.

"No!" Steve denied.

"But you wanted to. You want to. Don't you lie to me!" Estrella pushed at him, shoving at his chest.

"Yes! Who doesn't want Natasha? I dreamed about her once, and I got off on it, okay? Is that what you want to hear? But you know what? I could have her. Like that," he snapped his fingers sharply, "and why haven't I?"

"I don't know," Estrella said with a small voice. She wasn't accustomed to so much blatant honesty. It was painful to hear.

"Because she's too damaged to have much heart anymore. It would only be a quick, hot fuck. Are you too damaged, Estrella? Is that all you're good for?" he practically shouted in her face.

She slapped him. Hard. She immediately knew that she shouldn't have. She'd prodded at him for the truth, and he'd let her have it undiluted. She looked up at him, waiting for the impact of his fist. From the way his veins were prominent, she knew he was angry.

Steve carefully picked up the hand she'd slapped him with. He brought it to his mouth and kissed her palm softly. Then, he moved her hand and kissed her fingers and her thumb, too.

"Is that all we're good for? A quick fuck? Fun while it lasts?" he asked her with heavy sadness.

"I don't know," she said.

It was difficult to admit to him. He might never let her close again, if she admitted her fears. Maybe she was as damaged as Natasha. Steve was courageous. His courage challenged her. She had to be as honest with him as he'd been with her.

"I don't know, Steve. I want to be with you, but I'm afraid. What if you're having a personal crisis because of what your body is doing right now, and you wake up one morning and discover that you don't want a used girl anymore? What if you realize that I'm nothing more than a cheap trick, with my voice and my looks?" she asked.

"And what if the serum fails me and I turn into a sickly little weak guy? What if you get tired of living in fear of all my enemies?" he asked.

Estrella sighed tiredly and stepped forward to rest her forehead on his chest. His hand came up to rub soothingly at the back of her neck.

"Maybe we should make a list?" she suggested dryly.

"Hmph!" he grunted.

She enjoyed the comfort of his skin for a moment longer, then she pulled away.

"Do we have to have all the answers right now? Is it enough to know that I want to be good enough
for you? I want to want to stay. I don't ever want to hurt you," she told him, somewhat muffled into his muscles.

"Don't say that you're not good enough for me. I feel the same way, like I'm not good enough for you. So can we agree to cancel that one out? It would make the list a little shorter," Steve said with the slightest hint of humor.

"Okay," she agreed.

"I need to know," he went on more seriously, "Are you saying that you want to try this with me, Estrella? I can back off. We can stay friends, if that's all you think you can have with me. I know my life is crazy. I won't blame you at all if it's more than you want to put up with."

"I think I can take the crazy. My life gets crazy too. If I could ever stay in one place, with one man, it would be you. Maybe I'm using you. You're the only person who's made me feel safe, like I could even consider staying," she admitted.

"It would be my honor and my privilege to keep you safe, if you'll let me," he told her.

"Is that why you brought a gun?" she asked.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Oooh! You stink!" she told him vehemently.

Steve drew away from her sharply and sniffed in the direction of his armpits.

Estrella laughed.

"No, not like that. You smell fine. I can't stay mad at you! I want to, but then you go and make me feel all melty inside. Okay! I want to try with you. If you're stupid enough to take a risk on me, then I'd be even dumber not to try. But the hurt goes both ways! You could have any woman you wanted, Steve. If you decide you want to try for Natasha, or if you want to play around with hookers again, you better tell me, and then we'll be over. If you're keeping me safe, then you keep my heart safe, too," she demanded.

She was surprised when instead of balking at her bitchy demands, Steve lowered himself to his knee on the sand in front of her. She didn't like to see him lower himself, and she would have stepped back to fuss at him, but the look on his face stopped her.

He was happy. Even happier than he'd been about his new truck. His arms came around her waist, and he looked up at her with shining eyes.

"No more other women. You're all I'll ever need," he promised her.

"Hmmph!" she grunted at him in a copy of his earlier skepticism, "Let's be realists, here. You're a man. You'll look. But if you ever think of doing, you have to tell me. I won't share you," she said.

"Jealous?" he asked.

"Yes! If I've ever got babies for you, then I'd better be the only one," she said.

Steve took a moment to kiss her over her heart, and then she tugged him upward. She didn't want to see him on his knees.

He bent to get their beach towels. They snapped the sand out of them with hard flicks, and Steve
took her hand. They walked toward the truck.

"Uh, I hate to mention it right now, but I should..." Steve said.

She looked to see his jaw set in determination.

"Go on."

"Remember, it's possible that one of those women could be pregnant. And I have to train with Natasha. She's exciting. She gets under my skin sometimes. But I don't want to be with her," Steve admitted.

"Then we'll take it slow until we know about the women, but I think you're worrying too much. I'll talk to Natasha. She's wanted us together all along. If she can't stop teasing you, then we'll go live somewhere else. Or she can," Estrella said with a firm chin.

Steve smiled at her.

"I like you. You're strong," he said.

She rolled her eyes at the absurdity of Captain America telling skinny little her that she was strong, but he could tell she was pleased. She knew what he meant.

When they got to the truck, Steve used the hose of the solar shower to rinse the sea water from his body and from his shorts as best he could. Estrella watched him and tried not to salivate. He started taking the grill out of its box and assembling it because he knew he wouldn't be able to watch her shower without making her self-conscious.

"Steaks or hot dogs?" he asked her.

"Hot dogs are faster, right?" she asked him.

"I guess so," he said.

Estrella came around from the side of the truck, dripping. Steve averted his eyes, or he was going to want to follow the water down her skin with his tongue. She grabbed her beach towel and flicked sand from it again, then dried herself when she was satisfied the towel wouldn't make her dirty.

Steve lit charcoal in the newly assembled grill. It took longer for the charcoal to get ready than it did to heat the hotdogs. The sun was getting low by the time they served up their food onto paper plates. Estrella added condiments to the toasted buns, and Steve got them each a soda from the ice chest.

They sat to eat, and Steve bowed his head. She waited until he was done and had taken a bite that consumed half of his first hotdog of the five that were on his plate. A bag of chips was open on the folding table between them.

"You can pray in front of me, you know. I won't mock you or think it's weird," she told him.

He looked at her.

"Thanks," he said.

She got the feeling that he wasn't ready to do that in front of her yet. Not out loud. She set it as a milestone to look forward to, if he could ever open up to her like that. She'd seen how Tony
sometimes snidely mocked him for his faith. She could imagine Bucky doing it too. Estrella kept her silence on the matter. Things like that showed her that no matter how cozy they got with each other physically, there were still parts of themselves that they held back.

As the sun went down, the breeze became cool. All this time, it had felt like early fall in New York, but only now did the reminder come that late October in South Texas could be chilly at night. Steve noticed her goose bumps. He hurried to put the lid on the grill and close the dampers. Estrella started putting the trash away, and stowing the chips and the rest of the condiments where they belonged.

"I've got this. You can go get ready for bed, if you want. You look cold," he told her.

"Okay," she said.

She was starting to feel sleepy. It had been a very long day. She went around to the front of the truck and closed herself inside. She turned on the cab light so she could see to dig in her suitcase. She took out fresh underwear, a soft sleep shirt, and boxer shorts she had borrowed from Natasha. She laid out her damp swimsuit across the dashboard. Tomorrow's heat would dry it quickly. She wished for the wet wipes they'd bought, but they were in the back with the groceries. After she hurried into her night clothes, she went out around back to get some water to brush her teeth.

Steve got his toothbrush too, and she stood beside him near the dunes while they brushed. In that moment, it felt strangely more like they were siblings. She laughed and shared her cup of water to rinse their mouths clean.

At the back of the truck, Steve held the shower hose so she could rinse her feet free of sand. Then, he towed her feet dry. Suddenly, the 'sibling' feeling passed. There was something about his large hands moving over her feet that felt anything but platonic.

Steve went to the cab to change, and Estrella started dressing the mattress with the new sheets. Halfway through, she looked up to be sure Steve was still busy. The light from the truck cab clearly showed her what he was doing. She faltered and wondered if he'd seen her changing. Had he seen her without her top on? There was little time to ponder the question, if she was going to freshen up. She quickly got a wet wipe and cleansed herself, then stuffed it into the garbage. She embarrassed herself with how slick she was from all the kissing they'd done today.

Steve closed the front of the truck and she heard his keys jingle. She hurried to finish getting the sheets on the bed and the cases on the pillows. She fretted that they should have washed the sheets first, but she'd slept in far worse circumstances. The sheets smelled clean and starchy, only faintly like their plastic packaging.

She smiled nervously at Steve as he joined her in the back. He rinsed his feet and dried them, then he closed the tailgate and the camper hatch. He slid open the side windows to let the breeze in through the screens. The moon was bright enough that he didn't need to light the lantern to see.

"I can tell you're nervous, Eya. I can sleep in the cab if it would make you feel better," he offered.

"No. I want you here. With me," she said.

"Only if you're sure. I don't know what I was thinking. It's really brassy of me to expect you to bunk with me," he told her.

"It's fine. Just lie down. We did this before in New York," she reminded him.

"Alright, but I'll go anytime you tell me to," he said.
"Steve," she said with exasperation, and she flopped the sheet and blanket back for him.

He slid into their nest, but kept a little distance from her. At least the queen mattress was wider than the day bed at Tony's beach house. Estrella moved to snuggle closer into his warmth.

"Eya, I'm-

"Oh," she said.

He was hard against her. His hand gripped her shoulder as if he wanted to push her away.

"Are you okay?" she asked him in a small voice.

"I think so. I can't seem to help it. The whole time I was changing, I tried to talk it down, but knowing I was going to be sleeping close to you...It wouldn't quit," he explained.

She giggled, trying to imagine him having a stern talk with his unruly penis.

"You think that's funny, huh?" Steve asked her with humor in his voice.

"I guess so. What do you say to it to try to make it go away?"

"I don't really say anything. My favorite trick lately is to think of German field maneuvers. That's pretty brutal and unsexy, so it helps sometimes," he told her.

"But not tonight?" she asked.

"Not tonight," he agreed.

"You know, I could sleep in the cab. I'd probably fit better," she offered.

"I'll be alright," he assured her.

He set a little distance between their bodies. She frowned in the darkness, and his finger on her lips let her know that he could see her face, even though it was too dark for her to see his.

"How will you be alright? A few days ago, you were so mad with it that you went off to Bucky and got yourself into trouble. What's changed so fast?" she wondered.

Steve sighed. He wouldn't tell her everything, but she was due some kind of explanation.

"It was Thor. He told me a few things. You know how he's all on, all the time? Like he's ready for anything?" Steve said.

"Yes. Standing close to him is crackly, like lightning. He scared me at first, but he's so good, I can't help but trust him," Estrella agreed.

"Exactly. He's a thousand years old, Eya, and he's still young. He's had the same urges and temptations as me, but he told me how to manage it. It's been working for him for a long, long time. I think it'll work for me too, now that I understand," he told her.

"You mean, he just told you something, and boom, that was all it took?" she asked skeptically.

"There's more to it than it sounds. It's not easy. It never could be. I had to wrap my mind around thinking about it differently," Steve said.
"It?" she asked.

"Sex. Power. Responsibility," he said, and that was all he'd tell her of it.

"It sounds like some big secret," Estrella sounded disappointed that she wasn't going to hear more.

"It is," Steve agreed.

She grumbled about men and secrets. He reached out and smoothed a hand down the back of her hair.

"I won't tell you, but I might show you someday, if we can make this work," he promised.

She stopped making noises at him. It was impossible to stay grumpy with him when he spoke sweetly like that, and with such promise.

"So you're alright with kissing, then?" she asked.

"Yeah," Steve said.

Estrella attacked him. She pushed him over onto his back and nearly off the mattress. He laughed, then scooted more toward the center, since she was partly on top of him anyway. He expected her to kiss him, and he steeled himself to let the desire she brought up in him flow through and away without building into something dangerous. But she didn't kiss him.

She perched atop him and looked down at what she could see in the dark. Her eyes were adjusting, like the other night, and she could see better now than she could a few minutes ago. She looked at him, and then her hand caressed his face.

Steve closed his eyes and moaned eagerly for her touch. Her fingernails scratched under his jaw among his beard that was slightly too long to be prickly. She rubbed him all over, enjoying the feel of his face, neck, and scalp. He made a questioning sound when she paused.

"Just because we're kissing now doesn't mean we should stop the other things we like," she told him.

"Tell me what you like, Eya," he said.

"I like your hands on my skin. On my back. On my waist. Your beard felt good on my neck," she whispered.

"Like this?" he asked, and brushed his chin along her collarbone.

She ducked away and squealed. The high, girly sound excited him. Steve pursued her across the mattress until he had her under him and he was scruffling his beard at the nape of her neck. Her necklace got in the way of that, so he opened his teeth on her to lightly nip at the back of her neck.

She was making noises and wiggling under him. When he wanted to dig in and bite her harder, and his hips wanted to snap forward, he realized that he'd gone too far. Steve got off of her and rolled away, panting. She was doing the same on the other side of the mattress.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Nnnn," was all she said.

"Sweetheart, I don't know what that means. Can you talk to me?" he asked.
"Don't…don't get over me, maybe?" she asked quietly.

"I'll keep that in mind. Bad memories?" he asked.

"I think so. I didn't know, Steve. I'm sorry. I don't want to lead you on, then push you away," she said.

"No, it's alright. I understand. We all have memories. Triggers. Sometimes we don't know them until it's already happened. Is there any way I can help?" he offered kindly.

"Hold me?" she guessed.

"I don't think so, doll. If you don't want me over you, then I don't need to confine you with my body. Why don't you come over here and hold me instead?" he suggested.

She didn't answer, but he felt her curl up behind him. One of her arms wormed under his neck so that her hand could rest on his chest, and her other arm shoved to make room under his. Her hands met on his chest, and her warm breath feathered against the back of his neck.

"Are you alright now?" he asked her.

"I will be," she said.

She kissed the back of his neck softly.

Steve lay still beyond when she fell asleep. His balls hurt, but his heart hurt more. The worthless fucks who had harmed her in the past weren't done with her yet, at least in her mind. Until he fell asleep, he thought of ways to help her. He was no therapist, but he had a few ideas.
Estrella slept deep and hard. Steve was able to get into the running shorts he’d bought for vacation and lock up the truck without waking her. He made sure her phone was right by her head and he kept his in his hand while he ran.

There was absolutely no one on the beach at this early hour. He’d been counting on that, because he was in only the brief nylon shorts. Never would he wear shorts like this in New York, but he’d loved bare skin on the beach so much before that he’d bought them in anticipation of vacation. He didn’t even want shoes on his feet.

He pushed himself hard, as if he was running a critical mission behind enemy lines. The reason the Southern part of the beach was restricted to four wheel drive vehicles became obvious. Out of the dark loomed half buried snarls of wooden poles and wreckage from past tropical storms. Occasionally there was a tangled wad of massive steel cable or rope which had washed ashore. Several miles down from their campsite, the beach was washed nearly in half by a deep inlet. Steve’s eyes were sharp, but he couldn’t see through water in the dark. He took his chances running through the water. In some places, the sand was high and fluffy enough to make him doubt that his truck would have enough traction to pass.

Steve liked the physical challenge of the nearly hidden obstacles. Being in a novel location with occasional palm trees and the deep dark of no nearby urban centers helped his mind to open up to the things he wanted to think about. Only the wan light of the moon helped him along.

His physical urges weren’t going away simply because Thor had told him how to direct them. On the contrary, his entire body was surging with energy that he tried his best to run off at a punishing pace. The full ache in his groin felt nearly as antsy and demanding as it had the night Buck had dug up all the trouble he could handle. The difference was that Steve wasn’t afraid anymore.

The strength and drive that filled him would find its outlet soon, somehow. He didn’t know how that was going to take care of itself, but he had confidence that he wouldn’t mess up again. Before, he’d been afraid that he’d embarrass himself in some way, like tipping over into orgasm in public from too much stimulation on the dance floor at the restaurant. With the new understanding he’d gained, that was still possible, but he wasn’t ashamed. Tact would be required if he found himself too close to the edge in public, but he wasn’t going to panic. There was an eagerness in him, looking forward to however his tension might find a way to resolve itself. And he wasn’t going to apologize.

He’d been gone a while, so he turned to make miles back toward Estrella and the truck. The morning was cool, probably around sixty degrees. Hard as he was pushing his body to run, he’d have been sweating even if it was freezing. He estimated that he was still four miles from the truck when his phone buzzed in his hand.

Concern that Estrella might need him made him stop and check his phone immediately, but it wasn’t Eya trying to contact him. It was Buck.

*Where did ya end up?*

*Call me,* Steve texted in return.

For security reasons, he wanted to hear Buck’s voice before he revealed even his approximate location. Steve walked briskly while he waited for his phone to ring. He would have liked to run
more, but he already knew-

“Is everything alright?” he asked as soon as Buck’s call came in.

“Yeah. Are you on the run?” Buck asked with urgency.

“Yeah, on a beach. Relax, Buck. I’m only jogging,” Steve said.

“Bullshit. You’re breathing like when we made that ordinance run to-”

“I know, I know. I did it on purpose. Nothing’s wrong. Being on leave is nice, but I need the PT,” Steve explained.

Buck was silent for a moment on the other end of the call.

“I can’t get a lock on your phone. Where’d ya end up?” he asked.

“It’s good to know the new security protocol is working. We’re near Corpus Christi. At the beach. I think you can figure it out from there without any technology. Why?” Steve asked suspiciously.

Bucky grunted a sound that seemed to combine surprise and disgust.

“And you’ve got the girl with you,” Buck said.

“Her name is Estrella. What’s going on? I can tell you’re on about something.”

Another silence on Buck’s end. Steve shook his head. Buck was up to something. It wasn’t like him to have to stop and think about things. Quick as he was, there was hardly ever a pause in their conversations.

“Maybe I’m surprised you ran off so far. I don’t like you out of reach of backup,” Bucky grumbled.

“Yeah, well I spent months chasing your ass, so it’s your turn to worry. There’s not a war on, Buck. We’ll be fine. Just one girl recognized me so far, and she didn’t take any pictures.”

“Watch your back. I mean it.” Buck said.

“I will. I am. I’ve got my usual gear.”

Bucky grumbled something about a shield, a handgun, and a fancy suit not being adequate gear for the sort of trouble Steve was capable of stirring up. Steve smiled and listened to him bitch about running off to bum-fuck Texas until he ran out of things to say. The fact that Steve didn’t argue let Buck know that he wasn’t changing his mind and that Buck was going to have to put up with it. He eventually changed the subject.

“I quit my job at the construction site. A shifty redhead offered me some contract work,” Buck said dryly.

“Is that right? Do I know this broad?” Steve asked.

He didn’t try to hide the smile in his voice. If it took him going out of town to get Buck tied in with the Avengers, then he was glad.

“You’d better. She’s giving the orders while you’re gone.”

“That’s great, Buck. Are you sure you’re ready for that much entanglement? Once we get you
hooked in, you’re always on call.”

“Not this time. It’s cash work. I take what I want, and I can tell em to stuff the jobs I don’t like. I hope the regular boss man honors the deal when he gets back from leave. I hear he’s a real ball buster.”

Steve chuckled.

“He is. He’s not here right now, but I promise I’ll put in a good word for ya when he gets back.”

Steve would swear he could hear Bucky smiling on the other end of the line, if he was a swearing man. He walked toward his truck which he could see in the distance and let the quiet stretch out. His respirations were relaxed into their resting state, and it sounded like Buck was moving a little. Getting ready for the day, maybe.

“Buck, why don’t you feel anything?”

“What kind of question is that? Is this some new-age philosophical crap?”

“Not at all. I want to know what they did to you. You never chase the girls anymore. Sure, you’ve got Kenya, but that’s not like you used to be. Everything we’ve done lately, and you’re not interested,” Steve said.

“It might be something in the hardware. Or my software. Something’s scrambled. It doesn’t matter. For now, I want it this way.”

“Why?” Steve asked evenly.

He could tell that Buck didn’t really know why he was the way he was. The fact that it didn’t seem to matter to him was troubling.

“I need to focus. I’ve got loose ends whipping around. Chasing tail could get me killed. When things settle down, I might take the time to figure it out,” Bucky said.

He didn’t sound concerned about his lack of sexual interest at all.

“What about you? Does the girl need rescuing yet?” Buck asked.

“I’m wound up pretty tight, but Estrella’s in no danger. Thor shared some wisdom from the home world. Before, I was bottled up and pressure was building. Now it’s…hard to describe. I’ll tell you about it sometime,” Steve said.

Just the thought of trying to describe how he felt left him at a loss for words. He hoped Buck didn’t ask for a better explanation.

The familiar sound of metal gently meeting wood reached Steve over the phone. He’d listened to Buck handle a rifle so many times that there was no doubt what he was hearing.

“Are we using you for the same kind of work, Buck? That’s not how I’d have it,” Steve said with low disapproval.

“No. Not the same. I’m cleaning it to pack it away. My new boss is starting me out easy. You don’t worry about it, anyhow. You’re on leave, pal.”

“Sure. That’s easier said than done,” Steve grumbled.
“Look, go do something with your girl and stop thinking about us working schmucks,” Buck said in that tone that indicated that he was about to end the call.

“Estrella,” Steve emphasized.

“I know her name, punk. Just because you think she hung the moon doesn’t mean I gotta get all googly-eyed over her,” Buck teased.

“Heaven forbid,” Steve said as he approached his truck in the morning twilight.

“Keep a sharp eye, Stevie. I mean it,” Buck told him.

“I hear ya. I’m sharp,” Steve agreed.

“Good. See ya.”

“Later.”

It was getting hot. Estrella tried to turn over and throw off the blanket and sheet, but the cozy weight atop her stopped her from turning. The weight shifted. She shoved the covers down, and then she was able to sprawl on her back across the mattress. Her backside, which had started to feel too warm, pressed to sheets cooled by the early morning chill. The weight settled onto her again. The heat of contact began to seep into the skin of her legs, belly, and chest.

She crimped her brow. It felt good, but it was going to make her too hot again soon. She pushed at it half-heartedly where her thighs were pressed down, but it was too heavy. Not blankets.

“Good morning. I wanted to make coffee for you, but we forgot to buy any,” Steve said.

She could feel the vibration of his voice on her chest as he spoke, and his quiet words were at her ear. Steve. Of course it was Steve. As she continued the slow climb to consciousness, one of her hands rubbed at her eyes, and the other fumbled until she found his shoulder to touch.

“I shouldn’t have been in such a hurry with the shopping yesterday, or I would have thought to get makings for coffee. If you want to visit your family today, we can stop somewhere for breakfast and coffee first,” he murmured.

Estrella tried to move her legs again, but then she woke enough to realize that he was lying atop her, gently sharing his heat and some of his weight. Only some of it. She knew he had to be heavier than what she felt against her. Above her. Trapped.

Her eyes opened wide, and she tensed to struggle, but what she saw didn’t match her fears. Steve was lying on her, but he looked lazy and almost bored, as if he’d been there for a while, waiting. His face was propped on one fist, the elbow braced into the mattress at her shoulder, and his other arm was out across her. He held his phone with his free hand while he played a puzzle game with his thumb.

He was huge and he looked strong and naked. Remembrance that even Natasha, skilled as she was, couldn’t evade or defeat him in the training room started to make her nervous. But then he smiled at her kindly and showed her the little starburst graphics on his game screen as he beat the level
and earned a new high score.

Estrella’s heart stopped thumping quite so hard and she made an effort to pull her mind away from fears about pain and rape and struggle. If he’d wanted to hurt her, he’d already had plenty of time and ability to do so, she reasoned. From what she could feel against her legs, he wasn’t even hard. Steve regarded her with patient understanding. He didn’t say anything, but it seemed that his expression was gently coaching her past the panic. She cast around in her mind for something normal and appropriate to say.

“That’s a really old game. There’s better ones if you want to get an app. I can show you the one I play,” she said with a faint tremor in her voice.

“Old is good. I like this one,” he said, and started a new game.

She watched him get absorbed in figuring out where to put the numbers with his thumb. It became clear to her that waking up with him on her had been deliberate. He’d seen a way to try to help her, and he’d thought of a strategy to diffuse her fears effectively. Last night in the dark, his aggressive advance and biting at the back of her neck had tripped her over into panic. In the bright light of morning, he’d been sure to wake her gradually and to look uninterested in assaulting her. His dear face and the feel of all his wonderful skin against her lulled her into comfort and calm.

“You’re tricksy,” she said with the beginnings of an affectionate smile.

Steve stopped playing his game and set his phone aside. He settled onto both his elbows and centered himself over her. He was braced high enough that he wasn’t right in her face.

“Tricking you isn’t the plan,” he told her.

“I know. This is good, but I want my toothbrush and I have to pee,” she said.

Steve moved aside and let her up. He looked nearly naked in his gray shorts. Estrella tried not to stare at all the skin and muscle as he rolled onto his side and gave her plenty of room to move. If she didn’t need to pee so badly, she would have snuggled against him without the sheet and blanket in the way.

“See, that’s the plan. Wake the girl. Go get coffee,” Steve told her with a smug little smile.

He watched her slip off the open tailgate and reached for his phone again. Estrella took a few minutes to get fresh and comfortable, then she hopped back up onto the tailgate. He was still there waiting for her. She rinsed her feet free of sand and crawled back onto the mattress with him.

“You want more?” he asked.

Estrella smiled in happy anticipation of enjoying his touch, but when she lay down in front of him, she found herself unable to pull him over onto her as she’d planned to. Too large. Too much skin. Her hand fell from his shoulder and she looked to him. She could feel the disappointment on her face, so surely he could see it. Steve watched her patiently.

“You had a little success, and now you want more. Don’t expect everything to get better at once, Eya. Your eyes are wide and your heart rate is up. That’s enough for now,” he said.

“But it was good, Steve! I was barely afraid. Why am I too scared to do it again?” she asked him.

“Because if I moved over you right now, it would be sudden and you’re aware of it. You felt safe while you were waking up partly because you became aware of my voice and my face before you
thought about my body,” he told her.

“But I like your body,” she frowned.

She wanted to feel him over her, but the thought of it…wasn’t good. Imagining him over her now made her feel anxious, like she needed to escape. Steve lying on his side next to her was no problem. It was only having an aggressive male above her that made her panic.

If she couldn’t be with him exactly how she wanted to yet, she could at least enjoy touching him. She glided her hand up his belly and ribs. It was amazing how his muscles contracted under her touch. Beautiful. She wanted to caress his chest too, but that felt like too much for some reason she couldn’t explain. As she rubbed him, she enjoyed the play of muscles under his skin.

“Are you ticklish?” she asked him.

“No. I’m trying not to move. Eya, you should stop. You’re making me…” he faltered.

“Hard?” she asked.

It was easy to see what was happening to him. While she was enjoying how he responded to her touch, one of those responses was that he was about to be too large for his shorts.

“Do you really want me to stop, or are you only trying to be polite?” she asked.

She lightly rubbed at his hard belly, just above the waistband of his shorts. His hips twitched toward her hand. The shiny gray nylon did little to hide the details of his shape. Though she didn’t want him over her, she couldn’t resist smoothing her hand over his erection.

“Feels good,” he breathed more than spoke.

Steve held himself mostly still. If this was how things were going to happen, he wasn’t going to protest. Estrella’s warm hand gliding over him felt tingly, almost electric. If she wanted to do this, he wouldn’t stop her. No apologies, he reminded himself.

“This isn’t too much?” she whispered.

He surged harder, larger under her stroking hand.

“Not enough. Harder,” he told her.

Estrella couldn’t believe he was allowing this. She sat up briefly to look out the windows and down the beach both ways. No one was coming. No one would see. She settled down on her side in front of him and wiggled down so that her feet were in the sun like his. He had his eyes closed, one fist propping his head up, and the other hand loose on the blanket in front of him.

He wanted it harder. This wasn’t merely exploration between them. He was going to let her finish him? She’d never done that before. Not voluntarily. With Steve, she was eager to try.

It felt naughty to grip him through the shorts and slide her hand around him. She was nervous whether he would like it or not, but his deep breath and the slight buck of his hips showed her that it was good. Her eyes skittered over the hard contours of his legs, his body, and his familiar face. She didn’t want to disappoint him, and she only vaguely knew what to do.

“Steve, I don’t know… Show me what you like,” she said.

Uncertainty and a desire to please was in her voice. It wasn’t in his nature to be demanding. Or, it
hadn’t been, but she’d asked.

“Like this. Harder. Faster. Let it slide,” he told her.

Steve showed her with his hand over hers briefly. She did her best for a first time, and it wasn’t exactly like he was used to. That was alright. Knowing that it was her and not his own hand added a mental kick that more than made up for any imperfections of sensation. He’d wanted to close his eyes to not make her feel that she was being watched, but he couldn’t. He wanted to see her. Had to see her. He had to know she wanted this. If she felt obligated, it was no good.

He made a sound, low and questioning. Estrella looked up at him. Her eyes were darkened with excitement and she breathed through slightly parted lips. She didn’t look reluctant. She really, truly wanted this. They got lost looking at each other until Steve huffed a tight laugh. Her hand had fallen still.

“Don’t stop,” he urged her.

“Oh!” she said.

She stroked him again how he’d showed her. There were two layers of slick fabric that made movement easy. The shape of him was fascinating and new, something intimate to know about him. Estrella bit her lip and tried to control her breathing. Steve, looking like this, like what she was doing was the only thing in the world for him, was heady. The lewd, meaty task at hand made her want to giggle with nerves and writhe with excitement at the same time. It wasn’t like him to allow this, but things were different now. He trusted her. He needed this. Thoughts of Captain America almost ruined it for her. She nearly laughed, but then Steve throbbed impossibly harder in her hand.

His body tensed and she looked up to his face.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop. Pleeease don’t stop. Eyaaa…” Steve breathed.

His eyes fluttered shut and he locked his body taut and motionless. Wet heat slicked under her hand while she watched the veins stand out on his neck. Color bloomed across his face and chest, and then he relaxed to breathe deeply. He lay bonelessly back against the sidewall of the truck bed.

She wondered what she’d see when she looked, but Steve moved his hand up to displace hers. Whatever mess was made of his shorts, he covered it with his large hand. The gesture looked protective somehow. His other hand fumbled until he got a grip on her wet hand and wiped her mostly dry on the leg of his shorts.

Steve pulled her up the bed to face him with his hand spread in the middle of her back. He looked at her with a slow smile that made her heart clench and her belly clench harder. His strength in moving her was effortless, but his lazy grin was all satisfied boy. She was glad and proud to make him look that way.

“Thanks. That felt great,” he said in a rumble that pushed the meaning of ‘great’ beyond its normal depth.

Estrella bit her lip and nodded. She didn’t know what to say. Instead, she leaned over him and kissed him. Their kiss was nearly chaste, but there was something in the enjoyment of soft lips and sharing the same breath that was anything but bland.

“Daylight’s burning. You want coffee?” he asked.
Estrella belatedly noticed how damp and antsy she was. She could barely lie still. As aroused as she was, she was too shy to do anything about it in front of him. Her body had other needs to focus on, anyway. Coffee sounded wonderful, and her belly gurgled.

“Yeah, and we could find a place for breakfast,” she said.

“Now you’re talkin’. Let’s get moving,” Steve said.

He hugged her to him for a moment, and she enjoyed being close to him. Then, they scrambled to clean up and dress and load their gear into the back of the truck.

She was nervous. Today was a good day to visit her family, if they still lived where they used to, and if they’d kept to the same habits on Sundays.

The waitress in the diner didn’t bat an eye at the large amount of food they ordered, and she kept their coffee mugs filled. Estrella was too addled about the morning’s events and the thought of seeing her aunt, uncle, and cousins again to mind that Steve paid the bill and left the tip.

“We should shop. They won’t be home until after noon. I need clothes. Can we go to a thrift shop? We need to get things for coffee too. Steve! What if they don’t recognize me?” she babbled.

“I’ll be there with you. Whatever happens, we’ll take it. If it goes poorly, we can leave. If it’s good, we can stay for as long as you like. I think they’ll know who you are,” Steve tried to assure her.

“But I’m still so skinny. And I don’t have any hair! What if they don’t live in the same place? It’s been years. They could have-”

“Eya, try to let it happen. Don’t anticipate so much. Be here with me,” Steve told her.

On the beach at Rockaway, she’d used the same phrase on him. When she stopped watching her feet flash in front of her in quick steps, she saw a rascally glint in his eyes. He knew that the desire for fairness was a trait they shared. Life was grossly unfair sometimes, and it felt good to keep things even when they were allowed to. She’d made him comply with her request that night, so she felt compelled to pull her head out of her worries and make herself present in the moment with Steve.

“Okay. I’ll try. Let’s shop. I have to distract myself until noon,” she said.

They drove around town and found a kettle to use over the fire, mugs, good coffee, and a French press. She used her own money at the three thrift shops they found and ended up with five more outfits she liked. Two were nice clothes that would be good for an evening out. Two sets were cute tops and shorts. She was pleased to find jeans and a lady’s Western shirt that would complement Steve’s shirt in the same theme.

She spent some time in a beauty supply store where she bought nail polish and some things for her hair. Steve waited patiently outside, leaned against the front of his ridiculously large truck.

She’d told him to wait in the air conditioned cab, but he refused. He wanted to keep an eye on her and their surroundings. She started to argue, but he got that same look as when she’d asked him if
the heavy black gun he concealed was necessary. It was a look she’d hoped he would leave in New York. She didn’t bother arguing anymore.

They had hamburgers and fries at Sonic, followed by ice cream. It was slightly after noon, and she was stalling, hoping to stretch time so that he wouldn’t notice.

Steve took her empty banana split tub and their lunch trash to the trash can, and she knew time was up. He walked back toward her in a long limbed saunter that momentarily distracted her from her nerves about seeing her family. He joined her in the truck and they waited while her hands dithered at her clothes. She looked for spilled food stains or anything out of place, but she was clean and presentable.

“Put their address in navigation. You’ve worried long enough. Let’s get this done,” Steve said gently.

“I don’t remember their address. Turn left out of here, and I’ll tell you how to get there,” she told him.

While Steve drove them and followed her directions to a lower middle class neighborhood, she checked her hair in the mirror behind her visor and smoothed on her new lip gloss. Should she get her ears pierced? Should she have worn makeup?

Her nerves were so bad that she didn’t want to get out of the truck when Steve parked curbside at the house she remembered. Her uncle’s same old truck was parked in the white crushed shell driveway, along with a smaller truck and two more cars.

“They’re here,” she gasped.

She tugged on the hem of her burnt orange top and smoothed her brown skirt over her lap. Her hands touched her butterfly necklace until Steve took her fingers in his.

“Eya. Eya. Look at me,” he said.

“What?” she asked flatly.

Steve gave up trying to reason with her. He unfastened her seatbelt and moved her closer to him across the seat. He kissed her thoroughly. The taste of vanilla ice cream and root beer shared between them along with their own unique scents. Steve’s arms pulled her close and tight. Estrella broke the kiss and giggled.

“You have cherry lip gloss,” she said.

“Mmm,” he hummed and smiled.

Her fingers rubbed around his lips to remove the gloss that they’d smeared out of place. His lips were sinfully kissable all the time. With a hint of clear gloss on them, Estrella didn’t want to stop kissing him. She nudged some space between them and re-applied what he’d taken. As an afterthought, she used a fast food napkin to blot the excess shine from Steve’s lips.

“I’m with you. I’ll watch. If it’s going well, I’ll give you space. If you need me, I’ll be there. Let’s go,” he told her after she was done fixing him to her satisfaction.

They waited for a bunch of kids to rush by on scooters and bicycles, then they got out of the truck.

“Did you spend much time here?” Steve asked as they walked across the side lawn.
“Every Sunday afternoon, and I spent the night when I was little and mami had to work late. My cousins were more like my siblings,” she said as they walked up the shell drive to the door.

Tears were already welling in her eyes at being in such a familiar, dear place. When they got to the front porch and the old ratty palm tree beside it, she and Steve could hear the television and men’s voices inside. Anxiety swam in her belly, but so did hope.

Steve gripped her hand and laced their fingers together. He used his other one to knock firmly on the door. He had time to give her one last reassuring smile, then the door opened. It was almost as if someone had been standing there, waiting.

An incredibly handsome young man stood in the doorway. He was turned away from them, looking back at the television inside. The men in the house yelled and groaned in disappointment. Steve recognized the sounds of a football game. The young man had two twenty dollar bills in his fist. Finally, he turned to look at them. There was a strong family resemblance between him and Estrella.

“Oh… where’s the pizza?” he asked.

He looked behind them to the driveway, obviously confused. Steve wanted to step in and clear up the confusion, but he decided not to get in the way of Estrella’s reunion with her family. They would sort it out.

“Jesse,” Estrella said with wonder.

Jesse first looked at Steve, then he looked down at Estrella. He had that ‘do I know you?’ look on his face, but then it changed.

“Eya!” Jesse smiled, then turned away from the door, “Ma! Fran! Estrella is here!”

Steve smiled as Jesse grabbed Estrella up in a hug and spun her around. There were feminine yells of disbelief from the kitchen, and then two large women hurried toward the door. Steve stepped inside and shut the door as Estrella was engulfed by joyful greetings from her family. Two men watched the ruckus from chairs in the living room. Steve smiled politely and stood patiently by the door. He would wait until Estrella was free to introduce him, or until someone approached him.

He watched closely until he got a glimpse of Estrella’s face among all the hugging. She was crying, but smiling. As long as she looked happy and not afraid, Steve decided to keep his distance.

Jesse disentangled himself from the group hug and turned to Steve.

“I’m Steve,” he said and offered his hand.

Jesse shook it, but he scrutinized Steve in a way that was very nearly unfriendly. Then, he went still and alert, listening. Estrella was speaking tearfully to the women.

“She’s talking and I don’t feel it,” Jesse said.

“Yeah. It’s her necklace. We have some friends who were able to help with that,” Steve explained quietly.

Steve was forgotten again. Jesse looked to the older man in the room, then to the younger one. Both looked on curiously, but unbothered.

“Ma. Eya’s talking and I don’t feel anything,” Jesse said fervently.
“What did you do, niña?” The older woman asked.

She looked around nervously to the men, then back to Estrella.

“It’s this. It fixes my voice,” Estrella explained and touched her copper butterfly.

“You didn’t have surgery or something?” the younger woman asked.

“No. Oh! Everyone, this is Steve. Steve, this is my aunt Rita, that’s Uncle Alberto, and these are my cousins Jesse and Fran. I’m sorry, I don’t know you,” Estrella said to the other young man in the room.

“He’s my husband. Luis,” Fran said.

Luis and Alberto got up and Steve went over to greet them. Luis seemed friendly, but Alberto just stared at him as long as it took to shake his hand, then he went back to watching the ballgame.

Steve noticed two little boys in the opposite doorway of the living room.

“And those are Mateo and Isaac, my boys,” Fran said proudly.

“Oh, Franny! You got married and had babies and I missed it. Let me see,” Estrella said.

Fran called the little boys over and Estrella brushed back their hair with her hands and cooed over them. The older one was a cute kid, but the younger one looked like his grandfather Alberto. Steve noticed that Rita, the aunt, was a strikingly beautiful woman, despite her being quite overweight. Jesse’s looks had clearly come from her, while Fran looked plain, an even mix between her beautiful mother and her rough-looking father.

“Where is Val?” Estrella asked.

“In her room,” Jesse said, and everyone went quiet and looked away from Estrella.

There was another knock at the door, and it was the pizza delivery this time. Steve got out of the way so that Jesse could pay and take the pizzas. He noted that Jesse was the same height as him, but a little slimmer of build.

The women took Estrella away into the room across the hall and the two children ran off somewhere else in the house. Jesse put one pizza box on the coffee table between Alberto and Luis, then he went to bring the women the other one.

Steve went with him.

Estrella looked to Steve and smiled. The women were seated at the large table of a comfortable eat-in kitchen. Jesse set the pizza box among them. Estrella twiddled her fingers to Steve in a happy wave. He read it as her not needing him, and that he should go with the men. He was going to do just that, but Jesse grabbed his sleeve.

Instead of going back to the living room and the football game, Jesse indicated that he should go down the hall. Steve complied and they ended up in what was obviously Jesse’s bedroom. There was a messy bed, muddy work boots, and a guitar on a stand. The room smelled of cologne and dirty socks.

“Why is Eya so skinny? What did you do to her?” Jesse asked in a voice of controlled fury. He spoke plain English, but his Latino accent was stronger than Estrella’s and flavored with a slight
Steve was prepared for this. He’d thought about being questioned by her family last night while he was thinking about everything else in her past.

“She was thinner when I met her. She didn’t speak. We became friends, and I eventually learned about her voice. Some associates of mine work in a lab, and they were able to frequency match her voice, then make a device for her to cancel out the effects we feel. She was living alone with no protection, Jesse. She’s smart and she’s strong, but it’s taken months for her to feel safe enough to speak and to eat more,” Steve explained.

Jesse watched him with that ‘I know you from somewhere’ look. He shook it off and focused on their conversation again.

“So her voice is still the same as it was before if she takes off the necklace?” Jesse asked.

Steve nodded. He would have felt disloyal talking about her, but these people already knew her. There was a knock at the door, and then Estrella came in, followed by a worried looking Rita and Fran.

“Steve. My little cousin, Valeria. She’s fourteen and she stays in her room. She hasn’t been to school in a year and a half. Her voice is like mine,” Estrella said.

She looked distressed and expectant. Steve had noticed how everyone had gone quiet and uneasy earlier when Estrella asked where Val was. Anger rolled in him that the child had been suffering in isolation until now, but it was no one’s fault. If it was in his power, and it likely was, he’d see that the girl had what she needed.

Steve nodded to Estrella, then to Rita.

“Ma’am, I’d like to speak with you and your husband,” he said.

It was clear from the change in Steve’s demeanor that he meant something a little more formal and private than a family discussion standing in Jesse’s bedroom.

“Go get your father. If he doesn’t come away from that game, tell him I’ll flip the circuit breaker,” Rita said to Fran.

Fran looked daunted by the task, but she went.

Jesse ushered them all out of his room. Steve met a disgruntled looking Alberto in the dim hallway of the house, and Rita pulled him down the hall and into another bedroom that appeared dusty and unused, probably Fran’s old room, from the feminine look of the decor. Steve and Estrella followed.

Alberto complained to his wife in rapid fire Spanish, and she replied firmly. Steve understood most of it. Rita gestured to Steve and then to Estrella’s necklace, then mentioned their daughter Valeria.

Alberto sat down with Rita on the edge of the guest bed, and Estrella tugged Steve’s hand toward the outdated loveseat. They sat.

“We never thought there was any hope. What can you do for our daughter?” Rita asked.

“You need to understand that I can’t guarantee anything. There’s a good chance we can help, but it’s not certain,” Steve said.
Rita nodded. Alberto squinted skeptically. Steve got the feeling that the man understood English just fine.

“Eya, show them the back of your necklace,” he said.

She took it off and passed it to her aunt. She pointed to the silver soldered to the back of the butterfly.

“That’s the part that controls her voice. It’s possible that we can have something like that made for Valeria. I’ll need to get a recording of her voice to send to the people who made this, so they can customize a necklace for her,” Steve told them.

Alberto frowned at Steve.

“Sir, I know you don’t like the idea of people listening to your daughter. I wouldn’t, either. I’ve heard Estrella’s voice. If I had a daughter with the voice, I’d be concerned, too. My friends are very discreet. Valeria will be in no danger,” Steve assured.

Estrella opened her palm and Rita returned her necklace to her. She put it on quickly.

“I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t work for Val like it works for me. We can try my necklace on her. Natasha and Bruce made a spare for me. If it works for her, I can give her my spare! Steve, maybe we could help her right now!” Estrella said.

She got more excited as she thought about her spare necklace and the possibility that helping her cousin could be so easy and fast.

“Wait, Eya,” Steve held his hand up and spoke calmly, “They made that specifically for you, with Jarvis’ help. It had to match you exactly. I don’t pretend to understand what they did, but it’s probably more complex than it looks. The chances that a necklace made for you would help your cousin are small.”

“We have to try. It’s in my suitcase in the truck,” Estrella said.

She got up and hurried out of the house. Steve followed her. Buck’s warning to stay sharp lingered in his mind. Estrella had eyes only for the truck, but Steve looked around.

There were lots of people out in the neighborhood for a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Most of them looked harmless, but there were a few young men on the street corner of the next block. Steve met their curious stares casually, then pretended to pay no more attention to them. There were too many places for concealment. Trees, laundry lines hung with clothes, shrubs, toolsheds, and windows. The place was indefensible. He stayed alert until Estrella dug out her spare necklace and hurried back into the house. Steve turned the deadbolt behind them. It felt odd to lock another man’s house, but he did it anyway.

“Where is she?” Estrella asked when she got back to the spare room with Rita.

Alberto had already gone back to watching his ballgame.

Rita got up from where she’d been sitting on the bed. She wiped her eyes. Steve had seen parents of sick children at the hospital he sometimes visited. Rita had that look that was tragically hopeful, but braced for bad news. She led them down to the end of the hall. There was soft music playing behind the door she knocked on. An empty paper plate with spots of pizza grease sat on a little table outside the door.
No one answered the door. Estrella stepped forward and knocked louder.

Rita looked alarmed to see that Steve had followed them to Valeria’s room.

“Ma’am, I can resist Estrella’s voice. I don’t know about the other men in the house, so I’m the safest bet. We’ll need to know if Eya’s spare necklace works for Valeria, and if it doesn’t, I’ll need to call my friends so they can sample her voice. Nothing bad will happen,” he told the woman.

The door opened and a mopey teenage girl stood there. She looked to her mother, then was startled to see Estrella, and plainly frightened to see Steve. She clapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes spoke volumes to her mother.

“Val, this is your cousin Estrella. Do you remember Eya? You were only six,” Rita said.

Valeria continued to hold her hand over her mouth, but she turned smiling eyes to Estrella and nodded. She noticed Estrella’s necklace, but then her eyes went back to Steve.

“This is Steve. He had this necklace made that controls Estrella’s voice. They want to help you,” Rita explained.

“Eya go in with her mother and talk to her. Explain things. I’ll be in the living room. Come get me when you need me. Valeria, it’s nice to meet you,” Steve said.

He moved more into the light spilling from the teenager’s bedroom door so that he wouldn’t seem like a lurking stranger in the dark. He smiled at the girl.

Valeria’s eyes went even wider and she went dead still. Steve knew that look. A quick glance past her into her white and lavender room showed him an Avengers poster on the wall, and one of Captain America.

Steve grinned a little.

A squeak of pressurized sound came out past Valeria’s hand.

“Val! Hush! You know better!” Rita hissed.

She looked to Steve with fear and worry.

“I’m alright, Ma’am,” Steve said, and he was.

The girl definitely had the voice, but it wasn’t as strong as Estrella’s and he was mentally prepared to resist it. Her brief squeak barely made a stir in his mind. Steve nodded to Estrella and retreated down the hall toward the living room.

Valeria leaned farther out of her room to watch Steve walk away. Rita looked at her daughter suspiciously, but then the girl pulled her mother and her cousin into her bedroom and shut the door.

She hugged Estrella hard.

“I missed you! Nobody knew where you were. And then I got this voice, and I worried about you even more. How did you live with it? Eya, where were you?” Valeria whispered.
“I was in New York. Val, there are dangerous people looking for me. Things happened because of my voice. I had to leave. Life was hard, but then I met Steve,” Estrella said.

She glanced to the posters on the wall. Rita sat quiet in the chair in the corner, unaware of what the girls knew about Steve. Valeria hurried to sit on her floor on her fuzzy yellow rug. Estrella sat with her, their knees almost touching.

“Did you meet his friends?” Valeria asked.

She was wiggling, she was so excited.

“Yes. I moved into their building. Tony made this for me. Well, it was Tony and Bruce,” Estrella smiled fondly.

“Stark and Banner?” Valeria whispered so softly that her mother wasn’t likely to overhear.

Estrella nodded.

“Am I dreaming? You live with the Avengers? Steve is Captain America? You’re dating him?” Valeria asked.

Estrella nodded again.

“The fewer people who know, the better. We’re on vacation. If I’d known you had a voice like mine, I would have come months ago. Val, this necklace works. Tony and Bruce can make one for you. It’s not fool proof. You can still make bad mistakes if you take it off to sleep or if you forget that you need it. Do you want me to see if we can make one for you?”

“How much does this cost?” Rita asked from her chair in the corner.

“About three hundred dollars,” Estrella said.

“If it works, then it’s worth it,” the woman said.

“Mami, I want to talk to Eya alone. She must know things. It’s embarrassing,” Val said haltingly.

“Okay, but don’t keep her forever. Her man is waiting in a room full of strangers, and that’s not polite,” Rita said.

She pushed herself up from the chair and left, closing the door behind her.

Val waited a moment, then turned excitedly to Estrella. She hugged her again, and Estrella smiled and hugged her back. She’d never gotten so many hugs!

She looked around her younger cousin’s room. The girl had every teenage luxury she could think of. There was a television, a few different game consoles, two shelves of game cases, a triple book case, a stereo system with an iphone jack, and her décor was teen girl chic with lots of fuzzy, sparkly, colorful items. And the posters. Other than the Avengers and the one of the Captain, there were posters of bands and from her favorite TV shows and movies. There was hardly a bare space in the room.

“Eya! Do you kiss him?” Val asked in an eager whisper.

It was strange to hear another girl speak in careful whispers as she had done, but her question bothered Estrella.
“Sometimes, but we only just started dating. We’ve been friends for a few months. He’s a good man. Val, we can help you with your voice. Don’t you want to talk about that?” Estrella urged her.

“Yeah, I do, but my voice is all the time. I never thought I’d have Captain America in my house! God, doesn’t mom even know? What about Jesse? Why am I the only one who recognizes him?” Val gushed.

“Because you’re a fan girl. He tolerates that kind of behavior, but he doesn’t like it very much. Val, come on. I know he’s amazing, but I need you to act normal around him. He’s just a guy. Don’t make him feel weird,” Estrella told her.

“Just a guy?”

“Yes. He’s tired of all the fighting. The news and the internet make it look exciting, but it’s not much fun for them. He gets hurt. We’re on vacation. He wants to help you, and I know Tony will too, but please don’t fangirl him,” Estrella said with firm older-cousin authority.

Val nodded solemnly. Estrella studied her. She wasn’t as plain looking as Fran, but she wasn’t as gorgeous as Jesse, either. Her appeal was a little above average, at least while she was wearing frumpy sweat pants and an old tee. Some effort might make her pretty. With her voice, it wouldn’t matter. She could have looked exactly like her father, and it wouldn’t make a difference.

“Val, has anything bad happened to you?” Estrella asked gently.

Valeria looked away and shrugged. Her fingers twirled in the yellow polyester fuzz of her rug. The fact that she didn’t want to talk about it told her the answer to her question.

“A lot has happened to me. Bad things that I have nightmares about. I wouldn’t want that for you. If you need help, we can see that you get it. Right now, I’d like to see if my spare necklace fixes your voice,” Estrella told her.

“Okay, thanks,” Val said.

Estrella took the opal necklace that Natasha had given her and threaded the flat metal eye with a white strip of fabric. She leaned forward to tie it around Valeria’s throat.

“What if it doesn’t work? I can’t talk to anyone to test it,” Val whispered.

“You can try it on Steve,” Estrella said.

“But he’s a guy!” Val hissed.

“I know,” Estrella smiled, “Remember who he is. He’s good and he’s strong. He won’t hurt you. I promise. He doesn’t hurt me, and he’s heard my voice several times. I want to bring him in here to see if it works for you.”

Valeria looked anxious and afraid, but she put her chin up and nodded. Estrella would have called Steve right then, but her cousin was only fourteen. She acted fairly mature for her age, but she was still a girl. Sympathy for what she must have gone through, and empathy for how she was going to feel once she got swept up in Avengers drama tempered Estrella’s haste.

“Val, you’re going to have to talk to guys. To men,” she told her.

“I know, but you said to trust him.”
“Sweetie, he won’t hurt you, but he will react. If he gives you any orders or instructions, you need to listen to him,” Estrella said.

“Well, yeah! He’s Captain America. I’d do whatever he says!” Val grinned and wiggled on her carpet with fangirl enthusiasm.

“Valeria! This is serious. If you can’t behave, then we’ll come back some other time. I love him. I don’t want him hurt, and I’ll have to hurt him if you don’t listen to what he says,” Estrella said sternly.

“You can hurt him?” Valeria whispered in awe.

“Yes, with my voice. But it’s sad and I don’t want to do it,” Estrella said.

“I’ll do what he says,” Val agreed.

Estrella pulled out her phone and texted Steve.

In a moment, he and Rita came to the door. Val’s mother sat in the chair, but Steve was hesitant to enter. Val waved to him cheerfully, then motioned for him to come in.

“Did you explain everything to her?” Steve asked.

“As much as I needed to. She’s agreed to test the spare. If that doesn’t work, will you talk to Tony?” Estrella asked her cousin.

Val nodded.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Rita asked.

She looked skeptical.

“I’ll be fine, Ma’am,” Steve assured.

Rita got up and made sure the bedroom door was closed and locked. Steve walked to the night stand where Valeria’s phone was and turned off her music.

“Whenever you’re ready, Valeria,” he said.

“No. Wait,” Estrella insisted.

She got up from the floor and went to Steve.

He was wearing dark jeans, his leather boots, and his dark green Henley shirt that she liked so much on him. Estrella pulled the shirt longer from where it was bunched at his hips. Once he was better covered at the groin, she gestured to the bed so that he wouldn’t be standing facing the teenage girl. Steve understood and sat on the bedside. He thought it was inappropriate for him to sit on Val’s bed, but Rita was in the only chair, and this was better than standing.

“Okay. Val, you don’t go to school. Do you take classes online? Tell me what you do to study,” Estrella asked to give the girl something to say.

Val glanced nervously at Steve, then at her Captain America poster. She took a breath for courage, then she spoke.

“Ma looks up what I should be learning on the school board website, and we get the text books—”
“Stop,” Steve said between clenched teeth.

Val’s voice sounded normal to the women, but it was clearly doing something to him. His expression looked pained, and his hands clasped either side of his head above his ears.

“What’s happening?” Estrella asked.

“Resonance. The necklace sort of works, but it’s wrong. A little like nails on a chalkboard, but inside my head. Take it off and we’ll get a baseline,” Steve said.

He waited for the discordant, unpleasant tones of Valeria’s incorrectly moderated voice to fade from his mind. It wasn’t exactly painful, but it made him faintly queasy and it set his teeth on edge. Any arousal the girl caused was doused by the freakish harmonics. The spare necklace wouldn’t do to help her.

Estrella untied the opal necklace from Val’s throat.

Valeria looked worried until Steve took his hands from his head and stopped clenching his jaw. He took a deep, calming breath and smiled reassuringly at the girl.

“I’m fine. Let’s try again, with just your voice, to make sure it’s the necklace that’s wrong,” he told her.

“Val, tell me how your school was with you quitting. Was there any trouble?” Estrella asked, again providing something for her to say.

Rita shook her head. She was afraid for Valeria to speak in front of a man.

“I have to do this, Ma,” she said, then looked to watch Steve as she continued, “Home schooling is easy in Texas. We submitted a form to the county and I take a test at the end of the school year.”

Everyone waited to hear from Steve. He cleared his throat and leaned to sit forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Your voice is much more pleasant when you’re not wearing the wrong necklace. Eya, would you switch necklaces so we can be sure the spare isn’t defective?” he asked.

Steve carefully composed himself. He wasn’t lying to the girl. Her voice was nice. It affected him, but not as intensely as did Estrella’s. He was uncomfortable responding to an underage kid, but this was business. It was nothing personal. He could forgive himself because they were here with the purpose of helping the girl.

The spare necklace worked fine on Estrella.

Steve took out his phone. Jarvis answered immediately.

“How may I assist you, Captain? Is everything well?”

“We’re fine, J. I’ve got a project for Tony and Bruce. We’re visiting Estrella’s family. Her younger cousin, Valeria, has the same voice effect. We’ve tried Eya’s spare necklace, but it’s not made for her. Put Tony on, and Bruce if he’s available. Will you record for us?”

“Doctor Banner is asleep, but Sir is available. I will be happy to assist,” Jarvis said.

Rita, Valeria, and Estrella watched him talk on the phone. Steve disliked speaking without including them. It was rude, but necessary.
"Hey, Spangles. How’s the downtime?"

"Fun so far. Did Jarvis explain anything?" Steve asked.

"You’ve got another pixie vixen. This is a family thing. There’s got to be a history of it. Grandparents. Great grandparents. I’d love to put Bruce on that genome. Can you get us some blood? If that’s too creepy, then saliva would do,"

"One thing at a time, Tony. She’s fourteen, and her mom’s here. I’m putting you on speaker."

"Understood, Cap,” Tony’s voice said to the room from Steve’s phone.

Steve winced slightly, but Rita didn’t seem to notice. She was too concerned for her child.


He sounded busy and distracted.

"I’m here, Tony. Pay attention. This is important,” Estrella said.

"Everything I do is important. I’m not distracted. You’re ungrateful, you know that? I’m setting up to record from your little tiny phone mic. Phone mic! I make a good phone, but it’s not ideal for this application. Jarvis, can we do this? It would be so much easier if you’d fly the kid in,” he said.

"I believe I will be able to manage, Sir.”

"Fine. Kid, you got a name?"

"Mister Stark?” Valeria said in amazement.

"That’s me when I’m feeling really, really old. Every other day when kids don’t insist on calling me that, I’m Tony. Come on, you gotta give me more to work with. What’s your favorite color? Gimme a name. I like to know who I’m making things for.”

"Um.. My favorite color is indigo. My name is Valeria Therez Robles-Castillo. Did I say enough?” Val said in a nervous hurry.

"Is Spangles squirming? Sing an aria,” Tony said.

"Stark. Now is not the time," Steve growled at him.

"Heh. Yeah, you said enough, kid. Nice name by the way, Mom. My lab partner isn’t here, but we’ll get on this sometime today. It should only be a few hours. I can send Point Break with it express mail. Where are you, anyway? Jarvis is being stingy with the details.”

"I, go ahead and transmit a location on us. High encryption. Tony, if Point Break brings it, I want Banner and Barnes alert and ready to step in. You’ll be too many men down if something happens while he’s away,” Steve instructed.

"Location captured, and I have reset the location privacy on your phone. I will retain the information personally until Mister Odinsson is in transit.”

"Jarvis, you’re a dirty rat. The plague kind,” Tony said, but Steve could hear the humor in his tone.

Tony was already working on it. Steve could hear the clunk of his coffee mug and the wheels on his chair as he stood up and kicked the chair away. Valeria’s voice was a puzzle to him, and Tony
was dragging the new digital overlay onto the previous records of their work for Estrella.

“Tony. Thank you.” Steve said sincerely.

“Yeah, thanks Mister Stark!”

“Geez, kid, don’t yell! It’s no problem. We’ll get you fixed up,” Tony said, and then the call went dead.

Steve put away his phone.

“That’s all there is? With a phone call, my daughter’s voice can be fixed?” Rita asked.

“Yes, Ma’am. A phone call to the right people,” Steve said.

“I could have it today? Who is Mister Stark sending? I don’t know who Point Break is. Is it one of you?” Valeria asked Steve.

“Val, that’s enough,” Estrella said quietly.

Steve was unnaturally still and his face looked a lot more like the one in the poster on the wall. Estrella could tell that he was exerting some effort, at least mentally.

“Sorry,” she whispered, “I forgot.”

“And that’s why you have to be careful. If you have a necklace like mine, it’s easy to forget to put it on. Aunt Rita, she could still get hurt. You need to practice with her so she won’t take it for granted when she gets used to talking again,” Estrella said.

“I’m gonna go,” Steve said.

Estrella didn’t know whether to be angry with him or proud when he stood and walked out of the room without trying to hide what her cousin’s voice had done to him. She looked apologetically to Val and Rita, then hurried after Steve.

Steve found the back door of the house and went into the fenced back yard. He knew Estrella was behind him. There was a trampoline out on the grass, and Steve leaned his hip against its edge.

“Thank you for helping. Are you okay?” Estrella asked him.

She slipped her arms around him, but didn’t stand too close. She understood that he might be feeling weird about Val’s voice.

“I’m fine. It’s good that we came. I hate that she’s been in her room for so long. Did you hear what Tony said about family history?” he asked.

Estrella thought about her family for a moment. Was there anyone who could have been a source for her and Valeria’s strange voice?

“My great grandfather!” Estrella exclaimed.
For reasons Steve couldn’t understand, Estrella hugged him tighter and cried on his shirt. He rubbed her back and waited for her to talk if she felt like it. It took her several minutes to work through her thoughts and feelings before she spoke.

“He was old by the time I met him, nearly a hundred. He was like Jesse when he was young. I saw a photo. He and grandmami were beautiful together. Everyone thought he was deaf and dumb, Steve! They said horrible things about him, and he could hear everything! He must have had the voice, so he refused to speak. I know he could hear, because he would smile at me when I was little. I’d follow him around the garden while he worked. I made up stories about the bumble bees and doodle bugs, and he’d smile. I thought he was only smiling because he could see that I was talking. He could hear, and people were mean to him!” Estrella said.

“He was used to it, Eya. I know how it is. I hear every little comment when folks think I can’t. I’ve come to know human nature pretty well, and nothing surprises me anymore. I know what they’re gonna say almost before they say it. Your grandpa was used to it, too. I’m sure he didn’t let it bother him much at all by the time he knew you,” Steve assured her.

Estrella rubbed her furrowed brow into his shirt and he massaged the back of her neck. What he said made her feel only a little better. Grampi had been happy and at peace when he died, though she’d been too little to understand. She remembered seeing him lying still and waxy looking in the funeral home. She’d wanted him to get up out of the fancy box and go home.


“No. Aunt Rita had him before, with her first husband, my Uncle Tomas. He died working in a refinery. I don’t know why she married Alberto. He’s never seemed very nice,” Estrella said.

Steve could figure it out. Families tended to have secrets, even from some of their own members. It was probable that as Jesse grew out of infancy, Rita had noticed a resemblance to the photo of her grandfather. Estrella didn’t realize it, but the family likely knew about the old man’s voice, or had at least heard some rumor of it as a sordid cautionary tale. Rita had gotten scared. When her first husband died, she’d married a rough, ugly man so that the rest of her children wouldn’t be like little Jesse, almost too beautiful to be real. Until a year and a half ago, Rita had likely thought her children would escape what was hidden in the family’s blood. Jesse had dodged the voice, but Valeria wasn’t so lucky, despite Rita trying to carefully select an unlikely mate. Steve had no doubt that Rita, like Estrella, used food to obscure her physical beauty. The woman had curves and was attractive still, even though she probably weighed more than Steve did.

He didn’t judge their choices. Nobody had a right to. Living with unexplained phenomena had been a real hardship back before people could understand things like they did now. This family had suffered for their genetic inheritance. Estrella was a pleasant woman in his arms now, but he knew how skeletal she’d been. She’d almost died.

Steve rubbed his lips back and forth against Estrella’s forehead. She was an incredible mix of what had come down to her from her ancestors. Only one in every fourth generation or so had the combination of beauty and the voice. It wasn’t worth the suffering for her. Her life had been hell since it all manifested. Things would have been a little easier for her great grandfather, being a man, but not by much. He shuddered to think of what could have happened to a young man with Estrella’s combination of traits. Poor man. It was a miracle he’d made it to almost a hundred years. Cruel words from his unknowing family had likely been the least of it.

Protectiveness welled up in him for the woman in his arms and for her family as well. For Valeria. Something had happened to Rita, he’d bet. Even without the burden of the voice, beauty like hers
would have drawn unwanted attention.

From the way Jesse and Rita looked, he had a better idea of what Estrella would become. He now understood her paranoia of men looking too closely at her in public. She was going to get a lot of looks and some unwelcome advances. As long as she let him, she was his to protect, if only she would stay with him like she said she would. Estrella thinking of staying anywhere long term was new to her, so he kept his thoughts to himself.

“You’ve got me all this week and next, doll. We shouldn’t stay out here to ourselves. Let’s go visit with your family. I’m gonna go see if I can charm your Uncle with football stats and gringo Spanglish. I’ll make a wreck of it for him to laugh at. You could go teach the ladies some of Natasha’s card tricks,” Steve suggested.

“Will Natasha kill me for sharing her tricks?” Estrella asked as they walked back to the house.

“Not if we don’t tell her,” he said.

End Note: Once again, this came out in one long bit, which I then split into Chapter 37 and Chapter 38. I’m editing 38 and will have it out within 24 hours, maybe sooner. Reviews are my bread n butter, with cinnamon and sugar on top!
Chapter 38

It turned out that Jesse and Fran's husband Luis were fans of broken language contortions. They had a good laugh at Steve while he tried to communicate with Alberto. Steve smiled and persisted in debating season stats with the man of the house. Alberto argued with him strictly in Spanish.

"I can understand you in Ingles," he said at one point when Steve was trying hard to learn a word that his knowledge of Latin, German, French, and English didn't help him with. Alberto's accent was thick and cadenced heavily with his native language.

Steve felt honored that the man met him halfway in his efforts to learn. Jesse and Luis were quietly impressed, too. Alberto almost never spoke English. They quieted for the last half of the game. It was a good one, and before the end Steve was yelling and groaning with the guys. Alberto and Luis yelled in Spanish and Steve and Jesse said pretty much the same things in English.

Steve could hear the women laughing in the kitchen. They would jokingly call Estrella a card cheat when they weren't asking her questions about her life. They were sensitive and caring when Estrella told them some of what had happened to her. Estrella explained some of the card cheats she'd learned from Natasha.

The football game was a long one, and everyone was getting hungry again by the time it was over. Mateo and Isaac eventually came to sit with their father once they figured that Steve was alright.

Steve was in the bathroom when he heard a faint, familiar sound outside and up high. By the time he got to the front door, he heard the distinctive sound of Mjolnir being set down on the concrete porch outside the door.

Alberto looked up from the after game commentary when a brisk knock rattled the door.

"It's my friend with something for Valeria," Steve said.

"That was fast," Alberto commented.

He went with Steve to answer the door.

Thor stepped inside on his best behavior. He was in canvas cargo pants, clunky boots, and a red plaid flannel shirt that made him look like a lumberjack.

"We're being invaded by Vikings," Jesse commented to Luis.

The two large blonde men by the door grinned.

"If that were true, I would be taking gifts, not bearing them," Thor responded.

He handed a choker necklace to Alberto. The man shook his head and quickly handed it over to Steve.

"This is your business, and the women's. Tell me if it works," he said.

Alberto nodded his thanks to Thor and waved him into the house, as if he wasn't already inside it. Thor gave Steve an assessing look, and was apparently satisfied with what he saw.

"I need not linger. This is your time, Steven," he murmured low enough for only Steve to hear.
"You should stay at least for a little while. I think Valeria would like to meet you. She has posters of us," Steve said equally as quiet.

"Eya, Val's necklace is here," Steve called into the kitchen.

Rita, Estrella, and Fran came to take the necklace and go to Val's room. Fran lingered to look at Steve and Thor, and Steve saw the exact moment she figured out who they were. Thor gave her a cheery smile and the goofy wave he enjoyed confusing surprised humans with. Fran shook her head as if she'd seen something impossible, then hurried after her mother.

A moment later, Steve's phone vibrated. Val was eager to see if her necklace worked.

"Come on," Steve said to Thor.

"This is a strange practice, visiting the bedchamber of a maiden child with all the women in attendance. Are you certain we are welcome?" Thor asked.

"I know the necklace will work. She'll want to thank you, and having both of us there will thoroughly prove to the family that it works," Steve said as they went down the small, dim hallway. Jesse joined them.

"Are you sure this thing will work?" he asked.

"I bet my life on Stark tech all the time. We can resist their voices. If it doesn't work, we'll keep you out of trouble," Steve told Jesse.

The bedroom door was open and Valeria was surrounded by her family. At the sight of both Steve and Thor, she was dumbfounded until Estrella nudged her.

"Go on. You should thank Thor for bringing it so quickly."

"Thank you?" Val whispered.

Her eyes looked past them to her brother. Jesse looked as uncertain as his little sister.

"You must speak if we are to know, child," Thor said.

"Okay. Thank you?" Valeria said more bravely this time.

Steve looked to Thor, then they both looked to Jesse. It appeared that no one was affected by the girl's voice now that her customized necklace was in place.

"This is cause for celebration! Tell me what you have missed most during your confinement," Thor said.

"I want to see my family," Valeria said.

The thought that she could brought tears to her eyes. She pushed through Steve and Thor on her way to Jesse.

"You're okay? You don't feel anything?" she asked him.

"Nothing, squirt. It's just like before," Jesse told her.

Valeria hugged him, then ran past to see her father.
They heard raised voices in the living room. Alberto was startled and adamant about Val going back to her room, but then the girl spoke to her father.

"There you are!" Alberto exclaimed happily, and they all walked in to see him patting his youngest fondly on her cheek.

He quickly concealed his happy expression into gruff inspection of the necklace she wore. He nodded once, then sat back down in his chair. He waved a hand at Valeria, which seemed to indicate that she had free run of the house again. She laughed and hugged Mateo and Isaac. Luis got a smile, and then Val ran back to her mother.

She looked to Estrella, then to Steve, then to Thor.

"You've changed my life. Please tell Mister Stark that I'm grateful," she said softly.

"I will tell Doctor Banner also. He awoke to help, and they had the task done in minutes," Thor said.

"Please. You stay and we'll do steaks. Jesse, go to the store and get more charcoal!" Rita said to them.

"Is Buck standing in as backup while you're away?" Steve asked Thor.

"He was unavailable. He is already away on an assignment."

"Get back to the tower. Anything could happen," Steve told him.

Thor nodded.

Before he could turn to go, Estrella hugged him.

"You kept bad things from happening to my cousin," Estrella told him after she let him go.

"There is no worthier cause than the defense of family and the protection of the innocent, and when both can be served it makes for a good day indeed," Thor said warmly.

He smiled at the girl with her new necklace, then at everyone else. Alberto lifted a hand to him, and then Thor was out the door. Steve heard the hammer spin up, then the sound of Thor jetting off to the Northeast.

"Jesse! Take Steve and go get enough meat and charcoal for everyone. By the time we cook, we'll all be starving," Rita said.

"Yes, Ma," the young man said.

Jesse went to his room to get his keys and his wallet. Steve stepped closer to Estrella and the rest of the women went back to the kitchen to give them some space.

"She wants me to go with. Do you want to come? I won't leave you here if you're not happy," he said.

"I'm more worried about you and Jesse. He was always a tomcat. He might corrupt you while you're out," Estrella said.

"Ain't scared," Steve said, and winked at her.
"Ooh. You go! Don't forget that we already have some steaks in the ice chest in the truck," she told him.

"Yes, Ma'am," Steve said.

He couldn't seem to resist wrapping his tongue around a Texas accent when he was feeling playful. Estrella wrinkled her nose at him and pushed him toward the door just as Jesse came out with his keys, ready to go.

"Don't you stop to get any women! We're getting hungry, and he'll tell on you," Estrella warned her cousin and tilted her nose up at Steve.

Jesse slapped a hand to his chest over his heart and walked backwards out the door. As soon as it closed behind Steve, he dropped his playing around. Steve kept a casual demeanor, but he studied the neighborhood closely. Jesse walked toward his truck.

"We're going in mine. This way," Steve said.

"Whatever, man. What are you doing?" Jesse asked.

"How safe is this neighborhood? Is there any trouble?" Steve asked.

"The police come sometimes, but it's never anything to do with us. All the gang shit stays over around twelfth. Why are you worried? We're just going to the store."

"Have any men around here heard your sister's voice?" Steve persisted in his questions as they got into his truck.

Jesse looked around at the vehicle appreciatively.

"Jesse," Steve prompted him.

"No. Some boys heard her once, but she doesn't go to that school anymore. You think somebody's gonna come to the house in the half hour we're gone, just because you and Eya came to visit?"

"I don't know what to think. It's my job to be cautious when it comes to other people's safety," Steve said as he started the truck.

"But not your own. I saw you with those robots a few months ago. That was some deep shit! You took that green laser thing so your buddy wouldn't get knocked out of the sky. Didn't it cut you or something?" Jesse asked.

"Something. It was clean. Healed fast," Steve said.

He waited with the engine running. He appreciated how laid back the family was being about his job, but he still needed directions to the store. Jesse looked at him, amazed that he was in a vehicle with a super-hero. Steve studied Jesse because he looked so much like Estrella, and because he was waiting for driving directions. Jesse shook his head and laughed nervously.

"What, man?"

"I don't know how to get to the store," Steve told him.

"Oh. Just drive. You turn right when we get to the light at the end of the street," the young man said.
He laughed again. Steve didn't like the nervous edge to it.

"At ease. You're nervous. What do you think is gonna happen?" Steve asked as he stopped the truck for two little kids to cross the street with their bicycles.

"I don't know. You gotta admit, today has been some strange shit since you got here. I'm wondering what's gonna happen next. Do you usually go at people so hard and get all personal and shit?" Jesse wanted to know.

His voice had turned a bit aggressive. Steve liked that. The kid wasn't in awe of him. He had a backbone, like his cousin. He wasn't fawning, despite Steve's role in helping his sister. If this kind of crossfire conversation went on all the way to the store and back, Steve was going to be as aggravated with Jesse as Lewis made him.

A thought niggled at him, but he kept it to himself. Steve kept his eyes on his driving and followed the instructions given to him. After a few minutes Jesse couldn't tolerate the silence.

"What the hell is with you? Is this an interrogation? Did I do something wrong?" he finally cracked under the pressure of prolonged quiet.

"Did you?" Steve asked dryly.

"Fuck you, man! How does Estrella put up with you?"

Steve laughed.

"It's alright, Jesse. I understand. You can relax," he said.

Now it was Jesse's turn to be silent. Under his stony silence, Steve could hear the frightened beat of his heart. He felt bad for him. He hadn't meant to rile the kid up so much. Now he was sitting over there looking like he was thinking about jumping out of a moving vehicle.

"I understand that today has been a lot to take in. Probably what bothers you the most is the slight disconnect from reality that comes when the world shifts and you're not expecting it to. Avengers are people too, and sometimes you see them when they're not on a glowing screen. Then, you're used to being top dog. You walk in and rule the room wherever you go. Other men fear you because you're attractive enough to make them look bad, and you can take their women if you want to. You don't know what to do with a man who isn't a little bit in awe of you. Then, there's the attraction. You're scared spitless that you'll tip your hand and I'll figure out that you're gay or bi, and that I might tattle to your family."

"Fuck you," Jesse said again, but it was weak. Terrified.

Steve pulled into the grocery store parking lot and parked the truck.

Jesse was breathing fast and shallow. Steve had talked down so many scared young men that it was easy as song and dance, but he had to make Jesse face his fears first so he could then show him that there was nothing to be afraid of. Fear of the unknown had always been the biggest bug-bear humanity had ever faced.

"Strange things happen in my life all the time, and I've learned to keep marching. Are you listening, Jesse?" Steve asked.

He nodded a jerky affirmative.
"First, I don't care if you're gay or bi. That's your business, and I'll never tell anyone. I don't know if I'll ever see you again, and I've got bigger things to think about. Your secret's safe with me," Steve assured him.

"I'm not a fag," Jesse said.

Steve didn't like that word, but he ignored it. Jesse was a nice enough guy, and he was under a lot of stress at the moment.

"I'm not worried about you making me look bad or taking my girl," Steve continued with the next point on his list.

Jesse snorted.

"I don't have anything to prove about who's alpha. I see the type all day long. I wipe my boots on them and knock down the next one in line. I'm not trying to sound puffed up. It's what I do. It's boring and repetitive. I could teach you how," Steve told him.

"Would you?" Jesse asked after a moment.

"It would take a lot more time than I have to get you actually knocking guys down, but to make them think twice all you gotta do is be confident and use actions more than words. A lot of noise and cursing is a sure sign of weakness," Steve said.

"I can see that. You're a master," Jesse said.

"Why thank you. I've worked hard," Steve said with a grin.

"Why do you do that?" Jesse asked.

"Do what?"

"That thing where you act all humble and write off what you are," Jesse said.

"I've gotta be humble. The more I see, the more I know how small I am. Anybody who opens their eyes and looks is a fool to be a cocky bastard. As far as writing myself off, I did that in the biggest way possible at the end of the war. I gave myself up to stop the enemy, and when I woke up seventy years later, the enemy was still here. All that they made me, and it still doesn't amount to a hill of beans sometimes. I do what I can, and the rest will have to be good enough," Steve explained.

"You make it sound hopeless," Jesse said.

"It feels that way sometimes, but then something good happens. Estrella is that for me. She's my good thing. Good person, I mean," Steve said.

Jesse nodded. As improbable as it felt that his cousin would be with Captain America, it was plain that Steve was dead serious about Estrella. No joke.

"We're supposed to be getting steak and charcoal. Ma's gonna burn up my phone in a few minutes," Jesse said.

"Blame it on me," Steve said.

"Why are you doing this? Talking to me?"
"Because you needed it," Steve said, "you were about to rattle out of your skin."

Jesse nodded.

Steve was relieved that the kid wasn't scared anymore. He wasn't socially adept enough to know what precisely he'd done to set the kid off, but it was mostly settled now.

"Are we done here?" Steve asked sharply.

Rather than being harsh, his tone was meant to convey comradery and strength. That everything was right and they could move on.

"About the other thing…" Jesse said uneasily.

He looked out the window or at his hand clenched on his knee. Anywhere but at Steve.

"What about it?" Steve asked.

He didn't bother to play dumb. They needed to get this conversation done and get to work.

"Nobody knows. I lie to myself and believe it most of the time. I like girls. Love pussy. But every once in a while, somebody comes along… Are you really gonna keep it to yourself, or should I start packing to get outta town?" Jesse asked, then snapped his teeth shut.

"I'm sorry about that. I don't enjoy making people uncomfortable. I won't tell anyone. Not even Estrella. You have my word on it," Steve said.

"I'm sorry too. It's just that you're a fuckin beast. A lot of guys put on a show, but you're it," Jesse said with a single brave glance at Steve.

"I'm not a beast," Steve denied.

"Yes you are. You can't fake me. I've got a nose for it. Grampi had it too. He told me," Jesse confessed.

The kid wasn't messing with him or trying to bluff. He had that resigned, knowing look that Estrella got sometimes when she spoke about the unusual things she'd been born with. Whatever his nose was telling him, it must be part of the family heritage.

"We've all got things we don't want anybody else to know about. I don't think I'm a beast. I'm trying hard not to be, but if you say so…," Steve said with a shrug, "You keep my secret. I'll keep yours. Good enough?"

Jesse nodded.

"Let's get the meat and get back before Eya thinks you've got us in trouble with women, because apparently you do that," Steve said.

"Why did you buy these ones, Jesse? Were they on sale?" Fran asked her brother with a displeased look on her face.

Fran's job was to prepare the meat for the grill while her mother worked on the side dishes. She'd unwrapped all the steaks they'd brought back until she got to the ones Steve had brought from his ice chest.
"I bought those yesterday," Steve admitted.

"Shut up, man. I could take it. I had it covered, but you had to go being all honest and…stuff," Jesse said.

His eyes flashed to where Val was peeling potatoes at the table. Steve guessed that he'd gotten loose with his language while his little sister was put away and couldn't hear him.

"I don't need you to stand up for me to women. I'll dig my own trenches," Steve said.

He was getting the feel of the culture in this house. There was a subtle, good-natured competition between the genders. The men used it to bond, and the women did likewise. Estrella smiled at them both. She was pleased that Steve was figuring her family out.

"Yeah, but you don't have to jump yourself under the bus like that when I could have saved you. When Ma sees those! Yeesh. Fran, just put them in the marinade and don't say anything," Jesse said hopefully.

"When Ma sees what?" Rita turned around to go see what Fran was handling.

She took a look at the mysteriously deficient steaks and gave Steve a cool, insulting look with just her eyebrows. The fact that she turned away without saying anything at all made Steve feel particularly low.

"See. Keep your mouth shut and let me take the bus," Jesse said quietly.

"Cerveza!" Alberto yelled from the back yard where he was getting the charcoal going.

Valeria hurried to bring her father a beer from the fridge.

Estrella laughed and kept cutting the fresh green beans.

"I'll let you take the bus if you ever deserve it," Steve told him easily, "I'll pile drive you into the ground with it. Have you ever been beat with a bus before? I have. I can't seem to stay away from them. Robots, aliens, misguided friends… I see a lot of buses. Not my idea of fun. I hate buses. So if you ever deserve it, you better believe I'll let you take the bus. But this time, I earned the bus. Bad steak. I need to learn why."

Jesse and Fran stared at Steve. Estrella pressed her wrist to her mouth and tried not to snort laughter onto the food she was preparing.

"Too much?" Steve asked her.

Estrella held her fingers a little bit apart and nodded. There was a twinkle in her eyes that made up for the embarrassment of his over-sharing. Steve grumbled something, got a beer from the fridge, and went out back to learn about steak from Alberto. He was the resident grill master, and he probably wouldn't give him that insulting eyebrow thing that the women did.

Jesse finally laughed and followed him out.

"I think Jesse's in love with your boyfriend," Fran whispered quickly before Val could come back in.

Estrella nodded and went back to her cutting. It was understandable. Steve was lovable.

"None of that talk in this house. Don't break your father's heart," Rita admonished them.
Fran would have replied, but Val hurried back inside.

"Oh my gosh! Captain America is in my back yard!" Val gushed as she lingered by the window.

"You people! I come back after all these years, and all you can talk about is my boyfriend. I bring people to fix Val's voice, and do I get any thanks?" Estrella said.

"We love you too, Eya, but you're so skinny. I could snap you!" Fran teased.

Estrella refrained from commenting about that. In most of the world she knew, you didn't tell people they were too skinny or too fat, but that wasn't the case here. It was hard to get back into old habits when they'd been beat out of you.

"I think you're pretty, Eya. Your hair will grow, and you can eat more. All that matters is that he likes you, and he does," Val said.

"That's not all that matters. I have to like me, too. What if I like to be bald and skinny?" she asked testily.

Rita put down her big spoon and walked to the table. She laid a hand on Estrella's cheek.

"Look at me, niña. I'm like a whale. We do what we have to do. I'm happy to see you alive, so I don't care if you're skinny. Those putas at child services wouldn't tell us a thing about you. I wanted to get a lawyer, but we didn't have the money. You better call us when you go back to New York. Your mami will pray me bald all the way from heaven if I don't look after you," Rita said.

"I don't think she needs any more looking after. She's got the Avengers," Val said dreamily over her pile of peeled potatoes.

Estrella blew a frustrated breath at her hair. They were back to talking about heroes again.

"I don't care who she's got. They're not family," Rita said.

Steve learned what he could from Alberto and Luis while Mateo and Isaac jumped on the trampoline. The boys bonked their heads together at one point, and there was a little blood, but they shook it off with no whining and kept jumping after a thrown fist or two.

Jesse fussed at little Isaac for punching his big brother. When it was time to eat, Steve saw that the table wasn't huge after all. With him and Estrella, it was bordering on crowded. After the meal, it felt right to linger, but Steve wanted to get back to the beach before dark. He wanted some quiet time with Estrella.

"I promise we'll come back before we leave for home," Estrella told her aunt as they lingered near the front door.

"We could go to the beach," Val suggested.

"That could work. Eya, do they have your number? I wouldn't want to miss them if they get a free day. Our schedule is flexible," Steve said.

"Yes, they have my number," she smiled at him.

There were hugs all around, except for Steve. He got handshakes from the men. Rita gave the best hugs. Estrella thought so too, because she cried again.
Steve let her go through her emotions from the day in peace while he drove them back out to the beach. She was quiet and she didn't offer to get out and help him refill their water containers.

They had to take a spot a little farther down the beach, because there were campers near their spot from the night before. It didn't matter. There were miles and miles of beach to choose from. Steve didn't stop driving until they couldn't see anyone else in either direction. Estrella yelped a few times as he maneuvered the truck around or over obstacles. Steve was having fun with his truck and its four wheel drive, so she didn't complain. If he got it stuck, he was probably strong enough to lift it free.

"Are you alright?" Steve finally asked her as they sat out under the stars in their folding chairs.

"I'm wonderful. Thank you, Steve, for everything. You take me down here, and you bring me to my family, and you make an effort to get along with them, even crabby old Alberto. Val's life will be different. You've saved her too."

"Don't talk about Alberto. He's alright. You just have to understand him," Steve said.

He pointedly refused to take credit for all she was trying to praise him for. It made him happy to do all of it, and it was no bother.

"And you understand Alberto?" she asked archly, "I don't even understand Alberto most of the time."

"Sure. You just have to know Latin, German, French, English, and have a good ear. Spanish is easy. I'm picking it up fast," Steve smiled smugly.

Estrella took the foam drink cozy off her soda can and threw it at him.

"Do you really wanna get in a throw down with me, little girl?" he asked.

There were about ten tons of Brooklyn in his tone, and he launched the piece of hollow foam back at her. He managed to make it sting across the bridge of her nose somehow, just a little.

Estrella laughed. She loved how he was starting to let hints of smugness and sarcastic wit show in front of her. It felt more genuine than him being gosh-darn choirboy all the time.

"I'm not getting into any kind of throwing contest against you, Steve. But, 'little girl?" she questioned him.

She got out of her chair and went the few feet across the sand to stand in front of him. She took his beer and set it in his cup holder. Then she climbed onto his lap.

"You and me together exceed the rated weight capacity of these chairs," he cautioned her.

"You sound like Jarvis. You think I'm a 'little girl?" Estrella persisted in a dangerously light tone.

"You're small and you're female. I like that. Is there a problem?" Steve replied, sounding like he hoped there was one.

He loved the way Estrella felt against him after a long day of being around a lot of people. The peace they found together fit strangely well along with the thrill he felt at her touch.

"No. I'm only making sure, because Jesse likes you. I thought you should know."

"I'm glad. I like him too. He's fun. He hardly blinked when he found out what I do. They're all good
about it. I was afraid it was going to be a problem," he said as smoothly as he could.

Natasha would be proud. He thought he fibbed to Estrella pretty convincingly.

"It's a Latino thing. They don't like to seem too impressed with anything. You missed what I'm saying, Steve. Jesse likes you. As in, he wouldn't mind being locked in a closet with you for a while," she said.

"Oh. How do you know?"

"We're his family. We're not blind," she said.

"Does Jesse know you're not blind?"

"I don't know. We're all trying so hard to keep Alberto in the dark. It wouldn't go well if he knew," Estrella said.

"There's nothing any of us can do about that. Some folks can't get around the idea of same-sex relations. I was one of them for a while when I was young and sheltered. I've been around too many people to condemn anyone. I've seen too much. It's not for me, but it's not my place to dictate to others, either. If any of that's an issue for Jesse, you should all leave him alone to find his own way. I've seen some tragic things happen when somebody thinks they know best and they act on someone else's behalf," Steve warned.

Estrella shuddered mildly at the idea that Jesse's life could end in tragedy, or even that he might suffer if rumors started about him. Then, she noticed that Steve had taken her light comments far more seriously than she'd meant them.

"You know about Jesse? What happened? It had to be when you went for the steaks," Estrella said.

"Nothing happened. I'm good at reading people, that's all. Jesse likes women. No worries there," Steve said.

"You're a rotten liar," Estrella said.

Steve sighed. This meant more lessons with Natasha.

"Honestly, nothing happened. He was acting nervous. We talked. He got over it. Do we have to talk about Jesse?" Steve complained.

"As long as you know that he likes you. We know he loves women, and lots of them. He's been that way since before I left years ago, when he was fifteen. But, sometimes, he notices a man, and off he goes. Don't tease him, Steve. It would be cruel."

"You're talking to me about cruelty and teasing? I wouldn't do that to anyone I liked. I've been through it enough," Steve said.

"Okay. Yes, let's talk about teasing. Somebody had fun this morning without me. I've been left like this all day," Estrella said.

She found the relaxed mound of his genitals and perched just so on him. The heat of her and the slick ease of her sleep shorts and underwear sliding against him told him what 'like this all day' meant. He wasn't relaxed for long.

Estrella was above him in the chair, looking down. Being on top didn't bother her at all. She
probably felt safe that way. Steve wasn't going to tell her how quick he could get her under him from this position. If she felt safe, he wanted her to keep feeling that way.

Before he was fully aroused and Estrella had set in her mind exactly what she wanted to do, Steve shifted her hips so that she was riding the hard muscle of his thigh, rather than directly on him. He wasn't ready for that, no matter how she wanted it. He wanted to be ready for it, but he didn't think it meant the same to her as it did to him.

He helped her work herself against him with careful hands. It was incredibly exciting for him to watch the slow build of a woman to orgasm. A woman he cared about. He almost came too from his hot, thrilled empathy for her, and from listening to the little sounds she made.

It was wrong to do the sexual things they had done today according to what his upbringing had been, but Estrella was no blushing virgin to woo with tepid acts. She was a frightened and abused woman, and she needed strong love to overcome her past if they were going to make it.

She fell asleep on him. Steve carried her to bed without waking her. She jerked away when he brushed sand from her feet with fingers, but she didn't wake. When he closed them in the truck camper for the night, the scent of her was strong. He could almost taste her in the air.

He loved it, but it took him a long time to get to sleep.
Discomfort woke her. Estrella rubbed her fingers at her eyes and looked around to see that she had the back of the truck all to herself. She sat up and looked around. Steve had left her phone right next to her, as was becoming his habit. A quick look out the camper windows showed that she had the beach to herself as far as the eye could see.

She had to pee so bad that she broke a fingernail pulling at the camper hatch handle. She didn't bother putting down the tailgate. She climbed over and hurried to the dunes. Then she rushed back and got her toothbrush and a wipe to clean up with.

Even with Steve not around to see, her face flushed hot at the memory of last night. So much of seeing her family yesterday jumbled in her head, and it all left her with a happy feeling. Happy wasn't a big enough word. Still, the feel of Steve's strong hands on her hips gripping and guiding her, and the hard arc of his thigh muscles against her deliciously sensitive places overwhelmed all that. She was embarrassed for falling asleep on him. He must have carried her to bed.

She felt a little shy of rubbing on him now that she was standing in the cool light of early morning brushing her teeth, but only a little. Steve had shared his pleasure and relief with her in the morning, and she didn't think any less of him. From the heated way he'd been looking up at her last night while she was seeking hers, she knew he didn't mind. They weren't exactly enjoying each other together yet, but it was a start. It was more than she thought she'd ever have with anyone, and she loved being close to him in a way they couldn't when they were at the tower. It was as if they were building something exclusive, just for them. Something worth protecting.

While she put away her toothbrush and toothpaste, she paid attention to the discomfort that had awakened her. It wasn't only the urgency to pee. She wanted. The idea of coffee and food was mildly appealing, but what she really needed was Steve. Even though she'd fallen asleep touching him, and may have been touching him in her sleep, she wanted more. Yesterday had mostly been about her family. Today, she wanted him all to herself.

Estrella frowned at the needy feeling in her skin and in her bones, in the meat of her. It felt good. Healthy. Powerful. But she dreaded it. It meant that she was getting better, and she was changing fast. She pressed her fingers to her face, then combed them through her hair. She'd changed overnight. It was slight, but she could feel it. Before long, she wouldn't even be able to resent the changes or remember not feeling this way. It was going to overwhelm her and swallow her up with its purpose. It always did.

She sighed, then shook her head. There was no point stressing over what was happening inside her. The smartest thing would be to enjoy these simple days while she could. With that in mind, she turned her focus to doing something for Steve rather than worrying about her future.
There was no telling how much longer he'd be gone. Maybe she had time to make coffee and something for breakfast. She opened up their little green camp stove and got the burners lit by recalling how Steve had done it. The left burner made a ‘whoomph’ sound and the flame went out, but then she used another match and re-lit it and it seemed to work fine. She put their new kettle over one flame with a bellyful of fresh water. She got their little black iron skillet and bacon from the ice chest for the other burner. It was easy to set up the French press for coffee.

While she waited, she kept looking along the beach in each direction. It was so strange as to be almost creepy, to have this much space all to herself. Only the seagulls glided by, giving her and her cooking a hopeful eye. The day was starting out with gray skies, but calm and quiet. She could see Steve's footsteps in the sand, leading off to the South.

The bacon cooked quickly. She turned off the flame under it and looked for Steve. She still couldn't see him. She put the kettle on low heat. She didn't want the coffee to be overdone and bitter. Estrella looked to the gentle, lapping waves, and then to the far empty distance of sand. If somebody came along, she'd have time to see them and get herself back in the truck before they got to her.

Estrella wandered across the beach toward the water. She was in her thin comfy sleep tee, and her little silky shorts. Her bare legs and feet felt supremely naked in the gentle breeze. Her throat was bare to the breeze, too, and she loved it. This was like walking around nearly naked in her room back at the tower, but she was out in 'public', on an open beach where anyone at all could come along. The freedom and lightness from worry made her smile. She rubbed her fingers at the bare front of her throat and was pleased to not feel collared.

Her toes reveled in the little waves and she shuffled along idly, kicking up swirls of sand in the water. The air was cool enough to give her little bumps on her skin and make her nipples tingle, but the water was warm almost like a bath. A shape at the water's edge drew her attention.

A starfish! Estrella smiled in wonder and went to squat down over it. The creature was big as her spread hand, and bumpy all over in rows along its five arms. The color was a dark reddish orange, and it was alive. As she watched intently and thin sheets of sea water washed over her feet and the starfish, she could see it moving along, creeping so slowly that its movement was almost imperceptible. Under the bottom edges of its arms, its color was a light toasty tan, and thousands of tiny little pod feet stepped it along over the sand. For such a mindless animal, she marveled at how it coordinated all those tiny feet.

She wasn't going to disturb it, but she couldn't resist. With an outstretched finger, she touched its tough, bumpy skin. The thing did a very slow motion direction change back toward deeper water. She chuckled at how its increased speed to flee was still hardly moving at all.

A repetitive thumping sound drew her attention up and away from the starfish. She looked up to see Steve running toward her, still quite a distance off. Estrella stood up and left the starfish to bumble along where it would. She'd never seen Steve run like this, and it was pretty amazing.

He was approaching faster than she would have thought possible. In the time it took her to get lost in watching him move like an unstoppable machine, she realized that over two hundred pounds of solid man was headed right for her. She barely had time to fear an impact, and then Steve smiled his rascally smile at her, the one he sometimes used when Bucky was around.

There was no use running or dodging. She'd seen his agility and speed. She stood her ground on the damp sand and smiled back at him.

It happened so fast that she couldn't tell what he'd done, but there was an abrupt movement, then he
was up and over her in a tight tuck. Steve came down behind her so close that his chest and belly
smacked into her back and his large feet shocked the sand just to the outside of hers.

She began to stumble forward from the gentle but abrupt bump, but his arms came around to tug
her back against him. Steve tucked his face into the side of her neck and laughed. Estrella wanted
to laugh with him but his harsh, hot breaths against the bare skin of her neck made her choke down
on her airway. She wasn't wearing her necklace. Instead, she brought her hands up to grip his
forearms in welcome and she turned to kiss the bridge of his nose.

"Hiya, Gorgeous," Steve breathed at her, then smooched her lips.

She kissed him back softly. It landed on his teeth because he couldn't stop grinning. He jostled her
in his arms from side to side just a bit, the better to feel her against him.

A slight tremble shook her. Steve was pumped hard from his run, and his chest rose and fell
against her back, making her feel squished in his arms some. Veins stood out under his skin
wherever she could see him. Unwanted jolts of alarm shocked adrenaline into her blood. He had
her. There was no escape. Even if she screamed, at this point he'd only grab her harder. She was
trapped.

Estrella took a deep, calming breath, then another one. She laid her head back onto his chest and let
her mouth fall open slightly. When she fully relaxed against him and let her tense muscles go soft,
he didn't feel so scary.

"Are you alright now?" Steve asked.

She nodded and waited for her heart to stop thumping. Strenuous and fast as his run had been, it
only took a few minutes for his body to calm. Estrella patted his arm and he released her. She
pointed to the starfish, which hadn't gotten very far away in its attempt to flee.

Steve squatted beside her to look at it.

"The beach is full of them this morning, but I didn't stop to look," he said.

Steve reached out and carefully picked up the starfish. They looked closely at its pale underside.
There were grooves under each arm, and a little mouth hole in the middle. Thousands of pod feet
waved and waved and waved at nothing.

Estrella flicked her hands frantically toward the water. The poor creature wanted to get away from
his grip, just like she had. Steve set it down and it stayed there, immobile and confused. A wave
washed over it, and that seem to clear its befuddlement. It began its gruelingly slow march back out
to sea.

"It's a good thing there's millions of them. Response time that slow isn't very good for individual
survival," he said.

"Does everything have to be about tactics?" she whispered.

He shrugged.

"It's an observation. It's not really a tactic if I'm only noticing a characteristic. Taking note of a
situation, assessing what needs to be done, making a plan, and then acting with directive purpose
would be tactical. I was just enjoying a starfish," Steve said with flippant attitude and a twinkle in
his eyes, as if it was her fault for making him think work-related thoughts.
Estrella poked out her lip and tapped him in the middle of his forehead.

"Eh, I know. It's hard not to think about work. I'll try harder. And thanks for trusting me," he said, and looked a few steps away to where he'd abruptly stopped his run, "It feels good to be trusted."

She looked to the slowly escaping starfish and nodded.

"It was my plan to wake you up like I did yesterday, but you made some progress anyway, didn't you? You did good. You calmed yourself quickly. I wasn't trying to scare you, though," he told her.

She rolled her eyes in frustration at herself, and tapped at the side of her head in annoyance.

"Don't blame yourself. I have a phobia of ice water. We learn these things whether we want them or not. Clint threw a glass of cold water at me when he thought I'd sprayed him with champagne. None of us were thinking about it. I locked up. I couldn't even breathe. Hours in a frigid swimming pool with scuba gear, and I'm almost over it, but I'll never like cold water. The goal is to be functional despite the fear. You're making real progress," Steve assured.

Estrella looked at him. It was difficult to imagine Steve so afraid of anything that he couldn't breathe, especially something as harmless as a glass of water. A frown drew down her brow and her lip poked out stubbornly.

"Don't frown at me. I hadta do it. Cap can't afford to be vulnerable like that. It would be embarrassing and dangerous if I had to make a cold water insertion and I couldn't function. Plans could fail. People could die," he said, all too serious.

She blew out a breath that fluffed the soft hairs over her forehead. She tapped his forehead again, harder.

"Sorry," Steve grimaced.


His demeanor brightened and they stood up. They walked back to the truck in the bright gray morning light. The sun was trying to burn through the clouds and the air was warming up. Steve glanced at her shirt and Estrella self-consciously tugged the fabric away from her bra-less breasts. The movement of walking was keeping her perky against the rubbing cotton.

"I didn't mean to stare," Steve apologized without really apologizing.

She shrugged and went directly for the kettle. It was just below a boil, which was perfect. She turned off the burner, then poured hot water into the French press. She had two bowls of instant maple oatmeal ready, and she poured water into them too and stirred. She looked to the coffee pot, then to Steve and tapped her wrist. He set his watch with a four minute timer.

Estrella waved a hand toward his chair, and he sat. She set four thick, crisp slices of bacon and two boiled eggs on top of his oatmeal and brought him the bowl, then fixed half as much for herself. She angled her chair so she would be next to the coffee while she ate and so that she could see the waves instead of the dunes.

Steve must have hand washed his running shorts because they were the same ones from yesterday, but clean. He looked perversely Captain America-like sitting in his dark steel blue folding chair, wearing the gray shorts. He was eating out of a red plastic bowl. She wondered if he'd even noticed the colors he'd chosen for things. She smiled faintly around her mouthful of oatmeal.
"What?" Steve asked.

The timer went off for the coffee, and she shrugged. It was too complicated for her to want to explain while she wasn't wearing her necklace. She reached and pushed down the press to filter the coffee. Their new mugs and the sugar and cream were already set out. She poured for them and then indicated the cream and sugar.

"Nah. Black is good this morning. Thank you," he said.

He held his bowl in one hand and came to get his coffee mug so she wouldn't have to get up. She nodded and smiled softly at him. She was pleased to have made breakfast and coffee for them, and to have figured out how to operate the camp stove. The view of his backside as he walked back to his chair was worth smiling over, too. Not just his ass. His shoulders and back and legs were lovely, too. She sighed appreciatively.

Steve grinned at her as he sat down, and gave her a brief little-boy look from beneath his lashes.

"I've heard that sigh a thousand times or more, but it feels good when it's you doing it," he said.

She made a face at him as if he was making a little much of himself. His eyebrows went up.

"Oh, really? Is that the way it's gonna be? You're a looker, Eya, and I think you got even prettier overnight. Are you gonna treat me like every other guy when I get stuck admiring you? Or are you gonna let me in under your defenses?" he asked.

There was real curiosity and trepidation in his question. They both knew she was damaged and conditioned to respond to men's attention in negative ways. Steve wasn't wrong to be concerned.

She set her oatmeal bowl down. She couldn't have him thinking that she resented his attention. It was only four steps across the sand to him, and she sank to her knees in front of his chair. He set his empty bowl down in a hurry.

"I don't want you on your knees," Steve protested.

She shook her head and brushed his hands away when he reached for her to lift her up. He didn't sit back again completely, but he let her do what she wanted. Estrella leaned forward and hugged him around the waist. Her arms wrapped around him and her head rested beside his hip. She squeezed him tight for a moment, then she kneeled up straight again. He didn't know what to do with his hands, but she did.

Estrella drew one of his hands to her and pressed it to wrap around her neck from the front, and then tucked his other one up under her loose shirt. She flattened his palm between her breasts and over her heart. Their skin pressing together in such vulnerable places felt exhilarating and perfect. She put her hands on him in the same way, though he had no shirt to slip under.

They stared at each other, and Steve's eyes darkened, his pupils going wide. She could feel his strong heart thump a little harder under her hand. She rubbed up and down the contours of his neck and he shook his head slightly. She got the impression that he wasn't telling her 'no'. He was shaking off some unexpected feeling.

"Loud 'n clear, Doll. I'm all for you, if you're all for me," he said.

The rumble of his voice reminded her a little of the sound of his truck. She nodded and smiled in delight. Quick as a hummingbird, she pressed up and in to kiss him deeply. His hand around her neck slipped around to the back of her head, and the hand between her breasts moved down and
around her ribs to press her closer to him. His work-roughened palm moving over tender skin buzzed her with excitement. She wiggled against him so much that their noses bumped while they kissed.

She bit at his tongue and he groaned and pushed his way deeper in to offer her more to nip at. His jaws opened hers wider in a gentle show of eagerness rather than a rape of her mouth. Her biting turned to slick wet sucking, and Steve undulated his tongue in her, a hint of challenge for her to hang on and do as she would. Things got a little frantic and clumsy after that, but they relished everything. Neither of them cared if they were doing things perfectly. The point was to share and to feel.

They enjoyed the near-grind of their facial bones, then Estrella pulled away to breathe. She moved her head aside to press her temple against his. She nuzzled their skin together and tried not to breathe in his ear too much. For his part, Steve tried not to clutch at her too tightly because she was bent in an awkward position.

"Our coffee's probably getting cold," he said.

Estrella made a huffing sound, but she got up off her knees. She didn't bother brushing the sand off, because then she'd have it on her hands. She put a bit of sass in her step as she went back to sit in her chair and she heard Steve's faint groan behind her. She was aware that her backside was beginning to look interesting.

She turned to sit and she picked up her oatmeal bowl. She frowned because she wanted to tease him back about the sound he'd made while looking at her ass. She couldn't. Not without her necklace.

"What?! You just told me that it was alright for us to enjoy each other," Steve complained.

Estrella waved her hands at him and shook her head. Then, she stopped that and waved her hands in a different direction when he looked confused. They were pretty good at communicating without her speaking, but not everything was so easy to say. She gave up trying and simply flopped back in her chair. She rubbed at her larynx and looked frustrated.

"So talk, already. Let's give this a try," Steve encouraged her.

He took a relaxed sip of his coffee. At least, he tried to look relaxed. His body was humming and warm, ready to act. He made himself release the muscle tension that wanted to grab and take and push. Instead, he focused on his desire to give and to please her, to help her however he could.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

"I'm sure. I'll feel it, but we'll be okay. I want to see where this goes," he said.

"I wanted to tease you for making that cute little needy noise when you looked at my ass, but the moment's gone now," she said.

Predictably, Steve looked fine for the first moment, then he started to look dazed. Estrella didn't want to say anything else, in case…

"Again. I can hardly pay attention to what you're saying. Say it again. I'll try harder," Steve told her.

She was hesitant.
Steve tried accepting and processing the effects of her voice differently, kind of like he was trying to handle his own desires since Thor had advised him. Instead of locking himself down and fighting any kind of response, he let it wash through him. Yeah, he wanted to fuck her. But only if she wanted it, and she didn't right now. She was scared and unsure. So he could enjoy wanting to fuck her. He could imagine it. He could think of what it might feel like, the sounds she would make. He squirmed in his seat, adjusted himself in his shorts, and forced himself to take his hand away when what he really wanted was to get in a few rubs. Or to crawl over there to her and tip her out of her chair…

A gentleman! He could be a gentleman. Not a beast. Words. Focus on her words.

"Again," Steve urged her.

This time, he tried hard to listen to the enunciation of her sounds as she repeated herself, not just the intoxicating effect they made in his brain. He heard her, and could have repeated the words back to her, but the meaning was tough to string together in his higher brain. His feet dug into the sand and his hands wanted to curl around the armrests of the chair, but he made himself go loose. It was more important to keep control of his body than to understand her naked voice. Had to keep her safe. That was easy to comprehend in the deeper parts of his brain.

"Teasing noisy ass. Gone," Steve said. That was all he could string together of what she'd said.

Estrella laughed, though she knew she probably shouldn't. This wasn't easy for him. She could see from the way his body went through cycles of tension and then forced relaxation, and the crimp on his brow that it was quite an effort. It was impressive to see. This was a different kind of fight for him, but still a fight. He was determined to win, like with everything else. When she laughed, his brow eased and a smile pulled at his lips.

"You like it when I laugh. Does it feel different?" she asked.

She'd never had reason to laugh in front of a man while she wasn't wearing her necklace. It was fascinating to see him struggling and aroused, but smiling. There was something slightly frightening in it, too. That didn't make sense, but it was true.


It wasn't exactly the detailed explanation she was looking for, but it was something.

"How are you doing this, Steve? Nobody has been able to resist, and there you go making it even harder. Like it's the next level on a game or something," she said.

That was too much for him. Too many words. Meanings were getting lost again. She'd asked a question, but he couldn't pick it out of all the words, much less make sense of it to try and answer. He whined in disappointed effort. Sweet fire was spreading, creeping out along his nerves to his extremities. His groin and his chest were already consumed with it.

He didn't know if it was worth trying to understand her again. His mind was getting lost. He was failing at his task and not sure he cared.

"Steve? Are you alright?" she asked.

He laid his head back and focused on his vitals. Heartbeat. Respirations. He needed a moment to gather himself in again, or something was gonna happen. Growing. Spreading.

"You're worrying me. Please say something," she said in a near whisper.
That was the last lick, right along his spine down low. It rolled up to his brain, and out to his fingertips and toes. His dick went off in his running shorts for the second day in a row. It was like a waking wet dream that didn't stop until the resonance of her voice quit humming in his skull and through his bones.

Estrella watched him sprawled back in his chair. It was eerie, like a ghost was having sex with him. His erection grew larger and firmer and his body got harder, like after his run. Mentally, he wasn't there, and that was maybe the scariest part. It was hot to watch him get off without anyone touching him, but she was worried that he was going to be unhappy when this was over. She didn't like doing this to him. It wasn't right. It's not what he'd asked for or expected.

Steve wanted to lie there and enjoy the warm, twitchy feeling that he would swear reached all the way to the tips of his toe nails, but something was bothering him. A sound. Faint, but it meant something.

Steve's head snapped up, and then he did too. Concern chased the lingering fog of pleasure from his mind and body.

"What?" Estrella asked sharply as he came for her.

Steve had no time to explain. He'd been distracted, and they'd almost waited too long. He took hold of her as gently as he could and moved her.

"In the truck," he said briskly.

Then, she heard it too. A helicopter. She was unsure why they should worry about a helicopter, but she did as he wanted and got in the truck.

"In the backseat. Get your clothes for the day. Head down and don't come out until I tell you," he ordered.

He shut her in the truck and moved himself slow and casual toward the camp stove and the coffee pot. The helicopter flew over lower, slower and louder than most would do. Even the most basic part of his mind had recognized the sound of a refitted federal aircraft. It was unmarked, but he knew what it was. Either Homeland Security or INS, or both. They were close enough to the Mexico border for it to make sense that this would be a routine flight, so he kept his cool. He looked on as any tourist on vacation would do. He tried for curious and startled as an expression, but maybe it didn't go so well.

Shit. He heard the change in rotor pitch before the chopper shifted to come around for a landing. He tossed out his coffee as if he was about to break camp and start cleaning up their breakfast things. He picked up a kitchen rag and wiped out his coffee mug down low near his waist. They'd see that he was messing with a mug and a rag, but not that he was wiping any visible mess from the front of his shorts from where his girlfriend had just made him pop from her voice alone.

Hah. He had a girlfriend. Steve smiled and set down the coffee mug and the rag. As an afterthought, he wiped down the hot camp stove with the rag, then polished the kettle, which was still near scalding temperature. Sometimes these boys wanted to confiscate strange things. He wasn't letting anyone get a viable sample of him. The smell of toasted protein assaulted his nose. Good enough.

The helicopter set down on the beach just far enough away that the wind didn't blow away their chairs and table, though Steve squinted his eyes some against the sand. The rag tried to blow away but he snagged it out of the air before he would have to chase it down.
He was slightly concerned about how this was going to go, but then he spent most missions at least slightly concerned, so it wasn't a new feeling. He stayed calm and walked over to pick up Estrella's coffee mug. It had sand in it. He tossed it out and wiped it down as the chopper spun down. There were mounts for equipment on the belly of the craft, but only a glass bubble was currently equipped. He wondered what they had. Infrared? Full spectrum? Something else?

Three agents stepped down onto the sand. Steve waited for them and wished he had his shirt on. He also hoped that Estrella was getting dressed and putting her necklace on. He stood as if he was in command and they were coming to report to him. The officer immediately recognized the steady authority in the stance even though they probably didn't know who he was yet. The little group slowed their aggressive approach slightly. Steve notched his chin down ever so slightly in approval.

The noise from the helicopter wound down so that the officer didn't have to shout by the time they reached him.

"Identify yourself," Steve ordered when they were in conversational range, but not yet stopped in front of him.

"Agent Carlisle. INS, Brownsville. Can I see some ID, Sir?" The man said.

He was fairly young, and the agents with him, one man and one woman, were younger still. Carlisle was being carefully neutral, and that was good enough.

"Sure. It's in the truck. I've got a sidearm. Do you want to step around and run my plates first?" Steve offered.

The agent looked the nearly naked man over, but nearly naked was normal for this beach. He nodded to one of his junior agents and the young woman stepped to the back of the truck to call out his plate number into her comm.

Carlisle waited a moment, then nodded to Steve when he got some information in his ear. The other junior agent followed him to the back of the truck where his pants and wallet and sidearm were from last night when he'd taken them off.

Steve didn't bother to tell the young man that him having his hand merely on his holster wasn't going to be enough to prevent him from accessing his own weapon if he wanted to. It was best to be straight and calm with these folks and to not say much more than he had to.

He used two fingers to slide his wallet out of his folded pants and he stepped back around the truck toward Carlisle. The junior agent was easier now that Steve was away from his firearm. Steve momentarily marveled at the differences from how a New York agent would have reacted to the presence of an unsecured weapon. Texas was pretty relaxed, it seemed.

Carlisle accepted his New York driver's license, and Steve kicked himself mentally for thinking through about a dozen different ways he could put the agents down for a nap, and how quickly he could get to his shield and take out the helicopter. If it was just him, he wouldn't be worried at all, but he had Estrella to think about. Estrella, who was Latina and had no identification.

"Mister Rogers, who is the person in your vehicle?"

"My girlfriend. She's getting dressed. You surprised us. Is sex on the beach a crime or misdemeanor here?" Steve asked in a deliberate attempt to mislead their line of questioning.

"Only if you get caught, or if you damage the dune ecosystem. That's not really our jurisdiction,"
Carlisle smiled just a little, "Sir, we picked up on a strange object in the backseat of your truck. We need to investigate."

"That would be my shield. You want me to get it for you?" Steve offered.

These guys were making it too easy on him, but it didn't seem like things were going to get interesting. He'd get the shield, but he didn't think he'd need it.

"Your shield? What kind of shield?" Carlisle asked, and then he went quiet again.

Steve could hear a raised, incredulous voice over the comm, and Carlisle winced at the volume, as did the other two agents. Steve chuckled. Someone had just put together the information from his identification and informed the agents who he was.

"That kind of shield," Steve said with a smile.

"Captain?" Carlisle asked.

"Keep it quiet. We're on vacation. If word gets out, I'll have to deal with fans and crowds. I'd rather not," Steve said.

"Certainly, Sir. Captain. Can we still see the shield? It's vibranium, right? The scanner was going crazy. We've never seen anything like it," Carlisle said in a more relaxed Texas accent.

"Sir is fine. Or Steve. I'll get it for you," he said.

He had to keep a tight leash on his tongue to keep from playfully copying Carlisle's accent. He had a fingernail thin grip on his morning happiness, until he realized he couldn't make himself turn his back on these guys.

Steve didn't fully trust anyone with federal or international ID anymore, despite how safe a situation seemed. He turned aside as he walked to the rear door of the truck under the pretense of talking to them.

"Is it safe for my girl around here? What kind of activity do you see?" he asked the agents.

"Drugs. Some border crossing, but that's mostly inland. Some minor sex trafficking. We load out different agencies to handle it all," Carlisle said conversationally.

"Interagency cooperation. That's nice to see. With communication and detection tech nowadays, your job must be a lot easier than it used to be," Steve said in return.

He kept his movements smooth and visible. Internally, he was dismayed at how concerned he was about Estrella being here with him. He didn't want her involved in any work-related things at all, and this was bordering on it. It was enough to make him grumpy, and he needed to avoid that. He made eye contact with Estrella as she was putting on her necklace and slipping on her flip flops. His shield slid out of his satchel and he gave her a stay-put hand signal.

His fingertips gripped the shield loosely as he carried it in almost a lazy dangle back to Carlisle. They couldn't know that it was one of his most effective grips for close-contact use. The senior agent looked googly-eyed to see the shield. The junior agent wasn't as impressed, and the female junior agent had eyes for his skin, now that they weren't worried about him being a bad guy anymore. It was unprofessional of her, but Steve ignored it.

"How did it look on your scanner?" Steve asked.
"Bright white, even more than titanium," Carlisle said with awe in his tone.

Steve handed his shield to Carlisle, and the man nearly dropped it, he was so fan-struck.

"Go on. You can't hurt it," Steve said.

Carlisle groped the shield and Steve made a slightly apologetic face to the male junior agent for having to humor his senior's moment of distraction. He tried to reel in his cynicism. These were regulars. They weren't used to dealing with the outlandish things Steve had been exposed to. He occasionally had to remind himself that common folks were going to be a little boggled, even if they were in a position of authority.

"Do you want ID on my girlfriend? I think she's dressed now," Steve offered dryly.

"That won't be necessary, Captain. Sir. Sorry," Carlisle stammered. He handed the shield back.

Steve automatically sheathed his arm into it. The move was quick, aggressive, and natural as breathing to him. The agents startled.

"I apologize. Muscle memory. I didn't mean to make you nervous," Steve said.

He really hadn't, but he was secretly pleased now that he had. He was quietly simmering into anger that he and Estrella's pleasant morning had been interrupted. Something of that must have shown, because the agents began to wrap up their time. Carlisle made a gesture to the pilot and the helicopter began to spin up again.

"That's alright, Sir. It sure was nice to meet you," Carlisle said.

Steve shook his hand.

"I wish I could say the same, but I'd like to get back to my girlfriend and my morning," Steve told them.

"Sorry, Sir. We'll stay out of your hair," Carlisle called over the noise of the aircraft.

"I'd appreciate that," Steve said.

He waved goodbye to them briefly as they lifted off. As soon as the blown sand was settled and the sound of the chopper retreated, Steve tossed his keys in to Estrella so she could start the truck.

"Get the air conditioner going, please. I want to cool off after I shower," he said. She nodded and crawled over into the front seat.

They said they'd stay out of his hair. He took them at their word. He got clean shorts from his bag, then he showered the sweat and sand and semen of the morning off of himself. He rarely let anger get the best of him, and he didn't now. A few harsh strokes of his hands as he was soaping up was all he allowed.

They had one clean dry bath towel left. He scrubbed dry, then got into his clean boxer briefs. He tugged the shower bag over and rinsed his feet, then got behind the driver's wheel and shut himself inside the cab. Estrella perched nervously beside him on the front seat and ducked down so he could pass the shield over her and into the back.

"Any trouble?" she asked.

"No. Not this time. I was able to talk us through it. You need papers. Identification. I'm calling
your aunt. She might have something to prove your citizenship. What time is it?” he asked absently, and looked at the clock in the dash. It was still pretty early, but people should be getting up for a Monday morning.

"Wait," Estrella said when he touched his phone screen to select Alberto and Rita's contact information.

He paused and looked at her.

"What if I don't want papers?” she asked.

"Then don't keep them, but I want something with us for now. If anyone tries to detain you, I'm afraid I wouldn't be very patient with them," Steve bit out.

"I know. I saw. You were thinking way too hard. It's a good thing they don't know you, or they'd have acted stupid. If they try to take me, you let me go. Don't get yourself into trouble," she said.

Steve laughed humorlessly.

"I'm serious. I'll be alright. I always am. Jarvis and Natasha can get me out later," Estrella insisted.

"I'm not letting anyone detain you. Not for a minute. They'd take your necklace. It's standard procedure to remove personal items like jewelry. We need to be thinking subcutaneous," Steve said and looked at her neck speculatively.

"Steve, stop it! You're freaking over nothing! I'm not letting anybody put anything under my skin. Not to stay there like a thing. Not even Jarvis. I don't want to be tracked, and that kind of stuff is trackable. Like papers. As soon as I have papers, I'm on the map again. I don't want them," she denied.

"You need them, this close to the border. We can issue you an alternate ID, but that takes time. Until then, I want papers for you. I don't want to kill anyone, Eya. Please. Not on vacation," he said.

What scared her is that she could see in his eyes that he would. Maybe only in an extreme circumstance, and only if he was forced to, but he would. The air conditioner sounded loud in the truck while she contemplated that this was a man who didn't make empty threats. Lying and bluffing weren't his style. If he said he was going to keep her out of any kind of custody at any cost, and the papers would help him to do that non-lethally, then she had little choice. She didn't want him to have blood on his hands because of her.

"Okay, but I'll do what I want with them when this is over. Call her," Estrella said.

Steve pulled Estrella into a brief, tight hug. Then he finished making his phone call.

"Alberto. It's Steve. Good morning. I saw an INS helicopter, and thought it would be good to have some kind of papers for Estrella. Do you know if Rita is keeping anything for her?"

Estrella heard her uncle's gruff voice, and then Rita came on the phone. She wanted to take the phone and do the talking, but Steve's calm business-like tone would probably get it done with less fuss and chatter. The phone was handed off yet again, and Estrella smiled to hear Val's voice chattering excitedly.

"Put it on speaker. On speaker!" Estrella insisted.
She grabbed at Steve's phone, and he gave it to her. In a moment, they both could hear Valeria clearly.

"Where's Eya? Tell her-"

"I'm here, Val. What's so exciting?"

"Ma is taking me to school this morning, and she's going back to work! Well, she's going to go put in job applications, anyway. She says she's been out of the workforce too long, but I don't think so. It's only been a year and a half. I'll get to see 'Drea again. I hope that bitch didn't sell my jacket," Val said in a happy rush.

"Valeria! That's good news, but don't talk like that in front of Steve," Estrella said.

"Hey, Steve was Army. Steve's heard a lot worse than that. But yeah, Valeria, don't talk like that. You're a lady," Steve said with a smile.

"Oooh, he's so old fashioned!" Val said with a tone somewhere between complaint and adoration.

"It's called 'charming.' And he wasn't very charming when the INS helicopter landed. Does your ma have any papers on me? I don't want him to get himself in trouble trying to keep me away from Immigration," Estrella said.

"The helicopter landed? Weren't you scared? Did they have guns and everything? Why didn't they get you if you don't have papers?" Val wanted to know.

"Because Steve is the biggest white guy ever. They never even saw me. I stayed in the truck and he said I was his girlfriend and they were like 'whatever.' The top guy was drooling to see Captain America's shield. They didn't care about me," Estrella gave a shrug and a hand wave powerful enough to probably be heard over the phone.

Steve smiled at her. Just like a Texas accent crept up on him when he heard a good one, Estrella's Latina accent got a little richer when she spoke candidly to her cousin. Rita shooed her daughter away from the phone, with much protesting.

"Put it on speaker! I want to hear them," they heard Val complain.

"You mean you want to hear him. There's no speaker on the house phone. Go away," Rita said.

Steve chuckled. Estrella's family was doing a good job at winding him down from the unpleasantness of having to entertain agents on his vacation.

"I have your birth certificate, and two papers from your church, some report cards from school, and a photo ID from your high school. Is that enough?" Rita asked.

Estrella shrugged and looked to Steve. He nodded.

"Steve thinks so," Estrella said.

"Then why didn't Steve say so?" Rita asked.

"Because I didn't want to interrupt, Ma'am," Steve said.

He was afraid his 'Ma'am' would forevermore be twanged with Texas. He couldn't seem to help it. It's not that it was such a big word to make a noticeable difference in the sound of it, but Estrella looked at him funny.
"You're a good young man. Do you want me to mail them to you or something?" Rita asked.

"I don't want to wait that long. Anything could happen. Will anyone be home for us to come pick them up?" Steve asked.

"When?" Rita asked.

"In a half hour?"

"You just met us last night, niño. You can't stay away?" Rita teased him.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. You're irresistible," Steve said.

There was a silence on the other end of the line.

"It's that and Alberto's steaks. Are there any leftovers?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Aww. You come. We'll be here for an hour, but no longer. Don't you get stopped for speeding, with no papers for Estrella," Rita warned.

"We'll see you then," Steve said.

Rita laughed, then the phone went dead. Steve put his phone away and stared uncomfortably at the gearshift of the truck.

"What was that?" Estrella asked lightly.

"I have no idea. It just kind of came out. It's this Texas… thing," Steve said helplessly.

Estrella laughed. He looked shy, as if he hadn't meant to flirt with Aunt Rita at all, and was horrified he'd accidentally done so. It was a much better look than the mildly murderous one he'd been wearing after the INS agents left.

"You don't have any shoes, and the lawn chairs and the stove and the shower are still out. We can't leave like this," Estrella pointed out.

"I'll get it," he said, and he moved to get out.

"No. I'll do it. I'm wearing the right kind of shoes for this. Stay here and enjoy the cool air," she told him.

Steve didn't like it, but he had to let her have her way sometimes. He was forcing her to take the papers from her aunt, so if it made her feel better to put up camp for him, it's the least he could do. He kept a sharp eye on the mirrors.

While he watched her move around stowing things, he had a moment to think. The last twenty-eight minutes had been pretty wild. The sex part, anyway. She'd gotten him off with her voice. She'd gotten inside his head and fucked his brain. That was powerful stuff. A belated tremor, a lingering wisp of ecstasy flitted through his mind like a lingering scent.

There was no denying what had happened, but she didn't have to know exactly how it was, how powerless he'd been to stop it from happening. He trusted her now, but if things ever went bad she could use it against him. He'd have to work harder to resist her voice. He didn't want to because she made him feel really good, but he needed to.

Estrella finally got into the truck with his socks and boots. Taking his socks and boots made him
realize that he was sitting around in his underwear.

"I'm sorry, Eya. I'm not being very considerate. My mother taught me better," he said.

"Are you kidding me? I don't mind. We can only do this kind of thing now, while we're here. We may as well relax while we can. It's not like you could sit around in your underwear on the roof patio at Avengers tower. And I wouldn't want to get sand in the polar bear rug," she said.

She twiddled her gritty toes in her flip-flops.

"I don't think that's a bear skin. Did you notice the size of it?" Steve said as he hurried into a clean pair of jeans, a button down shirt, and his socks.

Estrella watched with interest while he arched and contorted to tuck in his shirt, then stomped his feet into his boots.

"Then what is it?" she wondered absently.

"You should ask Thor. I think he killed it a long time ago," he told her.

"I've been walking on an alien elephant hide?" she wondered.

"Probably nothing so tame as an elephant, but it looks about that size. Don't you want to talk about this?" he asked as he buckled his belt and shoved his wallet in his pocket.

He didn't like that his sidearm was way in the back, but at least he had his shield handy. He got them moving from the beach. He went faster than last night. Their tracks were still there, and he knew the truck could handle it now.

"Talk about your driving?" Estrella asked as they bumped along.

She sounded worried but tolerant as she gripped the armrest on the door and the handle on the dash. Yeah, the ride was rough, but they had a schedule to meet. Steve thought it was fun, and nobody was in danger.

"My driving is fine. I'm a great driver. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've driven. Or piloted. No, Eya. I mean don't you want to talk about you talking me into orgasm," he said.

"Why did that happen? Nobody's done that before. What did it feel like?" she asked quietly.

He knew she wouldn't have brought it up if he hadn't insisted on it. She was shy about some things, and he got the feeling it wasn't because she was naturally shy so much as because she wasn't used to having any kind of positive dealings with men and sex. She wasn't used to being in control.

"Have you ever had a sex dream? One that did that to you?" he asked.

"I think so. A long time ago," she said.

"It was like that, but I was awake. I think it happened because I wasn't fighting the reaction to your voice this time. I was welcoming it. Taking it in. It made the effect much stronger. We can try again later, because I want to be able to listen to you if you talk without a voice modulator. It could be important someday," he said.

"There you go again. Everything's about tactics and potential danger. Do we have to turn over every single stone we come across? And do you have to drive so fast?" she asked.
"Yes. This is me, Eya. Life has made me this way. I don't like to leave fears and potential hazards unaddressed. Part of me is still going to be this way, even on vacation," he told her.

"Natasha told me I was going on vacation with the Captain. I should have known she'd be right," Estrella said.

"Leave off it. I'm the Captain sometimes even when I'm Steve. You're that scruffy, tough street girl sometimes even when you're my Eya. Can we live with that?" he asked.

She looked at him, so confidently driving the truck over rough terrain as if he was pushing a baby stroller in the mall. At the same time, he wanted to talk about sex and their relationship. He liked football and firearms, too. And her grumpy uncle.

"I think we can live with it," she agreed.

"Good. Just so you know, I'm feeling a little disadvantaged here. I don't have any specialty that can top that," he grinned across at her in the brief moment that he took his eyes off the road.

His smile slipped when he saw that she wasn't happy about something.

"Eya?" he asked.

"I don't want to have a specialty! You and your friends think that being weird or enhanced or gifted or whatever you call it is- is great. I don't. Not for me. I want to be normal, Steve. I wanted to be a teacher. How can I be a teacher like this?" Estrella asked.

She waved a hand at her throat.

They pulled out of the park gates and got onto the highway to get to town. Steve mulled through her words and tried to choose the right part to respond to. If being normal was her dream, then how was a life with him going to make her happy? Was she only settling for him because she didn't have any better, more normal options? For the first twenty-something years of his life, he'd been sub-normal. Then, he'd passed up normal on his way to super. Either way, not being normal was pretty much the same feeling, on either end of the spectrum. He decided to not be so defensive.

"Don't give up. You're young. You can be a teacher. There are plenty of pretty teachers. With your necklace, you can do that. If you didn't finish school, you can go back and-" he tried to encourage her.

"Just stop. You don't understand," she said morosely.

She was looking out her window and he got the feeling that she wanted some space.

"Alright," Steve agreed quietly.

It was in his nature to fight and to not give up on things. Right now, Estrella wasn't ready for that fight. He imagined himself as a kid, on one of those days when he couldn't get out of bed. One of those days when he could barely breathe and his lips were cold and blue, and his ma dithered over him and worried. There wasn't any fight on days like that, beyond the struggle for his next breath. Maybe Estrella felt like that sometimes, he guessed. She needed time to recover, time to realize she was strong enough now to fight when she wanted to. He decided it was his job to support her until she was ready to follow her dreams, if she ever was.

Again, a grinding, useless anger rose inside him against those men who had hurt her. It wouldn't help her future, but he wished he could avenge her past. He consoled himself with the thought that
at least he might get to spend her present and her future with her.

While they spent the last few minutes getting to Alberto and Rita's place, Steve hopefully rested his hand on the seat in the empty space between them. She didn't seem to notice.

"I don't want to be a drug for you. I don't want to be a party trick," she finally said as they pulled up curbside where they'd parked yesterday.

"I hear you, Eya. People see me like a party trick most of the time, too. It's useful every now and then, like when an immigration agent needs distracting from my girlfriend, or when I don't have anything to talk about at charity events. They always want to talk about the past, or they want to crawl straight in bed with me because of this body. They don't even know me. Hell, Eya, I don't know if I know me," he said in the quiet after he parked the truck.

"I don't think I know me, either. There hasn't been any time to do anything but stay alive," she said.

"I guess we're good at that, at least," Steve pointed out.

Estrella finally looked at him and smiled a little. They got out of the truck and went to the house. Alberto opened the door for them, then went back to polishing his shoes in front of the television. Valeria gave Steve one sparkly fangirl smile, then rushed Estrella off to wherever Rita was this morning.

Steve sat down in front of the television with Alberto. The man was getting ready for work. His deputy's uniform was crisp and he was making sure his shoes were spotless.

"I didn't know you were a deputy. That's a tough job," Steve said.

Alberto snorted a little, and looked at Steve like he was being patronizing.

"I'm just a court bailiff," Alberto told him.

Steve was going to say something, but he was distracted by the morning news.

"An explosion of homicides in a California federal prison over the weekend has officials boggled and scrambling for an explanation. Details are sketchy, as the investigation is ongoing, but so far, rival prison gangs are denying involvement in the death of sixteen inmates, most of them suspected to be members of the Mexican Mafia..." the news anchor said.

"It couldn't happen to better people," Alberto said dryly.

Steve held his tongue on that comment, and the news blurb went on.

"...are unusual because of the nature of the homicides, and the frankly disturbing level of timed coordination these attacks had with unexplained surveillance gaps in the prison security systems. Federal officials are not saying much about suspects, but gang activity is strongly implicated, and possibly even corruption and bribery among prison guards. More on this as the investigation continues..."

Alberto paused in his shoe polishing and grunted.

"What? Does that mean something?" Steve asked him.

"It's bullshit. If the Brotherhood or the Guerrillas or La Familia was behind it, they'd be claiming it. The Feds don't know what's happening," Alberto said.
It was Steve's turn to grunt. He wasn't familiar with modern gangs or the prison system. Organized crime had meant a completely different thing back in the day than it did now, but he suspected the motives were still the same. The promise of illicit cash and personal power was a strong draw for some.

Steve shook off the thought that what Hydra was doing in the nation's political system was just a white-collar version of mafia corruption. Those thoughts were for later. He was supposed to be on leave. These prison homicides weren't likely related to Hydra, anyway. It wasn't like them to target Latinos because… well, that thought wasn't very nice. Steve frowned until he heard Estrella's voice approaching.

Rita, Valeria, and Estrella came into the living room and Alberto changed the channel to a pleasant morning talk show. Steve stood up to go see what Estrella had. Valeria distracted him by slipping her hand inside his elbow. He automatically adjusted to the grip by offering his arm because his ma had taught him how to escort a lady, and he'd be happy to treat Valeria like one.

"I'm glad you came when you did. I've only missed the first part of the year. It's not too late for me to catch up. I didn't think I'd be able to go to school or graduate," Val smiled hugely at him.

"I'm glad too, but you be careful with that. If it comes off, you're unprotected. Don't play around," Steve said.

Valeria looked taken aback at Steve's stern instructions, but then he had to restrain himself from making a face the moment the girl took his words as 'Captain America' orders. He could see the mental shift in her body language. One moment she was let down that he wasn't being cheerful and chummy, and then she was all puffed up that he'd given her advice. He looked to Estrella, and she was wearing a bemused look too.

"What he means is don't be stupid. Don't run your mouth all day. You still have to be careful when boys are around," Estrella told Val.

"Okay, okay! And I guess I can't tell anyone that you're dating him? Or that I even met him?" Val said with sour attitude to Estrella.

"I'd be in your debt if you could keep it quiet," Steve said to the kid with a moderate amount of schoolboy charm.

Valeria patted his arm and looked up at him with mooncalf devotion.

"Enough of that. Did you pack your lunch? Go get in the car!" Rita demanded when Valeria indicated her lunch bag.

The large woman kissed Estrella on the cheek and mashed her face on the other side.

"Don't be a stranger anymore. You can call us. And Fran. Wish me luck!" Rita said.

She went over to hug Alberto, and then she was out the door. Alberto waved them off, and Steve and Estrella went back to the truck. Valeria waved happily to them as her mother's car pulled away in front of them.

"What did ya get?" Steve asked.

Estrella put a folder of papers on the seat between them. She watched the school bus that passed around them rather than looking at him.
"You don't want me to look," Steve said.

"No, you can look. I don't want to. You wanted them. You keep them," she said.

Steve pressed his lips closed on the sigh that wanted to come out. Estrella's behavior was distinctly that of the secretive, defensive girl he'd first met. He waited her out until she glanced over at him.

"Please? I've been dyin' to know more about you," he said hopefully.

"Go on, then," she said, and waved at the folder.

Steve wanted to see what was in the folder more for his own personal curiosity than for any kind of useful information. All he had of his girl was her first name. He could hardly wait to see what else there was.

Estrella finally smiled at his restrained eagerness.

Steve snatched up the folder and opened it. A plastic photo ID with a little metal clip on it slid into his lap, and he caught it up to look at it.

"Ugh. That. They always took the worst pictures!" Estrella said of her freshman year school ID.

She was tempted to take it before Steve could get a good look, but he was wearing the goofiest smile. He looked to her and actually blushed.

"Steve!"

"What? You were darling. If I'da known you then- I mean, if I was fourteen when you were fourteen, I woulda- Um,..." his words trailed off awkwardly, and it looked like he sort of tried to hide behind his shoulders.

Estrella laughed.

"You would have...?," she teased him.

"I would have talked to you. You might have turned your nose up at me, but I would have tried," Steve said.

Estrella scooted across the seat to him and knelt up to hug his face to her chest. He would have been a precious little gentleman and she would have loved him, she'd like to think. Steve muffled a laugh and huffed hot breath through her shirt.

"I wouldn't have been _that_ short," he said in a way that let her know he knew what she was thinking.

Estrella pulled away and sat on her heels next to him. She leaned against his shoulder and waited for him to look at the paper on top of the thin stack.

"You made really good grades," he commented as he flipped past the three report cards.

"I had to. My mother would accept no less. I didn't mind. I liked school," she told him.

She didn't mind seeing the papers, now. It was more like a fond remembrance of the part of her childhood before things went wrong. There was her birth certificate, likely the most important thing they would need if there was any trouble with Immigration.
"Sofi," Steve said with quiet wonder.

He looked at her and nodded once.

"What?" she asked.

"It fits. I like it," he said.

"Thank goodness I've got a short second name, because the rest of it's not," she commented.

Estrella Sofi Fernandez Silva.

She hadn't lied about her age. He looked at her parent's names but didn't comment. He flipped the page over.

"You're Catholic," Steve said.

Estrella nodded.

Her first communion certificate and her baptismal certificate showed the same church and the same priest.

Steve's feelings and thoughts raced ahead, and he tried to pull them back, but they'd rushed off on their own. Estrella Sofi Fernandez-Rogers. They could get married in the church. He bit his tongue to have something to distract himself from smiling and stammering anymore. He couldn't help that his face got red again.

Estrella was staring at him and his reaction to her certificates. It was awfully presumptuous, what he was thinking. She was sitting there wondering why he was turning seven shades of crimson, and he couldn't stop himself from wondering what she would look like in a white dress, and what it would be like to come home to her every day. What it would feel like to… Heat flushed down his front all the way to his groin.

The folder bent itself closed as he twisted his body to hug her and hide his face in her hair. Estrella made a surprised noise. She petted his shoulder with one hand, and curled her fingers into his beard under his chin with the other hand.

"It matters that much what church I went to?" she asked.

"I didn't think it would, but I guess it does. If you're still…?" he asked hesitantly.

"Still Catholic? I guess I must be. I only ever stopped going because the last time I went to church by myself wasn't good. What happened after wasn't good," she said.

Steve kept his face down and his mouth shut. All of the things he was thinking were too much. He'd make things awkward if he said anything more, so he didn't. He loved the feel of her hands on him, but they couldn't stay parked beside her family's house all day.

"I hope I didn't make you feel picked over, looking through your papers," he finally said when he could make himself sit up straight.

"I'm fine. It wasn't bad like I thought. You can keep them here, and maybe we won't need them," she said.

Estrella took the folder and turned to put it in his leather satchel with his shield and his uniform. Steve started the truck, and waited.
"Where are we going?" she asked him.

"I dunno. You wanna go to the water park? It looked fun on TripAdvisor," he said.

"I don't like being cold. Let's do something else first, and go to the water park this afternoon when it's hot. What else did you want to do?" she asked.

"The Lexington," he said as they pulled away from the curb.

"That big ship in the bay?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's a World War Two carrier. I'd like to see it," he said.

"Let's go. Then we can have lunch. It should be sunny and hot enough for the water park this afternoon," she said.

She wasn't very excited to tour the ship, but maybe it would be different than her fifth grade field trip with Steve at her side. Estrella was fascinated by how he seemed to change after they bought their tickets for the next tour of the Lexington. They walked out along the long pier to get aboard, where they were met by a really old man in slacks, a white shirt, and a hat with Navy insignia and pins all over it.

It was mostly older couples and a few small children with them and the tour guide. Steve was quiet and respectful while they listened to a brief history of the ship's construction and commissioning during the war. The old guy didn't seem like he'd be able to lead a tour up and down the deck of the huge ship, but he was spry and careful as he lead them past some roped off static displays on deck. The door was open for them to go in, and most people did, but the old guy waited by the door for everyone to get inside.

The ship was all gray and smelled like fresh oily paint cooking in the sun. There was a huge number sixteen on the side of the tower over the flight deck, and airplanes were roped off. Steve told her little facts about the aircraft quietly enough that only she could hear from their position at the lingering tail end of the tour group. She'd never remember the details of what he said, but he knew a lot about what he was looking at.

"Maybe you could lead this tour, and I could take a load off," the man suggested with a little smile as Steve escorted Estrella inside.

"No, Sir. I was Army. A ship tour belongs to a Sailor. Just a bit of a history buff," Steve said.

The tour guide looked at Steve funny for a moment before he spoke.

"Thank you for your service, son. I guess I'll lead on."

He stepped carefully over the doorway and moved to the head of the group in the mess while Steve stood and looked constipated. Estrella poked him to try to get the weird, pressurized look off his face.

Steve stepped closer to the group gathered around the low metal table. She looped her arm through his while he fingered the tray that was attached to the table as a display. The tour guide went on about life aboard ship, but Estrella was too distracted watching Steve to pay much attention.

There was an old looking radio back in a corner that played equally as old music. Steve stood rooted in place until he looked around at some of the black and white photos on the wall. He wandered over and towed her with him. The tour moved on slowly, and once again the guide
waited for them.

"You alright, son?" the man asked.

Steve nodded once briskly and moved on.

Estrella felt several times that somebody should go help the old man down ladders or past a narrow spot, but his age-spotted, gnarled hands gripped doorways and rails with familiarity. He was slow, but sure. She wondered why Steve didn't help the guy out a few times, but he carefully ignored the man's obvious frailty.

When they came to the room where all the mapping and battle planning happened, Steve felt far distant from her though she was right next to him. The other tourists kept a polite distance from everything as if things around them were as fragile as their guide. Steve leaned his weight on the table and ran his fingers over a map as if he intended to do something with what he was seeing. He looked around at seemingly unrelated objects and areas in a way that soon had the tour guide distracted.

Steve pulled himself into a less handsy decorum when he noticed he was distracting the guide. At least he hadn't been fussed at for touching things like Estrella had been in fifth grade when she was bored. Her tour guide had been a prim middle aged woman, though. Maybe that made a difference. Their old man seemed to have all the time in the world.

The tour ended with a movie. Estrella watched the old black and white footage and looked to Steve. He smiled a few times when other people were watching intently or looking bored. He shook his head and blew out a frustrated breath once during a commentary about the movements of the Pacific fleet.

"What?" she whispered.

"Ask me later," he whispered back.

When the lights went up after the movie, the old man was waiting outside the theatre.

"Walt Hermann. The memory's not the like it used to be. Where do I know your face from?" he said and held a hand out to Steve.

"Steve Rogers. It's nice to meet you, Walt. My face has been all over, so there's no telling. I sold some war bonds until they let me do some real work. Served until I went down in '45. You were in the Pacific, and I was in Europe, so I doubt we ever met unless you're from Brooklyn. You probably saw a poster or one of the films," Steve said.

Walt stared at him until his eyes got watery. He shuffled backward a few steps and groped for a chair. Steve squatted down and carefully took the guy's wrist in hand. Estrella stood behind his shoulder and felt bad to intrude on the old man's temporary loss of composure.

"I shoulda known," Walt said, and he pulled his wrist from Steve to shake a finger at him slowly.

"How could you know?" Steve asked, just to make conversation while the man calmed down.

He pulled up a chair for Estrella, then got one for himself. They sat and Steve gave the man his undivided attention.

"You knew how to read the map. You knew where the alarm panel was and what it's like in an op center when things are hot, and you knew the words to the songs on the radio. You had that look,
"like the Admiral pissed in your Wheaties," Walt said.

"He didn't piss in mine. I had my own CO for that. And who're you calling 'son', anyway? I'm probably older than you are," Steve joked.

"You are, by three years. Geez, Rogers, it blows my socks off to meet ya. Look at you. I shouldn't gone stood in my freezer," Walt said.

Steve laughed.

"Nah, being on ice isn't all it's cracked up to be. I coulda done without it," Steve said.

"Yeah, but my Florence hasn't looked like that in sixty years," Walt said with a smile for Estrella.

"Hey, now. You can't have my girl," Steve said with humor in his challenge.

"I wouldn't dream of it. Florrie's the one for me. She's up a-waiting for me, but I can't seem to get around to dying," Walt said.

"I know how ya feel," Steve said.

"Steve! You don't get to die yet. Don't talk like that," Estrella fussed.

He reached back and held her hand. He gave it a slight squeeze. She understood that he was just making conversation with the man, but it was disturbing to hear them talk about death that way. She shivered. She'd never seen quite so blatant a reminder that Steve was actually an old guy.

"You wanna go see your Florence, then? What's stopping ya?" Steve asked.

"I don't know. I thought I had something to do here, but nobody cares," Walt grumped.

"I care, and I'm not the only one. I've got this. I'll hold things together and remind folks. Like my girl said, I'm not allowed to go yet. She might be my Florence. I just met her a few months ago, so I gotta be around for a while," Steve told him.

"And you didn't kick hind-end quite like you thought you did. You've got work to do, Rogers," Walt said.

"Ouch," Steve winced.

"Eh, I've got every confidence in ya. You'll get it done," Walt said.

"It seems endless sometimes," Steve said.

"It is, and it always will be. You just gotta keep fighting it so it doesn't get any worse. Not on our watch," the old man said.

Steve nodded. Estrella couldn't see his face, but Walt could. He looked at Steve sympathetically from inside his wrinkles and his faded brown eyes.

"You get tired," Walt said.


"Well, don't let 'em run you around forever. A man's not meant to serve as long as you have. Train up some younger ones and pass it on," Walt advised.
"I think I'll take your advice. Someday," Steve said.

"Are you on leave? Is that why you're in my neck of the woods? Or should I keep an eye on the news and be ready to run?" Walt asked.

"I've got leave. It took me being my own boss to make it happen, but here I am. It's nice around here," Steve said.

"It's not that nice. Quit lookin at my old ugly face and get outta here. Go make some time with your girl," Walt told him.

"Alright. You don't have to tell me twice. Thanks for the tour," Steve told him.

"Thanks for what you do, Captain. Hey, you shouldn't be a captain anymore. It's been too long," Walt said testily as Steve stood and started to go.

"Shh. Not everybody realizes that. Besides, I'm retired," Steve said with a conspiratorial wink.

Walt smiled and nodded.

"What was that about? You're not a Captain?" Estrella asked on the way to the truck.

"I haven't been a captain for a long time, but that's what everyone is used to calling me. It's easier to let it sit how it is," Steve told her.

The sun was radiating off the dark deck, the pier, and parking lot. The inside of the truck was sweltering.

"Then what are you?" Estrella asked.

"I'm a special consultant. And retired," Steve said in a careful way that let her know there was more to that story.

"I have an honorary title. They say it's real, but I know who holds the reins. They'll never call me in for it. They wouldn't want to be under me. I don't wanna talk about that, anyway. Can you get us directions to lunch?" Steve asked briskly.

Estrella let the subject drop. Someday she wanted to know whatever he wasn't telling her, but not now.

Steve cranked up the air conditioner and the radio. He had a strange look about him, somewhere between sad and angry, so she left him alone. The radio station he chose was loud and modern. He was distant while they found a fast place to eat, and until they parked outside the water park. They put together a small backpack of their swimsuits and towels. Estrella zipped up her suitcase and handed her modest green swimsuit to Steve to add to their bag. He put it in with his while he stood in the parking lot.

"I really am that old," Steve said quietly.

"No, you're not. You're kind of like a movie that was on pause. Everybody walked away from your story, especially you, but now you're back and it's time to play again. It's time to live some more, Steve. You're not even halfway done. You've still got the best parts ahead of you, so come on," she said with firm conviction.

Steve gave her a mule-stubborn look as she tried to hurry him along to go have fun. She stood
beside him as he closed and locked the truck. The water park didn't open until two o'clock, and other people were just starting to arrive in the parking lot. There was no rush to get to the ticket window, but she wanted to shake Steve loose from the grip of his unhappiness.

"I know it matters. I know that what happened to you is messed up, but you can't be sad and angry all the time. It's not like I'm saying 'Get over it,' because I know it's not that easy. I'm trying to tell you that it's okay to set it down and walk away from it for a little while. Look at me. I've been raped and strangled and beaten repeatedly, but am I holding a grudge? No, because my crazy boyfriend thinks I should take care of myself and try to have some kind of a life. Come on, Steve," she complained, and pulled at his hand that wasn't tucked into the shoulder strap of their pack.

He stood there looking like a whole lot of pouty, defiant little boy. It was beyond strange to see the noble Steve Rogers looking grumpy and selfish, but there he was. Estrella was hurting for his misery, but secretly pleased that he was showing her how he really felt about things. Back in New York, he was always genuine, but he held himself in reserve. He tamped down his feelings for the sake of the greater good. Estrella thought it was healthier to let it out some, and she felt privileged that he trusted her enough to let her see him.

"What if I don't wanna get over it? What if I wanna hold a grudge? What if I want to find em all and tear them down, and then go after the ones who hurt you, too? Where's the room for fun and happy in all that?" he asked.

"Then you do all that. But you don't do it on vacation! There's plenty of time to be mad later. Do I have to give you a blow job right here in the parking lot?" she threatened him.

Steve looked startled and confused, as if he hadn't heard her right, but she took advantage of his gentleness with her to bully him back against the truck. She pushed at him and his back thumped against the truck window. Estrella batted his evasive hand aside and pushed her fingers under the tails of his shirt to get to his belt buckle.

"Eya! We're in public!" he gasped out and looked around.

The palm trees in the landscaping waved in the slight breeze, and the people walking toward the ticket window didn't pay them much attention.

Estrella grinned up at him with naughty intent as she pressed close to his hard belly. Her fingers tugged at his belt buckle and brushed against the sensitive skin under his navel. She tickled her fingers through the fine hairs there. Steve went wide-eyed and cautious as he looked around at their surroundings and tried to pretend that his girl wasn't getting awfully fresh with him in front of everyone.

"Oh, Steve, you're so old. Look at this!" she said with thick, dry sarcasm.

She lifted his free hand and glided the pads of her fingers over his vibrant, healthy skin and the strong, hard-hitting bones of his hand.

"Your skin is so thin and papery," she ran her fingers over the toughened callouses from using his shield. Her other hand pinched and tugged at the supple, taut skin above the waistband of his pants.

"You're so weak and fragile," she complained with a twinkle in her eyes as she scratched her fingers up his belly and chest so that his body contracted hard enough in response to jostle both her and the truck.
"All you do is take naps and gum your food," she curled her lip with a teasing smirk as she grabbed a full, hard bicep in one hand and clunked his head back against the truck by shoving a finger into his mouth and poking hard at the edge of one of his strong white teeth.

Steve chuckled weakly. Her sly little game was proving her point, of course, but it felt good. Nobody touched him like she did. She wasn't afraid to push him and get in his space, but she wasn't done yet.

"You're not even interested in women anymore, and you probably couldn't get it up to do anything about it if you caught one," she sneered, and then giggled.

She brushed his slick tongue with her fingertip, then slipped it up under his shirt again to lazily circle one nipple, around and around. Steve gasped and jerked again, but her hand was already gone down his front before he could grab at her. His cock was full and hard at her teasing, pressed down the leg of his pants. Her hand glided over it, and he jerked again when she lightly pinched at his tip through the fabric.

"Unh," he breathed, part in eagerness, part in denial.

"All those lies you tell yourself, old man, but if you're still not convinced, I could blow you. Right here," she whispered.

She licked at her lips in eagerness and began to lower herself to her knees while she stared hotly into his eyes.

"No!" Steve said, almost too late to keep this anywhere near decent for a public, family-friendly setting.

The desire for her to do exactly what she threatened burned in him, but it wouldn't be decent. He urged her to stand up straight, and he got himself properly upright too. He cleared his throat and tugged his shirt down in the front.

She was right. He wasn't feeling old anymore. Just eager for her touch. Those old things that made him angry and frustrated could wait their turn. By God, he had a girl, and he intended to enjoy her! And she was more than that. She was a damned good friend to play him like this when he needed it. What the hell had he been thinking? It was a shameful waste of time to dwell on that dusty old crap when he could be with Estrella instead.

Estrella grabbed him by the hand and easily pulled him along behind her toward the ticket window. Steve didn't trust himself to talk to the lady behind the counter, so he let Estrella pull his wallet from his back pocket and hand over his debit card. The woman raised her eyebrow at him in question, and Steve cleared his throat again and nodded for her to go on and process the transaction. He was glad it was a high countertop and he was hidden below the waist. What was he going to do when they got inside and it was time to change into his swimsuit?

Estrella's hand soothed down his arm after she pushed his wallet back into his pocket. She extended her arm to have her neon yellow rip-stop paper bracelet affixed, and Steve did the same. They went inside the gates and she tugged him into the locker rental area. She paid cash for their locker, and Steve's skin distracted him too much to pay attention to the exorbitant locker fee, especially his left nipple, which still felt cool and wet and incredibly sensitive.

She led them to the changing rooms and took her swimsuit from their bag. Steve held the bag so she could dig in it.
"You're gonna have to meet me right at the men's entrance," Steve grumbled in embarrassment.

There were older high school kids running around gleefully, and moms with young kids, and a few older people, and the park staff, all moving around randomly. He had no way to hide what she'd caused unless she helped him.

"Okay," Estrella agreed.

In the changing room, Estrella decided that she could do without the cover-ups Natasha had lent her to go over the green one piece swimsuit. She was trying to convince Steve that he wasn't really old, so she didn't want to dodder around looking like an old lady with a shawl. She folded her clothes to stow in their locker and waited for Steve at the men's changing room.

It bothered her a little that the men and most of the older boys who came and went at the changing room looked at her. She lifted her chin and gave them the evil-eye and most of them hurried along. She knew that all she had to do was call for Steve if anyone started something and wouldn't leave her alone. One group of boys looked like they thought about it, but she narrowed her eyes at them even more and looked menacing. They mumbled something about her being a cold-ass bitch, but she didn't care, as long as they went away, and as long as Steve didn't hear them.

Finally, Steve emerged in his swim shorts and a white undershirt. He was barefoot, at least, and had his clothes clutched in front of him. She dragged him aside from the doorway and shook her head.

"No. No, no, no. Give me that shirt! Look around. Do you see anybody wearing shirts over their swimsuits?" she said flatly.

Steve sighed and she held their things while he removed his shirt and folded it neatly into his clothes pile. Estrella hurried to put their things into the locker, then she snapped the elastic key bangle onto his wrist.

Steve unzipped his debit card from his pocket and insisted on buying a pair of sunglasses, then Estrella hurried him off to the big red and white racing slide. Crowds were light, and they climbed the steps to the top and only had to wait a half minute before it was their turn to go down.

Some of the kids whooped on the way down, and one little girl squealed at the humps and the speed of the slide. Steve smiled as he heard Estrella laughing on the slide next to his. They splashed down at almost the same time. His mind did a quick rundown of the physics of the slide and why a lighter person might get to the bottom before he did, but he pushed the thoughts away and followed Estrella's happy feet as she hurried back up the stairs to the top of the slide.

She was wet and sparkly in the bright, hot sun, and he was glad to go around with her through the various waterslides. Some guys stared at Estrella for an instant too long. Steve tugged her to his side and tangled their fingers together while they waited their turn for the double tube slides.

"You doing okay?" she teased him.

He grinned and leaned down to talk in her ear.

"I am for now, but the fun's over if you get me all bothered again. It took me five minutes to look any kind of presentable in these shorts, and then you took my shirt. You'd better behave," he said.

"Okay. But what if it's not my fault?" Estrella wondered.

She cut her eyes up toward a group of five young women who were already turning and making
eyes at Steve. He kissed her on the temple, then they took another few steps up the stairs.

"They're alright, but they're not you. I'm not that easy, doll," he said.

"You didn't even look at them!" Estrella pouted.

"Sure I did, two rides ago, and then by the lockers when we first came in," Steve grinned at her.

Estrella didn't know what to make of that, but she decided to be pleased with his honesty and with his refusal to pay any mind to the girls who were talking and giggling and obviously trying to get his attention.

Most people were trying to crowd to one side of the stairs and avoid standing in the sun, but Steve didn't. He turned his impressive shoulders to the heat and smiled behind his sunglasses. Estrella's brain went a little fuzzy at the sight of him and all she could do was smile back and sigh. The group of girls whispered furiously among themselves, then giggled louder.

Estrella's smile faltered a bit, but Steve shook his head and reached out to touch her cheek. The touch was brief, but effective.

"This is nothing. We hafta learn to ignore it. I'm glad you can't hear what they're saying, and I made a heroic effort to not beat those little punks outside the changing room who said rude things about you. The sun feels great. Do we have to go anywhere tomorrow? I wanna stay at the beach and try my surfboard," Steve said.

"Tomorrow's Tuesday. I don't have any plans," Estrella said as they went up the last steps for the waterslide.

"Good," Steve said with a sort of satisfaction that gave Estrella unexplained shivers.

They loaded into the double tube with Steve's legs around her. They laughed on the way down and Estrella loved the relaxed happiness of him as he guided them to the edge of the exit pool.

"Wanna go again?" he asked kindly.

"No. The line is getting too long. School is probably out now. Let's go to the lazy river," she said.

"Lazy river?" he wondered.

"My favorite part is the lazy river. Every water park has one. If I could, I'd go to them all. The one at this park is really tiny. I've heard that some water parks have lazy rivers almost a mile long," Estrella said happily.

She led him through increasing crowds, to a pool which had actual waves in it like a beach, and Steve was distracted by the sound of the machinery that made the artificial waves. Estrella tugged at his hand and guided him to a stack of inflated tubes. She smiled expectantly at him and he looked around. People were just sitting in or lying on the tubes, slowly moving around a long artificial creek. It didn't look very exciting.

Estrella hopped nimbly up onto her tube, and Steve chose to lie belly down over his. He folded his arms and propped his chin on them. It felt nice to stretch out and let his legs dangle. The little blue concrete creek was shallow enough that he could push along with his toes.

Kids laughed and barged along among the floating guests, and Steve began to see why Estrella liked the simple drift of this. It was relaxing. Estrella tugged her way up his body against the gentle
current and grabbed hold of the back of his arm near his face. His tube bumped the wall, and he put a hand out to wrap around her bare ankle to keep their tubes together as they drifted along.

He'd wanted to touch her ankles for a long time. He stared at his hand wrapped securely around the pretty arch of bone, sinew, and golden skin. He adjusted his grip and wiggled his fingers for no reason at all, other than to feel her in his hand. Estrella chuckled with an edge of nervousness.

He looked up at her.

"I didn't know you liked ankles so much," she said.

Her foot kicked and splashed idly, and Steve resisted the urge to smooth his hand into a caress up her leg.

"I didn't know I did, either," he said.

Was he blushing again? He was! It was harder to tell in the bright sun, because it made him look sunburnt instead of bashful.

"It's only an ankle. What's so exciting?" she asked him.

"It's not only an ankle," he said, and he gripped harder and gave her a little jerk through the water toward him.

His meaning was immediately clear to her. She stilled her playful splashing. In hands as powerful as his, her ankle made a secure grip. He could open her up and the strength of her legs to resist wouldn't be enough to stop him. Estrella demurely pressed her legs together, but didn't try to get free of his hand.

"How can you make something simple into something dangerous?" she asked him.

"It always has been. There's a reason that ankles were uncovered only in art up until the last century. You wouldn't catch a nice girl showing them around before then. Modern man has managed to desensitize himself to the exposure, but I'm not immune yet, I guess," Steve told her.

"That's so Victorian," Estrella arched a judgmental eyebrow at him.

"Victorian is too limited a period. It's Victorian and everything before that. It goes all the way back to about here," Steve said, and lifted his hand from under his chin to rub at the base of his skull in the back.

"Oh," Estrella said, "so you think that modern man is teetering on a dangerous precipice with all these flashing ankles? Should there be a law against them?"

At her spunky smile, he slipped his hand down over the arch of her foot to tweak her big toe. He laughed when she splashed him over the back with water. The coolness felt good against his skin roasting in the sun.

"No. No more laws. I like ankles. You've got great ones. Why wouldn't I want to look at them? And touch them?" he asked.

"Oh. My. God!"

Estrella looked up at the footbridge that they were about to drift under. The girls they'd seen before paused there. Even Estrella with her unenhanced ears could hear them exclaiming among
themselves over Steve's ass. Her face hardened into the gritty resolve to go do something about them ogling Steve like he was meat. She curled her body to stand from her tube and move to the nearby steps. Steve gripped her ankle again and pinned her immobile with a look.

"How many times am I gonna have to overhear guys talking about you? Do you think it's a good idea for me to go after every guy who speaks his mind a little too loud for my ears?" he asked.

Estrella gave the girls a cold stare, but they didn't notice because they were too busy looking down at Steve as they came out under the other side of the footbridge.

"Eya," Steve prompted her.

She shook her head reluctantly.

"I'm used to it. It's on them, not me, remember? They're the ones acting low class. See, we may be used to showing ourselves off now, but that doesn't mean we're free from the reaction it gets. Not all the old ways are bad ways, and not all the new ones are better," he said.

Estrella kept glaring at the rude girls until one of them noticed her. The girl laughed, and they all walked away.

"Now who's ruining the fun with a sour face?" Steve asked her.

"They are," she grumbled.

"Nah, we can't let them control us. Cut em some slack. My ass is pretty spectacular," Steve said so smooth and dry that it took her a moment to process what he'd said.

Her mouth fell open, she blinked rapidly, and Steve laughed at her shocked look.

"Bucky's right! You're a rotten little punk," she said with a one sided twist of a smile.

"Hardly ever," Steve denied.

Estrella pursed her lips at him in an attempt not to laugh at his overly innocent look, but then gave up.

"Nobody knows you!" she exclaimed.

"You're getting there," Steve said.

They drifted around and around the little loop for almost an hour. Steve was tempted to doze off and let Estrella keep watch because the sun warming his naked back felt good. He was burning, but his healing was working against it at about the same pace, which resulted in a fuzzy warm glowing feeling under his skin. It made him hungry.

They got out of their lazy tubes and went to the ice cream kiosk. Estrella had a caramel vanilla waffle cone, and Steve bought a Texas-sized banana split with every available topping.

"Jalapenos? Who puts jalapenos with ice cream? Are they pickled?" she asked with a grimace.

"They're fresh, not pickled. You wanna try? I wouldn't have thought so either, but it's really good," Steve said.

A big spoonful of cold vanilla along with a crispy little ring of hot pepper did amazing things with his taste buds. After ice cream, they rode the slides again. He thought they were fun, but nowhere
near as thrilling as some folks seemed to think they were. Even the tall one with the straight drop was nothing compared to jumping out of a quinjet or off a helicarrier. He encouraged Estrella to brave the tall slide and she did with much coaxing.

At the bottom, he was waiting to help her up. Her legs were shaky, just like a new airman after his first jump. She was proud of herself for doing the biggest slide in the park, but still a little snippy at him for talking her into it.

"Aw, c'mon. That was nothing," Steve said.

Estrella looked like a shivering wet cat. He averted his eyes from how her breasts were small, perfect and perky. The plain dark green swimsuit was more provocative than some of the skimpier and fancier ones he was seeing around the park. It made no efforts to conceal her lovely figure, other than to paint it green and disguise some skin texture. Only some. Steve hugged her to him with one arm and said pleasant nothings into her ear about going swimming with Buck's family when he was a kid.

A man who'd been watching her as they walked shifted his gaze away under Steve's regard. Estrella led them to the lazy river again and this time they found a double tube. They sat side by side, facing opposite directions so that it was easy to talk.

"Is any of Bucky's family still alive?" Estrella asked.

"His youngest sister is, and several extended nieces and nephews. I'm sure Buck knows that. He can't go visit her. With what's after him, it's best that he doesn't expose any vulnerabilities. I asked Natasha to have her declared dead in the federal and state systems. Her social security deposits are coming from a Stark trust now, but she might not notice unless she looks real close at her bank statement. People tend to not pay much attention to routine things that don't appear to change," Steve said.

"You can make somebody 'dead'?" Estrella gawked.

"We can if we need to for their protection, but we've only done it a handful of times. Hey, I didn't mean to start talking about work again," he told her.

"I wanted to know about Bucky's family, since you told me about them. You should set up something for him. Like record him on your phone for her, then go visit her and let her see. She can make a message for him. Couldn't you do that? Or anyone could. You could send any of your people or Stark's. Even Billy the courier. It doesn't matter who, as long as they know how to keep quiet," Estrella suggested.

"Why does it matter to you? I thought you didn't like Buck?" Steve asked.

"I'm trying to learn to like Bucky because he's important to you. I think I disliked him so much because the first time I met him, he scared me. He's terrifying, Steve. I didn't know who he was or where he came from. There were guns shooting around me because of some stupid drug thing gone wrong, and then there was just this man. He grabbed me and it hurt, and I though my heart was going to seize up. He got hit with a bullet, and it was like he didn't even feel it. Did he ever go to the hospital for that?" she said.

Steve looked at her with a cool, level stare. It was sort of unnerving.

"When was this?" he asked.

"It was the day you brought your sketchbook to our bench in front of the coffee shop. You showed
up about two hours after all that was over," she said.

Again, he was quiet for a moment.

"Why didn't you tell me? I asked you if you'd seen him and you lied," he said.

"I know. I'm telling you now. I was scared, Steve. I didn't know who he was, and he was dangerous. I could see that much. He knew where I lived, and you weren't there all the time. He could have done anything. When I collapsed and Wanda and Jarvis had me brought to the tower, I was trying to move my things because he knew. I lived in the alley beside the coffee shop," she told him in a rush.

His small smile was a relief compared to how mad she thought he'd be from finding out she'd lied to him.

"We were neighbors, Eya. I wish I'd known you sooner. I'm sorry that Buck scared you. He scared the crud out of me the first time I saw him lately, too. I mean, I couldn't afford to act afraid, but he didn't make any sense. He's come a long way back to who he used to be, all on his own. He won't hurt you now, but I don't blame you for thinking he would when you met him. He was worth being scared of for a long time. Why do you think he protected you?" Steve asked.

"He said it was because of you. He'd been watching. Probably from the rooftops, because he came from up high. He knew you spent time with me, and he could see that we were friends. He called Jarvis 'Stark's kid'. He seemed to know exactly where and how he could stand without being seen by Jarvis. How does he do that?" Estrella asked.

"I don't know how yet. He keeps wiggling aside when I ask him about those kinds of things, but I'll get him to spill someday. What's important is that I trust him. More than anybody, I trust him. If I'm not around and Tony tells you one thing, and Buck tells you another, you go with Buck. That goes for all of them," Steve said.

"Even for Thor?" she asked.

"Even him. Thor's as good as the day is long and I don't see that changing, but he doesn't understand things here as well as Buck does. You and him are street smart. You both can hide if you need to, and watch each other's backs. Hiding isn't Thor's forte," Steve smiled affectionately.

"You sound like you think that could happen. Me having to go with Bucky," Estrella said with a frown of concern.

"I don't see it happening, but if it does, you go with it. He knows how to drop off like you. No papers," he said.

Estrella nodded. She knew that Steve believed what he was saying, but she'd make her own mind up if the time came.

"Ah! That's a Natasha nod. You're gonna do what you want, anyway, aren't ya?" he asked.

Steve had already determined that this small town amusement park wasn't a Hydra stakeout or he wouldn't be talking so freely. They kept their voices low, and nobody around them cared about the boring things they discussed.

Estrella smiled and shrugged a little.

"That's good. Learn what you can from Nat. But Eya?" he asked.
"Hmm?" she hummed.

"Please don't lie to me," he requested.

"I didn't want to lie to you the first time, but I didn't have any choice. With what you do, can you make the same promise to me? Maybe we better agree to tell the truth when we can," she said.

Steve cocked his head aside slightly and nodded.

"Fair enough," he agreed.

They left the water park when they were both so wrinkly that their wrinkles had wrinkles. They used the showers and changed into better clothes, then had dinner at a nice steakhouse before they headed back to camp at the beach. Dinner was quiet, with both of them thinking about their past. Steve ordered them a fried cheese appetizer and encouraged her to have a glass of wine with dinner. She was pleasantly drowsy on the way back to South Padre Island.

"It's been an alright day, but maybe not the ideal vacation day. There was a lot of business," Steve said to her in the dark of their little camper nest.

"It wasn't all bad. We had some fun here and there," Estrella said around a wide yawn.

"Yeah. Eya?" Steve asked.

"What?"

"Tomorrow might be... different. I'm starting to feel squirmy. I'll need to work that out somehow. Will you tell me if it gets to be too much for you?" he asked.

"Okay," she mumbled.

Steve could tell that she was too sleepy to listen anymore. He reached out a hand across the space between them on the mattress and touched her warm, relaxed fingers. He prayed that he wouldn't make too much of an ass of himself tomorrow, or even for the rest of tonight.

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**Note: The next chapter should be a lot less business and a lot more fun!**
The surf was raging and he loved it. Steve played around with his skim board for a while before dawn. He fell on his ass several times before he got the feel for the balance required. By the time he had it figured, he wanted more. A real surf board would be nice, but this section of coastline wasn't known for serious surfing.

He stabbed the end of his board in the sand as a visual marker, then waded out farther into the crashing, sucking waves. It was just getting light enough that he'd be able to see the bright stripes on the board if he was out from shore for a reasonable distance.

Soon as he was hip deep, the water dragged at him and pulled sand out from under his feet. The sea tugged him deeper and threatened to tumble him. At waist deep, he lost the fight. A heavy curl of wave smacked him backward off his feet like a punch from the Hulk, then he was dragged along the bottom.

It wasn't like sparring, or even like a real fight. A human partner could see when you needed a break, or when you had weaknesses to take advantage of. The water was turbulent and relentless. It didn't care if he was strong or agile, angry or eager. It didn't care if he was a super-hero or a nobody.

Steve knew about riptides and undertow. He was supposed to swim perpendicular to this. He didn't care to right now. He used the rip to work himself against. Since his tendency was to sink, he had to fight hardest to stay near the surface to breathe. The water wanted him down.

He swam hard as he could against it and still didn't make any distance. It was too fast, and he would have needed fins to do any better. This was an opponent he couldn't grab and subdue. It was all mindless kinetic energy and it felt humbling to struggle against it. When he could get up to breathe, he'd get a glimpse of his skim board. It appeared farther and farther away.

For once, he could fully exert the power of his body without the worry of hurting anyone. For a long while, he pulled hard and fast against the current. When he felt the rare wonder of his muscles starting to tire, he swam at a right angle to the pull. All the way back to shore he teased with the edge of the flow, into the rip, then out of it to calmer water. His damned body kept recovering, losing the tired shakes before he could even get to shore.

He was quite a distance down the beach from Estrella and his truck, and that's what made him quit play fighting against the sea. He didn't want to get too far from her, just in case. Something undefined was worrying at the back of his thoughts. It probably had nothing to do with them, but it made him cautious.

In one last push, he angled into the rip current again and fought it all the way to shore. Steve finally felt sand under his feet. It was thoroughly satisfying to feel tired, like he actually wanted to stop and take a break. He crawled the last few feet on his hands and knees. His muscles felt weak and shaky, overused.

He collapsed on his back under the stormy sky and enjoyed the feeling for the few minutes it would last. When he held his hands up over his face, he could see the shakes fading away already.
So predictable, except his recovery times were getting faster. Next, he'd be hungry.

The cement gray sky started dropping fat, cold splattering rain on him. A few spits of it at first, then an increasing barrage. Steve lay on his back, closed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue. The rain water tasted sweet and sharply fresh, like atmosphere and elements. It felt wild and sensual to let the water pound on his exposed skin.

The first rumble of thunder made him get to his feet. He jogged up the beach until he got to his skim board. The rain washed sand down his skin and into his low-hanging swim trunks. He was almost to the truck when the camper hatch popped up and Estrella clambered over the tailgate. She squealed when the cold rain hit her, but she ran around to the front of the truck.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," Steve said with a grin.

He set his board down and reached inside the back of the truck to get their last mostly clean towel. He didn't mind the wet, but Estrella was going to want to dry off. She ran back toward him in her night clothes, already soaked to the skin. Steve scooped her up and she yelped at the surprise. When he balanced her rump on the top edge of the tailgate, she blinked water-spiked lashes at him.

The camper hatch shielded her from the rain and he used the towel to dry her before she could go inside and drip on their bedding. She smiled at him in thanks. He liked the way her eyes tracked down his skin. It felt good to be wanted by someone he wanted to be with.

"Wait, let me rinse your feet," he told her.

She touched one toe to the truck's bumper and he held her other foot out where rain sheeted off the glass of the hatch. He rubbed the sand off her ankles and feet, then toweled them dry. Estrella got inside and looked at him expectantly.

"I can't get in yet. Sand in my shorts," he explained.

"Oh," she said.

Steve smiled at her and shut her inside. He checked that they were alone on the beach, then stripped off his swim shorts. The rain sheeted down his skin. He'd been out in it for long enough that his skin was starting to Goose bump from the cold. He set the shorts aside and ran his fingers down his back and his ass. Sand gathered in the most difficult places, and he worked to get it all gone. He cracked the hatch open and groped for their bar of soap. Estrella must have been aware of him, because she put it in his hand for him.

"Thanks," he called.

Steve rinsed the sand out of his swim shorts, then he perched on the bumper long enough to rinse his feet. He recalled the arrangement of their stuff inside the back of the truck. He wrung the excess water from his shorts, held them in front of his groin, then got inside in a hurry.

Estrella was wrapped in the towel. She squatted on the balls of her feet beside the mattress and stared at him, startled at all the skin he was displaying. Water ran down him, slowly heating to his temperature. There wasn't anything for him to dry off with.

"I'm stuck here until I dry. We need to do laundry soon," he said.

"I'm in the middle of changing. I was going to go outside with you," she told him.

"The rain's cold. We wouldn't be out there for long," he said.
"Turn around then. I can't stay like this," she complained.

"Eya, I don't have anything on," he said, not sure if he was embarrassed or not.

"I won't be looking. You don't look, either," she warned him.

Steve nodded. Instead of turning completely around, which there wasn't much room to do without dripping on the foot of their mattress, he turned sideways and dug in the ice chest and their dry goods bag. His belly was demanding things of him, so he got a bagel, a pack of beef jerky, and an orange soda.

It wasn't the best breakfast, but it kept him busy while water ran down his skin and while Estrella did whatever she was going to do. Hunger was almost a strong enough urge to keep him from glancing at her while she finished changing. He had to use a bit of willpower, too.

"Okay, I'm done," she said.

"Are you hungry?" Steve asked her around a mouthful of bagel.

"A little," she admitted.

Steve offered her their last bagel and a few pieces of jerky. For her, he dug down in the ice chest and got her a bottle of milk. He did everything one handed while he held his damp shorts against his front. He almost fumbled her bagel onto the bed sheet when he turned.

She was wearing her little bikini swimsuit. That was distracting enough, but the way she looked at him froze him immobile. She'd gotten more beautiful again overnight. Her hair was longer, and her lashes fanned at him once as she looked down at herself and took a shaky breath. She'd piled both pillows in the opposite corner from him and she lay partly upright, but sprawled across the comfort of the soft mattress. The gray morning light showed her mostly bare skin in a way that made him wish for his pencils and his sketchbook.

"Um. Here?" he offered her the food and drink.

Estrella crawled forward to get them, and his eyes were drawn to the soft, rounded cleavage of her bosom. Just a few days ago, the bikini had fit her fine. Now she was nearly too much for it.

Their eyes met only briefly. She seemed intrigued by his hand which held what little covering he had on him. His hips and ass felt extremely bare under her gaze, but then he wanted to feel more than her eyes on him.

"It's damp, but it should help some," Estrella said.

She tossed the towel at him as she retreated to her corner with her food. Steve set his soda down next to the bag of jerky and at least got the running drips dried from his skin. He stuffed the wet towel into their mesh laundry bag, then put the whole bag behind him in his corner to make a backrest. The rubber bed liner under him cushioned him from the cold metal of the floor, and he draped his feet and legs up onto the mattress toward hers. It was more comfortable than he would have thought.

He made sure the cool, damp swim shorts covered him where he needed it most, then he laid back to finish his makeshift breakfast. He tried not to stare. She tried not to stare. The rain pounding on the roof made enough white noise that they could ignore the thick silence between them if they really tried.
Soon as Steve had his belly satisfied and calories were making their way into his blood, it was very difficult to ignore her any longer.

"Don't watch me eat. I hate that," she told him.

"It's okay if we're both eating, but I can't look at you if you're eating alone?" he asked.

He instead watched rain rivulets snake their way down the glass beside him.

"Exactly. You should have eaten slower. You look like a teenager. You're all rough energy and messy and dripping, and then you're shoving food in as fast as you can," she said.

"Yeah, that's me," he admitted.

"I like you," she said.

"You sounded like you were complaining," Steve pointed out.

"No. I don't like eating with an audience."

"I can understand that. I don't like it either. I'll try to pace myself next time," he promised.

"Hmmph," she grumbled doubtfully around a bite of bagel.

Steve watched the rain as it slacked off. The sun was still behind heavy clouds, but at least they could open the windows and get some fresh air. He pushed open the hatch, then leaned forward and slid open the window on his side.

"Open that one?" he asked Estrella.

When he looked at her, she was stuck staring at the way the shape of his hip joined the muscles of his upper thigh. She didn't tell him to get the window himself, because that would make him crawl partly over her to get to it. The air was already charged with enough tension between them. She opened the window and reclined back into her corner again.

Eventually there wasn't any more eating to do and the noise from the rain was gone.

"Eya," he said into the quiet.

She looked at him. It was difficult, because all his bare skin was so distracting, but she tried to find her friend in the shockingly naked man opposite her. He laid his left arm out along the top of the tailgate and his other arm was down over what little modestly he had. He was extremely attractive, and the stormy light made his blue eyes seem moody and gray.

"What?" she asked.

"You're changing fast. I can see it every morning. Do you feel alright?" he asked her.

"I'm fine," she bit out.

"No, you're not. Tell me," Steve insisted.

"I don't want to talk about it," she denied crossly.

"Not talking about it isn't gonna make it go away," he pointed out.
"Fine, then. Everything's becoming sexual. Not everything, like brushing my teeth, but I feel like I'm walking into a fog and I won't be the same after. I wanted to be your friend, Steve. I'm afraid we're going to lose that in everything else that's coming," she said.

"We don't have to," he told her.

"Are you sure? I want to talk to you, but all I can do is look at you. You should put something on," she complained.

"I don't want to," Steve said, "I will if you want me to, but this feels good."

"Okay," she said with uncertain acceptance.

"I know I should put something on. My ma would twist my ear off for this. But she's not here. You are. Eya, do you want me to put something on?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to see you," she said almost in a whisper, as if she was afraid someone would hear and chastise her.

"Ya do? Just like this?" Steve asked, and indicated his body with his free hand.

Estrella shook her head slowly and bit her lip.

"How, then?" he asked.

"You could...take that off?" Estrella suggested hesitantly.

"You don't sound sure about that," Steve pointed out.

He gave her a steady, thoughtful look. She made a frustrated face at him. Why did he have to analyze everything? Why did he have to make her say things?

"Did those women see you naked? The women Bucky got for you?" she asked crossly.

"I guess so. I didn't stand still and let em gawk at me, but I wasn't wearing anything, so yeah," he admitted.

"Then get rid of the wet shorts! I don't want them knowing more about you than I do," Estrella snapped at him.

She didn't care if he found out she was jealous. So what if she was? Her chin tipped up in challenge and she looked him in the eyes and dared him to make fun of her.

"We can't have that," Steve said with a smirk.

He leaned forward a little to twist and put the damp swim shorts into the laundry bag behind him. He fought a shiver at the feel of her eyes on his revealed skin. This felt like way too much, but he was ready for it. If she was going to have any objections to his size, he'd rather know now than later. Steve relaxed back into his corner as he had been. Her dark eyes studied him for a long time.

It took some patience and emotional fortitude on his part to sit exposed and let her look without filling the space between them with nervous chatter. He couldn't help that his balls drew up from
the sudden cool on his damp skin. His dick lay across the crease of his thigh, more than half hard. Of course with her looking at it, it got harder. He looked at himself as she did, but wondered if he looked alien or threatening to her. His foreskin slipped back as he got harder, thicker. It all looked normal to him.

His belly contracted into tight contours of muscle and his chest moved more deeply with a touch of anxiety as she stared. Her eyes flicked up to his, then she let go of her bottom lip and looked away, off aside from them both.

"You gotta talk to me. I can't do anything about it, but if it's too much, I'll understand. Do you want me to get dressed?" he asked.

The urge to move and cover himself was strong. If Nat was here, she'd see how rattled he was, but he didn't give up. He made himself lie still and wait.

"No," she said.

"No. I shouldn't get dressed?" he asked.

Estrella shook her head, then looked back at him again, this time top to bottom and everything in between. Steve blushed under her scrutiny and shifted his legs against the mattress. The suspense of waiting to hear what she thought was near intolerable.

"That's beautiful," she breathed.

"What is?" he wondered.

He felt some relief that she'd at least said something positive.

"Your skin. Pale gold, with a blush reaching down. You're pretty, Steve. All over," she told him.

"Aww, don't say that," he groaned in a fit of bashfulness and laid his head back to shut his eyes.

Estrella stayed where she was by will alone. The sight of him laid out in front of her hard and blushed rosy was difficult not to take advantage of. Everywhere she looked was inviting, mesmerizing perfection. Especially the parts she hadn't seen yet, like the muscle-wrapped sharpness of his hip and the pale of his skin right above his dark blonde hairs. He looked sensitive there. She wanted to touch. His genitals looked heavy and alive. She curled her fingers into her palms and looked away again.

"I'm okay, then?" he asked her.

"You know you are. What do you need to hear?" she wondered.

"You don't think I'm too big? I was afraid that with everything that happened, maybe you wouldn't like…me," he said.

"You mean your penis?" she asked.

Steve nodded, and his blush intensified. Unfortunately for him, his dick only got harder. He felt it changing how it lay, tickling as it slid up his skin to lie against his belly. If she was gonna protest his size, now was her opportunity. It just about didn't get any harder.

Estrella made a sound, sort of a choked moan. He looked at her. She squirmed a little in her corner. Her hands were spread on her thighs, rubbing restlessly. Her hips shifted subtly. That kind of tilt
put pressure on her center.

"Sweetheart," he breathed.

"Mmm?" she wondered.

"You need to tell me 'no,'" he said.

"Why?"

"Because I want you. I want to touch you. I won't make love to you. Not like I want, but I want other things. I want to hear you say 'no.' I'd be sad to find out later that I did something you didn't want as much as I do," Steve told her.

"I don't want to say no. I want you to touch me," she said.

"Good, but you tell me if there's anything you don't like, alright? You can stop me and tell me no," he said.

"Okay, I will. If I want to. Come here," she agreed.

She waved him closer. He started to move to her, but she wiggled down on the bed and her thighs rubbed together, then parted invitingly. Steve froze still, before he accepted the unspoken invitation of her body and scared her. Over her. He wanted to be over her, but she didn't like that yet.

Estrella saw his hesitation and loved him for it. She smiled at him and rubbed the smooth sheet beside her. Steve crawled onto the bed and leaned on his elbow next to her. She couldn't stop looking. The weight of his cock tipped it down to touch the sheet. His hand hovered in the space between them, and she didn't know if he meant to touch himself or her, then he let it rest on his hip.

"Do you want me over you?" he asked her.

"No," Estrella said.

"Do you want me to take your swimsuit off?" he asked.

Her hands came up to cover her breasts.

"No," she told him again, but her legs shifted some, still seeking friction.

"Good. See, you can say no. Do you wanna touch me?" he asked.

She nodded.

Steve was glad to hear her tell him no, though he'd had to ask leading questions he already knew the answers to to get her to say it. That was enough for now. He lay down with a brief glance out the windows.

He folded his arms as a pillow for his head and offered himself to her, for however she wanted to touch him. He was painfully eager for anything.

Steve laughed when she reached out and twirled her fingers in the hairs under his arm. It tickled and he wanted to jerk away, but he stayed put. His girl was weird sometimes. At least he'd just washed and he didn't smell.

At his laugh, she buried her smile against his bicep. Her face rubbed down his arm until she kissed
him there, where he didn't think any girl would want to kiss a guy. Her hand glided onto his chest, and her mouth followed.

Steve's instinct was to tilt his head back and close his eyes at the warm, damp feel of her mouth on him, but he needed to see. Estrella kissed him with her full, soft lips across his chest and back again, and he had a short moment to wonder what her mouth would feel like on his nipple before she was there.

His arms unfolded and his head went back. His hips jerked as she sucked and bit at him. It didn't make any sense that it would feel so good, but it did. And her hand was rubbing across his ribs, his belly, and downward. Oh God, was she gonna…?

Steve hissed in a breath as her fingers dug into his pubic hair and curled tight. He made a high, surprised sound as she combed through repeatedly, then gripped and tugged again.

"You like my hair?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm," she hummed.

Estrella laid her head on his chest and petted and combed him with her fingers, just aside from where his cock twitched with greedy anticipation.

"I can stop shaving, if you want more," he offered.

"You shave? Where?" she propped up to look at him.

"My chest. It's the uniform. It pulls at hair. It's not so bad on my legs, but I guess my chest is sensitive," he said.

He could hardly breathe steady enough to talk. Her hand so near him, but not on him was breaking his thoughts almost before he could say them.

"I don't want you to hurt, especially while you're working," she frowned.

Estrella rubbed her fingers back and forth across his chest, which was smooth. She couldn't even see little bumps or prickles. Every time her hand passed over his nipples, he seemed to like it. But then, he liked all her touches.

She circled her fingertip around and around his navel, then tickled her fingers down his belly again. She avoided his groin, but curved her hand around the inside of his thigh. She pulled, and he bent his knee and opened up for her.

"Eya, please... I didn't want this for me, but I can only take so much. You can touch me all you want, but I might come. I'm not any good at lasting," he said.

"You're not?" she asked with a little frown.

"Nuh-uh. Too excited. I pop right off. But I can keep going, as often as you like. It's a mess," he said with another blush.

He turned his face and bent up a little to kiss the side of her neck, right above her necklace. She knew he was really trying to hide his face. The kisses felt good, but he was blushed all over again. His beautiful, strong body was tight and straining. His cock was overwhelming. She didn't know what she should do. When she'd gotten him off in his shorts, she'd been more paying attention to the rest of him. With it exposed, it looked too large. Too demanding.
"Steve," she whined.

"Wha?" was all he could manage.

Her hand rubbing restlessly at his belly was making him barely coherent. She had to be in control of this. He fought what his body wanted and tried to pay attention to her.

Estrella rolled aside and he was disappointed that she'd taken her attention and her hands away from him. She unzipped her suitcase and rolled back with something in her hands.

Rosie.

Steve groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"Eva," he protested.

"Don't fuss. I wanted you to have it in case you needed it. You say we can't make love, so here," she offered.

"I don't want that. It's cold and rubbery," he told her.

"I'm not… I can't," she gestured to his groin.

"I'm not asking you to," he was quick to tell her.

"But you just said 'please'. I don't want you to hurt, Steve. I don't want to tease you," she said.

"I want to make you feel good," he said.

She shrugged and looked down between them to twirl her fingers against the sheets.

"Okay, but what about you? I don't want to be some big sacrifice you make. If I have fun, then you do too," she told him stubbornly.

Steve thought for a moment.

"But what do you want? I don't want to scare you," he said.

She bit her lip again, and looked at his mouth.

"There's one thing nobody has done to me," she told him.

She brought her fingers to touch his lips. They looked pink and soft and perfect. She already knew his tongue was strong and slick. She tapped her fingers gently against his lips and looked down at him.

"Really?" Steve asked quietly.

She nodded.

"Only if you want to. I know some people think it's nasty," she said.

"I am not one of those people," Steve said.

He rolled onto his belly and scooted down the bed.

Her skin was soft and inviting against his ribs. He wanted to wrap an arm around her and lavish
kisses on her belly, but he wasn't sure she would like that.

Estrella shifted up the bed some, and reached to hand him his sex toy again. He shook his head.

"But-

"Eya, I don't think I'll need it," he told her.

She didn't know what that meant, but she was close to not caring. Steve looked more than happy to do what she asked. It triggered her instinct to get away when he first put his hands on her hips to slide down the strings of her bottom. She wiggled some in an urgent way, and Steve stopped and looked up at her. The softness and concern in his eyes eased her fears. He wasn't over her face. His broad shoulders moved atop her, but only down low above her thighs. She knew her fears didn't make any sense. He was just as dangerous down there as he'd be anywhere else, except that he probably wasn't dangerous at all. She nodded at him to go on.

"That's good. So strong. I'm amazed at how well you redirect your mind," he murmured.

He kissed her right hip bone, then slid the bikini string down over it. He did the same on her left. He dropped warm kisses across her lower belly, then paused to tickle around her navel with his tongue.

"I like it better when you talk less and redirect your tongue more," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Steve said with a wicked grin and his favorite accent.

"Oooh, you're getting too good at that. Steve, stop," she said in a hurry.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm not shaved. Down there," she warned him.

"Mmm. Good. I'm not into little girls, and a real woman seems hard to find nowadays. Will you let me see?" he asked eagerly.

Estrella nodded.

She tamped down her nervousness again as Steve got situated. He seemed to enjoy grasping her ankles and bending her knees up to set her feet flat on the bed. He stared at her and lifted one brow.

"Yes, I get it. Ankles. Go on," she urged him.

Steve chuckled, and eased his hands under her hips. He nuzzled his nose against her bikini bottom, right over her clit, and she gasped and wiggled her hips. Heated breath warmed her through the fabric. He was taking his time to enjoy himself, and the anticipation was killing her.

"Steeeve!" she complained.

He listened to her and worked her bottoms down from behind. He pulled the tie at one side, then skimmed the fabric away and off of her other leg. She watched him as nervously as he'd felt earlier.

"May I touch you?" he asked after looking at her black, silky mound for a moment.

"Grrmph!" she growled at him, and nudged toward him. Any part of him. His mouth, his hands, whatever. She wanted.
Steve took that as assent. He sank down lower and looked at the golden skin under her cute muff. She was golden all over, and in the middle she was the most delectable shade of pink. Reverently, he set his thumbs to her and parted her a little.

She was already shiny and her scent made his mouth water. He looked up her body to her face and kissed her right where she went from furry to pink. She made a tight little noise, and he hummed in appreciation.

Then his hot tongue licked at her and she couldn't think anymore. She'd been worried that he was only pretending to like what he was doing, because he was nice like that. The passion and skill he devoted to her pleasure was well beyond anything that could be considered reluctant or fake. The delighted, hungry sounds he was making were thrilling her almost as much as his careful licking and sucking.

"Ow, ow," she said when pain rose up above the pleasure.

His hands were gripping her too tight. She grabbed at his hands and tugged his fingers looser.

"Sorry. Are you alright?" Steve paused to ask her.

His voice was rough and he looked aroused and messy with her. The crimp of concern between his eyes warmed her heart, but she wished he'd get back to other parts of her.

"I'm fine, but don't hold me so hard with your hands," she said in a strained voice.

"Sweetheart, did I hurt you?" Steve asked.

"No! Steve, please. Stop worrying about it. Go back," she pleaded.

She lay down and focused on her breathing. Her legs were shaking and she didn't know why, but she didn't much care. Steve frowned at the back sides of her hips as he tilted her one way, then the other. She would probably bruise. He made his hands into fists and planted them beside her hips instead of holding her.

"I don't care about it," she told him.

"I'm so sorry. I-"

"Steve!" she exclaimed.

Estrella put her fingers in his short hair and urged him back to where she wanted him. She gave him a dire frown to let him know he better not delay anymore. He tried to hide a cocky little grin and she grumbled at him for his male arrogance until he put his wonderful mouth back to work.

She made urgent sounds when he did something she liked more than the rest, and he soon had her cooing and writhing, then making sounds that sent him over too. His hips ground against the sheets and his moan of pleasure hummed against the inside of her thigh.

Soon as they felt they could move, he carefully rolled her to get a better look at where he'd been gripping her. In his enjoyment, he'd put finger marks on her. Five spots splayed near each hip that exactly matched the reach of his hands. He kissed the marks, then the adorable, sexy dimples he found on the backs of her hips. Her bottom was worthy of some worshipful attention, but not right now.

"You okay?" he asked her.
She rolled herself onto her back again and giggled.

"I guess that means 'yes'?" he wondered.

She nodded. Estrella looked happy and relaxed and that made him happy, too. She pulled at him and he moved up beside her.

"We have to do laundry anyway," she said, then wiped his mouth and chin with the top sheet.

Steve was looking at her in a way she hadn't seen before. She couldn't tell if he was concerned or sorry or deeply touched by something, but whatever it was, he felt it strongly. Before she could ask, he gathered her into a careful hug against him. Careful, because he stayed aside of her, and he cuddled only her top half. She tried to scoot closer, but he had a knee up between them.

"Can I kiss you, or do you want me to wash first?" he asked.

She kissed him. First beside his mouth, then on his lips. Then he kissed her back with the same fervor he'd felt while he was focused between her thighs. Between them, the lingering taste of her was earthy and naughty. She knew it well from her recent explorations and fantasies, but to smell it on him was unexpectedly tender and tremulous. This was her, pure and strong, and he didn't make faces or think she was dirty. It was another reason to love him. She rubbed her nose against his.

"You're very good at that. I'm afraid to ask how you got so good. Do I want to know?" she wondered.

Steve chuckled.

"Remember the girls in my old films?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I didn't know a thing going into the bonds tour. Buck told me a lot, but it's nothing like touring with a few dozen lonely ladies. They took one look at me and I turned red and couldn't talk. They had fun trying to teach me, but I still turn red," Steve said.

Estrella spread her hand to his chest. She liked the way he blushed and was glad he wasn't so jaded that it didn't happen anymore.

"So you like…" she said, and pointed down her body.

"You taste wonderful. I'll kiss you like that anytime you let me," he said.

"We have different words for it now," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but I don't like any of 'em," Steve said.

He tipped her head back with a nudge and smooched down her neck. His teeth grabbed at her necklace and he tugged at it playfully and growled a little.

"I don't want to take it off," she told him.

"I know. I don't want it off either, but it's in the way sometimes," he said.

Steve kissed down her body, and she pushed away the thoughts that he only liked her for how she looked or for what her voice did to him. He'd known her before all that.
"Steve," she said to get his attention.

"Nnn?" he mumbled against her ribs.

"Did you? Did you finish?" she asked.

"I wouldn't call it 'finished' exactly," he said against her belly.

"What would you call it, then?" she asked.

"First round," he said.

She looked at him skeptically.

Steve leaned away from her and lowered his knee. He was hard as if he'd never gotten off. She wanted to touch him, but he was funny about her getting near him.

"Oh. How many times do you need it?" she asked.

"This isn't about what I need. It's about what you want," he said.

"Okay. I want you to be thoroughly finished, and I want to learn how to help you," she told him.

"Ya do?" he asked.

Estrella nodded.

"Why? What does that do for you?" he wanted to know.

She grinned and wiggled. Instead of answering him, she rolled toward him, hoping to feel more skin. She was a little cool, and he was always warm.

Steve calculated exactly where her roll would put her against him, and he leapt over her to the other side of the mattress. He wasn't sure how much restraint he'd have if their bare bottoms got together and she ended up right where he wanted her.

Estrella nearly rolled off the mattress, but she stopped and turned her head to pout at him for denying her the warmth she was seeking. Steve was perched taut and naked on her side of the mattress, and she'd almost fallen off his side.

He had another, different odd look on his face. How had he moved so fast in such a small space as their little camper and not hit anything? He hadn't even touched her as he jumped over. She wanted to see him do it again.

"What are you doing?" he asked as she came for him again, this time in a flat lunge across the sheets.

He went clear over her in a snap of muscle that landed him opposite her with hardly a wiggle to the truck. She laughed in delight at the control he had over his body. She gathered herself to spring at him, but he grinned and shook his head.

"Amateur. I can see that coming. Why are you- Eya!" Steve exclaimed.

Instead of springing at him, she rolled again, then rolled back when she saw him start to move. Steve instantly assessed where she'd be, then shoved his toe against the truck to land where he wouldn't hurt her. He ended up half off the mattress by the ice chest.
"What? Stop," Steve said, and he laughed because her chasing him was fun, but something else was happening in his head.

Her eyes were sparkling with fun, too, but she looked like she had a purpose in mind if she caught him. God help him, but having to calculate and evade, and to move with careful accuracy, along with all the bare skin was heating him up in a way he couldn't have anticipated. Something, some mental paths in his head were getting twisted and firing off excitement down strange channels he hadn't felt before.

She came for him again, and he couldn't resist letting her rub against him as he went around her. When he landed, he was shaking with want. If she did it again, he didn't know what would happen.

"No. Eya, stop," he said as kindly as he could.

She looked at him defiantly, and sweet heavens, she was beautiful. All passion and black hair. He could see already that she wasn't going to listen to him. She was a novice at this, and too thrilled to want to quit pushing at him.

"Estrella. No," he warned her more strongly.

Steve changed from a defensive crouch into an offensive one. If they both went for each other, there was no doubt who would end up on the bottom. A hard tremble shook him. He wanted that so bad that his dick distracted him from his resolve to let her be in control. He shook his head in a hard snap and blew a tense breath out, trying to clear his head.

Estrella sat in the corner with the damp laundry and wrapped her arms tight around her knees. Her feet scrunched protectively in front of her center. Steve's hot, conflicted gaze flickered to her ankles, then back up to her face. Fear and want collided in her, but fear was winning this time. Steve was all hard definition and tight coiled power. His erection had been fascinating and enticing a few minutes ago, but now it looked like a blatant threat, tucked large and hard up against his belly.

"We'll be alright. We're gonna sit here and breathe for a while," Steve said when he saw that she finally realized the situation they were in.

He eased back from his hard stance which had been more of a warning than a threat. It had worked when words failed. He didn't like seeing her afraid again, but it was that or something worse. He leaned back onto the pillows, but he crossed his arms and legs instead of sprawling as if he was at ease. He wasn't. She wasn't. No use in pretending.

Calming himself was something Bruce had taught him, and he breathed deep and slow. For him, the practice also kicked in the metabolic bump he got from extra oxygen, but he didn't have to do anything with that. Soon as he wasn't trembling with eagerness for sex anymore, he pulled at their blanket, which had been kicked off the bed all morning.

"Here. You'll want this when the nerves wear off," he said, and passed it to her.

Estrella had to force herself to reach out to him to take the blanket. He could grab her hand and pull her, but he probably wouldn't. Or her ankles. A slight, reluctant smile curved her lips.

"What's that for?" he asked her as she drew the blanket around herself.

"You're really serious about ankles. I saw you thinking about it," she told him.

"I guess I am," Steve admitted.
Another moment passed in quiet while Estrella's body began to unclench. She pulled the blanket into a tight snuggle under her chin and tucked it under her toes. Steve remained naked and unashamed. There was a difference in him from his bashful softness before. She couldn't imagine him blushing now.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You got in my head. You're good at that. I'm finding out all kinds of secrets with you lately. I like ankles, and apparently the idea of fighting and sex at the same time does it for me, too," he told her. Estrella had a funny thought which was also scary, but this time the funny won out.

"What about fighting and sex while you're holding my ankles?" she asked.

Alarm spiked through her again as Steve took a sharp, deep breath. His fingers spread on his biceps and gripped into the muscle. Against his belly his cock twitched and the tip looked shiny. Steve gave her a pained frown.

"You just don't stop, do you?" he growled with a hint of meanness.

"Sorry," she squeaked.

"Nah, it's alright. I've got this now. We need to talk it out, find out where the edges are," he said.

Estrella was afraid to say anything else that might tease him beyond what was fun for either of them. Then, another worry hit her.

"Steve, this happened and it wasn't even my voice! I don't have my hair yet, and I'm not all the way recovered. How is this going to work?" she asked.

"One thing at a time. I don't think I'll be much trouble to you if your necklace is off. Right now, this is my fault, not yours. You stay over there and I'll fix this, alright? Because I'm gonna be a grumpy bastard all day if I don't," Steve said.

She watched and wondered what he meant, but then his hand released his arm and instead dropped to curl around his penis. He gave it a few lazy strokes.

"I want you to stop me if you don't like any part of this. Say no," he advised her.

She shook her head in denial. She wanted to see him do this.

Where there had been a sweetness to how he'd come with her before, there was none now. It was all male, and all goal oriented. By the time he was a painted mess and had come three more times, Estrella couldn't resist touching herself either. When he heard her whimpers of want and enjoyment, his closed eyes opened to focus on her. His last time took longer.

She was in a satisfied daze, but still couldn't stop watching him. He was frightening in his intensity like this, but he had it safely confined to his side of the space. His body twitched and strained as he worked for the last of it, and he finally let loose with a toothy growl. He stared right at her in a way that thrilled and flattered her deeply.

Estrella perched in her blanket swaddle and gaped at him in amazement. He finally eased away from his intent staring and gave her a little smile. His feet flexed and he wiggled his toes. With his less messy hand, he grabbed the top sheet and began to wipe up his semen. She didn't need to get any closer to know how he smelled.
"Ugh. I can't believe I did that. Eya, you make me crazy," Steve told her.

"I'm sorry. I told you it would be-"

"No. Just you. Look, you're all covered up with the blanket. Your voice had no part in this. It's just you," Steve assured her.

He came close to stuff the dirty bedding in the laundry bag. They both smelled strongly of sex, but she liked it, and it seemed that he did too. He picked her up, blanket and all, and took her back onto the mattress.

Steve leaned on the pillows and he hugged her onto his chest. They looked out the window at the gray spitting sky and the crashing waves. His hand rubbed her hair back from her face and she smiled and turned to lick at his fingers.

He watched her pink tongue lave between his fingers. The warm satisfaction in her eyes hypnotized him. He'd wanted to apologize for what he was sure was a lingering flavor on his hand, but it was clear that was exactly what she was enjoying.

"Uff," he grunted senselessly.

The implications of her actions already had him eager for later.

"We're gonna be in so much trouble," Steve said.

"Not today," Estrella denied.


He held her for over an hour. He felt too good to want to do anything else. He had the best feeling in the world right here in his arms. They ended up kissing languidly for what felt like forever, but not long enough.

Eventually, it was Estrella's belly that announced itself. They laughed and washed up the best they could with wet wipes and what remained of their water supplies.

The muted television in the laundromat showed them storm warnings up the Texas coast. The tropical storm wasn't expected to become a hurricane before landfall, but it was strong enough that the beaches would be closed and some power outages could be expected.

Estrella hurried to find them a hotel for the next few nights. Steve called three before he found one with an opening. If they hadn't gotten themselves in front of a television, they wouldn't have known to make alternate sleeping arrangements until all the rooms were booked. He made the room reservation for two nights and Estrella fed more money into the clothes dryers.

She gave him a lover's smile that spoke of secret things while she walked back to sit with him in the plastic chairs by the windows. In return, Steve gave her a goofy one. He'd never thought to see a girl look at him like that, and it turned him to mush.

"You're unbelievable," he told her.

"Me?" she protested.

"Yes, you. All that's been done to you, and you still put up with me acting like an ape," Steve said.
There was no one else in the laundromat right now, so she felt she could talk. Odd how staying on an isolated spot of beach for a few days made her jealous of her space and their privacy. She relished it, because this wouldn't last forever.

"You're not an ape. You're all man and I love it. We'll have lots of fun when I'm not afraid anymore," she said.

"Oh yeah?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm. What's a girl ape called?" she asked.

"I dunno. You wanna be one of those with me?" Steve wondered.

Estrella nodded, then turned her face into his neck when a cranky-looking older woman came into the laundromat with empty baskets. Steve tried a polite nod to the woman, but she scowled at them and looked to taking her clothes out of a dryer.

He heard Estrella sniff at his neck, and then she licked him, sniffed again, then sucked a pinch of skin into her teeth. He should have pulled away, maybe, because the woman sent some really pissy looks their way, but he didn't.

"Did I miss a spot?" he whispered to Eya.

"I got it," she replied.

"When we get to our room, I'm gonna take a long, hot shower. Beach camping is great, but a real bathroom has its advantages, too," he said.

Estrella made a noise that sounded like agreement, and then she didn't say anything for the thirty-seven minutes they had left on the dryers. She grew heavier against his side, and Steve put an arm around her and let her sleep.

"No sleeping in the laundromat," the cranky woman told him.

She pointed to a RULES sign on the wall.

"Are you kidding me? We're not here to sleep. We're waiting for our clothes. What difference does it make to you what we do while we wait?" Steve said.

The woman stopped folding her clothes, stuffed them in her baskets, and went to her car. Steve watched her go with no remorse. Well, he had a tiny little bit of remorse down in there somewhere, because the rules were on the wall, but it was a stupid-ass rule, so he ignored it. It's not like they were bums, and so what if they were? How could anybody be offended that a cute little lady like Estrella was taking a nap?

Steve wanted to shake the angry tension out of his shoulders, but Estrella was leaning on him. She slept a lot, but that was probably because she was still recovering from emaciation. Her body was building a lot of bone and tissue right now, and he viscerally understood that. Healing always made him hungry and tired.

He eased her back in her chair and tried to get the laundry himself, but there was nothing for her to lean on without him and she woke up. They folded the clothes into their suitcases, and made a tall stack of the clean sheets and towels.

Vending machine food from the laundromat was completely insufficient, so they found a Mexican
restaurant before looking for their hotel. Between them, they finished two baskets of tortilla chips and three little bowls of picante sauce. The servings were generous with greens and sour cream and guacamole, rice and beans, but Estrella was already stealing off of his plate.

Steve ordered another plate for himself and they got dessert. The weather was getting worse and he didn't want to have to go out in it again later.

"I might not have gone swimming this morning if I'd known all this was a tropical storm," he commented over flan drizzled with caramel.

"You swam in that? I thought you went running," Estrella exclaimed.

"What, you didn't notice the swim trunks? No running shorts this morning," Steve said before another bite.

"Your poor running shorts," she said woefully.

Steve nearly spit his mouthful of soda, but managed to swallow.

"They washed," he said with a grin.

"Nobody knows how messy Captain America is," Estrella teased him.

"Oh, nooo. He's not messy at all. The Captain never so much as farts. Did you know that? Amazing intestinal fortitude. And he'd never, ever make the kind of messes I've been making," Steve made a face as if the very idea of Cap being a lowly human was shameful.

Estrella laughed.

"You're schizophrenic or something," she said.

"Or something. It's a learned separation. Living at the tower, it's hard because we're sort of 'on' most of the time. Seeing each other is a reminder that work is never far away. I like everyone and I value their friendship. We need each other sometimes. But with you, and with Buck coming back, I'm finding that I want to pick up pieces of who I used to be, before I had to lay it all down and be him," Steve explained.

"You resent being him? Do you regret making that decision?" she asked.

"No. I wouldn't go back and do it any different. I really wanted it. It's all I wanted at that point in my life. I'm still enjoying the benefits of it, but there's some parts that nobody could have known to warn me about. Even knowing those parts, I'd still make the same choice," Steve said.

Estrella thought about his moods and his struggles. His dedication and sacrifice. She thought again that she’d like to have seen and known him before he was large and physically strong as he was now. Right at this moment, under the mellow glow of the restaurant light, he looked like a blend of his two personas.

His separation was slipping sometimes. Like in the back of the truck when he'd taken an aggressive stance to warn her off from chasing him anymore. She wondered if he realized how very much Steve Rogers and the Captain had blended together just then. In that moment, she hadn't been able to tell them apart.

"What?" he asked for her thoughts.
She looked around at the half-empty restaurant. It was that odd time between lunch and supper and the place wasn't very busy.

"Why don't people around here see you and know who you are? Like the girls at the water park, and Uncle Alberto, and the people in here?" she asked.

"Nat could school you on that better than I can. I think it's because they don't expect to see me here. New York is getting used to seeing me with short hair and a beard, but I'm kind of like a favorite mascot in the city. I'm a social-media thing. Videos and web pages and millions of followers of accounts who claim to be me but aren't. It's insane. People in the city are looking for me, like bird watching. People in Texas don't see me because they aren't looking, and because their idea of Cap hasn't been updated to include the new look. Looking grumpy and thoughtful helps. It fools most folks. Except for that little guy over there," Steve said.

Estrella turned her head slightly to look where he indicated. There was a pre-school aged boy jumping and wiggling and getting fussled at by his parents in a booth across the restaurant. Steve signed the receipt, added a tip, and put away his card, then got up from their table.

He offered Estrella his arm, and she took it. They were parked on the closer side of the restaurant, but Steve walked toward the little boy, who was about to get swatted for misbehaving. The kid stilled and went quiet in awe as Steve approached their table. He couldn't have been more than five years old, and he had a bowl cut of white-blonde hair. Blue eyes stared at them until Steve and Estrella reached the family's table. The mom was attempting to feed rice and beans to a tot in a high chair, and the father turned to wonder who was coming toward them.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but it looked like someone was about to get in trouble for being a Captain America fan," Steve said quietly.

He got down to one knee so he'd be on the kid's level. The father looked at him strangely, still not knowing what to do.

"I'm sorry if he was too loud. Did he bother you from all the way across the- Oh God! You really are him!" the mom exclaimed.

"Kids always have the sharpest eyes. I was just telling my girl that nobody recognizes me with this beard, except the little ones. What's your name, son?" Steve asked.

"Kennef," the boy said shyly.

"Wait. You're Steve Rogers?" the dad said.

"I'm afraid so," Steve said.

"My grandfather served in the war. He had a huge memorabilia collection, some of it with your autograph," the man said.

Steve shook his offered hand, and didn't point out that the man had given neither his name in introduction, nor his grandfather's name. People did that sometimes. The kid was who he'd come to see, anyway.

The mother dug in her purse for some scraps of paper. She came up with a business card and the back side of a receipt. Steve picked up the ink pen from the bill folder on the table.

He signed one autograph the old way, with his name. On the one for the boy, he scrawled his shield and star logo and 'Cap' the way Estrella had showed him. He patted the boy on the shoulder
and shook the man's hand again. The family said goodbye, and Steve and Estrella left. He heard the mom's phone take a pic, but it was only of their retreating backsides, so that was no harm. At least the kid wouldn't get spanked for carrying on, now.

"You didn't have to do that," Estrella told him after they got in the truck.

"I know, but put yourself in the kid's place. When you were little, you thought you saw somebody interesting, somebody you thought you knew something about, but they left before you could know for sure. Wouldn't it be better to know? To have proof, and not just to make up stories in your head? I had heroes when I was little, too, though it turns out some of those actors weren't so heroic in real life," he said.

Estrella smiled at the thought of a truly tiny Steve Rogers, running around with a cap gun and a badge. She fingered the copper butterfly at her throat and tears stung her eyes. Westerns. His heroes were probably actors in the old westerns.

"Show me when we have time. I want to watch the movies you liked," she said.

"Alright. We'll do that," Steve agreed.

They found their hotel and rushed their bags through the rain because Estrella didn't want to be dropped off under the portico. The wind was blustery, but everything was calm serenity when they entered the hotel lobby. The staff was busy, or they would have been helped with their bags. It was a nice place and Estrella looked around uneasily.

"It's alright. Think of the bathroom and the hot shower," Steve whispered to her as they walked to the front desk to get their key cards.

The place was hectic with all the people from beach houses who were seeking shelter from the storm. The lady behind the desk was courteous but distracted, doing the best she could under the circumstances.

Their room was on the fifth floor. The elevator was a long wait, and crowded when it arrived. Estrella stuffed in with Steve, and he made sure his body was between her and any of the other men. She smiled at him and would have kissed him, but he smiled back and shook his head slightly.

There was peace and quiet in their room as soon as the door closed. Steve put the suitcases on the luggage stand and hung his satchel in the closet.

Two beds. It was just as well. Steve didn't think it would be a good idea for them to sleep together here. He had the day's events on hold in his mind, but they wouldn't stay on hold forever. If she got next to him while he was thinking about it all…

"You want to take a nice bath, or a shower? I wanna catch up on the news," Steve told her.

Estrella made a face that wrinkled her nose. She had no interest in the news unless Steve was on it. It was always the same. People in power making trouble for those who weren't. She went over to give Steve a kiss where he lounged on top of the plump duvet.

He both hoped she would and hoped she wouldn't ask him to join her in what was probably a nice big tub. It was a nice thought, but a bad idea in practice, just like sharing a bed tonight. She brushed her fingers up his neck to his chin and he made a happy sound into her mouth.

"Go relax. I'm in no hurry," Steve told her.
"You're in no hurry because you're a dirty boy who likes to wallow in his own smell, and because you're trying to be a sneak and do something while I'm in the bathroom. You're not fooling me," she said.

"Yeah, yeah. You caught me. You're a real wise dame. Now go bathe before I want to kiss you again, and let me make my phone calls," Steve told her with attitude.

He loved that he couldn't put much past her, and most of what she said was true, anyway. He liked the lingering smell of sex, but he'd never been able to indulge himself in it until now. The sex itself was nearly impossible in the old days, and now he spent most of his time around people and AIs who could smell it on him and make comments.

Steve found the local news station and watched until he determined that nothing interesting or threatening was happening near them. He put the TV on mute and got his phone while Estrella ran her bath water. He could hear her voice singing along to something from her phone, and it made him happy to know she was content to be with him.

He called and Nat answered on the third ring. That could mean anything, he decided. Either she was away from her phone, or she was busy, or she was bored and she wanted him to think she was busy.

"Rogers," she said.

"See, usually it's the person calling who announces who they are," Steve told her with a smile in his voice.

"It sounds like somebody's on holiday," she replied, and he could almost see the tight smirk on her lips.

"That's right. We should all take turns doing this. It's great, Nat," he said.

"Aww, you sound like you've had a balloon and a lollipop, and maybe even some ice cream," she said in a smarmy voice as if she was talking to a child.

She would never talk to a child that way. Steve laughed.

"Yeah, and waterslides, and we played at the beach, and I bought a real truck!" he responded with faux-childish enthusiasm.

"Rogers, you're making me nauseous. Why are you calling me?" she asked briskly.

"I've got a minute of down time-"

"From sex on the beach," she interrupted him dryly.

"Hey, that's no way to talk to your CO," he complained.

"You're not my CO right now. And I notice that you're not denying the sex on the beach," she said.

"That's not up for discussion. I want to know how things are," Steve said with a hint of sharpness.

"That's more like it. How things are where? Estonia is rattling sabers at the border again, and the Serbian consulate is not playing well with others. Wakanda is settling down nicely since our last visit. Stark sprained his wrist lifting something too heavy because he was having a tiff with his shop bots. The situation in DC is moving as fast as Monday morning traffic. Can I use a wire,
Steve? One thin wire and this would all be over with," Natasha sighed.

"No. Our cleaning crew isn't big enough for that kind of op. Ops. One wire wouldn't get it. Problem's too big," Steve said.

"But I hired Barnes. He's good with wires, too. I know when to call in backup," she sassed.

"We sure don't have a cleaning crew that big, then. No wires. Dammit, I can't say no wires. Never know if you might need one later. So, everything's alright, then?" he asked.

"We're good. You didn't need to call. You should take the time you have and try not to think about us. I'll call you if there's anything you need to know," she said.

"Thanks, Nat," he said.

"No problem. Are you good?" Nat asked.

"I'm good. We're good. You sure there's nothing I need to know?" he asked.

"I'm sure. Get off the phone," she told him.

"Alright. 'Bye," he said.


Steve made a confused face at her odd closing, but figured it was something else he'd missed. His call didn't completely put him at ease, but he felt he could relax at least for one more night.

There was no answer when he dialed Buck's number. No voicemail. It rang once, then died.

Hold, was the text response he got a moment later.

Well, shit. He hoped he hadn't interrupted anything important. They didn't bring phones with them on missions for that reason, and if Buck was on their pay now, he shouldn't have his, either.

Steve waited.

And waited.

He got up and walked the floor a little. Nothing too energetic, just some movement to keep him from fidgeting. He double-checked his sidearm and its magazines and his spare rounds. The straps on his shield were good, maybe could use a little oiling. His uniform had gotten shuffled around, so he re-folded it and put it away again. Estrella's paperwork went neatly into a side pocket where it would be safer from loss or crumpling. He looked at the name of the church on her baptismal certificate and wondered if they could…

His phone rang. Steve sat in the chair in the corner by the window and pulled it from his pocket.

"Buck?" he asked.

"C'mon. I was more confused than you and I know how to read a caller ID," Bucky replied.

"Hold? What the hell is that supposed to mean in a text?" Steve asked.

"It means I'm on the pot and didn't want to call you right then," Buck said.
"That was one long squat. You're so full of shit," Steve said.


"Fine. Don't tell me what you're doing then," Steve said.

"What? I was reading the paper," Bucky said.

"Enough with the potty humor. We outgrew that when you moved onto dirty stories," Steve said.


Steve sighed.

"You don't need to know, kid. You wouldn't approve, but it needs to be done. If I've got any luck at all, you'll never know more about it than I'm not telling you right now," Buck said.

"Haven't we learned anything? These things have a way of blowing up in our faces," Steve warned tiredly.

"Not this time. No explosions. No falling. No ice. Not even any water. This one's easy. I'm having fun," Buck said.

"That's scary," Steve said.

"Maybe for them. Not for me," Buck said.

Steve sighed again.

"You shouldn't have called me if all you're gonna do is mother-hen this to death. They want me to keep my mouth shut about it completely, but I know better. You're smarter than that. I feed you a few crumbs and pat you on the head, and we're good, right? No tattling home to mommy," Buck told him.

"Buck, what are you into?"

"Don't ask again, Steve. I'll tell ya," Buck warned him.

That shut Steve up. Buck was right. He didn't really want to know. Not right now, and Buck would tell him if there was any danger. He trusted his people, but he knew them too. It might take some deep digging to find out after he got back.

They could hear the faint sounds of each other breathing over the connection. It was comforting. Like trying to get to sleep on a stuffy summer night a long time ago. A lifetime ago.

"Buck, uh.."

Steve had the will to ask for help, but his words weren't in order yet.

"What?" Buck prompted him impatiently.

"Did you ever get in a situation where you were… fighting and fucking at the same time?"

"Shit, pal, what are you into? I thought you were with your girl, but I know that little songbird isn't up to scratch for that kind of play," Buck said.
"Just answer the question for once, dammit."

"It can be exciting, but it's tough to do either one well when the other is going on. The only time I can think of when both are appropriate is when somebody's getting raped. Fuck. You're not… Stevie, what the hell?" Buck asked, truly confused.

"No. I'm not. It was just a thought. We were playing around. She started chasing me, and I evaded because I had to at the time. She kept at it until I had to make her stop it. Buck, I- It's embarrassing," he grumbled.

"You got all excited and ashamed of yourself because you couldn't tell if you wanted to fuck or to fight. Why are you asking me this? We served for years. We've seen this shit. Are you getting senile and forgetting stuff?" Buck asked.

"No. Fuck you. You're deliberately misunderstanding and it's not funny," Steve bit out.

"Alright, alright. I give. Don't get all sore-ass about it. What do you really mean, then?"

Steve made him wait in silence while he got over his mad. Buck always did this shit when things got a little queasy for him. It was familiar, but not the nice kind of familiar.

"Pussy," Steve spat at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Try again. I'm listening."

"I was already hard. Naked. We both were, pretty much. Playing around. She did the chasing thing, and then I had to turn it on her to make her stop. She got scared, but she's good. She's strong. I'm the one with the problem, Buck. Something in my head. Evasion, grappling. Fucking. I wanted that, and there's no place for it. Why did my head go there?"

"Because we've been doing rough work for a long time. I know I'm poisoned. No good. It burns me that it got to you, too. Is that what all this dark shit is about? Are you going bad? Seen too much? Tell me if ya are, 'cause I'll find a way to take you down."

Steve thought about that for a moment.

"Thanks, Buck," he said quietly.

"What the fuck? What is "Thanks, Buck? Is that you telling me I need to start making plans?"

"No. I'm not going bad. Different, maybe, but not bad. If I was going bad, I wouldn't wanna go back to church, right? I wouldn't want to do things proper for her, don't you think?" Steve wondered.

"Probably not. You better watch yourself. I thought you said Thor had a good father-son talk with you that calmed you right down. What gives?"

"Not 'right down'. Nothing works like that. I still feel the same, but the focus is different. It's worked for days, and then that happened," Steve said.

"So this is guilt. Golly, Steve. Here I was taking you serious and thinking I had to plan another take-down, when you're still just a late bloomer. Fuck, you scared me. Look, this is normal guy shit, but you've been too much a ninny-hammer to get around to it yet," Buck started to explain.

"It's not normal guy shit. I'm pretty sure that normal guys don't want to fight with their girls while
sex is happening. I've heard of make-up sex for after you've had a verbal argument, but this is completely different. It's physical, and it's rougher than she could take, and why did I even think of it?" Steve asked low so that Estrella couldn't hear from the bathroom.

Buck laughed in a way that was more salacious appreciation than humor.

"I've got your number now. Get on the internet and look up dominance. Not like animal kingdom stuff. You want information on the kind that happens in the bedroom. The two are related, but only loosely. Don't thank me later, and I'm not sure I wanna know what end you want to be on," Bucky told him.

"End I wanna be on?" Steve asked.

"Just get thee to the internet, Stevie. It's better than hiding behind the stacks to read the racy books at the library. And don't write that one down in your little notebook,"

Steve stared at the phone.

"Quit making that face. You'll get stuck that way," Buck teased him.

"Alright, I know when we're done," Steve said.

Buck started singing a bawdy French song to him, and he hung up on the noise.

Belatedly, Steve laughed.

If Buck was crown-deep in trouble, he wouldn't have been in such a light mood. Whatever he was working on was distasteful, but it wasn't overly dangerous for him. No need to worry.

And the other thing might be right. Estrella was still splashing in the tub, so he went to the browser on his phone and typed in 'dominance.'

For the next half hour, his eyes alternately went wide with surprise or narrow with horror. He didn't like the looks of all that hardware. It was too contrived. Steve figured that if a person didn't have the physical or psychological power to subdue someone, then they didn't deserve leather restraints to help them do it. He wasn't big on leather straps after having to free Buck from them decades ago, and after seeing the chair they'd kept him in.

Then the image of a powerful woman was in front of him. All she had was a whip. No straps, no gags, no painful pinching devices for delicate body parts. Her power was evident in her attitude, and in the bent posture of the man in front of her. Steve shook his head. Something was wrong with that picture. He wanted to kick the man out and see if the woman was strong enough to make him bend like that.

He laughed. She wouldn't be. No woman would be. Not even one physically stronger than him, if that was possible. He'd stood up to guys bigger than him in Brooklyn alleys when he was a weak little guy. Sure, somebody like Thor could bend him, but he'd never break. He wanted a fight against a different kind of strength.

This was just like daydreaming after reading a novel when he was a kid. It was never gonna happen. He had a place in his mind for things that had passed him by. Things he'd never get back again. Things he could never let himself do in the first place. This tickly, tantalizing dominance idea was impossible, so he filed it away in that mental folder of things he couldn't let himself want.

Hell, why was he even wanting more? He had an amazing girl. An amazing friend. He lay back
and waited for his turn in the bathroom and thought of all the delightful moments they’d had today. With that on his mind, he didn’t need the other stuff he couldn’t have.

Before he let himself get too distracted, he made some phone calls and checked some other websites, then erased his browser history.

Note: More soon.
Chapter 41

Note: I've never made music recs, but do us a favor and go watch Let Me Call You Sweetheart and Coney Island Baby by A Cappella Trudbol on YouTube. He's a nifty young guy, and you might understand this chapter a little better if you do. The Barber of Seville from Vocal Spectrum on YouTube is pretty freeeking awesome, too. Remember how Cap in the beginning of CATWS said that all the guys from his barbershop quartet were dead? I'm gonna run with that.

They'd fallen asleep on their separate beds, but Steve woke up with Estrella draped on top of him. That was different, and maybe it explained why he'd slept all the way through til morning. She was wearing one of her little cotton night gowns that only went down halfway to her knees, and the straps at the top showed her pretty shoulders perfectly.

Steve felt a little disoriented, so he checked his surroundings with his senses, then checked his phone. No messages or missed calls. He could see from the bed that the door was secure and nobody had moved their things. He hadn't slept this hard in a very long time. Maybe since he was sick and his ma used to get him the good medicine that made the shivers ease off.

He walked them up the bed on his heels and his hands. Estrella was sleeping deeply, as usual. He liked the dead weight of her on his chest and belly. When he started rubbing her back and neck, he felt that she didn't have her necklace. It was lying on the night stand between the beds.

His hands wanted to wander further than just her back, but he kept himself respectful. She deserved it. He kissed her head on her sleep-messed hair and turned on the television to check on the storm.

It was going to make landfall in a few hours several miles to the South of them, in Mexico. Rough seas, minor storm surge, power outages and possibly some local street flooding were expected from all the bright red and orange rain bands on the radar image. The local weather man told viewers a list of streets and areas around Corpus Christi to avoid because there might be water over the road. The GPS navigation maps he'd seen of the town showed all those streets and bridges away from where they'd be today. As long as the power stayed on, they should have minimal interruptions.

Steve enjoyed the feel of Estrella resting on him as long as he could. They wouldn't get to do this when vacation was over. The feel of her relaxed and trusting against him did something to him. He already wanted to protect her from everything and anyone who would hurt her, but this was more. He wanted to protect her from himself. The bad things, the unworthy things in his head. Those were his to face down. He only wanted to give her the good things.

With that in mind, he carefully rolled her under him. This was a tricky thing for him, because he wanted her even more, now that they'd had a taste of each other yesterday. He wanted to see if she'd respond positively to a loving wake-up as well as she did to a bored and distracted one. He maneuvered himself so that he could get the sheets and blanket out from between them.

Estrella was limp with sleep. She started to wake when he settled on her gently and held her head in his hands. He rubbed his cheek against hers and bent to lightly kiss her collarbone.

"Wake up, honey. I don't wanna miss breakfast. Eggs, sausages, and maybe cinnamon rolls. We could get donuts and coffee, if you want," he murmured.
He kissed her neck where her necklace would be when she had to put it on. That woke up his greedy dick, because of the mental triggers established in his head about her voice. He did his best to ignore that and enjoyed that little band of beautiful, delicate skin while he could. She was getting a tan. The strip around her neck was slightly paler.

"Hmm? Coffee?" she asked sleepily.

That kicked him in the gut and then the brain almost immediately because his ear was right by her throat. He felt her words vibrating against his lips. It was like a little kiss somewhere down low and naughty. Or maybe a lick.

Estrella stiffened under him, and he wasn't sure if it was from waking to find him over her, or because she'd spoken without her necklace. He looked down at her sweetly and smiled through the lusty feelings as they faded.

"It's alright. I'm against the bed, not against you, see. Here's your necklace, if you want it," he offered.

He handed her the necklace and she put it on. There was a moment of anxiety in her eyes, but then he wiggled his hips against the bed between her legs. His erection wasn't touching her, and that seemed to calm her some.

"I have to pee and you're squishing me," she said.

Steve got up and gave her a hand. He saw a brief flash of her inner thighs before her nightgown fell into place. Her legs were smooth and gorgeous. He wanted her, always, but he was doing good. It was tolerable.

He encouraged her to dress in some of her nicer things, and he put on some tailored khakis and one of his dark button-downs that was meant to be worn untucked. She wore a cute yellow skirt that fell just at her knees. It had a few full layers underneath and Steve liked the way it moved and swished. She looked feminine and summery with her bright white blouse and her flip-flops. She smoothed her hair in the bathroom mirror and frowned at it. Steve slid on some dark leather shoes that looked sporty, but weren't just for show. They were more engineered than they looked, and he hadn't minded the price when Jan suggested them.

They made it to breakfast. Steve was impressed that she managed to have red plum jelly on her biscuit without getting any on her white blouse. Any time he wore white, he got something on it. Her bosom looked a little fuller, and his eyes noted other small differences.

Were her cheeks more sharply defined? Her eyes more sultry, even though she wore no makeup today? There was something about her jaw and chin, in conjunction with her lush lips that made him check that his shirt was down over his lap.

"More changes today," she commented.

"Yeah," Steve said.

He wasn't sure how much attention she wanted for that. She looked at him too, little glances and secret smiles. He'd seen her watching his hips as they walked to the elevator from their room, but he didn't mention it. He didn't see how his hips, of all things, could be interesting, but she seemed to think so. He knew he was changing some, too. His clothes fit a little tighter. Her eyes were knowing when she saw him trying to button his cuffs. She didn't mention it, either.

Estrella agreed to wait in the lobby this time as he brought the truck around to the portico. The rain
was coming down in sheets and Steve looked plastered when she got in with him.

"Where are we going in this?" she asked him.

"Shopping, and a few other things," he said.

The main entrance to the mall had a portico too. He was truly drenched when he joined her inside the entrance. He'd almost run up on the curb in parking because he wouldn't take his eyes off of where she stood inside the glass entrance. If anybody messed with her, he'd be there in seconds.

Estrella laughed fondly at his drowned- hero look. Steve smiled and shook himself like a dog over the water-absorbing mats the mall management had put down inside the doors. He looked at his watch. The mall had just opened, and they had appointments to keep. He glanced at the mall map in passing, then walked beside her toward their destination. He would have offered her his arm again, but he was all wet.

There were a surprising amount of folks out walking the mall. Everyone away from home because of the storm needed something to do just like they did. Estrella looked around and put her arm on his despite his soggy shirt.

"You left your gear in the hotel closet. That's okay?" she asked him.

"It's just as good there as anywhere else, except my locker at home or on my body. I've got trackers in it, in case it walks off," he told her.

"Where are we going?" she asked him as they passed through the food court.

"Today is mostly for you, but there's a few things I want too, and a shave is top of the list," Steve said.

"There was a barber shop here when I was a kid," Estrella said helpfully.

"That's where we're headed," Steve said.

The barbershop was packed with customers when they arrived. When Steve walked in, one of them yelled over all the guys talking.

"You got an appointment? Otherwise, you should come back tomorrow."

"Steve Rogers. Ten-thirty," he told them.

The guy cutting hair at the center chair looked to him sharply. Steve shook his head slightly, and the man kept his mouth shut. He turned to the men and boys waiting and yelled again.

"Hey, hey. Make a place for the lady. Shouldn't have to say that," he groused.

"Where am I gonna be?" Steve asked.

The guy in the middle pointed to his chair, which was occupied with a little guy who was probably getting his first haircut. Steve nodded and stood by Estrella and the chair that vacated for her. He thanked the young man who got up to make room for her to sit.

"I didn't think about it being like this," he gestured to all the men in the place, "Are you gonna be alright?"

"I think so. The chair you'll be in is six feet away, so you could flick your shoe at them from that
"You're brave, sweetheart. And you trust Stark tech as much as I do. Tony's never done me wrong when it comes to gadgets. Or Howard, either."

Steve looked around at the people, and picked out the father of the tot who was getting his first cut. It wasn't hard. He had his camera and was taking pictures as the kid squirmed impatiently. When he was done, the kid got a lollipop and the barber dusted off the chair. He looked to Steve when he was ready for his next customer.

"What can I do for you?" the older man asked.

He was probably in his seventies, and so were the other two barbers.

"A good shave, tighten up the sides and back, trim the edges sharp, leave the top longer," Steve told him as he settled in the chair.

"I never took you for a jarhead," the man said, "Name's Ralph."

"Don't have to be a jarhead to appreciate a classic cut. Besides, there's good people in all the branches," Steve made conversation as the chair eased back and Ralph prepared to shave him.

He noticed Ralph's hands shake a little.

"Are you alright?" Steve asked quietly.

"Not everyday we get gents like you in here. I'll be fine," Ralph said.

The shave was real nice, and the smell of the cream and the hot towel brought him back. When Ralph moved on to cutting his hair, Steve spoke up.

"You fellas know any tunes?" Steve asked them.

"We did, but nobody does that anymore," the barber on the right said as he snipped off a line of dark hair.

"C'mon. It's like riding a bike. I know you gotta sing in the shower. I do," Steve said.

"What? You want cold turkey? When's the last time you worked the pipes, fancy pants?"

"Other than in the shower, in '45. My guys could belt 'em out, but not always in English," Steve said.

"I guess we could try. We'll probably sound like toads in a bucket," the guy on the left said.

Apparently they'd all clued in on which Steve Rogers he was. Their audience seemed oblivious, though. The fellas took sips from their cups or water bottles.

"Which part did you sing?" Ralph asked him.

"I was baritone, but I can do bass in a pinch," Steve said.

"Baritone, then. We lost Vinnie in '07."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I know Coney Island Baby, and a few others. Jeanie, and Sweetheart," Steve said.
"Let's start with Sweetheart," Ralph said, "That's an easy warm up."

Estrella wasn't exactly sure what they were going to do, but she knew it must be something to do with singing. The idea of Steve singing was at first silly, and all the barbershop patrons stopped talking and looked at the barbers when they made several tonal sounds and cleared their throats and laughed a little. This was real. Steve was going to sing!

Estrella got out her phone in a hurry and set it to record. Steve saw her hurried preparations and grinned at her instead of telling her not to. They both knew that folks back home in New York would get a kick out of this. She framed the video up to include the three barber chairs and Steve in the middle getting his hair cut. The customers in the chairs on each side looked a little amused and confused, but ready to be entertained.

They were a touch out of practice and the first few notes showed it, but they soon were singing smoothly. The song became vaguely familiar to Estrella after a moment, and she watched Steve much more than the other guys who were singing. They sounded awesome in harmony, and she didn't know how Steve could walk in and just start singing with guys he'd never met, but it was working. By the last line of the short song, she noticed that Steve was looking a little blushed above the white towel around his neck. He was staring right at her, and though his part of the song wasn't carrying the melody, they all sang the last line together.

"Let me call you Sweetheart, I'm in loove with youu," their song said as it came to a gentle, precise finish.

The barbershop erupted in applause, and the guys with scissors and combs in their hands guffawed and waved off the attention. They did a few more moments of hair cutting, and Ralph patted Steve vigorously on the shoulder. Steve could only smile and nod, as his hands were under the smock which kept cut hairs off of him.

"You said you know Coney Island, too? We could do that," the barber on the left said happily.

"Sure," Steve said, but he looked to Estrella, "This one ain't about you, doll. Never mind me if I get a little choked up."

Their next song was fast and playful, with sliding notes and bouncing 'bum-bum-bums.' Now that the shock of hearing him sing was wearing off, Estrella could hear that Steve had a good, mellow singing voice. He made sure to blend in his part, instead of trying to stand out.

Despite the overall happy, bouncy attitude of the song, Steve looked down at his knees as he sang, and she could see that there was something sad in the words for him. Maybe even painful. He missed a few notes on a grimace near the end, but then finished it up calm and composed.

Whatever was in his head was a mystery to her. She was glad she was recording. She could watch it later. The song was about a guy saying goodbye to a girl on purpose and avoiding marriage, and she wondered if he was thinking about Peggy. He probably was. She thought she'd feel jealous that he'd once loved someone else, but she instead felt empathy for his pain. When it seemed like a good time, she'd ask him about Peggy.

They sang I Dream of Jeanie, which was a slower, more melancholy song. Steve's haircut was almost done, and the barbers had a captive audience both in the barbershop and from several people standing outside in the mall. Like the previous song, Steve's mood didn't seem to match. He was happy through this one, and she could tell that he was enjoying the singing. Ralph brushed the back of Steve's neck and his shoulders clean of hairs and took the smock off of him as the song finished.
The barbers gathered around and shook his hand. There was some hearty back slapping, and the guys refused to take Steve's money for the shave and haircut. Estrella fumbled to stop recording.

With his hair cut sharp and a clean shave, Steve looked much more like the Captain. Estrella looked at the men in the barbershop with them. Some of them had an uncertain look on their faces, and one opened his mouth to ask, but Steve took Estrella's hand and they were out into the mall again before anybody could say anything more.

"Steve, that was…wonderful," she finally chose a word.

"Yeah, it was fun I was hoping those guys sang. It might have been awkward if they didn't, but they had the look," Steve said.

He cut his eyes down to her and looked a touch bashful, but it passed. She was still flustered and amazed. Was there anything he couldn't do? Again, she felt unworthy that a man like him, so talented in so many ways, would think to spend time with her. Steve was still grinning and humming softly as they walked, so he didn't notice her thoughtfulness.

His clothes were much dryer now, and she could feel his heat through the dampness of his sleeve. With his fresh haircut and tailored clothes, he was very handsome, and anyone who truly looked at him noticed. She was so into Steve that she didn't notice the guys who looked her way.

Steve brought her to a nail salon, where he'd apparently made her an appointment. It was a good thing, because the mall was packed with people looking for something to do to pass the time.

"You could get a pedi, or have your nails buffed. That doesn't add any color," Estrella told him when he urged her to go on and enjoy her time.

"Sweetheart, the smell here is too strong for me. I'm gonna go wait right over there. I'll be watching. There's a newspaper stand, so I'll get a paper and read a while. Don't worry about me," he told her.

"Okay," she said softly.

She tipped up on her toes, touched his arm for balance, and kissed his cheek soft and slow. It was becoming clear to her that he'd planned their day and made appointments for her while she was in the tub last night. He was so sweet to her that her heart melted yet again. This time she felt his blush as a wash of heat under the skin of his cheek where she kissed him.

Steve cleared his throat and his hand came up to touch the small of her back.

"You better go before I do something dumb in front of all these people," he murmured low at her ear.

Their eyes met, and she was surprised to see that his lips were parted and he was breathing a little hard. The blue of his irises was mostly eclipsed by black, and she sucked in a short breath. He'd gotten that turned on by a simple kiss on the cheek? He had. She wasn't immune to whatever he was feeling, and there was a heavy magnetism between them. She didn't want to go. She wanted to push him down on the mall bench and do something dumb in front of all these people. He might let her, with the way he was looking.

"Go," Steve whispered because he didn't trust his voice not to come out in a croak.

Estrella hummed a note of frustrated longing, but she made herself turn away and go to her nail appointment. Steve pushed some coins into the paper box and took out a local newspaper. He
watched her until he saw where she'd be in the nail salon, then he sat on the bench to read. He had
to do something to derail his mind from what he was thinking and feeling.

It wasn't in the headlines. Lower down the front page in the national news section was an article
about another recent incident of prison homicides. This time in Oregon. Same MO. Surveillance
blackout, suspicious timing which made authorities suspect an inside connection, and the deaths
were all suspected members of an unnamed Latino gang. Steve read on to see if there was any
recent local police or justice system activity related to gangs. There was a local shooting, but it
didn't involve any Latinos.

Steve folded the paper and thought about it all while he waited for Estrella to have her nails done.

The lady massaging her feet and trimming her toenails wasn't able to distract her from thinking
about Steve. She was barely able to focus on choosing a nail color. Rich, dark mocha brown
appealed to her because she felt swaddled in luxury right now, with all the expensive things, and
Steve waiting for her.

Chocolate and coffee. That's what she felt she was living on right now. No more cups of lemon
water and frugally purchased past-expiration canned goods. Her bed had gone from a damp,
exposed crust of musty carpet over splintered wood to a plush warm nest with Steve in it. Was she
dreaming? Maybe she'd fallen and hit her head and was in a coma somewhere. No, the chemical
acetone smell of the nail salon was too sharp to be in a dream.

The nail technician didn't try to talk to her, and that was good. She absently watched her toes and
fingers be tended to, and saw the shiny coats of color applied. Estrella sat at the drying station in a
near stupor. This was all real. The plentiful food was real, and the expensive hotel room was real,
and the big rumbly truck was real. The man was real, too. And seeing her family wasn't an
impossible dream anymore.

She didn't know what to do at the cashier, and then the lady told her it was all pre-paid. She smiled
at Estrella and wished her a nice day. Nobody looked at her like she was something that needed to
be swept out to the curb.

Estrella felt light and tingly. Cold. Then Steve was there behind her. She looked to his dear,
expressive face. He said something, but she only saw his lips move. He picked her up in his arms
and swiftly carried her to the bench where he'd been waiting. His heat seeped into her, and his arms
were slightly too tight around her. Solid. Real.

"C'mon, c'mon. Eya, talk to me. Do I need to call a medic?" he said, and she finally heard him.

The concern on his face matched the rough, tight petting he handled her with. Her senses returned
from the near-swoon, and she wiggled strongly to be let down. People were staring!

"I'm fine. Let me sit," she said.

He put her down beside him on the blue plastic bench and rubbed her back firmly.

"Tell me what that was about," Steve said, and there was no mistaking that it wasn't an order.

She lifted her chin and gave him a stubborn stare. He was stealing her heart, but she wasn't ready to
give him every crumb of her mind and her will, too. That was hers to keep.

"It's too much. It's a fairy tale, Steve. I don't believe in them. Life is hard and ugly. This can't be
real. It won't last," she told him flatly.
"I know. Feels too good. Like we're dreaming. I've never had this before, Eya. Nothing like it. So I'm gonna take it and run with it. I'm gonna ride it hard while it lasts. That might be six months, and then I find something that can finally end me, or it might be eighty years and grandkids. I'll take what I can get, and I'm gonna use it all until I can't anymore. Will you go with me, or is it too much for you?" he asked in a growl that sounded nearly angry.

With what had happened to him, maybe he had a right to be angry. She was feeling vengeful against circumstance, too. She nodded.

"I'm with you," she said.

She didn't want to be anywhere else.

"But it's too much. Too expensive," she whispered.

"Fuck that. We're here. We're gonna do it because it's here to be done," he said with an aggressive jolt of attitude.

Estrella giggled and covered her mouth with a hand at his uncharacteristic use of an expletive. His intense look grew a smile that was toothy and had that new, kind of scary vibe he sometimes gave off. She laughed again nervously, but she hugged his upper arm to her chest. Steve nodded in satisfaction.

She got another rush of light headedness, but it passed quickly. She splayed out her fingers to show him her pretty, glossy nails. They were growing out, and the lady had trimmed them natural and rounded as she liked. Funny, she didn't remember telling her to do them that way, but she must have.

"Gorgeous. It suits you," Steve said.

He got them up and walking to their next appointment. Estrella couldn't stop smiling. This was really, really real. Like the sharp chemical smell of the nail salon, Steve was too big and exciting and solid to be a dream.

There was a loud boom of thunder from outside, and the power flickered in the mall. Everyone strolling around and shopping paused and went quiet. The power flickered again, and the quiet roar of the rain on the skylights overhead could be heard for the first time since people had stopped walking and talking. The power gave up and went out. The dim light from above was eerie.

"Aww," Steve said in disappointment.

Estrella giggled. She'd lived without electricity to light her stormy days for years.

A cheer went up as the power came back on. Estrella laughed again as the people around them started walking and talking, as if their own personal power plugs had been pulled when the lights went out, and then restored when the power came back on.

"That was strange," Steve commented.

"Oooh. There could have been zombies and screaming. We should watch some scary movies," she said.

"Only if you cuddle up next to me so I won't be scared," he smirked at her.

Estrella pinched him and he pretended to wince away in pain. He looked at his watch and walked
with purpose. She didn't ask where he was taking them next. She wanted it to be a surprise.

A hair salon. He checked in their appointments under both their names.

"You just had a haircut," she said in confusion.

"I want something else," Steve told her.

Their hairstylists had chairs across from each other. Estrella and Steve got to make eyes across the way as they were smocked up. She couldn't hear what Steve told the young punk-looking woman assigned to him. The slim, immaculate older man assigned to her put his hands in her hair and leaned her back for a wash. He looked kind and more concerned with doing his job than with her. That was comforting. He was probably gay, and that made her even more at ease.

"What are we looking for today?" he asked her as he massaged her scalp under the warm water.

"I'm not sure. Something easy to do in the mornings. Unstructured, I think. I'm letting it grow, so you could shape it, but don't take much length. Do you have any color that will wash out in a few weeks?" Estrella asked.

"I sure do. You're gorgeous, baby. We could do anything. What color were you thinking? Some streaks around your face, or some tips, or do you want it all colored?" he asked.

"Dark purple, almost black. Some streaks all around. I could run some gel through it and leave it a little wild. It's growing fast, so get all the way to the roots," she told him.

"Uh-un. Some to the roots, some a little ways down. That way, it looks intentional when it starts growing out," he said.

"Good idea," Estrella agreed.

He lathered and rinsed her hair, then sat her up and patted her dry.

"Is that your man? I hope so. Those eyes! If he's not, you've got a creeper," her stylist said quietly.

"He's mine," Estrella said with pride.

Across the way, Steve grinned.

"Oowee. Ya'll are gonna make some beautiful babies," the stylist said.

Estrella laughed.

"I don't know. I think we just started dating, so maybe it's early to think about that," Estrella said.

Steve gave her a smoldering look while his stylist moved around behind him.

"Mm-mm. He's thinking about it," her stylist said.

Estrella giggled again. Her phone vibrated. Steve was holding his, so she pulled her hand out from under the smock and looked.

*I don't know if you should tell him that I can hear him. It's up to you.*

She turned her head to look at her stylist. He pulled his scissors away from her head.
"He can hear what you say, but I don't think he minds," Estrella warned the man.

"He can't hear through this. It's a madhouse in here today. I can't believe they made us come in to work, with a storm coming. Tips should be good," he said.

Estrella shrugged. If he didn't want to believe her, it didn't matter. She'd been nice enough to warn him.

"Hey, Rafe. Did you hear about the barbershop?" the young blonde stylist working next to hers asked.

"No. Tell me," her stylist said.

"They were singing. I never knew they sang. It was old time stuff," the woman said.

"It would be old stuff. They were a quartet until a few years ago. I heard them when I was a kid. Did anybody say why they were singing? My daddy said they stopped after their baritone died," Rafe answered.

"Somebody said something about Captain America," the blonde said.

Estrella bit her lip hard and looked across to Steve. He smiled slightly while his stylist dabbed something on top of his head. Estrella made a face. He was getting it colored? The idea of him getting his hair colored distracted her from what was being said behind her.

"Like a tribute? Did he die?" Rafe asked.

"Did who die?" Estrella asked.

"Captain America. That man is too fine to die. Please tell me you didn't see something on the news about him being dead," Rafe said urgently.

Estrella laughed.

"He's not dead," she said with cheerful certainty.

"Oh, thank God. How do you know?" Rafe wondered.

Estrella couldn't control her laughter.

She shook her head and smiled. She couldn't say anything.

"Fine then, missy prissy. Keep it to yourself. This is a weird-ass day. If I'm in the middle of your color and the lights go off, you're rinsing it yourself, because I don't do power outages," Rafe said.

He sounded snarky, but he smiled at her kindly as he worked, taking a few strategic snips here and there around her head. Not much hair was falling on the floor, so she knew he was only shaping it. The cutting didn't take long, and then he was on to the color. He had to mix something to get the dark purple she wanted.

"Like aubergine, or like so dark you can only see the color in the sun?" Rafe asked her.

"Halfway between," she told him.

Rafe nodded and finished his mixing. He prepared her for the color application, then got to it. When he was done, he set a timer.
"I'm gonna go check the radar. Weather makes me nervous," he said in preparation of walking away.

"Then maybe you shouldn't look at the radar," Estrella said.

Rafe stared at her.

"Good idea. I'll have a smoke in the restroom. I'll be back when this is done," he said, and walked away.

Estrella looked to see that Steve was waiting on his color, too. It was so incongruous to see him sitting patiently in a hair salon that she chuckled to herself. He didn't look casual or effeminate at all. He looked like he had something on his mind. One of his plans, maybe. She fidgeted with anticipation. All his plans were good ones, some more fun than others.

"What color are you getting?" she asked as if she was talking to herself.

_Natural. It gets lighter in the sun as it grows, but I don't have time to wait,_ he texted back.

"What's the rush?" she asked.

Steve shrugged and texted her.

_Just a feeling._

She gave him the look that told him he wasn't fooling her. He was thinking something, and he wasn't going to share. He wasn't exactly lying, just keeping information to himself. Estrella was okay with that. She trusted him.

She turned away from looking at Steve because it seemed that it was so easy to get each other going today, and she didn't want him to be embarrassed if somebody recognized him and he was obviously hard. He'd hate that. Instead, she tried to listen to the storm over the noise of all the people. It was raging outside, and she marveled that everyone was so happily oblivious inside the mall. It was a cozy feeling, to be protected and immune to the elements.

The timer dinged and Rafe was quick to return. He rinsed, dried and styled her hair while Steve was having the same done across the salon.

"Oh my God!" somebody said.

Estrella winced. She knew Steve hated that, but it was a typical first reaction to someone recognizing him.

There was a hubbub in the salon after that, and Estrella turned her chair around from facing the mirror by pushing her toe along against the hair-dusted vinyl tiles. Rafe had abandoned her, his comb fallen to the floor.

Steve stood up and tugged the Velcro of his smock away from his body. His stylist and everyone in the back part of the salon was shocked still, staring at him.

"I'm on vacation with my girl. I'd really appreciate it if you don't take any pictures," Steve told the room quietly. He hoped to avoid the wave of recognition spreading out into the mall in general.

"But nobody's going to believe us. Why would you be in Corpus?" the blonde stylist asked.

"I've got video of him singing in the barbershop. Soon as vacation is over, I'll post it to YouTube."
Then people will believe you," Estrella said.

"Just lemme get a pic?" a girl asked.

"Ma'am, I'll have your phone memory erased if you do," Steve said as kindly as he could.

"He doesn't like to bully people like that, but he'll do it. I've seen it happen. Please, just let us go. He's really needed some time off," Estrella pleaded for him.

"Y'all, let the Captain alone. Hasn't he done enough?" Rafe said.

The salon was quiet for an instant longer, then everybody rushed into excited twitters of conversation. It seemed that they'd decided to honor Steve's wishes.

"Finish her," Steve told Rafe.

"I sure will," Rafe agreed.

"You could have told us," he whispered to Estrella as he got a fresh wide toothed pick and put the finishing touches on her style.

Estrella shook her head.

"I do what's best for him," she said unapologetically.

Rafe smiled at her and nodded emphatically.

"How's that?" he asked as if she hadn't been watching him style her in the mirror.

Estrella loved the look. It was a messy bob that almost brushed her shoulders. The deep purple color scattered through her ebony hair showed as streaks of rich pigment only where the salon lights gleamed brightest. She stared coldly at the emerging extravagant beauty of her face. This was her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Nothing except starve herself again. *Fuck it*, she thought, as Steve had said. Steve was sweet but strong. They could make it despite this, she told herself hopefully. He was genuine enough to see beyond her looks. Maybe she could be more than a thing to him.

"You're a perfect yin for him," Rafe told her.

Estrella smiled and wondered if Rafe was only talking, or if he'd actually read Chinese philosophy as she had in her long, lonely hours in the library. The idea fit for her and Steve and she liked it.

She quietly thanked Rafe. Steve stood waiting for her. He looked just like a sharper, more modern version of the Captain now. His naturally dark blonde hair appeared sun-kissed on the longer top. It barely was long enough to lie over to the side some instead of standing straight up. She didn't understand why more people hadn't seen him before and known who he was. The mall was going to be buzzing all day.

Again, Steve had pre-paid generously. Several people waved goodbye to them and smiled.

"I wanna see the barbershop vid!" Rafe called out before they were beyond earshot.

"I'll put it, I promise, but not yet," Estrella told him.

Rafe nodded and waved, and then they were off to the food court. Steve's clothes were completely dry now, and Estrella walked close to him. The crowds were tight, but not as bad as lunch hour in
Manhattan.

They stood in line for her to get noodles and pork, and Steve chose the same, but he ordered two. She had sweet tea, and Steve got a coke. He tugged her through the crowd to a table for two that had just opened up.

They bowed their heads silently over their food, then ate fast.

"Why are we so hungry?" she asked him.

"I don't wanna think about that," Steve said.

As the urgency of their bellies eased a little, they stared at each other and their new hairstyles. It was hard to chew and grin at the same time, but they managed. Steve was doing the worrisome thing where he would seem mesmerized by her, but then he'd look away and shift his eyes around. She'd gotten used to his watchfulness, but it was a little more distracting today.

People were waiting for tables, so they cleared out as soon as only their drinks were left.

"What's scheduled for the rest of the day?" she asked him.

"Another appointment at two, but there's some time until then. You choose," Steve told her as they walked along.

She could hardly see the shop windows, there were so many people. She looked instead at the lighted signs over the doorways. She loved pretty things, and being with Steve had shown her that she could browse the stores now without being harassed. She came to a stop in front of Victoria's Secret.

"Eya, I'd love to take you in there, but I don't think I can handle it right now. Can you wait til we're home and go with Pepper or Nat?" he asked.

Steve wasn't fighting his arousal today. If he did, he'd be an antsy jerk. Instead, he was on a medium simmer. The packed crowds kept anyone from looking at his lower half too closely, and he redirected his thoughts as best he could when they were in for an appointment. If he went in the frilly pink lingerie store with Estrella, he was gonna boil over and there'd be no stopping it. The thought of her fingering fancy, silky, skimpy underthings, then having him wait while she tried them on was enough to make him take a deep, calming breath. He hoped she could tell that that kind of experience was beyond him right now.

"Okay, papi. I won't tease," Estrella said with a little smile.

Steve wanted to automatically ask Jarvis what 'papi' meant, though he thought it was a reference to a father figure. Then, he smiled big because she'd called him a pet name, no matter what she meant by it. The crowd was almost too loud to talk over, so he didn't try. They walked on.

Estrella pulled him into a bath and fragrance store as soon as she could get a break in foot traffic. Steve tried to breathe shallow while she perused all the soaps, lotions, candles, and perfumes. There were bath salts and little bead thingies, and scrubbers like he had in his shower at home, all of it in an array of colors that would be pleasing to the feminine eye. He liked color too, so he tried to focus on the visuals of the place rather than on what all the mixed fragrances were doing to his nose.

He could tell that Estrella was delighted with her surroundings, but she wasn't touching anything. Steve got a shopping tote when they passed a stack of them. He chose a dark blue shower scrubby
for himself and a lavender and yellow one for her. She smiled at him.

"You're shopping for me," she said.

"You're not doing a very good job of it. I'm hoping to get you started. Go on, Eya. Get some things. We're not here just to look," he encouraged her.

She dithered over putting her hands on the fizzing bath balls, so Steve put a vanilla one and a gardenia one in their basket. She made a face and put the gardenia one back. They had goat milk soaps. They looked and felt rich and creamy. Steve stared hard at her. Estrella put a lemon verbena bar and a bourbon coffee one in the basket.

"Mmm. Bourbon coffee. I want to use that one. Or you can use it and then I can smell you," Steve said.

Estrella took a shaky breath at the mental image of Steve gliding his mouth and nose all over her to smell her. She stood still in the aisle and put her hand out on a wooden crate.

"That good, huh? I wonder if I'm thinking the same thing as you?" he asked at her ear.

"It's not fair! I can't take you in Victoria's Secret, but you can put those kinds of thoughts in my head?" she complained mildly.

"Do ya want me to behave?" Steve asked her with a sly look.

Estrella bit her lip and shook her head. He chuckled and encouraged her to continue shopping.

She chose a mildly scented herbal lotion and some pure lightweight olive massage oil. Steve stared at her hotly when the oil went into the basket. She hid her face behind her hair and hurried to the checkout. There were baskets near the checkout counter that contained little tubes of body glitter dust. Steve dug through until he found a shade of gold that he thought would look fine on her skin, and dropped the tube in her shopping basket. Estrella stuck out her chin at him and put tubes of red and blue body glitter in the basket too. Steve rolled his eyes, but didn't complain.

Steve paid before she could reach beyond him with her money. His card was plain, matte black. Even the raised numbers were dull black. The cashier looked up at him and her mouth parted slightly. She took the card and stared at it for a moment.

"I didn't think these were real," she whispered.

"Just run it, Ma'am. We've got somewhere to be in a few minutes," Steve said.

The girl nodded and processed the purchase. Her eyes were still wide as she watched Steve and Estrella leave the store. She whispered to her manager and wondered who he was. By her afternoon break, the girl had heard enough of the talk around the mall to figure it out.

Steve led them down a quiet, mostly vacant side hallway. The lights here were dim and moody, and the décor changed from bland, trendy mall style to elegant and slightly Asian. A stylized word in fancy script was on the glass pane door. Steve pushed in and Estrella realized they were going into a spa.

"Steve!" she hissed at him.

"What?" he asked with more of that sly little pleased smile he'd worn for so much of the day.
"This- We- I've never-!" she exclaimed.

"I know. Me, neither. The guys would rag me forever. That's why we're doing it now," he told her.

"Oh," was all Estrella could think to say.

If he wanted this, then she'd go along with it.

"You must be Sofi and Grant. Welcome. Right this way. We're ready for you," a statuesque brunette lady greeted them. She moved in that graceful, unhurried way that Estrella had always envied on some of the classic movie stars.

Steve strolled beside her through a heavy set of doors into a lush, sensually themed environment done in earth tones, with wood and stone accents. The air smelled fresh, humid, and faintly scented with something botanical. It was how Estrella imagined paradise smelled.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to be apart in the changing rooms, but we've cleared our schedule on both the men's and women's sides for the rest of the afternoon to accommodate your needs. The staff is prepared to provide you with anything you wish," the lady said.

"Thank you," Steve said.

"Steve!" Estrella mouthed silently to him.

He took out his cell phone and gave it to her. She didn't know why he did, but he took hers instead.

"Jarvis is in mine. He'll be with you while I'm not, if you want," Steve said.

The lady held open a door for Estrella and she reluctantly went ahead, while looking back at Steve.

"I'll see ya in a few, doll. Don't worry. Enjoy," Steve told her.

She would try. She didn't like being away from him in a strange place. The movie-star lady led her into a lavish bathroom with toilets discreetly tucked off to the side, and a makeup counter with everything she'd need to remove her makeup if she was wearing any, and then there were lockers and showers. All of it was rich-looking beyond her imagining, and spotlessly clean. It was like something she'd seen in a glossy magazine. She nodded as if she was fine with it all, and the lady left her alone.

Estrella shut herself in a toilet stall and tapped at Steve's phone. It was different from hers. She didn't know the passcode, so she pressed the home button.

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, Miss?" came his familiar voice.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello, Miss. I've missed your company. It's good to hear from you. Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Yes. No. I don't know. How do I live like this?" she asked in a rush.

"I believe you are in a spa. Are things not to your liking?" Jarvis wondered gently.

"I've never done this. What do I do?" she whispered.
"First things first. Are you in need of the toilet?" Jarvis asked.

"I guess I could try," she said.

"I recommend that you do. Miss Potts can spend hours at the spa, and I would imagine one would want to be most comfortable while doing so. I will wait for you to call me if you have any further need," Jarvis told her.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's my pleasure, Miss. As I said, I've missed talking to you," Jarvis assured her.

Estrella put Steve's phone in her shopping bag and hung the bag on the back of the door. Even the door wasn't a regular bathroom stall door. It was paneled and had fancy molding and louvers. There was nice stone trim in the stall and the fixtures were brushed honey-bronze.

She sat and waited, and was almost too excited to relax enough to pee, but eventually got it done. She was swollen and slick when she wiped, but that was becoming normal when she spent time with Steve. She washed her hands, then wondered what was next. She looked to the locker room and took out the phone.

"Jarvis, am I supposed to change into something?" she asked.

"Not precisely. There should be lockers. Do you see them?" he said.

"Yes,"

"Take off your clothing and store everything in a locker. Are there towels nearby? Robes, perhaps?" Jarvis prompted.

There were, now that she looked for them. She nodded. There was a new looking pair of taupe flip-flops in the bottom of the locker she chose. She looked around to see that she was completely alone, then took off her clothes and wrapped herself in a robe. The footwear was a bit large for her, but it didn't matter.

"Do you see a changing room?" Jarvis asked.

"I was supposed to use a changing room?" Estrella asked.

"They are customarily provided, yes," Jarvis said.

"I didn't use one!" Estrella said in a rush.

"Not to worry, Miss. There are no cameras, and you are alone. It is customary to wear a swimsuit for the next part of your stay. Do you have one?" Jarvis asked.

"No," she lamented.

"Please don't be distressed. This is meant to be relaxing. The Captain is doing his best to please you, but I'll have you know that he is experiencing some of the same difficulties on the men's side of the spa. He has the additional embarrassment of an attendant, so things over there are possibly more amusing," Jarvis told her with some humor.

"Really? What's his attendant like?" Estrella wondered.

"He is a burly young man, but discreet and distinguished for his age. He is much like a well-trained
footman. Our Captain doesn't know quite what to make of him, but they are muddling along," Jarvis told her.

Estrella laughed. She'd love to see that. Not that she enjoyed Steve's discomfort, but he was funny sometimes.

"If there aren't any cameras, then how are you aware of what's happening with Steve?" she asked.

"He has asked that I monitor him through your cellular phone while you are apart, precisely because he wants the information available to you, should you feel you need it," Jarvis explained.

Estrella took a sharp breath. The ways that Steve showed her he cared were piling up into a mountain. He thought of almost everything, and then sent Jarvis with her for everything else.

"I love him," she said quietly.

"Yes, Miss," Jarvis said.

She stood in the empty locker room awash in feeling until she realized that she should be moving along to whatever was next. Jarvis waited with her patiently. There was a tiny white noise from the phone that let her know he was there.

"What do I do about not having a swimsuit?" she wondered.

"How comfortable are you with the Captain seeing you naked?" Jarvis asked.

She had to think about that. She very much wanted to be with him. If she could, she would have already liked to be with him completely, but he was denying them that. If she was honest with herself, she knew she wasn't ready, either. She wanted her fears gone or at least managed before then so she could fully enjoy being with Steve. Being naked with him shouldn't be a problem, because they almost had been yesterday.

They were sort of in public, but it felt private because they had the place to themselves. There were attendants, and Steve had shown remarkable restraint so far. He was a gentleman.

"I'm comfortable enough," Estrella said.

"You don't sound certain," Jarvis cautioned her.

"I'm not, but I'm going to do this anyway," Estrella decided.

"Then there is nothing for it but to proceed. There should be showers, and then a room with some combination of hot tub, sauna, and steam room. I believe the Captain will meet you there, just past the showers. He is extremely efficient at showering and is already waiting," Jarvis told her.

Nervousness shimmied through her, but Estrella walked toward the showers she could see beyond the locker room. She still felt clean from her bath last night, but the place was fastidious, so maybe they expected everyone to shower whether they needed it or not. She didn't like that she was stripping naked in an unsecured place where strangers could come at any time, but it felt safe. She set the phone on the bench with her towel just outside the shower.

"Jarvis, please tell me if anyone is coming," she said.

"I will, Miss," he promised.

She avoided getting her hair wet and tried to be 'efficient' as Jarvis said Steve was. It took some
washing to cleanse herself of all the slickness, and washing with slippery soap wasn't helping to make it any less. She did the best she could, then patted dry and got back into her robe. She picked up Jarvis and brought him with her.

As she approached the door from the showers, she saw someone through the frosted glass, and the door opened for her. A neatly attired androgynous person smiled pleasantly at her and indicated with a hand where she should go. A short hallway opened under an arch into a water room of milk-colored tile.

Steve was already in the heated, bubbling pool with his arms resting along the rounded stone edge. He looked to her with a sheepish expression.

"We should have brought our swimsuits," he said.

"How were we supposed to know?" she wondered rhetorically.

She walked to the stepped entry of the pool and slipped her feet out of the flip-flops. The attendants weren't here to see her, but Steve looked at her with friendly expectation. She looked down and aside as she untied her robe and let it slip down her arms.

"Ooh, God. Eya…" Steve said.

The fervent tone to his words made her want to look at him, but she resisted. There was a teak bench for her robe, and a stack of neatly folded towels on a stand. She laid her robe across the bench and slowly stepped down into the hot, turbulent water.

Steve gripped the stone edge and let the rest of his body roll once, in imitation of what it wanted to do. That was indulgence enough, so he made himself go loose and still. Breathing. He could do that. Estrella's demure refusal to look at him while she entered and got herself situated across from him fanned his fires even more. He'd seen her yesterday, but this was different. Yesterday was informal and playful. She'd had her top on and he'd been trying hard to see her as a whole person, not just as a beautiful dame.

He gave up on that. For the moment, she was a fantasy. Grace. Delicacy. Softness. Gentle, divine curves and the sweetest puffy nipples he'd ever seen. Her sleek black fur of pubic hair nestled in the cradle of her hips, those dusky pink nipples, her new dark nail color, and her golden skin and smooth curves had him desperately on edge.

Then she looked at him. His friend. His girl. Her eyes.

Steve leaned back to look at the ceiling because he couldn't take anymore and keep his dignity. He let go of the stone ledge because he could feel it shedding grit under the hard clamp of his fingers. Breathe. Just breathe.

Estrella kept quiet and let Steve calm himself. She was pleased with his reaction. She'd expected his restraint, but not the unabashed compliment he paid her with his natural response. The banked fire in his eyes when he finally looked at her again was a thrill and an honor. He stayed where he was, and she didn't go any closer to tease or tempt him. Sometimes she could do that with him, but not now.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No. Don't be," he told her.

He was just as magnificent to look upon as he seemed to think she was. Something that Bucky had
said about him kept her from displaying any effusive praise. Instead, she let him see her thinking what she’d like to do with him.

There was a dark area under the water, so she assumed he’d chosen to wear his underwear. It was just as well, because she was very tempted to go and touch the parts of him that she knew were hard and ready for her, as she was ready for him. She chewed the corner of her lip and frowned at his underwear in vexation.

"We gotta stop this, or I’m gonna need to leave you for a few minutes," Steve said.

She nodded and barely was able to control her feeling of feminine satisfaction. She didn't like vanity, but it was hard not to be pleased at how much he wanted her.

"Mona Lisa," Steve teased her.

She shook her head and did what she could to help them.

"Are we here for a massage? Massages?" she asked.

"That’s the plan. They said to get here an hour early, but I didn't expect all this," Steve played along with light conversation.

"Jarvis thinks this is typical. He knows what Pepper's routines are. Are we becoming like them? Like Tony and Pepper?" Estrella asked.

"No. Never. I don't want that kind of notoriety. I’ll do what I have to do, but other than that, I want a quiet life. What about you?"

"I haven't thought about what I want since I was a kid,' she said.

"Maybe you should start. I've always been reactive. Things happen, and then I deal with them. You've been the same. That's how it is when you're making do. I want more than that for you. For us. We should think about a future beyond survival and necessity," Steve said.

"Can we have that?" she asked.

"We're having it right now. I don't see why it has to stop," he told her.

"Plants. I want to grow things," Estrella said.

"Ya do? What kinds of plants?" he wondered.

"All kinds. Trees. Flowers. Vegetables. Did you know there are purple grasses? They make a big, spilling fountain of leaves, with feathery tails on top," Estrella said.

"Sounds like a jungle," he agreed.

"Apes belong in a jungle," Estrella grinned.

"Whoo-ooo," Steve cooed softly at her.

She laughed with delight. The idea of cavorting with him in a verdant garden was something she hadn't thought of yet. It was fun and sweet and hot and…bare skin in the sunshine on soft, green grass, salty sweat and the scent of flowers.

"Mmm," she hummed.
"We'll get you a garden," Steve said.

"No. A garden is not something you 'get.' It takes time and selection and care. I'll grow it," Estrella said.

"What do you want?" she asked him.

"My wants are simple. You and me and some peace here and there, and whatever that leads to," he said.

She was going to reply, but the power went out. There was a moment of complete blackness, and then amber emergency lighting came on in the corner of the room and the hallway beyond. The swirling of the water stopped, but it was still pleasantly hot.

"Hmph," Steve grunted.

The kind, androgynous attendant hurried into the room with a flashlight.

"I apologize for the interruption. If you'll gather your things, I'll lead you to the dressing rooms," she said.

"Is there any sudden danger, or is the power just out?" Steve asked lazily.

"It's only a power outage, Sir."

"Then light some candles. We're not afraid of the dark," Steve instructed.

"Yes, Sir," the woman said, and left the way she'd came.

Estrella looked at him in the dim amber light.

"What?" he asked.

"You're bossy," she said.

"People need direction sometimes. Everybody panics like it's the end of the world if there's an electrical interruption. I don't think a massage requires power tools," he said.

"It might, for you," she said.

Steve laughed.

"We're ready for your session, if you're sufficiently relaxed," the woman came back to tell them.

Steve got out of the pool and dried himself briskly. He wrapped a fresh towel around his waist and held another towel for Estrella. She stepped out of the water and noted that Steve didn't look at her before he wrapped her in the towel. He used another towel to rub her arms, shoulders, and legs dry. She was becoming accustomed to him handling her feet to get the sand off, but she wasn't prepared for him to kiss her feet, one then the other, before he set them down.

"Steve," she protested.

"Shh. Let me do," he told her.

Estrella picked up her robe because Steve's phone was in the pocket. They followed the attendant down a long, dark hallway. More amber light lit their way at the end, but they turned left into a
quiet candle lit room. There were two massage tables.

"Make yourselves comfortable. There is cool water if you're thirsty. Your therapists will be with you shortly," the woman said.

"You first, Eya. Lie down and I'll cover you. I won't look," Steve said.

"You could," she told him.

"I won't," he insisted.

Estrella dropped her towel and hung her robe on a hook. Steve lifted the towel folded across one of the padded massage tables and laid it across her bottom when she climbed up and lay on her belly.

"Who's going to hold the towel for you?" she asked.

"I'll manage," he said as he moved to the other table.

"I'm looking," she teased him.

"That's alright," Steve said.

He shucked his wet underwear and folded it atop the damp towels near her robe. In candlelight, his sculpted body looked archaic. Primal. Like he should be wearing furs and carrying a spear. She watched the play of muscles avidly as he got onto his table and tugged the towel across his ass with one hand.

Just then, two people entered.

One was a pretty young woman, and the other was a burly young man. He must be the 'footman' Jarvis had spoken of. Estrella smiled as they introduced themselves.

"Would you like to turn over, Miss? We usually begin with the front," the woman asked her.

Estrella's eyes flickered to the muscled young man. He smiled at her once, and then he turned his back to her to get some warmed oil and begin work on Steve. Steve looked at her placidly. He would support whatever she wanted to do.

Estrella turned carefully and let herself be exposed. With Steve here, she could do this. The woman made nothing of her exposure and merely resettled her towel across her lap, then joined the young man in getting some oil.

The massage tables were beside each other at the head with a little space in between so that Estrella could see and talk to Steve if she wanted to.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when the woman touched her shoulders gently with oiled hands.

"I didn't think about that, babe. You don't need to do this if it's bad for you," Steve said.

His masseuse was already pressing into the hard muscles of his shoulders.

"I'm okay. I'm not used to being touched, except by you," she said.

"I know, so you don't have to. It was only an idea, maybe a bad one. I wasn't thinking, I guess," Steve told her.
"Miss? Should I stop?" the woman asked her.

Her hands went still.

"No. Go on," Estrella said.

"May I remove your necklace?" she asked.

"No. Work around it," Steve told her.

"Yes, Sir," the woman said.

After that, there was silence except for the sounds of hands rubbing on oiled skin. Steve looked at her face, or at where the masseuse worked her arms, not at her chest. Estrella liked how Steve's eye's kept trying to roll shut. He was very obviously enjoying the massage.

"If you like it so much, I could learn," she told him.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but I doubt you'd have the upper body strength for him," the young man digging into Steve's muscles said.

"Thor could do it then," Estrella giggled to Steve.

"Hah!" he barked out a laugh, "The prince of Asgard working on me? I don't think so. Been there, done that. Bloodstains on the floor to prove it."

The man and woman exchanged glances, but they kept their mouths shut.


"I don't think you want Nat on me. I don't want that, either. I don't trust her not to take something while she's working. I don't care if she's strong enough," Steve denied.

"Bruce, then," Estrella suggested.

Steve laughed again. She liked how he was starting to sound relaxed.

"Bruce doesn't massage so much as pulverize. I'm sure you saw what he did to the East side of the Empire State," he said.

"No, you dunce. I mean Bruce," she corrected him.

"Oh. Yeah, that could work, but I don't want to take up his time. He's got more important things to work on than me. And I'm not so sure that Bruce is as separate as he thinks he is. Don't tell him that, though," Steve said.

"Should we be talking like this?" Estrella wondered with a glance at the people working on them.

The woman was making jelly out of her arms. Warm, splendid jelly. Relaxed jelly.

"It's alright. They're not regulars here. Tony flew them in," Steve said.

"Tony! Steve! You're both crazy!" she exclaimed.

"Sir, friendly conversation is encouraged, but excitement isn't good for deep relaxation," the
"Yeah. Sorry," Steve mumbled.

Estrella seethed at Tony. These people with money had no sense! To fly people into a storm just for a massage? She was going to tell him a few things when they got back.

"Miss, breathe with me," the woman said.

Estrella almost told her what she could do with her breathing, but then decided not to. Even worse than flying all the way to give somebody a massage was getting there and then having the person refuse the massage. She made the effort to relax and breathe deeply with the woman as her neck and temples were massaged. It was hard to stay tense through that.

There were a lot of candles, and it was easy to see that Steve had given up his struggle to stay coherent. The young man had laid his arms upward on the table and was working the muscles along the sides of Steve's chest. He noticed Estrella's regard and smiled at her in a friendly way. It felt very strange to have her chest exposed and be sexually ignored by a man who was standing right next to her. Estrella smiled back at him. He didn't have time to look at her for long, anyway. He moved down to the other end of Steve's table and started on his legs.

The woman rubbed her sides some, but she didn't have the muscles there that Steve had, and she was ticklish, anyway. She moved on to Estrella's legs. Estrella closed her eyes. She got nervous when the massage moved up her thighs, but nothing was done higher than where her towel covered her, so she relaxed again.

"If you turn, we can continue," she said.

Estrella enjoyed the massage, but mostly for the candlelit atmosphere and Steve's presence. She'd have just as much fun watching him get a massage without her being on a table. He occasionally groaned a little, or huffed out a breath, and frequently he opened his eyes to smile at Estrella.

"Get the glutes. Tony's right. I never can seem to relax them," he told the young man.

"They're a powerful muscle group, used for almost everything. Doing glutes thoroughly can hurt. Are you sure, Sir?" he asked.

"Get it done. I'm not fragile," Steve said.

"Yessir," he agreed.

Estrella tilted her head to look down the table at what the man was doing. What was the big fuss, she wondered?

"Your ass. You have him massaging your ass?" she asked.

"It's common in sports medicine, Miss. It's different for the ladies. If it disturbs you, I can stop?" he asked either Steve or Estrella.

Estrella looked to Steve. He didn't look like this was a kinky sex thing. He looked matter of fact and patient for her to decide.

"Go on," she told the masseuse.

Estrella enjoyed the backs of her thighs being worked, and then the woman moved up to the small
of her back and she closed her eyes.

Steve tried his best to relax and let the guy get to deep tissue. He was good and strong, but it was near impossible for Steve to completely let his guard down, even with people Tony had vetted.

"Sir, you seem to be having trouble loosening. Is something bothering you?" the young man asked.

It was ever so slight, but his firm hands glided a little closer down and center between his cheeks than they needed to. The touch was a hint too gentle, too.

"You best stick to business, son," Steve told him.

"Understood, Sir," he said with cool professionalism.

Geez, what did Tony use these people for, normally? He hadn't been expecting that kind of services. His masseuse returned to doing the best that he could against his partially tense muscles. He couldn't expect too much of the kid. It took a lot more than some rubbing to get him thoroughly loose. It was better than nothing, with the concerns he had on his mind.

When the massage was done, he told Estrella to leave the room with the attendants. She took her robe, and he was proud that she felt secure enough to go somewhere without him. She had Jarvis and he'd told J to listen in no matter what. He wrapped his towel around and followed back to the showers and dressing rooms when he was sure Estrella was clear of the hallway.

His masseuse, whom he'd at first taken for a spa employee, met him in the locker area.

"Mister Odinsson sent this for you. He said you'd know what it was. Shall I mix it with anything?" the man asked.

He held a flask that Steve recognized.

"Not now. I've gotta drive. Leave it on the bench," Steve said.

"Yessir. Is there anything else I can do for you?" the guy asked.

There was a ready look on the young man's face. Steve knew that when he said anything, he meant it.

"No. Thanks for your time," Steve told him.

"It's an honor, Sir," he said.

He bowed slightly and made a sharp turn. He left and Steve relaxed a little.

He felt good all over, and he was able to set aside the slight uneasiness he always felt when he was offered something from a guy. It happened. Guys were guys. It didn't mean anything.

Steve was quick to get most of the massage oil off of his skin, get dressed and join his girl. They left the spa and Steve escorted Estrella through the comparatively noisy mall.

"Is there anything else you want to do here?" he asked her.

"No. Could we go back to our room? I'm all warm and fuzzy. A nap would be good," Estrella said.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. The weather's worse. You wanna wait while I bring the truck?" he asked her as they neared the portico entrance.
The rain was so heavy that the visibility across the parking lot was severely diminished. Steve's eyes swept the crowd of people who were milling around inside. There was only so much to be done in a shopping mall. A lot of folks were simply waiting around for the storm to pass.

"I can go with you. We've got towels to dry off back in the room, and some in the truck, too," she said.

Steve's eyes caught on a group of three young Latino men. They were the same ones he'd seen standing on the street corner not far from Alberto's house a few days ago. He let his eyes keep moving. There were plenty of Latino people in the crowd. More than half of them were. People of all sorts. But those three had a look to them. They were too still. Trying too hard to look casual. They looked at Estrella a little too long.

"Good. Let's go," Steve said.

Estrella squealed and laughed at the cold, hard wind-driven rain, but she kept up with his jog through the parking lot to the truck. Steve kept his attention broad. Nobody else was in the lot with them. Nobody except the three Latino youths, still trying to look casual. They were headed to a car parked three rows away from the truck.

"Get the truck started for me, will ya? Keep the doors locked until I get back," he said to Estrella after he had her inside. He tossed her the keys across the seat.

She was grinning and wiping rain from her face. She lost her smile when she noticed his quiet demeanor. Steve stood in the open driver's door with the rain pounding on him and running off his nose. It wasn't the way people usually chose to stand in the pouring rain. He didn't care that the inside door panel of his truck was getting wet.

"Okay," she said.

He pressed the door lock button and shut her inside. He heard the truck start as he walked away. He kept his attention active, scanning. Just because he'd seen three didn't mean there were only three. They were already in their car with it started and ready to follow his truck as he drove away.

Their faces glared at him through the rain-sheeted windshield. They weren't making any sudden moves, just startled and unsure about seeing him coming for them across the lot. Did they really think he wouldn't have noticed them? Their confusion and inaction at his direct, aggressive approach told him that they didn't know who he was.

Steve drew his sidearm and fired two shots. One into the front tire of the car, and one into the back tire. Everybody probably carried a spare, but not two spares. The guys in the car finally got rowdy with the gunshots, and the driver shoved out of the car.

"What the hell are you doing to my car, man? Are you crazy?" he asked in heavily accented English.

Steve holstered his sidearm under the back of his shirt and manhandled the young man around until he was pressed to the car and he had good physical control of him. He saw tattoos. The other two got out of the car on the passenger side, ready to support their friend. All three had tattoos. Steve glanced at the tattoos, and around at the parking lot again. It was still just these three.

He tore the neck and sleeves of the driver's shirt and twisted his exposed arms and torso around to get a good look. He'd seen this kind of thing. Street gangs. Pride marks. He bounced the kid's head against the car roof and dropped him to the pavement, then he jumped over the car and grabbed the
other two. Some handling and tearing, and he found a lot of the same tats on the other guys.

"Get the fuck off, man! Hey, fuck you!" one said while he struggled uselessly.

The other one went pale and pissed himself. Steve found their phones in their back pockets and bent them in half. Unusable. That would give him and Eya a little more time to get away clean and unfollowed. He left the two guys conscious to help their buddy. Another quick scan showed him no firearms on them or in the car at easy access. He studied their faces more closely, then turned and walked away. Parking lot still clear.

There was some yelling behind him, but no footsteps. He walked on.

"What did you do? Did I hear gunshots?" Estrella asked him as soon as he got in the truck.

"Punks were gonna follow us. I shot their tires," Steve said.

He drove calm and careful away from the mall. He hated that Estrella was shaken by an unpleasant moment at the end of an otherwise great day.

"You recorded me singing," he said to make conversation at a red light.

"Yes I did. Steve. You shot somebody's tires. You're going to ignore that?" she asked incredulously.

"You want me to go back and make something of it? I can, if you'd feel safer," he offered.

"No! You've done enough. What if the police come?" she asked.

"Then I'll explain it to them, and they'll understand, but I don't think they'll come," he told her.

He took a longer route back to their hotel and watched his mirrors. Nobody was following. Some of the traffic lights were out, and the wind buffeted the truck, trying to push it sideways.

He got them to the hotel and didn't offer to set Estrella down in the portico. He parked around the side away from the view of the street. He wanted her with him from now on.

The hotel staff offered them towels just inside the doors in the lobby. Estrella took one and started to dry herself, and Steve stood and waited for her. She made a face and patted him down, too. That was good, because he wasn't going to distract himself with a towel. He was only wet. The hotel staff mostly weren't Latino, and the ones who were didn't have any visible tattoos.

Steve kept Estrella in front of him on their way to the elevator. People got out of their way, and he nodded his appreciation to them. He relaxed some when he got them inside their room and checked it. Everything was good. Undisturbed. He got his shield and wedged the edge of it into the frame along with the door.

"What are you doing?" Estrella asked him.

"We're secure. You can relax. Dry off if you want to," he told her.

"Why don't you relax?" she asked him.

"I'm relaxed. I'm good. Wanna watch some television? We can order a pizza later," Steve told her.

He took off his wet shirt and set his holster on the table. He got two towels from the bathroom area. One he sat on so he wouldn't get the upholstered chair wet. He used the other one while he
disassembled, cleaned and dried his pistol.

"I feel like I'm in a movie. We spent all day having people make us pretty, and then you shot something," she said.

"You didn't need anyone to make you pretty," Steve commented.

Estrella gave up trying to talk to him. If he was going to refuse to talk about what had happened in the parking lot, she'd stop asking him. She went to her suitcase, got dry clothes, then went into the bathroom to change.

She knew she was going to have to accept this harder side of Steve too, no matter that she liked the softer side of him better. She towed her hair dry some more and looked in the mirror to finger comb it until she was satisfied. Mostly, she was trying to calm down from hearing gunshots and dreading that they may have been fired at Steve instead of by him. That had been a horrible few minutes until he'd come back to the truck drenched but unharmed.

Estrella got into comfortable sleepwear and sat on the toilet lid until her hands stopped shaking. She took out her phone and selected the barbershop video she'd taken this morning. The soft Steve she liked was in it, not the hard, efficient man who was out in the room cleaning his gun.

She turned her phone volume down and played back the video. She'd been too surprised that Steve was singing at all to appreciate what he was singing. The first song they'd sung was short. Her videography wasn't the best, but she'd kept them all in the frame. Steve was so handsome and kind looking. There was sincerity in his eyes as he looked at the camera and sang. Looked at her and sang.

Now that she had time, she could hear him distinctly among the three other guys. The words of the song were clear and sweet, and his voice was beautiful. His eyes, just for her.

_I am dreaming_ Dear of you, day by day

_Dreaming when the skies are blue, when they're gray;_

_When the silv'ry moonlight gleams, still I wander on in dreams,_

_In a land of love, it seems, just with you._

_Let me call you 'Sweetheart', I'm in love with you._

_Let me hear you whisper that you love me too._

_Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true._

_Let me call you 'Sweetheart', I'm in love with you._

_Longing for you all the while, more and more;_

_Longing for the sunny smile I adore;_

_Bird are singing far and near, Roses blooming ev'rywhere_

_You, alone, my heart can cheer; You, just you._

_Let me call you 'Sweetheart', I'm in love with you._
Let me hear you whisper that you love me too.

Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true.

Let me call you 'Sweetheart', I'm in loove wiith youu.

When the song was over, there was glad comradery among the singers, but Steve kept looking at her every so often. He never looked at anyone else like that. She'd been smiling at the time the video was recorded, gobsmacked, amazed. He looked patient. Indulgent. Like he could wait for her to get the message.

Estrella dropped her phone and ran out of the bathroom. Steve was still sitting at the little hotel table, but he'd set his gun aside. He was turned toward the bathroom door like he was listening and hopeful. His hard look was gone, replaced by the same soft, nearly shy expression he'd had in the video while he sang.

He hugged her close when she came into his arms. He made room for her between his knees and scooted forward in the chair so they could be closer.

"Sweetheart, I'm in love with you," he said into her nightshirt, a touch of Brooklyn coming out with the strength of his emotion.

"I love you too," Estrella whispered to him.

"I love you," she repeated more strongly.

Her hands travelled over all of him that she could reach, claiming him and soaking in the feel of him. He hugged her carefully and rubbed his face into the softness of her chest. Their touch was enthralling. Addictive. She wanted more. If he felt this good through their clothes, she had to know what their skin would feel like together.

Estrella urged him up from the chair and toward the nearest bed. Steve spread his hands on her back and held her to him at the chair. She frowned at him in disappointment and tugged at the bulk of his shoulders again, her fingers digging in gently as if she had any hope of moving him.

"I can't get in a bed with you tonight, Eya. I'm burning," he said.

Steve guided her hand to rest against his throat. He was hot and the strength of his heart pounded through the veins near the surface of his skin. He looked bright and angelic, but blazing like a sword across the path into Eden. She gasped and squirmed in the strength of his arms. The delight she knew she'd find with him was so close, but so impossible. He wouldn't let them.

Steve got up and laid her across her bed, and then he moved to lie on his. They rolled belly down and stared at each other in the lamplight. More than just what their bodies wanted, she could see all kinds of unspoken things in his eyes. He reached his hand into the space between the beds. She twined her fingers among his and they forgot to order pizza for a long time.

The tropical storm pushed and howled and spattered outside the window and it was a good background for the way they were feeling. After they remembered to eat, Steve cleared the night stand of everything but the lamp and set it between them. They played cards quietly with a deck that Steve got from his suitcase.

When Estrella started drooping and yawning, he put away the cards and set the room to rights for the night. His shield stayed wedged in the door, but his reassembled pistol went under his spare pillow, minus the holster.
"Sweetheart, you gotta stay over there in the morning," he said after he turned the lights off.

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly.
Chapter 42

Estrella whimpered in her sleep. She felt unbearably aroused. Steve was teasing her, always teasing in her dreams. Her body shifted on the bed, seeking any sort of relief. Dream images of him holding her, kissing her, his hands wandering slowly toward where she needed them most amplified her longing. Always, his attentions would tease, and then draw away.

A low moan of anguish sounded in the hotel room, and she murmured his name with pleading tones. Her legs shifted against each other and her hands travelled her body in an effort to satisfy the need.

Nothing helped. Even in her sleep, her mind recognized her own touch as too soft, too familiar to be what she needed. Her fists balled in frustration and she growled in hollow torment.

"Steeve, please!" she called to the man in her dreams.

This was the best dream yet. It wasn't some faceless female body this time. His mind had gifted him his own girl to play with. Estrella was erotic and beautiful, and so realistic in detail that he could smell her.

Her body showed him in plain language that she wanted the same thing he did. He lowered his weight onto her bed and then shifted over her. Since she was so real and he loved her, he didn't want to hurt her, even in his dreams. His strength effortlessly nudged her restless thighs apart and he captured her under him.

The sweetness of her voice saying his name shredded any thoughts he might have had about her fears. The Estrella in his dreams was ready for him, and there was no reason to deny them what they both wanted. It was only a dream, and he could have what he wanted in dreams. He carefully but firmly gripped her in a carnal hug and pressed his hips forward to find the heat he knew she'd have for him.

Underwear? Confusion pushed him a little further toward consciousness. He'd never had the impediment of underwear in his sex dreams. His fist reached and ripped his shorts out of the way. Estrella's voice changed. She still sounded sweet and compelling, but there was a rising urgency to her tone.

He started to wake from the dream when her hand fumbled for her necklace on the night stand and the alarm clock clattered to the floor. Little details like that didn't matter. The mind was a weird place. This was his sex dream, and he wanted to ignore the weird stuff so he could get to the good part faster. Her cotton panties were still in the way, so he rested his weight on an elbow and slid his hand down her taut belly. A finger hooked in the fragile fabric and one little jerking motion would get him access.

Estrella bit her lip against making any more frightened sounds. The dim morning light through the hotel curtains showed her that Steve was mostly asleep. His barely open, drugged eyes regarded her with wonder. He was gentle, but inescapable in his intentions. Her attempts to push him off were completely ineffective and likely not even noticed by him.

She'd never thought to see that look of complete animal dumbness on his dear features, but his state of partial consciousness allowed it to happen. She'd seen him aroused many times, but right now his sharp wit and awareness were asleep at the wheel.
Estrella sighed. She'd known this would happen sooner or later. It was her fault for taking off her necklace to sleep, she reasoned. She didn't want to hurt him to make him stop. It seemed cruel to stab him with such terrible pain while he was mostly asleep and vulnerable.

His weight pressed her down, and the mere discomfort of his firm hug turned into pain when he pressed his hips and his erection forward against her. She was aroused and tender, and the friction of dry cotton between them pulled at delicate skin. The pressure of him pushing at her for entry overcame her ability to stay calm.

This was only Steve, but it hurt. He was over her and he wasn't stopping. His hand ripped at clothing and she saw the flutter of his shorts fall to the floor. She didn't want this. Not like this. Fear sharpened her voice and biting her lip didn't stop the sharp whines of denial from humming through her throat. She scrabbled for her necklace on the night stand, but she feared it was already too late. He was too deeply under the influence of her voice.

Steve tried to get into her again, and this time it was only her underwear in the way. Without his shorts, the blunt force of his penis battered and stretched at her panties. If it felt good, she wouldn't have known, because panic was rising in her. Her thighs tried in vain to push him back, and her hands shoved at his shoulders.

His brow furrowed and his large, hot hand skimmed down her belly. She knew she had maybe a second or two before he ripped at fabric again, and then there would be no barrier. He felt terribly strong and harsh against her. Fingertips snagged at her panties. She knew he'd never forgive himself, even though she already did.

"No! Wake up!" she shrilled at him in a half-hearted, miserable yell.

Steve's body jackknifed atop her, and she barely had time to push him sideways before he would have mashed her into the bed with his weight. She tried to get completely out from under him but she was caught up, tangled in his legs.

His arm uncurled from its spastic clench and he gripped her hip with a hand. It hurt. Too much pressure. He began to shove her back underneath him.

"Nooo! Steve! Wake up!" she yelled and beat at him with her fists.

"Nnfff!" he grunted, and he was suddenly off of her and away.

Steve stumbled toward the wall opposite the beds. He was bent and pressing at his inner thighs as if his groin was too hurt and tender to touch. He muttered something and hit the wall hard enough to jigggle the framed hotel art.

Estrella pushed herself back against the headboard of the bed and watched him cautiously. The open bathroom door wasn't far away. She might make it inside if he came at her, but she probably wouldn't. The bathroom door wouldn't hold against him anyway.

She watched as Steve shook his head and stood hunched over and braced on his knees. His ribs heaved with his breath and he didn't seem to notice or care that he was naked from the waist down. His head turned so that his eyes gleamed at her through the dimness.

A quick grab retrieved her necklace now that she could turn her head to see it dangling off the edge of the night stand. She pressed it to her throat and didn't bother with the clasp.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him.
"Nn,' was all Steve could vocalize.

He shook his head and lifted a finger at her in denial.

Now that he looked awake and pained rather than dumb, she had a moment to assess their situation. She felt a little sore from his restraining hug. Her hip hurt where his hand had pushed at her. Her legs felt bruised where they'd tangled against his. Her labia burned mildly from his unsuccessful shoving.

"I was making noises in my sleep. This isn't your fault," she told him.

"Did I hurt you?" Steve asked.

His voice was deep and rough, as it had been after the last time she'd screamed at him.

"No. I'm okay," she fibbed.

It was only bruising. Nothing was broken.

Steve made himself straighten up despite the lingering pain. He went to his suitcase and ripped it open vigorously enough to break the zipper. With angry, jerky motions he pulled on a clean pair of underwear. He strode to the light switch and turned it on, then he came again to her bed.

He watched her eyes cautiously as he approached, but he didn't slow down. He was fully awake now, and angry at himself. Estrella knew what was coming. She relaxed back against the pillows and spread her arms and legs to let him do as he would.

Steve stood rigid beside her and bent only enough to touch her. He oh so carefully pushed up her night shirt and manipulated her body around to look at her skin. She could feel the extreme care he was using in handling her. He checked her over like a field medic.

He was still hard and full in his boxer briefs, but she had no concerns that he was going to further assault her. This was the brisk, serious Captain. He didn't linger in touching her. He tugged her shirt down, then he tucked her under the bedcovers and snapped them up under her chin.

She watched as he shoved his legs into a pair of pants from his suitcase. He pulled on a shirt and reached for his wallet. That went into his back pocket and he looked around for his shoes.

"Don't go," she told him.

Her fingers worked the clasp of her necklace, and then she slid out of bed to get in the way of him putting his shoes on. She shoved at his shoulders where he sat on the foot of his bed. He gave her a pained, rueful look.

"You shouldn't just forgive me like that," he grumbled.

"Why? You didn't do anything. Don't be stupid. This is simple to fix, Steve. I won't take off my necklace when I sleep, so it won't happen again. Don't over-react," she told him.

"You've got red marks. You're gonna bruise," he complained.

"Not for long, because somebody made it so that I heal," she said with a little wiggle of attitude.

She squeezed between his knees and pushed at his folded arms. He eventually loosened his arms and she tugged his stiff body against her. He stopped resisting her when she rubbed her chest against his face and pushed her fingers into his hair.
He was going to be cranky. His jaw was set and his lip was slightly pouty. It wasn't a good look, now that he was shaved clean and had his hair done so that he looked like the Captain all the time. Just to prod him, she rubbed the poke of her nipple at his lips.

"Eyaaa," he drawled, but his lips couldn't resist tugging at her through her shirt.

Estrella gave a little squeak at the thrill of sensation, but she smiled at the sensual loosening of his mouth. She rubbed his jaw until he nuzzled at her affectionately.

"Not your fault. Well, maybe it's your fault for making me have sexy dreams about you," she gently teased him.

"How can you say that? I almost raped you. Just like every other sleazebag who hurt you," he grated.

"No you didn't. I didn't let you. I could have stopped you sooner, but I hesitated. I didn't want to hurt you," she told him.

He rolled his eyes at her in a very un-Captain like manner.

"Hush. Stop what's in your head. We're fine. Now tend to this," she told him.

Estrella captured his head in her hands and turned his mouth fully against her. She lifted her soft sleep shirt and nudged her breast at his lips. A crease still lingered on his brow and he glanced up at her face with reproach, but he couldn't resist the softness of her skin for long.

"Mmmm," he hummed, and he gave in to lavishing attention on her nipple.

She gasped as the pleasure of his licking and sucking made her forget about the aches his rough handling had caused her. There was a bit of tooth, but he soothed the sharp feeling away almost as if the nip had been intentional. She looked down at his face. It had been intentional.

She made a face at his stubborn attitude. Yes, she knew that he thought she shouldn't simply forgive him and carry on like this, but she was going to. She wanted something good to come after the bad, for both of them. They'd both been hurt.

"Are you sore?" she asked him as she put her knees up on the bed to either side of his hips.

"Am I sore? Did you take one to the head? Eya, I'm-" Steve began to say.

His hands shifted restlessly against her. He wanted to push her off, but he didn't.

"Hush with that. I don't want to grind on you if you're sore. Answer the question, Papi," she told him with a hard pout of disapproval for his delayed answer and a roll of her hips against him.

"I-I don't think I'm sore. Papi?" he asked.

Estrella was making him crazy again. He should be out in the hall standing guard until she was dressed and ready for the day. He should stay away from her until he had a plan made to keep from nearly raping her again. They needed to practice with her raw voice some more so he could build up a better resistance to it, if that was possible. He needed to be stronger. It was a bad idea to sleep in the same room, the same space. He could try to control his mind while he was unconscious, but he wasn't sure how to do that yet. Maybe he could find something about it on the internet...Steve's thoughts spooled out in a meander of guilt and worry.
Estrella pulled her shirt up and off, and then he had his arms full of almost naked girl. She pulled his hair to tilt his head back and he welcomed the sting at his scalp. The beauty and sensation of her chased his troubled thoughts away. His lips felt the tug and bite of her teeth and her hips settled on him. Maybe he was a little sore from the ache of her voice, but it still felt good to have her soft heat resting on him. It was rude of him to nudge against her after what he'd almost done, but she seemed to like him doing it. Her response was to press down harder on him and wiggle her hips in a way that made his mind go fuzzy around the edges. No more thinking.

"Eya," was all he managed to say, carefully timed between her kisses.

"Shut up and let me. It's my turn, Steve. You don't get to tease me all the time. Lay back," she pushed at him and he slowly lay down under her.

He was physically compliant, but he stubbornly refused to ogle her bare skin. She bit her lip and sensually undulated her body over him. Her lip tugged against her teeth in a smile when he couldn't keep his eyes from watching her move.

Her hands pushed up at his shirt and undershirt while she slowly ground their bodies together. Steve's hands jerked on the bed, then stilled, and he looked at her defiantly for one last time.

"It's my turn, dirty boy. You think you can get yourself off until you're dripping with it, but I have to watch you prance around teasing me, and then you want me to be a good girl," she fussed at him with a gleam in her eyes.

"Teasing? I don't tease you. I-"


Steve swallowed down an answering sound and manfully avoided pushing up into her. She'd said she wanted him to let her, so he would. He was entranced by her beauty, the way she moved, the way she made him feel when she moved on him. What had she said? Something that wasn't true... Something he should refute.

"I gotta live, doll. Breathing and walking isn't teasing," he denied.

"It is, the way that you do it. Your lips parted, begging to be bitten, your eyes focused on something in the distance while your brain thinks up trouble. When you move, your shoulders... your hips... nngh. Steve. I want," she crooned.

A shudder went through her and she jerked hard against him. Her hands dragged down his exposed ribs to his belly, where her fingers tried to dig in against the hard muscle and soft skin. His body flexed subtly. She felt it in his muscles more than it was visible.

"The power in you. Mmm, Papi, how hard could you fuck?" she asked with a lip-bitten moan.


She laughed, and she rode him harder. The layers of dry fabric between them were saturating with her slickness, and the size and hardness of him gave her just the right pressure to rub against. She grabbed his hands and was aware of his slight resistance as she placed them over her breasts. Dear boy. He didn't want her to say naughty words, and he didn't want to disrespect her. Estrella leaned forward onto her hands over him.

"Touch me," she ordered him.
"Yes, Ma'am," Steve said with a grin in his drawl.

His hands skinned over her skin too softly, almost a tickle. He cupped her breasts, then rubbed them lightly as her body rolled against him. She nudged his chin up and sucked in a bite of skin at the side of his strong throat. His breathy vocalization of approval had her nibbling and licking at him harder.

Her mind took off with fantasy as his body flexed slightly under her. He was hardly moving, but she imagined it. What would it be like to have him really moving, bucking fully within her? His beautiful body working, and those soulful eyes expressing to her everything he was feeling.

She sucked hard at his skin and felt his pulse jumping against her bottom lip. So alive! She felt powerful. Her orgasm approached, lingered, then passed while she called out and twitched against him, half satisfied.

Estrella made an ambiguous sound, part purr, and part disappointed hum. It was good, but she'd wanted more.

Steve was vibrating under her. She slid aside from him and reached for his pants button and zipper. He rolled to his side to face her and brushed her hands away. In a half second, he had himself exposed and in hand.

He handled himself fast and rough. His upper arm jostled the bed against her shoulder. She looked into his heated gaze and she wanted him to come just as much as she'd wanted relief for herself. Maybe more.

"Please. I want to see," she urged him.

Steve wiggled the bed harshly with a shove and a leap, and then he had her pressed onto her back. He sat astride her hips, and his heels took most of his weight. Rather than feeling trapped, she felt like she had a front row seat. Though she'd just come, the heady eroticism of watching him stroke himself made her squirm against the bed.

Her hands reached for him, but he flicked them away. The bones of his fingers stung her a little bit, but she knew he hadn't meant to be rough. He tended to be either too gentle or too excited when he was aroused. She took the pain and turned it into raw sensation in her mind, nothing negative.

She hated his shirts right now. His muscles were full of blood, pumped with the promise of sex, and he strained against the stretchy fabric as his arm moved. She wanted to see how his arm moving caused all the rest of him to work in response, but he was covered up. Even his legs denied her the bare skin she wanted. In contrast, his penis was shockingly bare and jutting. Not that she could see much of it, with his hand moving so fast.

Steve didn't deny himself the sight of her anymore. Estrella noticed the greedy hunger of his regard as he looked, so she caressed her skin as firmly as she'd wanted him to earlier, pressing her breasts up into prominence. Her fingers twiddled her nipples and she had a momentary wish that she could lick them. She wanted to lick his. She wanted to lick anything.

Steve made a rough sound and his hips jerked forward. The fire in his eyes showed his imminent pleasure, and his hand flew faster, harder. His eyes shifted around, searching.

"No. On me. On me!" she insisted.

He made a rough sound of agreement, and then there was no more time to communicate anything.
Hot liquid hit her skin, her cheek and neck, onto her chest and over her belly and hip. She loved the abandoned groan he gave, and the almost little-boy look of disbelief he had at seeing his come spatter her skin. She could tell that he liked it a lot.

"Mmmm," he said with deep satisfaction.

"What's that, baby?" she asked him.

He had a clench in his jaw that she'd learned meant that he was holding something back. His eyes flickered up to her face, away from where he'd been watching his semen puddle on her skin. His stroking hand finally slowed to a stop, fisted around the end of him in some sort of last minute modesty.

"Hmm?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard her.

Estrella loved watching his breathing huff out through his lips, his respiration pattern quickly returning to normal. She was still displeased at his shirts being in the way.

"Stinker! I see you thinking. Evading. What did that 'mmmm' really mean? If you'd opened your mouth, what would have come out of it?" Estrella asked him.

Steve gave her a sly, contemplative look and his free hand reached to swirl a finger against her skin in a particularly large slick of his mess on her belly. She could see that all kinds of secretive male thoughts were flying in his head, and he was resisting telling her.

"Tell m-"

"Mine," he growled, low and possessive.

His finger swirled the slippery fluid around and around her navel, then into it. Oh, yeah. He was thinking hard. His eyes travelled up her body, lingering on her curves and her breasts, until he met her eyes with a mix of hesitancy and defiance. He was unsure what she would think of his claim on her.

Estrella smiled at him. He was right. She felt like she was his. She wanted to be his. Her hand spread over her hip, and they both watched her fingers slip across skin and to a different spot of his come. She lazily rubbed it into her skin, and spread it between her forefinger and thumb. His heat lingered in the substance for what seemed like longer than it should.

She gathered a smear on her fingertip and brought it to her lips.

"Mine," she agreed, and sucked the taste of him into her mouth.

Steve watched her jaw move as her tongue gathered all of him from her finger. She wanted him, too. Unspoken was the primal meaning of their agreement, but both of them understood without using extra words. This. This meant something. It wasn't vows at an altar, but it was something. She would stay, because she wanted all of him. Even though he'd almost made a terrible mistake and hurt her.

"You're too good to me. You're too good for me," Steve said.

Estrella laughed. As she lay there with his fluids cooling on her skin, she covered her chest with her hands. He was adorable in his earnest delusion. No one could be too good for him. She merely shook her head in denial. The moment didn't feel like it should be filled up with words.
Steve got distracted looking at the bare canvas of her skin, painted with his semen. Now that his higher brain function was returning, he wanted to clean her up and make her comfortable. It was embarrassing, how he found himself doing something as crude as marking her up with his seed, and then reveling in the sight of it. She wasn't a possession to be collared and marked and owned. Yes, she is!, something in the root of his brain insisted, and she owns you. The part of his personality that he was not proud of was smugly pleased with those thoughts, even the ones about Estrella owning him.

"What are you looking so saucy about?" Estrella asked.

Steve shoved away the unworthy thoughts and shook his head. He helped Estrella to her feet beside the bed. He got his torn shorts from the floor to wipe her mostly dry so she could go and shower without getting anything on the carpet.

"Beautiful," he said behind her as he followed to wash his hands.

Estrella's first reaction to his compliment was to fuss at him for objectifying her and making too much of her looks, but then she remembered that she'd been objectifying him too. She reminded herself that it wasn't really objectification to admire the beauty of the person you loved. Steve would never walk behind a random woman, stare at her ass and verbally compliment her on it. He only did that with her because he felt the freedom in their relationship to do so.

She turned before she shut herself in the bathroom. Steve looked aside from where he was washing his hands at the sink. His gaze kept wanting to linger over her exposed breasts, but he politely looked her in the eyes.

She smiled at him, then touched his chin to pull him over for a sweet, chaste kiss. Steve's lips pressed soft against hers, and they drew apart when their smiles made kissing impossible.

"I love you," he said while he dried his hands.

"I love you too, but you have to think about those compliments. If you tell me things like that, then I get to tell them back to you when I want," she pointed out.

Steve reluctantly nodded because he didn't think he'd be able to avoid telling her how amazing he thought she was. He'd think it, and then it came out of his mouth. He didn't want to stop complimenting her, so he'd have to put up with whatever she said in return. She rubbed his stubbly cheek one last time, then shut herself in the bathroom to shower.

Estrella enjoyed touring the botanical garden, but Steve was distracting. This was the first moment in their relationship when she wished he'd back off a little and give her some space. She loved being close to him, but how could she focus on other things when he was drawing her attention away?

"Amorphophallus titanum," Steve read the label of the alien-looking plant they were looking at, "that means 'huge unshapely penis.' Doesn't anybody know that they've got kinky stuff right out here for everybody to see?"

Estrella sighed.

"It's not a problem, because nobody knows Latin except you and the gardeners. Is there any language you don't know?" she asked.
"Knowing Latin isn't a serum thing. I got that way before. It's an old Catholic thing. You're one of those new-age Catholics. You didn't have a nun harping Latin vocabulary words at you in school. Still, that's pretty racy to be right there on a plant tag," he said.

Estrella let his remark about post Vatican II Catholicism pass without comment. He seemed to be spoiling for a fight today, and she refused to give him one.

"It's a plant that's known for its huge flower. Flowers are sex. That's their sole purpose. Kind of like you, lately," she said.

She couldn't help but giggle at his flummoxed expression. He so wanted to argue with her, but he couldn't. Not right now. It wouldn't be honest. As they walked along the path among the lush and storm-battered vegetation, she noted his look of self-disgust and the slight blush of color high on his cheekbones. It wasn't a full blush, but it told her that he was bothered by her observation about him.

"I didn't mean that in a bad way. I like you like this. It's fun to be with you. So much better than the stuffy old Captain," she said.

Steve nodded and shoved his hands in his pants pockets. He looked at the plants she seemed to be interested in. She wondered if this was like shopping with him. Was he going to remember what she liked and then order plants for her that would show up in New York? She hoped not.

"You know that almost all of these plants won't grow in New York, don't you? It's too cold there for them," she said, just in case.

"I didn't know that, but now I do. Thanks," he said.

Estrella was suspicious of what the speculative look on his face meant. He was probably thinking of something. Planning.

"Stop it!" she fussed at him.

"Stop what?" he wondered.

"Stop thinking! I can't even pay attention to the plants I'm here to see. You're making me crazy!" she said, and she poked at him until he took his hands out of his pants pockets defensively.

"That makes two of us, then," Steve said with a bratty smile.

"Ooohh! Go away. I can't think with you thinking next to me. I want to enjoy the garden," she complained.

Steve laughed. She couldn't help but smile at him. He was so handsome in the morning sunlight among all the green, growing things. He looked strong and confident. Happy, but watchful. He kept fidgeting, and his eyes kept looking around.

"You didn't work out today. Or yesterday, either. We've been eating like hogs. Do you need to go to a gym or something?" she asked him.

"You noticed that, huh? I'm sorry, Eya. I didn't realize that it would be hard to relax on vacation. I'm used to exerting myself more than this. I'll be fine. We can go back to camping on the beach tonight and I can run or swim tomorrow morning," Steve assured her.

"Okay, but you're on my nerves. There's paths here. You could go walk faster or something while I
see the gardens," she suggested.

Steve looked to her phone, which was in her back pocket. He looked around again. There was just one family pretty far ahead of them on the path. It was a Latina mom with three small children.

"Alright, but call or text if you need me. I won't be far away, and I can get to you fast," Steve agreed.

"Go" she said and waved her hand off toward the path.

He actually blew her a kiss with his tempting pink lips before he strode away. She wasn't going to tell him that he had a hickey on his neck. He probably already knew. He couldn't have missed it while he was shaving and looking in the mirror. She got lost in watching him walk away up the path. She shook her head and turned her attention to the collection of bromeliads displayed among rugged rocks and driftwood.

She had time to read three plant tags before a commotion of children's voices drew her eyes gain. She looked along the path to see that Steve had stopped to give autographs and talk with the little family. Almost everybody was recognizing him today, since he'd made an effort at the mall to have himself done up to look more like the Captain. He'd done that on purpose, and she wondered why. It wasn't like him to seek attention while he wasn't on duty. He'd already given out about a dozen autographs so far this morning. Estrella scowled at him for keeping her distracted, even when he was a hundred feet away from her.

She made herself turn back to the plants she was here to see. The botanical garden was strewn with shredded and torn green leaves, and everything looked soggy and well-watered. There were puddles along the path which she avoided stepping in. She really wanted to splash in the puddles like a little kid because she was happy, but she didn't. Steve would look, and he didn't need any encouragement to act up. He was already wound tight, an accident waiting to happen. Goofy boy. Poor man.

"Oooh! Stop thinking about him!" she fussed aloud at herself.

She stomped her foot, and turned to look at the plants yet again. Steve laughed across the way as he was walking. He'd heard her quiet words. Estrella's eyes squinted in annoyance. She managed to make her way along the path toward the greenhouse. She smiled and nodded a polite greeting to the mom and kids who were still a-dither about encountering Captain America, and let herself into the warm, humid glass building.

A coo of wonder escaped her lips at the blooming tropical gingers and orchids everywhere. There were butterflies! Blue ones! There was a koi pool with a rock waterfall, and a bridge over the water. Estrella grinned hugely at the lush beauty of the space around her. Bananas and the huge leaves of exotic elephant ears and other plants she'd never seen before waved at her in the breeze of the greenhouse ventilation fans. An orange and yellow butterfly landed on a ginger flower near her and she watched it uncurl its long purple tongue and drink nectar from the flower.

The air smelled of flowers and earthy humus, and-

"Eeeee!" she screamed.

A large shape blocked the sun for an instant as it fell from somewhere up high and landed with a thump behind and beside her. She turned to face the danger, only to find a grinning Steve there. His hands were smudged with something and he laughed.
"Don't do that! Where did you come from? You're a pest!" she yelled at him, and her eyes shifted around to see how he possibly could have gotten above her. There were only a few tiny places he could have grabbed onto in the greenhouse, and what the heck had he been hanging from up there? She didn't see anything…

"Heh. Steel structure. It was fun. I love watching you in here. You really like plants, don't you? And butterflies," he said.

"Don't wipe your hands on your pants!" Estrella fussled as he moved to wipe his dirty hands.

"Okay. Was that alright? Do you still want me to scare you?" he asked her.

Estrella huffed a breath, then bit her lip to keep from fussing anymore.

"That was good," she admitted.

He looked more engaged and energetic now, almost bouncing on his heels. His attention was fully on her in a way that she couldn't look away from. He was all tightly restrained kinetic energy, waiting for a reason to erupt.

"I could get some exercise chasing you. It might be fun in here. There are lots of secret nooks and places to pass through and climb over," Steve offered hopefully.

"No, you couldn't, because I won't run. That wouldn't even be fun for you, Steve. I'm no challenge," she pointed out.

"Not much challenge, but I can give you a head start, hide my eyes, maybe. The rewards when I find you would make it fun," he said with a grin.

"No. I don't want to play hide and seek in here. The plants are delicate, and you'd break them," she said.

"I wouldn't. I'm not clumsy," he denied.

He looked like a whiny little boy, though his tone of voice was reasonable. Was he doing that thing with his eyes and his lashes on purpose? She wanted to suck on his bottom lip because of the way it stuck out ever so slightly. He wasn't playing fair!

Estrella looked around. There was a dense stand of banana trees that made a dark shade under and behind its overhanging leaves. There was a side path. It was narrow, and monstrously huge elephant ear leaves blocked the path behind the bananas like tender, ruffled green shields.

"Come," she said.

She held out her hand to Steve and led him under the banana trees, which even she had to duck down for. Then they carefully pushed through the rubbery elephant ear leaves. The white translucent greenhouse wall was to one side of them, and foliage closed them in on all the other sides.

Steve smiled at the nook she'd found for them, then pulled her close to him.

Estrella melted into his kiss. He tasted fresh, of water and toothpaste. She shared with him the clean herbal taste of the parsley leaves she'd stolen and chewed. They kissed slow and sensual, enjoying the texture of tongues and soft skin. His hands closed around her hair to hold her, and she pushed her fingers under his shirt to get at his belly.
"Hmm," Steve agreed.

Their teeth barely touched, and she felt a momentary hum of vibration from the contact.

"Steve, you're shaking," she pulled back to say.

"Yeah. Sorry. Can't seem to help it. I think it's my body trying to burn off the extra energy," he murmured, then he kissed her again.

She hugged closer to him and felt what the long hem of his Henley was concealing.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked on a whisper.

A sulfur-yellow butterfly flitted by and distracted her with its cute rounded wings.

"I'm good. Don't worry about it," Steve told her.

He kissed her again, and she slid her arms around to enjoy the girth of him, the breadth of his shoulders. His hands slipped down to her bottom, and she jumped away before he could grab her. Steve frowned at her denial.

"Your hands! I'm wearing light colored jeans, and I don't want dark, dirty handprints showing on my butt all day," she said.

"Oh. Yeah. Hey, you know we're not really hidden back here. Our feet are showing to anyone who comes along. Oldest mistake in the book," he said.

"Kissing isn't a jailable offense. Let's do the nature trail, and then we can go so you can see the art museum," Estrella suggested.

Mosquitoes chased them along the walking trail, and they hurried back to the visitor's center where Steve washed the dirt of climbing the greenhouse off his hands. Two more people wanted his autograph, and one of them looked to Estrella for a moment, which was a bit odd. Usually, she was invisible to other women when Steve had their attention. She could see that Steve made note of it, but he didn't do anything or say anything about it. It was weird, but it probably didn't mean anything.

A short ride in the truck brought them to the art museum. There was hardly anyone there beyond the receptionist, who was a stuffy old woman. Estrella kept quiet and let Steve enjoy the sculptures and the photographs and the paintings. There were some large works made with lots of different colors, textures and media that she found interesting in that way that abstract art made you think about things.

They were almost ready to go when a bunch of people crowded into the gallery doors, and hurried off to a room along the hall. Steve looked to the receptionist curiously. The older lady looked up from her magazine.

"It's clay day for the public. Happens every Thursday morning at ten. You're welcome to go join, if you want," she told them.

"Clay," Estrella said with some enthusiasm.

She'd always wanted to work with clay and play with the squishiness. She'd just been getting into ceramics class in high school when the terrible things had happened and she had to run away from home.
"You wanna try clay?" Steve asked indulgently.

She nodded.

"Then let's go do clay," he agreed.

There was a mix of pre-school children and moms, home school families, and some older folks in the workroom off of the hall. There was a cheery young man who was instructing people to put on smocks and helping little ones dig out hunks of wet clay from a large tub.

Steve and Estrella joined the group and everyone was too enthusiastic to get started to pay any attention to them at first. Steve sat at one of the available clay throwing wheels that nobody seemed to want to use, and Estrella shook her head at him when he gestured to the empty wheel beside him that she could have used. She sat at the nearby sturdy work table. She put on a teal green smock to protect her clothes and tossed one to Steve. They waited until the line to get clay got short, and then they got up to stand and wait behind the last of the youngsters.

Estrella took a moderate amount of clay from the tub, and the instructor urged her to get more. She did so, and then she moved aside to let Steve get his. She watched while he reached in and got a large-handed scoop of gray-brown clay. He weighed the clay in his hand, then got a little bit more.

The instructor, whose name tag said "Dave," was making happy and helpful small talk, and then he looked up at Steve's face.

"You look like you know something about ceramics. Do you have a studio?" Dave asked.

"Nah. I mostly do pencil work, some charcoal, and if I have enough time, paint. Clay should be fun, though," Steve said.

"If it's your first time with clay, you might be more comfortable with hand forming, rather than throwing. The wheel can be a challenge the first few times you try it. I wouldn't want you to go away frustrated from your first experience," Dave said.

His face was starting to get that confused, thoughtful look that came right before a pronouncement of 'Oh my God, you're Captain America!' Just as he was opening his mouth to speak, Steve smiled conspiratorially and touched a finger to his lips.

"Shh. Don't you think it would be more fun to let the kids notice?" Steve asked.

"Uh…Yeah," Dave whispered, looking dazzled.

Estrella giggled softly and took her clay to her table. Steve went to his chosen throwing wheel.

The kids were pretty loud, but Dave moved to the brightly lit front of the room, in front of the huge dry erase board and got everyone's attention.

"Good morning! Does everyone know what method they're using today? Pinch, or coil, or slab? That's great! I see a lot of familiar faces in here. Hi, Tommy!" Dave waved kindly to a boy in a wheelchair who appeared to have Down's syndrome. Tommy wiggled, smiled big, and waved his hand back at Dave.

"Good morning, Tommy!" most of the class greeted Tommy loudly.

"Mornin! Mornin!" Tommy replied with a happy bob of his head. Tommy's mother smiled at the show of affection and recognition her son received.
Dave went to explain clay forming methods to a pair of pre-teen sisters who looked hesitant, and Steve looked over to see if Estrella wanted help getting started. Estrella was already forming coils with her hands against the tabletop, so he figured she was getting along just fine without any instruction. Steve found the power switch for the electric wheel and flipped it. His hands molded his hunk of clay into a ball.

"Putting it on the wheel is usually done when the wheel is still," Dave walked over to tell Steve helpfully.

*Thump.*

Steve's ball of clay thudded hard and dead center onto the spinning wheel.

"Or... you could do it that way," Dave said.

"Sorry. I thought throwing meant throwing. You see people on television with it spinning, and I didn't think it mattered. Should I take it off and do it again?" Steve wondered.

"Hm. Probably not. It's not wrong to do it that way, but I've never met anyone who could center it like that, right off," Dave said.

"Oh. Sorry," Steve apologized.

"Stop apologizing!" Estrella hissed at him across the space between them.

Dave looked to see that she knew what she was doing and was having fun on her own. He looked back to Steve and how he was already drawing up the clay into a symmetrically spinning shape.

"You sure you've never worked in clay before?" Dave asked him.

"I would have remembered," Steve said.

"Okay. Let me know if you need anything," Dave said.

He left them alone so he could wander around and give clay forming tips and socialize with people.

Steve and Estrella shared a glance which turned into a smile, then looked back to their work. He liked the way Estrella bit her lip in concentration as she built up rounds of coils and joined them together. She wondered why Steve was merely playing with the form he was making on his wheel, pressing it into different shapes, higher and slimmer, then broad and squat again.

Steve focused on the clay. He liked the way it was malleable in his hands. Responsive, like skin. He was fascinated with how its shape changed as he added pressure at one point or another. Its silky-gritty texture was pleasing to him. He got excited about trying an idea. His clay form wobbled to the side. The whole thing wobbled horribly out of shape as it spun. He'd pushed too hard, too fast.

Steve laughed and turned off the wheel. He chuckled again as the misshapen form settled forlornly soon as centripetal force let go of it. Estrella was captivated by the sound of his happy, genuine humor. It was rare to hear that kind of laugh from him. It was deep and rich, not tight and self-conscious like she now knew him to be when they were at Avenger's tower.

She wasn't the only one to notice Steve's presence in the room. Much of the talking and laughter around the room hushed, and Estrella could see Steve become aware of the recognition that was
happening all around, though he didn't look up from his efforts to remove his clay from the wheel and start over.

"CapMer!" an excited voice said.

"Hiya, Tommy," Steve said warmly, and looked up at the boy from his clay and his goopy hands.

"Are you really Captain America, or do you just look like him?" Tommy's mother asked.

"It's me. Can't do super-hero stuff all the time. A guy's gotta go on vacation," Steve said with a kind smile.

Most everyone in the room looked dazzled, and only a few hands were still working with clay.

"I was at the mall yesterday. I heard you were there, but I didn't believe it," a girl said.

"I was there," Steve admitted, "I'm having fun here, but I don't know what to make. Anybody got any ideas?"

"Da shield," Tommy said definitively.

Estrella could see that Steve wasn't thrilled with that idea, but he took it in good humor and didn't let anyone else see his thoughts on the matter. Dave came over and showed him how to make a flat disc on the wheel, then cut it loose with a wire.

Kids left their clay and gathered around. Some of the little ones pressed right up against Steve while he worked and the two sisters hesitantly reached out to touch Steve's shoulder a time or two, as if they were testing to see if he was real. Estrella caught his eye for a brief instant. She didn't like the film of persona which settled over him, but he was handling the attention well, like he was long used to it. He didn't mind the kids touching him.

"Okay, so now whadda we do with it?" Steve asked as he carefully lifted the wet, floppy flat disc off the wheel.

"You gotta throw it!" a boy said gleefully.

"Yeah, throw it" someone else agreed.

"Shield," Tommy agreed.

Steve looked over the small heads surrounding him to Dave. Dave hurriedly looked around the room. He unfolded a canvas drop cloth from a storage cubby and laid it out under the dry-erase board. He waved a hand at the glossy board and stepped away.

Steve turned his torso carefully and checked his clearance so he wouldn't accidentally hit anyone. The kids leaned away only a bit. They wanted to be close to him. He made a face at the slumpy, floppy mess in his hands and shifted it around in a way that would let him toss it without it disintegrating.

Tha-fwop! Splat.

The soft clay shield smacked into the dry erase board, crumpled into a ridiculous, pathetic shape, then peeled off and splattered onto the canvas drop cloth. It left behind a bow-tie shaped imprint of gray-brown on the board, then lay on the ground like a dead thing.

Laughter erupted in the room. Steve laughed too, and Estrella smiled because he'd found
enjoyment in entertaining the kids.

"'Gin!" Tommy insisted.

"Want me to make another one?" Steve asked.

Tommy nodded vigorously, and the kids gave an affirmative chorus of words. Steve set to making another clay shield, and this time he put careful line decorations on it while the wheel was spinning, then lightly scrawled a star in the middle after the wheel stopped. He stood up and flatly supported the slumpy disc on his spread fingers. The kids hushed in awe at the appropriate, familiar stance he'd taken. The disc hit the board with a *thwack!* and stayed stuck there for a longer time before it peeled off and hit the canvas. It left a rectangular imprint this time.

After that, Steve was busy making discs for the kids, which they gladly took, but they didn't want to throw any of them. He had to stop every now and then and make one to throw when Tommy requested him to do it "'gin." Dave was kept busy fetching clay to keep Steve working, and picking up the crumpled projectiles which fell to the floor.

When clay time was over, nobody wanted to leave. Steve made sure that everyone had a clay 'autograph' from him. He bent to give Tommy a hug, which made the boy smile so big that his eyes squinted closed. He shook Tommy's mother's hand. The older woman was nearly as happy as her son.

"Where's your real shield?" a boy of about ten years asked.

"You wanna see it, don't you?" Steve asked.

"Uh-huh," the boy agreed.

The rest of the kids backed him up. Steve took a short breath and looked around the room. There was only the one entry from the hall. He looked to Estrella.

"I'll be fine. Go," she told him.

Steve jogged out to the truck and got his leather satchel. He kept his eyes and ears sharp while he was away from Estrella. There was no suspicious activity around, so he wasn't concerned when he got back into the clay room.

Estrella worked patiently on her nearly finished clay pot while Steve let the kids handle his shield. She smiled at the awed tones of the children as they touched his gear. It seemed as if they were more impressed with the uniform and the shield than they were with the man himself.

"This stuff is old. Aren't you supposed to be old, too?" one of the two sisters asked.

"He was stuck in the ice. Cryo-stasis. Like Han Solo and Jack O'Neill" a boy answered.

"I knew that, you nerd. What I meant is, how'd you survive it?" the sister persisted with a put-upon look for the know-it-all boy.

"I don't really know," Steve said somewhat honestly.

Bruce had explained to him how he'd likely survived, but these kids wouldn't be interested in those details, nor was he inclined to give them.

"However it happened, I'm glad you're alive. We need a real hero. There are so many bad examples
for today's youth," Tommy's mother smiled at him.

Estrella saw the stricken look that Steve ducked his face quickly to hide. He was good at subduing it, and when he picked up his head again, he wore a neutral expression for the children and Tommy's mother.

"Ma'am, I may do the work of a hero, but I'm only a man. I make mistakes, too. I mess things up sometimes, and when I do, it's a pretty spectacular mess. Kids, the important thing is that when you mess up, you try to make it right, and then you keep going. You don't give up and sit down in the mess," Steve said.

"Okay," a boy said uncertainly.

The rest of the kids intuitively picked up on the fact that Steve was sad, and some of them gathered around and patted him. Tommy's mother looked at him speculatively. All Steve could do was gather his things together and stow them in his satchel. Estrella pounded her clay pot back into a ball and brought it to the tub she'd gotten it out of.

Steve told them he had to go and find some lunch, and they were able to extricate themselves from the little crowd. Once they were in the truck, Steve didn't want to talk about the troubled look on his face.

"Could you get us directions to one of those places we saw online that looked good for lunch?" he asked Estrella.

She directed him to a local food truck that was rated highly on TripAdvisor. She could guess that he was thinking about the looming potential trouble he might have to face because of his night with Bucky and the prostitutes, but she left him alone. Rather than talk it to death, it seemed better to let it lie and to distract him with other things. Like food.

Steve parked the truck in the informal gravel lot near the food truck. They got out of the truck and Estrella could immediately smell the heavenly scent of grilling seafood and spices. Steve squinted at the bright sunlight and tugged his outer shirt off over his head. He tossed the dark shirt in the backseat of the truck and tugged down on his white undershirt. Estrella appreciated the way the thin cotton clung to him, especially since he was slightly sweat-sheened in the heat.

Steve saw her looking at his abs and grinned back at her. She was glad that with his current mindset, it was easy to redirect him away from troublesome thoughts. She linked her arm in his and they walked through the sea of motorcycles parked around them to get to the order window.

Steve stopped beside one bike and stared. Estrella looked at it with him, but she didn't see what was so worthy of a lingering look. She didn't know enough about motorcycles to understand why the bike he was looking at was special. It was large, heavy, and expensive looking like all the rest of them parked around.

"Hey, buddy, you touch that bike and I'm gonna touch you," called a male voice in warning.

Steve looked up and across at the guy in denim and leather who had spoken to him. He looked all around at everything else, too, then he handed some money to Estrella from his wallet.

"Would ya go get us whatever seems biggest, and get me two of 'em?" Steve asked her.

"I will, but be careful. No fights," she warned him.

She looked to the rough men seated and eating at one of the several picnic tables in front of the
food truck. The one guy was watching her and Steve closely because they were still standing near his bike. Estrella wondered why Steve persisted in standing there. She tugged at his belt loop a little to hopefully move him away from the bike.

"Aww, you're no fun," Steve said to her with a small smile.

"Steve! I don't want to be on the news!" she protested.

Steve's insistence on provoking the biker made her nervous. There was a sharpness to his face. Steve looked too eager to start something. Hopeful, really. She made squinty eyes at him.

"Relax, sweetheart. I know how to make nice with these guys. They're pussycats," he told her.

Estrella reluctantly moved away to get in line and place their orders. The cooking food inside the truck smelled amazing, and her watering mouth and grumbly belly was almost enough to distract her from how Steve walked toward the guy who was concerned about his bike. She didn't like the subtle, aggressive set to his shoulders, or the overly relaxed and alpha-male way he walked toward the table of bikers. Or, she liked it very much, but she was afraid it was going to get them in trouble.

She glanced nervously at Steve between looking at the menu and placing their orders. She couldn't see much of him because a van was parked so that it mostly blocked the view of the biker's table. She could only see Steve's back. She was too far away to hear anything he was saying. It was a nerve-wracking wait while their food was cooked.

By the time she walked toward Steve with their loaded tray, he was speaking amiably with the bikers. Steve came to relieve her of the tray and she followed him to the empty table right next to the rough looking men. There were six of them.

Instinct had her reluctant to be anywhere near so many dangerous looking men, but they all looked calm now, or at least not angry. It was clear that they knew who Steve was, and the conversation was all about motorcycles. She would have sat down on the wooden bench across from Steve, but she was uneasy, even with his protection. Another table of bikers adjacent to the first was quiet and listened as they ate.

Estrella went around the end of the table to instead sit on the far side of Steve away from the men. She'd been fine all day, but now she was very aware of how her jeans hugged her bottom and legs, and how her top fit her.

"So you knew you'd get my attention, standing by my bike like that," the man said.

"Sure. I wanted to know who owned it. It's a sweet ride," Steve said right before he took a huge bite of his shrimp burrito.

"You almost had more than just my attention. If you've got a bike, then you know you stood there too long. What's with that?"

"I dunno. Maybe I was hoping for some excitement. Having some leave is nice, but I'm used to working all the time. It's not so easy taking it easy," Steve answered after taking a sip of his drink from the large Styrofoam cup.

"Right. Like I'm gonna start shit with Captain America," the guy said and laughed.

"Watch your mouth in front of my girl," Steve told him smoothly.
"Sorry, sweet cheeks," the man apologized to Estrella.

She ducked behind Steve's bulk and kept her head down over her food.

Steve rested his hand comfortingly on her thigh and turned his head to look at the biker. Hard.

"Sorry, Ma'am. I didn't mean anything, Cap. Just that she's...uh, pretty and all," the guy stammered.

The other bikers chuckled at him, and Steve tilted his head in slim acceptance of his apology. They all ate in peace with low murmurs of conversation among the two tables of bikers. Steve looked to Estrella until she met his eyes.

"Are you alright? We can leave if this is ruining your lunch," he offered her in kindly tones.

Estrella looked from him to the bikers. Steve was doing this on purpose, just like he'd changed his look, and she didn't know why. He looked happy and confident, like his sharp-edged banter with the biker gang was the better thing to focus on than the things that had been bringing him down before. There was no way a normal man could take on the aggression of twelve others and still protect her from the consequences of his smart mouth, but Steve was different. Maybe he needed this.

"I'm okay, but please don't fight," she whispered.

"Don't worry. It won't come to that," he assured her.

"How do you know?" she wondered.

"Experience. We'll be fine," Steve said.

"So what's the best bike you ever had? I bet there's been a few over the years," a different, older biker guy asked Steve.

"Yeah, there's been a few, and 'best' depends on how you think of it. I'd have to say that the Liberator was the best because it was reliable, parts were available if I broke it, and I broke a lot of em. I got to where I could take it down and re-assemble it almost as fast as I could my sidearm. I knew that bike," Steve said fondly.

"Just like a woman," the older biker agreed, "you learn how to keep one purring, and the skills work on all of 'em. I bet you got a lot of tail over there, you and your boys being the big guns."

Steve shifted his eyes to the guy. The cold look on his face worried Estrella. She'd never seen that look on Steve. The biker clearly got the message. He looked around at his companions, who were grinning at him and waiting. Then he looked at Steve, who set his food down and pushed it closer to Estrella and then casually freed his legs from under the picnic table.

"Shoot. Look, man. I ain't used to ladies, just back warmers," the guy said nervously.

"Yeah, I can tell. You fellas must think I'm sellin wolf tickets when I tell you to show some respect. All she wants is to eat her lunch in peace. Since she is a lady, she'd probably let the disrespect slide. But I won't," Steve warned one last time.

The guy nodded, and some of his friends ribbed him about backing down.

"What? Are you crazy? Shut up, Jake. What am I supposed to do?" the guy turned to his friend
who'd thrown a wadded up napkin at him.

Estrella tugged at Steve's elbow. He turned a much warmer expression to her.

"Will you stop it!?" she asked in a strained whisper.

"I would if it was hopeless, but these guys show some promise. They're too old to really be punks. Maybe they just need a gentle reminder about how to treat a lady," he smiled at her as if he thought he was doing her some honor by making an issue of things.

"I don't care about that. You can stay here and pick a fight. I don't want to be on YouTube. I'm eating over there," Estrella told him.

"I wish you wouldn't," Steve told her mildly.

Estrella ignored him and picked up her food and her drink. She walked to the farthest away empty table, which was a good fifty feet from Steve and the bikers. Steve turned his head to watch the other men. Soon as he did, they all looked down at their food, or got busy talking in a direction that wasn't toward Estrella. Steve shook his head.

"Thanks, fellas," Steve said sarcastically, "now I'm gonna have to think up something nice to get her over her mad."

"You're Captain America. Don't tell me she's got you whipped?" a different biker said.

"She's worth it. I've seen what happens at the end of the line when you haven't been smart with your girl. I'm not doing that again. A good lady is worth losing face for. Who're you gonna warm up with at night? Your brothers? You think you're still gonna be riding with them when you're eighty? Nah. I'll back up my brothers when they need me and blood's on the floor. I do that every time I clock in. Other than that, I'm on her side," Steve explained.

A moment of thoughtful silence passed. Steve left his feet free of encumbrance of the picnic table, but he pulled his food closer again and resumed eating as if the bikers weren't there.

"You're old school," one guy pointed out as if it was a sudden revelation.

Steve lifted his hands and let them fall in a gesture that said 'what else would I be?'

He could see the acceptance of the idea and a slow-grinding respect evolving for the concept.

"You fellas aren't exactly junior varsity yourselves. Nothing's wrong with having a little dignity," Steve said lightly.

"So are you saying you're strictly straight arrow? You don't take advantage of anything that your place gets you? No fun stuff?" the older biker asked.

Steve moved on to his second burrito, and was once again reminded of unpleasantness.

"I've tried the fun stuff. Ya know where it's got me? Waiting for the other shoe to fall. In my place, it's not worth it. If you never figure out what that means, then I'm lucky. You'll know it if you see it," Steve said.

"Somebody's got dirt on you?"

"Maybe I deserve it. At my level, you always gotta pay to play," Steve told them.
"No free passes? Even with what you do for everybody? That's harsh," the older biker said.

"I musta used up all my free passes in the war. I don't do what I do to earn freebies, anyway. I do it because it needs to be done, and somebody's gotta do it," Steve said quietly.

He turned his attention to his burrito and the bikers let him eat in peace.

"Something's wrong with him. I think he's trying to pick a fight with a biker gang," Estrella said quietly into her phone.

"Only trying? Is anything broken yet?" Natasha asked her blandly.

"Not yet. He's still eating," Estrella said.

"Then he's not trying. I don't know what he's doing, but I'd trust him. Why don't you trust him?"

"Because he's thinking something, and he's not telling me. He shaved his beard off and got the top of his hair colored blonde. He wants people to know who he is, and now he's provoking the bikers. I want to trust him, but what if his hormones are all off again and I shouldn't trust him? What should I do?"

"The hair thing is strange. What else? Tell me everything," Nat ordered.

"There's not much else. Yesterday was wonderful, and every day before that. But then he left me in the truck and went across the mall parking lot and shot out somebody's tires with his gun. When I told him he was crazy, he was calm about it as if shooting people's tires is a normal thing to do and I was over-reacting."

"You were probably over-reacting. If he was calm like that, then it was the right thing to do. He didn't show any remorse or worry after he shot the tires, did he?" Natasha said.

"None."

"If there was any doubt, it would have showed on his face and he'd have spent the next few hours silent and preoccupied, figuring out what he should have done differently. That's what he does when things go wrong. Was he silent and preoccupied?" Nat asked.

"Not because of the tire thing. We played cards. It was quiet, but he wasn't thinking about the tires."

"Why did he shoot somebody's tires? Did he say?"

"He only said that they were punks and they were going to follow us," Estrella recalled.

"Did you get a look at them?"

"No. It was raining hard. I didn't even know they were there in the parking lot with us, but he did. Natasha, what's going on?"

"I think he's feeling defensive. He's glad to have you, so he's protecting you. Does that make sense with what you're seeing?" Nat asked reasonably.

Estrella's suspicions were growing. Sometimes when Nat used that reasonable tone, she was trying
to manipulate her into a certain way of thinking, for whatever purpose. But maybe not this time. What Nat said made sense.

"Yes. He threatens the biker men every time one of them says something Steve thinks is disrespectful of me. That's why I walked away. Maybe if I'm not there to disrespect, he won't feel the need to defend me so much," Estrella said.

"That fits. I wouldn't worry. All I'm seeing is that he's in love. Has he told you yet, or is he being shy?" Natasha wondered with a warmly pleased tone.

"He's not shy. He told me," Estrella said with brisk certainty.

"Sounds like fun. You can tell me all about it later, if you feel like it," Nat nearly purred.

"Only if you can keep it to yourself. His business isn't for everybody to hear. And only if you start keeping your fangs out of him. He's not yours to play with anymore. The only reason I called you is because he's making things weird, and you know him," Estrella told her.

"Hmm. It sounds like Steve isn't the only one in love. Consider me warned off, girlfriend."

Estrella made a face that nobody could see. Now she was sure that Natasha was being overly chummy for some reason. These people kept thinking she was slow-witted and didn't notice things. Estrella was fine with that, because that meant they underestimated her, and that put her in a position to surprise them if she ever needed to. She loved and admired Natasha, but she didn't fully understand her.

"You already knew I loved him, so don't act surprised. Just tell me if I can do anything to make him not act stupid," she said.

"It's too late for that. He's in love. I'd say trust him. He might be stupid because of you at times when it doesn't matter much, but if it matters, he'll be sharp and ready. He won't take chances with your safety. I've got a meeting to get back to," Nat said.

"Okay. Thank you," Estrella said.

"You're welcome. Call me again if you feel the need. Better safe than sorry," Nat told her.

"Okay," Estrella repeated, then ended the call.

Natasha stuck her head back into the meeting room she'd left when her phone rang.


Before even quick-witted Tony could say anything, she was gone again. Natasha strode to the elevator and made her way down and out of the tower. Once she was halfway to the park, she called the newest number in her contacts.

"My delicate flower! Lovely boss lady. Now is not the best time to call me," Bucky said quietly to her in their shared tongue.

"Make it so that it is the best time, little mouse," Natasha responded.

"Very well. But a moment, please," Buck said.
She heard the faint sounds of heavy gear being shifted, and then a door closing, and gear being moved again.

"I'm sure you waited breathlessly. Tell me what your heart so urgently desires of me," Buck said.

"Stop the shit talk, Barnes. Something is the matter with Rogers. Someone follows him. Watches him. It is sufficiently bad that the girl called me. She worries, and she knows him well enough now to know when she should and when she should not worry. Barely was I able to redirect her suspicions, I think," Nat told him.

"You think. You think they both are stupid? He knows something happens. He is preparing. The girl is sensitive to his moods. No other sort of girl would so capture his interest," Bucky said.

"You have told him," Natasha accused mildly.

"I have told him merely that I am on a job which he would be happier not learning of;"

"What takes you so much time? You were once good with killing, and fast," Nat teased him.

"These people. They are chaos. Some are not where they are said to be. Much street trash looks the same, and they make a fuss when I ask like a girl to see their tattoos. Too many times I have hunted after the wrong mark. My lovely boss lady is squeamish. She doesn't want the wrong eggs broken, so she says I must be certain. Certainty takes time. In the prisons it is easier. They wear numbers," Buck made fun of her and the kind of tedious work he'd been asked to do.

"All this talk. What do we play at? This makes an amusing pass-time, and a childish one, while Rogers collects trouble," Nat admonished him.

"You want speed, paired with accuracy. This I can do easily when there are few marks, or when many marks are all in one place. Your Avengers, it's no wonder they work slowly. To be selective, yet cast a broad net...you ask much," Buck carried on.

"I tell you that our friend is in trouble, and you dally with words. You give me excuses," Natasha emphasized the last word.

"Since when is he not in trouble? I can get this done faster and cover more ground, but I'll need to call in help. Help that nobody's gonna like," Bucky switched to English.

"Do it. This isn't the old days. She says he's letting people recognize him easily now. He wants to be known because he feels a threat and he's trying to warn it off. His face is on the 'net, and probably the girl along with him. Make the biggest hits and let the help clean up the street trash. Get to him before he needs backup and doesn't have it. If I move my people on this, it all goes public," Natasha said.

"I'm way ahead of you. I knew this plan wasn't tight enough, but I let you do things the nice way for a while. I'm doing it my way now, how I planned to from the beginning," Buck warned.

"You know, as a new hire, you're showing a remarkable level of insubordination," Nat said with a chilly smile.

"Ain't it grand? Maybe I like to rattle your cage, little flower. You're fun to piss off," Buck said.

"English is so straight forward. The endearments lose a lot in translation," Nat said blandly.

"They do," Buck agreed.
They lapsed into silence, and Natasha killed the connection before either of them said anything more. What needed to be said was already said. She wanted to give Barnes no opportunity for more of his smooth tongue.

If ever she'd had any doubt about the man's sanity, it was gone now. He was fully both James Barnes and the Winter Soldier. If he couldn't reliably call on either as needed, she wouldn't have hired him.

When they got back to South Padre Island beach, things were different. The dunes were pushed back and colonies of grass flopped over with their roots exposed. The crashing surf of the tropical storm had eaten the edge of the beach away to a steeper angle. Steve drove them to find another campsite, which was easy. Almost no one was on the beach. Still, he drove a good distance down for privacy.

The afternoon was sunny and warm, so the damp sand wasn't a deterrent. They set out their camp site with their chairs and the little table and stove, and Estrella made better order of their sleeping space in the back of the truck. Steve put their solar shower out so the water could heat, and she gave him his privacy while he changed into his swim shorts.

Estrella looked at the mattress she was putting the clean sheets on. What would they do here tonight, if anything other than sleep? Steve had refused to share a bed with her in the hotel, but now they were going to have to sleep together in their cozy little camper space. She wondered if she even wanted to sleep with him, with the way he was acting. He made her nervous with all his extra energy.

Steve came around to the back of the open truck with his low-riding swim shorts on. He was sunny, golden and happy again. He slid his skim board out from its place along the wall of the truck bed and smiled at her.

"You wanna try the board?" he offered.

"No. The waves are too angry from the storm yesterday. You go ahead. I'm going to get my towel and enjoy the sun," she said.

"Alright," Steve agreed.

He stood there, and her eyes gravitated to the little dark golden trail of hairs below his navel.

"I'm sorry about today. I should have been more attentive," he said.

"No. We're different people. You don't have to be in my face all the time. I won't start doubting you if you take some time for yourself," she told him.

Steve gave her a searching look, but then appeared satisfied when he decided that she meant her words exactly as she'd said them, with no venom or resentment. She smiled at the simplicity and easy acceptance between them.

"I don't mean to confuse you with the things I'm doing that don't make sense," he further tried to smooth things between them.

"I know. I called Natasha. She says I should trust you, and that you must have your reasons. I already do trust you when you're using your mind properly. I only wanted to make sure that you
weren't being stupid again," she admitted.

"Smart thinking. I like that," Steve said.

"I don't need lollipops from you. Go swim, or surf, or whatever," Estrella shooed him away so she could get changed into her swimsuit.

Steve made a comically pained face at her dismissal, but then he grinned and turned to jog away to the waves. His surfboard was tucked under his arm in a carry that was strangely opposite of how he carried his shield.

Estrella regretted being short tempered with him instead of warm and affectionate, but she was still unsettled from being around him while he tried to goad the bikers. As she changed into her little bikini, she reminded herself that much of their life would be like this. Steve was going to have to do odd and uncomfortable things because of his job. If she wanted to be with him, and she did, then she had to learn to tolerate the uneasy parts.

She got her towel and went down toward the water where Steve was having fun with his board. There was a good slope of sand not far from the water's edge which made a sort of recliner for her to lie back against.

It was more than merely enjoyable to watch Steve. He was full of vigor to an extent that it was impossible not to watch him play. The water's edge rolled and crashed onto the sand then retreated in short bursts. She could see his eyes and his mind coordinating the timing of when he tossed the board down and jumped on. He played with the front edge of the incoming waves, and tested the frothy turbulent part of them at mid break, but he seemed to like the brief slip space in between waves the most.

His graceful, agile body was beautiful to behold. Just as she thought he was going to lose his balance, he'd step aside or back and catch himself as if he'd meant to almost fall all along. When he landed both the board and himself just right, she saw how he grinned into the sun and skimmed along on the water for a short ride. The fine, minute adjustments he made to stay in control brought his athleticism into prominence. Frequently Steve would look to her and show a bright, toothy smile. He was truly enjoying himself.

Estrella relaxed back and exposed as much skin to the sun as she could. Simply watching him in motion heated her senses and her imagination. The perpetual sea breeze helped to cool her skin, but she was beginning to want to be close to him again.

She resisted the urge to call him over while he was having such a good time. He needed this. As long as there was no gym to use, no training room, and no run on the beach which would leave her behind, he needed the fight against the waves.

Eventually, when the sun moved lower in the sky, Steve came to her and sat on his board beside her. She smiled at him for choosing the side which wouldn't block the sunlight from her skin. He sat for a mere few seconds, and then he lay back beside her on his board.

"Do you feel better now, after all of that?" she asked him.

"A little. I could have stayed out for longer, but I want to be near you," he admitted.

She got lost looking as his face. His eyes. The water that beaded on his body. Then she giggled.

"What?" he wondered.
"I wanted you beside me at least an hour ago, but I wanted you to burn off some energy," she told him.

"Thanks. It wasn't enough, but it helped some," he said.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Something that strains my stamina, but I don't want to be that far away from you. Burning it off could take a while, and a lot of distance."

She grimaced at his sacrifice to keep her safe.

"You don't have to stay right with me all the time. What do you think is going to happen?" she asked him.

Seagulls screeched and came to land near them on the sand, watching and waiting for handouts. Estrella observed them for a moment, but it wasn't long enough to completely make her miss the odd look on Steve's face.

"You saw how it was with the bikers today. You're right. Men notice you. You don't like it when they're rude to you, and neither do I. So, what happens if I'm gone down the beach to run, or if I'm swimming way out there and some guys come along and bother you? It's not worth it, Eya. I can manage what my body is doing. I can't let my body dictate my actions to me. This is good practice," he said.

"Everything has to be a challenge to you, doesn't it? You're not happy if you're not struggling against something," she pointed out.

Steve could see that she was merely observing, not accusing him of anything or trying to belittle him. He folded his hands behind his head and shrugged.

"Maybe. No, not maybe. You're right. I've noticed a pattern. I feel best after a hard fight. If I've really been pushed to perform and it tires me, then I feel great for the next few days. Nobody anticipated this when I got the serum. Erskine's notes show that he believed I might have trouble in the beginning, but he thought I would adjust to the new metabolic energy levels over time. I'm not. I can't undo the effects of the serum, and I wouldn't want to if I could. What works for me is training. Fighting. I tried to tell you that eating more would make it worse, but you thought I needed to eat. So this is what we've got," Steve said and he glanced down at his body.

"So it's my fault? If you'd told me all this, then maybe I could have understood," Estrella said.

"It's not your fault. I didn't say that. Don't twist it into something it's not, because I'm doing the same thing to you. You wanted to stay thin, and I wanted you to eat, and now men are causing problems for you. For us. If my problems are partly your fault, then your problems are partly my fault, so we're square with each other on that. " Steve told her with firm assurance.

"Okay," Estrella said quietly.

She smiled at his equitable outlook, and she felt better knowing that Steve didn't blame her cooking for his difficulties. She didn't blame Steve for the men who bothered her, either. That's just the way things were. They couldn't change it unless they starved themselves.

"So, how do we manage? I can't think of any way that you can get enough exercise while you stay near me to keep the men away," she said.
Steve laughed, and Estrella looked at him with confusion. Was there an idea that she'd missed?

"Nah, it's nothing, doll. Don't mind me," he said with a twinkle in his smile.

"No! You have to tell me, now. You can't laugh and then not share it," she demanded.

"Alright, then. Sex. Lots of vigorous sex could serve both purposes. We could try that someday," he suggested.

The humorous twinkle in his eyes turned into more of a sexy gleam. With that look on his face, and him lying there looking like a skin mag centerfold, she wasn't bold enough to meet his eyes. She turned her face away and let her hair fall between them. Steve chuckled.

"You're funny," he said.

"I'm not funny! I'm completely normal. No, I'm not even normal. You know that most women would be attacking you right now. They'd be crawling all over you. They tried to even when you wore stuffy clothes and you were fully dressed. You're almost naked, Steve, and all I did was look! You're teasing me again," she said in a plaintive tone from behind the protection of her hair.

She heard Steve move beside her, and then the heat of him was behind her shoulder. She shivered at the gravity of his presence. The cooling evening breeze tried to blow her hair away from her face, so she put up a hand to keep it in place between them. She made herself look only at the wash of colors that was starting to pink the sky. None of that helped her to ignore the man behind her.

"I wasn't saying that you're weird. I meant that it's odd that the woman who demanded her turn on me this morning could act shy now. You've seen me naked. I made a monkey of myself in front of you, and the memory of it embarrasses me, though I didn't feel any shame at the time. I can't believe some of the things we've done. It surprises me that we can go back to being shy after we've been very not shy," he explained himself.

She felt his fingers smoothing down her hair, holding it against the wind where she tried to keep it as a curtain between them. The gesture soothed her jumping nerves. He respected her shyness, rather than trying to cajole her out of it. It was so like Steve to be sure she was comfortable, rather than to press for his own wants. She sighed and relaxed back against his solid shoulder.

"This is all new to me. I've had sex done to me. It hurt, and I hated it. I'm not used to wanting it. You make me want it, and it feels so good," she ended her admission on a whisper.

"It's new to me too. I've never had time with a girl who wanted me for me, instead of for my looks or because she wants to say she's been with Captain America. I've done sex. You'd probably call it 'dumb animal sex' if you'd been a fly on the wall to see it. But it's never been like this. Not like it is with you," he said low and gentle.

Estrella tangled her fingers with his away from her hair so she could turn and look at him. The orange-pink of coming sunset made it hard to tell if he was blushing or not. Steve's innate honesty was all over his face. He looked open and vulnerable and it made her want to protect him from what the world would do if it ever saw him like this.

She didn't kiss him. She turned on her hip to face him and she put her arms around him in a hug. The warm comfort of their embrace was immediate, and she tucked her face into his neck. She only wore her bikini, and he only had shorts. The feeling of so much of their skin touching was overwhelming. Exciting. She wanted to crawl into his lap and rub all over him. She didn't.

"What are we going to do? About everything?" she asked.
"I dunno. I'm pretty good at planning on the fly. If you can put up with me, I think we can make it work," Steve said.

She nodded and kissed the spot where she'd given him a hickey. It wasn't there anymore.

"Sweetheart, have mercy. You kissing me there reminds me of this morning, and I'm already sore for it," Steve said.

His large hand came to splay in the middle of her bare back. She arched into him with involuntary response, and he bit off a groan at the sweetness of it.

"Okay. We can make it up as we go, but we better go make something for supper and get ready for bed. If we stay here like this, I don't know what I'll do," she said.

"Right. But when it's time to go to bed, I don't know what I'll do," he replied.

Estrella nodded against him.

Steve swallowed loudly, then he got up and took her with him. They avoided looking at each other as they walked back to the truck, he with his skim board, and her with her towel.

Estrella couldn't have said what they had for supper, other than it was hot and she helped him do the dishes afterward. She was hyper-aware of his location while she showered, but he stayed away and made himself busy with other things. After she brushed her teeth, she got under their covers and waited. She could see Steve's silhouette moving against the camper window as he showered in the deep dusk of twilight.

His presence seemed to fill the small space of their camper with life when he got in with her and shut the tailgate and rear hatch. The screened windows at the sides were already open to the cool air.

His shape loomed crouched and still at the foot of the mattress. His hesitation made her nervous.

"Are you okay? Is something wrong?" she whispered.

He didn't verbally respond, but she could barely see that he held a hand up in a 'please wait' sort of gesture. So, she waited.

A moment later, he crawled onto the mattress with her. Instead of getting under the covers with her, he lay down on top of them.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just praying. For strength. I have to be stronger. You have your necklace on?" he asked.

Estrella smiled softly at the idea of the strongest man she knew praying for yet more strength, but she knew he wasn't talking about physical strength. She fingered the copper at her throat.

"I do. What happened this morning won't happen again," she assured him.

The dark and the quiet deepened between them for a while. She could hear him breathing.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I will be," Steve said, "talk to me, Eya. Distract me. Please."
"Alright. Vacation is going by fast. Do you think we can find somewhere to dance? Not like in New York. I mean with boots and country music and beer. That shouldn't be too hard to find in Texas," Estrella said.

"That's a good idea," Steve agreed.

The dark lit up with the glow of his phone, and she saw the look of concentration on his face as he leaned back on his pillow and started searching for ways to get her to some dancing. She smiled and wiggled down further under the covers. He welcomed her under his arm against his side. He wore a t-shirt, so even her arm draped across his chest and her head pillowed on his shoulder didn't get her any skin contact with him. She would have complained, but she knew he was already having a hard time.

"I love you, Steve," she said drowsily.

"And I love you, Eya," he replied.

He set down his phone for long enough to kiss her on the head. She wouldn't have thought that she would like being treated like a little girl at this point in their relationship, but she was learning that it wouldn't be about sex all the time with Steve Rogers, even when he was feeling torturously aroused. The man had incredible self-control. That was a comfort to her.

Long after Estrella was asleep and Steve had plans in his head for tomorrow, he lay awake in the dark. She was soft and warm against his side, and the joy of being near her in the quiet made up for the temptation he had to fight against.

Hours into the night, Steve heard the distant approach of a vehicle. Without disturbing Estrella, his hand eased under his side of the mattress and retrieved his sidearm. It was one vehicle. He pulled out a spare loaded magazine and tucked it into the waistband of his shorts.

He lay still and listened. It was a truck, probably an old one, from the off-tune sound of the engine. He didn't allow his muscles to tense yet. It might be nothing. Kids out for a ride from one of the other camping areas in the park.

The truck slowed to an idle as it approached their campsite. He heard hushed voices. Men. Latino men. At least three of them. They were far enough away and the engine noise made it so that he couldn't understand what they were saying, but he was sure of that much.

Steve freed his other arm from behind Estrella's head carefully. From minor incidents over the past few days, his instincts were itching at him, telling him that this was no coincidence. Without sitting up or wiggling his truck, Steve moved down the mattress and put the bulk of his body between Estrella and the lingering vehicle. The metal of the tailgate between them wouldn't adequately protect her if the next moments turned into an exchange of gunfire.

He waited, armed and ready. A kick at the tailgate would get him a clear view for accurate targeting. He drew up one leg.

The voices murmured louder for a moment, saying something about a place, a man, and some money. Somebody said something negative, that it was too dangerous, and that they should wait. Steve frowned.

The truck drove on past their position. Steve moved carefully and quietly. As the vehicle drove away, he kept himself positioned between it and Estrella while remaining below the windows where they might have seen him. He didn't want to give them the advantage of knowing he was
aware of them.

Before it went far enough away that he lost the sound of it, the truck turned around and came back. This time it didn't slow as it passed. After it passed them, it sped up and left their section of the beach.

Steve slept only lightly for the rest of the night. His plans for tomorrow were solid. It would be good to get away from the coast, away from Corpus for a day.
Chapter 43

The touch of her hand brought him out of the light drowse he was in. She mumbled something in her sleep, and he was thankful she had her necklace. Her hand sought better contact with him, and her fingers twined between his.

She sighed happily in her sleep and Steve smiled in the dark. He loved that she moved to him for comfort. It made him feel better about seeking her touch for the same reason. Not that he was distressed over anything right now to have a reason to need her touch. Sure, his body was burning at him, making demands, but the ideas Thor had taught him allowed him to feel through that, and past it. He simply liked having somebody to touch. Somebody to touch him. He liked not being alone.

Some time later when her hand loosened, he slid away from her and got ready for a run. He moved silently and got out of the truck without waking her once he was in his shorts.

It felt goofy to run a brief two miles down the beach from the truck in one direction, and then to turn around and run four miles to the other side of the truck, but that's what he had to work with. The entire time, he kept his breathing quiet and controlled so he could hear any vehicle which might approach long before it got near Estrella. He wore a path in the sand for a repetitive twenty miles until he could feel the high-energy shakes starting to back down.

If he could have focused on the workout without having to be so alert, it would have been more effective. The temptation to jerk off during his shower was strong. It was the pre-dawn gloom of morning. Estrella was asleep, and no one was around to see. It would be easy to do, but even less effective than his run had been. He decided to leave it alone and get dressed.

Once he was in his jeans and boots and a plain dull red t-shirt that was a size too large for him, he slid back into the truck to wait until Estrella woke up. Or until 0700, whichever was sooner.

He lay beside her fully dressed and atop the covers. He knew he was taking a chance lingering here at the beach in the same spot where the men had found them in the night. They could come back with greater numbers. He almost hoped they would. He timed out in his head how long it would take to get to his shield if he heard them coming back. He could wake Estrella and have her get behind the shield while he took out his frustrations on the people who kept tailing them. They weren't as well trained or equipped as his usual opponents, but they might be able to entertain him for a few minutes, as long as he could be sure that Estrella was safe.

Steve shook his head to clear it of his day dreaming. He was wasting time that he could be spending with her. As long as he kept his ears pricked, he didn't have to worry about those guys for the moment.

He curved himself around her and pushed his nose into her hair. She had a sweet, girly smell that he couldn't get enough of. His body wanted to agitate. To jostle her. To wake her up and find a way to work out the nagging stiffness in his jeans. Steve pushed out a long, steady breath and once again let those wants find their place somewhere else. He focused instead on the non-physical things he loved about her.

He adored her brassy fussing. He couldn't wait for more of her manhandling. It felt exquisite, like
elegant precision in battle, to let her shove or poke at him and to react with delicacy in imitation of a normal guy. He loved how she saw right through him and didn't put up with it when he thought he was being sly about something.

The best thing of all was that she was beginning to trust him. Not only with the physical stuff. She was far too forgiving there already. What got to him was that she let him see her weaknesses. Her fears. Her hurts. He must have done something right along the way, because she was hardly recognizable from the incredibly defensive girl he'd first met on the street.

She was brave to take a chance with a goon like him when she knew she was fragile and he could so easily hurt her. She had walked through a crowd of rude bikers yesterday and held her chin high when they were all looking at her… because she trusted in him.

He curled around her more closely and gathered her up, blankets and all, into his arms. She wasn't tracking her weight with visits to medical twice a week, but he could feel and see that she was getting a little heavier. From her strong appetite, he figured she still had a ways to go, and he welcomed the thought of her becoming lush and healthy.

She looked healthy now, but she kept making comments like she wasn't done yet. Her family had thought she was skinny. Steve tried hard to not imagine her as even more attractive than she was now, because he was strongly tempted to misbehave with her already. He brushed the corner of his mouth against her cheek and took another calming breath that included the warm, familiar scent of her skin and hair. She moved sluggishly in his arms and he smiled.

"What are you doing?" she asked him sleepily.

Steve felt bad for waking her, but he was glad, too.

"Nothin'," he said with the most innocent charm he could muster.

"Is it time to go? Are you trying to wake me up?" she asked, and he could hear the welcoming smile in her words.

She was happy to be with him, first thing of the day. Happy to wake up in his arms. It was all right there in her voice. He grinned with pleasure as her hand came up to touch his face. This was the best 'Good morning' ever.

"I was trying to wake you. It's time to go, but now I don't wanna," he admitted.

Estrella pushed the covers away and turned to hug him. Steve held her and took another slow, deep breath.

"I don't want to let you go, but we need to get on the road," he said.

"It's a bench seat. I can sit next to you," she offered.

"That'll work," Steve agreed, but he didn't move away from her.

She wiggled against him and laughed because he made room for her to wiggle, but he plainly wanted to keep holding her.

"If you let me go I'll make coffee for us," she offered.

"Nah. You said you wanted to eat at Waffle House. Camp is already packed. If you get dressed, we can get breakfast and coffee on the road," he said.
"Okay," she agreed, but neither of them moved apart.

Steve mentally kicked himself for lingering here. It wasn't a smart thing to do. She made him feel like a cave man. He wanted to stay here all day and canoodle with her. If those punks came around he'd beat them down, and then crawl right back in with her. But today wasn't about him. She wanted things. He delighted in getting her all the things she'd been wanting and hadn't been able to have. The look of wonder and happiness on her face in the bath and body store, and when she'd been at the botanical garden made him want to do more for her so he could see that look again.

"I found a dance hall. They've got dancing lessons every Friday night before the main performance. Live music. Beer. Wanna go?" he asked her hopefully.

If he could get her to say 'yes' and sound enthusiastic about it, he'd be able to make himself let her go. Just in case she could get him to let her go, he took the moment before she answered to lip at the arch of her eyebrow. Her eyelashes tickled his chin and his heart beat a little faster at the feel of her fingers rubbing his chest.

"Dancing. Yes," Estrella said distractedly.

Dammit. That wasn't good enough. She sounded like she might want to stay in the truck all day, too. He was going to have to be the strong one. Steve held her tighter for half a second, and let his hips push against the welcoming softness of her bottom, then he moved.

"Dancing! Boots. Music. Come on, Eya. It looked like a really swell place, from the pictures on the 'net. It's historic and everything," he said energetically, and he set her aside from him onto the mattress.

Once he slid his body away from the warm, sleepy bundle of her his willpower got a little stronger. She looked him over as he stood in the sand beyond the open tailgate. Her eyes were large, dark, and compelling. God, he wanted to crawl back in there with her! Before he allowed himself to see more of the want in her eyes, he hurried around the truck to get her suitcase for her from the cab.

"Do you think you should get dressed for dancing now? Or later? It's a few hours of driving. There's a store where I want to shop, and-"

"Steve. Did you run this morning?" Estrella asked him.

"Yeah, some. God help me, Eya, just get moving," Steve said in a rush.

He shut her in the back of the truck to change. His keys jangled in his hands and he walked around the truck and checked their surroundings, more to distract himself than because there was any danger at the moment. There was nothing but miles of sand and dunes and grasses, gentle waves, and hunting sea birds. The sun was high enough to cause him to squint from its glint off the water. Every detail he could shove in his brain was something to distract him from the desire to get back on the bed with Estrella. The cool morning breeze felt good on his neck.

Estrella gave him a mixed look of concern and guilt that troubled her smile. When she passed him and got into the cab of the truck, Steve knew they'd have to talk. He didn't want her feeling bad for how she turned him on.

He got his sidearm and all the magazines to bring to the front of the truck. He was a lot more firm with shutting the tailgate this time. It felt satisfying. The holster went into the back of his pants and the mags went under the driver's seat. He made sure that his satchel was situated on the floor behind Estrella's seat so that the edge of his shield was just at his fingertips if he reached for it. The
truck started with a sound he was beginning to really enjoy, and he backed them away from their camping spot.

"We should have taken some time to make you comfortable. You're going to be grumpy all day," she observed.

"I have to be away on extended missions sometimes. I've got to learn how to go without sex, Eya. I can't afford to indulge myself every time I feel the need," he told her.

He looked to her as they bumped along over the beach. He knew he was driving faster than she liked, but she was starting to get comfortable with it. She unbuckled her seatbelt to move and sit next to him. Her thigh pressed his as she buckled up again. He clenched his jaw and drove on.

"I feel like I'm torturing you," she said.

"If this is torture, then I'll keep it. Sweetheart, it's not your fault. Your voice isn't bothering me, and I haven't even looked at you this morning enough to notice what you're wearing. It's me. Sure, you're hard to set aside, and I'm thinking about you nonstop, but I've got to adjust. It's not easy, but it feels good, too," he told her.

"You don't look like it feels good. Your jaw is tense," she observed.

"There's different kinds of good. Since when do I get to go around like this, and not pretend? When we get back to the tower I'll have to play nice and put on a good face for everyone. Let me have this, just for now?" he asked.

Estrella looked at him skeptically and curled her hand inside his bicep while his hand rested between her knees on the gearshift. He was hard everywhere. Even his lips looked firm and tight.

"How can you be enjoying this?" she asked him.

"Don't know, but I am," he said.

"I know I'm being a nag, but could you explain how you're enjoying it? Because you look scary, and I'm worried that there's going to be trouble, like with the bikers yesterday," she persisted.

Steve ground his teeth for a second, then loosened his mouth. She was right. Sexual tension was causing him to drift off course from where Thor said his mind should be. He traced back in his mind to the moment when he'd gone from willing self-sacrifice into aggressive restraint again.

Her eyes.

After he'd set her aside and got out of the back of the truck, he'd had a difficult time looking away from her eyes. He'd always heard people mention a sinking feeling in their gut when things started to get rough, and now he knew what they meant.

This thing with her eyes was something more. She'd changed overnight again. He didn't want to tell her. Not now. She was already struggling with so much. If this was the way she was going to be, he had to know how to deal with it before they were around other people.

Steve slowed the truck while they were still on the more remote part of the beach. They'd passed a few other campsites, but they were in a long, empty stretch here. He downshifted to neutral and let the truck idle.

She was looking at him, waiting for an explanation. Steve took a moment to see all of her. She
wore her new-to-her jeans and a western style shirt with pearl snaps and a sharply pointed collar. Her necklace was cute nested in her collar, and her hair had that casual disarray that made him want to dig his hands into it. Her face. So gorgeous. But, her eyes…

He leaned down some to kiss her, and he could only shut his eyes after she closed hers. Compulsion was a good word for what he felt. Fear spiked into his gut like cold, familiar ice. Could he be strong enough for this, too? He barely had a grip on his willpower as it was, just with her being pretty and wonderful and his. And now her eyes turned his will to jelly. What more was there? He forgot to kiss her as he sat there frozen in anxiety. It would be harsh and impersonal to never look her in the eyes again. It would hurt her. What was he going to do?

"It's my eyes, isn't it?" she asked quietly.

He tipped his head to rest against hers and made himself breathe slow and deep. He'd have to thank Bruce when he got home. He never thought he'd use these calming techniques so much. He couldn't lie to her, not about something as personal as this.

"I didn't want to say it," he said.

Several moments of tense silence passed, except for the smooth purr of the truck. He could sense her getting more and more upset. He brought his hand up to cup the other side of her face and he spoke near her ear, low and calming in the way that seemed to help distressed people.

"We can deal with this, too. I can take it. I'll adapt," he said.

"All I am is more work for you! I don't want this!" she cried.

"I do. I want you. I want to be with you, and-"

"Of course you want to be with me! That's what I'm about. Everything about me makes men want to be with me. I've got to wear a necklace, and now I'll have to get sunglasses. You can get me a trench coat so people won't stare when I'm done, and when the pheromones come, you can put me in a glass box! I don't want this!" she said again.

He let her cry for a while because she was right. She'd gotten a bad deal.

"Nobody's putting you in a box, and you don't need to wear a coat. Sunglasses and a necklace aren't so bad, and maybe you won't need the glasses all the time," he said.

"What do you know! You don't have to wear stuff so you can be 'fixed'," she argued.

"Aw, give over! Buck got his arm ripped off and he has to wear a piece of Hydra tech all the time. He's reminded every second he walks around with it that they turned him into a monster. He's got stuff in his head that he can't get rid of. You told me outside the waterpark to set my load down and walk away from it for a while. You gotta do the same, Eya. I've dealt with some big stuff, and this is not big stuff. It's important, but it doesn't change our whole world. When I tell you that I'm good with it, I am," Steve insisted.

Estrella had gone stiff and quiet while he was talking, and he hoped she wasn't angry. He kissed her temple and turned her face to his. He stared hard into her eyes and the sadness there and the tears on her lashes made his determination wobble, but only for an instant. She wiped at her eyes and looked away. Steve was secretly glad, because as he'd stared at her longer, his concentration felt like it was slipping. Much like her voice, her eyes did things to his mind. Looking into her eyes made him soft and malleable, probably to whatever her will was, he imagined.
"You're an ass. Like Bucky," she said.

"Yeah. Learned it from him. He's a natural," Steve said to deflect the intensity of their conversation.

"You should drive," Estrella said in a subdued voice.

"Alright, but don't get caught up in worrying about your eyes. We'll get used it soon, and it won't be a problem," he assured her.

She was going to protest, but then she didn't feel like it. She'd been struggling with these things for over a decade, and it was a relief to have someone like Steve with her to say that things would be alright, even if they wouldn't. It was the sentiment that mattered. She wasn't alone to deal with this.

Estrella leaned her head on Steve's shoulder as he drove. She wanted to shut her eyes, but it was more interesting to look at Steve. She knew she was stupidly in love, because she liked to watch how his hands and feet moved as he drove the truck. It was only driving, but it was him.

"You don't have to look at the floor, ya know," Steve said as they slowed to leave the park, then accelerated onto the highway.

"I know," she said morosely.

Halfway to breakfast, Steve got an idea.

"Eya, I just realized that while I'm thinking of your problem, your eyes, I'm not thinking of my problem. It helps," Steve said cheerfully.

"You want me to think of your suffering penis instead of worrying about my eyes?" she asked, and giggled.

Steve laughed too.

"Maybe so. Don't people always like to think about other people's problems so they'll forget to worry about their own? It feels like this is working. I've already got ideas of how to deal with your eyes. C'mon. Help me out here," he teased her into a better mood.

"I've already got plenty of ideas of what could work to help your penis," she said snidely.

"Eyaaa. Not those kinds of ideas. That's only making it worse. And do we have to say penis? That makes me sound like a dog," he complained.

"Or a horse," she laughed.

"God help me, woman, because you're not," Steve said, but he was smiling.

Estrella succinctly stated a list of slang words that would substitute for penis, and she laughed to see Steve practically squirming in discomfort as he drove.

"Stop that," Steve fussed at her.

She didn't need to look and see if his face was red. She knew it was.

"Why? Does it turn you on?" she asked him.

"No! I'm already turned on, so it doesn't make any difference. It sounds wrong to hear a lady
saying those words, and you know it," he said.

"You think I'm a lady. I want to be one for you so okay, I'll stop. But don't think I don't know how you talk with Bucky. You don't talk like a gentleman all the time," she pointed out.

"You heard- When? I was careful," Steve said.

"You think that just because you can hear so much better than me that I can't hear at all? I wasn't trying to listen, papi, but when you raise your voice I can hear it even through a bathroom door," she told him.

Steve thought back to the conversation he'd had with Buck on the phone when Estrella was in the tub at the hotel. No. no. Not that! He'd been worried about wanting to fight and have sex at the same time, and Buck hadn't been taking him seriously. Shit. He'd been louder than he'd thought. What must she think?

"What did you hear?" he asked in a hurry.

"Not much. I don't know what you were talking about, but I heard you say some words when you felt strongly and you talked a little louder. Pussy. Fuck. Nothing I haven't heard before, but you would fuss at me and look all disappointed if I said them to you," she pointed out.

Steve was so relieved that she didn't seem to know about his shameful thrill that he forgot to be dismayed that she'd said dirty words just now.

"Oooh, what's the big secret? What didn't I hear? You just completely ignored that I said words," she teased him with a smile.

"If you wanna know those kinds of secrets you're gonna have to grow enhanced ears, because I'm not repeating it," Steve told her.

Estrella made squinty mean eyes at him as a joke, and he smiled down at her while he drove for just a moment.

"Hey, your eyes didn't do the thing to me just then. Maybe because you were squinting," he said as he looked at the road in front of them.

"Good. I'll look mean all the time," Estrella said dryly.

Steve looked at her again, and she hurried to squint at him.

He laughed.

"Don't laugh at me!" she said, and pinched at his side. Hard.

"Ow! Ow! Alright! Geez, lady. Have mercy on a guy," Steve said.

He arched away from her hand, but stopped trying to get away when her pinching turned into soothing rubs to the spots she'd abused.

"How can I hurt you at all?" she asked.

Steve sighed. He didn't want to tell her, but then that would be lying again, since she'd asked.

"You can't. I like to pretend. It makes me feel like a regular guy," he admitted.
"Oh. That's no fun," Estrella said thoughtfully.

"Hey, I didn't want to tell you, but you asked," he said.

"So I'd better quit asking things, huh?" she wondered as they turned into the Waffle House parking lot.

"Remember, we agreed to tell the truth when we can," Steve reminded her.

They got out of the truck and walked to the restaurant. There were big trucks parked in a side lot, and the tables and booths inside looked mostly full. Estrella tucked her hand into Steve's arm and looked down at her shoes as she walked.

They took a newly cleared small table. Their waitress looked surprised when they ordered enough food for four people, but she turned around and brought their order to the busy cooks without comment.

Steve sipped his orange juice, and Estrella watched him glance around like he habitually did. His eyes lingered on a nearby table with some men at it for an instant longer than he tended to look at most things. She was tempted to turn and look, but Steve shook his head ever so slightly at her so she didn't. She listened instead for their voices. The men were speaking Spanish, so she figured that maybe he was interested because he was trying to learn the language.

Steve looked back to her, and she shifted her eyes down to her coffee cup.

"You don't look so tense now," she commented.

"I'm not so tense anymore because a really smart lady was distracting me from my problems with dirty words. Bruce said that your mental acuity had probably been suppressed along with your health. How smart are you gonna get?" he asked her.

"I don't know. It takes a really smart man to notice that he's being purposefully distracted by a pretty girl saying dirty words. How smart are you?" she replied.

Steve sat back against the booth and looked at her. The corner of his mouth curved up in a way that made her want to investigate it with her tongue. He drew in a sharp breath, shook his head and looked away. Estrella frowned and looked into her coffee.

"We have to be more careful, Steve. I'm distracting you," she said.

"Distracting me from what?" he asked lightly.

"Distracting you from whatever it is that you keep watching for," she told him.

"Oh. Yeah, that," he chuckled.

Estrella squinted her eyes because she liked looking at him when he was smiling and happy. He noticed, and he rested his elbows on the table to stare into her eyes at close range. He squinted a little, too.

"You're always testing your limits, aren't you?" Estrella said.

"How else am I gonna find em? Now I know that the squinting only partly works, but it's enough that I can get by if I really try," he commented.

"What's this? Six-guns at noon? I got hot plates, here," the waitress said plaintively.
Steve and Estrella sat back away from the table to allow the woman to set their plates down. Estrella smirked at Steve one last time before they turned their attention to eating. Estrella put most of her attention on her food, but she could see that Steve stayed aware of their surroundings while he ate. He took little glances up from time to time, and she imagined that if he had ears like a dog, they'd be twitching around.

"Thank you," she said between bites.

"For?" he asked a moment later.

"For whatever it is that you're doing," she told him.

"It's my pleasure, doll. I want you to be able to relax," he said.

He kept his look at her brief, but there was a lot of affection in his words and on his face.

Estrella paused with her fork of eggs partway to her mouth. Her hand moved back down to rest near her plate. He was watching for her. To keep her safe. So she wouldn't have to worry about men. And maybe something else, too. Whatever it was that Natasha was trying to decoy her away from with uncharacteristic girl talk.

The relief of not being alone washed over her again. The constant vigilance was tiring for her, but it looked easy for Steve. He'd said it was his pleasure to do this for her. Because he loved her.

Estrella rested her forehead in her free hand so he wouldn't see the welling of dampness in her eyes. Why was she so emotional today? The touch of his warm fingers, light as a leaf against her knuckles made her set her teeth against an undignified emotional sound that wanted to come out.

"You can choke up later. Eat. We've got fun stuff to get to," Steve told her kindly.

"Don't be a bully. I'll eat when I want to," she complained.

She wiped at her eyes, but she picked up her fork again.

Later, when both their bellies were uncomfortably full, Steve went with her to the bathrooms in the hallway.

"We'll do it this way. You go into the lady's room. When you're inside, I can go to the men's room. Don't come out of this door until I text you and tell you I'm waiting outside. If anyone bothers you in the restroom, you scream as soon as you notice a hint of things going strange. Not a second later. Understand?" Steve told her.

"We have to do all this coordinated stuff just so we can pee?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Okay, but I'm going to want to know why someday," she said.

Steve didn't make any promises. He stood at the men's room door and waited for her to go into the women's room. She blew out a breath, but she did as he wanted her to. Before she was done washing up, he texted her that he was waiting in the hall.

She took his hand and they went to the truck.

"I don't think I can keep my jeans buttoned and sit down," she commented about how full her belly was.
"I hear ya. I think I like Waffle House, except for all the truckers," he said as they got back onto the highway.

"What's wrong with truckers?" she wondered.

"They seem to like staring at my girl," Steve said.

Estrella felt sleepy again after their large breakfast, despite the coffee. She drowsed against Steve's arm as they covered miles and miles of Texas highway. The day was sunny and dry and the fields and ranchlands seemed to go on forever. There were rarely any tall trees except for around the river crossings.

The radio played country music at low volume. She looked up at Steve to see him enjoying the scenery. His phone was in a cubby in the dash showing their route on the map, but he rarely looked at it.

"This goes on forever, doesn't it? There's so much of... well, it's not nothing, but there's a lot of it," he said when he saw her looking at him.

"You've never seen the countryside? Didn't you tour the country selling war bonds?" Estrella asked him.

"Only in the Northeast. I've never been out here. This is different," he said.

"You've got a lot of your country left to see, Captain America. Not everything is cities and concrete. Where do you think all the beef and crops and gasoline come from? The denim for your blue jeans, and the leather for your shoes? You don't get that from the cities," she told him.

"I know, I know. I've just never seen it. Those are natural gas wells, right?" Steve asked.

He indicated a white gravel lot off from the highway that held a particular contortion of pipes and machinery, all with a fence around it. It looked very industrial, out in the middle of wild grassy cattle range and silvery-green scrub oaks. They'd passed several of the well sites, some of them right at the highway, and some far in the distance.

"I think so. I've been through here once before, when I was a kid and we were going to Schlitterbahn. The wells weren't there then," she said.

It took three hours of driving to get to their destination. Steve was easily able to determine that they'd lost any followers because the rural highway was long and mostly empty in the middle of the day.

He woke Estrella from her drowsing when they got to their first destination.

"You want to shop at a boot store?" she asked when she was awake enough to see where they were parked.

"I've seen what you packed. You don't have any boots. Gotta have boots to dance. Come on," he told her.

The western wear store smelled like leather and new denim. Near the front counter there were belts and buckles, wallets and purses and silver jewelry. A section off to one side had cowboy hats. Two walls of the store were dedicated to all kinds of boots from little kid's rubber boots, to western styles, to more utilitarian work boots. The rest of the floor space was dedicated to jeans and industrial work clothes, fancy cotton shirts, and plain tough ranch wear.
"Hidy, folks. Name's Colin. Ma'am, it looks like you need some boots," a youngish man greeted them.

His eyes got stuck on Estrella for a moment, then he turned his head sharply and shook Steve's hand. Steve couldn't help but smile at the guy. He looked like he'd walked off the pages of a rodeo magazine. His tan felt cowboy hat had a well-worn oil stain all around, with a darker smudge at the rim where he frequently touched it. His jeans showed wear spots specific to his keychain and his wallet. His boots looked older and more worn than you'd think you'd find on a guy who worked in a store that sold boots. His belt buckle was… impressive.

Steve forgave him his looking at Estrella because the guy had greeted her politely, shaken himself out of his staring at her, and then immediately greeted him. Estrella seemed to think he was alright, too. She smiled at him, but then looked down at her flip-flops.

"Hey, good guess," Steve said dryly, "let's look at your boots, and I think she's getting too big for her britches, too."

Colin grinned at Estrella as he turned to walk in front of them and lead them to the lady's boot section.

"Aw, You gonna let him talk to you like that?" he asked her playfully.

Estrella smiled and didn't say anything. Colin was making her shy, but she didn't seem to mind his attention. Steve wondered if the experienced-looking cowboy had caught her eye. Estrella looked to Steve and then pressed her face to the side of his arm when she couldn't hide a smile.

"Got yourself a shy one, there," Colin said to Steve, then he looked to Estrella kindly, "Come on, I promise I'll be gentle. You don't have to talk, just show me what ya like and we'll see what fits."

Steve couldn't believe the smooth, suggestive words coming out of the guy's mouth, but he second-guessed himself because Colin was keeping his distance from Estrella and being genuinely courteous. He had a sort of overt but easy-going masculinity that was perfect for a boot store in Texas, but would stand out in New York.

Estrella looked at the wall of boots silently, and both men could see that she'd be at least a moment before she settled on anything. Colin turned his attention to Steve. He tapped his rump where his wallet was and then put his hand down low, then lifted it up high with a questioning shrug. He wanted to know what price range he should guide Estrella toward in her boot selections. Steve looked at the prices marked on the boxes. Some of them were pretty high, but he didn't care.

Steve lifted both hands in an all-encompassing arc to indicate that anything at all was acceptable. Colin nodded and turned his attention back to Estrella patiently. Steve was about to make an issue of the way he was staring at her ass and legs, but Colin turned his head and hollered back across the store.

"Tammy, come have a look at our little lady and see what ya think for jeans," he said.

His knowing sun-weathered eyes held on Steve for a moment, and he waved a hand and smiled. It was a 'don't worry, I'm just pullin yer chain' look if Steve had ever seen one. With the gesture, Colin's collar gaping a little and Steve saw a tattoo. He was Army. It shouldn't have mattered, because lots of people of all sorts served, but it was one more reason that Colin was difficult not to like.

A middle aged woman with big blonde hair came through the clothing racks to the boot section.
She also stood and stared at Estrella's bottom half for a moment. She nodded her head in understanding and then smiled at Steve.

"Don't worry, hon. Colin only seems like he'd steal your girl and your horse. He's a sweetheart," Tammy said, and she disappeared back toward the women's jeans section.

Estrella ignored them and tried to find what she liked. She already knew that Steve was going to insist on buying her expensive shoes, so she tried not to notice the prices. Some of the boots were too clunky, and some had heels too high for dancing. Some had ridiculously pointy or curved up toes. No matter how she looked around for something sensible, her eyes kept straying to a fantastical looking boot off to her left.

Colin disappeared and she was glad he'd left them alone. Estrella was trying hard not to be flustered in front of Steve over how unexpectedly sexy the salesman was. She felt a stinging sort of shame that she was with the most attractive man she'd ever met, yet here she was helplessly noticing a cowboy who wasn't even quite as tall or as handsome as Steve. Why? She didn't understand it, and she didn't like it.

She held her hand back for Steve to take, and he was there immediately. His fingers claimed hers. His warmth at her back was a comfort against the confusing, friendly flirting of their salesman.

She glanced aside as Colin came sauntering back toward her with two boxes in his hands. He had a new pair of socks laid over his arm and his irresistible smile made her eyes skitter away from his face.

"Rest your fanny right there and we'll see which ones are yours," he told her.

Steve urged her toward a rough-hewn wooden bench, but Estrella protested.

"I didn't choose any boots," she said.

"Sure ya did," Colin insisted.

He waited patiently for her to sit. Estrella looked to Steve for backup. He nodded his agreement with Colin.

"You did," he told her.

This time her squint was true annoyance, and it worked to wipe the somewhat dopey look from Steve's face. She gave up and sat down. She crossed her arms, but she slid off her flip-flops.

Colin knelt down and broke the plastic tab holding the new socks together. His legs looked to be almost too much muscle for his faded jeans to handle. The man's tanned, wire-scarred hands reached for Estrella's bare foot, and something in Steve's head tripped over into denial.

"Un-uh," Steve grunted, and he stepped toward where Colin crouched in front of Estrella.

He didn't know what he was going to do, but the cowboy was not going to touch Estrella's feet. Colin looked up at him and grinned. He kept his hands away from her.

"Wonderin' when you were gonna snap-to," he said to Steve.

Words that he didn't want to say in front of Estrella piled up behind Steve's teeth.

"I can put on my own socks and shoes!" Estrella said crossly, and she took the items from Colin.
He sat back on one heel and draped his hand over his raised knee.

"I know you can, but it's supposed to be my job to help ya out. I don't wanna get beat by your man, so it looks like you're on your own. Sorry 'bout that," Colin drawled lazily.

Estrella firmed her jaw and avoided looking at him. She didn't need any more attention from him. Once she had the socks on, she opened the boot box marked with the smaller size. Her mouth parted on a soft inhalation at the beauty and craftsmanship of the boots.

The toes, the heels, and the top edges of the boots were nut-brown leather edged in fancy laser-cut curls and points. The buttery soft shanks and uppers were dyed a dreamy turquoise in water-paint shades from white to blue. The boots were decorated with inlays in deeper colors of red and indigo in the shapes of birds and flowers. A few bronze studs here and there balanced the feminine fancy with a bit of country-girl toughness. They were almost too pretty to touch. She'd never even seen boots like these, let alone imagined she could own them.

"Cap, I think she's in love," Colin said.

Steve smiled and nodded, but he didn't want to distract Estrella from enjoying her moment. She touched the deep indigo birds, then she lifted the boots from their box. At this point he didn't care if the things cost as much as a good motorcycle. She was getting them.

She tugged the right boot on, followed by the left, and then she sat there staring at her feet. Steve moved around in front of her and narrowly resisted the temptation to knock Colin with his heel. He got Estrella to stand up by holding his hands out to her. She took a few steps, but she kept looking down at her feet.

"Bring 'em over here," Colin said.

Estrella looked to him suspiciously, but he knelt and put his hands out in a business-like manner. She went to him and Steve stayed out of the way. Colin felt of her foot in the boot, and pressed a little to find her toe.

"They should be kinda tight, but do they pinch you anywhere?" he asked.

Estrella walked around some more.

"No. They feel good," she said.

Colin put her flip flops in the empty boot box and stood up.

"Let's go see what Tammy's got for ya," he said.

Steve liked the way Estrella walked through the store as if she was wearing Cinderella's glass slippers. She was a few inches taller than usual, and he put his arm around her shoulder to see what it would be like to dance with her at this height. She reached up to touch his hand, but her eyes were for either her new boots or for Colin's ass. Steve didn't think she even realized that she was looking at the guy.

He saw Estrella off toward Tammy and the fitting room. Colin stood at his side. Steve turned his head to give the man a look which usually made other guys squirm away.

"C'mon, Cap. I hear you're a real nice guy. You wouldn't deny a fella a pleasant view, would ya? I know how to look harmless," he said.
"Don't make her self-conscious. She's sensitive. Behave," Steve warned quietly.

Why couldn't he hate this guy? Part of him wanted to knock his teeth in, but a bigger part admired him.

"I know I dance a fine line, but I ain't stumbled yet, have I?" Colin said.

Steve just looked at him. Colin shrugged carelessly.

"Y'all in town to go dancing at the Hall tonight?" the man asked as the quiet stretched on.

Tammy probably had several pairs of jeans for Estrella to try on. It was taking a while, and they could hear the women talking softly.

Steve nodded slightly.

"It's a good thing I know who ya are, or I'd be worried. Man's gotta be worth his weight to keep hold of a lady like that 'round here. I might tag along, just to watch the show," he said.

Steve chuckled.

"You don't say much, do ya?" Colin wondered.

"Do I need to?" Steve asked.

"Nope. Not really," Colin agreed with a grin.

Estrella peeked around the door of the fitting room at him, then lowered her eyes.

"You don't have to show me, sweetheart, unless you want to. As long as you like them…" Steve's words trailed off to nothing. Colin made a short, low sound beside him.

"I like them, but are they too much?" Estrella asked.

She'd stepped out into the open area in front of the fitting rooms. Her second hand jeans had fit alright, but these looked like they were custom made for her. Her trim waist was very apparent, but so was the fine curve of her hips and bottom. The moderate heels of her boots emphasized the showgirl quality of her legs in snug frost-blue denim. There was a slit up the side of the legs a little ways that showed off some of the color of her boots.

"Don't you just think that a belt and a hat would be the cherry on top of all that?" Colin wondered.

"Mmh," was all Steve could muster.

"She's waiting for ya to answer her," Colin nudged him in the ribs and whispered.

Estrella was squinting at him again.

Steve strode forward and pulled a cocky straw cowgirl hat off a rack and settled it over her hair. It was almost white and the green snakeskin hatband complimented her cool colors. He tipped the brim down so that she'd have to make an effort to meet Colin's eyes, or the eyes of any man who happened to be taller than her.

"Yeah," Colin agreed with his choice.

He rifled through the hanging belts and selected a green snakeskin one that matched the band on
the hat. He held it out to Estrella and pulled his hands back as soon as she had it. Tammy came to
Estrella with a deep blue tank top and a pearl white lady's western shirt.

"You gotta," Steve agreed with Tammy's choices.

He needed something to distract him from the fit of her jeans across her bottom. His artist's eye
appreciated the ethereal white-blue-green tones of the outfit. He wasn't much for style. Tammy
and Colin had that covered. Estrella's deep gold skin was going to look great in the cool, light
colors.

"I don't need more shirts," Estrella protested.

"Do it for me?" Steve asked.

She tipped her hat up to make a face at him, and Steve put out a finger to slant the straw hat
between her eyes and Colin.

"Please?" he said.

"Okay," Estrella finally agreed.

She went back into the fitting room. Tammy made a bemused face at both of the men.

"I'm goin to the Hall tonight. You're gonna need backup," Colin said.

"I don't need backup," Steve denied.

"Yes, ya do. I'll hang back, but I'll be there," he said.

Steve lifted aside the collar of Colin's shirt a little more and studied the details of the military tattoo
going across his upper chest and shoulder. If the tat wasn't misplaced bragging, then Colin might
make an alright wingman. Colin shrugged his shirt back into place.

Reluctantly, Steve nodded.

"I don't want your lady. My wife would quit feedin me if I brought another one home, and I can't
have that. I'm honored that you're here, and I don't want you to have to get your hands dirty while
you're trying to have a good time," Colin said with more sincerity than he'd shown since they'd
walked in the door.

"You really think there's gonna be trouble?" Steve asked.

Estrella came out of the fitting room again. Her blue tank top hugged her breasts and the delicate
structure of her ribs. The white shirt was tucked in, but open down the front to show off her pretty
neck and collarbones. Along with the hat, jeans and boots, Steve couldn't take his eyes off of her.
Tammy smiled in satisfaction.

"Yeah," Colin said again.

Estrella cocked her head aside some to check Steve's opinion from under the rim of her hat. She bit
her lip and smiled at the way Steve looked at her.

"Can we find a CVS or a Walgreen's?" Estrella asked over her basket of fries.
"Sure. There's a drugstore on every corner nowadays. It shouldn't be hard," Steve agreed.

Estrella was back in her flip flops and her old clothes for their lunch stop. They'd learned to keep their looks at each other brief, so that Steve wouldn't get too snared in her gaze.

"I'm crazy," she said when her burger was finished.

"Why?" Steve asked.

"I'm crazy because I know I shouldn't wear the clothes you just bought me to go dancing in public. I shouldn't have let you buy them, and now I shouldn't wear them, but I want to. See, I told you I wouldn't feel like being modest. Steve, a month ago I wouldn't have wanted to go out on the street in anything that fit me. Now I'm going to be wearing a tank top, tight jeans and snakeskin!" she exclaimed with a furious whisper.

He pushed her large milkshake toward her. The rustic little town was warm and dry and the condensate on the outside of her paper cup was evaporating almost as fast as it formed.

"You're not crazy. Lots of people wear clothes that fit, and at least you're covered. Have you seen those belts they try to pass off as skirts? And then they wear a bra for the top. In public," he leaned forward to say.

"But that's not me! If I ever wear something like that, make sure I don't leave my room," she said.

"You're not a kid. You can wear what you want," Steve told her.

He nudged Estrella's milkshake again. She picked it up and sucked down the last of it to satisfy him. She'd realized by now that Steve was making sure she got a calcium boost every day, whether it was cheese or ice cream or milk. She sucked until the straw made empty, gurgling noises in the cup. Steve had long since quit watching her, and she knew why.

He tugged down the front hem of his shirt and waited for Estrella to get up and go with him to the truck, which was parked across the street. They found a Walgreens pharmacy easily enough. Steve busied himself looking at something at the end of the aisle while she chose the makeup she wanted. He let her pay for it herself after she gave him a dire look when he reached for his wallet.

Steve drove them to a different block along the main street of the little town. The trees were bigger here, and the shade felt cool through the open windows. They drove around back of a historic homestead that somehow managed to be stately and quaint at the same time. Estrella was learning that if she had a little patience, her curiosities might be answered without her having to ask. Steve got their luggage out and rolled it along the bumpy brick paving to a side door of the old main house. A hand painted sign in the window said "office."

"We're staying here tonight? Steve, this is..." her words ended uselessly.

She'd been about to say that B&Bs like this were expensive, but it would be a waste of breath. She'd accidentally seen the sales receipt at the boot store. Sure, Steve had bought some things for himself and some souvenirs for their friends back home in New York, but she still felt a little queasy at the dollar amount on the bottom of the receipt.

Steve paused with his hand on the door handle and waited for her to finish her sentence. When she didn't, he moved around her hat to kiss her on the cheek. They stepped inside the house and out of the bright sunlight.

The walls inside were a cheerful pale yellow, and the place smelled like furniture polish and fresh
coffee. The pretty young lady behind the wooden desk stood up and called toward the hallway.

"Ma, I told you it was that Steve Rogers," she said, then she smiled hugely at him and Estrella.

"Hi. Welcome to town. I'm Kimberly. I hope ya don't mind, Captain, but we upgraded your room," she told them.

"Hello, Kimberly. Does our room overlook the river?" Steve asked.

"It sure does. It's got a better view. You might like the bathroom," Kimberly said to Estrella.

Estrella thought her cotton dress was cute. The historic home was beautiful inside. Her eyes drifted around the high-ceilinged room to antique rugs and furniture, the old paintings on the walls, and the dark wood doorframes. The place was very nice, but it felt more comfortable than Tony's beach house in Rockaway. Here, she might like to sit in the sunny window seat and read a book.

Kimberly came around the desk to give Steve their old fashioned metal room keys and show him where the room was on the little homestead map. Estrella then followed her to the dining room where their breakfast would be served, and then Steve brought their luggage through and out the other side of the house. Their room was down a shady, tree-lined path across the formal garden from the main house.

Estrella looked around in wonder at the beautiful setting while Steve unlocked their door. It looked like maybe their room and one other was made from an old brick kitchen outbuilding. She made a sound of pleasure that made Steve happy when they went inside and found rough wood-beam ceilings, sunlit stained glass windows, and a huge poster bed spread with an intricate quilt. The glass patio doors looked irresistible. Estrella hurried over and pushed them open. Two wooden rocking chairs sat on a rustic balcony which overlooked the river below.

"Steve!" she called.

He found her standing at the burnished cable railing. He came to hug her from behind. The view through the trees down the rocky riverbank was idyllic.

"I can't wait to have coffee here in the morning," she said.

"I'm glad you like it," he told her.

"I like being here with you. It wouldn't be fun by myself," she said.

"I know what you mean," he agreed.

She felt great in his arms. The area surrounding the balcony looked leaf-shrouded and private. He would have moved to kiss her in the next moment, but she wiggled away from him and went to look at the bathroom.

"Steve!" she called again.

He chuckled and went to see what had her so excited.

"I want to watch you take a shower," she said with near quivering eagerness.

He could see why. There was a stained glass window in the bathroom, too. It cast a warm glow of light through the room. There was a large, open shower in one corner. It was tiled in dark slate and had no enclosing walls or curtains. Across the room was a cream colored claw foot tub with
"You can watch me shower as long as you're right there, with bubbles," he told her and pointed to the tub.

She nodded. Steve had to look away from her eyes quick. She was flushed with arousal and her dark eyes were about a half second away from making him strip down for her here and now. He hissed a strained breath through his teeth and pressed the heel of his hand hard against his erection.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Estrella was the one to look away this time.

"Now it's your turn to stop apologizing," Steve told her.

"Don't you get blue balls? Doesn't it hurt to be like that all the time?" she asked with sympathy.

"I'm used to it," he said.

He smooched her cheek and left the room. If he stayed there with her any longer, something was going to get started that they couldn't finish. He hadn't realized how romantic and sensual the place would be when he booked their room this morning. He'd only looked at the pictures and thought that Estrella might like the place because of all the plants and its proximity to the river.

He strode past the connubial looking bed and turned the bolt on the entry door. Then he went out the patio doors and leapt over the balcony railing.

"Where are you going?" Estrella called down after him.

"I wanna go see the river. Gimme a minute, sweetheart," he looked back over his shoulder to say.

She nodded at him once, and he leapt away over the rocks and down the river terraces. This wasn't a place that tourists usually had access to, and he needed the seclusion. His agility allowed him to get to the river's edge without using a path or disturbing any of the rocks or flora around him.

Steve crouched by the steadily flowing water and pressed his hand against his dick again. He knew what she would want him to do when he gave her a shower peep-show. He was gonna get to watch her naked and slippery with bubbles while she asked him to stroke himself for her. Maybe that would happen tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning. And he was going to have to share the bed with her. It didn't make sense why it seemed so much more sexual to sleep here than anywhere else so far, but it did. That was the kind of bed you made children in, and it was going to be on his mind the whole night.

He tried taking short, shallow breaths to ease back from his sensual hyper-awareness. He watched the whiskey-colored tint of the clear water as it passed by in front of his toes. He reached down to put his fingers in the water. It was chilly. If he wasn't right in the middle of town, he'd strip down and wade into the water. He settled for dampening his neck with the river water.

His eyes unfocussed and all he could see was the vague movement of the river at his feet. Flowing. He had to let his desires go like the water through his fingers. He was so used to either fighting for or against everything that it felt wrong to simply let something be, to let it flow through him unimpeded. The thought of liquid flowing made him think of orgasm and he felt the first tingles of it simmering at the root of him. Better here than at the dance hall later.

Steve stayed squatted on the gravel and bowed his head. He quit pressing restrictively at his dick.

As he thought of it all, images pressed and teased at his mind. Like before in the abandoned schoolyard, his knees hit the ground and orgasm burned through him.

"Oh, God," he groaned.

He was fully dressed, but he had to keep still and quiet. His hips wanted to roll with the pulses. Anyone could be watching. Instead of letting his body convulse with the pleasure, he stayed in control. Anyone who saw him might think he was merely bowed in prayer. Maybe he was. He wasn't doing anything wrong. It felt good to come, and he was thankful.

After it was over, he was able to focus on his surroundings again. The rocky green river valley was beautiful. The breeze and a handful of splashed water cooled his skin. Only time would cool the heat pooled in his groin. The quiet trickle of water around rocks gave him something to focus on other than the thoughts which usually crowded his head.

At this moment, he felt that his body was his. It didn't belong to Erskine or to Howard. Not to the Army, nor to Shield, nor to the Avengers. Not even to Estrella. He was his. He could control his mind and his actions. His feelings could be channeled, as he had just done. It was rewarding, beyond just the orgasm. Steve felt a sense of self that was rare and comforting.

For a moment more, he appreciated the afternoon light on the water. Then, he stood and bounded back up to their room. His muscles felt loose and relaxed, instead of tight. It was wonderful. He would have kept jumping along the rocks for the fun of it, if Estrella wasn't waiting for him.

His last leap put him over the balcony rail. Estrella sat in one of the rocking chairs. She smiled curiously at him and he settled into the other chair. He didn't know why, but she didn't seem upset that he'd left her so abruptly.

Estrella looked to him and wondered what had happened. He'd gone out like his pants were on fire. If he was anyone but him, it would have been insane to go jumping across the rocks like he had. By the time he was down at the river, she hadn't been able to see him anymore.

He looked relaxed and content, his skin slightly flushed above his shirt. Veins showed under his skin a little more than usual, but it wouldn't have been noticeable to anyone who didn't know him.

"Did you…?" she wondered.

His head rolled toward her across the back of the rocking chair and he looked at her patiently. He was different. Not on edge or needy. There was something about him that she couldn't define. It made her uneasy.

Steve smiled slightly, like a cat content in the sun, and she was the one who had to look away. Why weren't her eyes doing the same thing to him now as they'd been doing all day?

"I might be wantin' a beer soon. And some dancin', but I'll need a shower first," he said in a drawl that she would have thought authentic if she didn't know he was from New York.

"Okay," she said.
The old dancehall had no air conditioning, but it didn't need it this time of the year. It was early evening, and the golden light slanted in through the open shutters and the window screens all along the sides of the building. The airy, open space had a single row of tables and chairs along either side, a bandstand on a stage at one end, and a bar at the other. The middle of the hall was an empty expanse of well-worn wood planks.

It smelled like decades of beer and dancing, and all sorts of tin signs, bar decorations, and country music memorabilia adorned the rafters. Neon lights hummed to life as the bartenders came in and started preparations for the night. A small crew was setting up for a band, and a nice lady waited to teach them to two-step.

Steve was content to admire Estrella rather than look all around the large, empty hall. She was acting shy again. He wondered if what he'd done for her in the shower had been too much. Maybe it had been, because she'd watched him explore himself with near breathless silence. He'd felt oddly unpressured to get off, so he'd taken his time and enjoyed the way her gaze followed the movement of his hands over his skin.

In the end the water was getting cool and he was full and hard, but still without the urgency to come. He'd walked, dripping, across the tile floor of the bathroom and stood next to her bathtub. She looked afraid to touch him or talk to him, so he touched her cheek gently, then went to the mirror to start getting ready for their evening out.

Estrella had made a sort of tight, suppressed female sound and submerged herself under her layer of bath bubbles. He'd refrained from looking at her in the mirror while he shaved. He felt good and in control, but that might not last if he saw her naked and exposed above the bubbles. He went to the bedroom to dress in his new rodeo-cut jeans and boots and his western shirt.

As he stood waiting for the dance lessons to begin, he had a better understanding of why Estrella had been staring at Colin's backside. The new jeans had room for the shanks of his boots at the bottom, but not much else. It was a tight hug up under his glutes and if he'd ever earned a big belt buckle, it would be fighting for room at the front. He supposed that when a man was trying to stay on an angry bull, you didn't want your stuff hanging around low and loose.

The instructor lady was a good teacher. As soon as the band was sufficiently assembled on the stage, they learned the basics of the two-step, the cha-cha and a few variations. Steve and Estrella had already practiced the waltz back home, but it was a different dance entirely when trod on the rough plank floor of a honky-tonk.

The lessons were brief but sufficient for Steve to get a feel for what he was supposed to do later when they came back for the night's entertainment. He felt capable and confident, and most importantly, able to dance with his girl without hurting her. Estrella was awkward in his arms. He could see that she was learning the steps almost as easily as he was, but her hands on him felt hesitant.

"What's wrong?" he asked her as they left the dance hall to walk the picturesque town for the evening.

"Steeve," she whispered as if she wasn't wearing her necklace.

Her fingers gripped his and he took another look around for trouble. There wasn't any at the moment, only other people out walking. It was mostly couples of all ages and groups of friends on the sidewalks. It was nothing like the city. There was a simplicity and a quiet here, even with the
band over in the hall checking the sound system.

He tucked Estrella's hand into his arm and followed other people along the brick path to the old gristmill. Strings of white lights lit the trees along their way and the smell of grilled steak made his mouth water.

They took a table outdoors. Estrella was definitely bothered about something, though she didn't look angry or afraid. He waited until their salads were finished before asking her about it again.

"Eya, please talk to me. Did I do too much in the shower?" he leaned forward and murmured quietly to her.

Other people were paying attention to their own conversations and their table was far enough apart from the others in the restaurant to afford some privacy. Estrella's eyes flashed to his, then away again.

"No. I don't know. I asked you to do that, but I didn't think…" she said.

"You didn't think what?" he wondered.

"I didn't know you would be so good at it," she whispered, "You made me want you so much, and you won't let us. Seeing you like that, I-" she bit her lip hard and a pained look tensed her brow.

"You know I want you too. Sweetheart, if it's too much then we need to stop tempting each other. We can find other things to do. We can try to think of other things," he suggested.

"Is that what you did down at the river? Think of other things?" she wondered

"No," he said.

The little word had a finality to it that was like a closed door. He smiled at her kindly in the glow of the tree lights and the bright flicker of the oil lamp on their table.

"Oooh! You're not going to tell me, are you? Is it one of your secret man things?" she asked him.

Steve chuckled.

"You make it sound like a boy's club house with a sign out front that says 'No girls allowed'," he said.

"It is! You're not telling me," she insisted.

"I'm not trying to keep a big secret from you. It's hard to describe. I don't know if it's so much a 'man thing' as it is personal. You know how sometimes you stop thinking and it's more feeling than thought?" he tried to explain.

"I guess," she said uncertainly.

Steve made a thoughtful face and tried to gather together the right words. He had trouble understanding this stuff in his own head. It was at least twice as hard to get the thoughts to make sense for someone else. He figured it might be easier to give an example than to try to define things.

"Alright. You know I've been on edge. Barely in control lately," he said.

She nodded.
"When it gets bad, you run off to Bucky and-"

"And I do something stupid. Exactly," he agreed with her.

"Why do you think I do that?" he prompted her.

"I don't know. You don't trust us at the tower to help you?" she guessed.

"I don't trust myself. If I'm gonna do anything crazy, then I don't want to hurt you or to have it tied to the Avengers. That doesn't matter. I hope that's in the past. I'm trying to learn to trust myself and to control myself. This 'man thing', if you want to call it that…It's hard to control. Thor said I should stop fighting it, so I have to find other ways to cope," he told her.

Estrella looked at him skeptically. He liked how spunky she looked with her hat, and how long her hair was getting, all dark and mysterious around her face. She was comforting in her friendly familiarity, but her changing beauty was hard to get used to. He shifted away from looking at her eyes. She'd bought mascara at the drug store, and her use of it made her eyes even more magnetic to him. He met her gaze in brief flashes, then looked at the gloss of her full lips. That wasn't much better.

The waiter brought them their steaks. The thick cuts of meat were juicy and crisped along the edges. Estrella had onions and vegetables with hers. Steve had the largest steak the place offered and a loaded baked potato.

"Other ways to cope?" Estrella prompted him.

"Right. Maybe you can help me. Tell me what you do when it's difficult to behave," he said.

Estrella paused in cutting a bite of steak and looked at him to be sure that he was asking what she thought he was asking. He was. The slight smile he wore was confident and naughty.

"It wasn't a problem until a few weeks ago. I sleep more than I used to, and I have my work. Me and Natasha usually talk or watch movies in the evenings when we don't meet with everyone," she said.

"And then?" Steve prompted her.

Estrella toyed with the sautéed onions on top of her steak, then her eyes smoldered at him in a way that spoke volumes. He was learning exactly how long he could look at her without his mind heating up and his thoughts melting away. It was a little less than two seconds.

"See what I mean? It's personal. It's hard to talk about," he said.

She nodded. After a bite during which he could almost hear her thinking, she glanced his way again.

"I don't always…" she said, and she rubbed her fingers against the table in a way that put warm, slick thoughts in his head.

He nodded. She was braver than him to try to talk about this. He'd found that touching himself in front of her was easier than talking about it.

"But it's getting worse. I knew it would. As I get closer to what I'll be, the things I want are changing. I didn't feel the need to do it until recently. Years ago, I didn't want to do it at all because anything down there was nothing but negative associations for me. You make me want to. When I
“think about you,” she admitted.

Steve set his fork and knife down and closed his eyes for a moment. He couldn't let himself dwell on what she'd just said. If he did, he'd be in trouble again. He let the thought slip past for him to think about later.

When he opened his eyes, he looked around unobtrusively. Thinking about their safety was a strong enough pull to redirect his thoughts. Of all the people in the busy restaurant, there was one who caught his attention. A man was clearing a table and wiping it with a cloth. He was short. Strong. Latino. Tattoos peeked from under the edge of his sleeve cuff and one was on his hand. As Steve watched, the man looked over his shoulder toward their table. His eyes first landed on Estrella. They lingered there in a way that was atypical of a man appreciating a pretty woman. Too cold. When he noted Steve watching him, he tried to pan his gaze around casually, but the effort was weak and belated.

The man wasn't armed, but he had a tub full of dishes, and maybe his apron hid a knife. At his distance from Estrella, he'd have to be a good throw to get a knife to her, if that was on his mind. Just in case, Steve changed his posture slightly and made his arm available on the tabletop.

The moment of watchfulness cleared his head some, and Steve was able to give Estrella his attention again. She had noticed his efforts and this time instead of trying to turn to see what he was looking at, she kept her eyes on him or on her food.

"That's good. Thank you," he complimented her restraint, then went on with their conversation, "I'm gonna keep the idea that you think of me when you do that in my head for later. Can you tell me anything else we can expect as you heal?"

"I don't think so. I'm sorry I didn't remember about my eyes. I would have told you. Natasha thinks I've forgotten things on purpose," she said.

Steve nodded. His peripheral vision was about as good as most people's direct gaze. He tracked the suspicious man into the back of the restaurant without turning his head.

"It's alright. If there's anything else, we'll take it as it comes," he told her.

Now was as good a time as any to share his ideas with her.

"Eya, I want to do more work with your voice. I need to be more resistant to it, both the pleasure and the pain," he said.

She stopped cutting her broccoli to look at him skeptically.

"I'm serious. And maybe your eyes, too. We're alright for now, but I can think of situations where I'd need greater resistance," he explained.

"You mean like in a dangerous situation? With bad people? I'm not an Avenger and I don't want to be one. Why would you need that kind of practice?" she asked.

"It could be tactically helpful, but I hope we don't ever need that. I don't want you in the field any more than you want to be there. I'd like to be more resistant for personal reasons, and the tactical reasons are only a benefit," he said.

"Is that going to be your phrase now? 'It's personal'? You've used that twice tonight," she said.

"What if it is personal? What else do you want me to say?" he asked mildly.
She was beginning to interpret his mild tone as not really mild. Everyone thought he was always so nice and polite, but she could see something other than bland acceptance in his words, now that she was becoming more familiar with his expressions.

"It doesn't feel smart to me to torture you with my voice, especially if you're already struggling. I've read about brain chemistry. I don't want you addicted to the effects of my voice," she worried.

"I don't get addicted to substances. I can form conditioned associations, but my brain chemistry corrects itself," Steve told her.

Estrella looked at him for a moment.

"Okay. I'll stop if you start acting weird, though," she said.

"Fair enough. Thank you, Estrella," he said.

After supper they walked back to the dance hall. They'd been able to hear the music some from their outdoor table at the restaurant, but it was much louder as they approached the dance hall doors from the street. The music was live and rowdy, and Steve's feet already wanted to move to the beats they'd practiced. Estrella shared a smile with him while they waited in a small crowd to get in.

He kept his attention broad while they were outdoors. The Latino people he saw looked relaxed and happy and focused on their own friends and loved ones. Some people looked at Estrella, but he couldn't fault them. She was hard not to appreciate. He was long accustomed to overlooking the women who gave him the eye, beyond determining that they weren't a threat.

Steve paid the small cover charge, and Estrella stayed close to his body as they went inside. The place looked different now that it was night and the crowds were starting to pack in. The band sounded gritty and southwestern. People lined the bar and the tables, and the dance floor was already obscured by a tide of dancers.

He would have offered Estrella a drink, but she eagerly tugged him toward the dance floor. Steve braced his senses against the pounding exuberance of the music much like he had to against the noises of battle. By the time they had a place on the planks, his mind had timed out the dance steps. It was exciting in more ways than one to take hold of Estrella's body and her hand and move with her.

It was too loud to talk much, so they enjoyed dancing. Steve didn't need a lot of words. He could see the look of enjoyment on Estrella's face while they moved. She laughed with him when he made a misstep and her foot ended up on top of his. He corrected his step quickly and used a touch of his strength to shift their weight onto the correct footing in a hurry.

The two-step was popular, and they became easier with it across two songs, then things slowed down. Steve marveled at the unrefined, relaxed atmosphere of the place. Having a good time was more important here than making a good impression. He caught a few people looking at him intently, but they didn't seem to get to the point of recognizing who he was, probably because they didn't expect to see him among them and dressed like he was.

Estrella's skin was misted with exertion from the vigorous dancing, and Steve could feel a pleasant heat in his muscles, too. The crowd on the dance floor slowed to a simple couple's dance and Steve became very aware of Estrella's tight curves against him. Her belly rubbed at his, and her warmth soaked into the front of his tight jeans. Her hand on his shoulder urged his ear toward her mouth.
"I dare you to wear this outfit back at the tower," she said.

Her dark eyes challenged him for as long as he could stand it, then he looked away smiling.

"What are you trying for, darlin? I'm already havin trouble keeping the new hires on task. If I show up at work like this, I won't be able to keep my head straight, and neither will anyone else," he drawled in the relaxed accent he heard people using all around them.

Estrella gave up on holding him properly and put her arms loosely around his neck. His hands slipped to her hips and he paid just enough attention to keep them moving along with the other couples. She laughed at his playfully arrogant words and Steve started to feel loose enough to toy with the rhythm of the song a little.

Rather than simply sliding his boots forward in time with the music, he let his body fall into the experienced posture he saw on the other male dancers. It felt right. There was a tension to his back like when he'd danced with Natasha, but he imagined it was slight enough for hardly anyone to notice. His hips rolled his legs more smoothly into the steps. What was really interesting was the way Estrella responded.

She felt his posture change and her face turned up to wonder at him. He shrugged.

"I think this is how it's done?" he said.

Estrella became more lithe and fluid in his arms. Part of her weight rested against him, and her bottom shifted along with his hips in a way that made sparks fly in his mind. Their feet shuffled a bit, then they both had the same idea at the same time. A smile curved his mouth as her boots seemed to press along the inside of his. They started to glide along as one. He adjusted his stride to make their bodies reach just a little until the muscle tension was like sweet friction.

Estrella stared up at him nose to nose, and he couldn't help but to get stuck on her eyes. The physical unity of their movement along with the dark well of her gaze drew Steve's mind along to thoughts of making love to her. He was aware enough to keep them from bumping into anyone, but only barely. Estrella's lips parted to allow deeper breathing when she felt what his body betrayed of his thoughts. She felt exactly the same, but firm confirmation of it melted heat down her spine.

They both regretted the ending of the song. Estrella recalled what her eyes did to him now, but she didn't mind that his hardness against her belly might be partly because of it. It felt too good right now to let worries bring her down, so she refused to think of it. She looked away from Steve's face as he guided them to the edge of the dance floor. The transition to normal walking after the last beat of the song made her stumble a little, but Steve's strength supported her.

Steve's mind felt like a warm, humming engine. He didn't trust himself to talk, so he guided them to one of the rough posts by the tables. A familiar face caught his eye, but he stood nearby as if Estrella was his whole world.

"Mighty fine, Cap. I'da thought y'all never danced before, but then you slicked into that last song like… Well," Colin said, and left his thought unfinished.

Only the twinkle in his eyes completed the words.

"That's about right," Steve admitted while he stood beside the man.

Estrella rested back against Steve and gave him time to calm down some. She wondered if he was uncomfortable confined in the tight jeans. She looked aside to Colin, then away. His shirt was half unbuttoned and his tan went as far down as she could see.
"Still think you don't need backup?" Colin asked.

Steve scanned around and made note of the men who couldn't quite keep their eyes off his girl, even with him looking at them. His attention snagged on a man across the floor standing against the wall. People passed between them across the room, but dark eyes stared back, then tipped down under a white ranchero hat.


"You got every right to be. Is that your problem?" Colin wondered.

Steve looked aside to see Colin's eyes tracking as the man walked away through the crowd. Colin didn't turn his head and he kept a friendly smile for anyone who happened to look at him.

"Might be," Steve told him.

Estrella couldn't see what the men were talking about, and she could barely hear what they said over the beginning of the next song. What she knew was the hard change of Steve's body. He went from aroused to alert, and she didn't like the way his hands gripped her hips. It didn't hurt, but it meant that he wasn't as relaxed and happy.

"You! Go away. You're making him think about work," she turned toward Colin and fussed.

Colin got a slight nod from Steve, then he looked fondly to Estrella.

"I apologize, ma'am. I can make it where ya don't see me," he said.

Estrella gave him a hard, squinted look because she didn't want to let on that she found anything about him appealing. Not his sun-gilded brown hair which curled at his collar, and not the deceptively lazy strength of his body, and not the roughly handsome charm of his face. She narrowed her eyes at him even more until he tipped his hat to her and turned to walk away. And certainly not the full, hard curve of his ass.

She jerked her head away and stared blindly across the other half of the room. Dancers glided by in front of them as Estrella and Steve took a moment to cool down under the air from the ceiling fans. She almost shrugged off the heat of Steve's body as he leaned a little to speak at her ear over the loud music, but she restrained herself. It wasn't his fault that Colin rubbed her the wrong way.

"It's alright," Steve told her.

"What is?" she asked.

"It's alright that you like looking at him, Eya," he said gently.

"I don't," she denied sharply.

Steve's hands turned her and she growled at the impossibility of resisting him. She squinted at him almost as hard as she had at Colin, but for a different reason. Steve was trying to talk and she didn't want him to get stuck and lose his words. She could have used her eyes to make him forget the uncomfortable topic, but it felt wrong to do that to him.

"Is this one of those things you think you have to lie to me about? Do you want me to lie to you when I notice an attractive woman?" he asked.

She couldn't look at Steve anyway. Shame for being attracted to Colin brought her chin down.
"No, but I shouldn't like him. I have you," she grumped.

Steve encouraged her chin back up with his finger.

"We can talk about it later when it's not so loud. For now, I want you to know that you shouldn't feel bad about looking. I know you're with me. I trust you," Steve said.

Estrella sniffed in a breath and shifted her eyes away. She wanted to look at him to know that he really meant what he said, because he was still a bad liar, but she could hear the sincerity in his voice. He wasn't offended that she had trouble with Colin.

"Can we get beer?" she asked.

Steve smoothly accepted her change of subject. Now wasn't the time for long conversations anyway. A few minutes at the bar got them each a chilled longneck. They stood aside from the dance floor while they enjoyed their beers. Estrella stayed close to him and watched the dancers with a smile on her face.

A guy tried to rub past Estrella's backside on the pretense of the crowd being tight, but Steve reached around her and used a firm hand to keep a little distance around his girl. The guy turned his head to give Steve attitude for daring to touch him, but the look on Steve's face had him hurrying away with a changed mind. Estrella stayed happily unaware of the moment.

Soon as their beers were done, Estrella was ready to dance. Steve was just as eager. He checked around again and saw a few possibly suspicious men in the crowd, but he didn't let himself get tight or paranoid. It might be nothing. Colin was along one wall in a dark spot, watching everything. A young woman asked Colin to dance, and Steve admired the smooth letdown he gave the girl. It felt nice to know that someone was on watch so he could enjoy dancing with Estrella.

They muddled through a cha-cha which was a lot harder than a two-step. Laughter seemed the best remedy for their mistakes. The waltz was easier, and Steve and Estrella fell into the provocative mood they'd found earlier in the night. After that, it was several two-steps of varying tempos.

Steve tried to stay alert, but the dancing was so enjoyable that he failed to. His enhanced vision was the only saving grace that kept them from being a menace on the dance floor. More often than not, he found himself lost in Estrella. She shared his fascination. After an hour of dancing, they were so entranced with each other that Steve barely cared or noticed that they were getting a bit too much attention on the dance floor.

A hard body bumped him, and Steve snapped his attention up to the rude interruption. Colin braced a hand at his shoulder to stop their motion, then drew them aside toward the bar. Steve near growled at the man, but Colin's level stare reminded him of the tattoos he'd seen on his chest earlier. The cowboy was on point about something that Steve needed to pay attention to.

"I promise to not be too sweet to your lady while you go get a beer and have a look around," Colin said with less twang than usual.

Estrella stood and fanned herself with her hat. She looked flushed and beautiful and not very steady on her feet.

"Can you dance with him?" Steve asked her.

Estrella looked between them skeptically. Something in Steve's attitude informed her that he needed her to do this. He looked too serious, like he was thinking about work again. His eyes were doing that shifty-flicker thing. The stillness of the two men in the shifting crowd set Estrella's
nerves on edge. For whatever reason, Steve seemed to trust Colin.

She nodded and set her hat back onto her head. Colin's hand at her waist guided her away from Steve and she didn't like that, but she went. He nimbly got them out to the middle of the floor and swept her into a lively dance. It was almost beyond her skill, but then Colin pulled her in close and the movement of his body helped her, after she got over the stiff shock of touching someone who was very male, yet not Steve. His cologne was light, but distinctive. Not Steve.

"I know you don't much like me, ma'am, but the Captain's a real hero to me and my buddies. You're twistin him up something fierce tonight, so I'd appreciate it if you can give him a minute to pull his head out and look around. Ya think you can run in them boots?" Colin asked at her ear.

Estrella wanted to thrash and yell to get away from the contact with Colin, but his calm words and his steady strength kept her from fighting. He used his body differently than Steve. Steve used light touches to hold her and to guide her, but Colin's guidance felt more overt and handsy. He had to use more of his body to do what he needed to do. Colin felt rougher, and she realized then that Steve's light touches were possible because he used so much less of his considerable strength to accomplish the same moves.

Once again, she remembered Steve's hands jerking Natasha roughly through the air as if her muscle-dense body weighed very little, and then slamming her down to the mats. She shivered in Colin's arms, but the man didn't notice it. That was another distinct difference from Steve. Steve noticed everything. Was a normal man really so different? So lacking?

She looked at Colin directly for a moment in startlement. Colin stumbled, then caught himself up before he stepped on her.

"Shoot, lady! You could drop an elephant at a hundred yards with that look. That's why he kept tippin your hat down," Colin exclaimed.

"Sorry," she said.

"You didn't say if you think you can run in those boots," Colin persisted.

"How many men are there?" she asked.

"Hard to tell. 'Bout a dozen, give or take," Colin said.

"I can run, but not with you," she said.

Colin avoided looking at her for the last half minute of the song. Estrella tried to dance gracefully with him, but it felt too strange. It was a great relief when Steve approached them through the dancers, though he wasn't really Steve right now. Estrella sighed. It made her mad that he couldn't have more time without trouble intruding.

Steve took her hand and led her from the dance floor. Colin came along behind. They left the dance hall and Steve didn't stop among the crowd of people outside waiting to get in. Nor did he walk toward the bed and breakfast they were staying at tonight.

"Six," Steve instructed as they walked along.

"I'm watching it, man, but are you sure you wanna go toward the shut-down end of town? It'd be better to stay under the lights and around other folks," Colin said.

Estrella didn't have to run. She kept behind Steve while he walked steadily along, away from the
touristy part of the little town. The sidewalk ahead had far fewer street lights.

"They're watching. Give them time to gather. Colin, I want you to stay just as we are. Her at my back, and you guarding her back. I've got this, but I'll feel better knowing you're there. Don't engage unless I tell you," Steve ordered.

"Yes, Sir," Colin said.

"But you don't have your shield or your gun," Estrella said.

"Won't need 'em," Steve told her as they walked along.

"Did you see what I was seeing?" Colin asked skeptically.

"Quiet. Keep moving," Steve said.

He led them off the sidewalk and into a small park. The only light was the distant glow from the last streetlamp behind them. Colin grumbled about getting too far away from backup, but Steve led them farther from the street. He got them to the center of the park, inside the ring of benches.

They stood in the dark and waited. Estrella looked around nervously at the black silhouettes of the trees, the benches, and the shrubbery. The night air was chilly against her skin, but her goose bumps weren't from the cold. The ominous quiet of impending danger shrilled her nerves.

"Tell me what's happening," she whispered.

Steve pulled her close and spoke against her lips as if they were standing in the middle of the park for the sole purpose of making out.

"Colin, get down in the shadows under that bench. Wait til I tell you, then get up here and cover her back," he said.

Their new friend did as he was told and he kept quiet about it. They heard barely a scrape from his boots against the pavement.

"Eya, I think you know that I've been watching for a few days now. For a while this morning, I thought we'd lost the men who were following, but I saw one at the restaurant tonight, and then more showed up at the dance hall. It's nothing to worry about, just stay at my back and it'll be over with quick," Steve whispered against her lips.

"What kind of men? You mean just regular men? Or is it Hydra? Robots or something?" she asked.

"Doll, if it was anything serious I'd have stayed at the dance hall with you until help arrived. These are small time chumps. Regular guys. I won't even break a sweat. If they have firearms, it's too dark to use them well here, and they probably wouldn't want to call attention to themselves like that," he tried to soothe her.

"There might be shooting?" Estrella's voice rose into sharp fear.

"Shh-sh. Kiss me now. I've got this. You kiss me until I put you behind me, and then you keep your hands on my back so I know where you are. Can you do that for me?" Steve asked.

He hugged her close, and Estrella grimaced. She was kissing Captain America. The body against her was hard and unyielding. His lips were too firm, and his tongue, when he used it, was harshly intrusive. He was acting, and he was horrible at it. She laughed into his mouth at the delirious
absurdity of the moment, and he chuckled too.

"That bad, huh?" he asked.

"You're awful," she murmured.

His lips softened on hers for a moment and she could feel him smiling, but then there was a slight sound off in the trees, and he went hard again. She trembled with nerves, but Steve kept kissing her. His hands ran roughly over her body in a parody of a passionately busy couple. Estrella rolled her eyes. It was a good thing it was dark, or this mockery wouldn't be fooling anybody.

More sounds came from a different direction. People trying to be sneaky, but Estrella could hear them coming. How many? How long was Steve going to wait? Her skin was crawling. It sounded like they were being surrounded. Too close.

A flashlight clicked on, and she shrieked in surprise at how close they were. She was blinded by the light in her eyes, but she could see shadowy man-shapes all around. Why were they waiting, staring? Steve tensed to incredible hardness against her.

"Ix-Chel," she heard a voice breathe in fervent wonder.

Estrella screamed in terror and Steve pushed her behind him.

"Colin!" Steve barked, and then there was the sound of hard hands thumping into flesh.

Estrella didn't stop screaming until Colin pulled her tight and clamped a hand over her mouth. The man pressed her up closer behind the violent movement that was Steve and spoke sharply in her ear.

"Put your hands on 'im. He needs to know where you are!"

Estrella reached out toward the dark shape she recognized as Steve. He was taller than the rest. Her hands touched hot, moving stone. He stood planted firm in front of her and his upper body moved to deal with the men who tried to get past him. Steve worked quietly, but their attackers made plenty of noise. Men's voices yelled encouragement, or they yelped in pain. Estrella whimpered sickly at the occasional wet, brittle sounds of breaking bones. Colin jostled and grunted behind her and she wished she could lose consciousness. There were too many of them! All around.

Steve's body turned against her hands, and the shoving, tugging pressure against Colin disappeared with the awful snap of bone. Estrella felt squished between the two men and hot tears seeped down her face. The smell of Steve's deodorant and Colin's cologne pressed closest to her were the only things that kept her from losing her mind from terror. When would this end? The horrid reality of what Steve did continued on in a series of hits that she could feel through him, and then his body stillled against her hands.

"Stay," Steve said, and then he was gone.

Colin clutched at her and Estrella stood too petrified to do anything about it. The dark humps of bodies littered the ground around them. A miserable sound keened in her throat. Steve was off away somewhere in the dark, and she could hear panicked yells. Shadows moved among the trees, men running away, but Steve ran them down with terrible speed. There was more fighting to the left, then straight ahead. It was silent for a while except for her tight, painful hiccupping. Tears turned cold on her face.

"Shit!" Colin exclaimed behind her.
The silhouetted shape of Steve came toward them at a normal walk, but he drug burdens along in his fists. The meaty flop of bodies gave Estrella a surge of nausea, and someone's skull smacked against the park pavers. She turned aside to retch, and Colin's arm supported her across her middle. The nausea passed as the moments of quiet stretched on.


Steve's hands moved over them both and Estrella shoved away from him.

"She's shocky, man. We're fine. Give her some space," Colin said.

The light from Steve's phone came on and scanned over her, then went dark again.

"This is almost over, sweetheart. Stay with Colin for a few more minutes and then we can go," Steve told her.

"Nnnnn," Estrella denied nonsensically.

"Whatever you're doing, hurry up. She needs away from here," Colin said.

Steve used his phone to take pictures of their attackers. Each time he arranged a body and the flash of his phone camera illuminated a downed man, Estrella made a sound and jerked in Colin's arms.

She saw Latino men in the strobes of light. Some of them Maya. Tattoos on them. On their hands. Were they dead? She struggled to get away, but Colin held her still.

"How many?" he asked.

"Twenty-three," Steve answered.

"There were thirteen at the hall," Colin said.

"They had backup. That's why we had to wait," Steve said patiently.

He stood and started sending pics with his phone.

"She's not good, Cap. I'm friends with the chief of police, so I can make this go away for you, but we need to move," Colin said.

"At ease, Colin. I need to finish this. Estrella, talk to me. If you could be anywhere right now, where would you want to be?" Steve asked her while he used his phone.

"Natasha," she said.

"Yeah, Nat's good to have around. Jarvis, too. J?" Steve asked.

"Captain?"

"Get me vitals on Estrella," Steve said as he continued to send pics.

"The Miss is in emotional distress, but otherwise well within acceptable parameters for her current condition. I agree with Mister Colin. She is verging on shock, but will likely recover quite well," Jarvis responded.

"Jarvis, you stink," Estrella said weakly, but she was relieved to hear his voice.
"Thank you, Miss," the AI responded mildly from Steve's phone.

"Cap?" Colin asked, bewildered.

"Need to know," Steve said.

Colin sighed.

Estrella wriggled at the indignity of being held immobile like a roped calf. He let her arms loose enough that she could wipe her face.

"Let me go," she said.

"Cain't see shit," Colin denied, "You wanna trip over the bodies?"

"Alright. We're done here," Steve said.

He stepped through the mess he'd left on the ground and guided Estrella and Colin out of the park.

"I'll call somebody. We shouldn't leave that lying around for people to find. What was that anyway?" Colin asked.

"I don't know. They've been following me for a while. I'd keep one for questioning, but I can't do that right now. I'll let my people deal with it. You might tell your friend the police chief to expect a visit from someone," Steve said as they reached the sidewalk and turned toward the heart of town.

"Federal?" Colin asked.

"Not exactly," Steve said.

Steve tried to comfort Estrella, but she wiped at her eyes and looked straight ahead while she walked. She didn't want his arm around her shoulder, and she didn't want the touch of his hand. He noticed the fine shakes that made her unsteady and he stayed as close to her as she would let him.

They passed the dance hall. The music was still going strong. There were fewer people waiting outside now. Steve kept them walking and no one paid much attention to them. Another block along the street, and they were alone again in the night. Steve stopped and turned to Colin.

"Thank you for being there for me," Steve said.

"It's my honor, Sir," Colin said.

He would have saluted Steve, but opted for a handshake instead when Steve put his hand out.

"Twenty three men and there's not a scratch on you," he marveled.

"Nah, that was patty-cakes. Make that call to your friend and have somebody get the park cleaned up before daybreak," Steve said.

"Will do. You go and take care of her. We'll handle the rest," Colin agreed.

Estrella looked back to Colin once as Steve urged her away toward the brick drive of the bed and breakfast. The cowboy tipped his hat to her. She didn't feel like smiling, but she gave him a two fingered wave goodbye.

"Ma'am," Colin said warmly, then he turned on his boot heel and walked away.
The sounds of music reached them faintly through the trees. Estrella walked beside Steve. The brick path guided them deeper into darkness.

Estrella's eyes grew wide and watchful. The dark under the trees was too much like in the park with the men all around.

Steve's arm gathered her against his side and she let him. His eyes were better than hers, so she trusted him to guide them across the grounds and to the building by the river where their door was. A cheery glow from the light under the shingle awning welcomed them. Estrella pressed against Steve's side and put her hand at his belly while he fit the key in the door.

Their room smelled like clean linens and luxurious bath soap. Steve shut and locked their door behind them. Estrella watched him check the locks on the patio doors, and then he came back to take her by the hands.

The quiet of their room felt secure and intimate after all the noise, people, and violence of the night. Steve took her hat and laid it on the table by the door. Her hands went to his shoulders as he knelt to remove her boots. She vividly recalled the stone hard feel of his flesh while he was fighting. He wasn't like that now. Steve wasn't soft, but he was far more yielding.

He put her boots by the door and took off his own to set with hers. His movements were gentle. Slow. Estrella followed him when he lifted her hand and urged her along to the bathroom. The warm glow of the lights above the sinks and the shower made the space feel cozy. Steve shut the door and stood them in the middle of the room.

His hands tugged her white shirt tails untucked, then pulled up at her little dark blue shirt too. His fingers skimmed the garments off of her like the touch of feathers.

"Undress me," he said.

She looked at him uncertainly, but then her hands moved.

In the plain light of the room, Steve looked uninjured, despite what she'd seen and heard him do. She felt the urge to see all of him. To know that he wasn't hiding any injuries. She felt dirty from the altercation in the park, but they were in the bathroom now, so it was okay. She undid Steve's shirt buttons and examined him as she revealed his chest, his arms, and his hard belly. His shirt fell to the floor and she walked around behind him. His broad back was unblemished.

Estrella stood behind him and reached around to undo his jeans. They were too tight, and the closures were too new and stiff. Steve's hands came down over hers and he helped her loosen the jeans. He stood still and let her struggle the denim down his legs. He stepped out of the puddle of clothing and snagged her with a finger in her waistband to tug her close. She smiled slightly when he had some trouble getting her tight jeans down and off as well.

They stood in underwear and socks and looked at each other. Estrella had her arms crossed over her chest, her hands cupped modestly even though she still had her bra.

Steve reached under her hair and unclasped her necklace. He set it on the bathroom countertop, then took off his underwear with a quick shove and a step. He lifted his foot and wiggled his socked toes at her. His nakedness was impossible to ignore, but the silliness of him wearing only socks made the tension deflate.

She smiled softly and gestured for him to bring his feet to her where she knelt beside the shower area. He did, and she pulled his socks off inside out. When she looked up, he was getting hard not
far from her face. Her head moved back to make some distance. Steve smirked and used a hand to
push aside his rude flesh from being right in her face. He shrugged in apology but didn't say the
words.

His other hand gestured for her to get up. When she did, he pinched open the clasp of her bra. Her
hands stayed in place, but he slid the straps down her arms. Steve knelt to kiss her belly below her
navel, then he skimmed her plain panties down her legs. Two swipes with his fingers, and her
socks were off.

He reached for the shower knobs and got the water started. It was cool in the open room, so he
flipped the wall switch for the overhead heater. Before he could get back to Estrella, his phone
buzzed on the countertop.

A series of emphatic looking Cyrillic words came in a text, followed by two words from Buck in
English.

*I'm coming.*

Steve set the phone down and turned back to Estrella. Her eyes travelled over him bottom to top,
and she let her bra fall to the floor. She opened her arms for a hug and Steve was relieved that she
would let him touch her now. He gathered her in carefully and moved them under the warm
shower. The touch of all their bare skin had him hard enough so that he stayed up against his belly
and out of the way of their embrace. His concern about Estrella made his physical urges easier to
ignore.

The soothing hot water plastered her hair to her skull and Steve ducked his face back to get a rinse
under the spray. Water made their skin squeaky-slippery. He got the bar of soap from its dish and
put it in her hands.

"Wash me. Get me clean," he said.

Estrella knew what he meant. He didn't use a lot of words to say it, but she knew he wanted her to
get the Captain off of him. To get any remnant of those men off his skin.

She started with his hands. Hands that had easily crushed bones were relaxed and slick in hers. She
washed him thoroughly across his knuckles and palms, between his unresisting fingers and up his
arms. His muscles were malleable, his joints easy. She pushed him to rinse and he did.

Steve looked at her questioningly when she soaped up his clean hands again. She cupped his
elbows and pushed his open, sudsy palms to her breasts. Steve's mouth opened in surprised delight.
Already, he had learned to meet her eyes as much as he wanted, but only in short glances. He was
right. Her eyes weren't going to be a big problem for them. He was already so strong.

She shoved through his hands and hugged him.

"I love you so much," she whispered.

His soapy hands smoothed up and down her wet back, and her slippery breasts rubbed into his
chest, to their mutual delight. Steve's hands slipped down to her bottom and gripped her weight
gently. His head clunked back against the slate wall. She rubbed her belly against his, his erection
trapped between them.


The little soap she'd used had gotten everywhere with the soft water. She wanted to rub him all
over. She wanted to get her new massage oil and slather them with it, but she didn't. She stilled so that Steve wouldn't be overstimulated beyond what he could bear. Her body demanded more rubbing, more slick friction. That was harder to resist, but Steve's hands and arms locked her immobile along her hips and ass.

"Captain America is a lousy kisser, but you're much better," she whispered to distract him.

"Romance is pretty far from my mind when I'm working," he said.

"I know," she agreed.

They stood against the wall. Steve reached up to adjust the angle of the shower more directly on them so that the water could warm them. He took the soap in hand, then he sank down the wall with her held against him. His knees parted hers and she found herself sitting astride his lap with her knees touching the floor tiles. His large, careful hands smoothed her with suds all over until they both smelled like rich homemade soap. As he spread it onto her skin, she rubbed at his.

She laughed and slid side to side against him, their chests getting most of the sensation.

Steve groaned at the delighted sound of her voice and she felt his cock twitch hard against her belly.

"Sorry," she whispered.

Steve shook his head and smiled at her when the effects of her voice passed.

"Colin looked at my eyes and almost fell down. You're so much stronger. In every way," she whispered as if it was a secret.

"I love you. I want to be strong enough for you," Steve explained.

Then her eyes weren't a problem anymore because they were kissing. The soft, erotic skill of his lips and tongue distracted her from the feel of his hand moving down her back.

"Much better than Captain America," Estrella whispered in approval.

Steve grinned for a moment until the happiness of her compliment passed and they could get back to kissing. She jerked in surprise when his fingers glided to the cleft of her bottom. Her eyes flew open, but Steve only paused and stared at her through narrowly open eyelids. She knew he looked that way on purpose, but it made him look sexy and devious, with the way his fingers moved down slowly and deliberately.

"Steve, you're gonna touch my…" she hissed, then her eyes slid shut and her head fell back out of the spray of the warm water.

"Hmm. Doesn't that feel good too?" he asked her.

His soapy fingers rubbed lightly against the tight bud between her cheeks. Then he slid further along to where she was hot and slippery with no need for soap. She felt trapped open and vulnerable to him in this position, but what he was doing felt so good that she didn't want him to stop.

"Yes," she breathed.

Steve rubbed her slowly back and forth from behind, his fingers flat and doing nothing fancy. He
didn't need fancy tricks. It was an amazingly intense sensation. A wordless cry wrung from her.

"Sing for me sweetheart," Steve rumbled.

She did. She couldn't seem to help it. She was vaguely aware that her voice had his cock throbbing against her belly, but she couldn't stop. His fingers, his whole hand rubbing her was like nothing she had ever done to herself. Strong and gentle, he relentlessly massaged her. It was torturously slow, but the pleasure built and swelled inside her.

Her hand sought to grip him between them and she held on as they both spastically twitched in the joy of being together. His voice joined hers and then everything was heated, pulsing sensation.

When Estrella came to her senses again, they were lying on the floor of the shower. Soap and sex fluids were washing off of Steve's abdomen and she watched, mesmerized. She felt warm and loved all over, but too slippery to stand up safely. Steve lifted his head to look at her, and they smiled at each other. He looked goofy and relaxed.

"I think the Captain's gone," she whispered triumphantly.

"You chased him away," Steve agreed.

He got them up and rinsed before the water completely cooled. Estrella felt boneless as he dried her and urged her toward the big poster bed. She shook her head and went back to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She grabbed her necklace and put on underwear and a night shirt.

Steve joined her in the bed wearing a full set of pajamas.

She giggled while she clasped her necklace on.

"I didn't know you owned PJs," she teased.

They slid under the cool, heavy covers and Steve pulled her close.

"They're not pajamas. They're armor. I need them if I'm gonna be up against you all night," Steve said.

"Uf, that's awful," she said against his chest.

Steve reached to turn off the lamp and the room went dark.

"Why's it awful?" he wondered.

"It's a bad joke. You're so corny sometimes," she said fondly.

"I wasn't joking," he said.

"Oh," she replied.

Now that she paid attention, she could feel him still hard against her. She sighed.

"I'm alright, Eya. You gotta understand that I'm not used to this. The sex. With a real lady. It's exciting, and it lingers in my head. It takes a while to go down, even if I'm satisfied," he explained with only a little embarrassment.

"A real lady? As opposed to what other kind of lady?" she asked.
"Rosie. Or my hand. Or a fantasy," he said.

"Rosie? Who the hell is Rosie?" she asked.

"Aw! The toy thing you found in my drawer and brought with us. Not a person!" Steve was quick to defend himself, but disgusted that he'd slipped up and said the name of his toy.

"You named it Rosie? Like Rosie the Riveter?" Estrella laughed.

"No. I don't like thinking about how old I am when I'm playing around, and Rosie the Riveter brings me back there. I mean like Rosie palm and her five sisters," Steve said with a little bit of stiff offense in his tone.

"Ohh, don't feel bad. You're not the only one," Estrella cooed and rubbed his chest, "my friend Lacey had a name for her hairbrush."

"Her hairbrush?" Steve asked, confused.

Estrella laughed and pressed her lips against his sternum. She couldn't believe she was saying this to him! If she ever saw Lacey again, and she had to introduce her to Steve, her face would burn right off from embarrassment.

"You know… the handle," Estrella said meekly.

"The handle? Oh!" Steve said, then he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Estrella petted him some more until he felt like speaking.

"What was the name?" Steve asked.

"Danny," Estrella said.

"Oh. Some hairbrush. Buck told me that a few girls were wild like that, but I don't think I believed him," his voice grumbled.

"Lacey was only a little wild. She's probably married and boring now. You shouldn't pick on people and call them names. You've got Rosie," Estrella pointed out in defense of her friend.

"I wasn't picking on anybody. What name did I call her?" he asked.

"You said she was wild. As if she was bad," Estrella said.

"I didn't mean bad. I meant sexually liberated. Sorry," he said.

"So does having Rosie make you sexually liberated?" Estrella asked pointedly.

"If I'd had Rosie when I was a teen, that would have been pretty wild. I could have earned my bread and butter renting her out. There was nothing like that back then," Steve agreed.

"Rented? That's disgusting," she said.

"Now don't you judge. We had to eat. It wasn't like now, when you could walk out your door and almost trip over food everywhere. Keeping fed was tough. A lot of people went without, so when you had a resource, you made the best use of it," it was Steve's turn to admonish her.

"I'm sorry," Estrella apologized after a moment, "I wasn't thinking."
"It's alright. I don't get offended easily," Steve said.

In the quiet that followed, Estrella reveled in the physical bliss that being with him brought her. He was warm and safe, and he felt wonderful. Mental unpleasantness prodded at her, but she distracted herself by opening her mouth against Steve's skin and licking at him, just under his collarbone.

"That's nice, babe. Real nice," he said.

"Thank you, Steve," she said, then set her mouth back to his skin.

"You're welcome. For what?" he wondered.

"For distracting me with sex so I won't think about what happened tonight," she told him.

"See? You're a really smart dame. I can't get anything past ya," he said in an exaggerated Brooklyn gangster accent.

She laughed and snuggled more fully against him.

"You need anything else to take your mind off your worries, you let me know. We'll talk in the morning, but until then, I want you to sleep, Eya," Steve murmured into her hair.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed.

She was already going limp against him.

Steve waited until she was breathing deeply in sleep before he picked up his phone.

He texted a simple question mark to Bucky.

A day and a half. I'll be bringing the last of it to you. You good there for now? Bucky responded.

Real good, Buck. S'nice having a girl.

I'm glad for ya, but don't get soft, Buck sent to him.

Steve chuckled in the dark room and typed a response.

She doesn't let me.

Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I gotta go. See ya, Buck texted.

Steve could almost see Bucky putting away his smile and his phone and turning hard and cold for whatever he was about to do.

Later, he sent, but he didn't expect a response.

He likely had a few hours that were safe for sleeping while Colin and his friend tended to things in the park. Steve didn't know exactly what Buck would be bringing to him in thirty-six hours, so he got some sleep while he could.
"Eya, it's alright that you like looking at Colin. We can't expect each other to stop noticing people, now that we're together. Human nature doesn't change. I don't think we should have unrealistic expectations," Steve said.

"You're only saying that so I'll feel bitchy if I don't like you looking at women!" Estrella argued.

"No, I'm not," he replied calmly, reasonably, "it's alright for us to notice attractive people. Some people are enjoyable to look at, like art. As long as we're not trying to make time with them, I don't see why it's a sin to appreciate beauty."

Estrella stared at him hard, and he shifted his gaze away as soon as he felt his mind start to dull. He hated doing that because it felt submissive to look away. As if she was winning a point in an argument, or as if he was wrong, or guilty. Looking away was necessary, so he did it, no matter that it made him feel like he was on the weak end of the conversation.

Despite their argument, it was a gorgeous morning. Before Estrella woke up Steve had called Kimberly at the front desk and asked that a generous breakfast be brought to their room. The smell of fresh coffee woke Estrella. They'd had a fun, friendly breakfast in the big poster bed. He let her steal some of the toast from his plate, but he guarded his bacon with his fork.

She'd wanted coffee on the balcony overlooking the river valley, so they sat in the rocking chairs outside while they were still in their night clothes. Steve thought after a few minutes of quiet enjoyment of the morning that it was time to talk about the things they'd let slide by in silence last night.

He wasn't accustomed to arguing with anyone except Tony and maybe Buck. He didn't like the discord between himself and Estrella. Her eyes made things more difficult, but he was determined to persevere. This conversation was necessary if their relationship was going to work.

She was upset. Defensive. Looking at her for too long, especially while her voice was raised, made him want to grovel and ask forgiveness. He wouldn't. Not when he knew he was right. Steve firmed his jaw and looked at her again. The leaves of the tree branches overhead moved in the breeze, and dappled morning sunlight danced just beyond them off the balcony. Estrella took a turn looking away this time.

"I know it's not fair, but I don't feel the same as you. I won't like you looking at women," she said more calmly than before, but with a jaw nearly as stubborn as his.

He was glad that Estrella felt she could be honest, but what she was implying was that she thought he might do more than look. That stung, but he had to admit to himself that he'd been acting like a dog lately, with all the women.

"Do you think that I've got no sense of fidelity? I know-" Steve paused and had to shove down a feeling of wrongness and regret before he continued on, "I know my recent behavior gives you reason to doubt that I'll be faithful to you. If you don't trust me now, could you give me a chance to earn your trust?"

"It's not that! I know you can be faithful. You're so stubborn, you could do anything you make up your mind to do. I don't want you looking because when women see you looking, they recognize what you're doing, and then they think that maybe they can have you, because you're showing them
that you're interested by looking at them. And if they come over and start something, like they try to do all the time anyway, I can't promise I'll be nice," Estrella said with a crabby frown.

Steve took a moment to mentally digest what she'd said. He sipped the last of his coffee and gave himself time to get his words together. He couldn't just lay into her like he did with Buck and Tony. It wasn't the same. His friends were used to rough sparring, both physically and verbally. Estrella was still sensitive to aggressive masculinity, so he had to keep himself carefully on point.

"You don't mind me looking so much as you mind them knowing that I'm looking?" he asked.

Estrella nodded once and kept her gaze directed out over the balcony into the tree canopy.

"That won't be a problem. I don't need to look at anything for long. With my memory, it's like taking a picture. A little glace, and I move on. They never notice. Remember the girls at the waterpark?" he prompted her.

She looked at him and waited.

"I saw them right off, before they noticed me. I had a little look, and that was enough. You didn't notice, and they didn't notice. Have you ever seen me staring at a woman, other than you?" he challenged her.

"No," Estrella said grudgingly.

"And you won't. I might look, but it's fast. People don't see it. I have to look, Estrella. If I try to avoid looking at attractive women simply because they're attractive, I'm gonna miss something dangerous sooner or later," Steve said.

Estrella thought about his quick flickers of attention when he was watching their surroundings. He wasn't exaggerating. His eyes were so fast that nobody would consider him to be staring. Stupid super-hero, super-soldier, serum enhancement bullshit! He made it hard to win an argument sometimes. She conceded the point with another reluctant nod.

"I'm not as fast as you, and it doesn't feel right for me to look at other men," she said.

She gave Steve a guilty, remorseful look.

"You plan to step out on me?" Steve asked her.

"No! I didn't mean to look, but I did. And then you saw me looking, and Colin is such an asshole! He grinned at me, and you were right there. How can you be okay with that? Aren't you jealous at all? I hate feeling jealous, especially if you don't feel that way too!" she griped vehemently.

"I take it as a compliment when other guys think I've got a fine lady, as long as they keep it respectful," Steve explained.

Estrella didn't like the smug male satisfaction that she could see hints of on his face. It was subtle, because he was Steve Rogers and he kept many of his baser feelings private, but she was starting to see that sometimes a small hint of expression on his face ran much deeper. Part of her was pleased that he felt proud she was with him, but a larger part of her felt objectified.

"I'm not meat for your ego! You know I don't like it when they look at me," she told him.

"I know, and if it ever bothers you, let me know and I'll do something about it. Your happiness is more important to me than my ego," he said.
"As if I'd tell you! You would beat them. Or you'd shoot their tires," Estrella said.

Steve bit his tongue. There were things he felt like saying in his defense, but he instead decided to change tactics. Estrella was smart. And curious. He felt only marginally bad for using that to his advantage. He had to level the field. Her eyes were still making him want to slide onto his knees and grovel.

"Most of the time I don't have to do that," he said with the slightest of smiles.

"Most of the…? What do you mean?" she asked with heavy suspicion.

He didn't let the feeling of victory show on his face, but inside, he was tap-dancing.

"I mean that lately when I've seen men looking at you, most of them look away as soon as they see that I'm aware of them. Only once did I have to take physical action, and it was so insignificant that you didn't notice it," Steve told her.

She kept looking at him, but her eyes narrowed. He didn't know if it was from suspicion that he was intentionally guiding the conversation, or from her trying to lessen the effect of her eyes, but it looked appropriate either way.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"A fella tried to get fresh with your backside last night at the dance hall. All I did was put out a hand to keep some distance. I knew you wouldn't like him touching you, and I'm not gonna let a disrespectful chump get his jollies from you," Steve said.

Estrella kept a straight face for a moment, but then she couldn't stop the pleased smile from overtaking her cheeks. It made her mad that he'd caused her to smile when she was trying to be serious, but she couldn't help it. The idea of Steve looking out for her like that did something warm and gurgly to her heart. It felt like puppies and chocolate and a soft blanket wrapped around.

She turned her head away to pretend to study a little gray and brown striped lizard that was sunning itself on the top cable of the balcony rail. He knew she was smiling, dammit! His annoying male pride was getting stroked by her pleased reaction, and there was nothing she could do about it. She'd have to talk to Natasha. She had to be smarter than this, or Steve would walk all over her. She wasn't used to dealing with a subtle, intelligent man. She'd only ever had to deal with the dumb ones. She got herself under control and looked back to him.

"You had to touch that man to keep him away. Wasn't he angry?" she asked.

"Sure he was, but there was nothin he could do about it," Steve said.

Estrella glanced at his powerful form slouched so casually in stodgy old-man pajamas. It didn't matter what he wore anymore. He looked latently dangerous whenever he wasn't trying actively not to. Like now. He wasn't threatening her. She knew she could crawl onto his lap and he'd be sweet to her. He was merely allowing her to see why other men didn't challenge him. A tight little smile tensed the corners of his mouth and eyes. It was remotely sinister and she snorted out a nervous laugh and shook her head.

"Hey, it comes in handy. You don't like me shooting people's tires or getting my hands dirty. What else am I supposed to do?" he asked.

Steve finally gave her a full-on rascal of a smile and changed his posture slightly so that he looked harmless. Mostly.
They heard laughter and turned their heads to see a couple with two children coming out onto the balcony adjacent to theirs. The family looked around at the leafy green scenery until the boy saw Steve.

"Whoa..." the kid breathed.

He reached blindly for his sister's hand and tugged the smaller girl to get her attention. The parents were still leaning over the railing, trying to see the river below through the greenery. Steve stood up and grabbed his coffee cup and Estrella's from where they'd set them down on the wooden deck. He waved cheerfully to the boy and Estrella moved quickly ahead of him into their room. Steve shut the glass door and turned the lock. He turned to her with a mildly hunted expression on his face.

"Are you running away from your fans today?" Estrella asked him.

"I think so. I'd rather be with you," he admitted.

Estrella wanted to hug him because he looked a little manic about not wanting to be the Captain today, but her phone made a noise from where she'd left it on the night stand. She glanced at Steve and they shared a concerned look, but then she went to get her phone. No one ever called her, so she worried that it would be bad news or trouble.

There was a voice message. She opened the message and put it on speaker.

"Eya! We can go to the beach today. Will you be there? Call me, call me, call me!" Valeria's happy voice said to them.

Estrella sighed and looked around at the cozy, rustic hideaway they'd shared for the last several hours. The bathroom held fond, sexy memories for her. The bed was an inviting mess of tumbled covers and pillows. Their clothes were mixed in a pile on the floor.

"It's your family. We should go," Steve encouraged her.

She heard the same reluctance to leave in his voice that she felt.

"I know. We will. But I like this place," she said.

"Me too. We can come back. I think I wanna two-step some more someday," Steve said as he stepped behind her and wrapped her in his arms.

Estrella turned around and put her arms around his neck. She tugged on him, and Steve stepped them off to a beat he counted in his head. They fumbled a little, but they laughed about it.

"I'd like to come back someday," she agreed.

They had three hours to talk during the drive back to Corpus Christi. They greedily hoarded their time alone because they knew that soon they'd be spending the rest of the day with Rita and Jesse and Val and a few friends the girl was bringing along. Alberto had a side job to do today, and Fran and her family had other plans.

Steve was just as interested in staring at the central Texas countryside on the way down as he'd been on the way up. Estrella almost thought he was going to stop on the roadside to gawk at the cattle when they passed a large grazing herd.
"It's just cows," she teased him.

"I know, but I like to see them. They look happy," Steve pointed out.

Estrella looked at the herd of multi-colored animals and agreed. The light traffic whizzing by on the highway didn't bother the cattle at all. They wandered freely on the sparse grassland and swished their tails with lazy flicks. Spring calves lay in the sun near their mothers, and white cowbirds were perched throughout the herd.

"They look like steaks," she said with an appreciative smile.

"That too," Steve agreed.

The sun shone warm on their legs through the windshield and the radio played old country music hits quietly enough that they could talk over the sound. Estrella turned it up when a good song came on and she tapped her boots along, but she turned it down again when the song was over. Her fingers ghosted over his knuckles where his hand rested on the gearshift. Steve noted the thoughtful frown on her face.

"You don't like violence," Steve pointed out.

"No. Why should I? Why do you?" she asked.

"Why do I like it? Or why do I do it?" Steve asked for clarification.

"Both?" she wondered.

"I don't like violence for the sake of violence. People get hurt, and I hate to see that. I wish power-hungry men would stop creating conflicts so we wouldn't have to respond to them. I enjoy the physical action, but I could get that just as easily in sport competition or sparring. I do it because somebody needs to, and it's what I'm good at. I know you were upset last night. I forget sometimes what it's like to not be used to it. I remember feeling a little sick at what I could do after I first saw combat, but that passed. I don't do this for fun, Eya. If I didn't know there was good cause, I'd stay home," Steve said.

"Don't tell me it's not for fun! I know you enjoy it. I saw you and Natasha playing in the training room. You were having fun when you weren't trying to kill each other, and maybe even then too," she said with a teasing smile.

Steve chuckled. He was relieved that Estrella realized he hadn't truly been trying to hurt Natasha.

"Training is different from work. I mean, it's part of work, but practicing with friends is a lot different than pushing through to an objective on the field," he told her.

"How is it different?" she wondered.

Steve downshifted and prepared to pass a slow farm truck they'd come up behind. Estrella let him concentrate on his driving instead of prompting him for an answer. Steve used the time to consider how much he should say and how he should say it. He didn't want to lie to her, but from her reaction in the park last night, he knew she wasn't ready to hear everything he could tell her. When they had nothing but wide open highway ahead of them, he answered her.

"While I'm training with friends, I don't have any intent to do harm. The goal is to improve our skills and endurance, and to learn how we can best work together. In training, we stop short of doing intentional harm, even if our training goals aren't met. On the field it's not... like that," he
"It's more like last night?" Estrella asked.

Steve distracted himself by looking at her in her thrift shop jeans and the same orange and pink top she'd worn when they'd first visited the abandoned schoolyard together. The top fit her more snugly, and he intuitively knew that she was wearing it for as long as she could in defiance of her changing body. All the attentive eyes on her yesterday and last night confirmed to him that he wasn't the only man who noticed that she was becoming a lot more than just cute.

"Steve," she fussed at him for staring.

He smiled at her shy smirk, and turned his attention back to the road.

"Is your work more like last night?" she reminded him of her previous question.

"No. Last night was candy. Like an alley fight. Not like combat at all. If combat was a car that could go a hundred miles an hour, then last night was puttering along at about twelve miles an hour. Easy as it was, bad things can happen if I let my guard down. That's why I had Colin cover your back, and that's why I wanted your hands on me," Steve said.

"Why? What good did it do for me to touch you?" she asked him.

"I needed to know exactly where you were. I don't know what those people wanted, Eya. I don't know why they've been following me. What if somebody knows I'm out on leave with no backup, and they've hired…" Steve said, then shut himself up.

All kinds of things might be happening, but he didn't want to scare Estrella with it any more than she already was. Buck knew something significant about the people following him, or he wouldn't have reacted so strongly to the pics he'd sent him of last night's losers. Steve wasn't naive enough to assume the Latino prisoner homicides across the nation and the Latino gangsters following him were unrelated.

The New York City police force was pretty adept at keeping gang violence controlled, at least in Manhattan, so it was possible that someone had been after him for a while, and him being on leave away from home was simply an opportunity for them to get to him. Or it could be symbolic. He hated to think that, but it was possible that Mexican nationalism, his status as an iconic symbol of the United States, and border control politics were converging to make a hit on him into a social statement. Or maybe Hydra was using different, more Machiavellian tactics…

"Stop it!" Estrella fussed.

He knew he'd slipped into his business mindset, and it was hard not to do that when he thought of such things. Steve looked to Estrella briefly in apology. She smiled at him a little and moved her hand to rub his thigh. Steve grinned at the feel of her beside him on the bench seat. The happiness of being with her chased away all thoughts about work except for his normal situational awareness, which was almost sub-conscious for him. Steve went back to watching the scenery and listening to the quiet music.

Estrella turned her head and pretended to be interested in the view out of her side window. She bit her lip in anxiety and tried hard to keep her breathing normal. Steve noticed the finest details and it was tricky to hide anything from him.

It felt wrong to keep secret from Steve what she knew of the men who had attacked them last night in the park. Last night since the attack, and all morning she'd tried very hard not to think of it. The
brutally strong Maya men, their tattoos, their voices, and the sound of impact and injury gave her a cold, panicky feeling. It all reminded her of the most awful things that had happened to her.

For a few years in New York, she'd been able to stay away from them. Hiding in plain sight as a scruffy anorexic bum had worked well as long as she was watchful and cautious. She'd seen them searching the streets for her, but she was good at being invisible when she didn't look like what they expected. Especially in a crowd. In New York, there was always a crowd.

It must have been their day at the mall that let the gang know where she was. There had been cameras. It was possible that she'd already been recognized from all the pics of their night of dancing in New York. Then people at the Corpus Christi mall had likely uploaded more pics including Steve, and gang members had maybe already made the connection between her and Steve, so they'd gathered together to take her back last night. Her hand clenched onto the mostly relaxed muscle under Steve's jeans. If not for him, terrible, terrible things would be happening to her right now. She knew she shouldn't resent the violence of last night, but it reminded her of things that had been done to her.

"I'm sorry I was such a wimp last night. I shouldn't have screamed so much," she told him.

"I'm sorry that you were there. I didn't want that, but it was going to happen and I couldn't let you out of my sight, with no other safe place for you to be. I don't blame you for screaming. Like I said, the details of fighting don't disturb me anymore, but I never wanted you to have to be there for that. Civilians shouldn't have to see what I do," Steve said with a tight frown.

"Don't act like I haven't seen violence, or like I'm some kind of fainting lady. It's been done to me. If you're too squeamish to want to remember what's happened in my life, that's okay, but I can't forget," Estrella said.

Steve drove on in silence, with only the soft sound of the radio to cut the awkward tension. Estrella looked aside and up to him somewhat defiantly. She didn't appreciate him sticking a 'precious little lady' label on her and making her a fantasy in his head. He needed to know she wasn't so delicate.

He glanced at her and looked contrite when he saw her firmly set jaw and her hard eyes.

"I'm not forgetting. I know you're not weak, and I'm not squeamish. I only wish I could do something about what happened to you in the past, and I'm determined that your future is going to be different. I don't want you involved in my violence, especially if it reminds you of past trauma," he insisted.

"You better get used to things not being how you like all the time. If you're with me, then you're going to be in my violence someday when you let us make love. They beat me. They broke me. They tore me. They were all inside me. I can't give you anything clean and untouched. Not like you deserve," she said.

She tried to keep her voice cold and angry. What cracked her was the misery that Steve was so good and bright, and she'd been so dirtied and used. She was going to defile him when they were finally together. Estrella wished so very much that he could be her first, but he wouldn't. She didn't know what number he'd be because she'd never wanted to count all the times she'd been used, or all the men who had done it. Steve deserved better, and she was ashamed to let him near where she'd been hurt. She was afraid that what they were nurturing between them would be tainted by her past.

An angry sob ground past her teeth and her eyes blurred.
Steve glanced in the rearview mirror, then shifted the big truck down to a hasty stop on the shoulder of the highway with nearly wrenching abruptness. The tires chirped against asphalt as he set the brake and released his seatbelt. He freed Estrella from her belt, then grabbed her up into the middle of the bench. She was stiff and resistant, but he knew it was from the strength of her emotions, not from fear of him. His arms turned her to face him, and she had no choice but to look at him.

"I don't deserve anything. I'm not pure like you're making me out to be, Eya. Not like my ma raised me to be. I messed around with a bus load of chorus girls. I've been with prostitutes across Europe. I've had nothing but paid women here since I came out of the ice, and two of them are gonna be there for me to deal with when we get home. I let Buck pay for a girl off the street to blow me, and then he took me to a club and I paid for a lap dance that started dirty and just got worse. If I could get diseases, I'd probably have every one in the books. I'm not an angel for you to defile, but all that stuff is in our past. My voluntary sin is a lot more recent than what happened to you, and you're not responsible for your trauma at all. There's nothing dirty on you, Estrella. There's nothing dirty in you. It's all on them, and you've got every right to be angry," Steve said with absolute certainty.

She glared at him through watery, squinted eyes. She tried to look away after a second, but he didn't let her. A passing vehicle shook the truck with its wind, but they didn't care. Steve took her head in his hands and kissed her hard and deep. She bit and growled at him and struggled in his arms. Her angst wasn't against him, and he seemed to understand that. She was fully justified in being angry and in expressing it.

Estrella beat at him fitfully for a moment, but then she cried quietly and their kisses turned soft and loving. Steve pushed his fingers into her hair, which he was really starting to love, and he brushed her tears away with his lips. She was sweet and salty and he wished he could take the pain and the memories from her.

A large oilfield utility rig passed them and shook the truck. Estrella rubbed her damp face against his because their skin felt good and soothing together. Then she nipped at his perfect, handsome nose. He smiled a little, and she kissed his smile in an effort to steal some happiness.

"Okay," she agreed simply.

There wasn't much more to say. She felt better, having reminded him what he was getting with her. She was even happy to hear his confession of all the illicit and paid sex he'd had, though it still wasn't near as much as had been done to her, and he was the naughty one for doing it. His honesty was cleansing, and she didn't feel so bad, knowing he wasn't really so virginal, either.

"Let's go. I want to get to the beach," she said.

Steve looked hard at her for almost a full minute. She thought he was just being contrary and stubborn, until she remembered about her eyes. Kissing him tended to make her forget things. The arrogant jackass was challenging her! Long past when her gaze should have turned his will to mush, he stared her down across the length of their noses.

"I'm not afraid of your past. Are you afraid of what I have to do for my job?" he asked.

She couldn't hold his gaze any longer. She glanced down and aside. There was no lying to him. No hiding. He'd already seen her fear last night. Up close, his strength and his ability were overwhelming. She nodded.

"A little," she admitted.
"I can't change our past. I can't change the work I'll have to do in the future," Steve said.

"I know. I'll try to be braver," she said quietly.

"And I'll try to make it so that you don't need to be brave," he said.

She nodded. He kissed her briefly one last time, and they moved apart to get buckled and back on the road again. They kept quiet for most of the rest of the drive.

Steve turned the radio down so far that it was almost off when a news blurb interrupted the music near lunch time. He listened to the nearly muted FM station while he pretended there was nothing to listen to. Even for his ears, the news announcer's voice was nearly drowned out under the purr of the truck's engine at highway speed.

"...full Federal investigation as the rash of gang-related prison homicides spills out onto the streets. As of last night, law enforcement in three cities is scrambling to understand unusual murders in two maximum security prisons and in the roughest neighborhoods of Phoenix, L.A., and Las Vegas. There's more certainty now than last week that these homicides are coordinated within the hierarchy of prison gangs, but no one is talking, which special detective Shannon Buller says is extraordinary, considering the scope and timing of these events. It also doesn't explain why members of the same Hispanic gang are now being found dead outside of prisons."

Steve turned off the radio entirely. He didn't need to hear anymore. He was becoming concerned and he didn't want Estrella to pick up on it. If this prison business was Buck's doing, then it was quickly getting out of reasonable control. This wasn't Russia, and it wasn't the analog age before the internet. The Feds were involved now, and they had intensive tracking and algorithms. If this didn't end soon, and if Buck's work wasn't flawlessly precise, there might be more trouble than he could get him out of. But Steve wasn't certain. Probability had this stuff down as Buck's hand, and if it was, then the tail end of it would find him and Estrella in twenty-four hours' time.

He resisted looking at Estrella. She would read the expression on his face and either fuss at him for thinking about work, or demand to know what was wrong. He didn't know how to explain to her what might happen tomorrow, because he didn't know exactly what was coming. It felt like a big lie to keep his concerns from her, but until he could better understand what all the connections were, there wasn't much to say. No matter what, he had to keep her safe. His mind sliced and sorted what little he knew, grouping and re-grouping facts and hints to find probable correlations. Until tomorrow, all he could do was think and plan to be prepared the best that he could.

Estrella looked at Steve and worried. He was thinking too hard. He was so hard at it that he'd turned off their music and stopped even pretending that he was relaxed. Why was he thinking about work, anyway? She didn't know, and she didn't feel like teasing him out of his thoughts because she didn't want him paying attention to her or her concerns.

What was she going to do about La Eme? Was last night's fight all they'd see of them during their vacation? Had Steve killed them all, or just left them to get up and hunt her again? Even if they went to jail, they'd get out someday. They never stopped trying to find her. She hadn't told Natasha everything, and she didn't like how Nat wanted to get involved in her problems. These people couldn't be stopped. They were utterly devoted to their wrong-headed ideology. It was better if Steve and his Avengers knew nothing about them, because they couldn't do the kind of work that would put an end to the threat. No one could. No one would. She had to keep being thankful for each day that passed with her staying free of them.

She hoped there would be no more trouble before they got back to New York, and then she could hide again. She could stay in the tower and never go out. If she stayed away from people's phones
and cameras, she wouldn't end up on the internet anymore, and maybe La Eme would think she was no longer with Steve and his friends, and they'd look for her somewhere else. If that didn't work, she'd leave and stop eating again.

Estrella knew that she couldn't let Steve get involved in this. He had an image to maintain, and fighting a gang for her would destroy what America thought of its hero. All she could do was hope and pray that there would be no more trouble before they got home.

"Steve."

"Yeah?"

"I need sunglasses. I can't visit with Jesse without them. And we should stop and get things for the ice chest for lunch and supper," she said as they drove into Corpus.

They met her family on the main public beach where everyone had access. Estrella's family had come in Rita's car and Jesse's truck. Valeria had two of her friends from school with her. Steve was determined to put on a friendly, unworried face for them, but he had to be certain of their safety.

Rita gave Estrella and Steve hugs, and that went a long way toward easing his mind away from tomorrow's worries. Jesse was glad to see them and he'd brought his skim board. Valeria and her friends did what girls do best. They laughed and chattered. Steve enjoyed their innocent exuberance, but their roving eyes itched over his skin. Jesse got just as much attention from Val's friends, so Steve was glad of his presence.

"It's too crowded here for you to show me anything with our boards. The waves look good today, but we'd hit somebody. Let's get everyone in the trucks and head further down the beach," Steve suggested.

Jesse looked at the Saturday crowds on the beach and shrugged.

"Prolly so. Ma, wanna drive my truck? I'll get the stuff from your car," Jesse offered.

He tossed his keys to Rita. She didn't try to catch them, but let them fall onto the sand. Valeria picked them up and handed them to her mother. Steve pulled his truck in beside Rita's car and helped Jesse get folding chairs, a beach umbrella, shopping bags, and an ice chest transferred to their trucks. Valeria and Jesse rode in the back of Jesse's truck, and Rita drove it to follow Steve a few miles into the four-wheel drive section of the beach where it wasn't so crowded. They parked the trucks a short distance apart and Jesse helped Steve setup the grill in the windbreak between the vehicles.

"Look at you, Eya! You're getting so pretty! What have you been feeding her, Steve?" Rita asked.

"Mostly ice cream and steak," Steve told the woman.

Estrella smiled and rolled her eyes as her aunt hugged her again. Rita's soft arms were as cheerful as it was eye-shocking. Her aunt smoothed her noticeably longer hair back and studied her face. She mashed her cheeks like Estrella was a toddler and made happy sounds to see the lush curves that good food was putting on her niece.

"You do a good job," she told Steve, "but don't forget the vegetables."

"I can feed myself," Estrella fussed.
"She always has vegetables," Steve assured.

"I brought some, just in case. And the cheesecake. Jesse! Don't tilt the ice chest like that! You'll squash the cake!" Rita fussed.

Steve squinted in the sun and grinned at Estrella's loud, happy family. The young people moved off to put their towels and shoes close to the water. Steve got armfuls of gear and handed the shopping bags to Estrella and Valeria, who had left her friends at the water's edge to come help.

He tolerated the girl's brief kiss on the cheek because his hands were full. Valeria giggled and ran away with the bags. In the distance, her friends squealed at the water's edge, probably because Val had been bold enough to get a smooch in while he couldn't do anything about it.

"Are you sure you're ready for hours of this?" Estrella asked him.

He couldn't see the twinkle in her eyes because of her new sunglasses, but her smile told him she was happy.

"It's great. They're great. We should get the grill lit. I'm starving," Steve said.

Jesse and Steve didn't have to wait long to get to use their skim boards. Rita shooed the men away as soon as the grill was heated and put pre-seasoned chicken quarters on to cook. Steve shut himself in his truck to change into the more modest pair of his swim shorts and a t-shirt. Estrella sat with her aunt and watched Valeria and her friends as Jesse and Steve took their boards to water.

"On the sand?! I didn't know you could-! I gotta try that!" Steve exclaimed.

From the moment Steve saw Jesse throw his skim board down onto the beach and skid over the sand and out onto the water, Estrella knew that she'd lost the company of her boyfriend for a while. She was glad of it. Steve needed to do something every day to burn his restless energy, and boarding with Jesse looked to be a happy pastime for him.

Valeria and her friends splashed and swam in deeper water and watched the guys with greedy eyes. Rita clucked at Estrella and told her how to cook the chicken as if she didn't already know.

"How does Val like school now? Have there been any problems?" Estrella asked her aunt.

She shut the lid of the grill and went to sit under the shade of the large umbrella in the empty chair next to Rita's.

"She's doing so good. She was working ahead in her textbooks, anyway, so she didn't miss anything. The only problem is that she's boy crazy. Look at them, Eya. A shark could come to bite them and they wouldn't notice. Your Steve and my Jesse may as well be the only things in the world," Rita said with a lift of her hand toward the girls.

"I was like that too. Until... until things happened. I'll pray that she stays safe," Estrella said.

The chicken smelled good enough to make her mouth water. She'd already seen the potato salad in the ice chest. No matter how interested Steve was in learning skim board tricks from Jesse, she was sure he would come to eat when the food was ready.

"Is he good to you, or do you like him because he's handsome and he has money?" Rita asked quietly.

Estrella looked to her to determine if the older woman was serious. She was. Rita waited patiently
for an answer while the wind blew their hair and the girl's voices carried across the beach to them. Her dark, pretty eyes held neither judgement nor any hint of brash materialism.

"He's the best man I've known. He's got money, but he doesn't do much with it. Look at his truck...he wanted a used one. I was sick and weak when he met me, Tia. I couldn't even talk to him because of my voice, but he sat down on my bench and he talked to me. I was skinny and ugly and smelly and there was nothing in it for him. I don't think he knew I was a woman. I knew who he was, and that's the only reason I wasn't too afraid to be near him. He was supposed to be one of the good guys, and he is," she explained.

"But what about other women? Men like that, they can have all the women they want. He's nice, but he's still a man. If he's important like Valeria says he is, there will be other women. Powerful men always have lots of women. Are you ready for that?" Rita persisted in her curiosity.

"I don't think he'll do that. He's already tried all the women. None of them wanted him for who he is. They all wanted the big celebrity hero. You can see that he doesn't want to be that when he's not working, and he's not going to pretend for anyone. I know him. We were friends first, before anything else," Estrella said.

"He sounds too good to be true. Are you sure he's not gay? I don't want you to fall in love and then he runs off with a man," Rita said.

They watched Steve put too much power into a run at the skim board he'd thrown down. When his feet hit the board, it shot out from under him and Steve landed flat on his back on the sand with a hard thump. Jesse laughed and put out a hand to help Steve up while Valeria and her friends watched and clapped. Steve accepted Jesse's help and came up grinning. He jogged off to get his board from the surf and try again.

Estrella saw the easy comradery between the men, and it was much like how Steve was with Clint or Sam or Thor. Just because he would look Jesse in the eyes and laugh with him and accept a pat on the back didn't mean there was anything more to it. She tried to keep in mind all that Rita was thinking and why she might be thinking it.

"We live in the city. It's not like here. If he wanted to be with men, he could have done that. Before he saw me as more than a friend, there were women. He loved someone before, and it was a woman. With me, he's..." Estrella paused because she didn't know how to describe how Steve enjoyed being with her without saying more than she wanted to.

"He likes you," Rita finished for her with a knowing smile.

Estrella nodded and let her hair fall forward to hide her face. Thinking of just how much Steve liked her and the exuberantly male ways in which he demonstrated his fondness embarrassed her while she was under the close scrutiny of her aunt. It was too new for her to be jaded about it. She was afraid that Rita would see her hot cheeks, and then she would know the kinds of things they did. When Tia Rita watched her as a child so her mami could work, she'd fuss at Estrella just as she did her own kids.

"I see you smiling that smile, niña. Don't you let him leave you with a baby!" Rita warned her sharply.

Estrella winced and her smile disappeared. Despite trying to hide, Rita had read her face anyway.

"He won't. We don't do that yet. We do things, but not that," Estrella tried to clarify, even though her voice seemed lost somewhere in a pit of embarrassment.
This was awful. It was just like if her mami was here to rip at her for misbehaving. Tears stung her eyes for the second time today, and she felt terribly conflicted. She was embarrassed and didn't know what to do about her aunt grilling her on her relationship with Steve, but she felt loved because Rita cared enough to ask these questions and advise her. She missed her mother! Rita was being nosy and pushy, but it was because she cared. Estrella wasn't used to feeling the love or the chastisement of family anymore. She'd never expected to feel it again, after long years without. It was awkward, but it felt good to know that someone cared beyond Steve.

Estrella got herself under control and wiped her eyes behind her sunglasses. She pushed her hair back behind her ear, and that made her smile too. Not so long ago, she'd been sad that her hair was ruined, and now it was coming back just as pretty as before and it felt the same to tuck it behind her ear as it had when she was little. She had family again. She had hair again. La Eme was still out there, but not everything was bad. She wiggled her bare feet down into the loose dry sand under her folding chair and let herself enjoy the moment while nothing was dangerous and she was here with her family.

"I'm sorry, Eya mia. You're going back to that big city and there's nothing I can do from here. I want you to be careful, so I fuss at you while I can," Rita said softly.

Her aunt's pudgy but well-manicured hand patted the back of her arm.

"I know. Thank you. Things were bad for years, and I stopped caring what happened to me. It's been as if you and Franny and Jesse and Val were just part of a story I had been told a long time ago. I didn't think I would live to see you again. I want to do well for Steve, because I want him to be happy. Now that I know you're worrying about me, I'll do well for you too," Estrella promised.

"You'd better! And you shouldn't want happiness only because of other people. You should be happy for you. You deserve it, niña. Life has been too sad already. It's long past your turn to be happy," Rita pointed out.

Estrella smiled at her aunt for a moment, then got up to turn the chicken pieces on the grill. The sun was bright today, and there was a hint of coolness on the sea breeze. Jesse skimmed across the water on his board and turned his body sharply to jump into the air from the lip of a curling wave while Steve watched and waited for his turn.

She wondered when it would be Steve's turn to be happy. Or maybe they were taking their turn together. It was hard to see the happiness sometimes when Hydra and La Eme kept messing things up for them, but Estrella found herself increasingly determined to try. Even if she didn't think much of her chances at happiness, she wanted it for Steve. Rita was another person who wanted her to try to be happy. She was starting to feel out-voted, but in the best way.

Steve waved briefly at Estrella where she stood by the grill and waited for her nod of understanding, then he turned and walked away along the beach. He had his board tucked under his arm. A quick scan around showed him that no one and nothing dangerous was nearby. Estrella would be safe if he took a little walk down the beach, and so would her family. As he expected, Jesse came jogging to catch up with him before he was very far away. He'd noticed that everywhere he went, Jesse wasn't far behind.

"Hey, where're you going? Can't you smell that? Food'll be ready soon," Jesse said.

"There's a bend in the beach over here. The waves might be different," Steve told him.

In truth, Valeria and her friends were too close for what Steve wanted to say to Jesse. The pretense
of finding better waves was enough to draw Jesse away. The slight crook in the beach made the waves sharper as they came in, and Steve was quick to take advantage.

The timing wasn't perfect, so he threw his board and ran at it fast. Just before a wave curled over, Steve hit the lip and banked, then came through the curl to the other side. He smiled while his momentum slowed and he started sinking into the water while standing on the board. The backside of the wave let him down and Steve balanced his weight carefully on the submerged board until he felt it grit down onto the sand. A slight lean and twitch of his ankles launched his board out from under his weight, out of the water, and toward Jesse.

"Shit!" Jesse exclaimed when he saw the board coming for him through the air.

He started to duck, but then laughed when it was clear that the board would fall short of hitting him.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Jesse called.

Steve smiled and shrugged, then walked out of the water to press a toe onto the edge of his board. The other edge popped up and he snatched it into his grip like someone who'd been handling skim boards for years. Or like someone who'd been handling a shield.

Jesse timed the next wave better than Steve and had a longer ride. Steve admired his control and precision as he skillfully wobbled back and forth along the edge of the wave. Jesse turned the last of the wave to carry him back to the sand, where Steve met him. They were far enough away from the girls now that Steve felt he could speak without being overheard, as long as he stayed aware of the wind direction.

The wind plastered his damp T-shirt against his skin as he stood and watched the next few waves crash in, but he didn't move.

"You're not gonna go?" Jesse asked.

"Not right now. I wanted to tell you to be watchful. The first day Estrella and I came to visit, there were some guys standing on the next street corner. Do you remember them?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. That's Malachi and Carlos. They're dropouts. Part time thugs. They wait there a lot for Yago to come pick them up because they don't have a ride. What do I need to watch for?" Jesse wondered.

"They're involved in something. I shot Yago's tires at the mall on the day of the storm. They were going to follow me and Eya back to our hotel and report on us to someone. Last night I had a confrontation with several men. Your part time thugs and Yago were among them. You need to be aware of them and anyone they associate with. Something's happening. I don't know the connection yet, but it may have something to do with Valeria's voice, and possibly Estrella's," Steve said while he squinted at the sun-bright water.

"You shot Yago's tires? He loves that car! Fuck! He's gotta be pissed. Wait. What do you mean a confrontation? You did something to Malachi and Carlos and Yago?" Jesse asked, his eyes wide.

His expression was so reminiscent of Estrella that Steve smiled a little.

"Yeah. They followed me into the dark and asked for it," he agreed.

Jesse stood there in his black board shorts and gaped at Steve. It would have been amusing if Steve wasn't in a hurry to relate the information to Jesse and get back for lunch.
"I don't know exactly what's happening yet, but I will soon. The only connection I keep circling back to is the girls' voices. Or the girls' voices in connection with me, because nothing happened until I came. It makes no sense that they'd want Estrella. They don't know her, do they? They'd have been too young to know about her before she left, right?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. Malachi and Carlos would have been little kids, like nine years old, when all that shit went down with Eya and she disappeared. They never knew her. What did you do to Yago and them? Are they dead?" Jesse asked.

He looked a little gray under his deep tan.

"I don't think so, but I didn't see a medical report after action like I usually do. Law enforcement has them, or they're in a hospital in Comal county. Unless they're close friends of yours, it doesn't matter. I'm telling you that something is happening and you need to watch out for Valeria. You need to know where she goes, and who she's with. Don't let her go anywhere alone. It would be better if she was with your mom or Alberto until I tell you differently," Steve said.

"It sounds like you think she's in danger of being snatched and held for ransom or some crazy border town shit like that. You should tell Alberto. If this is real, then he knows people who can help," Jesse said.

Steve made a pained face and stabbed the end of his board into the sand repeatedly. It came down to Bucky or Valeria. Alberto was a sheriff's deputy, though he served as a court bailiff, not an actual on-road LEO. The fact remained that he was connected to law enforcement and could cause a problem for Buck if everything was coming together like Steve thought it was. It was already problematic that Colin, through his friend the chief of police, could make a connection between Steve and these Latino gang members. In good conscience, Steve couldn't keep silent, even for Buck's sake. Valeria was an innocent in this, and someone needed to be aware of any potential danger to her.

"Whatever's happening will be finished soon. I only need you to look out for her for the next few days. No need to worry Alberto. Just make sure that Val stays close to home and family, and if she doesn't, then you need to know where she is until she gets home. You can nag her on her cell phone if she goes somewhere. Get creative. Think. But don't worry the rest of the family. It's probably nothing," Steve told him.

"You keep saying that, but your face doesn't look like it's nothing. Shit! I can't believe you shot at Yago, and now he's-"

"Not important. All that matters is keeping Valeria safe," Steve said.

"What about last night? What about Eya? Yago goes with some rough men, most of them ex-cons or cons in training. What if-" Jesse asked.

"I've got that taken care of. Estrella will be safe. Jesse, tell me you'll stay aware of Valeria's location until I let you know that it's over," Steve said.

Jesse took note of his stern, quiet demeanor. He nodded.

"Alright, man. I'll do that, but if anything happens, I'm calling Alberto first, then you," Jesse agreed.

"Good plan, but neither of you do anything alone. You get me, or Alberto calls it in and gets backup," Steve said.
Jesse didn't look like he was having fun anymore, but he nodded his understanding.

Rita's voice carried to them over the incessant sound of the wind and waves. Estrella was at the water calling the girls in to eat while Rita waved to Steve and Jesse. The men carried their boards toward the trucks. Steve hunched his shoulders slightly when he heard a rushing sound coming fast through the air behind him, but it was only seagulls flying overhead to go beg for food.

"I need to sleep. I want you to keep watch," Steve said.

"You're paranoid as fuck. It's a day at the beach, man. You think aliens are gonna show up here? What could I do if they did?" Jesse grumbled at him.

"You can wake me up. That's all I'd need you to do, Jesse," Steve assured him.

Jess looked at him skeptically. Steve was beginning to get used to him looking so much like Estrella. It still felt weird to walk next to someone who was almost his size, and plainly masculine, but who looked like his girlfriend. Maybe that was partly why he felt relaxed with Jesse though he didn't know him well.

"If you see anyone or anything coming that's too fast, too slow, or too interested, wake me up. Especially if it's a vehicle full of Latino guys," Steve explained.

Jesse nodded again, but he was frowning.

"Why Latinos?" he asked.

"I wish I knew. It's like asking why robots? Why politicians? Why Germans? This time, it's Latinos," Steve said, but that was the last to be said before they were near the ladies.

The food was good, and Steve ate so much of it that Rita was starting to give him looks as though he was performing a magic trick to put it all away. Valeria's friends were all eyes and whispers as they ate. Steve was glad to hear that their talk was normal juvenile topics. Each time the blonde or the mousy brunette girl started to wonder why Steve looked familiar, Valeria skillfully steered the conversation to something different. Steve smiled at her in thanks, and Valeria touched her necklace. He didn't like thinking that he'd bought the girl's loyalty, but he was grateful for whatever worked.

Estrella came to take his empty paper plate and ask him if he wanted more. Her thumb smoothed the crimp in the middle of his brow. He closed his eyes where he sat in his folding chair and enjoyed the feel of her touch on his face.

"I see you worrying. And thinking. What aren't you telling me?" she asked softly while Rita shooed the girls back to the water.

"I'm tired. I could use a nap," Steve told her.

Estrella handed the paper plate and plastic cup to Jesse, who was tidying up, then she opened her arms to Steve. He leaned forward in his chair and pulled her between his knees. His arms went around her middle, and he rested his head against her, just below her breasts. She was soft there, and he could hear her heart and her breathing. Her hands moved through his hair with soothing scratches against his scalp.

"Okay, so don't talk to me about it. You don't sleep enough. You're awake when I go to sleep, and you're awake long before I get up in the mornings. I'll get you a towel to lie on, because I know you won't go to bed in the truck if I'm not there and you can't keep watch," Estrella said.
Her mild fussing was soothing. It made him feel that things were alright, and that he could rest for a little while. Estrella snapped a large beach towel out onto the warm sand in the sun, and Steve barely spared a glance to Jesse before he lay down.

Jesse nodded his reassurance that he'd keep watch.

"Take off your shirt or you're going to get a farmer tan," Estrella told him before he was completely settled on his belly.

He was too sleepy to argue with her. With a reach and a wiggle, he pulled off his damp shirt. The sun was warm on his back. By the time he tossed the shirt and folded his arms around his head, he was already half asleep on the towel.

Jesse pulled Steve's empty chair closer to where Rita and Estrella sat in the shade of the beach umbrella.

The trucks were behind them enough that he had a clear view of the beach to either side for miles. Other people enjoyed the sand and the water in the distance, but there was no moving traffic. Only the gulls, the waves and the girls moved. Steve lay sprawled before them like a beached-up animal.

"He's so white. Won't he burn in the sun?" Rita asked.

"He won't stay burned for long. He'll be okay," Estrella said.

"Is he listening?" Jesse asked.

Estrella moved her foot forward through the sand. She rubbed the back of Steve's elbow where it rested not far from her foot. His other hand reached for her and closed around her ankle. After a moment of firm grip, his hand fell loose along the top of her foot.

"I don't think so," Estrella said.

"Good, because I need to tell you things before you go back to New York," Jesse said.

"What things?" Estrella wondered.

Rita looked away from watching the girls in the water and glanced at her son with a slight frown.

"She needs to hear about our family, Ma. About Grampi. Aunt Dolly didn't tell her anything before she died, and Eya's had to live with this for years. Don't you think she deserves to know?" Jesse asked his mother.

"To know what? There's nothing. All that stuff is in the past. Dolores didn't know anything to tell, because there wasn't anything," Rita insisted stiffly.

Steve's hand twitched on top of Estrella's foot. She looked between her aunt and her cousin on either side of her. She let it be seen that she was not happy about their raised voices bothering Steve while he napped.

"It's not in the past! Look at me! Look at Eya. And Val's voice. Ma, we have to live with this. You never believed me that Grampi talked to me, but he did, and I need to tell her-" Jesse persisted quietly until Rita pushed herself up from her chair.

The large woman took off her sundress to reveal a skirted swimsuit that was just as bright and
floral. She draped her dress over the back of her chair and pulled her long black hair up and secured it to the top of her head with elastic hair bands.

"This is all stories you made up when you were little, Jesu. You should be ashamed to tell it to her like it was real," Rita said with a pointed look to Estrella, then she left them to go join the girls in the water.

Jesse got up from Steve's chair in the sun and moved to sit next to Estrella in the shade under the umbrella. She tried to ignore the negativity Rita had left them with. Instead, she smiled at Jesse's lean, muscular body and his handsome face while he scowled at his retreating mother.

"You should get married, Jesse, while you're still pretty," she told him.

"Oh, God, stop it. Not you too. You get married, Eya! You gonna marry Captain America?" Jesse asked sourly.

"Maybe. If he asks. I don't know. You said Grampi spoke to you? Tell me what he said," Estrella prompted.

Teasing with Jesse about them having to act grown and responsible now was fun enough, but she wanted to know what was upsetting Rita so much. It must be serious if her aunt had walked away in protest of it.

"She thinks I'm lying about Grampi. She only calls me Jesus when she thinks I'm doing something wrong. How twisted is that?! She names me after the Lord, and then she beats me with it when I don't do as she says," Jesse grumbled.

"Shut up. Be glad you still have your mother. Now, tell me about Grampi and I might believe you," Estrella encouraged him.

She wanted to rub her foot on Steve's skin. She wanted to lie down with him and share in his peaceful nap, but time with her family was short. She turned her attention to Jesse.

"Take your glasses off," Jesse said.

"I can't," Estrella denied.

"Why? Do you have a black eye? Were you there at the fight last night?" he asked her.

"Steve told you? I was there, but nobody touched me. I just can't take my glasses off," she insisted.

"Because of your eyes. Look here," Jesse told her.

Estrella took her eyes off of Steve and looked to her cousin. Jesse stared at her, and by the time she realized that Jesse never looked at anybody for this long, she started feeling antsy and nervous. Jesse was displeased. She had to do something about it. His dark-eyed stare made her want to get to her knees and ask him what she could do to make him happy.

Jesse looked away down the beach abruptly, and Estrella gasped a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. She twisted her body straight in her chair again and sat back. She'd been turning, preparing to slide off the chair and do as she felt compelled to do.

"You see why Grampi never looked at anyone but us kids. He kept his eyes down. I can't do that, or I'll get my ass handed to me at work. So I look around like I have the attention span of a goldfish. Val doesn't have the eyes. Neither does Ma. It's just us, Eya. Grampi told me that this
thing goes way back. His father was Spanish, but his mother was Maya. From the South of Mexico," Jesse said.

"I don't want to hear it," Estrella said abruptly.

She'd thought Jesse was going to tell her an endearing tale about their grandfather, but this was going where she didn't want to hear. Jesse stopped talking for a moment, but he stayed like he was, as if he was only on pause. She met his eyes briefly, embarrassed at her outburst. It showed fear. This was her old, happy family life mixing with her current anxieties. Jesse let her sort herself out, and then he spoke again.

"We think we've got it bad, Eya, but for Grampi, it was worse. I think his voice worked on men, too. He was talking to me once when my papi came into the garden to get me. He stopped talking as soon as he saw him coming out the door of the house," Jesse said.

"How could he talk to you?" Estrella asked, and they both knew she meant the effect of his voice, not his ability to speak.

"I was little, probably about seven. He had a family. You know how kids are. They show up when you don't expect them to be there. He must have found out with his own kids that the voice doesn't do anything to little ones. He told me the stories, Eya. About our family. Where we come from," he said quietly.

His voice was gentle. Jesse could tell that for some reason, Estrella didn't want to hear about their history. She needed to hear it, especially if she was getting serious with Steve. Estrella took a slow, deep breath and nodded for him to continue.

"His parents moved from Mexico into what would be Texas to get away from people down there who were after his mother. She was a poor girl, but pretty, and her family expected her to live on the island because she had what we have. The voice. The eyes. Our great-great grandfather took her from there, where they were using her," Jesse said with some anger, as if he'd actually known the woman enough to care.


Jesse thought she looked far too stricken for the simple story he was telling, and he wondered how she could already know about the island when he was just now telling her. He wondered if she had the name right. She seemed to be certain of it.

"Okay. Grampi told me they thought she was Michelle," Jesse said with a grimace. He knew that part wasn't right, and Ma made fun of him for it.

"Ishchel," Estrella corrected him, "The Maya translations are written in English with Ix for the ish sound, but I can see how you would think their goddess Ix-Chel was called Michelle, if Grampi only told you and you never looked it up."

Jesse looked at her with wide eyes, then quickly away. He looked up and down the beach again because Steve had wanted him to keep watch.

"You already know this. Why don't you tell the story?" he asked.

"I know about Ix-Chel and Isla Mujeres because they have a website and pictures of me. They think I'm her, so I looked it up at the library to find out why they want me. But I don't know what Grampi said. I didn't know a lot of what you've told me. Go on," Estrella said.
"Who is 'they'? Who has a website with your pictures?" Jesse asked.

"The people who want to take me to Mexico. They never stop looking for me, but I'm not their stupid goddess woman. I'm just… me!" Estrella exclaimed with frustration.

Steve's hand moved lethargically on her foot and opened to curl around her ankle again. It was comforting and it brought her some peace. She rested her head back in the folding chair and closed her eyes behind her sunglasses to let the feel of Steve touching her ease her anxiety. He wouldn't let them get her. At least not today.

"Why would they think…? This isn't the stone ages. Somebody wants to take you to Mexico?" Jesse asked, confused.

"Yes, Jesse! Why do you think I ran all the way to New York? They found me in Phoenix, and they found me in Dallas, and the last time that they found me in Santa Fe, they-" she sucked in a breath, gritted her teeth, and shook her head.

"They hurt you," Jesse finished for her.

She looked to him and nodded.

"So you ran away and hid. Steve said you were starving yourself. How thin were you?" Jesse asked.

"I think it was seventy-eight pounds. Steve tried to get me help, but I couldn't go to a hospital. They might find me there, and the hospital would want my name and information about me. They're always looking for me, Jess. When I almost died, Steve took me into Avengers tower, and I haven't come out until we left for vacation. I shopped a little, but I looked different then and I was with people who could protect me," she told him.

"You can't live at seventy-eight pounds, Eya! What were you thinking?" Jesse admonished her.

"I know. I was dying. But Steve is stubborn. And he's a bully," she frowned down at the man sprawled in front of her, roasting in the sun.

Her frown slowly curved into a fond smile. Jesse was staring at her in disapproval, but he looked away as she turned back to him.

"You were trying to kill yourself," he accused.

"Not really, but I would have been glad to go. They would have found me eventually, even in New York. Death would have got me away from them for good," she explained calmly.

"And then they would have come for Val. Who are they?" Jesse asked, the hard set of anger returning to his face.

"Some gang. Their website says crazy things, like they want to take back Texas and the Western states and make everything like before the Europeans came. They think their goddess woman will help them do that somehow. They don't say how, but they think she's me, and they think I need to go to Isla Mujeres to make their plans happen. So I run," Estrella said.

She made a flying-away hand gesture and shrugged.

Jesse laughed. He stopped laughing and he looked sick for a moment, but then he laughed again. Estrella smiled sadly at him. She knew it sounded insane. That dumb website was insane, but it had
her picture from high school, and a few blurry ones of her in Phoenix and Dallas when she was living in the foster system, going home to home and running away.

"They think you're some goddess? That Ix-Chel thing?" Jesse laughed again, "Do they know that you got a marble stuck up your nose in church when you were nine? And that you used to eat cat food out of the bowl in the kitchen when you were in diapers? And you walked around all day at Schlitterbahn with a booger hanging out of your nose. You almost died from that bad meat at the old hamburger place that used to be on Frisk Avenue. You should tell them that stuff. You're not a god."

"I know that! I couldn't talk to them, Jesse. It wouldn't have mattered what I said, with the way my voice is. It's all in their heads and they won't stop looking until they find me," she said with resignation.

"Then you stay with Steve. He knows about them, doesn't he? He said I should watch for Valeria, to keep her safe from some people. He's doing something about it, isn't he?" Jesse asked.

"No, and I don't want him to. He doesn't know they're after me. He thinks they're after him. Don't you tell him different! He shot somebody's tires, Jesse! He thought they were going to follow us, so he used his gun and shot their tires in the mall parking lot. He's all nice and smiley around you, but he gets scary sometimes. He would make a lot of trouble and end up in prison if he knew, so don't tell him," Estrella insisted.

"Are you sure he didn't hear you just now?" Jesse asked, and looked down to where Steve's broad back was turning red in the sun.

"He didn't hear. He's out. I know because he'd be up and packing the truck to go find them if he did. He's not from now, Jess. He doesn't know how complicated things are. There's no way he can take on a whole gang," said in quiet frustration.

"Didn't he kind of already do that in the war?" Jesse asked with a smirk.

"That was different. He had friends," she said.

"He has friends now," Jesse pointed out.

"It's different. The bad guys aren't wearing uniforms this time and America isn't at war with this gang. He can't just go kill people, but that's what he would do if he knew they wanted to take me," Estrella frowned down at Steve.

"That doesn't sound like Captain America. Everybody knows that Cap does things by the rules. He always does the right thing," Jesse said.

"I'm telling you, it's different. He's different. Maybe the history books had it wrong, or it was all propaganda, but he's not that perfect. This isn't Nazis. It's personal. He would get himself in trouble, so you be quiet," she insisted.

"Alright, I will, but you stay close to him so they can't get you. People have been after our family forever, I bet. If we have children, they'll be after them too," Jesse told her.

Estrella nodded. Jesse couldn't know it was a Natasha nod, and she was glad of that. She had every intention of staying with Steve, but if loving her would ruin his life, she would go. For now, there was a possibility she could stay hidden, so she stayed with him. Maybe he'd stopped all of them in the park last night, she hoped, but she knew she was deluding herself to think that.
"Shouldn't you put a towel on his back or something?" Jesse asked.

There was a lull in the sea breeze, and the sun seemed to bake the air to stifling hot. Steve's skin was gleaming with sweat while he slept.

"He likes the heat. It's different from the ice. If he gets a sunburn, he'll enjoy it while it lasts," Estrella told him.

"Yeah, well, heat stroke is more serious than a sunburn. Put something on him," Jesse insisted.

"You do it. I can't go anywhere. He's got my leg," she said.

Estrella wasn't worried. Steve probably couldn't get heat stroke. Jesse pulled a towel out of a beach bag and got up to lay it gently over Steve's back and head. He bent to do it, but he paused, looking at Steve. Estrella had been enjoying the way Steve's powerful legs were bare to the sun and her eyes. It looked like Jesse also appreciated the view. She wanted to see Steve's ass in his other swim shorts, though it was very appealing in these too. His back and arms were an impressive expanse of perfectly sculpted muscle and bone. Even the shape of his head and the details of his hands were pleasing for her eyes to linger over. Jesse knelt beside him and made himself cover Steve with the towel.

"He's dead to the world. Does he get this tired often?" Jesse asked quietly.

"No. He said he knew the men from last night were following us for days, but he didn't tell me that until after. He wouldn't relax when he thought there was any danger, so he probably hasn't been sleeping," Estrella said.

Jesse got up and returned to his chair in the shade. His face was grumpy-looking and he watched the beach. His large hands clasped in his lap in an oddly prim posture for him.

"I'm not mad that you like to look at him. Everybody looks at him, but you can't have him. He's mine," Estrella said gently.

"Eya. I-" he began to deny.

"Don't feel bad. Tony looks at him, too. Tony Stark. You know, the man who's been in the gossip magazines with multiple women? Steve is irresistible. Like my voice and our eyes. We can't help but look at him, and when you know him, you can't help but love him," Estrella said.

Jesse grunted in a way that said without words that he was disappointed in himself.

"Does the whole family know about me?" he eventually asked.

"Fran and your mother do. Nobody wants Alberto to know, and I don't know if Val is aware. Jesse, I think you worry too much about who catches your eye. Don't let it define you. We all have guilty pleasures. It can be part of you without being all of you. Do you want to settle down and make a home with a man someday?" she asked her cousin.

"Fuck no," Jesse said with feeling.

"Okay, so you know what you don't want. Enjoy a fine man when you see one, and don't let it bother you so much," Estrella said with an easy shrug.

"Why do you get to give me advice? You're two years younger than me," Jesse grumbled.
"Because I live in a place where who you like to look at isn't such a big deal as it is in small-town Texas. Steve and I decided this morning that it's okay to look, as long as we're not sending messages that we want to touch. Does that make sense?" she asked him.

Jesse kept his mouth shut and his thoughts to himself, but he nodded. Then he changed his mind. Maybe Estrella needed to know what he knew.

"That's not all I learned from Grampi," he said in a hushed tone.

Steve was deeply asleep, and his ma and Val were far away in the water, but this more than anything, he wanted to keep secret between himself and the only other person who needed to know. Estrella looked to him expectantly. He couldn't look her in the eyes while he said this shit, even if it was his habit to meet people's eyes when he spoke to them, which it wasn't. This was too raw, and he'd only ever hinted at it with Steve. He was done with horrific family surprises. Eya might have kids. She needed to know this.

"It's not all about looks, Eya. The few men I've been attracted to, they all have something in common. They weren't all cover models, but they all had something. They had a presence. A strength. Something primal to them that I can feel. Grampi called our ability to sense it the judging, and he said I should watch out for those people. They're all either really good or really bad. I can't even describe it, but it's like an extra sense. Three of the guys I saw were the bad kind. They made me feel cold and sick. Scared. One of the other guys was good, and then there's Steve. He burns like the sun. He tries to keep it hidden, all polite and damped down and shit, but sometimes…" Jesse's words trailed off, but his mouth stayed slightly parted to breathe.

Estrella knew the feeling. She smiled and nodded.

"Sometimes he's just like the sun," she agreed, "You can't see it with your eyes, but he's so bright that you can feel him like radiation. But only when he feels strongly about something and he's not trying to hide it."

Jesse looked to her briefly, then down the beach again.

"Did you only ever feel it with Steve?" he asked her.

"No, but I don't think I have it as strongly as you. I've met some bad people on the street, and some in foster care, but almost everybody just feels normal. There's two people I know who give me a feeling, other than Steve. One of them is a big guy at my coffee shop, the barista. The other one is a lady I know at the library. They're so good, Jesse. They look ordinary, but I knew they were good as soon as I met them. Do you think we have this judging thing to go along with everything else as a protection? Everybody's always after us. It would make sense if we had something to help us survive. I stayed close to Izzy and Wanda because I knew they were the only truly safe people, until I met Steve," she explained.

Jesse nodded.

"Grampi said to trust it. Some people were after him too, when he was young. He found a priest at a mission church who hid him until those people weren't in town hunting him anymore. He was a really good man, and Grampi immediately knew he could trust him. Our great grandmother was the priest's housekeeper. She brought Grampi food while he was in hiding," he told her.

Estrella sat silent and marveled at what a life their Grampi must have had. He was nearly a hundred when he'd died some years ago, so his young days hiding with the priest had likely been about the time Steve was born. She got lost in daydreams of a handsome young man hiding in a secret space
of an old wooden house, and a pretty girl bringing his meals. Did the priest marry them? She smiled at the thoughts until Jesse nudged her out of her imaginings. It was getting to the hottest part of the afternoon, and she fanned herself with a paper plate.

"Grampi told you all kinds of things. He never told me all that," she said.

"He said that he knew I'd be different, and that I needed to know. I was too young for him to be sure of it, because the eyes and the judging didn't come to me until after my voice cracked, but I looked like him. He said to watch out for you too, and to tell you this stuff when I knew you had changed, but then you were gone. I should have told you sooner," Jesse said.

"Don't blame yourself. It wouldn't have made any difference. I knew about my voice, and I made a careless mistake that killed mami. I'm fine now, but I'm still glad to know what Grampi said. I only wish that people would leave us alone. Are they after you?" she wondered.

"I don't think so. If you and Steve are right, then they're looking for the voice. That means you and Val, but they want you because you're pretty. Me and Ma were safe from them because we don't have the voice, but you have it all. Don't let them know about our eyes. Or about the judging. They can't know, or they'll hunt us for that, too," Jesse warned her.

Estrella took note of how oddly grim Jesse was. He was usually so shifty and flippant, never taking anything seriously. She wondered if she'd really known her cousin at all. She shook her head. It was an idyllic day, and she didn't want to waste any more of it with depressing thoughts.

"Don't tell anyone that I ate cat food," she said with a challenging attitude.

Jesse noticed her change of mood and grinned.

"Don't tell anybody that my first kiss was with my cousin," Jesse teased.

"As if! We only touched lips, and it was gross because it was you, and you smelled like pickles and greasy slim jims. I don't know why we even did that," Estrella grimaced.

"We did it because I saw something stupid on TV," Jesse chuckled.

"Yeah, well, don't tell anybody that I stole Alberto's badge when I was in seventh grade because a boy was bullying me and he didn't believe me when I told him that my uncle was a deputy," she said.

"That was you? He got a disciplinary letter for it going missing. Why didn't you give it back?" Jesse asked.

"Because I didn't think it through when I took it, and Alberto was already in trouble by the time I brought it back from school, and I was scared the sheriff would put me in jail for taking a badge. I threw it in the bay when I went to ride bikes from Lacey's house. Don't tell anybody!" she reminded him.

Jesse smirked at her in disbelief and shook his head. Estrella wanted to smack him because he was slouching there looking so superior and handsome. He eventually quit making that face that made her want to slap him, and he looked out to where his mother and the girls floated in the waves.

"Don't ever tell Ma that you weighed seventy-eight pounds. She'll yell at you and God and everybody, and then she'll send you helpful articles about eating disorders for the rest of your life," Jesse told her.
Estrella smiled and nodded.

Maybe Jesse and Estrella would have liked to go play in the water, but they kept watch near Steve. The day was perfect, but they both were quietly aware that there were people out there looking for her and possibly Val, too.

"I don't want to know all that happened to you, because there's nothing I can do about it except get pissed off. I'm glad you're back, Eya. Don't stay gone forever again. We thought you were dead," Jesse told her.

"Okay," she agreed.

Later when the family left, Valeria made Estrella promise to come visit again, and it was Steve who assured her that they would. Estrella wasn't accustomed to being able to make promises about the future. Jesse seemed to have made friends with Steve over skim boarding, and Steve said a few things about having Jesse out to New York to see if they could find any waves at the Atlantic beaches. Rita didn't say much, but she hugged Estrella for a long time, and then she hugged Steve for nearly as long.

Steve's eyes looked damp as her family drove away. Seeing Valeria wave madly at her from the back of Jesse's truck broke her composure. Estrella turned her face into the space between Steve's arm and his chest and couldn't watch them go.

"Come on. I wanna go down the beach before it gets dark," Steve urged her.

Estrella put her hand in his when he reached for her, and they walked quietly to the truck. She helped him load the chairs and he put away the grill. He slid his skim board in with a smile and a brush of his fingers to get the sand off of it.

"Do you miss using your shield?" she asked him as they got into the truck.

"Yeah, but it's alright. Skim boarding is not very different. I could get used to it," Steve said.

They drove for over an hour past and through terrain that made Estrella's teeth clench tight with nerves. What if they got stuck out here? There were occasionally other campers on the beach, but they were few and far between this far out. Steve put the truck in low gear and they crossed a shallow stream that dissected the beach. After that, there wasn't anyone for miles. They put the windows down as the air cooled toward evening. Estrella put her face in the wind and smiled.

The beach grew narrow and they left civilization far behind. There was more driftwood and debris here, some of it exotic and inexplicable. The only tire tracks were the ones they were making as they passed. Finally, Steve slowed to a stop when the end of the beach was in sight. There may have been more land beyond the end of the beach, but if there was, it was too far away to see.

They had sandwiches for a quick supper, and then Steve walked with her to the large, sun-bleached log that lay across what felt like the end of the world. The wood was silvery and smooth and one end of the washed-up tree was lapped by waves at the water's edge. Estrella was already bare foot, so she climbed up and perched on the rounded top of the log like a gargoyle. She watched the sky shift colors into sunset while Steve stood behind her. His arms hugged her around her shoulders and his belly and chest were against her back.

"I don't want to leave yet," Estrella said as the landscape and the water lost the last of its color and dulled to tones of deep blue-gray shadow.

"I know how ya feel," Steve murmured at her ear.
To their far right, a sea bird with long, narrow wings flapped by and made a strange croaking in its throat. The sea grass on the nearby dunes was thick here, and it made shushing sounds in the wind.

During the week, they'd gotten used to the quiet and solitude of the beach. Where they were now felt particularly private. Estrella looked to her left, at the moon rising above the dark sea. It was silvery bright and not quite full. Steve was hot against her back. She shrugged him away and straightened herself to slip down the log and onto the sand.

She laid her clothes neatly along the top of the log as she took them off. Steve looked at her questioningly, but a boyish smile chased away his stuffy sense of responsibility. When else were they gonna get to do this? By the time Estrella was naked, Steve was already running into the water. She laughed and followed his pale bottom as it disappeared into the waves.

He wasn't so much swimming as he was thrashing around in the water. Estrella played near him, and he gentled his movements against the surf, the closer she got to him. He didn't want to accidentally hit her. When their initial exuberance wore off, Steve stood up in the water and watched the rising moon. The wind had calmed during the day, so the waves were barely more than small swells that rocked them back, then forward on their heels.

Estrella came up behind him and jumped a little to get her arms around his neck. He reached back and helped her up onto his hips with his hands under her thighs. The feel of her breasts pressed to his shoulders and her mons at his back made him shiver, but he refocused his mind to their surroundings. He had to, or their light hearted play would get sidetracked.

Illuminated clouds cruised by between them and the moon. Estrella remembered the chill on Rockaway and how she'd tucked her hands inside his heavy sweater. Now, she flattened her hands and ran them over Steve's chest slow and sensual. His head went back and his eyes closed. She thought he was going to say her name in that tone of his that meant he thought she was misbehaving, but he didn't.

Estrella rubbed his bare skin, all across his chest and as low as she could reach over his ribs, then up his neck and to his face. Her fingertips skimmed his lips and caressed his eyelids.

"You slept for five hours," she told him.

"I feel great. Five hours is a lot of sleep for me. Thank you," Steve said.

"Will you sleep tonight?" she asked.

"Nah. I won't be sleepy until tomorrow night," he said with lazy bliss as her hands moved over his shoulders and neck.

Estrella hugged him with everything she had, from her legs around his hips to her breasts high on his shoulders, to her arms around him. She wiggled them back and forth to feel their bodies move together and she sighed. Steve twisted and played along with her, and he made a cutoff keening sound before they went still.

"Hmm?" she asked.

"Water. Moving around my…cock," he said hesitantly.

"Mmm," she agreed.

Estrella flexed and moved her thighs against his supporting hands until he got the message that she wanted down. Her hands loosened from him and she bobbed around to stand in front of him. Steve
could clearly see her lovely breasts floating near the surface of the water, and that distracted him from noticing her preparing to jump at him.

"Eya, no!" he said, but he was too late to do anything except catch her.

She leapt onto him just as she had to get onto his back and he caught her the same way. Soon as she felt that he was hard in the water, she lowered her legs so she wouldn't tease him by being open to him and naked at his waist. It was a poor choice, because his hands slipped off of her thighs, and her legs closed around his erection.

She tightened her arms at his neck in surprise, and Steve made a strangled sound and went rigidly hard against her. He felt like he did when he was fighting, and she could discern each of his abdominal muscles against her belly.

"I'm sorry," she hissed against his cheek, "I only wanted to kiss you."

"Nngh, don't move," Steve croaked.

His hands bracketed her hips in a stiff, careful grip. He was frozen still in conflict. Last night in the shower, he'd known what he was going to do and he'd felt in control. He'd had a plan. Just now, he'd gone from innocent but sensual play to suddenly having her warm, soft thighs clasping his dick. Try as he might to be still, the movement of the water nudged them a little, back and forth, back and forth in a timeless motion.

He'd never meant to put them in such a close approximation to making love, but here it was. Her center, where he so wanted to be, was inches away from him. He wanted to be good, but the drive to get inside her was powerful. Nearly impossible to resist. Something in the bottom of his brain knew just how to move his hips for a good angle to slide in. The only thing keeping him from doing so was locked muscles and a strong, but weakening will.

Estrella gasped a little breath at the sudden weight of arousal that pounded in her veins. A moment before, he'd only been Steve. He was her friend, her boyfriend, and the adorable goof who would frolic naked with her in the moonlit water and let her rub him all over like a cat.

Suddenly, he was a very large man, and she was acutely aware that she was at his mercy. He'd learned to be careful so that his hands weren't hurting her hips, but she struggled against them anyway. She felt empty inside, and his thickness between her thighs was maddening. With a whine, she bucked her hips and shifted her thighs. If she tilted her hips just right and squeezed at him, maybe she could angle him up and get him inside. His strong body against her and the feel of his teasing erection had her aching and weeping for him.

"Please!" she shrieked at him with a tortured voice.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Steve pleaded for strength.

He walked them out of the water and back to the log on the beach. Steve didn't know if he was struggling with her or against himself. Estrella writhed and bucked against him, and he was weeping from his tip by the time he put her down on the smooth wood. Holding onto a desperately aroused woman was almost more than he could bear. He had to get some distance between the parts of them that most wanted to be together.

Physical logistics flashed through his mind like battlefield strategy. He shoved her knees up and set her feet flat on the log. He set her hands on top of his head for her to balance against, and then he sunk to his knees.
Estrella cried out in both pleasure and disappointment when his lips found her. He loved the saltwater taste of her, but she was still frustrated by emptiness. She gripped his hair and pulled at him.

"Inside," she gasped.

Steve did the best he was willing to do and eased two fingers into her slick heat. She sounded a lot happier when he started massaging her sweet spot while he licked at her. It didn't take long to get her to her first peak, and he didn't stop there. When the urgency was off and her hands were softer at his scalp, he fluttered his fingers inside and lapped at her gently, more indirectly until she wasn't twitching and overly sensitive. The taste and smell of her was intoxicating. He felt tingly and almost ready to go off without touching himself. The sight of her perched above him in the wilds and the moonlight like some kind of bare-breasted fertility goddess was mind blowing.

She made delicious, feral sounds in her throat while he adored her, and he glided the fingers of his free hand up to her neck and around to the back of it. He was skilled enough to use his mouth, his fingers inside of her, and his other fingers to undo the clasp of her necklace, all the while aware of how close he was to his own orgasm.

Her necklace came off in his hand and Steve refocused his tongue and fingers on her most sensitive places. She nudged her hips at him now, rather than twitching away, so he knew she was recovered and ready for more. Hard as he was, the sound of her voice without her necklace filled him to almost painful tightness. Her wordless tones of pleasure and encouragement drenched his mind in ecstatic purpose. He could only think to drive her on toward more because that's what her voice demanded.

Estrella's pleasure became his. Steve breathed harshly through his nose as her keening cries sucked him over the edge and into hard-pulsing ejaculation. His fist that gripped her necklace ground against the wood of the log and his body clenched and trembled in the grip of sensation that was both mental and physical.

When the rush of it passed them, he knelt in the sand and braced himself against the wood. His cheek was against something soft, and he realized it was the inside of her thigh. She'd sat on the log to rest her trembling leg muscles. Steve stared with dull wit at the beautiful sight of her. Her inner thighs were shiny wet. Her pelt of black fur was trying to conceal her delicate parts from his eyes, but he'd left her swelled and bloomed open. She purred at him as he gave her pink folds a lingering kiss, chaste compared to his earlier lusty voraciousness.

"Get up here with me," Estrella commanded him.

Just after orgasm, he found that he was able to hear and understand the meaning of her words through the mesmerizing tones of her voice. Some small part of his consciousness was even able to reason that there was no harm in following her directions. Estrella turned on the log as he stood and swung her leg over to straddle the smooth, rounded surface. She leaned forward and patted the wood in front of her to indicate where she wanted him.

Steve saw little need to pretend at normalcy in the moment, so he leapt and mounted the log in a fluid, efficient motion. One hand took his weight and he settled in a straddle facing her. He kept his other hand, glossed with her juices, free from sand and the drying effects of the wood.

Estrella thrilled at seeing him so feral and free. He was a beautiful human animal, stripped naked of his usual concerns and responsibilities. The moon was bright enough to show her that despite one release, he was still hard and ready for more.
"You want me to talk to you?" she asked him.

Steve nodded. She had his undivided attention, and the intensity of his focus made her shudder with eagerness and nerves at the same time.

"Once is never enough for you, is it? You want more," she spoke to him in small bits, and the words didn't really matter. He looked sharper than men usually did under the influence of her voice, but he could take more of it without capitulating, and she wasn't really trying yet.


"My handsome man," she praised him, "I'll give you more. Take your hand that was inside me, wet with me, and stroke yourself where I can see you. Just like that. Feel good? Mm-hmm."

Steve looked so wanton, so exposed, pleasuring himself out in the open and unashamed. Not at all like she knew all their friends imagined him to be. The sound of his wet hand moving over his skin was luxurious and vulgar. He grunted at her, an encouragement to go on working him with her voice. She would give him what he wanted, but not without the gentle chastisement she felt toward him.

"You're so strong and stubborn, Steve. I want that beautiful cock, and you won't give it to me. You wanted in and I wanted you in, so why can't we have it? Why do you have to tease us by holding back? I know you won't hurt me, papi. We could feel so good," she pouted at him.

"Buh," Steve huffed out an unintelligible sound and slowed his hand. His brow crimped just a little and she could see that he was trying to think so that he could speak. She gave him a moment to quiet his mind, to decide if he wanted to argue with her, or if he wanted her to continue. He looked undecided and unsatisfied, so she had mercy on him.

"Don't stop. If it's drying, spit on it so your skin won't get sore. I don't want you to hurt," she laughed when he quickly, expertly complied, "you look like you've done that before. Have you used spit to slick your cock? Maybe somewhere out there when you didn't have lube? Do all soldiers do that when they can't stand it anymore and they have to get off?"

Steve sat up taller on the log and his eyes gleamed slightly at her in the moonlight. The tight little smile he gave her was neither confirmation nor denial of her question, but he certainly seemed to understand what she was asking. His more upright posture brought his lower abdomen and groin out of shadow and more into the light. She didn't pretend to be shy or look away. The way he handled himself was graphically practiced and male, and she was fascinated.

"How are you lasting so long? How are you understanding what I'm saying, Steve? I want you to come, baby, but you're fighting it, aren't you? You're always practicing, always fighting. You like fighting so much. You want something to struggle against? You don't like it when it's easy, do you? Yeah, I see you. Going faster. Harder. Gonna come for me? I love the way you move. Make it feel good. Mm-hmm. Don't waste it. Catch it all and use it for next time," Estrella made herself keep stroking him with her voice while he twitched and shoved through his second orgasm.

So many words were hard to find when all she wanted to do was pant and stare at how hotly erotic he was. All for her.

Like she'd instructed him to do, he used his other hand to keep his fluids from flying away to the sand and being wasted. Both his hands were messy now, and semen drizzled his groin like sugar glaze. She admired the way his thighs gripped the log and his chest moved with his deep breathing. After a full minute of quiet recovery, she whispered to him.
"You understood what I said, didn't you?"

"Most of it, yeah. Eya, this is crazy. Your voice…my mind. I can't pay attention to anything else. Hold on. Don't talk yet," Steve said.

She marveled at how he stood up smoothly by bringing one foot up onto the log. For a moment, he stood, stretched high on the balls of his feet like a meercat, and looked all around. She stayed quiet so he could listen carefully and satisfy himself that they were still safe and alone. All the while, he mindfully used his hands to contain the mess they'd made of him. He lowered himself with a rough male grace and kicked his feet out to either side of the log at the last instant. His rump and thighs caught his weight, and she felt the controlled impact of his landing through the wood of their perch. She laughed and he smiled.

"Where is my necklace?" she asked in a whisper.

"It's right there on the sand. I see it," he indicated with his nose off to the side of them.

She tipped her head up and looked at him over his cupped hands.

"You're still hard," she whispered.

"Sorry," he said, but he didn't sound very contrite.

"Is this what you meant when you said you wanted to practice with my voice?"

"I didn't mean to do it now, but sure, this works," he said with a smile.

"Of course it does. What man wouldn't want an excuse for sex?" she hissed to him with narrowed eyes.

"Hey! I'm not the one who took off my clothes first. I'm not the one who snuggled up all around my- your- dammit! You put your legs around my dick, Eya, and then you wouldn't be still. That put us so close, so what did you expect? Sweetheart, I almost couldn't keep a lid on it, and you know I don't wanna go all the way yet," Steve complained.

"I'm not the one who took my necklace off! And it's only you who doesn't want to go all the way. I want you to," Estrella told him defiantly.

Steve rested his messy hand on his thigh and started stroking himself again. Estrella sighed. She would never get tired of looking at him like this, but she was annoyed with herself that she'd forgotten to whisper. So now he was back to sex again. She kept quiet for a moment to see if he hadn't meant to start yet. It was easy to see him regain more controlled use of his higher brain function now that she was watching for it.

"Make it harder this time. Challenge me a little. Make it so that I can't think. Let's see if I can resist what you tell me to do," Steve said.

Estrella sighed.

"I think you get off on the challenge as much as you do to my voice. This isn't easy, you know. I have to keep thinking up things to say and I feel like I'm babbling," she whispered.

"Whatever you say, I won't laugh at you. Not now, and not later. I promise. Look at me, Eya. You're bossing me like a trained dog. If I can handle this, then you can at least think of something to say. Get going. Make me work for it," Steve told her.
"Okay," she whispered uncertainly.

Now that he had a moment clear of the influence of her voice, Steve enjoyed the beauty of his girl in the silvery light. Looking at her now, he wouldn't have guessed she was at death's door a few months ago. She looked sleek and strong, rounded in all the right places.

"You like to look at me when I'm naked, don't you? It gives you all kinds of thoughts," she said in a clear, sultry voice, "You don't even know what I'll be like in a month or so, but you're happy with me now. You think I'm pretty."

"Hmm," Steve hummed his agreement.

His hand was working himself again, and Estrella watched the sharpness fade away from his eyes. He didn't look dumb so much as distracted. Like him, she sat back a bit so that the moonlight could give him a better look at her breasts, her belly, and the dark area between her legs that he seemed so drawn to.

"You want pussy, Steve. Why don't you take it? I couldn't convince you last time, but maybe I'm not trying hard enough. Come here," she told him, and crooked a finger at him, just in case he needed a hand gesture to understand.

Steve leaned forward and centered his upper body weight on his free hand between her knees. Estrella tried to ignore the spike of fear she felt when he loomed over her suddenly and got in her face. The wet sounds of him working at himself and his close proximity made her skin prickle. This was Steve, and Steve was good, she reminded herself.

Estrella looked him in the eyes and shared the same breathing space with him. If her voice wasn't enough challenge, then she'd use her eyes too.

"I want you to fuck me, Steve. Take your hand away and get over here. I'm ready for you. Wet. So quit playing with yourself and come to me," she told him.

She yelped when Steve bulled her back with a shove of his chest. She lost her balance and fell back to lie on the log. Steve aggressively took the space above her and set the palm of his free hand above her shoulder.

"Nnnn," he shook his head in denial, but his body lined up to take her.

Estrella was more thrilled than afraid. Could she really get him to do this? Was she ready for it if she could?

"Here, baby. Come to me. Stop playing around and make love to me. You know we want to. You'd feel so perfect in me. Don't play. You're making us wait and I can't stand it! Now, Steve. Please! Right here," she urged him with her voice and her eyes locked onto his.

"Nnnngh!" Steve growled at her, harsh and a little desperate.

His eyes were wild and shifty, as if he was searching for a solid grip in his mind. Estrella whined in excited fear, tinged with trust. He was so big, so strong, so close. She pressed flat back against the wood and wished desperately for something. What, exactly, she didn't know. It was too much. Too intense. His body rolled and surged, hovered a breath above her, and she was afraid to touch him.

"Steve!" she cried.

That set him off, and she finally touched him. He'd pinned her between his legs, and she rubbed the
insides of his thighs while he marked her with wet heat. She moaned encouragement to him as he finished and her voice wrung more out of him. They held still except for their breathing and the final twitching of his hips. The backs of his knuckles came to rest heavy on her belly and his forehead pressed to hers.

"I did it. I can resist your voice, Eya. Your eyes too. When I really try and something important is on the line, I can do it," he said with tired satisfaction.

Estrella couldn't seem to catch her breath, and maybe it was because he was still over and around her like a cage. She told herself she was stupid and let her hands rest on his sides. The danger was a few minutes ago, not now. The most he was in the mood for now was a cuddle.

"This won't be the worst of it. I'm not done yet," she whispered.

"Then it's good that I'm learning some resistance now. If I keep at it, I should be able to keep up with you," Steve said.

He kissed her temple sweetly, then sat up away from her. He looked down at her and shook his head.

"What?" she whispered.

"I don't know how I was able to resist. You're gorgeous, doll, and I wanted to do just what you said," he told her.

She accepted his help to get up, even though his hands were sticky. He led her to the water and they rinsed off. It felt more intimate than the sex, somehow, when he gently used his fingers to rub her skin clean of his semen.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I don't know. You're a crazy ass. What if you hadn't been able to resist? I thought you didn't want us to make love yet. Aren't you waiting to find out if that woma-" she hissed.

"Shh. I don't want to think about that now. I don't want to leave either, but I think we should start heading home. Keep them out of our time while we can," Steve said.

"Keep who out of our time?" she wondered.

"Everyone else."

She nodded and leaned against him. He was only half hard now, and his muscles were comfy and relaxed. She brushed at his belly and combed through his pubic hairs under the water to make sure he was clean and wouldn't wake up with anything stuck to his skin.

They wouldn't be able to be like this back at the tower, and it made her sad. She loved touching him. Being naked and close to him without shame. Sharing everything. She even liked helping him practice to get stronger against her voice, when her heart wasn't trying to beat out of her chest from it all.

She looked up at him briefly, then turned her face to nuzzle at his chest. She kissed and licked at his nipple, and he grunted and smiled down at her.

"Stop that or I'll have to go again," he told her in a voice too mellow to be taken seriously.
Estrella sighed and wrapped her arms around him. His arms looped around to clasp his hands at her hip. The gentle waves lapped at their middles and sand shifted underfoot.

"If you really think you're going to be strong enough for me, then I want to go to church," she told him.

"Shh," Steve touched a finger to her lips and urged her out of the water.

While she slipped damp, clingy clothes on, he took her necklace to the water to rinse the sand off of it. He put it on for her, then slipped his feet into his shorts. They walked back the short distance to the truck. They washed sand from their feet and got in the back.

"Sure we can go to church, but why now?" he asked.

He'd feel like a hypocrite walking into church, knowing all the fornication he'd been indulging in, but if she wanted to go he'd certainly take her.

"I want to go because if you're going to be strong enough, then there's hope for us. I don't think I could respect a man I could boss around with a look or a few words. I didn't know there could be a man like you, but I was doing everything I could and you resisted me. So, let's try," she told him while they shuffled things around in the back of the truck to get their bed ready.

"You mean that you weren't serious about us before tonight? What did you think it meant when I told you I love you? I'm not a school kid who says that to a different girlfriend every month and doesn't understand what it means," Steve said.

Estrella turned back the top of their sheet and blanket and slipped into bed.

"I was as serious as I could be at the time. I know you love me, and I love you too, but it takes more than love. It was doomed to be a pretty dream that I got to live in for a little while, until tonight. Why do you have to question everything to death? We love each other, and now we have hope. Let's go to church," she said.

Steve felt an irrational, fragile smile grow on his face. Her simple trust and faith gave him hope, too. He wasn't worthy to set foot in church after all he'd done, but she was.

"If we're going to church, we need to take a thorough shower. We'll stop at the showers when we leave the beach in the morning," Steve said.

"You do the planning. You're good at that. I'm tired," she said, and her mouth stretched wide around a big yawn.

She fluffed the blankets between them, felt for her necklace out of habit, then rolled against him. Steve couldn't fight the smile as she snuggled into him and went to sleep. He propped his head up on his hand and rested his other arm around her. He had too much to think about to sleep, and he had to keep watch.

Estrella's childhood church where she'd received all her sacraments had a ten o'clock mass, which gave them plenty of time to shower and make themselves presentable. Steve wore dignified khakis and a button-down plaid that he tucked into his pants. After last night, and with the worries of today, he didn't think he'd have any trouble with embarrassing erections. Estrella wore her long crinkly brown skirt and a pretty top. Her flip-flops didn't show much under the skirt, so she could wear them without feeling mismatched.
She was quietly emotional at going back to her old church, and Steve stayed at her side for support. The mid-century styled church was a sturdy, plain structure of pale orange brick, cream-white stucco, and dark, polished wood. It smelled of candle wax and wood polish, and faintly of incense from the traditional Latin mass they'd had earlier in the morning. The bright morning sun pinched off into a multi-hued, peaceful glow as the exterior door closed silently behind them.

They were early for mass, and Steve followed her around the vestibule while she went to things that he was sure were familiar to her. She touched the well-worn foot of a serene statue of the Blessed Virgin, and then she went over and looked at the baptismal font. She pushed open a door and peeked into an empty room that had a window for viewing the mass, and a shelf full of children's books and soft toys. She turned to smile at him and he knew she'd spent some time in there as a little one.

Estrella was quiet and he could feel her shaking just a little when he touched her back after they blessed themselves with holy water at the inner entrance to the church. Several voices were praying the rosary near the front of the church, but Estrella didn't take a pew and join them. There was an open door and a bench along the wall beside it. She looked hopefully to him.

Steve sighed and his heart felt heavy. He wasn't ready for confession. There was too much to think about. Too much to say. He shook his head but he smiled at her kindly.

"I'll wait here," he told her in a hushed voice and sat on the bench.

Estrella seemed reluctant to leave him. She made it halfway to the confessional, then turned back and rushed to take his hand. Her fingers touched her necklace and he saw her throat work on a nervous swallow.

"Your necklace works fine. Do you remember the Act of Contrition?" he coached her.

"I say it all the time in my head," she whispered.

"Then it's easy. Go make a good confession, and I'll be here when you get out. Remember that you don't need to confess things that aren't your fault," Steve said.

She knew what he meant, and she nodded with relief. That made things a lot simpler. She'd thought about going to confession for years, but with her voice, she'd never dared to. She touched her necklace again, then walked into the confessional and shut the door behind her.

A half-second later Steve saw the red light blink on as her knees pressed on the kneeler. He tipped his head down and tried to unobtrusively press his fingers to his ears. He'd told her that he'd wait here for her, but with his hearing, he had to be careful not to violate her privacy. Whatever Estrella had to say was personal and he didn't need to know it.

Several minutes later, she came out wiping her eyes. He worried that the priest had been too rough in advising her, but then she smiled beautifully at him. He was happy for her, and he followed her to a pew near the front of the church. After they genuflected, she slid into the pew and he put down the kneeler for them.

He crossed himself and asked a few humble things of the Lord. When Estrella was done with her penance, he opened the missilette and showed her the small changes to the wording of the mass since she'd been away from church.

Parishioners were coming in for mass, and then it was time. Since he'd been a soldier, he'd developed a better appreciation for the mass than he'd had as a squirmy, impatient boy. Their Lord
Jesus had made sacrifices for them all along, and then the big one at the end. Steve understood sacrifice and he respected it deeply.

There was a joy and solidarity to attending with Estrella, even though he wasn't in a state of grace to receive communion. She was, and he was happy to see her go.

After mass, they got an early lunch at a drive-thru with parking because Steve felt antsy and he wanted to stay near the vehicle. Estrella was quiet and he left her alone to think and to feel. On his way to walk their trash to the receptacle, his phone vibrated at him. He'd silenced it for mass, but he thumbed his code in and listened to the message Jarvis had for him.

"Do it," he told Jarvis, and he walked back to the truck.

When he opened the door to get in, he pulled his shirt untucked. He reached under the driver's seat and got his holster and sidearm and slid it into the back of his pants. His fingers felt of the spare magazines under the seat, then he got into the truck.

Estrella watched him with concerned eyes, and he couldn't look at her. He still didn't know what to say. Before he backed out of their parking spot, he put his hand back behind the seat and felt that his shield was where it was supposed to be.

"What's happening?" Estrella asked him.

"I don't know, but I'll handle it as it comes," he told her with firm certainty.

They drove a few blocks to the highway and Steve pulled into a gas station to fill the truck's tanks. He wanted to be ready for anything, if they had to make a long run. His muscles were already tensing with pre-mission readiness and he squeezed the fuel pump handle too hard, too fast. The sensor tripped the pump off. Steve made a face and tried again, more carefully this time.

His eyes scanned around for whatever would catch his attention while he filled the tanks. There was nothing. Yet. Just truckers and ordinary people coming and going about their business.

Steve set the fuel nozzle back in its holder and tore off the receipt that scrolled out. He thought he heard a rumbling somewhere far off, but it might be a plane taking off at the nearby airport, or a truck braking hard on the interstate. It was likely nothing, but his skin prickled with awareness anyway.

He took another look around, then got back into the truck. Estrella looked to him as he turned the key in the ignition, and he tried to smile at her reassuringly. It was hard to do, because she could always see through it when he tried to bullshit her.

Movement in the mirror along the passenger side of the truck caught his eye, and he glanced up. Estrella whipped her head around to see what he was staring at.

She screamed and tried to climb into his lap. A man was standing outside the passenger door of the truck, staring intently at them through the window. His face was smudged with gray-black grease paint and his clothes were dark and nondescript. A knit cap covered whatever hair he may have had, but it was his eyes and face that terrified Estrella. Cold, cold eyes and an emotionless face.

"Don't be scared. It's only Buck. Put your seatbelt on, sweetheart. We hafta go," he said gently.
Author's note: Special guest appearance. Thank you for all the support from Mar and Mead, and for the interesting thoughts from Visionary. You'll know your contributions when you see them. :-) Laissez les bon temps rouler! Blessings to all my reviewers.

"Why is he here?" Estrella hissed at Steve.

The man standing outside the truck window waited emotionlessly. There was something about the set of his shoulders and jaw that told her he was anything but patient. He was poised for action, merely awaiting Steve's approval. She pressed hard back against Steve's side and hip when he set her down on the seat.

"He knows something about the men who tried to ambush us in the park night before last. I sent him the pictures. Come on, Eya. I hafta let him in. We need to move," Steve told her.

She set her feet against the floor around the gear shift and stayed as far away from the door as she could. Her hand clutched at Steve's leg, but she nodded. Bucky had come a long way to meet them, and he didn't look like he would tolerate being left outside like a wet cat. Steve unlocked the doors, and Buck got in.

"Drive," he said in a hard, quiet voice.

Estrella squeaked a helpless sound at his menacing presence beside her. Buck set down a worn, faded pack onto the floor between his feet and slammed the truck door. She didn't like that he watched the rearview mirror instead of greeting them like a civilized person would.

Steve got the truck moving away from the gas station pumps and turned right onto the highway service road when Bucky gave a directional indication with his thumb. As soon as Steve had them on the highway, Bucky bent to dig in his pack. His free hand slipped the knit cap off his head and stuffed it in the pack. He took out a plastic package of cleansing wipes.


"Incoming. Multiple. Go east across the bay, then take one thirty-six, then north on one eighty-eight to rendezvous," Bucky said as he began to wipe the dark grease paint from his face.

"Incoming what, Buck? Who's the rendezvous? No more of this cryptic stuff. I gotta know," Steve said.

He looked to Estrella pointedly, then stared at Bucky before he put his eyes back on the road. A glance in the rearview mirror was inconclusive, but he could hear that same rumbling he thought he'd heard at the gas station. It was louder and closer. He glared at Bucky and drove a little faster to get them out of Corpus Christi.

"It's more of them like you sent me pictures of. Rendezvous with my field partner. Merc," Bucky explained as he scrubbed at his face and neck with another wipe.

Estrella looked between the two of them. Much of what they were saying didn't mean a lot to her, except the mention of pictures. She remembered flashes of light from Steve's phone in the dark. Maya men. Latino men. Tattoos. Cold dread started to seep into her gut, her muscles.
"You brought them to us? To him?" she accused Bucky.

"It's his turn, toots. I'm not doing all the work on my own," he told her without looking aside.

He pulled down the visor to look into the lighted mirror. Buck was busy getting grease paint out of the corners of his eyes and mouth. It looked odd to see his pale skin coming clean from under the deep ashy color with each swipe. He made a pile of dirty wipes on the floor.

"How many?" Steve demanded, "What merc? We don't use mercenaries. Natasha knows better."

"All the rest of 'em, Stevie. It's time to clean up. Don't tell me Natalia doesn't use mercs, because that's what I am. Things were squeezing out the cracks, and you two kept sending us proximity warnings. Had to get help to wrap it up, so don't complain," Bucky said.

"What merc, Bucky? Tell me it's not Rumlow," Steve said.

"It's not Rumlow."

"You think I'm in the mood for word games? I got my girl here! Quit making me work for every detail. You're saying it's not Rumlow just like you told me it wasn't Marvin Belcher who put my sketchbook in the toilet," Steve said.

"Nobody knows where Rumlow is. He was last seen at a hospital, and they lost track of him in the middle of the night. I told you it wasn't Marvin Belcher for your own good because you were too dumb to acknowledge that Belcher would knock your face in if you gave him any lip. I was working three jobs to keep a roof over our heads at the time, and I couldn't be there to keep you outta trouble every minute of the day. I'm tellin ya, it's not Rumlow. Rumlow ain't enhanced enough for this job. Shut up and drive, old man. Faster. I'll tell ya what you need to know when you need to know it," Bucky explained patiently.

Estrella quit scowling at Bucky to look and see how Steve was taking the backtalk. He wasn't happy about it. She could hear his teeth grinding, and his hand shifted roughly between her knees as he accelerated to higher speed across the bay bridge.

"Damn Sunday drivers. Put some lead in it, Stevie, or this is gonna happen here among all the civvies," Bucky said.

He looked in the rearview again and Estrella refused to be curious. Her tummy started to cramp with anxiety and she felt nauseous. They were running from La Eme. Things seemed surreal again. The truck, which had many pleasant memories for her, now felt like a dangerous place. She eyed the bridge railing flashing by outside the window. The water. If she could make it to the water… but, the truck was going too fast. Steve wouldn't let her get away and hide. He faced everything, and she would have to too, now that she was with him. She barely noticed her body press back into the seat as Steve pressed harder on the accelerator.

"If I go any faster, we're gonna get stopped," Steve said.

"No you won't. Jarvis has the locals busy somewhere else. Geez, Stevie, you think I'm an amateur? Go!" Bucky urged him.

"Ffff." Steve bit his bottom lip against cursing.

He looked behind them in the rearview almost as much as he looked ahead. He smoothly swerved the truck around traffic and took the exit off the bridge at far faster than the posted speed limit. Estrella bit her lip at the sound of the knobby tires yowling in the grooves cut in the asphalt
shoulder. She clamped her fingers harder against Steve's thigh, but it was like trying to squeeze wood.

"It's alright, girlie. We got this," Bucky assured her quietly.

She stopped fretting over the traffic and glanced to him. He smiled at her like nothing at all was wrong. She wanted to pinch him for trying his charming act on her now. Did he think she was stupid? He was ridiculously handsome with the grease paint off his face and neck and with his long lashes and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, but she didn't care. It was Eme after them!

"You cut your hair. And you shaved," she pointed out senselessly, and then she felt stupid for saying anything about useless details at a time like this.

"Swell of you to notice," Buck said with a smirk.

She narrowed her eyes and tightened her lips at him. He only stopped smirking when he looked in the mirror again.

Steve almost missed the curve onto highway one thirty-six. Estrella leaned her cheek on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Her belly was churning, and she wished there was time to find a bathroom. Her legs clenched tight. The smell of Steve's shirt and deodorant was comforting and she tried to tell herself that she wasn't really here in this moment. It was an anxiety dream, and she could wake up from it, she rationalized. Traffic must have thinned around them, but she wasn't looking. Steve drove faster. Was the truck supposed to rumble like that? She squeezed her eyes more tightly shut and turned her face against his arm.

"Aerial surveillance diverted," Jarvis's voice said from somewhere.

She cracked her eyes to see the speedometer needle pegged beyond a hundred miles an hour.

"Turn left onto one eighty-eight. One mile," Bucky said.

He didn't sound charming anymore. Steve grunted an acknowledgement and slowed the truck for the turn. The rumbling sound got louder, and it seemed impossible, but Steve's body hardened even more against her.

"Buck. Tell me what's ahead. We can't do this the way things are. It's too open, and there's too many of them," Steve said.

"Trust me. There's a plan. After the turn, it's nothing but agriculture. Fields for miles all around. There's a bridge over a ravine and a little rest stop. We'll park it and deal with this there. It'll be the perfect setup."

Steve grunted again, and Estrella was barely aware enough to know that he sounded unhappy. She was trying to ignore what was going on. The rumble behind them sounded like a lot of motorcycles. Dozens of them. She whimpered. How many men? And there was only Steve and Bucky. All they had was Steve's gun. For the first time, his big black gun seemed small and inadequate.

They took a hard turn which made the tires vibrate against the road, then Steve's arm jerked against her while he worked the gear shift to force a fast acceleration from the truck.

"You can't outrun 'em in this rig, but they don't wanna take a chance on hurting the girl. They won't bump you. See the bridge? The trees ahead? That's as far as we go," Bucky said.
"You're shitting me. I can't slow down for that. They'll overtake us and we'll be surrounded. You want us to stop and chat with em? Why… Why won't they hurt Estrella?" Steve asked.

"Because she's who they've been after all along," Buck said.

"Buck," Steve said in a threat for more information.

"There it is. Start slowing down, but keep them behind us," Bucky said as they neared the little wooded park out in the middle of miles of fields of golden sorghum.

The entrance to the little park was filled with a huge old vehicle. It's red and silver were faded by rust, and it had obviously seen better days.

"A firetruck?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. It's a shame, too. I like firetrucks," Buck said.

Steve saw the plan now. It was savage enough to even the odds a little and buy them some time to make a stand. He'd slowed down too much, so he regained some distance between his truck and the long line of vehicles following them. Blue-white smoke chugged from the tailpipe of the old firetruck as they passed it.

Steve braked hard. He turned the wheel slightly to bring the truck around across the empty highway. He had to see this. Buck would want to, too. He'd arranged the operation, after all. His truck and all the gear in it shook roughly as it came around, but it stopped just as he wanted it to, facing the action. He checked to see that Estrella still had her face against his arm, her eyes shut tight. He put a hand to the back of her head to keep her there.

The heavy firetruck trundled out across the highway with a lurch. Steve wondered about the driver who would do such a thing, this merc Bucky had hired. In the next instant, the large utility vehicle shuddered and jerked sideways. Steve could clearly hear the impacts of a lot of motorcycles crunching into it broadside. He winced at the carnage that was being made of the bikers even though he couldn't see it. The firetruck rocked on its tires, but it was densely massive, its tanks filled with water. It would take more than motorcycles to overturn it or even to move it much.

As he and Buck watched, cars and trucks swerved off-road around the firetruck, plowing up dirt and bogging down in the soft fields. A man exited the passenger door of the firetruck and walked away, calm as if he was walking along the sidewalk to check his mail.

"No. Not him. Tell me that's not your merc," Steve said with disbelief.

"What? I've worked with him some. In the fifties, I think, and again in seventy-two. He's good."

"What's all this about?" Steve asked as he reached for his shield.

Cars and trucks were coming to a stop, arrayed like a battlefront before them with the firetruck front and center. Men got out of the vehicles and advanced on the merc who stood placidly in the highway. He turned around to face them with his bare hands.

"No. I got the shield this time," Buck said, "Get out there and help him. Here's your chance, Stevie. All these guys? They want one thing. Your girl. They think she's their goddess. They took her and gang-raped her years ago when she was a kid, and they want her back to do it some more. They're gonna take her to Mexico. Put her in some old Mayan ruin and chain her to the wall while they-"

That's all it took to get Steve out of the truck. Bucky chuckled.
"Fuck you," Estrella hissed at him.

"No, no, no. None of that's gonna happen today. Wanna see somethin' beautiful? C'mon," Buck said.

He lifted Steve's shield from behind the seat and took Estrella's wrist. No matter how she resisted against the pull of his hand, it didn't help. The bench seat was slick, and Bucky easily dragged her out of the truck. She almost stumbled when her feet hit the pavement, but his stiff arm braced her, then tugged her along. She jerked and struggled against him, and Buck stopped short.

Steve stood before them, and she'd never seen him look so frightening. He breathed hard and deep, and his skin was flushed even though he was standing still doing nothing. The expression on his face was appallingly coarse. She looked away.

"Stay," he growled.

"I will. I'll keep her safe behind the shield. Go. Make it so they can't hunt her anymore," Bucky urged.

Steve turned and loped away toward the other man who stood in the road. The Latino men were almost to him, but they looked past the mercenary, past Steve's approach. They looked like they always did. Hard. Obsessed. They didn't care about the crash and the firetruck. They didn't care who Steve was or who the other man was. They could see her, and their steps sped up, some of them breaking into a jog. They were here for her, to take her again. Terror splashed down Estrella's nerves like ice water.

"Here. Get down. I don't think these dumb fucks will use firearms because they want you unharmed, but we'll get behind cover just to make Stevie happy in case he looks back at us," Buck said.

Estrella was too scared and confused to fight him. Bucky pulled her close and tucked her tight in front of him. He held the shield on his right arm almost as naturally as Steve did. He bent his body and got to one knee, and Estrella had no choice but to go down with him. She didn't want to watch, but Bucky's left hand wrapped around her forehead, just above her eyes. It was cold and hard. It was nothing she could win a struggle against. He pulled Steve's shield in close so that she could see just above the rim of it. Her quick breaths fogged against the silvery metal.

Men tried to move around Steve and the other man to get to her. There were dozens of them, and more coming from behind the firetruck, coming from the bogged down cars and trucks in the fields. Possibly hundreds of them. Estrella whimpered at seeing so many. She vaguely noted that the other man, the mercenary, was taller, bigger than Steve. More brutish.

Then, they moved. The man went left, and Steve went right. Both of them used their bodies with inhuman speed and agility. Estrella made a low sound of denial as the first few bodies dropped to the pavement. From fifty yards away, she could barely hear the sounds of impact when they fell, but she could already tell this was a different kind of confrontation than the night in the park with Colin.

The bodies hit the ground utterly still and twisted. Steve and the man moved across the approaching gang like arrows to targets, one after the other. There was no fighting. They were too fast for the reaction times of normal men. The gang members at first discounted that only two unarmed men could be any serious hindrance to them. They accepted the death of their brethren until it came for them. By the time they saw that their increasing numbers weren't getting them any closer to Estrella, they started to move away from the threat, to go around. The threat came to
"Lookit that. I knew he'd finally let loose enough to do what I knew he could. Creed's been an animal all his life, but Stevie keeps it chained down hard. Look at him now. All he needed was the right inspiration. Ooh," Bucky winced, "Yeah, he's mad. That guy probably said something about you. But see? Even quick as he is, he's checking for tats on their hands. He's enraged, but he doesn't wanna kill some dumb chump who's in the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew he'd pick up on that."

As they watched, Steve knocked a young man in the head. He fell limp, but not broken. Steve moved on. His body which Estrella loved so much, which was so careful and kind with her, reached and grasped, twisted and tossed. It was too horrible to watch, but she couldn't stop.

"What have you done? He's not supposed to kill like this. I didn't want him to know about these people," Estrella said.

Bucky was right. There was a kind of grace, a kind of beauty in how Steve moved. Under the glaring noonday sun, nothing was concealed. Every movement he made was controlled power and purpose. She saw his head turn slightly as he worked, choosing his next target before he was done with the one in his hands. He never stood still. His adversaries got carried along in his deadly hands until he dropped them to reach for another. There were so many men that Steve flowed among them, breaking and dropping them as he went.

Her eyes flashed over to the other man. He was almost as fast as Steve, but he was heavier. He moved with the surges and leaps of a cat. The leaping moves looked improbable on a man his size, but it showed how strong he was. Estrella couldn't watch him any longer. His hands were horrible and his face was hungry and joyous, as if this terrible killing was like sex to him. By comparison, Steve was angry and grim. Determined.

Between them, they pushed the advancing hordes of men back around the junked firetruck where she could no longer see the fight. The man called Creed leapt to the top of the firetruck while Steve went around. He stayed there for a mere moment, looking around to be sure they weren't letting anyone sneak past. He jumped down, and Estrella saw him go as if he had a target picked out to land on. His hands were spread, ready to begin the grabbing and breaking again. She tipped her head down and shut her eyes.

"We stay here. He wouldn't want you to see what's over there. Hell, he's gonna be livid that I let you watch this. What do ya think? Is a royal Stevie ass-chewin' worth getting to watch the show?" Bucky wondered as he stood them up.

Estrella could see more from a higher vantage, and the sight of piled and twisted bodies was too much. Bucky turned her out from his hip and held her across the belly while she lost her breakfast onto the road. He wasn't expecting the back-handed fist that clobbered him between the legs.

"Uff," he grunted.

The pain of the clumsy retaliation didn't do much to him, so he was quick to make sure that Estrella's hair stayed out of the way while she thoroughly emptied her stomach. Soon as she was done, he hauled her back to the truck. It was parked askew on the road, doors open and the engine still running.

Buck set her on her feet and gave her the shield. Estrella held its weight dumbly while Bucky dug in his pack for a water bottle. He took the shield back and twisted off the cap of the water. He passed it to her, and Estrella took it. He could tell that she was in a mild state of shock. She didn't
do anything but stare at Steve's shield, so Bucky lifted her hand toward her mouth. She rinsed and spit, then drank the rest of the water from the bottle. Her throat burned from stomach acid.

"You pregnant already?" Bucky asked her.

"Fuck you," she told him again.

"Not my job description, lady. Does Steve know what a mouth you got on you? Hey, you should be thankful. I've spent the last week cleaning out every prison and street gang in the Western U.S. of every sorry sack that had your tattoo on his hand. This is the last of them, except for the ones Steve played patty-cake with in the dark. I had Natalia pick those ones up. You should be thanking me and Steve for cleaning up your problem, rather than getting all up-chucked over it," Buck said.

Estrella went wide-eyed at the idea that what Bucky said could be true. Could one man really exterminate a whole subculture of a gang? He even knew about the tattoos on their hands, and that it wasn't all of La Eme, just those who believed she was Ix-Chel.

"This was all of them? Every single one?" she asked.

"Yeah, probably. They're not like Hydra. They get the message loud and clear. They try to show up again, and we'll cut em down again. We'll be watching. Natalia wanted em gone for you and Steve's peace of mind. So do I, and Jarvis was happy to help," Buck said.

Estrella fought off shivers and rubbed her arms. She felt too cool for the warmth of the day. Bucky pulled her toward the truck with two fingers snagged in the hem of her sleeve. He lifted her onto the truck seat and handed her another water bottle. She sat and stared at it. It was hard for her to believe that this was happening. How could one man do all of this? Maybe he could do it if he had Jarvis and Natasha and that Creed guy helping. But why all the effort?

"Why did you have to involve Steve? I'm thankful that you did this, but you know it's not right that he's in it," she fretted.

The stretch of highway on their side of the firetruck was bizarrely quiet after Bucky reached in and turned off the truck. A heated breeze blew grain-scented air to them and the smell of diesel fumes dissipated.

Buck could hear the sounds of raised voices, panicked voices, from the other side of the roadblock where the killing continued, but he didn't think Estrella could hear it. She looked like she was recovering and he was glad of it. He gave her the shield again, then walked around and closed the driver's side door of the truck. He came back to stand in front of her in the open passenger doorway and he pressed the lock button. Nothing was going to come up behind Steve's girl on his watch.

Estrella was still watching him, waiting for an answer. Bucky loved how she gave him the shit-eye and didn't make a damn thing over his looks like most dames did. She was a scrapper, despite how soft and pretty she was, and he thought she was perfect for Stevie. She only needed a bit of perspective to understand his motives.

"Everything good Steve's had has been taken away from him. His Pa, his Ma, his health, his girl, and his life. There wasn't anything he could do about all that. He was helpless like a baby to stop any of it, even though he's this big man now. Then you come along, and these creeps are after ya. You didn't tell him. You were just gonna let them do their thing. Until what? Until you and the kids were at the grocery store five years from now and they grab all of you and Steve's left helpless again. He'd lose everything, again. You got any idea what that would do to him? He's strong, but I don't know that he's that strong. Estrella, this way he gets to do something. He gets to stop the
threat before it takes everything from him again. He needs to see that he's got some kind of control over his life. Sure, this'll change him. I've never seen him go at it bare-handed like this, but it's justice for what they did to you, and for what they were here to do today if we let them," Buck explained.

Estrella looked out through the windshield at the bodies littering the road around the firetruck. She paled a little toward greenish again, and Buck tapped her knee to distract her and piss her off. It was better she stayed riled at him, rather than looking sickly like that at the sight of what he considered a squeaky-clean battlefield. There wasn't even any blood.

"Don't touch me," she grumped at him and pushed his hand away.

"I'll do that and a whole lot more, if I have to. Whatever it takes, doll, and you'd better get used to it. I told you before, but you were a bag of bones then, so maybe you don't remember. I'll do whatever's good for Stevie, and if that makes you mad, tough shit," Buck said.

"Then shouldn't you be over there, helping him? To make sure he doesn't get hurt?" she challenged him.

"Nah. My place is right here. He can't do his job if you might be in harm's way. Besides, these chumps are hopeless. No advanced weapons, no organized tactics, no air support. No leader to direct them. All they have is numbers, which means that all Steve needs is time. They didn't even bring firearms because they didn't want to kill their goddess with friendly fire. How dumb is that? If you were really some kind of deity, a bullet wouldn't hurt you, and they wouldn't be able to hold you against your will," Buck said.

Estrella smiled a little and nodded. Bucky was about to say something else, but a sound Estrella couldn't hear distracted him.

Once Steve was assured that Buck had Estrella behind cover and would keep her there, he ran out to position himself beside Creed. He felt about Creed like he would if it was Rumlow standing there, but the feeling was old and stale. No, Creed was worse. He was unpredictable.

"White meat! Long time no see," Creed growled at him.

"Shut the fuck up and do your job," Steve growled back.

"Ooh. You're angry. This must be personal," Creed gave him a toothy grin, and then they were too busy to talk.

Steve checked for tattoos with Jesse's words in mind. Some of these guys might be young wanna-bes. Half-hearted followers like Malachi and Carlos. As he moved through the engagement with the Latino gang members, the sight of the tattoos on their right hands enraged him more. He could see how the inked image was supposed to depict Estrella. It was on their right thumb and the web of flesh connected to the forefinger. They would look at it when they masturbated. As a devotion. A perversion. A violation.

Buck's words of what some of them had already done to Estrella, and what they planned to do to her if they took her again drove him steadily away from mercy. Only one young guy without a tattoo looked a little lost and afraid. Steve tapped him, let him drop, and moved on.

What had they done to Estrella? Which ones of them? A few of them? A lot of them? What did they want of her? His imagination lashed horrible thoughts at him. Thoughts of Estrella young, screaming, and helpless. He moved faster through the men. He had to make it stop. All the time
Estrella had spent homeless, starving, and alone was because of these fucks. Every icy winter. Every missed meal. Every fear and vulnerability and abuse she'd suffered was because of them. And he could end it. So he did.

Creed was heartless, but he was professional. When they had the leeward side of the firetruck cleared, Creed got a vantage up top so Steve could go around without anything slipping by. The other side of the firetruck was a street riot gone wrong.

Meat and metal was squashed and twisted together into the dented side of the firetruck, and water was leaking from its tank. Forty seven vehicles of varied models had avoided the collision, and Steve took only an instant to get a head count. The guys over here hadn't seen what happened to their brothers on the other side.

They crowded in around Steve and tried to bring him down. It only made his job easier. The grabbing and breaking was quick and efficient when he didn't have to leap around to do it. Too many. Some tried to get around him. He heard them say that word from the other night in the park. Ishchell. Many of them gave up crowding to him when they saw he was slowing down forward progress. They wanted around the road block. Around him. To get to his girl. This was too slow. Grasping and twisting took too long.

It was faster if he used his fists like hammers. He slammed them above the ears. It knocked them down fast, but the fall wasn't what killed them. Subdermal skull shrapnel and brain hemorrhaging finished them while he moved on. The tactic was so fast that he had to slow down a little to check for tattoos. One guy looked too young to be here, but his face was hard and he was determined to get around Steve to Estrella. He had the tattoo on his hand. He went down.

It seemed endless. There were a few hundred of them. He wasn't accustomed to working so closely with targets without a weapon, a shield, or even the leather of his gloves for separation. It was vicious work. No grace to it at all. His anger dulled to resentment and perseverance. He felt he'd meted out enough punishment to satisfy justice. The rest of the work was for prevention. He didn't want Estrella to have to look over her shoulder anymore. She wasn't a fighter. She didn't want training, and she didn't like weapons. He had to eliminate the threat for her.

Steve's muscles were still eager and his heart still ready to serve when there was no one left standing. He jumped atop a nearby truck in the stalled lot of vehicles on the highway. Creed did the same nearby. They looked around. Someone was here. Alive. Hiding.

Steve's ears zeroed in on the sounds of frantic breathing, a heart pounding. He also heard Creed draw in a deep breath. He and Steve silently jumped down from atop the vehicles and moved toward a nearby rusty car. Creed jumped clear over. Steve walked around behind the man who crouched in hiding, staring terrified at the sight of Creed's hands.

"What the…?" Steve asked.

The man's head whipped around and he made a high, undignified sound. He was young and blonde. He had only one tattoo. On his thumb.

"Come on, Captain Tits N Ass, nobody educated you about these little college shits yet?" Creed smiled with a particular joy.

Steve grabbed up the young man and held him by the jaw. Even to his nose, the sharp reek of adrenalized fear was discernable. The kid made another sound at the painful grip, but his eyes shifted around, searching past Steve.
"Where is she? They said she was here. If you're gonna kill me, I deserve to at least see her first!" he whined through a mouth obstructed by Steve's grip.

"Aww, precious," Creed crooned with false sympathy. He clucked his tongue with a somehow macabre sarcasm and strolled to where Steve held the blonde up on his toes. The young guy's eyes shifted away from searching for a sight of Estrella to watch the menace in front of him.

"These nice people lied to you, didn't they? You got your pretty skin inked up and listened to some stories about a hot little frail. They told you that if you helped, you could fuck her, huh? Maybe you got an uncle who's a judge or a senator? Or a DA?" Creed asked.

The guy's eyes widened.

"My aunt's with IN-"

Steve changed the angle of his hand so that it would feel like his jaw ligaments were going to tear. It stretched his jaw wide, and the kid couldn't talk. He could only make muted, raspy sounds and whines.

"Why would you do this? Why join them?" Steve asked him, not really wanting an answer.

Creed moved. The guy jerked and was ripped from Steve's hand.

"Aztlan!" he cried out, then he went still on the pavement between the cars.

"Why did you do that?" Steve asked.

"You heard all you need to. Look up that word he yelled. Then think about why blondie here joined up with this lot. 'Murica!'" Creed yelled out in a gleeful mimic of the dead college student.

He laughed, then clapped a clawed hand onto Steve's shoulder.

Steve snapped his arm around and threw off the false comradery. Creed could be creepy as hell and he was never to be trusted. Better to keep him beyond arm's length.

"You people are a rat's nest. Damn, I'm glad I'm Canadian," Creed said, and he strolled off toward the firetruck.

Steve looked around at the wreck of vehicles and bodies littering the otherwise peaceful Texas countryside. Jarvis was involved, or a carload of innocent civilians would probably have come along. Law enforcement would already be here because of his speeding. With that in mind, he pulled out his phone and jumped back atop a vehicle.

"Jarvis. Any vital signs other than me and Creed, Estrella and Buck?"

He held his phone high so J could get a good vantage for a scan.

"There are five others, plus the one you spared, Captain, but they have mere moments remaining. You need not concern yourself that they will be further trouble for Miss Estrella," Jarvis' cool voice told him.

He put his phone in his back pocket and looked around to begin a strategy for clearing the site before anyone could see. Creed was walking away, toward the firetruck. He didn't get in it. He stalked around it, his head tilted in that way that meant he was scenting for something. For Estrella.

"Creed!" Steve shouted.
He began a running leap and kept moving. Before Creed was out of sight around the firetruck, Steve was on him. His weight brought both of them down, but the larger man shoved against Steve and the ground. They flew apart. Creed got to his feet and Steve rebounded off a pickup truck. Another run had him at his opponent, and this time he hit him hard like he'd been hitting the gang members. Steve took claws deep into his side, but Creed's brain was more delicate.

Creed stood stunned for a moment. Steve didn't give him that long to recover. The bastard's healing was faster than Steve's and he could outlast anyone in a fight. It would take Thor or the Hulk to put him down and keep him down, and they weren't here. Steve's only slight advantages were speed and intellect. He had to buy some time.

"Take her and go!" he yelled to Bucky.

He pounded Creed's head to keep his brain traumatized and unresponsive. The bones of his skull were too tough to break, but blunt force was hopefully good enough. Steve got his legs clamped around his opponent's arms and did his best to crush the life out of him, little good that it would do. At least it kept his hands slightly less dangerous. As he'd feared, it wasn't enough. Creed groaned and claws sunk into Steve's thighs, seeking arteries.

He couldn't protect Eya if he bled out. While the damage was still only to his muscles, Steve ripped away. Creed groggily rolled to his hands and knees. Steve moved in with well-timed precision kicks to his head and throat. Why wasn't the truck starting? Estrella was yelling something, but he couldn't afford to take his eyes off of Creed to look. He had to keep the feral disoriented and down until Buck got his shit together and took Estrella away from here.

"Go!" he commanded, but all he heard was the truck door slamming and Bucky cursing.

Creed gurgled something which sounded like a laugh through his damaged throat. The next time Steve moved in to stun him with a kick, his foot was caught. He anticipated the wrenching twist because it's what he would do. He snapped himself around with the movement and landed another kick to the head which freed his caught foot, but Creed was on the move again.

A powerful leap knocked Steve back against the firetruck, and only his raised forearm kept Creed from ripping at his throat with his teeth. His arm took the crushing bite, and Steve pounded at his head again with his free fist. He hadn't wanted to kill Creed, only to keep him away from Estrella, but he was starting to consider emptying the magazine of his sidearm into the man's face. If that would end him. Or at least put him down for a while.

Quick movement to the side caught Steve's attention, and the distraction was enough for Creed to notice it too. Steve expected it to be Bucky, but it wasn't. Estrella stormed toward them, her necklace dangling from her fist.

Pain gouged into Steve's brain. It clenched his body into a useless contortion, and his balls felt like they were being crushed in a vice. Sound. Stabbing, punishing waves of sound crippled him. He wasn't aware that he fell to the ground, with Creed as dead weight atop him. There was only debilitating pain.

Bucky walked over with his hands pressed hard against his ears. It hurt him too, but he was somewhat numb to the effects of Estrella's voice, and she wasn't screeching toward him. He stood ready, but the little dame seemed to have things well in hand.

It was rough to see Steve down and bleeding, but it was only pain and flesh wounds. He'd had worse.
Creed, though. Buck almost felt sorry for him. The mutant's enhanced feral senses probably took in the sound and amplified it. His quick healing kept his muscles twitching and it was enough for him to coordinate a self-preserving crawl to get away from the god-awful sound. Blood trickled from his ears, and he clawed his way to his feet by getting a grip into the metal body of the firetruck. The bold bastard tried to get a look at Estrella, but whatever he saw when he looked at her face made him flinch away, then run.

Buck couldn't make out what she was yelling at him, but it didn't matter. As soon as it was clear that Creed was determined to make distance from them, Estrella went quiet. She stood guard over Steve and watched Creed run off into the distance across the fields.

"Hah! Would ya lookit that? You just ran off Victor Creed, girlie," Buck said into the ringing silence.

Estrella saw that Bucky was keeping an eye out for Creed. She sunk to her knees by Steve and spoke sweetly to him. His side, his thighs, and his left forearm were torn and bleeding. She couldn't put pressure on them all, and her hands hovered over him, excruciatingly undecided about what to do.

"Baby, it's over. I'm so sorry. So sorry. Can you move? We should get away from here before the police come," she said in soothing tones.

Just like the sex last night on the log at the end of the beach, it didn't matter so much what she said. As long as she spoke softly to him, it should help the pain to go away. Her hands touched his face. She wanted to soothe away the tight creases there. Steve's expression was so clenched and painful that she knew he must still be hearing the reverberations of her yelling.

"Local law enforcement has great interest in investigating your location. I would suggest that you leave quickly if at all possible. I am only data. I can't physically stop them," Jarvis informed them.

"C'mon. Enough of the coochie-coo. We gotta double-time it outta here," Buck said.

He pushed past Estrella and knelt down in front of where Steve was finally getting up onto one arm. Buck got a shoulder under him and pulled them both up. Steve hobbled toward the truck. Buck tossed the keys to Estrella. She barely caught them without fumbling, but she ran to Steve's truck.

"You're tore up that bad? I've seen you get in worse fights with an envelope," Buck chided him.

"Balls," Steve strained through his teeth.

Bucky winced in sympathy, but he didn't slow down their shuffle toward the passenger side of the truck. Estrella got the truck started, then dithered in the middle of the seat, waiting.

"I can drive," Steve protested as Buck pushed him up into the passenger side and buckled him in.

"I know you can, but your hands are gonna be busy. Put some pressure on your legs. Don't wanna get blood all in your truck, do ya?" Buck told him.

Bucky dug in his old bag on the floor and pulled out a bottle of liquid. Estrella pressed at Steve's left thigh from her position kneeling in the middle of the seat while Steve pressed on the deep punctures of his right thigh. His arm was bleeding freely, but he held it against his belly and his clothes absorbed the warm blood. Estrella wondered why Bucky was wasting time squirting liquid on the ground all the way back to the firetruck. He was tediously meticulous in looking at the ground and at the bodies piled everywhere. He squirted the unknown liquid here and there as he
made his way back to the truck. All the way to the passenger side, he used the squirt bottle, until he put it back inside his bag and shut Steve's door for him.

"Buckle up," Buck told Estrella as he got behind the wheel.

She glared at him, but she removed one hand from Steve's injuries to do so. Buck got the truck oriented with the road and they headed north, away from the carnage they'd made. They drove for miles, and then Buck turned right at a lonely rural intersection.

"Does he need a doctor?" she asked Bucky.

Steve's blood was warm and slippery-thick under her hands, and its coppery scent filled the airspace in the truck's cab.

"No arteries, right?" Bucky asked.

"No. I moved before he could dig that deep," Steve said.

"He's fine. We'll get him in the shower at a hotel, and he'll be good as new tomorrow," Bucky assured her.

Estrella looked at the deep red seeping from her boyfriend in multiple places. His muscles went through cycles of trembling tension and tired laxity. Steve smiled at her.

He was glad she was safe. He wanted to touch her, but he had to keep his hands to himself right now or he'd make a mess. He had a lot to think about, but it could wait. Buck and Jarvis knew how to manage situations like this, and the biggest threat, Creed, was gone.

"Hey pal, we're headed back to New York, right?" Bucky asked.

"Uh-huh," Steve said while he happily stared at Estrella.

Her dark hair was really pretty. He liked her eyes, but he couldn't look for long, or he'd have to kiss her. He didn't want to kiss her yet. He needed a shower.

"How do ya want to get there? Lotta ways we could go," Bucky asked.

"New Orleans," Steve said.

"Alright. We need to feed you up, anyway," Bucky agreed with a smile.

Estrella took over pressing on both of Steve's thighs until he fell asleep and his bleeding seemed to stop. She got more cleansing wipes and cleaned her hands and his. She wished she had a blanket to cover him. In her mind it would make him more comfortable, and it would at least hide his bloodied and torn state from truckers who could see down into their windows as they travelled on the highway. Steve's head lolled back against the headrest and she nudged him over until he was leaning more comfortably against the doorframe.

"What about you? Aren't you sleepy?" she turned to ask Bucky.

"Nah. M'fine for now. Why's he so tired?" Bucky asked as he merged them onto a busy highway.

"I think it's my voice. He's getting resistant to it, but that was more than I've ever..." she let her words end because she didn't know what to call what she'd done.

She'd never used her voice like that. She'd screamed in fear before, but never with the kind of
protective rage she'd felt when she saw that Creed man trying to tear into Steve with his claws and then with his teeth.

"They weren't trying to kill each other, you know," Bucky said.

"Did you see the same thing I did?" she asked him with disbelief.

"Sure I did. They could have ended each other at least three times in the time they were tangled up. With people like Stevie, and like Creed… sometimes fighting serves other purposes," Bucky said.

"Then why was he fighting? If Creed wasn't a threat, why did Steve attack him like that, and if Creed was a threat, why didn't he kill him?"

"Creed was definitely a threat. He's got a nose on him like a bear. He wasn't supposed to meet you or even get near you. If he got too interested in you, he'd have been worse than the people we just got rid of. If you recall, I was trying to get you in the truck and away, but you threw the fucking keys in the grass. It all worked out anyhow because Creed got to meet you real good, and I don't think he wants any more of ya," Bucky said, then he chuckled.

Estrella only took a moment to think of what it would feel like to have a man like Creed hunting her like she'd been hunted for years. It was more than she wanted to think about. If Bucky thought that Creed was turned off of his curiosity about her to the degree that he could laugh about it, then that was good enough for now.

"What hotel will we stay in?" she asked.

"I dunno. Whatever one's got room for us, I guess. As long as it's got a bed, a shower, and a door that I can secure, it'll do," Buck said.

"Make it a nice one. He's wounded and I don't want him in a nasty bathroom," Estrella insisted.

"Get your phone and go ahead and find us one, then. You did good back there, by the way. Real good. He might be proud of you after he's done yelling at us," Buck said.

Estrella frowned at the dashboard. If Steve wanted to yell at her, she might have some words to say back at him. She hadn't known there was a big thing going on with Bucky and La Eme. If Steve had told her that, she could have told him more. And she could have called Natasha and yelled at her for making all this happen now to mess up their vacation. She knew that it was telling Natasha about her nightmares that had started all this.

It was a long drive north to the interstate, and another long drive through Louisiana. There were trees, trees, and more trees. The monotony was occasionally broken by petrochemical refineries or small cities along I-10. While she considered all that the day had already contained, her eyes blurred to the deep green surroundings. It didn't seem like it could be real that the threat to her was over and done with, but Steve slept beside her on the seat, sticky with drying blood. She knew he wouldn't have stopped fighting until the threat was gone, so she felt hopeful for the first time in years.

It was dark by the time they arrived in New Orleans. Buck nudged her and then Steve to wake them up. He was surprised that Steve had slept so long. He'd seen him sleep a lot when they were kids and Steve was sick, but never this long since the serum.

"I gotta go in and get our room key," Buck told them when they looked at him with bleary eyes.
"I'll get cleaned up before I get outta the truck," Steve said.

Buck nodded, then left them and the truck parked curbside.

Steve smiled down at Estrella, then frowned when he realized he still couldn't hug her or kiss her. His wounds had closed over, and the bleeding was long stopped, but he was still a stained mess.

"You took a bad chance doing what you did. I wanted you far away from Creed. Why didn't Buck go when I told him to?" he asked quietly.

He wasn't yelling, so she was glad for that.

"I didn't want to leave you, so I threw the keys," she said.

Steve pressed his lips together against the words he wanted to say about that. Estrella turned to get him a clean shirt and jeans from his suitcase behind the seat.

"I can't change pants while we're parked on the street," Steve said as he struggled into a clean shirt in the constricted space.

"It's dark. Nobody's looking, and you can't walk into the hotel with blood all over your pants," she argued.

"You'd be surprised at what I can do," Steve smiled at her.

He knew he could change in the truck. What he didn't want was what would happen if he changed pants. He could feel material stuck to his thigh wounds, maybe into them in a few places. If he changed, it would all pull loose, and then he'd bleed again. Then she would make a fuss over him. He could already see from the way she looked to his injuries that she wanted to tend to him. It felt good that she cared, but they didn't have time right now.

Estrella sighed and put the clean jeans back into his suitcase.

"Buck's tired. He's probably been up for at least sixty hours. I should have done the driving," Steve murmured as he tucked his shield into his old satchel.

"He seemed fine," she said.

"Of course he did. C'mon. Let's go meet him and get to the room so he can sleep," Steve told her.

He opened the curbside door and got out. He grabbed his suitcase and Estrella's, then slung his satchel over his shoulder and gave Bucky's bag to her. Steve looked pointedly to her chest where some of his blood had stained her blouse. Estrella put Bucky's bag onto her shoulder to give her a reason to put an arm over the stain. Luckily, her dark skirt didn't show stains.

The small bit of New Orleans that they could see from the sidewalk looked worn and quiet for a city on Sunday night. A city bus trundled by at the closest intersection, and an old man with cottony hair ambled along the opposite sidewalk, but other than that, they were alone in the dim street light. The buildings were only three stories tall, the street was a narrow two lanes of traffic and a narrow space for parking. Few people walked. Steve was surprised that he'd slept through Buck parallel parking the truck.

"Interesting smell," Steve commented as he locked the truck and they walked toward the hotel entrance.
The hotel looked small by New York standards, but felt surprisingly opulent for its surroundings. Uniformed staff opened the doors for them and offered to take their bags, but Steve quietly declined their help. He was aware that it could be considered rude to deprive the men of their tip, but that couldn't be helped right now. He had to keep a suitcase in front of the bloodstains and punctures in his pants, and his satchel hid the stains on his hip from his torn side.

Bucky was finishing up at the front desk when they came in. They made for the elevator, and Buck didn't bother to reach for any of the bags. They had a room on the third floor of the hotel overlooking an interior courtyard.

Steve checked both ways down the hall while Bucky unlocked their room with the keycard. No one was around, though Steve heard voices approaching from around the corner. Buck secured the door behind them after they were inside, and Steve didn't like how weary his face looked.


He knew Buck was feeling dead on his feet when he didn't argue.

"Got somethin' I can wear? I don't wanna turn your girl's head, walkin around in nothin but my shorts," he smirked.

Steve smiled, but he refused the invitation to banter. Buck needed to get clean, then get to sleep as soon as possible. He set his suitcase on the rack and got a soft, clean shirt for Bucky and a clean pair of sweats. Buck's eyes went to the door assessingly. Steve pulled his shield from his satchel. A flick of his hand, and the shield embedded into the crack of the door, a little above the doorknob. The door visibly shimmed in and made a creaking sound.

"Handy, that," Buck said, but he looked satisfied.

Estrella stood by the window, looking down into the old brick courtyard below. When the bathroom door shut behind Bucky, she turned to face Steve. Her eyes travelled his body. She frowned at him when she saw how his pants plastered to his wounds with dried blood. He took the offensive before she could take it on him.

"You knew those men were after you. You recognized who they were Friday night, and you didn't say anything. Why, Estrella?" he accused quietly.

He didn't want to make any emphatic gestures which might make her feel threatened, so he crossed his arms and waited. The disappointment on his face was real and he didn't mind her seeing it.

"Because look at you! I knew what you would do if I told you how to find them, and you did it!" she exclaimed with a wave of her hand at his ruined clothes, "I wanted you to stay out of it, but Natasha had to put her pointy little nose into it, and now there's Bucky, and look at the mess we made on the highway! You think we're just going to get away with this? Like it's some hit and run traffic accident? And you! You had no business killing all those people. If they needed to die, then Bucky should have done all of it. Or that other man. Creed. He was nasty enough to do it."

Steve bit down on a varied mix of emotions and kept his face neutral. She was adorable in her agitation and concern for him. It made him angry that she wanted Bucky to do all the dirty work. Buck had done far too many black ops already, and he didn't want him anymore damaged. He was insulted that Estrella thought he and his team couldn't handle something as simple as a little interest from law enforcement. Lastly, it hurt Steve's pride that Estrella thought he was too darling
to finish the job himself. Didn't she trust his abilities by now?

Despite the pull of cloth stuck in his wounds, he advanced on her. He loosened his hands to his sides, and he didn't like how she looked at them somewhat fearfully. He'd have to chew into Buck for letting her watch him work. When Steve had her against the hotel wall beside the television, he picked her up under her bottom and lifted her until they were eye level with each other.

Her hands gripped his shoulders and she looked worried about what he would do. He didn't let her worry for long. He kissed her, at first softly, then with a bit more fervor. He felt sour that what she'd seen made her fearful of him, so he knew he needed to be sweet. Still, he had to make his point. He enjoyed the quiet and the feel of her for a moment, then he pulled away slightly to breathe in the scent that he hadn't let Creed get close to.

"Mine," he said when he pulled back, "you're mine to defend. It stings that you'd think I can't handle it. I don't mind getting my hands dirty for you. I like it."

"I don't like it. You were so angry. You told me that you never fight angry. Maybe you did things that you shouldn't have done," she said.

Her hand left his shoulder to scratch through the hair at his temple. Steve closed his eyes at the feel of her fingers on him. He liked that she was relaxed in his hands, trusting that he had her.

"You let me worry about the state of my soul. I did exactly what needed doing. Eya, just tell me you won't hide dangerous things from me. Not ever again," he said.

Steve opened his eyes and looked hard at her. She squinted at him until her eyes looked almost shut. It was a little funny, but it touched him that she wanted him to be able to express himself without effect from her.

"I'll tell you if I think of anything that could be dangerous, but you have to promise not to over-react," she said.

He stared her down until she turned her head slightly and looked away.

"No Natasha promises. You gotta mean it," he said.

"I promise, Steve. I'll tell you," she said.

Her eyes widened a little until he could see and then feel her sincerity. He didn't know if it was a mind trick that she could make him feel it, but he accepted the sensation of honest intent that soaked into his head.

"And you? Do you promise to not over-react?" she asked.

"I promise," he told her.

"What is this, vows already?" Bucky asked from across the room.

Steve slipped his arm farther under Estrella's bottom and freed a hand to give Buck a rude gesture behind his back. Estrella turned her head slightly to glare at him. Bucky laughed a little, but then Steve heard him fall onto the bed nearest the bathroom. Steve set Estrella at his hip and turned to see Buck lying with his arm over his face against the light. He hadn't seen Buck like this, barefoot and vulnerable, for a very long time.

"Hurry up and get scrubbed, punk. I gotta sleep soon, or my mind starts going places none of us are
gonna like," Buck said.

"We're gonna talk later," Steve told him firmly.

"Yeah, I know how that's gonna go. If you want me to be awake for it, it'll have to wait," Buck agreed. His last words were distorted by a yawn.

Steve grumbled unhappy things. Estrella wiggled.

"I'm not a little kid. Let me down," she complained.

He let her slide to the floor, and they got fresh clothes to wear from their suitcases. Steve looked at her and wondered if she planned to shower with him.

"You know I'm going to look at your wounds. That nasty man had his teeth and claws in you. Are you sure you won't get infected with anything?" Estrella asked him.

"I don't get infections. I've been cross-ways with Creed before, a long time ago," Steve assured her.

She followed Steve to the bathroom. He stopped at the door, and she almost bumped into the back of him.

"Eya, wait out here for a minute," he told her.

"Oh. Okay. Sorry," she said.

She felt embarrassed to be so pushy. Maybe Steve needed the toilet, and now he thought she wouldn't even give him a private moment. She fretted near the closed bathroom door, then she moved away from it. She was almost to Bucky's bed with the intent to walk around it, when she heard a muffled, pained sound from the bathroom. She turned to go back to Steve, but Buck's cold hand reached out and gripped her fingers.

"Leave him alone. He doesn't want you to see this part," Bucky said so quietly that she moved back toward him to hear.

"Why is he in pain now, when he was fine a minute ago?" she bent to whisper.

She didn't like the intimacy of holding another man's hand while he lay on a bed, so she shook her fingers loose from his. Buck lunged a little and wrapped his shiny arm around her hips. Estrella made a face, but she kept quiet as Bucky pulled her to sit on his bedside. She didn't want to bother Steve while he was in pain, and his wicked friend knew that. She scowled at Buck and he took his arm from her lap when she didn't try to fight away from him.

"You know he heals fast. It's been over eight hours since he was hurt. His pants are embedded at the wounds, and maybe his undershirt too. He's gotta pull all that loose to get undressed. It hurts like a mo- like- never mind. It hurts," Bucky explained.

Estrella forgot about her distaste of being so close to Bucky while she imagined Steve in pain again, tearing his wounds fresh open. She wanted to get up and go to him, but Buck set fingers lightly on her knee.

"Wait for him. Let him keep some dignity. You already insulted him once by implying that he couldn't handle things," he advised.

She resented his words, but then she felt horrible that Steve had gotten hurt for her, and she'd
insulted him. She looked at the pale, clean carpet and frowned.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's alright. He can take it, but try to go easy on him," Bucky said.

"No. I'm sorry, Bucky. I wasn't very nice to you, and you did all that for us," she said, barely a whisper at all.

"Don't thank me. It's a job. And don't try to butter me up, doll. I know you don't like me," he said, and she could hear the smile on his face, though she refused to look at him.

"I don't hate you," she said neutrally.

It was true. She thought he was obnoxious and pushy, but he obviously cared for Steve, so she forgave him a lot of his flaws. He'd been handling her all day in ways that she didn't like, and she couldn't help but resent that, no matter how good he was for Steve.

"Don't that just warm my heart," Buck taunted her.

The bathroom door opened slightly, and then they heard the start of the shower. Estrella got up and walked away and Bucky let her go. The bathroom was warm, and the mirror still steamy from Buck's shower. She noted Steve's clothes on the floor, kicked deep under the countertop. There was bright, fresh blood on them, and she could see color running down his legs through the foggy glass of the shower. She locked the bathroom door and hurried out of her clothes.

There was a light overhead of the shower and Steve was leaning against the wall when she got in. The hot water washed eye-shocking red down the side of his ribs from the half-healed claw slashes. Four of them. His sturdy, gorgeous thighs had awful gouges and red ran from them, too. It sickened her that someone had dug into his flesh, like he was meat to play with. As she frowned at the ten wounds on his thighs, obviously spaced from human hands, his penis twitched and started to fill.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed, and looked at his face, "How can you get turned on when you're all torn up? Look at your arm! It looks like a dog attacked you!" she fussed.

The thicker part of his left forearm was deeply bitten and bruised. A little deeper, and the tooth marks would have made a complete oval into his skin. Creed could have...

She shook her head against the nauseating thought.

"It's just love marks, sweetheart. He could have torn chunks outta my hide if he'd wanted to. I could have put him down for at least a couple of hours if I meant anything by it, too, and he knew it. He didn't want to wake up in a holding cell, and I'm glad you ran him off. I wish I'd been alert enough to see that," Steve smiled at her.

His magnificent body under the shower spray was somehow enhanced by the wounds he so casually disregarded. His rascally smile was genuine enough to annoy her with its male smugness. If he could enjoy that she couldn't resist looking at him, then his wounds really weren't serious.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Estrella asked.

"Hmm. How about come over here and gimme a little love? Not too much, now," Steve murmured.

He pulled his hands down from behind his head and smiled as she came closer in the huge marble
shower, but then he stopped smiling. His head turned toward the door and he frowned.

"What? Are we okay? Do you need to go?" she whispered.

"I'm fine. Buck's an ass. He's laughing at me," Steve grumbled, but then he smiled.

"Ignore him. He's only jealous," Estrella said plainly.

"Hey! Shaddup! I never got between you and your skirts, so leave me and the lady alone," Steve called toward the bathroom door.

Estrella saw the tension of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He might be putting on a show of protest, but he was happy. She carefully hugged him as he turned his attention back to her.

"How can you think this was a good day?" she asked him softly.

Her fingers reached to trace his smile.

"It is. The threat is neutralized, I've got a friend I thought was lost to me, and you're here with me. What could be more perfect?" he asked.

"Not bleeding?" she offered, but his lips were too close for her to think anymore.

"I don't mind that," he said, and then his arms went around her and they kissed.

She wanted to rub their skin together and add some soap to make them slippery, but Steve stopped her from moving or reaching for the soap. She could feel him hard against her belly, but he got the little bottle of shampoo and set her away from him slightly.

The water hit her between her shoulders, and he tipped her chin back so her hair would get wet. Estrella tilted her head and rolled it back and forth. The hot water penetrated her thick hair to her scalp and she closed her eyes as it splashed onto her face.

"Oh God, you're gorgeous, sweetheart. Ahh, all I wanna do is wash your hair," Steve said with determination.

His hands pushed around at her hair to make sure it was all wet, then he pulled her against him again. She smiled and kept her eyes closed so shampoo wouldn't get in them. She didn't complain when Steve pulled her hair a time or two as he worked the shampoo in.

"It must hurt a little when I pull. I'm sorry. I've never touched anything as soft as you," Steve murmured.

Thick suds ran down her back and along the cleft of her bottom. It felt almost like a touch, and with her eyes closed, she could imagine Steve's fingers grazing the inside curves of her bottom, his lips and teeth at her neck. She moaned quietly and arched against him, her head back in offering.

"Baby, you're killin me," Steve grumbled.

She fought the urge to writhe against him, seeking more touch than his hands in her hair. A whine escaped her, though she tried not to. She wanted to look at him. To snare him in her gaze and urge him to do more than he was doing. Her necklace itched at her throat. She wanted it off.


She opened her eyes a crack to frown at him. Steve rolled his eyes in Bucky's direction and made a
face. Shampoo seeped into the corners of her eyes and she hissed at the sting and stood up straight. She turned to put her face fully in the shower spray and rubbed at her eyes.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," Steve said.

She rubbed her eyes vigorously with her fingers, then moved on to working the shampoo out of her hair. Water was sheeting over her nose and mouth, so she didn't reply to him. Every day she had more hair, and it took longer than it had the last time she'd washed it. When it was squeaky clean, she turned and sputtered the water out of her face. She blinked drippy eyelashes at Steve.

He stared at her hotly, his mouth parted to allow for his breathing. She recognized the tension in his muscles that hadn't been there before, and his penis was fully hard. After seeing him work today, her mind was getting mixed messages about the sight of him, but he smiled a little and quirked his eyebrows. It seemed that every night lately they found themselves at this decision point. She smiled back and enjoyed what watching her wiggling backside had done to him.

"You like my butt," she said.

He made the cutest squinty-eyes, pursed his lips and nodded his head. She giggled at his silly deflection of the intensity of his arousal. It was clear that he more than merely liked her bare, sudsy bottom, and he was restraining himself mightily. His full, wide smile deserved a reward, after the day they'd had.

And she was curious.

Steve's smile faded when she put her hands on his spread knees and lowered herself to the rough tiles of the shower floor.

"Eya," he whispered at her sharply.

"If you don't want it, then stop me. I know you can," she whispered back.

He gave her a short, grunty breath and banged his head back against the marble wall. Estrella smiled.

She briefly noted that the wounds on his thighs were almost done bleeding. The shower spray hit him across his ribs and ran down his body. She was fascinated with how the water parted around the base of his erection, then curved under to drip from his scrotum, then on down his thighs. She'd never had such an up-close, unobstructed, and well-lit look at him.

She knew he was thick, but now she saw that he was slightly thicker in the middle and closer to his tip. It made him look heavy and somehow vulgar, more than merely functional. As if he was designed for sex. For pleasure. She sighed in soft longing and moved on to other details.

The small slit in his tip teased her from just inside the protection of his foreskin. His skin crept back to show her more as she watched. She lifted a hand to touch him, to explore, but looked up to Steve's eyes first. The look of plain want on his face made clear to her that he desired her touch.

Her fingers touched his warm, soft foreskin, and his penis jerked upward from her hand. She snatched her hand away and Steve laughed.

"Don't you laugh at me! You didn't have to do that," she fussed.

"I didn't do it on purpose. It's involuntary. Here. I'll make him behave for you," Steve said, still chuckling.
He grasped himself at the base and held on. Estrella liked the strongly male look of him like this, but she didn't trust him not to prank her again, from the gleam in his eyes. It was good to see him so playful, but she didn't like being teased just now.

"I promise. Go ahead. Do whatever you like," he said.

Estrella reached again. He didn't look quite the same. He was harder now, and redder. His skin was pulled back more. Her fingertips felt of the extra skin, and with her touch, it slipped back behind his ridge. She rubbed it lightly, wondering at how it moved over the underlying hardness of him. Her fingers grazed his exposed tip, and Steve's hips twitched. It looked like he would have jerked from her touch again, but his fist held still.

"Sensitive," he explained.

"Okay?" she asked on a whisper.

Steve nodded. His brow was slightly pinched the way it did when he was serious about something. She was awed that her light touch so completely had his attention. Again, she glided her fingers, but this time over and around the head of him. Her thumb grazed the underside, and she liked the texture there, so she lingered where the softer, crinkly skin met hard, shiny flesh.

"Nnngh," Steve said.

He'd given up looking at her and had his head back against the wall again, his eyes squeezed shut. She had a thought, and simply had to try it.

Her tongue needed to feel what that spot on him felt like. Tasted like. Her mouth naturally closed around him, for her tongue tip to explore the fascinating area that made him react so prettily. He didn't make any more sounds, but his mouth and throat were open to breathe.

She knew from harsh experience and bloody lips that she was supposed to suck and bob her head, but she didn't want to. She held him gently, softly in her mouth and explored. Much like slipping their bodies together with soap, she wanted to move a little to get a better feel for him, so she moved her lips and tongue, massaging and feeling the different textures of him.

The taste of his fluid spread across her tongue. She liked it, so she licked at him, wanting more. He was too big to bob her head on, anyway. Her mouth was full just with the head of him. So she sucked and licked.

Steve was lost. It would take an imminent threat to tear him out of the wondrous sensation of her heat and her slick softness. The fact that she wasn't doing it the standard way forced him to be still and feel every detail of sensation. Her lips felt glossy smooth, and her tongue like oiled velvet. She kept rubbing underneath, at his sweet spot, like she couldn't get enough of it. Then her tongue would flicker up against his slit. She hummed in appreciation of what she found there and heat pooled in his groin.

Estrella opened drugged eyes and looked up his body at him. He nudged into her subtly now, and she adored the way his hips and abs worked, so fine and restrained not to do too much. It thrilled her that he was too deep in the feel of it to look at her. Every time her tongue passed over the little crinkly arrow spot where everything came together, his brow pinched, then released. As he grew more swollen and hard in her mouth, each of his breaths tightened into a low vocalization.

"aaa…aaa" became "yaa" and then it grew into her name.

"Eyaa!" he warned her, and his eyes opened to burn down at her.
She squinted at him in denial when he attempted to pull back from her, but there was nowhere to go. His rump was already against the wall. She doubled her efforts and sucked at him in a frenzy of want. She wanted to feel him, taste him. Needed to.

He pulsed harder, and then she had all of him that she could want. He was stuck on a guttural repetition of "aaa", and she hummed her pleasure at the taste and force of him. She made sounds of encouragement in her throat.

As soon as he shuddered in sensitivity and his fist slipped forward to protect himself, she was desperate with need. She jumped up to him and he caught her. Barely was she able to honor his wishes of not consummating their relationship fully. His hands on her hips guided her, and she rubbed herself hard and fast against his thigh. He wasn't deep inside where she wanted, but he felt good, and hard, and the texture of the fine hairs on his skin drove her over the edge.

Steve reveled in her sweet little growls and shrieks. She sounded demanding and ecstatic and he wanted every pleasure for her that she gave to him. Her slippery heat on his skin felt full and lush and he barely had time to wonder how it felt from her perspective. Then he belatedly realized they were being too loud for a hotel room. He muffled her fierce, feminine sounds against his neck. Her hips shuddered and ground against him, and her teeth bit down with her last growl.

"Uhhh," he groaned.

He held her in his arms and locked his body still. He was full hard, and the temptation was becoming too great. So great that it scared him sober.

"Eya. Sweetheart. We gotta- mmm. You need a little more, baby?" he asked.

She rubbed slowly against him, her mouth still at the side of his neck. He didn't think he'd like the feel of her teeth on him so much, but he did. The feel of her hips moving in his hands was making him crazy.

"Estrella. Please. No more," he asked her.

She made a pouty sound and slowly lowered her toe to the floor.

Steve eased her away from him, then began to vigorously lather himself with soap. He had to get clean and get out. He couldn't even look at her.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Poor baby. You need to go again, don't you? That was just enough to-" she stopped talking because he'd pressed her face against the wall.

Away from him. No more crooning, heated female voice. Not if he was gonna make it out of here. He gave her a stern look until her eyes shifted away and down, and then he got back to lathering and rinsing. Soon as he was done, he got out of the shower and left her to it. A rough pass with the towel, and then he wrapped it around his hips. A brief glance back showed him that she was fine. She was doing something with her hair under the shower. He turned his head, left the bathroom, and shut the door behind him.

Buck's eyes gleamed at him from the bed. He took in the hard, grumpy set to Steve's jaw and the fact that he was moving tight and aggressive, unsatisfied.
"You're fucking crazy," he hissed.

"You bet I am," Steve agreed.

He'd abandoned the clothes he intended to wear in the bathroom in his haste to get away, so he grabbed fresh things from his suitcase. He'd dressed in front of Buck so many times that it didn't even matter. He sat in the stiff hotel chair and tugged his boots on over his socks.

"Are you dressing up like a cowboy? Holy… You didn't have that bite on your neck when you went in there," Buck said.

Steve just looked at him, then got up to run his comb through his hair. He slicked it down into his usual do, then he dropped the comb and fisted his hands in his hair. It was a farce to try to make himself up as the Captain now. Estrella's teeth were nothing on Creed's, but the marks were fresh, and the collar of the shirt didn't hide them as he'd hoped.

"Easy, there. Stop your rush and tell me you're not bleeding anymore," Bucky said.

Steve turned and showed him his front, where the pale, threadbare jeans snugged over his thighs. He looked down to see no blood seeping through the denim. He reached into his suitcase, then pushed his leather belt around through his belt loops. He dared Bucky to comment on anything else.

"Aren't you tired?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, but I gotta make sure you kids don't abuse each other too much. What the fuck was that in there? It sounded like you were strangling cats and enjoying the hell out of it," Buck said.

"Look, Buck. This is us. Get over it and shut up, or leave," Steve told him.

Bucky looked at him for a moment, and when he saw that he was serious, he rolled over onto his belly and pulled a pillow over his head.

"Right. Go get us some food, will ya? M'fukin starved," Buck complained, and then his head was hidden.

It looked kind of strange, his sinister metal arm clasping the pillow to his head like he'd always done when he didn't want to wake up as a kid. Steve had a visual memory of what his flesh arm looked like. It kicked him in the gut, after a long day of figurative blows to the gut.

Estrella walked out of the bathroom barefoot and rubbing her hair with a towel. She looked to Steve sheepishly, and when she saw that he wasn't angry, she looked to Bucky.

"Is he asleep?" she whispered.

The rosy color on her cheeks told him that she finally realized how loud they'd been in the shower.

"Sure," Steve said.

"You suck at lying," Estrella accused him.

Bucky snorted from under the pillow.

"Yeah, well, you … suck," Steve countered lamely.

"ooooo…naw," Buck mumbled, and they could see his head shaking in denial.
"I what?" Estrella asked with venom in her eyes.

"Um. You uh, you do that really well, baby. And... you're never gonna do it again, are you?" Steve asked miserably.

"Stop talking. Just stop talking," Bucky said in disgust.

He twisted aside and threw his spare pillow at Steve. Hard.

Steve didn't bother to dodge it. He let it hit him full in the face.

"It's your fault! I've never had trouble talking to her, and now you come along, and I'm tripping over my tongue all over again. It was you all along, I bet," Steve accused, but he got up from where he'd perched his rump against the dresser.

He pointedly took the thrown pillow from the floor and set it on the bed. Then he turned to comb his hair again.

"Doll, you gotta forgive him. He's a high-functioning idiot," Bucky said.

"He's not. You go to sleep," she told him.

"Yes, Ma'am," Buck said.

He tugged his remaining pillow over his head again.

Estrella got her hairbrush from her bag and ran it through her slightly damp hair. Next she put some stuff from a little bottle into her palm, rubbed her hands together, then flipped her head so that her hair hung down, and rubbed her hands all through her hair. Steve stared, fascinated. She was really pretty in her tight jeans and the fluffy, feminine top she was wearing. Her eyes stared at him through the filter of her dark hair while she worked the stuff in with her hands, whatever it was.

She stood up and tossed her hair back and Steve swallowed through a tight throat. So pretty. His rump rested against the dresser again to wait for her. She put on lip gloss, then socks and her new boots.

"Are you going to stay over there, or are we going to eat?" she asked.

"Okay," he said.

He felt for his wallet, then they walked to the door. With a tug, he pulled his shield free and tossed it onto the empty bed.

"Do people know that they're letting a twelve-year old use that?" she asked him slyly.

Steve sighed.

"I'm hardly ever a twelve-year old," he said.

Estrella put a hand to his chest and pushed him against the wall in the hallway by the door. He automatically spread his feet to even their height some. She stepped close and his hands found their natural resting spots on her hips.

"I love you when you're a twelve-year old. I love you when you're my friend. I love you when you're my hero, and I love you in the shower," she whispered to him. She tipped onto her toes to kiss his neck softly.
"I'm sorry that I bit you," she apologized.

"Don't be. Loved every minute of it," he smiled.

She laughed and tried to tug his collar up.

"Should you untuck your shirt?" she whispered.

"It's New Orleans. Nobody cares that he's hard, and nobody cares that a vampire's been at his neck. Go get some damn food and let me sleep," Buck complained at them, "And turn off the lights."

"Sorry," Steve said.

The hotel restaurant was as far as they went, because the smell from the second floor lobby turned Steve's feet. They sat at a proper linen covered table and used heavy silverware. There were water goblets along with the wine. The rolls were delicately crunchy-flaky on the outside and heavenly soft on the inside.

"Are these fried?" Estrella wondered.

She challenged Steve for the last one with her eyes, but then let him have it.

"I think so. We gotta bring some for Buck," he said.

Steve could read French, but he still didn't recognize half of what was on the menu. He felt good ordering what he recognized as salads, and then it went sideways from there. The waiter made suggestions in a thick, yet refined southern accent that neither of them had heard before, and they both agreed to whatever he said.

"What did we order?" Estrella asked as the man walked away.

"I don't know," Steve said.

Ever since getting out of the shower, he felt like he was perpetually climbing the upside of a steep roller-coaster. His senses were softly buzzing and everything felt heightened. He looked around the quiet, romantically lit restaurant and saw that he and Estrella were underdressed compared to the other patrons, but he didn't care much. His eyes snagged on hers, and she looked down in a show of shyness. He recognized that she was merely keeping their eye contact short, and resorting to habitual mannerisms. It contrasted strongly with how she'd been earlier in the day.

"You're amazing," he told her.

She leaned forward to share private words with him and he met her aside from the flickering candle on their table.

"Most girls can give a blow job, and I know I'm not that good at it," she whispered at his ear.

Steve smiled and sat back in his chair.

"That's not what I was talking about. Though that was amazing, too. What I meant is what you did today. In Texas. You're brave, Eya. I should put you over my knee for daring it, and I should tear strips off of Buck for letting you, but it was impressive," he said.

"I'm not brave. I was angry. He was hurting you and I wanted it to stop. And if you put me over your knee, I'll shake my booty at you," she told him.
Steve smiled and sipped his wine.

"Ah. You'd have me beat," he admitted.

Their salads came. The greens were unusually dark, and the other vegetables were deeply colored. The smell of the house dressing made his mouth water, and the thin sprinkling of cheese was aged and sharp.

"Oh! These are home-grown tomatoes. And the cucumber," Estrella closed her eyes and chewed for a moment.

The salad was pretty tasty, but he'd never seen a person enjoy salad like Estrella did. He was afraid she was going to start making sounds like in the shower again. He was all but forgotten about, except as a partner in gustatory enjoyment. She said some words which he suspected meant plants or vegetables or herbs or something, but he thought she was more talking to herself than to him.

He pushed her wine toward her when their plates were empty, but she held up a hand in denial. Steve smiled fondly, though she wasn't looking at him. Since she'd been slim, he'd enjoyed seeing her eat, but tonight was something else. The meal came, and their waiter lingered long enough to check that they enjoyed their first bites. When the man saw their looks of amazement he went away pleased.

Steve wasn't sure if he was having fish or alligator, or something else entirely. Whatever it was was a pale, firm meat that blended perfectly with the spices in the sauce. It was served over fluffy rice and he found that the fried shrimp at one side of his plate made perfect little tools to get his food onto his fork without losing anything.

Estrella had a kind of soup, and he didn't ask what was in it, because he didn't think she knew, either. It must have been good. When the waiter came back around to them, Estrella asked what was in the soup. She was informed graciously that it was not soup.

Duck and andouille sausage were two things he'd heard of before, but the rest was incomprehensible. Their wine was refilled, and the man left them again.

Someone started playing violin and saxophone in the next room, and the odd, mellow mix of sounds went well with the food. Steve got the waiter's attention with a mere look, and he ordered an identical meal as his for Buck.

Dessert was suggested and they couldn't say no. Bread pudding didn't sound appealing, but when it came, it was as good as stolen pie. It was soft and warm and custardy on the inside, but with crisply baked sugar-caramelized bits around the outside. And rum over the top. Steve ate slowly because he didn't want it to be over.

When they thought it was over, they were ushered out into the evening on the balcony. Estrella sipped a small cup of rich coffee while Steve admired his cut crystal tumbler of Irish whiskey.

"I don't want to go home," Estrella said into the quiet night.

She patted a hand at her full belly. Steve leaned over and watched a horse pull an open carriage along the street below them. Its hooves made a lazy clomp-clomp sound against the clay brick street. The driver tickled his whip on the horse's back and garbled something affectionate to the animal. It sped up fractionally. The couple riding in the carriage snuggled together in one corner of the seat.

"Everything here seems half asleep," he commented.
"Tony would hate it," Estrella said.

"Feels like downtime to me," he shrugged.

A songbird went twittering by the wrought iron balcony railing, which seemed odd for the time of night. They heard the soft padding of feet overhead, and a cat's tail swayed into view once, then moved along. The strange sight distracted Steve for only a moment.

"Eya, we can't. I can't. Not another night like this. In the shower. In the water. Wherever," Steve said.

He hoped he was making sense.

Her eyes locked with his, and maybe it was because of the dark or because she was too confused to send a specific feeling, but he didn't get caught up in her gaze.

"Is this because I wanted to go to church, and now you're trying to keep me clean?" she wondered.

"No. Not at all. Maybe that's another good reason and one I should have thought of, but it's not my reason. Sweetheart, if we're together like that again, I don't know if I can stop. I didn't like putting you against the wall like that, but I had to," he told her quietly.

"I don't want you to stop," she said.

"I wonder about that, Estrella, but does what I want matter in this?" he asked, low and intense.

She bit her lip and looked away. Was she forcing him? Was what she was becoming overpowering them both and pushing her to where she wouldn't have wanted to go? Was it happening already? Tonight in the shower she'd kept her necklace on, and she'd been careful with her eyes, except at the last moment. Last night at the beach, and again in the shower before that-

"Water," she said.

"You're right," he immediately agreed.

"Do you think if we stay away from each other and water, it won't be so hard to resist?" she asked.

"I don't know if it's worth the risk of testing that idea," Steve said.

He thought for a moment more, and finished his whiskey.

"Bucky is annoying. You don't like him," he pointed out.

"I don't want to do anything in front of him!" she denied.

"Alright," Steve easily agreed.

Estrella sighed heavily. She was beginning to hate winning arguments with Steve. Because when she thought she'd won, he sat back and said something agreeable. Then she realized that she hadn't won at all.

"You're not going to let me get close to you around water unless Bucky's there, are you?"

"It's your choice, Eya. I've made mine, and I'd like you to respect it. I can resist your voice. I can resist your eyes. What I'm afraid I can't resist anymore is wanting to be with you. I want to do this right, because you're worth it. Help me," he said.
"Ooooo! Is this one of your motivational speeches? Sam warned me about them," she seethed at him.

"Maybe. Help me, Eya," he repeated.

"Okaaaaay," she drawled reluctantly.

"Is that the best you can do? I ask for your help and you just cave to it?" he smirked at her.

Estrella stared at him. She was confused for sure, now.

"What are you?" she whispered at him.

"I dunno. I've heard that I'm a sly, arrogant, manipulative little shit when I'm not being an awkward loser," he said.

"Bucky," she said, recognizing the sentiments, even if Steve hadn't attributed the words to him.

"Yeah. Let's go feed him. I think he turns into an assassin after midnight if he's not fed enough, and it's almost that time," Steve said.

Their waiter discreetly took care of payment, then summoned a footman to carry Buck's food up to their room with them. Steve tipped the man, then he opened their hotel room. He put a hand out to stop Estrella from entering.

"Buck, it's us. You awake?" Steve asked as he walked cautiously into the dark room.

"I am now. Smells good. Bring it here," Buck said gruffly.

The bedside lamp clicked on. Buck got up and went to the table. Estrella shut and locked their door. It took less than four minutes for the man to devour the excellent meal they'd brought him while Steve watched the weather channel on low volume.

"How can you do that? That's the best food I've had in forever and you're wasting it. Do you even taste it when you eat that fast?" Estrella asked him.

Buck's eyes shifted to her, and she suppressed a shudder at how he looked before he put on a friendly face. Steve might have been joking about the assassin after midnight thing, but there was something chilling about him when he wasn't trying to be social.

"Haven't eaten in forty-eight hours nor slept in seventy-five, girlie, and I've been hauling ass all over the western half of the nation. Try that and see how you feel," Buck said after he swallowed the last huge forkful of bread pudding.

He got up, grabbed Steve's shield from the bed and flung it at the door. Estrella jolted at the hard hit and the hum of vibranium. The hotel room door was secure again, if not quite as perfectly as Steve had done it.

Buck collapsed back onto his bed and pulled the pillow over his head again. Steve muted the television but left it glowing. Estrella went to the bathroom to get ready for bed and to brush her teeth. Steve did so too, and then she got under the covers of their bed with him.

"Aren't you going to stay up?" she whispered.

"Yeah. But you sleep. I had plenty before," Steve said.
"What are you staying up for? Didn't you kill them all? You and Bucky?" she wondered.

"We did. Go to sleep," Steve said.

He turned on his side and curled around her. His arm pulled her back against him and she felt sheltered. She got the feeling that what he was guarding her against wasn't necessarily out there, but maybe in the room with them.

"Rest. He'll be better tomorrow," Steve assured her.

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Chapter 46

Author's Note: I know it's been a long, long time and I'm sorry. My mom died in August and it's taken me a while to get my head and heart right from that and to even feel like writing. This chapter was tricksy all on its own, as its a transition from one part of the story to another, and it had to cover a lot of plot points that matter for the coming chapters. Sorry if it's a bit rambling. Thank you for all your patience. It's been so long that I feel rusty, like I've forgotten how to write. Oh, I found a girl/woman/lady online that I think looks similar to Estrella, though some of you may have different ideas. If you're interested, look up images of Carol Seleme. There are ones of her posing on a lifeguard shack, with a blue car, in a kitchen and with an art easel. Sort of NSFW. It's not perfect or exact, but will give you a general idea of what Steve's dealing with. For those of you who wanted more Bucky, here you go...

As soon as Buck was aware enough to know that things weren't normal, he forced his mind to full alertness. He didn't move, open his eyes, or change his breathing. A momentary confusion of times and places blurred in his head, then cleared.

Hotel room. New Orleans. With Steve and the girl. Safe, for the moment. The job was done. Peace. Luxury. Buck took a full minute to appreciate lying warm between the soft, clean sheets in a comfortable bed. Light was trying to get through his eyelids, so he'd slept past sunrise. Steve's breathing was slow and regular in the quiet of the room, as was the girl's.

Buck turned his head and opened his eyes. The lamp on the nightstand was partly in the way, but he could see in the filtered morning light that the girl was lying atop Steve like a blanket. He knew Steve slept lightly, so he moved real quiet to sit up a little and get his phone.

The sight of them together was picture-worthy. They'd kicked the covers down sometime in the night, and Steve had his shirt off, tossed to the floor. He had one arm folded back under his pillow behind his head. His other arm was on the girl, draped across the small of her back so that his fingers hung loose by her hip. Her thigh had slid off of him. Her knee and shin rested on the crumpled blankets. Buck appreciated the fine curves of her ass and leg, and noted the edge of plain white cotton panties that showed past the hem of her sleep shirt. He was surprised Natalia had let her go anywhere with such plain undergarments.

Estrella's face was smooshed sideways on Steve's chest, her pretty lips slightly parted in sleep. Messy dark hair concealed most of her face except her mouth, her chin and the tip of her nose. Her arm was bent and tucked beside her atop Steve's ribs and chest. Her hand splayed across his pectoral muscle, and her fingertips touched the shadow of hair under Steve's arm. Buck couldn't remember when, if ever, he'd seen such relaxed happiness on his friend's face.

He framed up the image on his phone and touched the screen to take the picture. The camera didn't make any sound and the flash was turned off, but Steve's eyes opened anyway. He looked sharply at Buck for taking a pic of them. Buck gave him a cocky eyebrow and a challenging grin.

He expected Steve to make that constipated face at him, but he didn't. Instead, he got a smile that told him Steve was really happy to have him around. He knew he'd get yelled at later, but for now, Steve was all sweetness and bliss.

"You got your hands full," Buck murmured, hopefully quiet enough to not wake the girl.
"Looks like I do, huh?" Steve agreed, barely above a whisper.

Steve shifted his head slightly to look at his girl, and that adoring, erotically raw expression changed him yet again. Buck fiddled with his phone and kept his eyes fixed on the picture he'd taken. While Steve's arm came down for him to rub the girl's hair away from her face, Buck sent the picture to Natalia. He needed something to do, because as close as he felt to his friend, there was something else going on with him and the girl.

It was easy to remember Steve's insistence last night that he either accept them as they were and shut up about it, or leave. Old habits made it difficult to resist teasing Steve simply because he was so easy to get an amusing reaction out of. Steve was different now. He wasn't going to accept the teasing peacefully anymore, probably more for the girl's sake than his own.

Estrella began to move sleepily, and Buck couldn't take any more. The two of them were like watching soft porn. It got him in the heart rather than in the groin. He was happy for Steve, but it made him antsy to be there when they got all touchy-feely and romantic.

The part of his mind that was always cold and analytical raged at the way Steve made himself vulnerable while he was with the girl. Anyone with his speed and skills could do a lot of damage to them, and Steve trusted too much. A brief flash in his direction from Steve's eyes, and he knew his friend wasn't unaware of the danger. That soothed him, some. It settled his place with them in his mind. His purpose here was to allow Steve the time to be vulnerable. It was his job to cover the weak spots, not to resent that Steve was allowing weakness. The fact that Steve obviously trusted him felt like heavy responsibility. He had to do better to keep the Soldier locked away in his mind, except when it was needed. Something in Steve's distracted stare acknowledged Buck's struggle. How could he know?

It didn't take them long to get going for the day. The girl was fast and low maintenance, and Steve was just as quick. Buck dug through his bag until he found the cleanest of his dirty clothes. He didn't usually mind wearing stale clothes, but today was an unusual day. This felt sort of like a job, but not the kind he was used to.

Steve and Estrella were freshly groomed and in nicely laundered clothes that made them look like exactly what they were, which was a young couple on holiday. Buck could smell shampoo and toothpaste and deodorant on them, along with whatever fragrance their laundry detergent had. He only smelled of bland hotel soap and days of running and fighting. The sweat, grit, and grease paint in his clothes were a constant reminder of what he'd been doing just yesterday and for several days before. Steve and the girl were happy and bright, eager to get on with their lives. Buck wasn't sure he had anything resembling a life to get on with, but this might be a start.

Bucky shouldered his bag and followed them out of the hotel room. His duty was to stay alert for anything. Keeping the girl safe was a duty that he'd willingly taken on so that Steve could have a life. With that in mind, he stopped resenting that they were clean and happy and that he wasn't.

Estrella looked back at him once as they walked along the hotel hallway. She pulled her suitcase, and Steve had his. Buck knew as they got into the empty elevator that Steve would have taken both bags, but he was keeping a hand free. Steve was on alert, too, though he hid it well from the girl.

Buck marveled at the changes to her since he'd seen her last and since before that, when she'd been on the street. She looked healthy and almost physically remarkable enough to be a match for Steve. The white top she wore and the snug jeans surprised him. He didn't think she'd want to show off her curves. She met his eyes knowingly, then squinted at him.

"What?" Buck asked as they went down to street level.
"Don't look at me like that," Estrella told him.

"No need to get your bloomers in a twist. I'm not looking at you like _that_. You're changing a lot. I need to understand how things are, because I'm gonna be around for a while. What's with the squinting? You got something in your eyes?" Buck asked.

"I can't look at anybody for long without bending their will. It helps if I squint. What do you mean, you're going to be around for a while? Who invited you?" Estrella asked, then looked to Steve suspiciously.

"Come on, guys. We can finish this in the truck," Steve told them as the elevator doors opened.

They walked across the hotel lobby and Buck was irked with Steve because he didn't check the space around them except to glance left and right as he exited the elevator. After that, Steve looked ahead to the goal, which was the glass doors out onto the street. Then, some dusty memory crept to the front of Buck's mind.

Steve always looked forward, to the middle and long distance they were headed for. That was his task because his eyesight was better than anyone's. It was Buck's job to keep aware of their near surroundings. It was an old memory that crawled to the front of his mind through decades of training in working alone. He wasn't alone anymore. Steve was subtly telling him they were a team again, relying on him to remember how it used to be. Buck didn't like that he trusted him so much already. How could he know the old memories were all there? They couldn't depend on his brain to recall critical shit like this, not when things were a dark, hazy tangle in much of his mind.

Buck stood on the slate-paved sidewalk by the girl while Steve loaded their bags into the backseat of the truck. He tossed his ratty pack in before the door closed, then stepped back so she could get into the front seat. She reached to touch Steve's arm as he walked away. She let her hand fall, then looked at Bucky with a frown.

"Don't do that. I don't want you to change how you are with him on my account. If you want to touch him, then do it. He likes it when you touch him," Buck said.

"You told me weeks ago not to touch him. Now you want me to. I'll do what I want," she said.

"Good. Let's argue in the truck," Buck agreed.

Estrella got into the front seat and slid over as close to Steve as she could. He smiled at her and Buck noted the way they couldn't resist a quick kiss. Steve glanced at him once, and the warm smile was still there as he started the truck. Estrella curled her hand inside his bicep and looked at Bucky a bit defiantly. Steve glanced at him once, and the warm smile was still there as he started the truck. Estrella curled her hand inside his bicep and looked at Bucky a bit defiantly. Steve paid attention to getting them away from the curb and out into the sporadic traffic. New Orleans traffic was very different from New York. Traffic wasn't so bad, but the streets were narrow and there was less room for mistakes.

"Nobody invited me into your life, but I gotta be here. Steve, you told her that hanging around with you would be dangerous, right?" Buck asked.

"I don't think she believes me," Steve said distractedly.

Estrella looked between them and around at their unique surroundings. There were too many things to pay attention to, like the pretty black iron balconies, the hanging plants, and the street hucksters. She didn't trust Bucky not to do something annoying, like poke her or tickle her just to make her mad. He needed watching because he was in a more energetic mood today than yesterday. He made her nervous. She wanted to see the city as they drove through it, and to appreciate all the odd
things around them. Mostly, she wanted to look at Steve. She felt she wasn't seeing enough of any one thing. Finally, she gave up and looked aside at Bucky. He was waiting patiently for her attention.

"If La Eme couldn't get to you, but they knew they could take Stevie to make you come after him into a trap, they would have done it. Steve's smart, fast, and hard to kill, but you're his weak spot now. His enemies can hurt him through you. When they learn that you exist, they'll go for you to get at him. I'm here to stop them from doing that. I told him I'd keep you covered so he could be with you. That's what I've been doing. You should get used to me being around," Buck told her.

Estrella looked to Steve, but he purposely ignored the both of them and paid attention to his driving. There were a lot of pedestrians, and the people on bicycles didn't obey the traffic laws at all. On top of that, she could see some strong emotion trying to get past the way Steve clenched his jaw. The muscles of his arm were tense under her hand. She slipped her fingers under the edge of his shirt sleeve and rubbed his skin in an attempt to soothe him.

Bucky was quiet beside her, but his particular stillness caught her attention. He looked quickly to her, but he'd been watching Steve. His pleased, subtly vulnerable expression was entirely different from the cold, frightening look he’d had when he first got in the truck with them yesterday.

"You love him," Estrella said.

Buck made a face and cocked his head at a jaunty angle, but he smiled a little.

"What do you think? I've known him longer than anyone, back to when he was a hopeless little squirt with more moxie than meat on his bones," he said.

"So you can't help it," she concluded.

"Eh, shaddup," Buck mumbled, but his mouth wouldn't stay straight.

Sometimes love was stronger than like or dislike. When Bucky was being a scary asshole, she couldn't stop herself from fearing him. Fear made her cranky and shrewish, and she was sorry for how she treated Bucky. He wasn't all bad, but her fear made it hard to notice his good qualities.

Half the time, he was more like the rascally flip side to Steve rather than a murderous creep. Whichever part of his personality was in effect, he was loyal to Steve. His devotion was obvious, ironically, in the way he tried to deny and downplay how much his friend meant to him. Steve trusted him. That was enough for her to at least try to trust, until Bucky gave her reason not to.

She let go of Steve with her right hand and took Bucky's left hand, where it rested on his leg. His arm was heavy, and the way his eyes widened at her made her afraid he was going to do something, but he decided to go along with what she wanted.

The metal was shaped smooth and shiny into a perfect human hand. It flexed and bent just like flesh and bone, but it was too heavy. Too cool. Estrella firmed her courage and slipped her fingers through his. He could probably crush her bones. She had to trust that he wouldn't hurt her because that would be against his intention to keep her safe for Steve.

She lifted his hand to her cheek and pressed the back of it to her face. He'd been frozen, too, Steve said. He still felt too cold. She held his hand there until some of her warmth spread into the metal.

"I'm sorry I'm mean to you. You scare me," she whispered.

"Don't worry about it. You ain't gotta be sweet to me, anyway," Buck said.
She let him have his hand back. There was an awkward moment while she turned to press her face against Steve's arm. Steve grinned at Buck and at the flummoxed way he stared at Estrella. Maybe her voice didn't do anything to him, and it looked like her eyes didn't do much to him either, but her touch and her sweetness was hard to ignore.

Buck flexed his left hand, then looked out the window.

"Why are we sitting in a parking lot?" he asked.

"Because it would have been rude to interrupt, and she had you so confused that you didn't notice we'd parked. I'm not ready to get out yet, anyway," Steve said.

He unclipped Estrella's seatbelt and put a hand behind her hip. She eagerly went onto his lap and straddled him. Steve's hands threaded into her hair to hold her head, and they kissed as if they hadn't seen each other all morning. Buck watched them for a moment, then turned his attention to the half empty parking lot outside the truck's window. There were blocks of centuries-old three-stories around them with more modern buildings in the background. The people on the seat with him carried on until he looked at them impatiently.

It wasn't like watching Steve with paid girls. The way his hands held Estrella, the way his body moved in sync with hers, the way his brow pinched over his closed eyes showed that it was all just as much internal as it was physical for him. They were thinking and feeling as much as they were touching. Steve cracked an eye at him and got the hint that maybe it was time to quit making time in a public parking spot in broad daylight.

"Are you two done circling and taking jabs at each other now?" Steve asked when he could pull his lips away from Estrella's.

She nodded and looked down and aside. From this close, her eyes would keep them kissing all day, and she'd already heard Steve's stomach growling.

"Yeah, I think I've figured out who's boss," Buck said.

They got out of the truck and stepped down onto the asphalt of a tourist parking lot near the river. They couldn't see the river because of a tall, thick wall. They followed Steve over to a kiosk where he used his card to pay for a few hours of parking.

"Was there any doubt who the boss is? If I ever let you lead, we'd all stupid ourselves to death," Steve snarked as he put his wallet back in his pocket.

Bucky smiled and shook his head. Estrella looked back at him as he followed her and Steve along. Why was he smiling? It made her back feel twitchy to have him there, only a few steps behind.

He said something quietly about Steve being under new management, but she was too interested in their surroundings to pay attention. To their left was a park square with a statue of a man on a horse, and a big cathedral behind that. There was a black iron fence around the park, and street artists had their work displayed on the fence for sale.

She looked to Steve, but he wasn't interested in the art. Ahead was a café and the smell of coffee was inviting. It was a large open air café with a green and white striped awning. There were plenty of tables available on a Monday in November.

Coffee came fast, and they each had plates of square fried donuts with powdered sugar on top. She ate hers carefully to avoid sprinkling her clothes with sugar. Steve and Bucky weren't so careful. Steve coughed and choked from inhaling powdered sugar. She would have been concerned, but the
crinkles at the corners of his eyes showed her that he was laughing at himself even as he coughed up sugar.

Bucky tossed down a twenty dollar bill, and they got on the sidewalk again.

"Where are we going? Have you been here before?" she asked Steve.

"I had plenty of time while you were sleeping to study the layout of the city and I checked the reviews. There's a lot of good stuff we'll miss because I want to be on the road again by noon, but we can do a few things. Come on," he told her.

Steve guided them between buildings and past bronze sculptures and fountains to a long open air market. There was a roof over head like the coffee shop, but street traffic crawled by just beyond the vendor's tables. She could see tables of mysterious market goods ahead, but there was food to be had nearby.

Bucky wanted to stop at the first food counter that smelled good, but Steve shook his head and led them on. One of the food counters had spicy scrambled eggs with crawfish etoufee. They also had fried oysters and gator kabobs, red beans and rice, and boudin balls. Estrella didn't know what much of it was, but Steve ordered some of it all.

She had a large glass of milk with her scrambled eggs and fried oysters. She watched as Steve and Bucky devoured the massive amounts of food on the table. They were non-verbal except for sounds of appreciation as they tried the exotic mix of seafood and wild game. Steve's eyes looked around occasionally, and Bucky paid a little more attention to their environment for possible threats in the moments when Steve wasn't alert to anything but his food. For once, Estrella felt that she was the one keeping watch while the boys indulged themselves.

They barely said anything after they ate, but Steve took a picture of the place with his phone, and he bumped shoulders with Bucky while he rubbed his belly in satisfaction. Buck nodded his agreement, and they walked on to see what the vendors had for sale.

Estrella forgot about Bucky and she tugged Steve along every time she found a new wonder. There was a Thai man who had lots of very pretty things for sale, but she was most fascinated by a tray of loose jade carvings. They were smaller than the palm of her hand, and they were all different intricate shapes in shades of cloudy green. A lamp shone on their lustrous polish and her fingers gently, reverently picked through them.

Steve began taking the ones she showed special interest in. She looked to him strongly, but he looked back just as determined.

"Let me. You'll regret it later if you don't have the memories," he murmured to her.

She was becoming easier with him spending money, especially when she saw how inexpensive the trinkets were. She wondered how someone around the world from them could spend so much time making these beautiful things, and yet they cost so little. Steve paid the vendor and the man wrapped the small jade carvings carefully.

Estrella was hesitant to show too much interest in things, but Steve was happy and smiling. Any time she looked at something interesting, he urged her toward it. An Indian woman sold her a carved wooden fan. There were beautiful feathered masks laid out on a table, and Steve picked up the three she was most drawn to. Steve asked the vendor to double bag the incense she found. He stood a few steps back from the table. Estrella smiled at how he tolerated her love for fragrances, even with his sensitive nose.
There were dark wood sculptures from Africa that had bits of metal and shell and animal fur. She admired a squat, round likeness of a woman and child, and Steve bought that too. They turned to look for Bucky.

He stood near them and intently alert, but a little across the aisle. Steve tugged her over, and they looked at the cheap jewelry laid out on a table. The vendor watched them with a look somewhere between hopefulness and suspicion. Buck moved to a tray of heavy, gothic looking men's trinkets. He picked up a wrist bracer that lay strangely askew on the red velvet. There were thorn-like spikes on the underside of it, and Buck put the metal bracer on his right wrist. It cinched tight with a leather thong to press the iron thorns against his skin.

Bucky paid the vendor and walked away.

"Buck, you shouldn't-" Steve began to protest.

"This is me, kid. If you want me around, you'll shut up and leave be," Buck said in an echo of Steve's words the night before.

Steve looked like he was trying to swallow something sharp. Estrella noted how natural Bucky made it look to walk around with his left hand in his pants pocket. The vendor had noticed Buck's metal hand as he put on the bracer, but he said nothing and called no attention to them. New Orleans was a city that collected strange people like bits and pieces of lint, so the vendor had likely seen odder things than a metal hand.

They were on their way out of the market when Bucky paused by a table laid out with row after row of gloves. There were long silk and satin gloves for ladies and a small selection of men's work gloves, but there was also a table laid with fine, thin men's gloves with nearly invisible stitching. Bucky held out his right hand over a pale pair to try and judge the size. The vendor abruptly took his flesh hand and pressed a cloth measuring tape across it. Buck tensed and almost jerked away, but Steve murmured something too low for Estrella to understand, and Buck seemed to relax again. The vendor selected a pair of gloves that were the same color as Bucky's skin and pushed them at him. There was obviously a language barrier, because the fellow didn't bother to speak. Buck tried on the gloves, and the man seemed to take note of his metal hand. His eyes widened, but he did not back away from the sale. The gloves were snug against Buck's skin as if they had been made for him, and there were no wrinkles when he closed his fists. If he wore a long sleeved shirt and no one looked too closely, the new gloves would make his left hand appear unremarkable. He pulled money from his pocket. The gloves were so thin that he had no trouble handling money with them on. The vendor said something that sounded polite, and gave him back some change.

On the way back to the truck, Bucky ducked into a shop off of the slate sidewalk. Steve and Estrella followed him in, but kept to themselves and let Buck wander deeper into the shop of cheap souvenir goods. He kept flexing his wrist against the thorny iron bracer, but he didn't let the discomfort distract him from his goal. The teenager behind the counter paid them no mind, and seemed more interested in braiding her long fuscia hair.

"He likes pain?" Estrella asked in a whisper.

"I don't know what he likes anymore. There's stuff in his head that I don't understand. I'm not sure he understands it any better," Steve grumbled.

She cozied up to his belly and his hands came to rest on her hips. Estrella noted how he perused the amusing slogans and images some of the souvenir T-shirts displayed. He also kept alert to the sidewalk outside the open doorway, the traffic beyond, and occasionally the cluttered aisle of the...
Bucky strode purposefully to the girl with the pink hair, and she stopped braiding it long enough to stare at him. She arched her thin-penciled purple eyebrow at Buck and blew a bubble with her gum.

Buck dropped a black and gray double-sleeved shirt on the countertop and handed the cashier a twenty. Instead of giving him a shopping bag for his purchase, she spent her time staring blatantly at Buck's backside as he walked away. Steve didn't like the lack of a knowing grin on Buck's face. Way back before, a cute dame's overt interest would have inspired something playful in him. Not now.

"You wanted to make miles," Buck reminded him.

Steve handed the small shopping bags to Estrella and led them out of the shop. Buck slung his purchased shirt over his shoulder and watched how Estrella eagerly took in the sights and smells around them as they walked. Steve crossed a street holding Estrella's free hand, and she tugged him to a stop when he wanted to move on. Bucky stepped onto the curb behind her and crowded her away from the street traffic. She shoved back at his unwelcome proximity with her shoulder, but she made more room for him on the sidewalk.

"I want to see the river. It's over there, behind the levee and the wall, isn't it?" Estrella asked.

Steve glanced at his watch, and she could see a series of thoughts weaving behind his eyes while he considered her request. Estrella studied the deep violet color of a painted night-time swamp scene that was displayed on the iron fence beside them.

"Sure. Let's go," Steve said.

He grasped her hand again, and they waited to cross the street toward the river. It took a while for the pedestrian crossing light to change, and they walked across among a sparse group of people. Once again, she was reminded of how unlike New York this was. The pedestrians around them were not business people. They didn't move with hurried purpose. Everyone's eyes were more on the sights and the architecture than on the pavement in front of them. Buck ghosted along not far from her backside and she twitched her shoulders irritably. Did he have to stay so close?

Steve led them around buildings and up a steep embankment. A green park-like space covered the downward slope of the levee, with the riverside promenade beyond the grass. There was a cable rail, and then the café au lait colored water of the Mississippi river beyond that. Estrella smiled at the sight of the wide, turbulent water. A tall white tugboat roared with power as it pushed six heavily laden barges upriver. There was a gaudy tourist paddleboat moored to their right, and industrial warehouses far to the left and lining the other side of the river.

Estrella gripped her shopping bags tighter and laughed as she ran down the grassy slope toward the water. Steve effortlessly kept up with her. She didn't care where Bucky was, as long as he wasn't tripping over her heels. She set her bags on the concrete curb where the promenade met grass and she leaned over to try to see beyond the thick timber bumper that protected the edge of the promenade from wayward river traffic.

Steve looked around them, close and into the near distance. There were a few municipal cameras mounted to the streetlamps overhead, but they looked old, probably not in use. There weren't any policemen or guards nearby. Buck cocked his head curiously. He stood patiently near Estrella's discarded bags. There wasn't anyone in sight, except for the scruffy bum who slept four benches down from them under a shade tree.
Steve grabbed Estrella around the waist and leapt them over the railing. She shrieked in surprise, but he liked the way she clung to him and smiled. He chose his footing carefully, because the rough timbers he stood on looked crumbly and splintered. Estrella danced her feet around between his when he set her down, trying to find a spot that didn't feel crunchy and uneven. The air smelled of river water and creosote timbers baking in the sun, and of the faint whiff of exhaust from the passing tugboat.

"You'll get us into trouble. We're not supposed to be beyond the rail," she said, but she looked avidly to the water rushing by not far from her shoes and just a little way down.

"You wanted to get closer," Steve pointed out.

"Maybe you shouldn't get me everything I want," Estrella argued mildly.

He loved the way her words sounded pleased but scolding at the same time. Estrella still clung to his arm, apparently feeling unsure about being so close to the river. He didn't blame her. It was like standing next to a moving freight train, or maybe a gargantuan snake crawling by. It was nothing like the little crystalline trickle of river in Texas near the old dancehall.

Steve felt to be sure of his footing again, then he squatted down, with her in front. She hunkered between his knees, and he enjoyed how the humid wind off the water blew her hair against his face. He stepped them aside a bit, and the river gurgled and rushed by a few feet below their toes.

"You want to touch it?" he asked.

He could see that she did. It didn't make sense, and she was struggling with her reasoning against all the wisdom not to. She looked like a kid standing in a candy shop window.

"It's dirty," she said.

She was right. The storm debris of a nation rushed past them. There was everything from leaves and twigs to entire logs and tree trunks rushing by on their way to the Gulf of Mexico. There were likely things in the water that they couldn't see and would rather not know about. There was no way to see beneath the surface of the muddy, churning water.

"You've got my healing. You won't catch anything," he pointed out.

"What about alligators?" she asked.

"Alligators are lazy. The water's moving too fast for them to waste energy staying right here," Steve reasoned.

"But we agreed we would avoid water," she said.

"We're not having sex," Steve told her with a twinkle in his eyes.

Estrella made a little pout at him from inches away and he momentarily lost his thoughts. Did that pout mean that she didn't want to touch the water anymore? Or did it mean that she wished they were having sex? Gosh, she was getting pretty. Her lips, her eyes, even her nose…

"Okay, but how?" she gave in.

"How?" Steve asked dumbly.

Estrella blew out a frustrated breath and looked away from him, down at the water.
"How do I touch the water without getting all the way in? It's too far down to just reach with my hand," she said.

Steve pulled his eyes away from staring at how a hint of the upper swells of her breasts showed above the neckline of her blouse. He scowled at himself and redirected his thoughts.

"Slip off your shoes and roll your pants up," he told her.

While she stood to get ready, Steve checked their surroundings again. Still, no one was around except Buck and the man sleeping on the bench. The air was comfortable and balmy for November, but the breeze coming directly off the water felt cool. Estrella stood on top of her canvas sneakers to keep her feet protected from the weathered wood.

"You ready?" he asked her.

She nodded. He thought she looked nervous, but he could see that she was eager and excited, too. Her jeans were rolled and shoved almost up to her knees. Steve momentarily got lost again in admiring how cute she was, then he moved to help her get to the water.

He took both of her wrists in his left hand and set his feet on the sturdier parts of the abused wood. Estrella squawked nervously as he lifted her with her arms above her head and let her hang out over the water. Steve trusted that Buck was keeping an eye on things, so he paid attention to the rushing water, his grip on Estrella, and to his footing and balance. She giggled and kicked her feet above the water as he lowered her. He took one last glance behind her to be sure no debris or logs were sweeping downriver toward her.

Estrella reveled in the steady, strong grip Steve had on her wrists, even though his hand hurt a little against her bones. She met his eyes and saw that he was completely sure of his ability to hold her safe above the water. Then, she wiggled with joy and kicked a spray of water as her toes touched the Mississippi.

The water was cool and determined like a live thing to go on its way, despite her intrusion. She kicked a bit more just to fight against the current, then she let her shins sink in as Steve lowered her. The force of the water seemed to want to suck her out of Steve's grip, but he held tight. She knew it couldn't be real, but she felt almost a sort of life, an energy from the moving water. Its force felt vast, and she shivered at the helpless feeling of being suspended between Steve and the river. She enjoyed the rushing sensation for a moment until her wrists started to hurt and images of river monsters made her squirm. Maybe with her luck, and all the noisy splashing she'd made, an alligator had heard her…

"Up! Steeeye!" she shrieked.

Steve smoothly pulled her up and into his arms. He held her against his chest and inspected her wrists for bruising. He couldn't help but smile at the giddy look of excitement on her face. She huffed fast breaths and watched the river, mesmerized.

Her lower legs felt cool and slick, and water dripped from her toes. The thought of gators and huge, toothy fish made her squirm against Steve. She turned wide eyes to him, then squinted. Her hair blew across her eyes anyway, so maybe that helped.

"Why are you hard?" she whispered to him.

"I don't know. I don't seem to need a reason lately," he murmured near her ear.

"Me and the water?" she wondered.

"I do," Estrella agreed.

She turned her head briefly to flick her hair out of her face. She wanted to see him and she didn't care if he got stuck, because Bucky was just over there, on watch. The sun ducked in and out behind high wispy clouds. His eyes looked stormy blue-gray. She wanted to feel the shape of his handsome, strong face in her hands, so she did. He so often closed his eyes in enjoyment when she touched him, but this time he didn't look away. She didn't bother trying to hide her eyes or her desire from him.

They kissed slow and deep. The wind off the river buffeted them, and the tugboat sounded its horn in the distance. She wanted to writhe and rub against him, as always, but she resisted the urge and held still. The solid, untiring strength of his body and the slow deliberation of his mouth heated her mind until her heart was tripping fast.

Naughty images teased her mind. Images, fantasies, of Steve holding her wrists together, but pressed down onto his bed. His hands and arms, holding her under her bottom and lifting her. That stormy, determined look on his face as they stood naked in the middle of his living room and he lowered her onto-

"Gotta move. Time's up," Buck said to them from the other side of the rail.

Estrella whined in disappointment. She squirmed against Steve again, trying to prolong the waking fantasy Bucky had interrupted. His arms tightened around her and she fought him harder for a moment, then went still. Their kiss slowed to gentle nips of teeth and a final brush of lips that tickled.

Steve reluctantly took his mouth from hers. Estrella panted, dazed. Her eyes opened slowly and Steve glanced away, at her shoes abandoned on the timbers. He let her go, but their fingers stayed laced as she bent to get her shoes. Her feet itched on the rough wood, then Steve tossed her up and to Bucky.

Buck snatched her from the air and moved her over the railing and onto her feet. Steve hopped over and looked to see a city officer on a bicycle pedaling toward them from pretty far away along the promenade. There was no real danger, but possibilities bunched together in his head.

"Go get the truck started," Buck said, low and easy.

"Yeah," Steve agreed.

He strolled away at a leisurely pace from where Buck stood with Estrella. He bent and grabbed the shopping bags, then continued off the promenade and onto the grass. She enjoyed watching him move. A little thrill made her smile while she rolled down her pants legs. He was gorgeous and impressive, and hers, and she got to kiss him. Steve turned his head aside to look back over his shoulder briefly, and she could see the curve of his cheek that meant he was smiling, too.

Soon as Steve was onto the slope of the levee a little ways and aside from where the approaching bicycle officer could see him, he upped his pace to get to the nearby parking lot. He checked for cameras and slowed his jog when he judged he was in range of the one near the trolley tracks. There were people ahead and he didn't want to draw attention by being in a hurry. The truck was warm inside from the sunshine. He started it, pulled to the exit of the parking lot and waited.

Estrella finished tying her shoes and stood straight. She felt strange and bereft without Steve beside
her. Bucky was both a comfort and a bother standing next to her hip.

"I don't like being up in the air. I'm not a sack of grain to throw around," she grumbled.

"So tell him that. What was I supposed to do? Refuse to catch you?" Bucky answered.

"Why did he have to run away?" Estrella asked before the approaching bicycle cop got too close.

"Mostly because he's worried about being recognized within a feasible range of travel from the bodies we left on the road in Texas yesterday. There's no guarantee that she'll know him on sight, but it's safer not to risk it," Buck explained.

"Then isn't he taking a risk of being recognized anywhere in the city?" she wondered.

"Have you seen anybody look at him today like they recognize him?"

"No," she admitted.

The bike cop was much closer. Buck put a hand to Estrella's chin and turned her face to his so she couldn't stare. He moved closer to peck a kiss just aside from her mouth and she barely restrained herself from pulling away. There was nothing romantic about it, and there was a feeling between them like steady expectation. Buck had a plan, and she was to play along. Somehow, she felt it without being told. This was business, and she was surprised to learn that she trusted him in this.

"Don't say anything if she stops to question us. Not one word. Let me do this," Bucky murmured close to her face, as if he was sharing cozy, romantic words.

She looked at him oddly. He wasn't cold like when he was being creepy. He wasn't smart-mouthed and smirking as he was when he joked with Steve. It was odd to see a calm maturity in him that was genuine and ordinary. She relaxed in his proximity and let him lead her into whatever he had planned.

He put his right arm around Estrella's shoulders and they started strolling casually along the promenade. They faced the oncoming officer, but Estrella copied Buck's bland, vapid smile toward the river. Her nerves twanged with the possibility of being stopped and harassed for going over the railing, but there was nothing she could do at this point except to follow Buck's lead.

The female officer slowed her bike as she neared them instead of continuing to pass them by. Buck gave her a cheerful, brief greeting in what sounded like Italian, and he made to keep walking.

"Sir. Miss. I saw you over the rail. That's a dangerous area and you're not allowed to be there. It's clearly posted," she told them in a tone that no reasonable person would dismiss or walk away from.

Bucky let go of Estrella and turned to face the officer, still playing at being a friendly, oblivious tourist. She didn't know Italian, but there was enough similarity to what little she knew of Spanish that she thought he asked the officer where the nearest restroom was and said something about his girlfriend. His words sounded fluent and smooth, and even his attitude and body language seemed at least ninety degrees away from American.

"Sir, do you speak English?" the officer said after a long-suffering sigh.

Bucky said something fast and he shook his head in the negative. He reached and pulled a passport from his back pocket, and the officer waved it away as not necessary.
"Never mind. Look, just don't go over the rail," she said loud and slow, with exaggerated hand gestures to indicate what they'd done wrong. As if they were stupid because they apparently didn't speak English.

Estrella giggled and the officer looked to her sourly. Bucky rattled off more lilting, finely cadenced words, and attempted to approach and show her something on his phone. The officer shook her head at them and set her foot to a pedal. She cycled away and didn't look back.

Bucky returned them to their strolling until there was more than enough distance to talk without being overheard. They took a right turn away from the river and approached the trolley line pedestrian crossing.

"Do you get away with everything?" she asked him.

"No. Sometimes failure is painful. That didn't happen this time. You did good. It didn't really matter if we got a citation for being over the rail, as long as I kept jabbering and waving my passport, and you kept your mouth shut. Nobody knows us. We're not in the system. I've looked. You're just old enough for nobody to have biometrics on you. Nobody who has samples of me is left alive to use them for tracking. If we stay out of their hands, nobody ever will," Buck assured her.

"Nobody but Jarvis," she said.

"I might have ID on you, but he doesn't on me, yet. He will as soon as we get back to New York, though," Buck grumbled as they approached the waiting truck.

He opened the door for her, not as a courtesy, but to hurry her inside. Steve smiled at her and waited from them to buckle up. He checked the rearview mirror, and was glad to see no officer observing them.

"Why will Jarvis get biometrics on you? I didn't think you would want him to," Estrella continued her conversation with Bucky.

Steve looked pleased, and he set his phone in the dash. He had a route planned out on the map, and he kept quiet while they talked and he drove.

"He can't help it. Jarvis is curious like a kid. He's got the sensors, so he'll use them on me soon as I take up residence in the tower. He'll get facial recognition, a retinal scan, voice, and probably a chemical signature from my breath. Even if I don't let Stark or Banner get blood or tissue from me, Jarvis will have enough to find me almost anywhere," Buck explained.

"That's not good, if Jarvis can be used against you. You didn't want to be found. Are you sure you want to give Tony the ability to track you?" Estrella worried.

"It's not too bad. There's still places I can go, things I can do to get lost," Buck said.

They fell into silence while Steve left the city streets and merged onto the interstate. Estrella looked down at the river as they crossed over it on a high steel bridge. There was more urban and industrial sprawl when they were down off the bridge, but interstate traffic was moving fast and they were quickly away.

"You said you'd stay at the tower. Where?" Estrella asked.

"I dunno," Buck said.
"You can stay with me. I've got an extra room," Steve said like it was already decided.

"Sure, punk. It'll be like old times," Buck smiled a little.

"Not really, Buck. I've got a steady job, a housekeeper and cook, and Jarvis butts in like an over-eager butler every time you say his name. Everything's new and perfect, and I don't want for anything. It's never too hot or too cold, and the only time you get a draft is if you turn on a fan. It makes me miss the old days," Steve said with a faint smile.

"Heh. Only because you like to struggle. You're bored with comfort and perfection, aren't you?" Buck taunted him.

"A little adversity never hurt anyone, Buck. It makes life more interesting," Steve denied.

"Bullshi-p," Bucky stuttered.

Estrella looked aside at him for his avoidance of profanity, but she didn't look for long. Steve's shoulder was warm and comforting against her cheek, and she was sleepy. The guys continued to bicker around her in the truck cab, but she didn't care. They sounded happy. The drive was monotonous and steady. She was lulled to sleep by the hum of the truck on the interstate and their voices.

"She's a tough little dame," Buck said quietly.

"Too tough, sometimes. She was going to let herself die. She got too close to Creed yesterday. Why'd you let her do that, Buck?"

"She's fast. I'm used to offing people, not babysitting. If you didn't mind me hurting her, I coulda done what you wanted and got her away. Didn't think you'd want me to be too rough," he said.

"It might have been worth a minor injury to keep her away from Creed. That could have ended poorly, and you know it," Steve said.

His eyes stayed on the road and the traffic ahead of them, but Bucky knew that look all the same.

"There it is. Time for my ass-chewing. How are ya gonna get it done without raising your voice, Captain? Your girl is sleeping," Buck taunted him.

Steve gripped the steering wheel until it creaked under the pressure. Buck took perverse enjoyment in seeing his jaw tense, then his mouth open to begin giving a 1940's era dressdown worthy of a disorderly band of roving randies, but then Steve shut his mouth. Buck wondered if he was really hearing his teeth chipping. Probably not. Hard as he'd been hit over the years, Steve should be gumming his food by now, but he still had all of his choppers.

Between barely parted teeth that made a sound more like a growl than words, Steve quietly ranted at him. Bucky quirked a brow at the quiet fury of his tone.

"You and Natasha took chances with Estrella's life while you ran this op without telling me. I count nineteen times in the last week and a half that she could have been targeted. Nineteen times I turned away, walked away, left her by herself because I didn't know the danger," Steve said.

He shot Buck a hard, reprimanding glace in the moment that he looked away from the road.

"We had it handled. Natalia brought me in because she knows I could do it, then Jarvis volunteered. Between us, we mopped up. I moved fast, and I know how to not get caught. A few
small-time players made it to you, but it wasn't anything you couldn't handle. You've never had leave time, pal. Never. Can you really say that you didn't enjoy the time off?" Buck challenged him.

"You took chances with her life. I should have been informed," Steve insisted.

"Alright. Yeah. But it wouldn't have been the same. You would have been 'on' all the time. Quit your bitchin'," Buck said.

"Her life. And yours. Bucky, I'm not God. I only have so much influence. I can't pull a favor heavy enough to get every level of law enforcement to look the other way if they find something you left behind. You're already wanted for what happened in D.C. and they only don't have you yet because they're still looking for The Winter Soldier and not James Barnes. When clear media images of you and me together start showing up, and then somebody sees that James Barnes has a metal arm, the clock runs out for you. They'll put it together with D.C. and with any surveillance from this op and then they'll come to the tower. I'm done letting go of people, Buck. Not if I can stop it," Steve told him.

Bucky didn't like the dead calm in his voice, or the stubborn set of his jaw.

"They didn't get eyes on me. Me and J made sure of it. So all I gotta do is keep the arm disguised."

"And when people know that you're the original Barnes? We can't pass it off as you being your own great-grandson. They can tell, nowadays. What do we say, other than the truth?" Steve demanded.

"What's wrong with the truth? Natalia had the brass to put it all out there. You think I'm no better?"

Steve's jaw clenched again, but he looked down at Estrella drooling on his sleeve while she napped. He visibly forced himself to let go of his angry tension. Bucky was beginning to be impressed by the level of control his friend was showing. It was an indicator of maturity that the ever-responsible Captain had always had, but now he was seeing it in raw Steve form, too.

When they were kids, Stevie was the king of the righteous shit-fit, and Buck hadn't known whether to laugh or cry when his weak lungs tripped his tirades into spasms of coughing and gasping. That was the reason why, when serving under Steve as the Captain during the war, almost no matter how severe the verbal ass-chewing their leader gave them for the incautious crap they'd done, Buck had been pleased nearly to tears to hear his voice ringing out loud and vigorous.

"You've got an answer for everything, don't you? What about the men you killed in the prisons? The ones who weren't going to come for Estrella any time soon? We're not vigilantes. That was pre-emptive, like the Insight carriers" Steve said.

"Get over yourself. Now you're looking for a reason to complain. Every Hydra take-down we do is pre-emptive. Can you tell me that you'd rather have waited a few years, and then put them down after they'd got your girl again? Misplaced guilt is your problem, Steve. Let it go. Admit that you enjoyed it. It felt good to break the life out of them. You can't say that shit to anyone else, but I saw you. I know you enjoyed allowing yourself to be angry about all they'd done and were gonna do," Bucky told him.

Steve took a slow, deep breath, then let it out through a tight gap between his lips. Rather than the nervous glance Buck expected, Steve merely lowered his brows and kept driving.

"I'm compromised, Buck. I let emotion motivate me. I was too close to it. I shouldn't have been part
"I goaded you into it, knew you'd enjoy it," Buck pointed out.

"No. I let myself be goaded."

"Meh, whatever. You enjoyed it," Buck didn't let Steve wiggle around that point.

Several minutes of quiet passed between them.

"Let go of the damn guilt. It doesn't matter if you liked it. It had to be done. She never reported the original abduction and gang rape. The statute of limitations is out. There's no case can be made against them, but they were actively coming to take her when you ended them. The feds know the video naming her as their target is out there, and they did nothing. It was her or them, Steve. No matter the tactics, we did the right thing. If we didn't do it, you know where she'd be right now," Buck assured him.

"I know that," Steve murmured, "but-

"So quit regretting that you enjoyed it, because I know that's what really has you bent up," Buck said.

He let Steve stew in that thought until they stopped to get a late lunch.

"Where are we?" Estrella asked.

"A little past Birmingham," Steve said.

Estrella slid down from the truck and rubbed her sleepy eyes. It was afternoon, and when she had her hair pushed back and her eyes open, the delicious smell made sense to her. They were parked in a gravel lot, surrounded by other pickup trucks. A few steps away was a wood plank building that had wisps of smoke streaming from a round metal chimney.

"Barbecue," Estrella agreed with Steve's choice for their stop.

Bucky hung back and kept his hands free. Steve got the heavy door for her and she walked into the dark interior. There was a line to place their order, thought it was well past the regular lunch hour. As the three of them moved up the line, Estrella watched the man behind the glass window manage the huge iron pits. Flames flickered and seared the meats, producing the drool-inducing smell they'd caught outside.

She didn't bother trying to get a lady sized plate. She felt nearly as hungry as the guys looked. Their mouths were too busy salivating to talk as they walked their laden trays to an empty table. Estrella made a sound of appreciation when she bit into the succulent meat on the rib she was holding with already messy fingers.

Bucky looked mildly grumpy because he could only eat with his right hand. Getting barbecue sauce and grease on his new gloves would have ruined them, and he needed the gloves. She made a snooty, teasing face at him while she tore another chunk of meat into her already full mouth. Bucky chuckled and used his gloved hand to nudge her elbow so that she smeared sauce across her cheek.

"MMmmm!" she fussed at him around a mouthful.

Steve smiled at them with his eyes, but he was too busy stuffing himself to tell them to settle down.
He took the time to pass her a paper napkin that he tore off the roll in the middle of the table just for her.

"Mmnk-yrr," she said.

"You're welcome," Steve agreed.

He took a sip of his soda and watched her scrub at the sauce on her cheek. The edge was off his hunger, so he enjoyed a moment to appreciate the scrappy, catty attitude that Estrella was sending to Buck. The gentle teasing Buck was returning to her wasn't much different from how he'd been with his little sisters when they'd been kids. He was sad that they only had about twenty-four hours until they got back to the city, but he couldn't complain. It was good to see his two most important people beginning to find a way to get along. He'd been concerned that they'd hate each other forever, but things looked promising.

He also liked how Estrella was taking her turn keeping alert. In quick glances she wouldn't notice, he paid attention to how she unobtrusively looked up and around whenever he and Buck had their heads down over their plates. She'd told him that she didn't want training, but she was learning anyway. He wondered if she even realized she was doing it. She could only be partially effective because she didn't know all the things to watch for, but he knew she'd alert him if anyone moved toward them. He kept his ball cap kind of low over his eyes and didn't spend much time with his face up where people could see and recognize him.

"Go to the bathroom if you need to. We've got a ways to go before we reach camp tonight," Steve said.

"You don't have to tell me. I was going to anyway," Estrella said.

She dropped her napkins onto her tray and took the whole mess of plates and napkins and bones with her to dispose of on the way to the bathroom. Steve, then Bucky hurried after her. Steve loved the way she twitched her ass in her snug jeans as she walked and he knew she was doing it to tease him, but the other men in the place took note of her, too. He dumped his plates and set his tray in the stack and got himself into the guest hallway to wait outside the bathroom for her.

Bucky smacked him on the back of the head.

"Cut it out," Steve complained.

"You're lame. She's a sweet little piece, but I don't think anybody's gonna run off with her in the middle of this joint," Bucky said on his way into the men's restroom.

"She's not a piece," Steve said quietly, just to him.

"Sure she is, when you stare after her like that," came Buck's equally quiet response as the bathroom door eased shut behind him.

Steve stood in the hallway scowling until Estrella and Buck came out of their restrooms at the same time. He passed Bucky his truck keys and took his turn in the bathroom.

They got back on the road, and Estrella felt too energized to sleep anymore. Bucky drove and she draped her legs over Steve's left knee as he sprawled beside her. His contented belly-rubbing and good health was a big improvement over having him bloody and torn yesterday.

Steve twitched, then reached to pull his ringing phone from his back pocket. He looked at the ID in passing and put the phone to his ear.
"Colin. How's it goin?" Steve asked in a voice somewhere between contented-casual and business.

Estrella could barely hear Colin's lazy masculine drawl from Steve's phone, but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

"I can't say much about that right now. I'm sorry. You know how it is," Steve replied to whatever Colin asked him.

Estrella bit her lip and tried not to grin at how a hint of Texas was slipping in around the edges of his words. His confusion between vacation and business was even more jumbled with an accent she'd come to associate with playfulness in him.

"It's over. Done with. You don't need to worry," Steve assured Colin.

Colin said something that made a big grin bloom across Steve's face.

"Really? I mean, is that alright with your wife?" Steve exclaimed happily.

He took the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker.

"That's right. You ain't got a wife yet, do ya? If ya did, you'd know it's alright with mine, or I wouldn't be askin'. I value my hide just like it is," Colin's voice assaulted them with its rich timbre.

She squinted evilly at the phone. Steve chuckled.

"What did he offer? You already agreed, didn't you?" Estrella seethed.

"That's it right there. See? You hafta ask your woman before you go agreein' to stuff. Hidy, Darlin'" Colin greeted.

Steve nudged her.

"Hello, Colin," Estrella said with forced politeness.

Steve frowned at her. A bit of silence passed, a touch too long for a phone conversation.

"You ain't gotta make 'er talk. I ain't as dumb as I sound. I know how things are. You bring her around when you come visit and my Prissy'll settle her right down. Don't be a stranger, ya hear?" Colin said.

"I won't. Thanks, Colin," Steve answered.

"Alright, now. Y'all take care. Call me if you need testimony about what happened Friday night," Colin offered.

"I hope I don't have to," Steve said.

"Well, do if ya do. Bye," Colin said.

Estrella made a face at the cheerful smile she could hear in the cowboy's voice.

"Bye," Steve replied with more of a hard "I" sound than his native accent allowed gracefully.

"That guy's gonna teach you to ride a bull, huh? I gotta see that. Think you can get an invite extended to me?" Bucky asked.
"I dunno, Buck. It sounds like his wife kinda runs the place," Steve said.

"Riding bulls? He's married?" Estrella asked.

"Oh yeah. I think he really loves her. Seems like he doesn't do anything without asking her first," Steve said.

He was faintly smiling at his phone.

"But he's so…" Estrella said, and made a shooing gesture with her hand.

"What's with the twang?" Bucky asked Steve.

"He gets it stuck and then it doesn't go away," Estrella explained.

Buck smiled and set the cruise control. He checked his mirrors and settled back comfortably with one hand on the steering wheel. Estrella looked at the interesting topography of forested hills and low mountain ridges around them. The cropland down in the valleys was pretty in the afternoon sun from their high vantage, but Steve was acting strange. His mental unrest distracted her from enjoying the scenery they passed through.

He was antsy. He'd smile at his phone some, then a slight frown would pinch his brow, and then he'd ease it by looking at her and rubbing his thumb on her knee. She wondered when he was going to make up his mind on what kind of mood he was in.

"I need to borrow your phone," Steve said.

She handed it to him from where she kept it in the dashboard cubby of the truck while it charged. Steve took it and thumbed through her contact list. He tapped a number, then put it to his ear.

"Hey. How's Val?" Steve asked.

"She's pissed off at me, man. What did you expect? She caught me watching out for her at the mall and how am I supposed to explain that shit? Ma keeps looking at me funny, and-"

"Relax, Jesse. It's all over. Tell them you were doing a favor for me and keep it mysterious. Girls like that shit," Steve advised.

Estrella and Bucky looked at him incredulously until Steve made a placating gesture. He was trying not to laugh as Jesse complained at him.

"Yeah, girls like that shit. But only if they're not already mad at you, and if they're also not your mom or your sister. Try again, pendejo," Jesse griped sourly.

"Then you're doing it wrong. Don't act hunted. Be the hunter," Steve advised seriously.

"Oh. Yeah. That would work," Jesse said speculatively.

Steve smiled a little. He could see Jesse figuring out the mannerism and effecting the change in attitude he would need to get his mom and his sister to stop acting weird. It was very much like the attitude that Pepper had taught him. Jesse had a natural ability with women, but he'd never thought to use it to manage the ones he lived with. Estrella was looking at him with confused horror, and Bucky looked surprised and impressed, for once.

"Listen, there's some big shit down here. Somebody put a phone vid, and they keep taking it down, but somebody keeps putting it back up, and everybody knows something happened. People don't
know if it's real or not," Jesse said hesitantly.

"What kind of phone vid?" Steve asked.

"A guy on the highway east of town. I didn't see it, and I heard it's blurry like the camera was messed up, but somebody said something about dead people. When anyone goes out there, there's nothing, but it's weird, like they pressure washed the road and shit," Jesse said.

"Nothing to see," Steve agreed.

"Fuck you, man. I know it was you-"

"Shut up. I've got you on speaker and Eya is right here," Steve reprimanded him.

"Hi, Jess," Estrella said weakly.

"She doesn't sound good. Is she alright?" Jesse asked.

"I'm fine, Jesse. We just stopped for barbecue and I'm stuffed full. I'm sleepy," Estrella explained.

"Where are you?" Jesse wondered.

"In the truck," "You don't need to know," Estrella and Steve said at the same time.

"Riiiight," Jesse agreed sarcastically.

"I need you to get serious for a minute," Steve said in a no-nonsense tone.

"I'm listening," Jesse said.

Estrella marveled how her cousin dropped his punk attitude as soon as Steve asked him to.

"You need to convince yourself that you don't know a thing. Whatever happened, I'll deal with it. Don't call me about it. Don't text me about it. I'm not going to contact you for a few weeks. If you want to talk about anything else that's not work related, you can get to me through Eya's phone. Understood?" Steve said.

"I understand. But what if Alberto asks? And why is it okay to talk about it now?"

"If Alberto asks, then you tell him that I said the both of you know nothing. He'll know what that means. I can talk to you about it now because I'm about to burn your phone. I'll send you a new one tomorrow. Get the phone away from your face and set it down somewhere. Bye, Jesse," Steve said.

"Bye? Shit! Sh-"

They heard Jesse's confused voice move away from the phone, then the connection went dead.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"It is done. The carpet may be singed in his truck, but he is unharmed. The data and call records on his cellular phone are unrecoverable, and I have removed evidence of your call from the communications system. Would you like me to send Mister DiAlba-Castillo our newest model overnight?" Jarvis offered.

"Thank you, Jarvis. No. I don't want that much of a link between us and Jesse. Send him a new phone of whatever kind he had. Did you save his data before you burned it?" Steve wondered.
"Of course I did, Captain. I am insulted you would ask," Jarvis said with a touch of humor.

"Sorry, J. I didn't mean to be rude. Load it. Send it. Debit my account," Steve instructed.

"I have a courier out to purchase an inferior cellular phone as we speak," Jarvis said.

They could all hear the disdain in his tone.

"Then don't tell Tony. If he finds out, blame it on me," Steve told him.

"You can be assured that I will," Jarvis said.

"Jarvis,"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Are you in my truck?" Steve asked.

The flat tone of his question made it clear that he would be displeased if the answer was affirmative.

"I am not. Your vehicle's memory storage devices are inadequate for even the smallest of my viable datasets. I am merely utilizing the Bluetooth feature of your phone to tap into the audio system of your vehicle," Jarvis explained.

"Stay in the phone," Steve told him.

"As you wish. I apologize," Jarvis said humbly from Steve's phone speaker.

"It's understandable, but I'm not Tony. Don't assume, next time. Ask," Steve said.

"I'm terribly sorry. I should have known," Jarvis moped.

Estrella elbowed Steve in the ribs.

He looked at her firmly. Bucky offered no sympathy for either her or Jarvis. He kept driving with a bland face.

"Now you know. No harm done, J. Don't worry about it," Steve relented with a gentler tone.

The particular almost unnoticeable white noise that Jarvis generated to indicate his presence to them faded away.

"You were rude to him," Estrella pointed out.

"So were you," he argued.

There was no need for him to elaborate on what he meant. She knew he meant Colin, not Jarvis.

"Colin deserves it," Estrella said.

"No, he doesn't," Steve denied.

"What do you want me to do, then? I don't know how else to be," Estrella admitted after a moment of soul-searching.

Steve kept his words behind his teeth. He knew this moment would come, but he hadn't imagined
how soon. He wanted to talk to Estrella, but what he wanted to say was for her alone. She probably
wouldn't want Bucky to hear things that would embarrass her.

"You may as well say it now," Estrella said with some attitude, "he's probably creepy intelligent
like you and already has it figured out."

She flipped a hand to indicate Bucky.

"Are you sure it's alright? You can have your privacy. With the work we do, we get intimate with
people when nobody means to. We're used to ignoring things we aren't meant to know," Steve told
her.

When she looked, Bucky was still driving as if he was the only person in the truck. He was going
to be living with Steve. He might be there for much of their relationship, if he was needed to keep
her safe like they said. She made a reluctant decision.

"Go ahead," she said.

She didn't like having to share embarrassing things in front of Bucky, but she was going to have to,
so she may as well get a start on it.

Steve urged her to snuggle in closer under his arm. He spoke kindly to her after she was resting
against his chest. His hand in her hair made her sigh with almost unwilling contentment.

"Being rude to Colin isn't helping anything. He knows. I think he finds you amusing. I know he
teases you some, but he's respectful. You have to get to a place in your head where you separate the
person from the attraction you feel for them. That's what works for me, anyway," Steve advised.

"You're giving a lot of advice today, pal. When did you get so wise?" Bucky teased.


Bucky made a face, then smiled. Then his face fell, then returned to neutral.

"I know, Buck. I get tired of thinking of them, and then realizing they're probably dead. Eya, Leah
Tomlin was our eighth grade homeroom teacher. Miss Tomlin, really, but I heard Buck saying
'Leah, Leah, Leah!' a time or two. She was young and pretty-"

"Yeah, well, Genevieve Wiltshire! 'Gennie, oh Gennieeee!'" Buck lisped in a weak, breathy tone,
then he choked up and gasped until his gasps turned into wheezing coughs.

"You pea-hearted fuck! Shut your hole!" Steve snapped.

Bucky went from theatrical wheezing to laughing. Steve backhanded him across the forehead.
Hard. Estrella yelped when the body she reclined against stiffened and the truck jerked in the lane.

Steve's face was flushed deep red and he was scary-mad again. She looked to see blood running
down Buck's face from his split left eyebrow. His forehead was purpling in the shape of Steve's
knuckles. Bucky continued chuckling and put out the tip of his tongue to catch the blood before it
got to his chin.

"He's driving! Leave him alone. You're both assholes!" Estrella fussed at Steve.

She reached forward and dug in the glove compartment to get some leftover napkins. Careful to
not obstruct his view of the road, she pressed a folded wad of napkins to Bucky's split brow. She
alternately frowned at both of them.

"It's not like you think, doll. He's not riled up because I'm making fun of him polishing his cue over a girl and then getting choked up over it. He's tougher than that. He thinks I'm disrespecting her, and I probably am. She died in a traffic accident. As a pedestrian. It was horrible. Sorry, Stevie," Buck apologized.

Estrella took a moment to digest all they'd said in the last few moments.

"Don't apologize to him. You're bleeding," she said, then the turned to Steve, "What's wrong with you? You don't hit your friends while they're driving! Especially when they're driving your truck with your girlfriend in it!"

Steve put his hands over his face in shame. As she watched, he made an abortive writhing motion with his body that was visually interesting but cringe inducing. He was thoroughly upset with himself.

"Aww, you made him do the squirmy," Buck said.

Steve took a deep breath and held out one hand in a silent plea for mercy and truce.

Estrella ripped away the napkins and tossed them to the floor of the truck. She settled herself squarely in the middle of the seat and crossed her arms. Bucky could bleed until his pockets filled up with it, and she wouldn't care. He shouldn't have been so cruel to Steve. And Steve deserved what he got for lashing out in anger at his friend. Who in their right mind would think it was okay to assault the person who was driving them? Steve was so strong! He could have seriously injured Bucky and killed them all. Was he crazy?! Her mind seethed.

Maybe this is what it was like living around enhanced people. Or maybe they'd been just like this as kids and it was merely worse because they were enhanced now. Or…

Estrella turned her head to look at Steve.

He still had his hands over his face. He was trying to calm himself, but she could see. The worst heat of embarrassment and anger had left him, but his skin was still slightly flushed with color. His veins were somewhat visible under his skin. His major muscle groups went through periods of almost invisible tremors, then locked up with tension.

"I'm going to touch you," she told him softly.

Steve nodded and let his hands fall from his face.

Estrella set to work smoothing her hands over the exposed skin of his arms, face, and neck. It wasn't enough. She unbuttoned his shirt and laid the halves open so she could get to his tense chest and belly.

"You should tell me when you start feeling crazy. I can do this instead of you hitting people," she scolded him softly.

"Quit it, girlie. I don't mind him hitting me any time. What he did wasn't so bad. It only seems that way to you," Bucky said gently.

"Compromised, Buck. I told ya," Steve rasped.

"You can't live if you don't have somethin to worry about, can you? You're on leave. You're
Estrella tried her best to keep her mind on easing Steve's tension rather than on how attractive his body was. He needed her love right now, not her lust.

"I'm an idiot. You're too good to me," he said as her hands smoothed up and over his face.

"I know, but you're too good to me too. You put Jesse on alert to keep Val safe, just in case?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," Steve mumbled.

"So sweet," Estrella praised him.

Her hands rubbed at his neck and he extended it by tilting his head back on the headrest for her. She squirmed sideways in her seatbelt to have better access to him. She liked how he breathed with his lips parted when she pressed and glided over his skin from shoulders to hips. After a few minutes of that, Steve started to relax some.

"I thought you and Bucky didn't masturbate together," she asked.

Bucky grunted.

"That's not the way to get him to relax," he said.

"No, 's alright, Buck," Steve said.

"We didn't," Buck said.

"I thought you were asleep," Steve accused mildly.

"I was until you started making that whistle-wheeze sound. I hated that sound. It'd wake me from a dead sleep," Bucky said.

"I didn't know. Wasn't exactly mentally sharp back then, especially while doing that," Steve said.

"I thought you were asleep, too. Never would have done it on the nights you stayed over if I'd known," Buck explained.

"My knees were hurting. You know I couldn't sleep when my knees would hurt. Wasn't tryin to spy on you," Steve explained.

"When was this?" Estrella asked.

"Probably around '32. My ma got a lot of overtime about then. It was better pay, but winter was coming on and she didn't want me to get cold at home by myself and start coughing-"

"Because when he did that, he didn't stop-"Buck interrupted.

"I'm telling this. She asked me," Steve griped.

"You're taking too long. My folks had a little more money for heat, so Stevie would stay over and sleep on the cushions we pulled off the couch. My room was closest to the heat and it had the smallest window, so-"

"So we ended up bunking in the same room for about half the nights that winter. I never knew you
heard me," Steve finished.

He looked embarrassed again, but only a fraction as much as he'd been before when he was squirming with it.

"Yeah, whatever. Like I was gonna mention it. You were a pathetic little weasel. The mortification would have killed ya," Bucky said.

Estrella frowned at him again. His bleeding had stopped, but he had a ghastly stripe of dark red down the left side of his face. Steve smiled and looked out the window at the lengthening afternoon shadows across the land they passed.

"Why does he get to insult you?" she asked.

"Because it's true and he was there to see it. I was a pathetic little weasel and nobody knew that more than me. It's a reality I lived with every day. I didn't mind so much except for the coughing. That, and I couldn't be a help to anybody," Steve made a face.

"And the wheezing," Bucky added.

"All of which was told to tell you that you're not alone in your embarrassment if Colin is hard for you to deal with. I know you've been through a lot, and it makes sense that you'd feel antagonistic to a guy you don't want to be attracted to. He's a good guy. We need to come up with a way for you to be civil to him," Steve said.

"Because you're going to be seeing more of him?" Estrella asked.

She was clearly displeased about that.

"He's gonna teach me to ride a bull," Steve said.

Estrella went stiff against her seatback and gripped Steve's knee when she saw an oncoming car drift across the centerline and into their lane. Bucky handled it calmly by laying into the horn and preparing to get over onto the shoulder. The driver at fault looked up from the phone they were playing with and jerked their car back into their lane.

"Eh, loser. Put the phone down and drive! You're gonna kill somebody," Buck grumbled ineffectively at the other driver as they passed.

Estrella snorted into abrupt laughter.

Bucky looked at her with an arched brow for an instant, then he shook his head.

"I never killed anybody accidentally," he sneered.

Estrella's laughter faded. It was a grim reminder of who she was sitting next to.

Steve's phone rang in the middle of the awkward silence.

"Bruce. Hi," he said.

He made sure the speaker was off and held his phone securely to his ear.

Estrella couldn't hear any of what Bruce said, but Steve lost some of the relaxation she'd been working to give him. He ended the call after only a short conversation.
"Is everything okay?" she asked him.

"Everything's fine. We can talk about it later. Gimme some more of that magic stuff," Steve invited her to touch him again, but she could see that something from Bruce's call was bothering him.

She set to work rubbing him and pressing little kisses to his skin on whichever spots she could reach that seemed to need kissing. Bucky once again paid strict attention to his driving. The girl almost had Steve groaning in bliss when his phone rang again.

He looked at his caller ID before she could snatch it from his hands.

"I should answer this. It's Mrs. Stiles, from church. She makes the cakes. You remember the one I gave you a bite of on the bench?"

"So answer it," Estrella sighed.

Steve had an uncomfortable sounding conversation with the nice lady while she and Bucky tried not to hear.

"I've been away on leave. Vacation… No, not the whole time. I'm really sorry about that. I hate that you made me one and I wasn't there. I can come visit you next Monday. At eight? I'll…."

Steve looked to Estrella and found his words, "I'll probably be back to mass soon. Thank you, Mrs. Stiles."

Estrella didn't know why a call from the nice church lady would make Steve tense again, but he was. She worked on him some more until he looked like he was sleeping, but she knew he wasn't.

This time, when the phone rang, Estrella was quicker to get her hand to where he'd set it on his knee.

It was a man. He had a voice like he was a large black man, but she didn't care if he was green and had leprechaun shoes. He didn't even say Steve's name. He only said 'Rogers' and started giving orders in her ear.

"Hey, hey! You stop talking. I don't know who you are and I don't care. Steve is on vacation and his phone won't stop ringing. If you need him so bad, then you track us and send the jet to get him. And if you can't do that, then you don't need him anyway. Don't call back. He'll call you later," she said, and she turned off his phone completely.

She tossed it on the floor with Bucky's bloody napkins.

Steve groaned.

"That was Nick Fury. What did he say?"

"I don't know. Just your last name and a bunch of orders. You heard me. I meant it. If the world is ending, they'll come get you," she insisted.

"You turned my phone off. How is anyone supposed to track me if they need me?" Steve pointed out.

"They'll have to try harder," Estrella said with a bob of her head and a hint of Latina.

She once again touched his available skin, but this time she tickled quickly up his sides, then brushed her fingers against the light dusting of hairs he was letting regrow on his chest. Steve made
an eager, appreciative sound and pulled her toward him for a kiss.

Bucky was starting to become irritated from the sound of their kissing, but Jarvis cured him of that.

"Please. I'm extremely sorry to bother you, but the Captain should be informed of this…" Jarvis groveled quietly to get their attention from Bucky's phone.

Steve laughed a deep belly-laugh which was anything but true humor. It gave her chills and she leaned away and sat back from their kiss.

"Jarvis!" Estrella scolded.

"So very sorry," the AI mumbled.

"Get it over with, J. What?" Steve asked.

"The city of Corpus Christi was installing a new security system, and I was unaware that they were testing it Sunday. Unfortunately, two low quality images were recovered of your vehicle. This would not be a problem, except that the young man you left alive at the confrontation gave a description which matches the blurry images," Jarvis said.

"Where are we on this?" Steve asked sharply.

Just like that, Captain America was sitting next to her on the seat, looking half clothed and with ever so slightly swollen lips. Estrella sighed and gave up. It seemed this day marked the end of their time off.

"The Corpus Christi police department contacted the Federal authorities and the Texas Rangers six minutes ago. They are already in the area, so it will not take them long to get to the precinct office. The FBI has the resources to clarify the image which shows your license plate," Jarvis said.

"Call the police department and get me contact with the investigator in charge. On my phone," Steve ordered.

"Yes, Captain," Jarvis agreed.

Steve picked up his phone and turned it on. He waited and listened through the receptionist while Jarvis did his work to get him to the lead investigator.

"Smythe. This better be damn good. It's a bad time," said a harried female voice.

"Hello, Detective. I'm Captain Steve Rogers. The images you need to clarify are of my truck. I understand that we'll have the FBI and the Rangers with us on this soon?" Steve said kindly but briskly.

"Who is this?"

"Captain Steve Rogers. Captain America, of the Avengers. Out of New York," Steve said, and then he clearly and concisely read his Driver's License number to the detective.

Bucky went stiff and quiet next to Estrella. He down shifted the big truck to a stop at a scenic overlook in the hills. While Steve was still establishing his identity to the incredulous detective, Buck got out of the truck and slammed the driver's door. Estrella didn't know what to do, but there was a horrible tension in the air.

Bucky was seething with rage as he paced on the pavement in front of the truck. Steve was calm
and collected beside her, but the gravity of what was happening made her lightheaded. Steve was turning himself in for what Natasha and Bucky and Jarvis had done for her! She folded herself forward and hugged her knees to her chest. She and Bucky were powerless to stop him because any sound they made might only make things worse. They didn't know what his plan was. Surely he had one?

"That's right. I'm telling you that I had my people on this and that I was directly involved. I'd like you and the heads of whichever agencies are interested to meet with me at Avenger's tower at nine o'clock Thursday morning so we can brief you on the details," Steve told Detective Smythe.

Estrella heard some argumentative tones over the phone, and Steve patiently waited for Smythe to finish. She tried to keep her hot, teary breaths silent so that she wouldn't bother him while he was working.

"I understand the pressure you're under. What you need to understand is that this isn't the only matter I have to deal with right now. Thursday at nine is the earliest I can work you in. There's no urgency on this. The op is over and the threat is eliminated, so Thursday is just as good as today," Steve said.

The woman's voice was getting adamant, but Steve kept his dignity.

"You're welcome to come with whatever equipment makes you comfortable. My staff and I will be in business attire. This is a desk job at this point. Would you like the appointment for Thursday at nine, or do you need to schedule for a later time?" Steve asked.

"Captain Rogers, I've got the deaths of hundreds of men to explain, and this is not going to happen on your timetable!" a gruff male voice interrupted into the call.

"I was speaking with Detective Smythe. She's welcome to call me at this number and let me know if she wants the Thursday appointment. Anyone else calling will not get through. Thank you for your time," Steve said.

"Capt-!" was the last they heard of the call as Steve took the phone away from his ear and ended the connection.

Estrella looked up at him. She fumbled with her seatbelt, then went into his arms. For long moments, she held him and tried to think of how to get him out of this. Bucky! He'd said there were places to hide. They could go together and not be found.

"Don't worry so much. I probably won't go to jail for this. I know how to manage it," Steve tried to assure her.

Bucky opened Steve's door and stood there. He had that cold, emotionless look to him, but there was a layer of humanity woven in. He wasn't completely without feeling. He'd used his working demeanor to calm his anger about what Steve was doing.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it's the right thing to do and we don't have a choice. We were free and clear until they had the images of the truck. Jarvis made a good call and I got to set the parameters of the meeting. Home field. We're good, Buck. I've been dealing with bureaucrats and agencies for years. I can do this," Steve said

His quiet confidence and slight smile made Estrella and Buck begin to question the severity of the trouble they were in.
"Yeah?" Buck asked.

"Yeah," Steve agreed.

"Alright, but don't pop anybody in the face. That's rude," Buck smirked a little.

"Only for you, Buck. You get all the good side of me," Steve said.

Estrella looked to Steve, confused.

"That's sarcasm, doll," Buck explained.

"How can you joke about it? This is bad. It's like D.C. all over again. You'll be a fugitive," she complained.

"No. The fall of SHIELD works in my favor. I was a fugitive once before, and I came out on the right side of things. That will make them question their understanding of events. With a few days to think on it, they'll hopefully come to Thursday's meeting with cooler heads," Steve told them.

"You're banking on your reputation," Buck said.

"What else have I got?"

"Impressive friends, an impregnable fortress, and a nice skillset for if things go wrong," Buck pointed out.

"I'll try this the easy way first, before I fall back on any of that. I might have to call in Colin. Do you think the city can handle him, love?" Steve asked as he turned to Estrella.

She laughed even though she wasn't feeling funny. This was all absurd. Her boyfriend had just played chicken with the FBI and had possibly won. And now he was more concerned with how comfortable his new cowboy friend would be if he had to make the trip all the way from Texas to New York.

"You have an incoming call from Detective Smythe. Other agents are standing by, but they've allowed her to place the call since none of their calls have connected," Jarvis announced before Steve's phone rang.

"Detective," Steve greeted her.

"Captain. How many people can we bring?"

"As many as you'd like, though it would be considerate of you to coordinate with the city if you'll be causing a traffic issue. Your people are welcome to observe from a media room if the team you bring won't fit at a conference table with us," he told her.

Buck and Estrella watched him. Estrella was still worried, but Bucky was starting to see how this was going to go.

"Are you honestly going to try to play this off as a red tape incident? Have you been watching the news for the last week?" Smythe asked.

"I don't think I sound like I'm playing, Detective. I'm opening our files to you. That's interagency cooperation, not a game. I'm giving you an opportunity to complete your file on this and move on to whatever your next job is. And no, I haven't been watching the news. I don't have much time for television," Steve told her.
"Do your associates have any other questions for me?" he asked.

He could hear Smythe put her hand over the phone to take instruction from those with a higher jurisdiction.

"Can you guarantee our safety, Captain?" Smythe asked.

"That depends on what you're afraid of, Detective. I can't make any guarantees against traffic snarls or pickpockets, but I can give you my word that you'll be safe inside our building unless you get caught up in some sort of unexpected conflict. Those do happen. Are you expecting any conflict?" he asked mildly.

There was a moment of silence while Steve imagined the FBI and the Rangers thinking hard.

"We'll see you Thursday," a male voice said.

The call ended, and Steve put away his phone.

"Jarvis, I left instructions for only a few people to be able to contact me while I was away. How were Fury and Mrs. Stiles able to access my number?" he wondered.

"I was overridden," Jarvis admitted with yet another dose of despair and humility.

"Not your fault, J. I want you to keep in mind that this is why, despite all your capabilities, you're not infallible. You don't have full personal autonomy if you can be overridden, you're not completely fluent in human expectations yet, and you can't know everything, even being embedded in the global network as you are. So don't act insulted when I ask for confirmation of something," Steve told him.

Estrella firmed her bottom lip. She got her words together to defend Jarvis, but Bucky shook his head subtly at her from where he stood on the ground not far from Steve's knees. She didn't like the way Steve took Jarvis to task for things that weren't his fault, but Bucky probably was right. If Jarvis was going to act like a person, then maybe he needed some humility sometimes.

"Can you get me through to Tony?" Steve asked Jarvis.

"I can, Sir," Jarvis said.

"Why is he calling you 'Sir'?" Estrella whispered.

Steve shook his head and shrugged, but then Tony was on the comm.

"Running man! How kind of you to take some time out of your day to speak to me," Tony sassed.

"What is it, Anthony? You made Jarvis put all those calls through for the sake of annoying me. You have my attention. What did you want?" Steve asked.

"I wanted to know when you'll be back, since my AI is being disobedient and withholding information from me. How do you get him to do that? He shouldn't be able to disobey me. What did you do to him? I know you're not a hacker. Not one that good, anyway," Tony said.

"How do you know I'm not a hacker? I don't need much sleep and I learn exponentially. It comes with the memory," Steve said.

Tony was uncomfortably silent. Steve could almost see his mouth working and his eyes blinking in panic. Steve laughed. It was so satisfying to get one over on a Stark. It was a rare event, and he
could see that Buck was enjoying it, too.

"Relax, Tony. I don't have any interest in computer language. That's your specialty. I'm better with people," Steve conceded.

"You're a- a-," Tony stuttered.

"I know," Steve fondly played along with their familiar, friendly insult game, then he looked at the angle of the sun and got back to business, "You're not fooling me. Jarvis can't willfully disobey you. You used an override. What's going on? I know you don't miss me solely for the sake of my company."

"Are you paying attention to the news? Because if you're not, you should be," Tony said.

"I'm not, but it doesn't matter because I just called the detective in charge and I had the Feds and the Rangers in on the comm, too. I've scheduled a meeting with them for Thursday. Full disclosure, as far as they know," Steve told him.

"So we're bringing the orchestra into this?" Tony asked dryly.

"Except for Pepper. Keep her out, Tony. Do what you have to, but I want her and Estrella completely disassociated from this," Steve said.

"But she's one of our best minds," Tony protested.

"I don't need media management. Hill is better for this situation, in consultation with Barnes and Romanoff. Pepper and Estrella stay off-stage," Steve insisted.

"I'll see what I can do. She's got a mind of her own and she'll want to help," Tony said.

"You're not listening, Stark. Pepper will not be in this. I'm not burning my last evening of freedom on negotiating. I appreciate your concern and hers. As friends, I couldn't ask for more. It warms my heart. As business, it's done. She's not in," Steve ordered.

"Good," Tony said with some relief.

"Thanks for trying to warn me, Tony. I'm already on it. Jarvis is a good kid. You should be proud of him," Steve complimented.

"He's my best," Tony admitted proudly.

"He's your only," Steve pointed out.

"He's not. There's the shop bots, and I have another lineup of-" Tony began.

"Jarvis is the only one who's truly sentient. That's what I meant," Steve said.

"Oh," Tony said.

Bucky turned around to face the scenery at the overlook. Estrella rubbed her fingers at the back of Steve's bare shoulder, where she'd pulled his shirt down and off a bit. There was a silence over the active comm line that felt busy with racing thoughts, but it was equally as comfortable as it was awkward. A truck passed on the highway near their parking spot and an owl hooted somewhere in the forest below them on the hillside.

"We all should take some time away when we can. It's almost impossible to feel the stress when
we're at home because we're acclimated to it, but it's there. This has been great. Do you think you
could ever unplug yourself and get away from everything, Tony? I bet Pep would love that," Steve
said slow and relaxed.

"Unplug. You mean no coffee, no booze, nothing electric, no tools?" Tony asked with thinly veiled
distaste.

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Steve agreed.

There was a deep laziness to his voice that made Bucky glance back and smile.

"Are you high right now?" Tony asked.

"No. It's just that good," Steve said.

Another long pause passed while the moments moved on toward evening. Estrella brushed a flying
insect off of where it had landed on Steve's wrist.

"I'll think about it," Tony finally said.

"Good. See ya tomorrow evening," Steve said.

"Right," Tony agreed and ended the call.

Estrella, Bucky and Steve all went to stand at the edge of the scenic overlook. A crow cawed and
flapped over the thick carpet of treetops below them. In the distance across the fertile valley from
them was another ridge of low hills. The topography sloped up gradually as they looked to the
north. The slant of golden sunlight over the trees turned the fall leaves into a blaze of rich color all
across the hills. The beauty was nearly more than the eye and mind could believe was real. He
didn't even want to paint it. There was no way he could do it justice.

Steve breathed deeply of the air which smelled of verdant, living things. He saw that Estrella was
appreciating the life around them, too. Somehow he knew she would. She wasn't the kind of lady
who would be afraid of the wilderness. Pepper would probably make a face if she got mud on her
heels, but not his girl.

"So that's what we're doing? Ignoring everything 'til tomorrow?" Bucky asked.

"Ignoring everything but what we've got right here, right now," Steve confirmed.

"Alright. I can do that," Buck said.

Estrella slipped her hand into Steve's and he raised it to his mouth for a kiss, and then a precisely
calculated lick across the back of her hand. She sucked in a breath as heat flared to life in her mind
and in other parts of her.

"That's the way it's gonna be? God, help us," Bucky snarked.

"One last night, and I want to make the most of it. Gimme the keys. It's already gonna be dark by
the time we get to the campsite," Steve said.

Buck handed over the keys to the truck, and they got on the road again. It was after ten o'clock by
the time they made it to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, but Steve had called ahead and he
had a gate code for entry and a campsite reserved.

It was dark, and their campsite was tucked away from the other sites behind a stand of saplings.
There were other campers, but none near them. It was a weeknight, and the park was host to mostly older folks in large RVs. Their spot was at a primitive camping loop with no hookups. They had their own water and they didn't mind getting by in the dark, so the privacy was nice.

"Fire," Steve said to Bucky.

Estrella made sure their bed was ready for later and she set their folding chairs out near the fire ring. They heard more owls hooting in the distance, and the dense tree canopy echoed the sound like they were in a cathedral. She looked around above them in wonder as her eyes acclimated to the dark.

"Bats," she said with delight.

Little black silhouettes flapped and fluttered here and there against the backdrop of a midnight blue sky. It was easier to see where they were by the brief blotting out of the stars than to see the tiny animals themselves.

"Yeah. I always thought they were kinda cute," Bucky said as he struck sparks onto dry tinder inside the steel fire ring.

A small flame caught, and Buck leaned down to blow on it and feed fuel to it. He looked like he'd done the task countless times. His gloves were off and he showed no fear of fire with his metal hand. His uplit face still showed a partially flaking streak of dried blood. Estrella went to rummage in their supplies at the back of the truck until she had a clean washcloth. She dampened it with water from one of their cans and paused to watch Steve make sandwiches.

"That's taller than it is wide," she commented.

"We may as well use up the last of the sandwich makings," he said.

She stepped closer to where he stood at the end of the tailgate over the open ice chest. Steve looked calm and happy, but she knew better. The need for the damp cloth in her hand reminded them both that he was not alright, despite the distracting phone calls that had kept them busy all afternoon. She touched his hand as he put mustard onto more slices of bread and busily layered on cheese and meat. She couldn't feel anything conclusive because he wouldn't stop moving. Her hand turned his face down for a kiss, but after the first smooch she set the edge of her tooth lightly against one of his. The fine vibration she felt was proof.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a whisper.


"Okay," Estrella said.

They knew they weren't fooling each other, but they were fine with ignoring that too. Estrella took the first thick sandwich he'd finished making and loaded Doritos onto the blank space on the paper plate. Steve dug out a canned beverage and handed it to her. She'd piled the chips too high for the plate to be intended for her.

"Thanks," Steve whispered.

"For what?" she wondered.

"For letting Buck in with us. For looking out for him. I didn't think you would do that," Steve explained.
"He's looking out for us, isn't he? I'm beginning to see that you're just as much of an asshole as he is, so if I can tolerate you..." she left the statement open-ended.

Steve smiled after her as she walked carefully over the leaf strewn ground toward Bucky. Her hands were full of food, drink, and medical attention, but she didn't spill so much as a Dorito.

"The fire is going good enough. Sit in the chair," she told Bucky when he looked up from his squat.

He saw the things in her hands and a strange look crossed his face.

"Go on," Estrella urged him.

Bucky stood up from his squat and moved to do as she'd asked. She could see that he was conflicted. Sitting next to him in the truck was different than standing next to him. He wasn't quite as large as Steve, but his slightly smaller size hid a lean, lethal strength that she'd seen doing amazing and improbable things on the blurry news coverage images from D.C. His quiet uneasiness made a world of possibilities worry at her mind. After another long moment of hesitation, he decided to settle into a chair and stare at the flames.

"Eat," she told him.

He took the plate she held out to him and she put the beverage can into the chair's cup holder.

"Thanks, Ma," Bucky teased her.

She relaxed some, now that he was out of his confused contemplation and back to teasing. He was allowed two big bites of sandwich, and a swig of drink, and then she took his chin to angle the dirty side of his face toward her.

"He's got razors. If you don't want to be prickly anymore, you can shave," she made conversation while she dabbed at the dried blood.

"It can wait. I want my own stuff," Buck mumbled around a mouthful of chips.

She felt his crunchy chewing as she held his jaw with one hand and cleaned him with the other. He rolled his eyes at her as he took a sip from his soda.

"Don't be so careful. I'm healed. Scrape it off already," he told her.

"Fine," she said.

Estrella scoured at him as if she was washing a pan. The muscles of his face hardened into a smile. She wanted to thump his ear for rebuffing her attempt at gentleness, but maybe he couldn't handle much affection. He was right. She had to fold the rag over to a cleaner side, but when she was done, his handsome face was unscarred.

Now that his gloves were off, she could see the iron bracer on his right wrist. She reached for it, but he pulled it away out of her reach.

"Leave it," he said.

"No. You give it. I don't care what you do to yourself, but he'll look at it all night and worry. _Here_," Estrella demanded.

She held her hand out expectantly.
Bucky stared at her but she didn't relent. He shifted his plate to his other hand and shoved his iron-clad wrist to rest against her hip. He even helpfully rotated it so the light from the fire would make her job easy. His plate balanced on his knees and he ate with one hand.

Estrella untied the leather thong and took off the jointed iron piece. It was a menacing sort of ugly and its artistic design was crude, barely redeeming as an ornament at all. It was gritty and rusty in a few places. She hissed at him through her teeth when she pulled it away from his skin. The back of his wrist was smeared with blood. Three indentations nearly deep enough to be punctures healed and smoothed as she watched.

"Freak. This thing is rusty. It should be illegal to sell it to anyone. Somebody will die of blood poisoning," She said as she wiped his wrist clean.

"Not me. I bought the only one. Probably made in Senegal or something. Give it back," Bucky demanded when she let the bracer hang in her hand away from him.

"I'll make you a deal. If I give it back, you promise not to wear it at night," Estrella said.

"No deal, girlie. I can take it from you easy. What else you got?" he bargained for the sake of it.

"Look at him. He's making more sandwiches than we need and he's shaking. You know he gets stupid, even though he said he's feeling fine. Don't make him worry more than he has to. He'll see it on you, now that your gloves are put away. He'll pick a fight or something," Estrella tried to reason with their mutual concern for Steve.

"That's a great idea. Thanks," Buck said and then stuffed the last of his sandwich into his mouth.

Estrella felt victorious, but then his hand snatched out and took the bracer back. He cinched it on tight and knotted the leather with one hand and his teeth. His hand pushed aside at her hip until there was a clear line of sight between him and Steve.

"Hey. Estrella has a great idea. She says you wouldn't want me to wear this at night. Fight you for it," Buck called out.

He held out his wrist and taunted Steve with the ugly ornament.

"That was not my idea!" Estrella denied.


"Why would you fight? That's dumb and petty," Estrella said.

She went over to where Steve was eating more than he probably should. She ignored the plate he'd made for her and the nice glass of iced tea he'd poured for her.

"It's not petty. It's fun and it's exercise. C'mon, Eya. You know I need it," he said between bites.

"Oh. So no one will get hurt? It's practice, like in the training room?" she hoped.

"Nah, not like practice. Buck's the best. Somebody might get hurt, but it'll be a rush," Steve said.

"You're too much trouble to have out in public. You've already got the FBI after you, and now you want to make a spectacle of yourself at a campground. Are you too testosterone poisoned to see that this makes no sense?" she asked.

"It'll be fine. The old folks are all in their beds with their air conditioners on. It's not like anyone's
out to see us, and we're not gonna yell or anything. I can fight quiet. I'm good at it," he said with pride.

Estrella gave up. She picked up her plate.

"I'm not watching you. I'm going to bed," she grumped.

"We'll go shower, after. It's a hike to the shower house and it should be nice in the dark. Wanna wait up for us and go with?" Steve asked hopefully.

"You've lost your last brain cell if you think I'm showering with the two of you," Estrella gave him a sour face.

Steve froze still with his last sandwich halfway to his mouth while he thought about what she'd said. Bucky laughed at them from his chair by the fire. Even in the near-dark of the firelight, she could see Steve's face blush.

"I didn't mean it that way. There are women's showers on the other side," Steve finally said once he had the peculiar thoughts out of his head.

"Oh. Okay, but I'm still not watching you fight. It's stupid, and you better not get hurt," she complained one last time.

"Shh," Steve said, "Gimme a kiss for luck."

She had her mouth full of chips, but she stuck her lips out for him to peck. It was the most she felt like giving him at the moment. He ate fast and Buck waited patiently by the fire ring.

"You're going to fight with that much food in you?" she asked as he walked away from the truck.

"Full or empty. Gotta be ready for anything, anytime," were his last words to her for a while.

She hurried to finish her food so she wouldn't be standing around watching their idiocy for long. She shook her head when Bucky bent to rip the heavy steel fire ring out of the ground. It had to be hot, and it was stubbornly embedded in the dirt, but he jerked it up and handed it off to Steve. Steve walked the heavy piece of equipment over to the truck and set it near the back tire. He smiled at Estrella and toed off his shoes. Bucky brought the folded chairs and his shoes to the truck to set with the rest of their things. She understood that the accumulation of stuff around her meant that they would at least stay away from her.

"Don't kick the fire," Steve said.

"No shit," Buck said as they squared up barefoot in the empty area of their campsite by the trees.

Estrella rushed to rinse her hands free of food. She was inside the truck camper before she heard the first thud of their bodies. There was a quiet 'oof' sound and the thump of heels impacting the earth, but she didn't let herself care. She pulled up the tailgate, then reached out to grab the hatch and close it.

A flash of metal in the firelight caught her eye. She looked. Bucky wore a sleeveless gray undershirt and Steve had stripped to only his pants. What they were doing wasn't anything like what Steve had done to all those men on the Highway.

They both had a grimace of effort on their faces, and they were locked together in some kind of struggle which had Buck's metal arm pinned between them. Something changed, maybe in their
footing, and then there was a rapid flurry of arms. The sounds of smacks and thumps carried to her across the distance of maybe fifty feet. It wasn't clear what she was seeing, but it was confusing to look at, anyway.

They lunged one way, then aside, and there was another locked up struggle that ended with Bucky vaulting over Steve's shoulder and pushing off of his back. Steve shook his head as if something stung, but he closed distance on Bucky and they were at it again. When they moved around to the other side of the firelight, she could see them better.

Steve brought his knee up and she thought he was going for Bucky's side, but so did Bucky. He saw the diversion and changed his guard at the last instant to deflect a punch to his throat, but that worked in Steve's favor, too. Steve grabbed hold across the front of Buck's shoulders and swung his weight around. Buck tried to counterbalance and use his strength, but Steve's new weight was too much. He went down backwards, and Steve's knee stabbed the middle of his back, making him arc painfully.

"Natalia," Bucky said fondly, and then he moved.

His metal arm became a fearful thing, and Estrella cringed every time Steve only barely avoided getting hit. There was something more to that arm than just an arm. Was it making some kind of sound? Bucky made Steve dance around to avoid getting hit with it, but Buck had to be careful, too. Steve wasn't hesitant to use his legs, his strength, and his longer reach to catch at any part of Buck that he extended too much. They finished that round with Steve curled on the ground coughing and holding his middle.

Estrella almost screamed at them when Bucky moved in to kick Steve mercilessly while he was down, but she didn't have to. In a blink, Bucky was the one on the ground, and they grappled and rolled close to the fire. They shoved violently at each other to get distance, and she turned her face away from the ugly grimaces of effort on them as they pummeled at each other. It was impossible to tell who won the round, but she saw blood on both their faces. Steve kicked against the ground and the tangle of them rolled away from the fire again.

She eventually got tired of watching them. Whether they were upright and swinging, grappling in the leaves, or circling each other waiting to find a weakness to strike at, it all became a series of the same to her. She thought she heard the tearing of tendon and crunch of bone once, but they continued on nonverbal and nearly quiet. She lay down across the foot of the mattress and quit watching. Maybe it was the angle of the camper hatch, but their impacts seemed louder after she laid down and could no longer see them. Over time, their breathing grew more labored and she wondered how long it would be until they tired themselves out. Sleep overtook her while she blearily watched the patterns of firelight flicker on the ceiling of the camper.

Steve woke her sometime later. She cracked her eyes at him and tried to roll away from his jostling hand, but he gathered her up.

"Up and at 'em. Get some fresh things, Eya. We've gotta hit the showers," he told her.

The fire had died down so that she couldn't see much more than his silhouette. He smelled like leaves, dirt, blood and sweat.

"Go 'way. You stink," she complained, but he wouldn't leave her alone. He gently pestered her until she had fresh clothes and her toothbrush.

She refused when he offered to carry her. He was dirty, sticky, and hot. She grumpily slipped her feet into her shoes and followed him through the dark to the shower house. It was a long walk
downhill, uphill, and around another loop of campsites full of tents. If her night vision wasn't so good, she would have tripped over tent ropes and sticks in the dark, because they were going across terrain rather than walking a paved path. She mentally said a litany of unkind words about Steve, about Bucky, and about manhood in general. Why couldn't they have gotten in the truck and driven here? Or used the cold water in their shower bag to rinse off at their campsite?

Bucky shuffling along behind her was annoying. Why was he walking funny like that? She looked for long enough to see that instead of Buck, Steve was wearing the awful iron wrist bracer. She rolled her eyes and would have said something, but then they finally reached the shower house.

The guys went silent and still and she did too, out of an abundance of caution. As far out as she could hear into the forested night there was nothing moving. She knew they could hear farther.

"There's nobody around. Go ahead and shower, sweetheart," Steve told her.

She trudged into the blindingly well-lit shower facility. The space was clean and had private stalls with plenty of space for her to set her dry things on. The lovely warm water woke her some and improved her mood considerably. She began to smile as she heard them bickering at each other through the high grill in the wall that separated the men's side from the women's side.

"Boys," she said fondly.

"Eya? Are you alright over there?" Steve called to her over the sound of the shower spray in three stalls.

"Ow! What was that for?" he exclaimed as she heard the wet snap of fabric.

"I'm fine," Estrella said softly. She knew he heard her.

Their water turned off and she heard them move on and make tooth-brushing sounds, but she lingered under the luxury of the warm water. She got out her shampoo and lathered herself clean all over. The guys were waiting outside for her when she emerged fresh and dressed for bed. In better light, they were a rough sight to see.

Bruises covered much of them, and she didn't want to know what their clothes hid. Bucky was standing oddly, sort of slouched and favoring one side.

"Did you break your nose?" she asked Steve.

"No. He broke my nose. Again. Fifth time?" he asked Bucky.

Buck nodded.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked Bucky.

"Tore something in my side. Kid tried to take my arm off," Buck explained.

"If you'd quit trying to choke me with it, I wouldn't try to take it offa ya," Steve taunted.

"Yeah, bitch, but I'm getting my stuff back tomorrow," Bucky eyed the bracer that Steve wore proudly.

"Buck, c'mon. Mind your manners," Steve said.

"Don't ninny at me. You cursed in front of her in the truck," Buck pointed out.
Estrella didn't care anymore. Her wakefulness from the shower was wearing off. Steve picked her up and handed their things to Bucky to carry. He didn't smell bad now, he wasn't sticky, and he was pleasantly cool to the touch. Her feet never touched the ground while the guys jogged back to the truck through the campground. She stayed curled against Steve's chest and listened to his heart until he laid her down on their bed in the back of the truck.

There was some metal clanging sound that she vaguely identified as Bucky reinstalling the steel fire ring into the ground. Steve shut them into the back of the truck and pulled her close. The night was getting chilly, so Estrella tugged at the covers and he pulled them up over her.

She drifted out of consciousness again with Steve's jaw pressed to her temple. He wasn't shaking anymore. She pushed a hand weakly at his wrist and he moved like limp dead weight. There was the clunking sound of Buck adding wood to the fire, but she wasn't awake for long enough to see the light flare up. The world was warm, comfortable bliss and she was happy and safe in it.
Chapter 47

Author's Note: Mature themes and mature stuff. Kind of a lot of it. I was tired while I wrote some of this, but determined to get it finished for this weekend. I implied a lot of things without fully fleshing them out. If you pick up on a hint or implication, it's probably not your imagination. I'm sneaky like that.

Steve and Bucky looked at a park map of the hiking trails and cross referenced it with an overhead satellite image of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It was two o'clock in the morning, and the forest was silent and dark around the campsite except for the crackling of their small fire.

"We can go off-trail here, zigzag to hide our path some until we're away from tourists, and maybe take her to this waterfall. Nice meadow. Some rocks. You think she can make six miles, round trip?" Bucky asked quietly.

"She's got the energy. She'll like the waterfall and the creek. Hour travel, hour in the meadow, maybe a little extra in case we find something worth stopping for. We can be on the road by nine," Steve said just as quiet.

If felt like old times to be bent over a map by firelight. There were important differences, but some things stayed the same. The satellite image on Steve's phone was a nice modern addition, and the park map was cutesy and user-friendly compared to the old technical maps they used to plan a day's trek with. They'd spent so many moments like this, discussing the next day between shifts of the night watch, that it was impossible to not feel the weight of the past. They keenly felt the absence of the rest of the Commandos.

Unspoken, they let a moment of silence pass while the ghosts of their old friends and battle-buddies drifted through their minds. A piece of wood in the fire snapped sharply and sent a shower of bright embers drifting up toward the black sky. The moment passed.

"My shift 'til dawn. Try to get some sleep. I'll have breakfast made by six so we can get moving. We should be back to New York by evening," Steve said.

Normally, Buck would have moved off to comply, but things weren't exactly normal anymore. There were the intervening decades and all that had happened, and Steve wasn't technically Bucky's commanding officer right now. That might change once they were back home, but it didn't hold any weight at the moment, other than friendly agreement.

"About that," Buck said, "I don't feel right. With Stark. I could work near him. See him every once in a while. But moving into the tower… I don't know, pal. He can't be copacetic with me, no matter how cool he acts."

"Estrella and I live in the tower. If you're with us, where did you think we would live? Why get cold feet now?" Steve asked.

A gentle night breeze ruffled the trees around them and yellow and orange leaves drifted to the ground all around. Buck shook his head.

"I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe that we'd get our own place? It doesn't make any sense that Stark would be alright with me hangin around," Buck persisted.
"We'll deal with that on the way home. Whatever happens, I'm with you. If we can't get it sorted, we'll find a place," Steve assured him.

"Naw, Steve. You're not gonna drop your life like that. You've got a good job, and it's safer for Estrella to stay in the tower. I can-"

"Buck. I'm with you," Steve said again.

Bucky looked at the stubborn set of Steve's face in the firelight. It was only slightly funny-looking with the bridge of his nose swollen. He'd seen his nose busted often enough that it wasn't sufficiently remarkable to detract from the determination in Steve's eyes.

"Get some sleep," Steve said again.

Bucky gave up the argument. It was going to be nearly impossible for him to sleep, even with Steve on watch. He left Steve sitting by the fire and jumped nimbly to the top of the truck's camper shell. The grippy rubber soles of his boots and the fingers of his flesh hand cushioned his landing silently. He didn't jostle the truck or the sleeping woman inside it.

Buck laid on his back on the roof and resigned himself to being hyper-aware of his wide open surroundings. He would have felt better crawling under the truck, because then at least two approach vectors would be covered. His rational mind fought with his ever-vigilant inner soldier. Steve was here. They were only being hunted by the 'good' guys. With no imminent threat, it wasn't worth getting the clothes he'd borrowed from Steve dirty under the truck. He got comfortable against the hard surface and got what rest he could for four hours.

He felt a little more secure when he heard Steve turn his chair around so that he faced away from the firelight.

Estrella woke up in their bed in the back of the truck because she felt movement. Steve wasn't beside her. She sat up clutching the warm blanket. She looked through the glass to see Steve driving the truck. The disorientation of sleep cleared, and she saw that they were still in the campground. Steve drove them slowly along the road toward the bath house in the pre-dawn gloom. Bucky was nowhere to be seen.

She smiled and got out her toothbrush and toothpaste from where she usually kept them. Steve parked the truck in the nearest spot to the women's side of the facilities and came around back to open the tailgate and hatch for her. She wiggled her feet into her shoes and left the stubborn canvas bent down under her heels. As soon as he had the back open, she pushed into his arms and pressed her face alongside his.

"You're sweet," she told him with warm appreciation.

"You didn't like the walk last night. I figured I'd give you a better morning, since you can't make a quick run to the dunes today," Steve said.

He returned her hug gladly, but briefly. Other campers were beginning to stir, and an older lady walked toward them and the bath house. Estrella slid down from the tailgate and hurried into the women's bathroom. She took care of her morning business and freshened up, and Steve was waiting for her outside the door as she knew he would be. It didn't feel odd to be in public in her sweatpants and sleep shirt because the lady who had joined her in the bathroom was in house slippers and a fuzzy robe. The November morning was too cool to wear skimpy clothes.

Steve gave her a smooch and they breathed each other in with the scent of fresh toothpaste. He
started the truck and drove them back to the campsite. Estrella looked at him for a while and couldn't stop smiling. He wore a heavy flannel shirt that was large, even on him. He'd not shaved in two days, so his jaw was shadowed. His hair looked finger-combed and untidy. She saw the swelling at his nose, but it was much better than it had been after their fight last night. He was almost completely healed already.

Steve smiled for her while he kept his eyes on the road and she felt a happy thrill. It was their last day, but it still felt like vacation. The quiet, woodsy campground and the layer of morning fog among the trees made the air feel hushed. She didn't want to speak and break the spell. It seemed that Steve agreed with her.

Bucky was back at their campsite sitting in a chair by the fire ring. Steve parked the truck as it had been the night before and Estrella didn't wait for him to get out. There was coffee and food to be had at the fire. She leaned on the truck for a moment until she got her heels properly into her shoes, then hurried over to the empty chair by the warmth of the fire. Buck didn't smile at her, but he handed her a plate of eggs and ham and a cup of coffee. Their box of honeybuns leaned against his chair, mostly empty but not quite.

"You cooked?" she asked him after her first sip of coffee.

"Nah. Steve had morning watch. I don't cook if I can help it," Bucky said.

Estrella turned to smile her thanks up at Steve when he came behind her chair and settled his warm flannel shirt around her shoulders. Shivers had been sneaking up on her and he noticed her chilled skin before she did. She ate quickly so she could go change into a heavier shirt.

When her coffee was empty, Steve poured a cup and brought her the last of their milk from the ice chest. His walk toward her from the truck caught her attention. There was something relaxed, confident, and unapologetically male about the way his body moved. He handed her the cup then went back to their supplies to look for something else. She told herself not to feel bashful about appreciating his assets because even his enhancements didn't give him eyes in the back of his head.

She wondered how he could wear plain canvas utility pants with a dark shirt and look more provocative than he had at the beach in swim shorts. Heavier clothing didn't do much to conceal his athleticism. Estrella admired him while he stood at the tailgate and looked down to search through their dry goods bag.

Like she was getting uncomfortably snug in her clothes, Steve had also gained some bulk from their vacation eating. All of it was muscle. He only looked lean because his tight belly, his height, and his bone structure allowed him to keep his grace. She didn't notice these things merely for aesthetics. There was something wonderful in him that her mind hungrily grasped at the meaning of. The idea coalesced into clear thought for her as he found what he wanted and walked back toward her and the fire…

Steve's strength and maleness made her feel like a woman, rather than a potential victim. Instead of being fearful of him taking something from her, she wanted to give. Not to merely give to him because she liked him or was his friend or felt she owed him anything. She wanted to burn him with the joy and excess of her devotion.

He squatted on his heels across the fire from her and peeled an orange. She couldn't stop looking at him. The early morning sun shone through the treetops and the fog, and he looked splendid in it.

There was no escaping that she was staring, but he didn't tease her or make light of it. Steve stared back, his hands steadily peeling the orange without the need to look at it. The light shining on the
side of his neck showed her his pulse surging strong. His eyes were already dark with want. He knew what she was feeling.

Bucky took half of the orange when it was handed to him and passed it around the fire to Estrella. How could Steve make eating an orange look sexy? She didn't know and she was pretty sure that she didn't have that skill. The orange was sweet and tart. She hardly noticed.

Steve made a low sound, both questioning and hopeful. He stood up and went to the truck. Estrella got up to follow him. She failed to notice Bucky taking her paper plate from her before it could fall to the ground.

Steve helped her into the back of the truck and closed them inside. There were no curtains to block the view or the sunlight from outside. Steve knelt on the foot of the mattress and pulled his shirt off over his head. Estrella matched him in her hurry to get rid of the things in their way. When they were down to only their underwear and her necklace, Estrella went still and lay down flat on the bed.

"What if someone sees?" Estrella asked while her eyes darted to the side windows and the rear hatch.

She didn't ask for the sake of her modesty. She was beyond worrying about that, and she knew Steve would protect her. She did so out of a reluctance to share what they were doing with anyone in the park who would not want to see them, especially children.

"Buck would let me know if anyone came around. We could lay low below the windows until he gives the all clear," Steve assured her.

That was good enough. Her desire to get close to him got her moving again. She no longer felt hesitant about her nudity. With only her necklace as adornment, she let him see. Even if she didn't feel beautiful yet, his eyes were enough to tell her that she was.

She tried to stay still under his attention, but him kneeling upright at her feet made her anxious. Eager. For whatever he wanted. She arched her body and her head back in offering and her toes pointed in a wanton stretch. Her knees rubbed past each other, then parted.


She was all gold and pink, and he trembled at the point of falling on what she was offering. He wanted. Hell, yes, he wanted. But he'd had enough of regret after the fact. For the moment, until they found a happy way to enjoy each other, he was content to marvel that a beautiful, lovely person was here for him, and that she wanted him for all the right reasons.

Estrella blended her sigh into patient, steady breaths. Pleading with him, even with the use of her voice and her eyes, had not broken him before. Maybe she could influence him now, but she found that she didn't want to. She wanted him to have what he wanted, no more, no less, and no different. Her desire was to give, not to manipulate.

"Anything, Steve. Anything that's good for you," she promised him.

"Sweetheart, what do you want?" Steve held himself away from her for long enough to ask.

He could hardly believe what he was seeing. There had been no time for her to train, yet her sweet, curvy body was filling out with muscle. Not like Natasha. She wasn't meant for fighting. She was made for love. For life.
She didn't just look healthy. She looked strong and thick in places. Her tummy was lean, but not marked with the almost masculine definition of a trained fighter. Her arms weren't sturdy enough to strangle a man, but they were strong enough to hold him. Her thighs could probably… Steve dragged his mind back from that precipice.

"I want you to hold me. However you want to. Be with me," she said.

Steve noticed that she avoided looking directly at his face. He loved her more because she wasn't trying to change his mind. His hand grasped her ankle and pulled her toward him across the soft sheets. He wanted to see what she would do. If she was fearful, he would stop.

Estrella bent her knee and used his grip on her ankle to pull them closer together, moved her other leg aside gracefully, and reached for him. The invitation was too much. Steve wanted to fill his arms with her and push inside. He could smell her and he knew she wanted him there. It was exhilarating to finally get her under him. Their skin pressed together and his arms served both to hug her and to help hold some of his weight off of her. His dick was just as greedy for the feel of her skin as the rest of him was. Steve exerted the willpower necessary to lie slightly off-center of her open invitation.

"I want you to have choices, Eya. I want choices. I wanna love you so much, but I don't ever want regrets between us. Get the toy. The thing you brought," he told her.

"I can't get it if you won't let go of me," she said with her face muffled against his shoulder.

Steve laughed because he had her thoroughly pinned, and yet she was unafraid enough to sass at him. He made room for her to move the direction she seemed to want to go. She kissed and licked across his chest and collarbone as she reached beside the bed and dug down deep in her bag. She giggled as she brought his sex toy out in its plastic case. Then she frowned when she felt how cold it was.

His skin was warm, almost hot on her. She reveled in his heat which made a delicious contrast from the chilly morning air. He was so heated that the toy would be too cold for him, surely.

"Rosie, you're a cold-hearted witch," she spoke to it, then pressed it against Steve's arm. He shivered.

"Yeah. She's a mean lady. I hope I can kick her to the curb one day and take up with this hot little dame I know," Steve played along.

Estrella tried to be jolly and keep the game going, but his cock was persistently rubbing against her thigh. Already his body was moving, and she wanted more. He was large and virile above her, ready to go. She wanted. Her hips twitched toward him, trying to bring them together. She whined. "Oh, Eya. Baby. We gotta… come on," Steve lost his mind for an instant. The slick of his excitement skidded them closer together across her thigh with their mutual semi-voluntary movements. If he didn't do something right now, their bodies were going to decide for them.

He kept his upper body weight on his elbows and snatched the toy from her hand. Damn. Her bag had lain against the metal of the truck bed all night long. She wasn't kidding. The toy was frigid. He tore off the end cap, then dug his fingers inside around the edges. If he couldn't get rid of the cold, he could at least get rid of the hard edges. The cap and the plastic case went flying. The cold, floppy liner touched her shoulder.

"Yee! It's supposed to be your friend, not mine. Get it away. It looks funny," Estrella said.
She angled her chin down sharply and gave the thing a critical eye. He could see that she was curious. He played a mental game with them where he turned the toy in his hand so she could inspect the receiving end of it and not just the part that was usually hidden in the case. It was a game because all the while that he delayed, letting her inspect the toy, their gentle rocking motion was bringing them closer to what they really wanted. He wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. Hot. Cold? Hot.

"Steve," she called his name.

The dumb, floppy toy annoyed her, resting partly on her shoulder, but at least it was warming up a little from being held in his hand and touching her skin. It smelled like talc powder, which was not unpleasant.

"Steve!" she said louder and bit the meat of his shoulder.

That got his attention.

"Please. Eya, I gotta…" he stopped talking to breathe, "You decide."

He said that he didn't want any regrets. No matter how his body felt right now, she knew his mind wasn't going to change. She could already imagine the grumpy face he would wear for days if he slipped into doing what he'd repeatedly said that he didn't intend to do yet.

She hid her distaste and licked the toy. It didn't taste like much of anything. That didn't seem wet enough, so she pushed at him with her hands. He made some room between them and she saw his mind clear a bit when he had to move himself away from rubbing at her thigh.

Steve made a high, disbelieving sound when she rubbed the toy at the ample juices she had ready for him. The toy was soft. Its crinkly texture felt good, and she got lost for a moment in the feeling, despite its cool temperature.

He made an urgent sound and she stopped playing with the thing. He needed it. She lifted her hips and tucked the squishy tube under her bottom, with the end that was for him facing out where he could get to it. Estrella liked how he easily hovered over her on elbows and toes. She couldn't pay much attention to his erection or she was going to want it for herself. The toy was cool and strange under her bottom.

"You do it," she told him.

Steve put one hand down between them to guide himself, and his other arm braced his body weight by her shoulder. He knew what he had to do. She was smart and she was sweet and she'd got it all ready for him, better than he could have ever had the words to ask her for. This may have been the first time in the last seventy years when he wanted so badly to give up a fight. Having her under him and available was making his mind slip. A mere change in angle and…

Estrella watched him and panted. He made his decision, tilted his head to look into her eyes, and pushed. She gasped at the sensation of him slipping beneath her, filling the silicone toy. Then she moaned at the feeling of his body moving on top of her. Was this like sex? Good sex, not the bad kind that had always happened to her?

Heat. Power. Steve. Yes, it was good.

"Couldn't do this to you. Wanna be more careful with you," he said with a pleasure-strained voice.

He was quick and vigorous and she was terribly excited to feel him moving over her. She took hold
of his shoulders and wrapped her legs around him because it felt right to do so. She could feel him pushing into the toy under her, filling it and then retreating. All of him moving around her and over her was the most beautiful, amazing thing. And his face!

He sought pleasure, but he was coy about it. While his body rushed into and over it, he shut his eyes and bit his lip. She moved her hand to his hair and kissed his flushed cheekbone. He hummed in relief and slowed his movements.

Now that he was calmer, her restless squirming was more noticeable.

"Hmmm. Babydoll… Let's make this good for you," Steve murmured to her.

Estrella nodded. Steve lifted them and the toy further down the bed until his knees were down on the rubber-lined floor and her bottom rested on the edge of the mattress. From this angle, he supported her slightly more upright, but with her body arched backward. His body met the curve of hers, and his knees splayed wide apart along the bottom edge where the mattress met the floor. It might have been an awkward angle, except his agility made it work.

Her bottom was tilted more upright, sitting on the toy. This way, she had better direct pressure for her dissatisfied feminine parts. He held her body to his with one hand splayed against her back and his other hand flattened against the bed behind her. It felt precarious until he started moving and she saw how it would work. With every slow thrust, she could feel him pushing under her vulva instead of her tailbone. When he sank deep into the toy, their pubic bones squished the soft material into a tight kiss against her clitoris.

At first, she interpreted the sensations as bad because the pressure of him moving against her felt a lot like penetrative sex. Her mind immediately equated that idea with pain. She made a sound and clutched at his back with both hands. Her face tucked into his neck where she had salty skin to lick. The familiar taste and smell of Steve helped her to overcome her traumatic memories with warm, happy ones. Then the flexing and moving of his back muscles under her hands distracted her from the false message her mind was sending her.

The way he moved now was hunched and carnal, crude with the brute force of working his bowed body. His breath at her ear illustrated how much he liked the effort and the challenge. It was alien and scary for her to feel so willingly captive, but he held her carefully. Urgency was gone from him now, so he took his time.

"Oh, God. This… hot. Gonna have to sneak down to the truck in the parking garage and do this," Steve babbled.

Estrella made a muffled sound against the skin of his throat as something started to feel different. She discovered that if she nudged her hips side to side at the right moment, there was something on the outside of the soft toy that felt good to her. Steve picked up on it and helped her make more pronounced wiggles. His movements became rougher when she started making happy noises. She was soon wiggling and snapping her hips forward as he thrust inside the toy. Good! So good! The fullness of him pushing past but not inside was a desperate tease and she sobbed at how it hurt so good. The unfulfilled ache was bitter, but the friction and pressure were sweet. Tension was building in Steve's body, and she knew he was going to go over again. She keened encouragement at him, and he fucked them together until she lost control of her movements. Her nerves were on overload at that point, and she rushed into orgasm too. She couldn't tell if she came before him, after, or along with. There was a confusing mix of harsh vocal sounds, and then a thumping that startled them.

"Keep it quiet!" Bucky fussed at them softly from the outside corner of the truck where they
couldn't see him.

"'K, Buck," Steve agreed roughly.

They both took a moment to simply breathe. It had been cool in the camper when they started. Now they were sweating. He supported her back while he moved them up the bed again.

"Eya, killin me," he shook his head in wonder and gave her a sweet, goofy, sexy smile.

"Cap dies from sex," Estrella said like a cheesy tabloid headline.

Steve shook his head and laughed the relaxed, deep laugh which she was coming to love so much. Then he lay her comfortably reclined onto their pillows and pressed her thighs together, the toy trapped between them. He set his thighs outside of hers and used one hand to stuff another pillow behind her back. He supported his upper body on the rim of the truck bed behind her shoulders so he wouldn't crowd her too much. They were face to face, with his arms holding her, as she'd asked him to do. This time it was him who was bent back some, but she could see his face this way.

Steve loved being pushed close to her soft chest with nothing between them except the sweat on their skin. He controlled how much he lay against her. There was room to breathe, but her breasts swelled higher every time he inhaled. Careful control of his lower body prevented him from making her uncomfortable under his weight.

Her eyes widened when he started moving. More so than before, she could see everything. His chest and his arms were right in front of her. His burly legs were angled wide enough where she could see them working, and if she tilted her head aside to look around the breadth of his back, she could watch his ass move.

"You want my ass?" Steve asked her as he stirred himself in the messy sleeve of silicone she held snug for him.

She nodded slowly.

"Then grab it," he told her.

Estrella was able to reach her hands around and down and to grip them full of hard, flexing rump. Steve couldn't hide a gratified smile as her face showed unguarded, innocent lust. He worked it for her in a way that was so shockingly nasty that he surprised himself. He felt wrong, but oh so right for the way he moved against her hands, but also for the way that it made his unfailing erection buck and stir between her thighs.

She made a whimpering sound and looked up at him. Estrella was clearly overwhelmed, and probably too inexperienced to have expected this, despite all she'd been through. Those men, those mean, greedy morons, had never done anything for her. Steve wanted to blow her mind, to show her something about sex that she hadn't experienced.

His heart pounded with the hedonistic thrill of finally allowing himself to do what he knew he was capable of. To do what women always wanted him to do, but he never would for them. For Estrella, he could be an utterly depraved vulgarian with this body he'd been given. She was paying close attention to him. Her eyes darted around to try to see everything he was doing. So he worked everything he had for her. He didn't really need to flex and writhe like this, but he could see that she loved it. One of her hands moved from his ass to his abdomen and he worked both in tandem for her, lewd as he could make it.

He could hear her heart straining under the influence of the same base thrill he felt. Her breathing
was gasping, uneven. Never had he seen a woman so aroused. Because of him. It tripped him up in
his own wires and put him in a state where he truly had no way of holding back. Shame and pride
roiled into a potent brew in his mind, and his dick ran away with it all. He hadn't meant to ejaculate
so close to her vagina, but he did. That, too spurred him on and all he could do was lock his ass still
at its farthest point away from her and moan like a wounded thing until it was over.

Quick as he could, he lifted her to a dry spot on the bedding. Rosie was plenty warmed up now,
and he set the messy thing aside under a fold of blanket. Steve felt shaky and mentally scattered,
but he looked to see that there was at least a patch of her inner thighs where his fluids and hers had
not met and mixed. He grabbed his discarded shirt and dried her off. His side of the bed was
cleaner, so he encouraged her to move in that direction.

He couldn't meet her eyes. While they calmed, he tended to her comfort and made a rudimentary
effort at cleanup until he could think up some explanation for what he'd done. Other than
overexcitement and dumb male pride, he couldn't explain himself. Steve's dithering fizzled to an
awkward stillness when there wasn't anything useful and appropriate left to do except to look at
her.

"ooo-oo" she cooed softly at him through rounded, ape-like lips. Estrella made patting, gathering
motions to him at the empty space of bedding beside her. Steve looked to her with embarrassed
hope, and bedamned the blazing heat in his cheeks.

She smiled at him in welcome and opened her arms to him again. Steve chuffed a breath of relief.
Then he lowered himself next to her, in a wet spot, and they laughed at themselves for a moment.
His nose was still sore, but he rubbed it to hers when she seemed to want him to.

"Did you have a brain-gasm?" she whispered.

"A what?"

"Where you find something good and your brain gets in a feedback loop, and then pop," she
explained.

"Almost. I don't know. There was some definite hip action in it," Steve pointed out.

"Mmm-hm. I think you would have gone off without moving, once your brain reached that point.
Stevie has brain-gasms," she teased, then hurried to say "I have them too."

"You do?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"When?" he asked.

They were both aware of Bucky outside, and that his ears were almost as good as Steve's.

"The night after the day you first licked me. When I tried to get to sleep, I kept thinking of you
licking me over and over again, and the hungry way you looked while you were doing it. pop," She
told him.

"Sweet. I had one when I went over the balcony rail, down by the river in Texas," he admitted.

"I didn't know men could do that with no stimulation," she said.

"I don't know if other men can, but I can," Steve said.
They stared at each other for a long moment. When he realized that he was looking into her eyes and all he felt was happy, he saved the information for a later time. She didn't seem to notice that her eyes weren't influencing him and he didn't want to make her think about it. She rubbed a finger back and forth across his bottom lip and he sucked it in for a moment, then spit it out.

"Do you feel sore? I probably shouldn't have rubbed at you for so long," he said.

"I think my skin is chafed in a few spots, but we're not done yet," she said.

"If you're rubbed raw, then we're done," Steve denied.

Estrella shook her head.

"I'm afraid, Steve, and I want you to help me with it. I need you to," she insisted.

He waited for her to go on.

"I was afraid it was going to hurt. When I thought you might choose me instead of Rosie, and then when what we were doing reminded me of penetration, I was afraid of pain. I want you inside me someday soon. I need to face the pain, so I can start getting over the fear of it. I can't enjoy the thought of being with you if it makes me afraid of pain," Estrella said.

"This is because of how they always hurt you, before?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It's always been painful for me," she admitted.

Steve frowned.

"I'm not asking you to make love to me right now. Or to have sex. I don't want you to move once you're inside. Just show me if it's going to hurt to be with you. I think now might be a good time," Estrella said.

Her body was very aroused, even after minutes of cooling down, humor, and conversation. Steve felt in control of his desires, especially after making a fool of himself by sharing too much, too soon.

What if penetrative sex was painful for her? It would be good to know that now, rather than later. They could find help for her if she needed it.

Steve nodded. He sat up to reach for his bag. Bucky startled them by putting a hand on the back glass, fingers spread. That meant it was 5 minutes until they were supposed to hit the trail, but Buck wouldn't bother him again if Steve ignored the reminder.

Steve reached again for his bag. He got what he needed, then he dampened a clean cloth and wiped himself down. Estrella laid herself in the middle of the bed and watched him roll on a condom. It was erotically interesting, but it seemed to mean something more serious, too, from the look of business-like concentration on Steve's face.

"I thought you didn't want that between us," she said.

"Later, I don't. But if I'm doing this right now, then I'm wearing it," Steve insisted.

He got between her feet and she pulled her knees together and up. He stopped moving toward her.
"I'm not going to rape you. If you don't want this, we don't do it, no matter how good an idea you think it is," he told her.

"I want you to do it. I'm afraid of the pain, not of you," she said defiantly.

She made herself straighten her legs again and then parted them slightly. Her eyes looked to his erection skeptically, suddenly critical of its size when she'd had nothing but admiration for it before.

"Don't put something negative between us," he argued with a determined tilt to his head that was more Captain than Steve.

Estrella squinted her eyes at him for being stubborn, and also so her wants wouldn't affect him. She wanted to win this on merit of reason, not on unfair influence. She had to think of a different way to convince him.

"Steve, what if it doesn't hurt and I'm afraid and worried for nothing? Or what if it does hurt, and then we can't make love when we want to? I'd rather know now, and we won't know until you try," she said.

He made his decision and lay down next to her on his back. He bullied her aside with his greater mass and strength. She looked at him sharply for his rudeness.

"You're doing this," he told her, "All of it."

"Okay," she agreed in a milder tone.

At least he'd agreed to participate.

Estrella lay beside him and her eyes went wide when she truly considered what she was proposing to do. He was safely sheathed and ready. She was belatedly glad they hadn't tried earlier. There's no way her insides could have tolerated the immediate vigor with which he'd used the silicone toy.

"If you want to wait til later..." Steve suggested.

She slid her foot and leg over him and lay down atop his belly as she'd done on a few mornings recently. Steve moved his hands to help her, then he laid them back on the bed. It had to be her.

"You lie there and be a dick. I can do this," she said.

Steve chuckled. His laughter caused his dick to bob and it prodded her in the bottom as she inched herself down toward it.

"I'm sorry. Don't make me laugh," he said, still smiling.

He could feel from her eyes that she was anxious though she'd tried to lighten the mood with humor. It was easy to see that she expected discomfort. Anger surged up in him again, but he tamped it down. He and Buck had already dealt with those men. He subdued his reaction to almost nothing when she found the tip of him and began to exert pressure. Quite a lot of pressure. Why did she need to push so hard?

"Take it easy. You don't have to do it all at-" his words stopped, useless.

She hadn't jammed herself down on him, but it wasn't far from it. He'd expected hesitant inches, but he should have known better. In a tense situation, it was always foolhardy courage from his
She looked to him with wide, teary eyes and took gulping breaths. There was pain. He could see it and feel it from her eyes. He was able to partly ignore the tight heat that gripped him and thumped with her pulse. Partly.

Estrella moved to take herself off of him as quick as she'd got on.

"Dammit, no. Answer me, first. Does it hurt a lot? Do you think you're bleeding? Any hot trickles where there shouldn't be?" he asked in a hurry.

He wanted to put hands on her shoulders to stay her because it was important, but he didn't. She could leave if she wanted to, but she chose to listen to him.

She paused, muscles tensed to dismount. Tears trembled on her lower eyelids, ready to fall. She assessed his questions and herself, then shook her head. Steve fought a battle to ignore sensation and stay fully reasonable. He was angry that she'd caused herself such pain, and angry that he was having a great deal of trouble ignoring how good it felt to him. He shouldn't be getting pleasure from her pain. It was wrong.

"You did that the wrong way. If there was going to be little or no pain any other way, now you've caused some to remember me by. Is this how you want to think of me?" he asked her.

She still hurt, but he could see that she was getting control of it. Adjusting. She stayed focused on his eyes. He pushed away his useless anger and gave her all the calm assurance he had.

"No," she admitted.

"Alright. If you're pretty sure that you're not bleeding, then I want you to lie down, relax, and be still until it hurts less," he said.

"It burns," she complained.

"I can see that. Come on. You're well-read. You know about forming associations, right?" he asked to buy some time and to get her thinking more than feeling, hopefully.

She nodded. Her body was still tense from the pain.

"You need to relax until the discomfort fades to neutral. When you get to that point, I want you to stay like that for at least a minute. Try to make a memory of how it feels after it doesn't hurt anymore," Steve coached her.

He set his hands on her shoulders not to make her stay, but to try to soothe her. She twitched, and he supposed he'd caused a bad memory. Instead, he put his hands in her hair and touched her face.

"Only a few minutes ago we had a lot of fun and you weren't afraid of me. Start by thinking of that," he said.

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of my insides burning again if I move," she said.

"You're not afraid of Victor Creed or Nick Fury, but you're afraid of a little burning," he pointed out the irony.

"This is different. It's not a broken arm or a smack across the face. You had a hard time making yourself run at me when you knew I was going to scream. I had to say the Pledge of Allegiance,
"Remember?" she explained.

"Right. I suppose it would be that kind of pain. I'm sorry, sweetheart," Steve apologized.

He meant to say more, but his throat closed up to stop a sound he didn't want to make. She was starting to relax, but she was skittish. It had the effect of her gripping, then easing on him in no predictable pattern. And he could feel her heartbeat around his cock.

He laid his head back and tried to stay calm. This wasn't fun and games like before. He couldn't get stupid with his ego and expect a second chance. Estrella lay down atop him and began to truly relax. Most of her body did, except for that gripping, pulsing little quim she held him in.

"Are you relaxing any yet? Is the burn fading?" he asked hopefully.

It was difficult to keep his tone neutral and polite. His voice kept wanting to slip deeper and do embarrassing things.

"It's not as bad as it was at first. How can people like this? I thought I wanted it. You get me so hot and I know I wanted you, but right now, I think it would feel like glass if we tried to make love. Not the smooth, good kind of glass. This isn't uncomfortable for you? Of course it's not. You just abused poor Rosie like a rubber chicken," Estrella griped.

Steve desperately let out a high pitched tone in a herculean effort not to laugh. If he laughed, his dick would jump inside her, and that might set him off into uncontrollable throbbing. He knew she wouldn't like that.

On a whim, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes again. She was displeased. Maybe with him. Maybe with herself. Either way, he let her unhappiness affect his mood. He took it in on purpose. It helped. He felt his erection softening a bit.

"That's better," Estrella said.

She wiggled her hips experimentally.

"No," Steve ground out, "We're not making love. We're not having sex. So don't move, Eya."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Steve lost the struggle for a moment and his dick twitched. His attempt to get it under control made the twitching worse for a second, until she complained. He dutifully took in a dose of her disapproving stare to help him.

"Ow. Ow. Can you make it stop doing that?" she asked.

"I'm trying. Is this at all tolerable for you yet?" he asked.

"It's... full. Not fun. Yeah, 'full' is the right word. You're getting too big again," she told him.

She didn't look anxious or in pain anymore, but merely uncomfortable. That was going to have to be good enough, for now. He tortured himself by curling to sit them upright while she was on him. He used the bulk of his thigh muscles as a backstop to keep her weight from shifting her deeper onto him. Steve lifted her off slowly. He set her aside and did his best to convince himself to leave her alone.

"Thank you, Steve. It hurt more than I hoped it would, but you were right to make me stay a while."
It didn't hurt as much at the end as it did at the beginning," Estrella said sincerely.

"You're welcome. Let's wipe clean and get going. I want to try one of the hiking trails before we leave. It would be good to run a few miles before we have to sit in the truck all day," Steve said in what he hoped sounded like a normal tone.

She turned to question him. For talking about getting dressed, his actions didn't match his plans. Steve had his arms wrapped around his knees, his hands gripping his shoulders. His darkened eyes lingered over her body. It was impossible to blame him for it because she could see that he wasn't doing it on purpose. He tore his gaze away, but it immediately came back. Her hands moved to shield her breasts from him, and she shifted her thighs more closely together to conceal where he looked next.

"Won't a hike take too long? I thought we had to-"

"Move! I need you to get dressed and clear quarters," Steve barked at her.

Estrella startled, put her hand over her heart, and her eyes flew wide.

"Get dressed and get out of here," Steve said, low and tight.

"I'm sorry," Estrella mumbled.

She hurried to find clothes suitable for a hike. She had one pair of jeans she could wear. It was a struggle to get panties on and then the jeans. Everything wanted to snag on her damp skin. Steve's fingers glided along her back in a feather-light caress while she fought with her bra.

"I need you… to go, Eya," Steve said quietly.

Estrella shivered at the way his words sounded just behind her shoulder. He wasn't yelling, but in some ways this was worse. A glance at him showed her that he was still hard and tense. His fingertips skimming her skin were precisely, carefully gentle.

"I'm going," she said.

She put on a simple blue shirt, grabbed the heavy flannel he'd given her earlier, and got her shoes on the way out. She almost hit Bucky with the hatch when she lifted it. With a clamber and a hop, she got to the ground and shut Steve inside.

"What'd you do to make him almost lose it?" Buck asked blandly.

She realized he was standing, tense and ready to go in after her. He'd meant to get his friend away from her if Steve couldn't control himself. How had he known what was happening? He had been turned away, not watching.

"You know too much already," Estrella told him.

She wanted to thank him for thinking of her and being ready to help, but cranky words had come out of her mouth instead. She frowned and stomped off to go see if there was any more coffee.

It was impossible for Steve to stay tense and tight-faced when he came out of the truck a few minutes later fully dressed. The sun was bright and high enough to blaze down through the leaves above them. Now that he and Estrella weren't so exclusively captivated by each other, they noticed the beauty of the autumn colors all around.
The bits of sky they could see through the trees was pure, clear blue. The pines remained dark green. Every other tree was tinted from bright yellow to blazing orange, to a candy red that in some places deepened to oxblood. Some leaves showed multiple colors. All of it rustled or fluttered in a crisp breeze. Estrella breathed deeply of the clean, sappy smell.

Bucky already had their camp ready to stow away. As Steve looked up and around, Buck slid their gear into the back of the truck. Steve belatedly realized he was making Buck do all the work, so he hurriedly moved to help load up.

"I got this. Let's get to the trailhead," Buck told him.

Estrella was eager for a hike. The park in the city had some rocks and the trees turned pretty colors, but it wasn't like this opulent, untamed display of nature. She hurried into the truck and took her spot between the guys. She waved her hand to the button panel in the door, and Steve put the windows down while they drove away from their campsite.

Steve was pleased at how enchanted Estrella seemed to be as she looked out the windows. Just as when they'd arrived at South Padre Island beach, she leaned to perch her hands on his leg so she could have a closer view. Even more so than then, he relished her trusting familiarity. Her actions told him that she wasn't upset with him despite his poor behavior a few minutes ago. He turned his head and kissed her softly at her temple. She kissed him back on his cheek, but she was distracted and quick.

A view looking down the mountainside opened up through the trees on the passenger side of the truck, and Estrella turned to look that way. She didn't lean on Bucky, but she moved closer to him to see out his window and down the mountain.

Buck's nostrils flared and a smirk shaped his lips. He looked to Steve. Steve was enjoying the lingering scent of what he and Estrella had done with each other. If he could smell it, there was no doubt that Buck could, too. He knew that the two of them smelled of fresh sweat, drying semen, and the kind of musky-sweet perfume that could only be woman.

Steve wasn't bashful about it. It was only Buck. It was his last day off. Steve was determined to enjoy as much of what he could for as long as he could. It was worlds better than the stink of seven stale guys who'd been in the rough for too long, and he and Buck had tolerated that for months at a time. Steve held Buck's teasing gaze and dared him to say anything about it with a subtle shift of his eyebrow. Buck smiled and kept quiet. Estrella didn't notice their silent communication.

It was a short drive to the trailhead parking. Steve got a bottle of drinking water to carry for Estrella, then he locked the truck behind them. Estrella looked around at the sloping, rocky forest just beyond the parking area, clothed in all its fall glory. There was a small SUV in the parking lot, its owners likely already out on the trail.

"Think you can run with us?" Steve asked her.

"No. Not if you're really running," she said, still distracted by their surroundings.

"Eya, look at me," he said.

She did.

"You set the pace, but make it as fast as you're comfortable with. I don't want any twisted ankles or falls, so keep your eyes on the path, not on the trees. We'll have time to look at the forest when we get where we're going," he told her.
She nodded. She took off the flannel shirt that she wore against the coolness. If they wanted her to run, she'd be sweating soon enough. She tied the shirt around her waist and she was ready to go. The trail was a little over a foot wide. It was merely a cleared dirt path that sloped downhill through the leafy detritus of the forest floor. Estrella looked back to Steve and Bucky, who waited for her to begin.

They looked like two eager boys, waiting for the starting gun of a race. She chuckled. There was no way they'd have any fun at her pace. She took off anyway.

It was enjoyable. More challenging than jogging in the park, because the trail would switch back at steep slopes, or there were tree roots to avoid, and in some places the loose dirt and gravel of the path would slide underfoot if she wasn't careful.

Estrella started at a jog, but soon gained confidence and speed. It felt great to have the crisp mountain air rushing in her lungs. Her heart proved robust and reliable. For now, her body was lean enough to do this. She smiled as she raced down the trail and leapt over a small stream that she otherwise would have wanted to stop and see. She couldn't. The guys were like boulders tumbling downhill around her, and she didn't want to slow them down.

It was tricky to watch her footing on the path, ignore the natural beauty around her, and also ignore the preternatural antics of her companions. One of them was always within leaping distance of her, but they gamboled ahead or behind, leaping boulder to boulder or from an available tree branch to the opposite creek bank. She wasn't insulted that they doubled back after each other in a sort of playful chase around her.

They were large, strong, and fast. Sturdy limbs bent and sprung under the force of their passing. Steve leapt to the top of a boulder almost the size of a city bus, and the thing moved at his landing. Estrella skidded to a halt when there was a clunk so deep in tone that she more felt it through the ground than heard it. Steve balanced on one foot and wobbled, trying to stop his velocity so he could stay and explore the precarious rock.

Bucky leapt across to land beside him and again the boulder made a deep clunk as it rocked against the stones around it. Estrella paused and waited patiently. She used the time to get her breath back while they murmured among themselves. They soon had a rocking motion going by shifting their body weight foot to foot. Clunk clunk clunk

They looked more like elated kids than grown men. Steve sensed her watching them and stopped his foolery. His smile started to fade, but Estrella waved a hand at them to continue if they wanted to. Buck turned to look at her, and with the boyish smile on his face, his dazzling good looks tugged at her heart. He looked young, like he could possibly be somebody's son. Somebody's brother. Buck didn't look at her for long once he saw that she was patiently indulgent.

The two of them started a slapping fight that challenged their balance atop the unstable boulder. That wasn't enough of an effort for them, so they soon incorporated making the boulder clunk along with trying to knock each other off of it. That required a level of coordinated, pre-meditated fighting that made Estrella shake her head in amused disbelief. At least they weren't actually trying to beat each other down as they had last night. This was obviously just for fun, more like an aggressive dance than a real fight.

After a few moments more of it, they decided to move on. Steve came down to walk with Estrella while Bucky disappeared somewhere behind them.

The trail was barely wide enough for Steve and Estrella to walk side by side, but they managed. He reached for her hand and she laced her fingers in his. This part of the path went uphill and she
began to resent Steve's effortless stroll while she had to breathe harder and her heart thumped loud.

"I could-" he offered.

"No. I'm normal, not disabled," she told him.

"Sorry. You've liked a ride before," he said.

"When it was romantic," she pointed out.

"Oh," Steve said.

There was sound and movement in the trees ahead, off to the side. Steve paid it no attention. Estrella knew it had to be Bucky if Steve was ignoring it. Their pace had slowed enough that she had a chance to look around them.

"There's a waterfall!" she said.

"That's where we're headed," Steve smiled at her.

"Are you planning my day again?" she wondered with happy accusation.

"I know you like water," he admitted.

Estrella smiled at him and brought up his hand to kiss the back of it. Steve smiled back, but he wasn't fully relaxed. She was unsurprised when he began talking in an apologetic tone.

"I'm sorry that I raised my voice at you and made you hurry out of the truck. I'm not as in control of myself as I should be. I was wrong to disrespect you like that."

She went along quietly until she had her words together.

"We're both changing. I know it's hard for you to control yourself when it comes to sex. Or food. Steve, you've been nothing but good to me. You let me sleep all the time when you probably want to do other things. You keep feeding me milk and ice cream and cheese because you want to help my bones heal. You made the effort to adapt to my voice and my eyes. The least I can do is try to be understanding when I ask too much of you. How can you think I would stay angry with you when you've been so kind and patient with me?" she asked.

"Alright. I can see that as fair. I'm still sorry that I was rude to you," he said.

"I'm rude all the time, and you forgive me. You and Bucky are rude to each other almost every time you open your mouths to talk, and nobody apologizes. Why do you think you should apologize to me?" she wondered.

"Because I wasn't only rude. I was out of control. Or barely in control, to be exact," Steve admitted.

There was another slight sound off to the side, and Steve guided her off the trail and into the rough toward it. She followed him without hesitation. The leaves and vegetation were thick, but she stepped carefully around and through it all as best she could.

"You can work on having better control, then. But don't apologize for being rude, as if you don't know me," she insisted.

Steve smiled at her while they walked, and she let him see that she was pleased that he understood. The sound of water rushing and gurgling through rocks drew her interest. Ahead through the forest
was a waterfall and a much larger stream than the little one she had leapt over before.

Their walk through the tangled, off-trail terrain was frustratingly slow. Steve kept his face carefully neutral and turned to wiggle his fingers behind his back at her. She let go of her pride and jumped up to accept a ride on his back.

"Getting to a waterfall is romantic," she said to justify changing her mind about accepting a ride.

"Whatever you say, doll," Steve said.

The idyllic scenery around the rocky forest waterfall made her forget to argue with Steve. He let her down at the edge of the water, and she wasted no time taking off her pants. The waterfall and its pool was a misty place of ferns and mossy velvet boulders. The water was clear and cold, and she had to get her feet in it.

"Should I strip down?" Steve asked with dry humor while he watched her struggle with her jeans.

"No. Somebody has to keep watch," she said.

"Buck's got that," Steve said.

Estrella looked to him and shrugged while she hopped on one foot to slip her shoes off. He leaned back against a tree and smiled. He wiggled around against the young sapling to scratch an itch at his shoulder and yellow leaves rained down around him. Estrella discarded her shoes, jeans, and flannel shirt. She squealed when she found out how cold the mountain stream water was, but it didn't stop her from wading carefully across the shallow bottom of the pool. Steve wondered if she planned to take a shower under the small waterfall.

She stopped in the middle of the pool, slightly more than knee-deep in the water. He could see her find her footing on an underwater slab of rock, and ideas tumbled in his head. Ideas for later.

"We have a hot tub at the tower, ya know. It has jets of water that feel really swell when your back is aching. You could use that sometime," Steve commented.

Estrella bent to look down into the pool. Her cupped hands scooped the water, lifting it and letting it flow through her fingers.

"Piped water isn't the same. It has no life in it. No wildness," she said.

Once again, Steve noted her particular delight at being in the water. What she said made sense, if he thought of water as more than a means to prevent thirst. The stuff he'd been stuck in for nearly seven decades and the stuff he'd swam in less than a week ago before a tropical storm was very different from what came out of his bathroom faucet at home. Water from the tap was small and powerless. Easily controlled. Maybe that's what she meant by saying it had no life and no wildness.

He let her stand in the water as long as she wanted to. They had enough time. Eventually she shivered and made her way back to him. She was gracious enough to take his offered hand as she stepped up out of the pool.

Estrella bent to pick up her shoes, jeans, and shirt. She hopped onto his offered back without hesitation this time. He gave her a ride to the meadow which wasn't far away. While she was still on his back, he laid out her jeans, then the shirt on top of them like a blanket. They'd done this at the beach, so she knew just how to slip down into his arms. Steve laid her on the clothes, then laid down beside her in the sun. Soon as he was down, Estrella rolled toward him and laid half on top of his chest. His arm held her across her back in a casual hug. He wanted to rest his hand on her
bottom, but he instead put it on the pleasing curve of her hip.

"My legs were getting cold. Mmmm. The sun feels good on my skin. Oh, God! Bucky's not looking at my ass, is he? Where is he?" she startled and half sat up.

She looked around in a hurry, but there was nothing to see except the colorful trees around the meadow.

"He's up somewhere. He probably can see your bottom if he wants to look. He likes pretty ladies. He used to, anyway. That's beside the point. You're my girl and he knows it. He wouldn't stare at you after a first little look," Steve said.

Estrella looked at him skeptically, but he knew Bucky well. It was creepy how well they knew each other. Bucky had never given her any feelings of sexual threat, and she was very sensitive to danger of that nature. If Steve said that Buck wouldn't act like a lecher toward her, then she trusted him enough to not worry on it too much.

Steve had chosen the leeward side of a rock ledge to lay them down next to. With shelter from the cool breeze, even the early morning sun was enough to warm them. She lay back down against him and hummed her contentment.

Steve had several things on his mind, but having her in his arms made most of them go away. He was content to bask in the last hours of his vacation time as mindlessly as he could. They were quiet for a while, and he secretly reveled in the feel of her curves against him. His fingertips played at the slight dimples on the back of her hips. He wanted to kiss her there, but for now, this would do.

"Have you ever had warm sunshine right on your…privates?" she asked.

"Naked? Not through any clothes?" he asked.

"Mm-hm. Naked," she said.

"Not exactly. It feels good through my running shorts," he admitted.

"You've got to try it on your bare skin. All the way from front to back," she advised.

"That sounds pretty exposed. Risky," he said, but the idea had already taken root in his mind.

"Your bedroom window gets good sun, and Jarvis promised me privacy," she whispered, as if there was anyone out and around to hear them.

"You can trust Jarvis, but I don't trust Tony, and Tony can override Jarvis," Steve said.

"But Pepper can override Tony," Estrella said and laughed.

"I didn't think about that. You're right," Steve said.

Estrella didn't mean it in the literal sense of the word. Pepper didn't force Tony to do things, or to behave better than he otherwise would. It was simply that Tony valued Pepper and he was usually careful about avoiding things that would set him outside of her good graces. The Iron Man suits were on the borderline, but the privacy of other people would be an absolute issue for Pepper. And thus, for Tony. Unless he thought he could get away with it. Steve had some evidence of Jarvis taking Pepper's directive instead of Tony's on occasion.
"And Jarvis would warn us of airspace incursions, anything like a drone or a news helicopter in the tower's airspace. Eya! I didn't think of that. I failed to take Pepper into account when thinking of Tony and Jarvis," Steve marveled.

Estrella smirked at him from her perch on one side of his chest. He couldn't help but think of her now, sunning herself in the nude, maybe right on his bed. Gosh, he was tempted to get his hands full of her bottom. His fingers twitched. He curled them and popped his knuckles, then set his hand back on her hip.

"You want my ass?" she asked him in a low, nasty whisper.

She was playing back at him for what he'd done with her earlier. A stream of fantasy rushed through his mind, of him grabbing her bottom as he'd told her to grab his. Then, of her grinding atop him as he'd done to her. Steve shook his head to clear it. Control. He needed to stay in control. It would help if he changed the subject.

"Eya, I noticed something about your eyes. I think it might be safe for you to look at people as long as you're happy and you don't want anything," he said.

She picked her head up and stared at him.

"Let me explain. I can feel that you want an explanation right now, so I'd have trouble not giving you one while we're looking at each other. Keep looking at me. Try to think that you're satisfied and that you don't want anything from me," Steve suggested.

Estrella worked out what he meant and tried it.

She was happy with Steve. She truly was. With him, she had everything she could want and more. There was nothing else she wanted than to be here with him right now.

"See? All I feel is happy while you look at me and think those thoughts. I bet that as long as you don't want anything and you aren't upset about anything, you'll be fine around people without your sunglasses. We can test it when we get home," Steve said.

She smirked at him.

"I'm not perfect like you are. I'll mess up," she told him.

"I'm not perfect. I practice. You can practice," he insisted.

"Shh. I don't want to think about all that right now," she insisted.

"In a minute. One last thing…" Steve said.

She frowned at him, but only for the instant it took him to shift their positions and put her under him. He made sure to block the sun from her eyes with his shoulder.

"Eya, look. You're not scared anymore. You let me get above you and you're not tense at all," Steve pointed out with a smile.

She reached up with both hands to rub her fingers through his hair, which showed as a bright golden halo around his head. Steve closed his eyes and moved his head in her hands with enjoyment for a moment, but then he looked down at her again.

"I trust you. I've learned to be comfortable with you. If Tony or Colin did this to me… no," she
decided more with her gut than with her mind.

"Stop talking down about the progress you've made. I think anybody would be antsy about having a strange person on top of them. I wouldn't tolerate Tony or Colin on me, either, and I'm not scared of contact with anybody," Steve pointed out.

Estrella could feel what he meant. While he lay carefully above her, their legs companionably intertwined, she felt no fear. Happiness and pride that she'd overcome something put a smile on her face. She could see that Steve shared in her feeling of accomplishment. He deserved to, because he'd played a large part in helping her get over her fears. Earlier, in the back of the truck, she'd been eager for sex with him, so she hadn't noticed this feeling of calm acceptance. Now that she could feel it with a clear head, she was pleased.

"What about Bucky?" she asked him.

"What about him? Do you mean if he would tolerate somebody getting over him? No way," Steve made a face and shook his head.

"No. I mean, would you be okay with him on you?" Estrella asked.

The question had started in her mind as a mere comparative curiosity, but it took on some kind of meaning as she waited for his answer. She could see him thinking, putting himself in that situation with Buck.

"Yeah, I'd be alright with it, but there would be a cause. Evasion, or cold, or injury. It wouldn't happen for no reason. What about you?" he asked.

His eyes were a little too wise and thoughtful for her to answer glibly. Whatever she was thinking and feeling about his relationship with Bucky, amorphous as it was in her own mind, he was onto it. She wanted to duck her face down and look somewhere else, but it would be incriminating to do so. For the first time, the power of her eyes was a liability to her. Her heart stuttered into nervousness. Steve's close scrutiny was merciless, even though he looked down at her with gentle friendliness.

"I can't lie to you. You'll see," she breathed.

She felt trapped. Mentally, not physically.

"It's alright. Try to calm down. You don't need to lie. I won't judge you, no matter how you answer. Let's try this… How would you feel about Buck getting over you?" Steve asked.

"No. I know he wants to keep me safe, but I feel what he is. He's too dangerous," Estrella looked at him and said with some relief. She didn't have to lie.


"You can feel all that?" Steve asked.

She nodded. Her eyes shifted away to look to the colors of the trees. He made her feel something she hadn't in a long time. When they'd first met, she'd been intimidated by his abilities, his enhancements, the things that made him different from normal people. As she'd spent time getting closer to him, it was his strength that had scared her. His physical ability was the obvious threat. But that wasn't all there was to him. His mind was too sharp and calculating. He'd figured out how
to use her eyes against her, and it was frightening.

"Eya," he prompted her.

His hand petted her hair aside, away from her face in an attempt to soothe her nervousness.

"What?" she whispered.

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling betrayed by her body.

"I can't stop thinking. Sometimes I figure out how to use things, even when I'm not trying. I love you. You're not any kind of enemy or competitor to me. I won't take unfair advantage of the things your eyes show me. I have no motivation to use it against you, because you're not my enemy. Sweetheart, you don't need to fear being honest with me," Steve said.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This felt like another burden to carry. It was a weight on their relationship caused by their respective enhancements. She loved him so much, but she wondered how deep her vulnerability was going to have to be with him. Was loving him worth giving away all her defenses? All her advantages? Any other man, any man of normal intellect and perception wouldn't be as overwhelming in his power. Any other man wouldn't have power over her at all, other than physical strength. That much, she was used to.

Estrella laughed at the irony. All along, she'd feared she was going to make a slave out of him. She'd feared that the nation's golden boy would become a useless puppet of her whims. Maybe that wouldn't happen.

His will was strong, and getting stronger all the time. Steve had resisted her best efforts at seduction once, but she wasn't done healing. She knew her appeal to the male sex would grow much stronger. Could his will and intellect keep up? Could he find strategy to keep her subdued? A hot thrill bloomed in her mind. She turned speculative eyes and a mildly predatory smile to him.

"Are you sure we're not competitors?" she asked.

Steve lost what temporary advantage he'd had over her. Instead of seeing what she felt and feeling confident in that knowledge, her imagination caught and trapped him. She was thinking deeply naughty things. A sort of sexual challenge blazed in her eyes, and something in him roared up to rattle the bars where he kept things safely locked away in his mind.

A stuttering breath squeezed out of him, and his eyes narrowed.

Challenge. Reward. Devotion, sacrifice, ecstasy. The possibility of it all was there, in her. He wanted it all, but not without a good fight.

"Sweetheart, you can't even take me yet without gettin all teary-eyed. You're gonna have to up your game if you want on the field with me," Steve said with a cocky smile.

He got to his feet and pulled her up with a smooth tug that popped her into the air and landed her on her feet. Estrella gaped at him when she allowed herself to believe that Steve Rogers had just said something so sexually playful and aggressive.

She wanted to laugh, but she couldn't draw enough breath to do so. All the while that she put her pants and shoes back on, she fought a thrilled grin. He looked far too confident, but it was a good look on him.

"I'm not done yet," she told him while her heart raced at the thought of playing with him.
"Neither am I," Steve said.

As they made their way to the northeast, Steve could feel himself coming down from the high freedom of vacation. For a while, he and Estrella sat in silence on the bench seat of the truck, lost in thoughts as the miles went by. The promise of intimate adventures kept them both aroused and hyper-aware of each other until Bucky snorted at them and Estrella punched his arm.

"That wasn't very smart," Buck commented as she shook her hand and scowled at him.

"People aren't supposed to be made of metal," she grumped.

"Heh. Life ain't fair, doll. Some of us get upgrades. Deal with it," Buck snarked back at her.

"I miss the company of women, or maybe just non-enhanced people," Estrella said under her breath.

Steve smoothed his palm against the inside of her knee, intending to comfort her, but she hissed a breath and shifted her leg in a way that was unintentionally suggestive, inviting. She grunted in frustration, then pressed her face to his arm in embarrassment when Bucky chuckled.

"You people are hilarious to watch. You love each other, right? Get to the priest. Why torture yourselves?" he suggested.

"It's not that easy, Buck. There's things to consider. We're not ready yet, if we ever will be," Steve said, his voice low with warning.

"Alright," Buck said lightly.

It took some time, and Steve steadily getting grumpier about returning to work, before Estrella relaxed enough to fall asleep against his arm. Bucky looked at her.

"What?" Steve asked.

"She sleeping?"

"Pretty hard. Her neck's limp. I have to keep a muscle in the back of my arm tense to keep her head from sliding," Steve said.

Buck got out his phone. He turned it on and selected a number.

"Stark," was all he said when a pleasant receptionist greeted him.

"Hold, please. May I ask who is calling?" she said with practiced courtesy.

"I will take this, Miss Culver," Jarvis' voice smoothed into the call.

A moment later, Tony got on the comm.

"Barnes," he said.

"Keep it quiet. The girl's sleeping," Bucky requested.

"Alright. What do you want?" Tony asked quietly.

Steve's brow tensed at the barely veiled animosity in his friend's voices. It hadn't been there when
Bucky had come to the tower before. Tony had been all charm, then. Of course, he'd been too hungry and troubled over his recent recon mission to pay close attention to Tony and Buck's interactions. Apparently he'd missed a lot.

"Steve thinks I should stay at his place. I wanna know if you're gonna kill me in my sleep if I take him up on it," Bucky said.

"Come on, Barnes. I'd never do that," Tony said.

Steve relaxed a little. Then there was a pause. A silence. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

"That's too easy. I'd gas you in the elevator and watch you choke. Or I could lock you in the shower and boil you to death. Or I could get a flight gauntlet on you and drop you a thousand feet. That would be better. It's more like what you deserve, isn't it?" Tony asked with deceptive civility.

"Yeah," Buck agreed.

"Tony, that wasn't him," Steve said, disappointed.

"Did he murder your mother, Rogers? If he didn't, maybe you should keep out of this," Tony said.

Steve felt like pulling the truck over and stopping. He didn't want to go any closer to New York, if this was how Tony felt about Buck. But Estrella was sleeping, unaware. Changing the motion of the truck might wake her to hear the awful things that were sure to be said.

"I'm not going to insult you with an apology," Bucky said.

"Don't waste our time. Let's cut through all the mundane shit. They made you into a machine. Machines have codes. The only thing that would make this okay is if you give me a kill switch. Do you have one of those?" Tony asked.

"No. All I have is the opposite. They'd take me out of cryo, say the words, and give me a mission. I was on until the mission was complete. No kill switch. They didn't want a kill switch. That would be mission failure," Bucky told him.

"The words, then. We start with that and reverse engineer it," Tony said.

"I have them. I can't look at them, but I know they were in a journal. I have the journal," Bucky said.

"That. And your arm. If you live under my roof, I know everything about it. I own the rights to replicate and improve it," Tony said.

Tony said nothing. It was clear that if Buck wouldn't give, then the situation was unworkable.

"Banner," Bucky said.

"Buck, we'll find somewhere else to live. I don't want you to do this for me. Tony, will you give me clearance to come back to the tower and get my things? I won't bring Buck," Steve bargained.

"No," Bucky said, "You turned yourself in to the Feds for my work, and I didn't want that. None of
us wanted it. Suck it up, Steve. This is how it works. The rest of us get our turn at the sacrifice play. It's my decision. If you're not okay with it, then you're still a self-righteous little prick."

Tony made a thoughtful grunt.

Steve scowled and gripped the steering wheel harder.

"Romanova has oversight with the journal work. Banner looks at the arm," Bucky said.

"And if you twitch in the wrong direction, especially toward people I care about, I end you. Instantly, and by any means necessary," Tony demanded.

"I'll agree to that-"

"Buck, no," Steve protested.

"-but I want it negotiated. It has to be conditional," Bucky finished.

"No," Steve said.

"Agreed," Tony said, "Hand over the journal to Romanoff as soon as you get back, and you meet with Bruce in the morning. Rogers, he goes straight to your place and he doesn't come out until he's going to Bruce for a diagnostic on that arm."

The call ended. Bucky put away his phone.

Estrella made unhappy sounds and shifted against Steve. Steve gritted out a pressurized breath and glared at the road.

"Don't cry, angel-face. I'm not giving up as much as you think. I need it this way," Buck said gently.

"I'm not crying," Steve grumbled in protest.

"Then fix your eyes, 'cause they're leaking. What's the matter? Don't you trust Stark? Banner? Natalia?" he asked, nothing more than a low murmur when Estrella moved again restlessly.

"Tony isn't completely reliable. Because of his childhood, he's susceptible to guilt manipulation and to vengeance. He can be arrogant and unwilling to see from any perspective but his own. He's got a certain amount of integrity and fairness, but he's too close on this. It cuts too deep. I thought he understood, but I was wrong. I didn't know he felt that way, Buck, or I never would have suggested that you bunk with me. He's great as a friend. I wouldn't want him as an enemy, and you opened yourself up to him," Steve pointed out.

"Not completely. I negotiated," Buck said.

"That's not enough. He's got Jarvis and Pepper, and Bruce is his friend," Steve argued.

"It's enough for me. Whether he knows it or not, Stark is working for me on this. I need a diagnostic and some deprogramming. Of the few teams out there who could do it, I hate yours the least. I walked into this with my eyes wide open. I'm ready for it, so shut up and get out of the way," Bucky said.

"Is that how it is?" Steve asked.

"That's how it is," Buck assured him.
Steve drove on into the evening. Bucky let him think for a while, until he could hear Steve's heartbeat even out into calmness. The girl was going to wake up soon. They had little time left to talk privately.

"Hey, pal. How's this for guilt manipulation? I know you feel bad because you think you let me fall. If you're gonna be a dumb chump about that, then let me twist the knife a little. I need something from you. Are you hearing me?"

"Yeah, Buck," Steve said with a measure of dread.

"I'm not always steady sane. There's bad days. I gotta fix it so that nobody has words they can use to turn me back into what I was. Don't just get out of my way. I need you to help me do this, and I need to see some life while it's doing. Don't slow down with your girl. I get a kick outta how she twists you. I wanna see where it goes. Gives me something good to think about, instead of all the nightmare shit in my head," Buck explained.

"Alright. I hear ya. I can do that, if you're sure. But..." Steve said.

"What?"

"She was worried about you looking at her. When we were in the meadow, ya know?"

"I heard. It was cute. No worries. I won't be a pervert until I'm myself again, and that might be a while," Bucky smirked.

Finally, Buck saw the smile he was waiting for. He'd known things were going to be rough with Stark. He'd known that Steve's kind-hearted naiveté was going to take a beating and leave him messed up over the negotiations. If he'd gotten that smile out of him, then his feathers were smoothed enough. Stevie wouldn't smile as long as he was still chewing on something sour.

"When we get back, I'm gonna hand over the journal and crash at your place. I'm beat. I'll have Jarvis send me some food, and I want to be left alone. Give me some peace and quiet, will ya? I'll start my duty with the girl after I see Banner," Bucky requested.

"Sure, Buck. You don't need to be on call all the time. She's safe in the tower, anyway, unless something strange happens," Steve said.

They smiled a little. Strange things happened all the time. It went without saying that things were only safe until they weren't.

It was full dark by the time Steve had to negotiate the truck in city traffic. Estrella was quiet and glum. It was creepy that Bucky smiled at her kindly as they turned into the parking garage at the tower. She made an effort and smiled back at him. He laughed a little and touched her nose with a silver finger as they parked.

"You're worse at hiding your feelings than Steve," Bucky said.

"Who says I'm trying to hide them?" Estrella asked.

She surprised both men by tugging Buck into a brief hug. He hunkered over sideways to her and made a sound of surprise.

"Thank you, Bucky," she whispered at his ear, then she let him go.
Buck murmured something gruff and unintelligible, and he dug in his ratty bag. He stuffed in his gloves, and took out a leather-bound journal.

Natasha had come to meet them. She stood outside Bucky's door. The way she looked made Estrella feel uneasy. She wasn't smiling.

"I can back out of here right now, Buck. It's not too late," Steve said.

"I want this," Buck said, and he looked at Steve so that his friend could see the truth of it.

Estrella knew that something was going on, and she kept quiet. They didn't need her getting in the middle of things, and it seemed like it was already settled, anyway. The look that Steve and Bucky exchanged was focused and deep. It made her uncomfortable.

Steve nodded. He touched the unlock button on the door panel, and Bucky opened his door and set one foot on the concrete outside, making himself intentionally vulnerable to Natasha.

"Behave at least a little bit, toots. I need to get some shut-eye," Bucky said to Estrella.

"Go away," Estrella told him. She held a stern face for a moment, but then she smiled slightly. Bucky turned away from them and got out to join Natasha. He handed her the journal and shut the door of the truck. Steve and Estrella watched them walk away toward the elevator lobby. Bucky held his pack over his right shoulder. His side was wide open for attack, and Natasha walked near him on that side. Estrella admired his shoulders and the kind of scary way he walked, as long as he wasn't walking near her. The fingers of his left hand twitched, closed into a fist, then loosened again. They went inside the glass doors and got into the elevator that waited for them. He and Natasha were talking as the doors closed, their mouths moving in syllables that Estrella couldn't make sense of.


"I don't know if you knew, but Buck killed Tony's parents when he was under compulsion from Hydra. It wasn't his fault, but he feels responsible for it anyway. He's negotiated with Tony for a kind of truce. He's trusting himself to Nat and Bruce and Tony to handle him," Steve explained.

"Is that good?" Estrella asked skeptically, "He was wearing that ugly iron bracelet for a reason. He wants to be punished."

"I trust Bruce and Nat to be fair and disinterested. Not Tony. Not with this. But Buck says he wants it. It's his choice and I have to respect it," Steve said.

"Then we can be watchful. Get him out if we need to," Estrella said.

Steve nodded, glad that she understood so easily without a lot of explanation.

They sat in the parking garage, in the truck. Neither of them wanted to get out. Steve let his worry about Bucky ease from his mind. Nothing dramatic was likely to happen tonight. Buck now knew that Tony was susceptible to manipulation. Buck could be sly and subtle. Steve had hope that Tony could be won over to seeing reason and the truth of things, beyond his understandable emotion about his parents.

Steve turned his attention to Estrella.

"I don't have words for how much I enjoyed our time together, Eya. If I could, we'd get away all
"It's only eight-thirty. We've still got the evening. You don't have to be him yet," she said with a little smile.

Steve moved their seatbelts out of the way, then he gathered her close. She giggled. For some reason, the closeness they'd shared on vacation seemed too showy and public, here among their friends at the tower. She imagined Jarvis and his cameras everywhere. She liked and trusted Jarvis, but it wasn't the same as knowing they were on the open wilds of the beach, and had surveillance confined to a phone they could tuck away out of sight. She ducked her face down into Steve's neck while he kissed at the exposed curve of her shoulder. She kissed him back, but she didn't want to bite and mark him as she might otherwise have done.

"Don't do that," Steve said.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Don't change the way we are because we're back here. Bite me if you want to," he told her.

"Really?" she whispered.

"Do it," Steve said.

She opened her mouth onto his skin and sucked and bit at him as she had learned to like. His resilient skin and the firm muscle underneath made a satisfying grip for her. She licked and sucked at him, and Steve groaned at the joyful thrill of it. His chin and jaw rubbed from her shoulder to her neck, barely careful to stay gentle enough.

"You need to either grow your beard or shave. Shadow looks good, but it's sharp," she said.

"Mm. Can't stay in the truck forever, but we can come back to it," he said.

His teeth opened and he glided them along the same path on her skin. Estrella shivered this time and shrugged him away. She didn't want him to see that his teeth scared her. He was too strong, and the thought of him biting down was beyond thrill and into fear.

"You mean we could sneak down to the truck like teenagers? Do what we did this morning? With Rosie?" she asked.

"Yeah," Steve said on a hot breath.

"I think you're going to have a hard time finding you-know-who to make him go to your office tomorrow. You're like a teenager now," she smiled.

"Good. Let's go. There's probably something to eat up in the kitchen. I'll come back later and bring our stuff up," Steve said.

"Food and sex. Definitely a teenager," Estrella giggled.

"You bet. I've got til midnight," Steve reasoned.

He pulled her from the truck. They held hands, and he hit the lock button on his key fob. They both looked back at the truck as they walked to the elevators. It was sad to leave it.

"See, I told you I needed a truck. I'm glad I bought it," Steve said.
"You're right. Steve, wait! Your shield and your uniform. Shouldn't you at least bring your satchel up?" she asked just before they stepped into the elevator.

He stopped walking and dropped her hand. For a moment, he took on the posture of a dutiful soldier and she was sad to see it. He pivoted on his heel and jogged back to the truck. She stood by the elevator to wait for him. Steve was quick to get his satchel from the backseat. Estrella waited until he was walking back to her, then she teased him with a pose that brought a smile to his face. She walked out to meet him a little ways and used a particular cadence to her step.

Steve grinned and two-stepped her backwards into the elevator, one hand at her hip, and the other holding his satchel over his shoulder. He dropped the satchel as the doors closed and used both hands to lift her bottom onto the hand rail.

"Mmpf!" Estrella exclaimed.

He was large and hard against her and her hands gripped at the backs of his shoulders simply because she wanted to. He kissed her hard and deep enough to make the back of her skull grind against the wall. Halfway up the tower, they stopped kissing to breathe. Steve bent to get his satchel. He held her to him and carried her across to the other elevator which would take them all the way up.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I do need some direction of where you mean to go," Jarvis said.

"Drop off my bag at home. Where is everyone?" Steve asked.

"An impromptu party has gathered in the common room. Your friends are eager to greet you upon your return, should you wish to meet them instead of lingering in the elevator," Jarvis said.

"Home, then common room," Steve said.

"If you are certain, Sir," Jarvis responded.

They ignored Jarvis in favor of holding each other close while they could. Steve touched his forehead to hers and stared at her as if he was afraid of losing her. Estrella met his gaze for as long as she could, and kissed him in between. His lips were delicious and she didn't want to let them go yet. She knew he was willfully defying the call of becoming the Captain just yet, and she was determined to help him.

They stumbled out of the elevator and toward the door to Steve's suite.

"Miss, I will not be able to allow access to his suite as long as you are with him," Jarvis pointed out.

"Undo it," Estrella told him.

"Sir? You had good reason for the protocol at the time," Jarvis reminded.

"The protocol no longer stands. Estrella needs to be able to get to Bucky, whether I'm there or not," Steve ordered.

"Yes, Sir," Jarvis confirmed.

Steve pushed open the door to his suite and Estrella followed him inside. The place was comfortable, familiar, and exactly the same as he'd left it, but with Buck's boots discarded in the hallway.
Steve set his satchel down against the coffee table in the living room. It was dark, except for the low glow of the city lights that made it through the window. He turned to Estrella and picked her up again. He began to lower her onto his hips, obviously intent on kissing her again.

She shook her head.

"We can't stay, Steve, please. I've thought of us, just like this in the dark. If we stay, I'll need-" she whispered.

"Alright. I won't tease you too much, sweetheart. I'm hungry, anyway," he agreed.

They hurried back to the elevator. Estrella used the brief moments to run her fingers through her hair and to straighten Steve's shirt. She couldn't do anything about the fullness in his jeans, or the fast fading bite marks she'd left on his neck. He wasn't wearing the kind of shirt that would hide much. The way he looked at her with a knowing smile told her that he didn't want to hide, anyway. He was kind enough to help her by wiping away a stray smear of lip gloss. He knew she wouldn't want to show off the beard rash at her shoulder, so he used his fingers carefully to arrange her hair over to that side for cover.

The elevator doors opened behind him. They could hear the voices of their friends and of something on the television. Estrella bit her lip, then gave him a gentle push toward the doors. She saw a hint of sadness on his face, but he put it away quickly and laced his fingers in hers to bring her along with him. The large room was so much more refined and posh than what they were used to for the past few days that Estrella felt out of place for a moment. Steve pulled her to his side and smiled at her. He dropped her hand to put his around her hip. She reached to smooth a bit of his hair that was sticking up in the front, but it wouldn't stay down, so she gave up trying. He looked like an untidy, rowdy version of Steve Rogers, nowhere near the impeccable, respectable Captain.

Thor and Sam were first to greet them and welcome them home. Sam was smoothly gregarious as always and Estrella felt comfortable in his presence. His eyes flickered over her once in friendly male appreciation. It didn't bother her. She knew she looked different and that men were bound to notice. Someone had taken the time and attention to raise Sam properly and she was made to feel admired rather than assessed by him. If she ever met his parents, she wanted to compliment them.

Thor had been in her family's house and he'd helped Valeria. She gave him a smile and he happily bent for her to kiss his cheek when she tugged at his hand. She might have felt uneasy with someone knowing where to find her family, but it was Thor. If anything, she felt more secure knowing that he could get to them quickly, if need be.

Jane smiled at her shyly and came to claim a place under Thor's arm. She murmured a quiet greeting to Steve, but her eyes seemed to resist looking at him. Estrella reached out and squeezed Jane's hand briefly. Their eyes met and Estrella felt better about the pretty scientist than her first impressions of her had been.

"How do you keep him fed? If he's anything like Steve, it's a never-ending task," Estrella commented of Thor, to have something to say. She felt out of practice on her small talk, but it worked well enough.

"He tends to seek out food on his own. Sometimes, if he remembers, he'll even bring some to me," Jane said with a smile.

The guys had fallen into their own conversation, which left Estrella to socialize with the women nearby.
Darcy lingered near Jane. She gave her and Steve a cheeky grin and a wave. Her eyes stuck a 
moment too long on Steve, but then they assessed Estrella. She could hardly blame the irritating 
woman. Steve was difficult not to look at, especially since he was engaged in conversation with 
Sam and Thor and not attentive to frown at what Darcy was doing.

"You've been eating your Wheaties. Your hair is divine. How did you get it to grow so fast?" Darcy 
asked.

Estrella could see a resigned social politeness in her. If Darcy was determined to make nice, then 
she could, too. She was careful of her eyes, to not look too long at Darcy. She didn't want to 
communicate her thinly veiled distaste for the woman. It was time to make amends, if they could. 
She instead looked at Darcy's luxuriant hair in return.

"I don't know. It happens that way. I've been eating like a hog. I had to buy new clothes. Home was 
nice, but the thrift shops aren't the same," Estrella looked down at her plain jeans and blue shirt.

"I know, right?" Darcy said in her best imitation of friendly.

Darcy popped her gum with a snap and studied her for a moment. Her imitation slipped, and 
Estrella was fine with that. Honesty was good, too. Steve paused in his conversation and looked 
down to Estrella attentively.

"We haven't eaten in hours. There's take out. You wanna?" he asked.

She nodded. Before they turned away, Darcy's eyes snagged on the faint bite marks at Steve's neck.

"Hey, Cap, you've got, um," she waved a finger at her own neck to indicate.

"I know, Darcy. I was there when it happened. I'd appreciate it if you don't call me that tonight," 
Steve said warmly.

Estrella couldn't suppress a giggle, and then Steve steered her away toward the kitchen.

Bruce sat on a stool at the bar by the food. He looked rumpled as if he'd only recently pulled 
himself away from his lab. He briefly glanced at Steve and nodded a greeting, then he reached 
over the bar to get a sandwich off of a tray. He passed it to Steve and took a moment to look at 
Estrella. Steve didn't like the intent way Bruce looked at her, but then he reminded himself that 
Bruce had been in charge of Estrella's medical care recently.

Bruce's attention touched on Steve's neck and the bit of Estrella's shoulder that was visible through 
her hair. He reached out to capture Estrella's pinky finger. He lifted her hand to study where her 
scuffed palm should have been, and then noticed the faint bruising around her wrist. He lifted an 
eyebrow at the two of them.

Estrella moved closer to his side and leaned in to speak at his ear.

"It's not what you think. We were in New Orleans yesterday. I wanted to touch the river, so Steve 
held me out where I could get my feet wet. Have you seen it? It's not like I could wade in. It was 
fun," she explained.

"I've seen the Mississippi. If I didn't know Steve, I'd say that was a risky thing to do. You're 
Alright? With him?" Bruce asked with only a little awkwardness.

She felt Steve step away to go into the kitchen, leaving her alone in a quiet spot with Bruce. His 
kind, intelligent eyes delved deep, looking for an honest answer. Bruce always had a quiet intensity
about him which she usually found comforting. Normally he was distracted with his work and she liked that he was a man who focused on something other than sex and male posturing. Tonight, she couldn't look at him for long. His nostrils twitched a bit, and she looked at his shoulder instead. He'd forgotten to take off his lab coat.

"He struggles sometimes, but he's strong. He doesn't hurt me, if that's what you're asking," Estrella told him quietly.

"That's good. Are you shy because you smell like sex, or is there something else?" Bruce asked. Estrella looked to him in shock, then quickly away again. She'd forgotten that they'd made a mess of themselves and neglected to shower. She didn't think anyone would notice.

"I didn't say that to embarrass you. Some of us have enhanced senses. Me. Thor. Natasha. Probably Barnes. Clint's eyes are good, but the rest of him is normal. Steve knows and he's playing a game with all of us tonight. He's acting like a ballsy kid, showing off. I can't say I blame him. He might be counting on us to not mention it to you, but I thought you should know. We're all adults here, so I don't think anyone minds," Bruce told her.

Estrella looked to her feet and wished she could just walk away, but there was more to say.

"I forgot about my eyes when I listed for you the things that would change. They changed while I was gone," she whispered.

"They changed? They don't look any different, except for the surrounding bone structure of your face, as we expected. How did they change?" Bruce asked.

Estrella bit her lip, then she let him see. She couldn't help that her eyes were wide. For a beat longer than three seconds, she looked at Bruce over the glasses which had slipped down his nose.

"That's interesting," he said a breath after she looked away.

"Why are you afraid of me now? Or have you always been?" he asked.

"No. Just now. I don't know why. I don't think my eyes are working like they used to. Instead of making people react, all they do is give my feelings away," Estrella whispered.

"That's just us, I think. I felt compelled, but I'm used to resisting. Your eyes probably work like they always have. Try them on Tony. He doesn't make an effort to resist much," Bruce suggested with a smile.

"I'm angry with Tony," she denied.

"Tony is angry with Barnes. You should leave it for them to sort out," Bruce said.

Estrella looked up to see that Natasha had joined Pepper and Tony, Steve and Clint in the kitchen.

"I'm gonna go. I only came to see how the both of you were. I'm glad that Steve has been good to you. Go and see Doctor Kalfey when you can. She'll want to get your weight soon," Bruce said.

Estrella nodded and watched him indirectly as he left. Bruce passed close to her when he got up from his stool, and she stepped back to give him space. He gave her a shiver, and she didn't know why he would be different tonight. She went to the kitchen to seek out Steve and Natasha.

She barely had time to greet Pepper before Natasha stood in front of her. Tony and Clint would
Natasha's eyes looked her over with laser scrutiny. No polite social distance kept her away. Her hands came up to comb through Estrella's hair once, and Nat smiled at her with pride. Her strong fingers got a grip not far from her scalp and tugged. She shook her only a little and she smirked at their inside joke.

"Are you going to make me go away, now that I have enough hair to grab?" Estrella asked.

She was surprised to feel warmth in her face and a hint of tears on her lower eyelids. She'd missed Natasha. The way Nat looked at her like a proud big sister made her emotional.

"If hair pulling doesn't work for me, why would it work for you? You look healthy. You smell healthy," Natasha commented with a knowing smile.

"Bruce mentioned it. I didn't know that other people would notice," Estrella repeated by way of apology.

Nat let go of her hair and smoothed it down. Her hands rested on Estrella's shoulders. She felt that it was best not to look at her, despite how Natasha studied her closely. Once again, she felt like a bug with a spider, but the spider was friendly. Welcome. Natasha always felt safe, even when she made her angry.

Estrella looked up when Steve came to stand close behind Natasha. His greater height and mass should have made him look menacing, especially with the stern look on his face, but Natasha was unafraid. Steve looked at neither of them, but down to the side. He slowly, gently took Natasha's hands off of her shoulders. Nat turned her head and gave Steve a dismissive eyebrow.

"Ease off, Nat. It's too much for her right now. We just got back," he said.

"You made sure to mark her. You don't want me to appreciate it? Or am I supposed to appreciate her mark on you?" Natasha asked him.

"He's mine," Estrella said suddenly.

The words left her mouth before she could think not to say them. Natasha stepped aside from between the two of them. She looked smug. Clint was smiling at her, but that happened all the time. Clint often found humor in things about Natasha that nobody else understood.

"I know he's yours. That much is clear," Nat said.

Once again, she got the feeling that Nat was proud of her, instead of put out with her clumsily blurted claim. She pushed Estrella's hair back behind her shoulders and walked away to join Sam in front of the television.

Clint smiled from Steve to Estrella and Steve couldn't help but smile back. Clint always seemed more goofy than anything else to Estrella, so she watched him go to the living room to settle beside Natasha. She frowned curiously after the man. His sexuality felt muted. As if it was held in reserve or directed far away. She would have thought that Clint was for Natasha, but he wasn't.

"He likes you," Steve said as he took his place at her side and urged her into the kitchen.

"Clint?" she asked.

"Yeah, Clint. He's the most intimidating of all of us, but he's all smiles for you," he told her as he
fixed a plate of things he knew she liked.

"Clint? Intimidating?" she asked again.

Steve made a mock-serious face and nodded. She knew he meant it, even though his humor played it off as trivial.

"Oh, yeah. If you ever see him when he's not smiling, you'll understand."

"If you say so," Estrella agreed.

"You look lovely," Pepper said to her with a warm smile.

She was graceful and charming, in contrast to a cranky-looking Tony.

"Thank you. I can't take credit for it. Steve has been making sure I eat, and he brought me to get my hair and nails done," Estrella said.

"I hope so. It's the least he could do," Pepper chuckled.

"Not all of us have… Tony," Estrella said.

She didn't mean her words as an insult, but then she was flustered and uncertain if they had come out that way. She looked sheepishly to Steve, then to Tony.

"You're almost as socially awkward as he is. Do you two actually talk to each other, or do you just make out?" Tony said, and pointed a finger back and forth between Steve and Estrella.

Steve's jaw tensed, and Estrella narrowed her eyes at Tony for upsetting him. She didn't care if Tony wanted to insult her, because she wasn't happy with him anyway, but Steve didn't deserve it.

"Anthony," Pepper warned him with one dire word.

"You want me to be nice. They brought a killer into our home and you want me to be nice," Tony pointed out flippantly.

"You're responsible for more indiscriminate death than James Barnes ever was. You manufactured weapons, Tony, and they got away from you," Pepper pointed out.

"Yes. And that's worse because Barnes is a very discriminating killer," Tony said with flat sarcasm.

"Pepper, it's alright. I understand," Steve said to her and then to Tony, "You've got every right to feel the way you do."

"Thank you for your permission to feel the way I do," Tony said.

"Tony, can I get you a drink? Or a fat lip, maybe?" Steve asked with fatigued tolerance.

"Yeah, if I can get if from the same place you got yours. You gonna let your girl chew on me?" Tony replied.

Steve's jaw jutted forward in a refusal to dignify Tony's words with a response.


He thought about doing so, but then he had another witty remark, this time for the girl. Tony turned
to look at Estrella, and he got stuck with his mouth open until she looked away from him.

"She just said 'Tony, I love you, but I hate you, go to bed.' With her eyes," Tony insisted, as if he was tattling on Estrella to Pepper.

"Then she's thinking the same thing I am. Come on," Pepper encouraged him. She gripped his arm and tugged Tony away from the kitchen. He must have really been tired because his dignity bristled, but he let Pepper take him away.

"I'm so sorry," Pepper mouthed to them over her shoulder.

Steve shook his head as if it was nothing.

"You're very kind to him," Estrella complimented Steve on his restraint.

"Not always. He's tired and he's feeling down. I'll give him a break this time, as long as he's fair to Buck," he said.

Steve grabbed another sandwich from the tray and Estrella ate from the plate he'd served her.

"I knew they would smell us," Steve eventually admitted when he felt everyone in the living room was distracted watching the movie.

"I'm not surprised," she said.

"You're not angry with me?" he wondered.

"No. Bruce said that no one minds," she told him.

"That's interesting," he said thoughtfully.

"That's what he said about my eyes," Estrella said.

Steve looked to her sharply.

"He wanted to see. You know he's fascinated by unexplained aberrations. I felt bad because I was afraid of him and he saw it," she admitted.

"Oh. That's not so bad. He'll forgive you. He understands things like that and he's used to it. Why were you afraid of him when you haven't been before?" Steve asked quietly.

"Because he smelled me. He smelled us, and part of him was interested. I was afraid of him because of it. He saw that too," she said.

"That's a little more complicated. He left, didn't he?" Steve asked. He looked out of the kitchen to the living room, but he already knew.

Estrella nodded.

"You don't have to worry about Bruce. He would go away before he let himself hurt any of us," Steve assured her.

"I believe you," she said, and he could see that she did.

They ate for a few moments, and then Steve found them drinks and glasses.
"I want to sleep with you tonight," she said.

"I'd like that too," Steve smiled at her.

He looked wistful about the idea. She could already see him starting to pack away his overt sexuality and his sense of fun. Tony and Bruce were responsible for that.

"But you won't let me, will you?" she asked.

Steve set down his drink and moved to stand beside her instead of across from her. He leaned against the countertop and she let him take her glass. His arms were inviting and she went into them. She liked the way she felt spooned in front of him. It was different from being face to face. It was more like a hug, and less like a confrontation with expectations. It was how he held her at night when they slept.

"If you're with me, then I'll want to take my time in bed with you in the morning," he spoke beside her ear, "Then I'll want to have coffee with you, and then breakfast. After that, I'll be late for my meetings, so I won't feel like going in."

"I distract you from your work," she said.

"In the best way. You distract me so much that I don't wanna go back to work at all," Steve said into her hair.

"You're needed," she said.

"Tell me that you need me, Eya," he said with quiet fervor.

She wrapped her arms atop his where they hugged her. She turned her head so that he could see her eyes.

"I do need you. So much. When there's time for us, I need you. Away from Bucky, away from Natasha, away from Tony and Bruce. I need you," she told him.

"We'll make time. I promise," he said.

"Are you saying that because I want you to and you're looking at my eyes?" she asked.

Steve turned his head slightly and looked past her cheek, at their wrapped arms.

"No. We'll make time. I can tell you that without your eyes making me say it. I've got a lot to do, and things will be in our way. I'll still make time for you," he assured.

"Okay, but I don't want to go to bed," she told him.

"What do you want to do?" he asked her.

"I love dancing with you," she said.

Steve stood up from his slouch at the countertop. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and thumbed at the music app. He selected a country music playlist that he'd put together while Estrella was sleeping in his arms in the back of the truck, and started it playing with the volume on low. He turned down the lights in the bright kitchen so that only the light over the stovetop showed them how far they could wander without bumping into the cabinets.

They danced in the kitchen and held onto each other and to the moment for as long as they could.
Sam and Darcy eventually walked in on them when they got up to find beer. Steve only slightly tilted his head and opened his eyes to look at them. Estrella kept her head buried against his chest, her hips in an undisturbed blissful pattern with his as they glided over the tile floor.

Sam smiled at them and quietly grabbed beer from the fridge. Darcy stood and stared until Sam tugged her away. Steve picked Estrella up when she started to wobble, and he carried her to Nat's suite. Natasha noticed and followed him.

"Jarvis, let us in," she told the AI, but she didn't permanently disable the protocol against Steve's access.

Nat watched from the bedroom doorway as Steve laid a sleeping Estrella on her bed, stripped her to her underwear, and then tucked her under the covers. He set her necklace on the night stand and put her phone beside it. The way he was reverently respectful of the girl, even when she was exposed and nearly naked, told Nat all she needed to know.

Natasha followed him back out of her suite and into the dimly lit hallway. Steve leaned against the wall outside her door and laid his head back to shut his eyes.

"This was good for you," she eventually said into the silence.

"I don't want it to be over. I don't want to be him again, yet," Steve said.

"I can see that. You've been in denial all night. You should talk to Clint," she said.

"What does he know?" Steve asked.

"You should talk to Clint," Natasha repeated with a little smile.

The quiet stretched out between them again. If he felt the need, Steve decided he'd talk to Clint someday. Nat was being cryptic about why, exactly, but he'd play it however felt right.

"How are you going to reel this in for the office in the morning? You can't show up with sex hair, bites on your neck, your eyes blown and your dick hard. That's not fair to anyone and it's going to mess up team dynamics," she said.

"How so?" he wondered.

"Don't play dumb with me, Steve. You know that half of us want to fuck you. It's distracting. Put on your big-boy pants and get it under control," she told him.

"I will, when I'm him again," he assured.

"I know you don't want to talk about things, but please tell me that you used the condoms," Nat said.

"I used one of the ones I got from Thor. Sort of. You gave her condoms?"

"You bet. There's no way you only used one. You better have used more than one," she threatened.

"No, just the one. We didn't have sex, Nat. I used one for long enough to let her find out that sex is going to hurt. I know I'm not small, but she's not a virgin. Why did it hurt her like that? I was on the bottom and I had her do everything. I talked her into lying still and trying to relax. She didn't move any more than it took to find out that it hurts," he said.

"Connective tissue damage from past abuse. Scar tissue can form during healing, and then it pulls
painfully afterward because the scar tissue is stronger than the undamaged tissue. It has to be stretched and worked like burn scars for it to ever feel okay again," she said in a voice that sounded sad and tired.

"Ah, God. I already killed them and I want to kill them again," Steve said. He sank down the wall and wrapped his knees in his arms.

"You killed them? What about Creed and Barnes?" she asked.

"Buck covered Estrella. Me and Creed finished it. I don't care about that right now. Nat. Scar tissue? Are you saying that she can't enjoy sex because of what they took from her?"

"I'm saying that it takes time. Patience," Natasha said.

"And you know this because it happened to you," Steve said.

"It's a job hazard," she said dryly.

Steve reached out and took her by the arm. She could have avoided him. She could have fought him. She didn't. Steve pulled her down to him, then he folded her up and tucked her inside the cage of his arms and legs. She had another chance to hurt him, but she didn't take it. He tipped her against his chest and belly and tucked her head under his chin. She closed her eyes and practiced her breathing.

"You should give your sympathy to her," Nat said.

"I will. Has anyone ever shown any to you?"

"You're a bleeding heart, Rogers. I don't need your sympathy," she said, but she didn't push to get loose of him.

"You don't need my sympathy, but what if I want to give it? Can you shut up and let me bleed on you?" he asked.

She lay quiet and let him do whatever it was he thought he was accomplishing. She didn't want to feel his body around her like a shield again. Every time he did it, it was harder to forget. Every time he laid it on the line for her, she lost another little piece of the few she had left. It would help if he was excited and hard and she could know that he did these things because he was only a man. He wouldn't even give her that much. He was soft. Calm. He'd been hard all night since he got home, but he was soft for her now.

"You ever been raped, Rogers?" she asked, just to make him squirm.

"Once," he admitted.

"Who the hell could hold you down?" she snorted.

"It was easy to hold me down, back then. Nothin to it. Don't tell Buck. He'll lose his mind," Steve murmured.

Natasha stayed quiet, except for the slightest hitch of her breath.

"What, you're not gonna tell me I'm a lucky bastard because some brawny dame wanted at me?" he wondered in his own version of toughness.

"It wasn't a dame, or you wouldn't be afraid of Buck finding out," she reasoned.
"Doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. I only mentioned it 'cause you asked. Nobody's ever asked me that. Who would? If anyone tried with me now, I'd break 'em off" Steve said with a wicked rumble in his chest under her ear.

Nat sighed.

"You're like Peter Pan. You'll never grow up. It's not always about them getting off. Sometimes it's about your pain and humiliation instead of their pleasure. Sometimes they use things that won't break. Steve, you can at least know that when they got to her, they weren't trying to hurt her. They didn't hate her. They were only thinking of themselves. It doesn't change the fact that she got hurt, but at least they were mindless. They didn't get creative with it. She had that mercy," she said.

As she spoke, his body got hard around her, but not his dick. She knew he'd be angry. Worse still, she knew he'd eventually figure out that he was the one who should lose his mind because of Bucky, not the other way around. Hydra spared nothing when it came to breaking a subject and making them into a machine.

She wanted to assure him that she would be kind to Barnes with the mental reconditioning, but now was not the time. If she even mentioned Barnes right now, when the subject was rape, he would get it.

She decided to send him off with humor, instead. Embarrassment, if he chose to make himself vulnerable to it.

"As much as I love the smell of your super-soldier spunk, do you think you can let me up? I'm tired and I've got an early morning," Natasha said.

Steve laughed and spit her out like a roll of hay from a hay baler. She was pleased that he could laugh. He was making some progress. He didn't look happy. He looked resigned and ready to think about work in the morning.

She rolled to her feet and offered him a hand up. He took it and even let her pull him to his feet.

"That was counter-productive," he said, "like wasted blood."

"I told you I didn't need your sympathy. Maybe someday you'll believe me," Nat told him as he walked to the elevator.

"Nah. It's like you say. I've got plenty blood to spare," Steve assured her.

He blithely wrote off his own sacrifices as he got in the elevator, but he turned to look at her. He paused and held his hand at the edge of the door which tried to close.

"I know you have to do what's needed, but do you think you could take it easy on Barnes? With what's in that journal?" Steve asked.

"I know what James needs. I'll go as easy as he wants me to," Natasha promised.

Steve made a pained face, but he left Nat for the evening. She was capable and she understood, probably better than any of them, what she would find in Buck's head.

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End Note:

This chapter felt iffy to me, like I relied too much on sex. Plot is important, too. Please let me
know what you think. Oh, and my beta is out of commission right now, so if you see any errors please point them out to me so I can fix them.
Chapter 48

Author's note: I need to express my deep gratitude to Cotton Blossom Diva. She's supported me through this dry spell when I really didn't feel like writing. Too much craziness going on in our country right now. If you're the praying kind of person, please say a few words for the U.S. that we can all pull together and show some love and understanding, no matter what side of the divide we inhabit. We gotta have some unity and faith in the future, y'all. Not gonna let bitter people keep us divided! I wasn't even thinking about writing, I was so bothered about things. But then Cotton Blossom Diva gently drew me back to it with kind reminders and reviews. This chapter is for her. Thanks a bunch, wherever you are! ;-

Steve was concerned about how things were going between Buck and Bruce in the lab. He'd wanted to at least go across to Nat's place to give Estrella a hug this morning, but there wasn't time. While he went down to the business levels, his skin felt starved for her touch. He was glad that his office attire at least partially hid his longing.

He had to force his mind to turn away from thoughts of Estrella, but he managed to be professional as he entered the room where the Avengers usually met for briefings and planning sessions. Estrella didn't need him right now. Buck could get by without him too, he told himself. He felt focused, but on the wrong thing. While everyone else was turned away chatting by the coffee station, he mentally redirected the intensity he felt away from thoughts of his girlfriend and toward his duty as the Captain.

It was easier than Steve would have thought to slip back into the required mindset to get his job done. Their efforts as a team were critical and time-imperative today, especially in light of the meeting with the FBI and the Rangers tomorrow. It felt good to focus on business.

He listened to Maria Hill and to Natasha briefly go over the details of the few important things he'd missed while he was away on vacation. Clint briefed him on some new security concerns that he and Tony had discovered about the tower, and Steve kept that information on hold in his mind to take care of as soon as he could. They spent over an hour conferring about the remaining Hydra facilities which awaited their attention. Bruce and Maria had found some promising leads which might help them to find Loki's scepter. Sam updated him on information he'd gathered from a fact-finding trip to D.C. Thor had nothing new to contribute, but he listened intently.

Tony was antsy, which wasn't unusual. What internally annoyed Steve was that the man kept sending him pointed looks which he couldn't determine the intent of. Tony was probably dying to get down to Bruce's lab and learn about Buck's arm, but Steve gained a certain satisfaction in requiring his presence here with the rest of the Avengers. He was eager to get done with old business and on to more urgent matters, and he wasn't going to let Tony's quirks distract him today.

Steve dismissed Maria and her agents when their old business was done. He waited until the door shut behind them before he spoke. Everyone looked to him when Steve let the moment linger longer than was comfortable. They knew why he'd sent the Intelligence team away. Everybody looked at least a little guilty except for Sam, who was justifiably disgruntled.
"You sent Sam away on busy work while the rest of you acted without my knowledge or approval. I appreciate your desire to help Estrella, but this was a legal overreach and we all know it. We can't act as judge and jury against people unless those people are engaged in criminal acts. The men who attacked me and Estrella in Texas deserved what they got, and we can make an easy argument for self-defense. Beyond that, a lot of people died who may or may not have ever approached Estrella. Explain to me how we're going to justify an unprovoked head hunt on the streets and in the prisons," Steve challenged them.

"Are you saying that these were good people, or that there was no threat against Estrella?" Tony asked.

"You know I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that the Avengers will not seek to assassinate people based on our personal agendas. If we do that, we're no better than the mafia. It could be argued that running this kind of op makes us a criminal organization," Steve told them.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Tony muttered.

"Drop the false outrage, Tony. You knew he would react this way before the op was planned, because you sent me away. You all know I would have told Steve what was going on behind his back, so you kept me in the dark. Why the hell am I the only one who thinks it was wrong to wipe out a group of people who hadn't done anything yet?" Sam challenged them.

"Because you're new to this business. You're naive. So is Steve, despite his age," Natasha said.

Sam made a flatly unimpressed face at her, but he kept his thoughts to himself out of respect that she was probably right. They were all a bit surprised when Thor had something to say.

"Natasha is correct, but so is Steven. A clear and specific threat was present. It required action. Steven's virtuous sense of justice, as well as the brief duration of his absence, did not allow for the depth of planning and intrigue which would have been otherwise appropriate," Thor stated.

Tony waved a hand to indicate his agreement with Thor. Clint offered no indication of where his opinion lay, but this wasn't about opinion anymore. It wasn't even about right or wrong anymore. It had come down to damage control.

"What makes you think that you couldn't have told me the information you had, and that I wouldn't have taken action myself? We didn't have to do a rush job of this. I would have enjoyed being part of it and doing it right. I could have thought of a better plan," Steve said.

Sam was uncomfortable with the hard look on Steve's face and the lack of emotion in his tone. It seemed that Steve was saying he would have enjoyed taking the time to personally destroy the men who were a threat to Estrella, but that couldn't be right. The Captain didn't work like that. No version of the Steve they knew worked like that.

"That's precisely why we agreed that you shouldn't have any part in it. Doing it right meant getting dirty in this case, and we didn't want you to do that. We didn't want you to call law enforcement and give them a confession, either," Natasha pointed out.

The implications of Natasha's words made Steve angry, and he clenched his jaw against saying anything petty. He couldn't stop the heat of his anger from rising to his face, nor did he try to hide the depth of the slow, deliberate breaths he took to calm himself. Tony's eyes widened a little at the sight of their leader pushing the limits of his shirt and jacket with the expansion of his chest. Thor smirked at him, proud of Steve's self-control and also subtly taunting him to let go of it. Very carefully, Steve unclenched his hands to rub his fingertips back and forth on the smooth, cool
The breaking of wood was always therapeutic. The explosive tear of splinters was satisfying. It would feel great to break the table. Or to flip it at them. Or to give the long piece of ebony wood a sharp blow and to thrash the broken halves to the ends of the room. Tony's surprise that he could get so angry prodded at him. Thor's knowing smile prodded him. Clint's complete lack of response prodded him. Even Sam's genuine concern prodded his anger. Above all, Natasha's statement that she didn't want him to get dirty prodded him.

They all thought he was a creampuff. A naïve creampuff, apparently. Steve had nothing to prove. If that's what they thought of him, that was alright. He could competently do his job no matter their opinion of his 'virtuous sense of justice.' Insult aside, it was clear that there was at least one misunderstanding which needed to be corrected.

"I will not remain in a position of authority in this organization where I am held responsible for our results if I am going to be denied information and approval of operations. Nor will I, as a man, be denied the opportunity to seek vengeance for my woman. If you go behind my back again, you'll need to find a new leader," Steve stated with quiet calm that was all the more unsettling because it was clear that he was angry.

"You'll take your ball and go home?" Tony taunted.

"I'm not a tyrant, Tony. Any of you could lead. If you don't like my leadership, I'll be happy to step down. But as long as you want me to lead, that's the job I'm going to do," Steve said.

Clint finally showed some emotion and gave him a faint smile and a nod. Everyone else watched him as if he'd pulled a monkey out of his ear. He looked at his team until it was clear that he meant what he'd said.

"I make my own mistakes, and I claim them. In the eyes of this nation and its people, this organization operates under me," Steve tapped his finger at the tabletop, "I allowed you to make this mistake because I trusted you. So I own it. My next order of business is figuring out how to deal with the repercussions of our actions. If you want to assist in that with honesty and integrity, then stay. If you think I'm going to lie and hide what we've done, then get the hell out and submit your resignation."

Tony showed a rare expression of submission and lowered his head because he knew he wasn't the kind of leader that they needed. Steve patiently waited to see if anyone wanted to leave. His friends stayed with him. He looked to Natasha. As much as she'd done for him, he couldn't be soft on her now. Her fingerprints were all over this operation. It was clear that she'd lost control of it near the end, but she'd started it.

"My honesty and integrity may need some guidance, but I'm with you," she said.

"What about Barnes?" Tony asked.

"Barnes was compromised from the beginning. He never should have been brought into this operation. It was personal for him, and you knew that. His mental state is still too rigid to operate without at least preliminary supervision, especially in a theatre involving noncombatants. I'm disappointed that you thought he was the appropriate agent to get this done," Steve said.

"He was the best agent to get this done. He and Jarvis were the perfect team. With Jarvis' ability, and with whatever Barnes has in that arm, they were unstoppable. No one else would have been able to pull something off so cleanly under that level of surveillance. Barnes is the best deep-
stealth killing machine we've got. It was magnificent. Then you had to go full boy scout and fuck it up," Tony said.

Steve gave himself a count of three and chose to overlook the cold-hearted assessment of his friend. Stark was sore about having his parent's killer in residence and he needed some space to deal with that.

"Reality mucked it up, Tony. Technology is not perfect, and it never will be. Jarvis isn't God. He was unable to compensate for random variables, and that shouldn't have been overlooked. It's always the variables that push the mission beyond acceptable parameters. It's my habit to build in allowances for those variables during planning. This op was too tight, and your planning left no room for variables. I got caught," Steve said.

"You're going to sit there and bitch after what we did for you and Estrella? This op was golden, and you know it! We could have falsified records for the registration of that ridiculous truck when the street cam caught you. One word to Jarvis, and he would have done it," Tony said.

"Jarvis knows me better than you do. He knew I didn't want to lie, and it's not fair to ask Jarvis to falsify records," Steve said.

"Listen to you! You're implying righteousness to Jarvis that he doesn't have. He's got parameters, but he's a pragmatist. He'll do what's necessary. You're an idiot to not use him as he's meant to be used," Tony said.

Steve said nothing. He let Tony's words sit there naked to be judged as they would. Tony glared at him, clearly blaming their situation on Steve's unwillingness to bend the rules. Steve was thinking about what Jarvis was and what he was not. Tony opened his mouth again, possibly to preemptively refute what Steve was thinking, but Natasha beat him to it.

"Shut up, Tony. Steve's right. If this was the kind of organization that I used to work for, you would be right. But you're not, and I'm glad you're not. We messed up, and now we have to fix it," she said.

Steve accepted her admission as a near-apology and chose to ignore Tony's pent-up disagreement.

"My plan for tomorrow is to hit them hard from the beginning and keep them on their heels. What do you have to add?" Steve asked anyone who had ideas.

Buck followed Jarvis' mostly wordless directions to Bruce Banner's lab. There were work stations for multiple staff members, but the lab was empty except for the two men. Banner said nothing into the quiet of the morning, but he gestured his coffee cup toward a comfortably padded exam table.

"I'm not lying down on that," Bucky said.

"You can sit or stand. Whatever you feel like. Anything works as long as I have access to your arm," Bruce said.

The smaller man turned his back and clicked at some files on his computer. Bucky walked closer and read what he could of the open file on the display. It was a blank medical form, waiting to be filled. Banner wasn't stupid. He was giving him some time to ease into the morning's work.

Bucky walked over to the exam table and sat on it. He tugged his borrowed shirt off over his head and dropped it to one side of the table. Bruce glanced aside at the voluntary exposure of so much
skin, then his brows went down when he saw the irritation. Buck wondered if the doc even cared that no one approached him uninvited and in a hurry like this. Probably not. Bruce pulled the long arm of an exam lamp over and flipped its switch on. Its bright light and warmth bathed over Buck's left shoulder almost as strong as sunshine.

"You've got healing, right? Why does this stay red?" he asked.

"You tell me. It's always itched. It burned in the beginning, I think, but I'm used to it now," Buck said.

"If your healing ability is anything like Steve's, then this is extreme, chronic inflammation. Your skin would be blistered and ulcerated if you weren't enhanced. 'Itchy' doesn't begin to describe this. You've learned to ignore the pain as a coping mechanism, but it still hurts," Bruce said.

Bucky shrugged.

"Pain doesn't matter. Get on with it," Buck told him.

"You're in my lab. I'll decide what matters," Bruce muttered, but he was distracted by looking at Buck's irritated skin.

The closer to the interface of his metal arm, the more inflamed his skin was. Under magnification and good light, the skin right at the interface of his metal arm was nearly blood red, and Bruce observed degradation and healing going on in a constant process. That took a lot of metabolic energy to maintain.

"How are you not hungry all the time?" Bruce asked.

"I am. Are we getting somewhere useful with this, or is this a routine medical check?" Buck asked crossly.

Banner's close scrutiny and the bright light were bringing on strong associations to being strapped into the chair and worked on, despite the differences in circumstance. His heart sped up slightly and he shook his head to clear it of unpleasant thoughts. This lab was high above ground, cheery daylight was streaming into the windows, and everything was clean, bright and modern. No restraints, either. That helped. He still wasn't able to fully relax.

Bruce stepped back some and looked at him.

"You can't hurt me, Barnes. Fast as you are, my transformation begins faster. I understand if this is causing you anxiety, but you don't need to worry for the sake of my safety. Are you alright to continue, or do you need some time?"

"I'm fine. Call me James. Anxiety doesn't matter. Get on with it," Buck said.

Bruce turned and picked up an electronic device from a tray of tools. When he got in Buck's space again, Buck did his best to ignore him. The doc took his left wrist and glided the device slowly over his arm. It made little crackly sounds that were almost silent near his hand, but the sounds turned into a constant static hum as it moved up his arm to his shoulder.

"Radiation poisoning," Bruce said to him.

"Yeah, so? It's only beta particles. The radiation comes from inside, from some kind of power unit. I think I saw them change it out once. The metal of the arm and a shirt is enough to protect people from exposure, as long as I keep the bands laid down smooth," Buck said.
"It's not enough to protect you. We should make you a new arm and get this one off," Bruce said.

"That's not what I'm here for. Do some more diagnostics. Use everything you've got. I've been too brain-whipped to pay much attention to this thing. I need to know if it's any kind of danger to other people," Buck told him.

Bruce kept his opinion to himself and set his rad meter down. He put pressure on the underside of Buck's wrist until the metal arm was held straight out from his body.

"Jarvis, full scan please," Bruce said.

"Scanning," Jarvis' voice said from somewhere.

Bruce stepped away to watch the glowing blue schematic that appeared in front of him. Buck could see that it was his arm, displayed in incredible detail, increasingly complex in layered schematics as the scan captured more information.

He clenched his jaw against a sense of wrongness at letting somebody get information on him. His training was to eliminate anyone who got intel on him, and to then seek and destroy the data. He didn't. This was weakness. This was humanity. Allowing these things was dangerous, but these were good people. Steve's people. Bucky forced himself to peacefully comply, even with a lack of physical restraints to make him do so. He could get up and walk out of here, he reminded himself.

"Please demonstrate a full range of motion," Jarvis requested.

Buck did so, and also flared the metal bands open in a ripple down his limb so that it could be understood how the parts moved. The sound of the activated arm made him tense the rest of his body in readiness. That sound was associated with fighting and killing in his mind. Or with painful technical adjustments without the benefit of anesthesia.

"Fascinating," Bruce murmured as he swiftly manipulated the multi-page schematics of details.

"Yeah. What can you tell me?" Bucky asked.

The glowing blue images were moving, but didn't appear to be getting any more complex, so Buck let his arm fall. The scanning part was probably done. Banner ignored him and instead flicked through images.

"Hey," Bucky barked.

"Sorry. There's a lot to see," Bruce said.

He grabbed the ephemeral frame of the display and swiveled it around so that he could see his patient through the images.

"The mechanics are impressive, but not surprising. I suspect it's made from a lesser vibranium alloy, not as pure as Steve's shield. It's been damaged over the years, but there's not as much wear as I would suspect for any other known metal or alloy. I'll try to get a sample for analysis. The nervous system interface is much more interesting. Here and here," Bruce pointed out something bright and dense displayed deep in the center of Buck's arm, "The larger mass is the power source. They didn't make any effort at shielding. I don't know what the other thing is. We need to find out," Bruce said.

Bucky nodded. As he'd suspected all along, the diagram showed metal running deep into his body. His left arm didn't end at his shoulder. All the way into his spine, his bones were spliced with
metal. There were lines on the diagram that went from inside his arm, to his spine, and into his brain.

"Are those hardware connections?" he asked Banner.

His finger touched the display and accidentally changed it, but not before Bruce saw what he meant.

"Yes, but the nervous system splice isn't what you would call 'hard.' It's not metal or cables. It's an advanced material, durable and discreet. That level of med tech shouldn't have existed back in the forties. Do you know what this is?" Bruce asked.

He pointed to a small shape lower down in the arm, not far below his elbow.

"No," Buck said.

"I knew that a diagnostic was going to create more questions than it answered. Do you want me to dig deeper, or leave it at this for the day?"

The way Bruce asked the question implied that there was a choice.

"Stark wants to know more. So do I," Buck answered.

Bruce frowned thoughtfully while he closed out the blue display. He turned off the exam light and pushed the tray of instruments away from Bucky.

"I know what Tony wants. I'll admit that I'm curious too. Jarvis is keeping data for me, but one of my contract conditions with Stark is that my data stays separate from his. I don't expect you to trust me, but ethics is one of my hang-ups. I've got to tell Tony something, but I don't have to tell him everything. You can choose what's disclosed to him," Bruce said.

Bucky grunted skeptically.

"I want Steve to know it all. I don't want Stark to know enough to make a duplicate."

Bruce smiled a little and cocked his head down to look at him over the rim of his glasses.

"You should know that Tony's probably got a functional mock-up of your arm in his lab already. I'd bet he imagined how it worked before you ever came to us. Anything we show him now would only enable him to refine his model, possibly improve on it. If we find anything unique I can limit the proprietary details I give him, but with so much as a hint he'll figure things out and run with that, too. You came to the wrong place if you wanted to keep that arm all to yourself," Bruce said with a fond smile.

"Eh, whatever. What do you gotta do to dig deeper?" Buck asked.

Bruce's fondness for Stark enthusiasm faded away into the frown he wore while he internally debated ethics.

"You flared the bands open. Is that the only way to get inside the arm? Are there no access panels? No ways to slip the entire casing off?" Bruce asked.

Buck shook his head.

"It's all one piece. Interlocked. To work on the inside, they had me flare it and then they used spreader clamps to hold it open," he said.
Bruce recalled the nervous system schematic of the arm. Fine nerve filaments were embedded along the length of every band of metal, and all those filaments flowed to a central synthetic nerve pathway which then went through his shoulder and to his brain. His metal arm was probably nearly as sensitive as his natural arm. He winced.

"It hurt when they did anything inside," Bruce guessed.

"Like a bitch. It helped for me to be outta my head when they worked on it. Compliant," Bucky admitted with a faint sneer.

Considering that James thought of chronic radiation poisoning as a mild itch, those were strong words.

"I'm not willing to cause you that much pain solely for the sake of exploration," Bruce said.

"I am. Do it," Buck said.

Bruce made a face that probably was meant to be stubborn, but ended up looking dorky with the way he pushed his glasses up in a hurry. He turned to a cabinet against the wall and unlocked it. Inside were vials of liquid, carefully labeled. Buck could read the labels from across the room, but it was no drug he'd heard of before.

"I can give you a general anesthetic, but I'll need to keep you on a constant drip. What I've got here is enough to kill anyone but you, me, Steve, or Thor. It's a risk. I'll leave it up to you," he said.

"How many times do I gotta say 'do it'?" Buck asked.

He turned his body, lifted his legs, and laid himself down on the padded table. He reached over, grabbed the exam light, switched it back on, and angled it to focus on the bend of his flesh arm. The look he gave Bruce was impatient.

Bruce blew out a breath that fluffed his hair. Then he got to work. Bucky lay quiet while he scrubbed the bend of his elbow and took a blood sample. Then he inserted an IV drip. He tried to explain everything he was doing to his patient, but Buck waved a metal hand at him.

"Don't care, doc. You can shut your trap about it. Jarvis is taking notes, right?"

"That is correct, Mister Barnes," Jarvis said.

"My names is James, byte-wipe. Use it," Bucky grumbled.

Bruce was quiet after that. He asked Jarvis for an accurate body weight on his patient, minus the left arm. He carefully and gradually administered anesthesia and monitored James' vital information while he gathered instruments.

Bruce felt cautious, but quietly excited about the prospect of getting inside the arm. Tony would be insanely jealous!

James Barnes wasn't of delicate health as Estrella had been when they'd repaired her heart. He was probably as robust as Steve. As long as his vitals stayed stable, there was nothing to worry about. James was lying with his eyes open, staring into unfocused distance. A sharp medical clamp applied to the skin over his ribs elicited no pain response.

"Zha 'spose t hurt?" he slurred.
"Yes," Bruce answered.

"'M goood," James told him.

"Alright," Bruce agreed.

He kept the box of liquid anesthesia vials nearby and got to work on spreading the metal bands of the left arm near the internal structures he meant to explore. A grunt pushed out of his patient when he inserted a delicate tool between two metal bands, but that was all. His heart didn't fluctuate in pain response, so Bruce proceeded.

It was easy to lose track of time while he worked at something new and mysterious. Bruce dutifully monitored his patient's well-being and switched out anesthesia as the liquid was consumed by Bucky's metabolism. He began to better understand the depths of Hydra's manipulation and sadistic tactics as he saw processes in place which had no purpose other than to cause pain or failure. The metal-to-flesh interface of the arm was wired directly to the power source in such a way as to cause a constant low-grade electrical shock sensation. Bruce angrily disabled the irritant. Wasn't beta poisoning enough?

The Hulk was on a steady growl in his head as he finished up. Pain was irrelevant to them, but it was distracting like a buzzing fly. Even the Hulk felt sympathy. As Bruce gently replaced the internal components he'd had to move aside, he saw something that was not like the other things. It was an ampule of liquid, nearly depleted. It was impossible to tell what the dark liquid was without disconnecting it and likely spilling the last of it in his effort to get a sample. There was no labelling and no indication of what it was. Only its placement in the underside of James' upper arm gave him any hint that it was meant to be a biological component, not a mechanical one. The tiny filament of tubing it was attached to lead into the organic part of James' body.

Bruce muttered curses in Hindi. He walked away and retrieved a delicate instrument from a protective case. Just before he put the tip of the instrument near the ampule of mysterious fluid, he removed the cap covering its probe. One careful swipe, and Bruce capped the instrument and set it down.

He did a quick exploration of the lower arm. It was packed tight with incredibly intricate engineering to give James realistic manual dexterity. Tony would want a closer look at that, but there was nothing unexplained or dangerous there. Bruce removed the anesthesia from the IV and then took the needle and tubing away from James' arm.

Bruce cleared his work space. He properly labeled his samples, and then he waited for James to metabolize the last of the anesthesia. The door to his lab opened, and he recognized Steve's respectfully quiet footfalls.

"What's happening?" Steve asked as he approached the exam table.

"We wanted to do a deeper diagnostic, and it required anesthesia. We haven't even used this stuff on you yet, but it worked well enough," Bruce said.

He indicated all the empty glass vials.

"Nnnnggh-ffss," Buck groaned.

He blinked his eyes and he shifted them to look at Steve, but that's about all he could do.

"Heya, pal. Looks like Bruce found a way to take the edge off for ya. Thanks for being a guinea pig," Steve said with a smile.
Bucky blinked at them hard and made an angry sounding garble in his throat. His arms twitched in an aggressive way, and Steve pushed Bruce back from the table.

"He's confused. If you've got anything irreplaceable nearby, get it out of here," Steve said.

He stripped off his suit jacket and tossed it toward an empty work station. Bruce moved all his bio samples to the records room and closed the door. By the time Bruce returned, Steve had James on the floor and locked into a strange looking hold. One of his legs immobilized the metal arm, but he held his friend's head and torso firmly in his arms. It looked brutally controlling and intimate at the same time. James was waking from the anesthesia more fully. His awareness manifested in powerful jerks and straining against Steve's hold.

"It's me, Buck. Doc had to look at your arm, and you're waking up. That's all this is. You'll come out of it soon. Talk to me," Steve encouraged his friend.

"Mrrrd-duuu!" James growled at them, and his eyes shifted around frantically.

He flailed at Steve with his flesh arm. The impact of the blows on Steve's body made Bruce wince in sympathy, but Steve didn't react. He held firm and murmured something soothing and unintelligible near James' ear. The metal arm strained and whirred, but the thick muscles of Steve's thigh hardened to hold it immobile. Bruce looked away and steadied his respirations to bring his heart rate down. Steve had this under control, or he would be calling for backup.

"Whhdya do t'me?" Buck yelled, his voice still garbled.

"You wanted the doc to look at your arm. He had to sedate you to do it. You're coming out of sedation, that's all. It's just me. Just Stevie. C'mon. I know you know it's me. Ya tried to call me Angel-face when you saw me. Calm the fuck down and quit fighting me, Buck," Steve said.

Bruce barely noticed Steve's use of an expletive. He was on edge enough, not for his personal safety, but for the thought of a mentally unstable James Barnes running loose in the tower. His lab equipment was a secondary concern. James breathed harshly through his teeth. His thrashing slowed. He forced out something that sounded like a laugh, then he groaned again.


"What the fuck did he do to my arm?" Bucky finally asked clearly.

He was still agitated, and Steve didn't let him loose, but Bruce could see that they weren't struggling at each other anymore. Steve looked up and across to Bruce. So did James, but his eyes conveyed anger and distrust rather than Steve's simple curiosity.

"There was something wired wrong in there. I thought that its only purpose was to cause you pain. I disconnected it," Bruce told him.

Steve nodded slightly. He knew that Bruce wouldn't have done anything malicious, but Buck wasn't as trusting.

"Put it back," James insisted.

"You want the pain?" Bruce argued.

"It didn't hurt. It's all wrong now. Numb. You gotta put it back, doc," James demanded, sounding petulant and distressed.
He gave a final resentful shrug, and Steve tensed around him again.

"I got my head on right. You can let me loose," Bucky said.

"Yeah?" Steve asked in a way that obviously had some shared meaning between them. James paused before he answered.

"Yeah. Just get him to put my arm back like it was. You make him do that, Stevie. No joke," Bucky said.

"I got it. Hop up on the table again. Bruce, get over here," Steve said.

"He needs anesthesia for this," Bruce said, but he moved forward to do what they wanted.

"No. Do it now," Steve insisted.

Bruce frowned. He got a fresh set of instruments and reset the exam light.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," James chanted impatiently.

"I need access to here," Bruce said to them, "and it's going to hurt. Open up the bands and hold still."

He indicated a spot in the inner bicep of the metal.

Steve stood at the head of the table and trapped Buck's arms behind his head. Buck chuckled through the grimace of discomfort that his arm was causing him. It was a reversal of roles from their night at the strip club, except this was a lot less fun.

"Hurry up," he said, and he caused the arm bands to ripple open where Bruce indicated that he needed access.

Bruce corrected the angle of the light, and moved in with his instruments to reconnect what he'd undone.

"Aaaaagh!" Bucky yelled as soon as the metal probe touched the inside of his arm. Bruce pulled away and scowled.

"Fuck, doc, are you using stainless for this? Oh, God, you are. Stevie, you gotta get your fingers in there and hold it open for him. Skin isn't near as bad as metal," Buck told them.

"Whatever you need," Steve agreed.

He let go of his grip on Buck's arms and instead carefully put fingers into the space Bruce was trying to access. It felt wrong to put his fingers into the arm, but he did what was required. The metal bands kept trying to close around his fingers and it pinched a bit, but he held open a clear work space for Bruce.

"Hurry up, doc. I'll try to be a good girl and stay quiet," Bucky said.

Bruce could hear the trepidation in his voice. As soon as his path was clear and he could see well, Bruce reached in with his instrument and reattached the connection he'd undone. For the several seconds it took to get it done, James whined slightly when he exhaled. Soon as the connection was made, he went limp with relief. Bruce stepped back and Steve carefully removed his fingers.
"Blessed Mother, that stung!" Bucky said.

"I don't wanna hear language like that! Not from anybody," Steve admonished with a strong frown.

"What? I meant it. I wasn't taking in vain. You don't even know, punk. **Fuck,**" James insisted.

He sat up and shook his metal arm as if it was a real fleshy appendage that had fallen asleep.

The drama appeared to be over with. Steve nodded his thanks to Bruce. Bruce eased out a slow breath.

"I'm sorry. I thought I understood what I was seeing. I didn't mean to hurt you," he apologized.

"No harm, no foul. You fixed the problem. Did you learn anything while I was out?" James asked him.

Bruce smiled at the man's easy forgiveness.

"I took some samples and did some exploration. Give me until tomorrow to write a report, and you'll know what I know," Bruce said.

"Sure," James agreed.

He reached for his discarded shirt. While he was pulling it on over his head and had his face obscured, Steve roughly shoved him off the table. James laughed and went with the move, then tugged his shirt into place and stood beside the table.

Steve toed off his polished office shoes and stepped onto the old fashioned weight scale that was to one side of the room. With the way Banner went over to look at the indicator weights when Steve was done sliding them, Bucky knew this was a routine thing for them.

Bruce wrote the numbers down on a paper he kept in a drawer near the scale and he looked meaningfully to Steve.

"You think I'm done yet?" Steve asked.

"I don't know how you can pack that much weight into the amount of space you're occupying. If you're not done, you're going to need new clothes again. You probably do, anyway," Bruce told him.

Steve sat where Bucky had been. He laid his hand on his knee and turned it so that his fingertips were exposed. It was an odd thing to do, so Buck figured it meant something. Banner went to search a drawer, and he came back with the little white instrument Bucky had seen before. There was a quick snap of a blade to get a drop of Steve's blood. Bucky looked on curiously. Bruce checked the reading on the instrument, then showed it to Steve.

"Your free testosterone is high. How do you feel?"

"I'm alright, but I could use a workout. While I was away I tried to do something to take the edge off every day. I think I'm learning to cope," Steve said.

He didn't want to share the details of what Thor had told him. Not even with his other friends.

"This kind of T reading is only a little short of crisis level for you. Five percent higher is where you were when you got yourself in trouble last time. Are you sure the girl is safe with you?" Bruce asked him plainly.
James gave a soft snort of laughter, but he waved their attention away when they looked at him.

"Estrella's been safe. I'll get away if I don't trust myself. Why did you run off last night, Bruce? You could smell her. She said she showed you her eyes. She was scared. Then you left in a hurry. What was that about? Is she safe with you?" Steve turned the question around at Bruce.

Bruce sighed. He used to get lonely when he was on the run. Lately, he often thought fondly of the solitude of those days. Living among so many people here, so many friends, felt stifling and intrusive sometimes. Some of the interpersonal exchanges were more than he wanted to deal with. This felt like being a parent. Maybe it was what it was like being the parent of an enhanced teenager. He stepped back until his backside rested against the countertop opposite the two supersoldiers. He wanted what space he could get, as long as politeness kept him here to explain uneasy things to them. To Steve. He glanced at James.

"He can hear it. He moved in with me to keep her safe. He needs to know," Steve said.

"Alright, but tell her too. I'm not explaining this more than once," Bruce insisted.

Steve nodded. James managed an attitude that was serious without being menacing.

"The scent of sex on her was interesting, but it wasn't that. She's more attractive now, but that's not it either. It's her eyes. I hate to say it this way, and I hope you understand… Her fear is an aphrodisiac. If her eyes are meant to influence people, then – " Bruce said.

Steve stepped down from the exam table and took a purposeful stride toward Bruce. Bucky was quick to get in front and in his way. He set a shoulder against Steve's chest and pushed back.

"Simmer down and think with something other than your dick, T-boy. What the doc says makes sense. If she's angry, you wanna apologize. If she's happy, you wanna laugh. But if she's scared, you wanna-"

"Defend her, Buck. I'd want to defend her. Her fear isn't an aphrodisiac. I'd want to beat down anybody she's afraid of," Steve said stiffly.

"Yeah, but what if she's afraid of you? What then?" James asked.

Bruce was thankful to have an intermediary to help Steve get over his immediate gut reaction. He could see Steve seriously considering his friend's question, instead of dismissing it out of automatic denial and discomfort. Steve was always honest and courageous, even when it came to looking into himself. Few men would willingly go there. It was easy to see when he understood what Bruce and Bucky meant about the girl showing fear. Steve's eyes squeezed shut and he turned his head down in shame.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Stevie. It's nothing but instinct. Dumb male stuff. Thrill of the chase. You're so high-minded most of the time that I doubt you allowed yourself to notice it. Has she been afraid of you since her eyes started doing the feely thing again?" Buck asked.

Bruce was mildly fascinated with the deeper look into how these two people worked. They were both ruthless and gentle with each other at the same time. James brought out a part of Steve that they hadn't known was there. Steve had always kept a moderate emotional decorum around the rest of them, but he wasn't like that with Barnes.

"No. She hasn't shown real fear of me since her eyes became an issue," Steve admitted.

"Don't go getting outta square with Bruce, then. I know you're not the kinda guy who would take
advantage. None of us are. We don't hurt dames, especially when they're scared. We might feel a little tug and a thrill, but it takes a guy like Creed to want to go after that. Or maybe a guy that's already under the influence of her voice, see? Nothing wrong with Bruce for having the instinct. Nothing wrong with you, either. As long as it inspires you to protect rather than to take advantage, you're in the right place in your head," Buck assured him.

Steve nodded, once. He backed away from Bruce and Bucky moved away, too.

"How'd I get to be so ignorant?" Steve asked.

"That's your life, pal. You've had to fight to survive from day one. No time to think about the dumb male stuff. You're getting fat and lazy now. Normal has a chance to catch up with ya. No worries. We'll get you schooled like the rest of us dumb grunts sooner or later," Buck teased him.

Steve grinned and shook his head. He was flushed with embarrassment and he rubbed his hands over his face.

"Sorry, Bruce," he mumbled like a reprimanded schoolboy.

"It doesn't bother me," Bruce accepted his apology.

This was too much. Too personal. He didn't need to see their tough, fearless Captain reduced to a soft kid in a too-big body. It was messing with his head. Bruce moved to leave them alone in his lab, but then he stopped at the doorway. There were things he needed to tell Steve.

"About Estrella. Make sure she knows not to show fear when she's out in public. I'm sure she's safe in the tower with us. And Steve?" Bruce prompted.

"Yeah?"

"The working girls. Catherine. She's good to go whenever you want to authorize her release. She mentioned accepting your offer of protective relocation. The other one, Dana. She's pregnant, though it's too early for her to know that yet. Jarvis' scanning sensitivity gives us an early advantage. From the stage of gestation, it's not possible that it could be your child. She deliberately got herself pregnant during the cruise you sent her on. She probably means to claim the child is yours. She's going to try to monetize the situation. Be careful. She can say what she wants, and we can't refute her claims until she submits to a paternity test," Bruce told him.

"I understand. Thank you, Bruce," Steve said soberly.

Bruce nodded, then hurried away to find some peace and solitude in his suite.

Buck clapped a hand onto Steve's shoulder and gave him a hearty shake. Neither of them liked the dense silence between them that was quickly filling up with worry. Steve didn't bother to shrug Bucky's grip off his shoulder.

"You'll do fine. You're ten times smarter than her on a bad day. Look on the bright side. What really matters is that the kid's not yours. You're clear to go forward with Estrella. No matter what the bitch does, it's not on you," Bucky assured him.

"Don't call her a bitch," Steve grumped half-heartedly.

"If what Bruce says is true, I bet you a hard day's pay that you'll be calling her a bitch too, before it's all over with," Buck said with a twinkle in his eyes.
They ambled out of Bruce's lab and toward the elevator. Steve shook his head.

"A hard day's pay. What year?" Steve asked.

"Summer of 'thirty-nine," Buck said.

Steve winced.

"That's not much money, but it was killer work," he admitted.

"What have ya got to lose? Hey, think we can get Thor to throw us around before lunch?"

"Sure, Buck. He was eggin me on during the meeting, anyway. He'll be up for it," Steve said with a hint of returning eagerness.

"That's it, pal. Chin up. Let's go knock blondie out, me an' you," Buck said as the elevator took them down.

"He really is a Norse legend, you know. All the tales are true. It won't be easy," Steve warned.

Buck grinned.

Estrella kept looking at her phone. She didn't have many texts from Steve because they'd mostly spent their time in each other's presence since she'd bought her phone. He'd called her early this morning, but she'd answered immediately, so there was no voicemail recording of him. One day, she'd have to ignore his call so that she could get him on voicemail.

'Mornin, doll. Wish I was there with you,' he'd said.

His voice had been all rumbly from sleep and she swore she could hear his skin moving against his sheets in the background of the call. She wanted his heat. Wanted his touch. She didn't even mind the hint of morning breath he had when he woke up every day. Estrella smiled while she sat on the couch in Natasha's living room. Steve probably had super-soldier enzymes in his mouth that kept even his saliva from getting bad overnight. Now that she'd spent several days in his company, she missed everything about him terribly. Even his morning breath. She embarrassed herself with how pathetic that was, but there was no one around to see her looking bashful.

She sipped from her coffee mug, set it down on the end table, and tried to get back to work. Natasha had her sign a non-disclosure agreement weeks ago, almost as soon as she'd started work for Stark Industries. Estrella was handling e-memos from the Avengers staff, from the employees and customers on the lower levels of the tower, and messages from all of the SI manufacturing facility employees on the east coast.

Jarvis was capable of doing almost everything, but Pepper wanted a more human touch with things like responding to complaints and suggestions from Stark Industries employees and customers. Estrella's job was to prioritize the most critical complaints and issues to Pepper's personal assistant, or directly to Steve's work email if it came from Avenger's staff. She was to sort the mid-level issues toward the appropriate SI management staff to deal with. She also had to send out polite and personally written responses to mere gripes and inquiries.

Lastly, she was to archive the random troll bombs that ended up in the complaint and suggestion system. Tony delighted in responding to the best ones himself. She had no idea why he wasted his
valuable time feeding trolls, but she was required to send him anything that made her smile or think a little harder before she sent it to archive. Tony made sure to re-loop his wittiest responses back around to her for laughs. Most of the trolls couldn't believe that Tony Stark himself was responding to their asinine thoughts. Estrella had fun assuring them that Mister Stark took an interest. The Stark Industries online complaint and suggestion link was becoming quite popular, and Estrella was beginning to have to sort through the truly original trolls and the ones who were only seeking a bit of Tony's time. Jarvis pre-filtered the vulgar ones for her, and she appreciated that. They were mostly from women seeking the wrong sort of attention, anyway.

Estrella startled when Steve's text tone sounded from her phone. She almost knocked her laptop off her legs in her eagerness to get her phone from the armrest of the couch.

*Please say you'll meet me for lunch. Too many people here. I want to be with you.*

She smiled so wide that she could see the white of her teeth reflected in the gloss of her phone screen.

*Yes! I want to smell your skin. Where?* she responded.

*You gotta stop that. I'm in the training room, about to shower. Don't need to think about you and my skin right now. Meet me at the diner downstairs in fifteen?*

Estrella giggled at the image of him trying so hard to be the brisk and efficient Captain in the showers, probably near some of the other guys. Just thinking of each other was enough to get them going, and she knew Steve's imagination at least matched hers.

*Okay. Be good until I see you,* she told him.

Suddenly her boring day was much better. She closed out her work and hurried to get ready to leave the suite. It wasn't even a date. It was only lunch but she wanted to look a little nicer for him.

Estrella dropped her stretchy sweats and t-shirt onto her bed and struggled into a bra. No matter how she poked and tucked, her breasts wouldn't fit all the way inside the cups the way she wanted them to. She was going to have to spend money on new underthings soon. That was a worry for another time.

She'd shaved her legs just this morning so she was fine to slip into her full, cheerful yellow skirt. Her white scoop-neck blouse settled onto her skin like gauze and she adjusted it at her shoulders just so. She had to push her bra straps apart to make it work. She slipped her feet into her little flat gold sandals and made sure her copper butterfly was centered on her throat. The dusky blue of the choker looked crisp along with her yellow and white cotton. She ran her fingers through her silky, dark hair. She could see the purple streaks in her hair in the bright lights of the vanity mirror in the bathroom.

*Rafe!*

In all the excitement lately, she'd forgotten about her hair stylist in Corpus Christi and her promise to upload Steve's barbershop video to YouTube. Now that she realized what Steve had been saying to her in the video, she was reluctant to make the video public. But she'd promised. It wasn't like anyone seeing the video would think about her, anyway. Everyone would be paying attention to Steve. He *had* heard her promise to upload it, and he hadn't protested.

"Jarvis, can you do video editing and audio stuff?" she asked.

"I can. What would you like my help with?" Jarvis responded.
"There's a video on my phone of Steve singing in a barbershop. Would you edit it for us like things are supposed to be edited for YouTube, and then create an anonymous account for me and upload the video? I promised some people that I would, and I don't want to break my promise," she said.

She slipped her phone into a hidden pocket of her full skirt and hurried out the door, to the elevator, and down to meet Steve.

"I would like to show the video to Intelligence Director Hill before it is uploaded to the public," Jarvis commented.

"Okay. That's good. I don't know what to look for to keep things safe, so please do that," she agreed.

"Editing is complete. Sending the file to Director Hill now. I'm certain we will have her input sometime this afternoon. Do you have any preferences for your YouTube identity? I would be more comfortable if you personalized things yourself," Jarvis said while he took her down.

"I don't care, I trust you, Jarvis. Just make it anonymous and safe so nobody can tell that it's me. If you can find Rafe, the hairstylist in the Corpus Christi mall, and the old guys that run the barbershop could you send a link to them?" she asked.

She was running a few minutes early of their agreed meet time, but she was eager to get her lunch and find a table. It made her smile to anticipate watching Steve walk in to join her. Knowing that she was about to see him again made her feel young and giddy. Her step was quick and light as she continued into the other elevator that would take her all the way down, still talking to Jarvis as she went. There was no one in the elevator with her, so it wasn't weird.

"It would be my pleasure to send links to whomever you wish, if director Hill approves," Jarvis agreed.

"Thank you, Jarvis. I don't know how to do YouTube. Could you teach me later?" she asked.

"I would be happy to," he said fondly.

She smiled up at the camera, then hurried out of the elevator toward the public diner. The midday sun was sharp and bright outside of the glass windows along the front of Avengers tower, but people rushed by in coats with their collars flipped up. She made a scrunched face. She was wearing summer clothes in light, bright colors. It was completely the opposite of what other people were wearing, but she didn't care. The food smelled good and she slid her tray along and selected her favorites. A large glass of tea balanced the weight of her tray, and she nimbly swiped her SI card at the scanner.

"There is no need for you to use your card, Miss. I could easily take care of the transaction for you in the future. There would be less chance of spilling your tea if I could be allowed to assist," Jarvis said softly from her phone in her pocket.

"Okay, but don't you let Tony pay for it. Put it on my account," Estrella insisted.

"Of course, Miss," Jarvis conceded.

It was near the end of the lunch rush, so there were a few tables available in the back of the dining room. With the right seat she was able to see both the bustling city life on the sidewalk outside and the elevator lobby just beyond the diner's entrance.

Few people paid any attention to her. Two men looked, and one woman made a prim face to show
what she thought of Estrella's unseasonal attire. None of them were threatening. She ignored them and settled down to eat. She bowed her head to silently give thanks for her food. Before she was done praying, boisterous voices spilled from an elevator in the lobby.

A smile bloomed on her face so that she couldn't sip her tea from the straw. Then her smile drew into a disappointed frown. She heard Bucky and Thor's voices teasing with sharp humor, and then Steve murmured low, tolerant complaints. When the three men came into view of the lunch crowd, the patrons in the diner were already staring.

Many of them knew not to make a fuss about random Avenger appearances, but some people were there for precisely the rare opportunity of seeing a hero. Estrella couldn't care less about the gawkers. It wasn't as bad as it had been at their coffee shop. What she didn't like was that Bucky and Thor had come along for lunch. She could see that Steve didn't like it either.

Buck's teasing was nothing new, but she was surprised at Thor's smiling, taunting rudeness. He was usually so wise and gracious. She was glad that the guys weren't speaking loud enough for people to understand them anymore, but body language made it plain that Steve was still getting picked on from both of his friends. He took it well and she could at least see that he was loose and easy with whatever they were saying.

Estrella sat and scowled over her tray. Steve met her eyes across the room and even in his annoyance, he couldn't not smile at her. His nonverbal greeting was sweet and eager enough to almost make her forget his hang-about pests. Thor and Bucky saw them smiling at each other, and their teasing of Steve dried up to nothing like a turned-off tap.

Thor nudged Steve into line to get his lunch. Bucky ambled over to the side of the room opposite the windows to look at something by a potted plant. Estrella smiled again when Thor had to nudge Steve a second time to get him to stop staring at her. Captain America was holding up progress in the lunch line, but nobody wanted to complain. People watched him and smiled, caught up in whatever was making their hero happy.

She could see him flush rosy from across the large room. She was stupidly happy to see him, too, but she wished he would quit looking back at her. A hushed murmur went around and people turned to look in her direction. Estrella quickly ducked her head down and hunkered over her tea. She was thirsty, anyway.

She picked at her food and felt the curious scrutiny of people's eyes on her. It felt different and naked to be stared at without Steve beside her. She startled defensively when a large man appeared beside her table. It was only Bucky.

"Hey. C'mon. He can't eat with you in here. Get your stuff," Buck told her.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," she hissed at him.

"Wasn't sneakin. You just weren't lookin," Buck sassed back.

Estrella picked up her tray and followed Bucky until he got to the wall near the potted plant. People were still looking at her a little, but mostly they had eyes for Steve and Thor. Nobody seemed to know who Bucky was.

Buck grasped a doorknob that was concealed behind the plant and twisted. A little metal crunching sound reached their ears. Estrella scowled at him for breaking Tony's stuff, but he grinned.

"Maybe tomorrow there'll be a knob here that Jarvis can open for us instead of me having to break
Estrella hadn't even known there was a door in the wall, much less a room beyond it. Mellow overheard lighting came on and she walked into a large, unoccupied dining room. It was obviously intended to be expansion space if the diner ever became crowded. For now, it would make a quiet, private place for her and Steve to have lunch. She had a room full of empty tables to choose from. She looked apologetically to Bucky where he stood guard in the open doorway. He gave her a rascally eyebrow and a charming, crooked smile.

"This is perfect. Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome," he said.

Again, she felt low for being snippy with Bucky when he was helping them. He seemed to enjoy her chagrin almost as if he was keeping score. She felt like she was gradually being taught a lesson. It was difficult for her pride to allow her to take instruction from a bossy, overbearing man like Bucky, but she tamped down her pride. Time and again, Bucky had helped her.

"Why are you covered in bruises?" she asked belatedly.

His skin was faintly marked with discoloration. There were a few marks on his exposed neck. He had on his flesh-tone gloves, so only his face looked truly battered. He was healing fast. No one was likely to notice his condition.

"Foolin' around. It's fun. Don't you worry," Buck assured her, but then Steve was there.

He slipped around Buck in the doorway, and then the door closed behind him. Steve came to the table she'd chosen and instead of him sitting down, she stood up. His lunch tray was barely set down before she went into his arms.

"Oof. I miss you like crazy, Sweetheart," he said into her hair.

He was warm and strong and solid. She nudged aside his jacket and tie and buried her nose in the front of his shirt. There were too many layers of clothing between them. It was hard to smell him beneath the starched shirt and fresh soap, but then there he was. She breathed deeply and hummed her satisfaction.

She looked up to his face to see if he had bruises too, but he kissed her instead. It was nothing hot or fancy, just a joyful greeting. They reluctantly broke apart when Steve's stomach gurgled. She laughed, then ghosted her fingers over his cheekbones.

"You have a big meeting tomorrow. Can't you stop fighting long enough to let the bruises go away? They're going to think you're nothing but a scrapper if you meet with them looking like this," she fussed softly.

She kissed his nose, then his lips again. He didn't seem inclined to speak. They got stuck in each other's eyes until his stomach grumbled again.

"Sit down and eat!" she said.

"Can't eat if you won't quit kissing me," Steve teased.

They stepped apart and sat down. She couldn't stand to not touch him while he was near, so she slid her ankle to his under the table while they ate. When his urgency for food was past and his belly sounded more content, Steve watched her as much as he could. They quickly fell back into
the habit of two-second glances, a look slightly aside to cheekbone or mouth or hairline, and then into eyes again. There was no humor, no real reason to smile, but they couldn't stop it anyway. It felt wonderful to be together.

"This must be what addiction feels like. Do you think we're addicted to each other?" Steve asked.

"I don't care if we are. I want more," she admitted.

"I thought you couldn't get addicted to anything," she reasoned.

"You're not a thing," he said. He tapped his fingers over his heart and his gorgeous blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

Estrella sighed.

She forgot about the two second rule and stared at him in adoration.

"Wowza. I love you too," Steve said.

She managed to flutter her eyelashes down over her eyes enough to break their gaze. After that, she made herself eat all of her lunch while Steve ate his. He pushed his plate aside like he'd accomplished something to be proud of.

"I want you to come over here and sit with me, but I know if you do I won't get to talk to you. Gosh, you look sweet, Eya. You're wearing the same thing you wore that day in the mall. That was a good day. The best. Hurry up and say something while I can still think," Steve told her with hushed fervor.

"It's getting cold outside and I didn't know because I'm living here where everything is perfect. I wore summer clothes in November and people look at me funny," she blurted in a pointless ramble.

"No, you wore Texas clothes in New York. You're not out of season, just out of place. If we were on our beach right now you'd be overdressed," he played along.

She looked at his finely tailored office attire and giggled.

"Steve! You'd smother. I would laugh at you if you wore a suit to the beach. You'd have to shake sand out of your shoes with every step like a cat with wet feet," she chuckled at the awkward imagery of him trudging across the beach in what he was wearing now.

"I look great in a suit," he said with mock pride, "I could do it so you wouldn't laugh at me."

Her smile slipped and fell. He was right. There was a twinkle of humor in his eyes, but she could imagine him now, strolling the beach like he owned it. He'd have his shoes dangling from two fingers, and the wind would blow his jacket tails. Stuffy as his layered office clothing was, it only pretended to conceal the power of his body. Steve would look impressive in a nice suit, even at the beach. If he did it right and didn't act goofy. She got lost in visualizing him, thinking of how he'd look at her, what they'd do if they were truly alone again. Discarded, expensive linen blowing in the sand. She took a deep, unsteady breath and shifted her hips on her chair only a little.

"Don't go there, Eya, or I'll be late getting back from lunch," he warned her.

The low tone of his voice didn't help to cool things down. She didn't dare to look at him at all. This was like dancing. He was right. They had to step carefully or they'd stumble into physical affection and have no time to talk. It would be a busy day for him. His lunch was probably brief. They had to
make the most of their time.

"We got lost and I didn't say what I meant to say a few minutes ago. What I meant was that I was on the street this time last year. Every year, I've been very aware of the seasons. This is the first time in a long time that I'm comfortable going into winter. I have so much to be thankful for that… I can't even... I can't pay it back," she said with choked words.

"You can pay it back. Let's find a place where we can help other folks who might be cold and hungry this winter. Do you know any places where we could do that? I hate the thought of you being out there winter after winter. I don't like to think of anyone out there in that, but meeting you the way I did makes it feel personal. We can't save everyone, but we can try," Steve said.

"You can't change people unless they want to change," she reminded him cautiously.

"I don't wanna change anybody. I don't even wanna lead or start anything. Let's find a place that already helps and put in some time," Steve suggested.

"I'll have to be careful, but I'll go if you do," she agreed.

Steve nodded. He knew what she meant. Sometimes guys from the street didn't make much effort at social skills, and Estrella was getting prettier by the day. She reveled in his unspoken understanding. It was amazing to have a strong person at her side who would watch out for her. She didn't even have to tell him. He knew her well enough to know what she needed in most situations.

She lifted her weight from her chair and slid it around the table and closer to Steve. At her encouragement, he leaned forward in his chair and he let her take his hand from where it had been propping his chin up. Estrella uncurled his hand and rested her face against his palm and his fingers. Soft kisses to his skin made him close his eyes and draw in a breath.

"Please stop," Steve said quietly.

She drew away from his hand.

"I want your touch. I want your kisses, but I can't think and I need to. I talked to Bruce today. He told me what he knows about your eyes. You need to hear it," he said.

She blinked at him.

"You said you were afraid when you looked at him last night. Bruce said that your fear makes men want to pursue you. It excites them and encourages them. Bruce didn't say all that, but I'm trying to explain what we talked about. You need to find a way to not seem afraid when you look at men, even if you are afraid. I'll help any way I can. Part of what happened to you was because of your looks and your voice, but once you were afraid, your eyes made it worse," he said.

She nodded. That made sense when she considered some of the things that had happened to her.

"I learned something else. One of the prostitutes is pregnant, but it's not mine. Jarvis can tell that the pregnancy is too new. It happened while we were on vacation," he told her with mixed feelings.

He hadn't wanted to mention those women at all, but Estrella needed to know what was going on.

"That bitch! She's going to try to extort you," Estrella said.
Steve chuckled.

"How can you laugh? This is bad! If you don't give her money, she'll get louder and louder until she tells everyone about that one night. I know you won't let her control you, so she's going to slander your good name to everyone who will listen," Estrella predicted.

"I'm laughing because Buck made me a bet that I would call her a bitch before all's said and done, and now you've beat me to it," he said.

"You just called her a bitch. I'll tell Bucky," Estrella said with slightly moderated anger.

Steve was so laid back about bad things happening to him that he looked resigned to that awful woman's manipulation.

"I didn't call her a bitch. I only talked about calling her a bitch. See? I can get away with this all day. If we talk about me not calling her a bitch often enough, maybe I'll never feel the need to, and I'll win the bet," Steve said with cold fury.

"Why are you angry now? You weren't angry a minute ago. You thought of something else," Estrella pointed out.

"I'm angry because I let myself see how this is going to play out. It's inevitable. Poor kid. It's not even mine, but I hate her because of what she's going to do, and because of what will happen to him. No kid deserves that," Steve grumbled and shook his head.

"Don't say that you hate anyone. Don't hate, Steve. I'll help you to think of a way to make his life better. Or hers. Can Jarvis tell that it's a boy so soon?" Estrella wondered.

"No. I chose a pronoun. You don't know what's going to happen to him and I'm not going to tell you. I'm going to try to protect you from knowing, and I don't want you to fight me on this," Steve said with a peculiar sort of gentle authority. The situation already felt tragic.

She'd thought he meant that the newly conceived child would have a rough life, but Steve looked concerned about something worse than that. If it was that bad, then she didn't want to know.

Estrella nodded. Then she thought of something else.

"This sounds selfish after what you just said, but-" she stopped talking and smiled the tiniest of smiles.

"It's not selfish. This means that I don't have babies for anyone other than you, Estrella. I'm all yours," Steve told her.

His broad, heated smile burned right through the last of her gloomy thoughts. He opened his arms and she went to his lap to hug him. She thought she was holding him too tightly, but then he hugged her hard enough to make her ribs creak. She kissed him breathlessly and gasped as soon as she had room to draw air into her lungs.

"We can start thinking about the future now?" she whispered shyly beside his ear.

"I've already been thinking about it. You can try to catch up," he replied.

"Steve, we're moving really fast. We only met a few months ago," she said.

"I know what I feel. You're the one who has doubts," he said.
She relaxed against his chest and thighs. Her legs were off to one side of his. Her dress was
pushed up in the back, but she didn’t care. He’d recently felt much more than her bare legs against
his pants. Knowing that there was only one layer of cloth between her legs and his made her feel
squirmy. She made herself sit still. She didn’t let her thoughts linger on memories of them naked in
the back of the truck together. She couldn’t.

Absently, she rubbed her forehead against his clean-shaven jaw. Her arms were secured around his
neck and her stupid, poofy breasts pressed to his chest. He made blissful rumbly sounds in his
throat while she tried not to think of anything except the moment. One of his hands rested on her
knee just at the hem of her skirt and his other one rubbed warmth into her back through her blouse.

An annoying beep broke their peace and Steve groaned. She sat up so that he could silence the
noise coming from his watch.

"You've got to get back to work," she said.

"Not exactly. I need to go get Colin from the airport soon," Steve told her.

"Things are so iffy for tomorrow that you think you'll need his statement for the police?" she
wondered.

"It's not 'iffy.' I'm being thorough. Colin has a good reputation in his area and he's already offered
to help me. I'm grateful to him for making the time to come. He's got a wife and kids, a ranch and a
store to run. It must not be easy for him to get away at a moment's notice, so the least I can do is
take care of him personally. A cab would take forever, and we need to spend what time we have in
planning," Steve said.

"Will you be working all night, then?" she asked.

"Naw. I'm sure we'll be at the office a little later than usual, but I should be home by seven. It's
only the FBI. It's not Hitler or Hydra, doll. I can handle this easy," Steve told her with a smooth
smile.

She believed him. It was only the FBI. And the Rangers. Right. He was good at what he did and he
would be offended if she showed any worry.

"You'll have Colin and Bucky at your place. I'll make supper and bring it over," she offered.

"And Sam, too. You don't have to cook. I can order something. Either way, I'm not done with you
today. I wanna see you again. Supper at my place," he said.

She nodded her agreement. She wanted to see him tonight, too. She wasn't sure about having
dinner with a bunch of men, but she’d do it to have more time with him.

Steve stood them up and he ran his fingers into her hair as she smoothed her skirt down into place.
Their skin still called to each other, but there was work to do. He kissed the bridge of her nose,
then the tip of her nose, then lingered for a long, torturous moment before he kissed her lips. She
licked him and then slipped their lips along with a lush, wet glide. Tongues went deep and Steve
grunted with eager sensuality. They wanted more, but they stopped, satisfied with being unsatisfied
for the moment.

"My Eya. Want you," he said.

"Rh," she agreed with a soft little sound and she let him see the longing in her eyes.
She had to tug his hand to get him moving toward the door of their empty dining room. She might not like Colin, but it was rude to keep anyone waiting at the airport. Steve needed to go. Thor got up from his and Buck's table in the main dining room when Steve escorted her out. There were far fewer people in the dining room, but Steve took one look around and hurried her out toward the elevator lobby. Estrella felt like she was being herded, with three large men at her back.

They had to wait because the elevator they needed wasn't available. What was that sound? Was Steve grinding his teeth again? She turned to ask him what was wrong, and then she saw them. It was two women and a little girl, in a hurry to catch them in the lobby. Well, one woman looked in a hurry. The other one looked embarrassed and resigned. The child looked like nothing much mattered other than not being jerked off her feet by her mother.

"Steve! Steeeve! There you are," the redhead called to them.

Yes, Steve was grinding his teeth. His eyes were tightly shut for a moment, and then he opened them. Estrella had only seen him look so unwelcoming once, when the rude girls tried to get his autograph in the coffee shop. Bucky looked even scarier. Thor was amused.

"All will be well," the big man murmured to her as Steve and Buck turned to face their unwanted acquaintances.

Estrella didn't need introductions. She knew who they were. They were tall. Sturdy. Beautiful. The redhead was loud and crass.

"I haven't seen you in days! Melody's been asking to see her Uncle Steve all this time. Here," Dana said and thrust the child in front of her.

Estrella watched with horror as Steve was forced to react. He couldn't be cruel or dismissive to a child. It just wasn't in him and the woman knew it somehow. Steve lowered himself to one knee and he took Melody's hand. The little one couldn't help but stand where her mother had put her, and Steve did what he had to do.

"Melody, look at me, honey," Steve said gently.

She did, but not for long. She wasn't used to anyone looking or speaking directly to her or handling her gently. She looked at the large, scary man knelt in front of her with quick, nervous glances. Estrella could empathize with the child's discomfort.

"I'm not your Uncle. Do you know who I am?" Steve asked.

"Captain 'Merica?" Melody whispered.

"That's right. I'm Captain America. I like almost everybody, and I like you, but I'm not your uncle and I won't ever be," he told her firm and true.

The child had the courage to look him in the eyes for a moment, and then she was done. She pushed around her mom's legs and hid her face against the other woman's hip. The brunette lady comforted the child while the mother vapidly fussed at her for being shy.

"C'mon, we're done here," Buck said to Steve when the elevator opened.

They made room for people to get out of the elevator, and then the woman tried to get into the elevator with them. Bucky twitched and took a half-step toward her. Steve, Thor and Estrella acted at once. Estrella spoke loudest and fastest.
"You!" she pointed a finger at Bucky.

He turned his attention to her.

"Take the Captain and go do whatever it is he's supposed to be doing right now. You, stay here," she looked to Thor.

"As you command, my lady," Thor smiled and bowed slightly at the waist.

Steve glanced uncertainly from the prostitutes, to Thor, and to Estrella. Estrella had that look about her that she used to run unwanted Captain America fans off with. With her standing there healthy and strong, it was even more impressive. He admired the fire in her eyes and her confidence in handling the situation. It was clear that Dana wanted more of him. The woman watched him, trying to think of something to say to get his attention. There was no good way for him to get out of this, but Estrella knew how. She was amazing. He could watch her forever.

If Steve stood there dazzled by the girl for any longer, Colin was going to get stood up at the airport. Buck chuckled at Steve's idiocy and pushed him back into the empty elevator. Jarvis closed the doors and took them away.

The lobby was hushed and empty except for the five of them. She was certain that Jarvis had something to do with that. Estrella turned to the brunette woman and the child. Little Melody didn't want to look at anybody now, and that was just as well.

Estrella held out her hand politely to the brunette.

"I know who you are. You helped him when he needed it. Thank you," she said to her.

The woman hesitantly shook her hand, then stepped away and clutched the child's head to her side. She was smart enough to know that things weren't going well, despite a moment of civility.

"You think you know who I am. Who are you?" the redheaded woman sassed.

Estrella reached back and unclipped her necklace. She held it in her hand and stepped into the taller woman's space. She let her see the wrath in her eyes for what she knew the woman had planned against Steve. She turned all the anger she felt into a low tone and sent it at the woman.

"I am no one. Be concerned about yourself. You'll be alone in your old age with no man at your side. You should be kind to your children. They're all you'll ever have," Estrella said.

The redhead stumbled backward until she bumped into the marble-clad wall beside the elevator. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. Estrella stepped into the elevator which had come back for them. She heard Thor get in behind her while she was occupied with putting her necklace back on.

Thor wasn't smiling anymore. He looked thoughtful. His hands were fisted at his sides, but she didn't sense any threat from him. She was still too angry at the redhead to pay much attention to her companion.

"Your words are like slow poison in the wound of a woman's pride. Is there any truth in them? Do you speak prophesy?" he asked.

"No. It's easy to see how she is. I can hope she'll change, but she won't. She's too damaged. I'll never see her again, so I couldn't pass up a chance to tell her what I think. If what I said makes any difference to her, then she deserves to worry for what she's trying to do to Steve," Estrella said.
The elevator carried them up, and she thought she heard the whine of the quinjet. So that's what Steve meant when he said he needed to go pick up Colin at the airport. She had wondered why he went up, instead of down to the parking garage.

"I don't think I needed you, but thank you for staying. They're bigger than me," Estrella said as they walked across the upper lobby to the other elevator.

Thor followed along behind her.

"I should thank you. It was entertaining. By the time you were done giving us orders, those women would not have dared to lay a hand upon you. Such is the way of power," Thor said.

"That tactic only worked because you all played along with what I said," Estrella admitted quietly.

The elevator closed and they went up again. The muted roar of the quinjet launching trembled the air, despite the distance and the walls between them and the launch bay.

"We all played along because Steven was without a plan and you appeared to have one at the ready," Thor said.

"How do people take one look at him and know that he's soft like that? He was helpless against her and she knew he would be. Because he's gentle," Estrella griped.

"He had few options. There was no graceful way out of the situation for a man of his demeanor. Steven is young. With time and more experience, he could have been harsh enough to deal with the impudent woman as she deserved. Don't think less of him for his gentleness, Lady. Cherish it while he yet has it. Once gentility is gone, a man rarely has it returned to him," Thor said.

He bowed slightly to her again, and Jarvis let her out onto Natasha's floor. Estrella turned to watch Thor disappear as the elevator doors closed between them. His friendly smile was the last she saw of him. He was good and wise and he thought fondly of Steve as a younger brother. She already knew that about him. What she'd learned today was that Thor smiled through things that made lesser people lose their shit. He wasn't a grinning idiot like some assumed. He was battered and weathered, but he still had a kind heart.

She liked that.

Jarvis informed her that Steve's barbershop video had been approved by Director Hill, but Estrella was too busy to take the time to look at the finished edit. She moved around Natasha's kitchen getting supper ready for four men. She'd heard the quinjet return to the tower not long after it had left, so she knew that things were on schedule for supper.

She had just enough time to finish up her work for the day before she started making a hearty shepherd's pie in two large casserole dishes. She made too much, and not all of it fit in the glass casserole dishes, so she put the rest in a separate dish for Natasha.

It was almost time to go over to Steve's suite. The food smelled delicious while its cheese crust browned in the oven. Estrella was putting on mascara at the bathroom mirror when she heard Natasha come home from work. A shape ghosted by silently in the hallway outside the open bathroom door, but Estrella didn't look. She had to pay attention to not poke herself in the eye with the mascara wand.
"It smells like home in here. Maybe I should get a wife who can cook like you," Natasha commented from the doorway.

Estrella snorted laughter and pulled the black, goopy wand away from her face. She turned to talk to the woman beside her. One set of her eyelashes was long, black and luxurious. The other set was ridiculously more so and clumpy.

"I don't think a wife has the kind of equipment you need," Estrella said dryly.

"Some men can cook," Natasha said.

She smirked at Estrella, then shook her head.

"No mascara. You're not like the rest of us. You don't need it. Learn to work with your differences. Wash that off and use eye liner instead," Nat told her.

Estrella set the mascara tube down and got a soft cloth from the drawer. While she removed makeup from her eyelashes, Natasha looked through her personal cosmetics and selected a fine felt eyeliner pen in dark charcoal brown. She waited patiently until Estrella patted her eyes dry, then she had her sit on the upholstered bathroom seat where she'd first shaved the matted hair from her head.

Nat held her chin in a firm hand and expertly drew a line of shading just along the edges of her eyelids.

"I can do that myself," Estrella insisted.

"There's no time for trial and error. Your casseroles are done. I turned off the oven and opened the door. The guys will be hungry and it's almost seven twenty. You didn't tell me that Colin was edible," Nat commented while she finished, then capped the eyeliner pen.

Estrella got up to look at herself in the mirror. Natasha was right. The mascara had made her eyes look overdone. The soft, dark eyeliner gave her face a hint of mystique without looking intentional.

"Edible?" she asked.

"Hell yes. Don't worry, I know he's married. I only take married men if I'm assigned to do so, and by that point they're dead anyway. He's only a civilian. He'll be susceptible to your attraction. Don't look at him more than you have to without being rude. Take that bra off. It makes the dress look lumpy," Nat said.

"I can't go without a bra!" Estrella denied vehemently.

"You're like a teenager right now. Of course you can," Natasha said.

The stronger woman moved to impose her will on Estrella, but Eya batted her hands away crossly.

Natasha was right. The smooth lines of the dress were ruined by the misfit of her bra, but she'd been trying to ignore it. She worked the bra off and pulled it out of her sleeve. Natasha threw the offending undergarment into the trash bin.

Estrella eyed herself critically in the mirror. Now her shape was perfect, but she was worried.

"The sweater-dress was a good choice. It's stretchy, so it fits well, and it covers you from neck to knees. It's sexy, but respectable. The fuzzy material will hide your nipples if they get tweaky. The guys are going to stare a little. You'll have to forgive them," Nat said.
"Come with me," Estrella urged her.

"No. Colin is married, and I'm interested. I'm staying here," Natasha denied.

Estrella blew out a breath of nervous resignation, then she hugged Natasha. Nat patted her hip, then set her away.

There was firm, polite knock at the suite's exterior door. They knew it was Steve.

"I'll get the oven mitts and I'll help you carry, but that's it for me. Go put on shoes. You'll get fucked if you go barefoot," Nat told her as she went to the kitchen.

"Natasha!" Estrella scolded.

The things the woman said were outrageous sometimes, but she'd learned to mostly trust that what she said was true, however blunt it was. Estrella tucked her feet into a pair of ballet flats made of soft black leather. She hurried to the kitchen where Steve was taking the basket of warm, crusty bread that Nat handed him.

He smiled at Estrella in greeting, then he set the bread back on the kitchen countertop. Steve's smile faded away and he made an audible gulping sound in his dry throat.

"Babydoll, maybe you shouldn't… I mean, you look great, but it's the guys, and…” Steve stammered.

His eyes moved over her, then he leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest. The toes of his shoes were apparently very interesting. She was so used to seeing the fullness of an erection at the front of his pants that she might wonder what was wrong if she saw him without one.

"I have hijab and niqab in my closet. Maybe a full burka if that's not enough," Natasha offered to Steve.

He turned narrowed eyes to her.

"You're projecting your problem onto everybody else, Steve. They're your friends. She's beautiful, but they'll be respectful. Both of you need to learn to deal with this. She's changing fast," Nat pointed out.

"It's supposed to be dinner, not training," Steve complained.

"Everything is training," Natasha reminded him.

"I can go change," Estrella offered.

"No changing, Estrella. This is you. Learn to love it. If you can't bring yourself to love it, then at least learn how to use it. I'd rather you learned to love it. You can do that. Steve will keep you safe," Nat said.

Estrella took a shaky breath and looked to Steve. At Nat's words, he'd changed from uncertain to steely and determined. He loosened his posture and turned to pick up the bread again.

"You let everybody manipulate you," Estrella told him.

"Only when I'm off-duty and I'm trying to be nice to people. I'm not gonna feel any guilt for that. If I let you disapprove of me letting people manipulate me, then I'm letting you manipulate me, too."
I'm an idiot, but I'm not that stupid. I do eventually learn," Steve made a face that showed his suffering male pride.

Estrella moved to him and tipped onto her toes to kiss his cheek. That's all it took, and they were smiling at each other again. He carried the bread, and she and Natasha brought the heavy casserole dishes of steaming food.

"I'm bitchy on purpose. It distracts him. He acts like he's not concerned about tomorrow, but he is. It's not a bad thing to keep him distracted if he's already done everything he can plan for and only the waiting is left," Natasha said to Estrella while they were still out in the hallway.

Steve gave them both a look, but settled his attention on Natasha.

"Leave it, Romanoff. We're off-duty," he said, and there was no mistaking it for a suggestion.

"Enjoy your evening, then," Natasha said with a sparkling smarmy smile.

Sam came to get the door when Steve pushed it with his toe. He took the casserole from Natasha and transferred the oven mitts without burning his hands. Estrella was impressed. She heard them speak to each other as she passed them to set her food in Steve's kitchen.

"You should stay and eat with us," Sam murmured to Nat.

"No. I want a bubble bath and a glass of wine. Now," Natasha denied, but Estrella could hear the smile in her voice.

"I don't have to stay for long. I could help you with that," Sam offered, sounding just as friendly.

"Guys," Steve fussed at them mildly from in the kitchen where he set down the bread.

Natasha said a very brief greeting to Bucky and Colin. She gave Estrella a look which seemed meant to give her courage, and then Nat was gone.

"You just don't let ugly women come around here, do ya?" Colin asked Steve after the door closed behind Natasha.

"Not everbody judges themselves by your standard of beauty," Estrella said to the cowboy where he stood in the doorway between Steve's kitchen and living room.

When she looked up from her casseroles she was surprised to see him dressed in gray slacks and wearing a crisp white shirt. His hair had been cut so that he didn't look like he'd come in rough from a month-long cattle roundup. He had no tie and his shirt was open at the collar. She could see bronzed skin over full, taut muscle. Buttery black leather shone beneath the hem of his slacks but it was western boots, not shoes.

Estrella's brows pinched in frustration, and she threw her oven mitt at Bucky as soon as she could wiggle it out from under the casserole dish. Buck was smirking at her from behind Colin. Colin ducked aside a little, but he relaxed when he saw who her target was.

Sam made a sound and went to the living room. Steve stayed behind her elbow and rubbed the backs of his fingers softly on her arm. She felt like running from Colin, and she absolutely would have, but she needed to learn to be brave. Colin made her mad enough that it was easy to speak her mind.

"Why do you come in here, and the first thing you say is about how women look? Everybody says
you're nice, but I don't believe them. You have a wife," she pointed out.

"I sure do, little filly. She's the prettiest lady in the world, bar none. Looky here," Colin said.

He pulled out his phone, made a few swipes on the screen, and held it out to Estrella. She didn't want to reach near him to take it, so Steve took it for her. He held Colin's phone and Estrella felt more comfortable looking at whatever was on the phone than she did looking at the man.

"Swipe left. If you'll be comin around our place to visit, she wanted you to see and get it over with. She's used to people staring, but it rubs her wrong when folks get all soft. Prissy is hell on wheels and she'll run over your toes if you try to feed her any sympathy," Colin said with pride.

The pictures showed a sassy, strong woman with lively eyes and hair like wild autumn sunlight. There was a picture of her laughing with a sturdy toddler whom she held over her head and a picture of her on a horse. There was a little gap between her front teeth, sun kissed freckles across her nose and cheeks, and in every photo that included Colin, they clearly adored each other.

She was in a wheelchair in some pictures, but it wasn't there in all of them. In the picture of them at the beach, and the pic of her on the horse, it was impossible not to notice that one of her legs stopped at mid-thigh, and the other one had been amputated higher than that. The scars that covered her lower body and arms probably stopped somewhere on her torso, leaving her face plain and pretty. It was the glow of love, health, and happiness in her eyes that made her beautiful.

"Oh," Estrella gasped.

"I met her in recovery after I had my knee replaced. I thought I was banged up. I was feeling sorry for myself pretty good, and then she started heckling me during therapy. All I did was fall down a little too hard. She found a bomb in Mosul," Colin briefly explained how he'd met his wife.

He took back his phone and slipped it into his rear pocket. Estrella only vaguely noted the fine curve of his ass. It looked just as good in slacks as it did in rodeo jeans. Colin smiled at her and gestured to the countertop by the coffee pot.

"She was taking some banana bread out of the oven this morning when Steve called, so she sent that for the both of you," Colin said of the wrapped loaf.

Estrella felt too overwhelmed to speak, so she instead walked toward the coffee pot. She picked up the banana bread and held it to her nose. The kitchen smelled like supper, but the banana bread made her mouth water. She set the loaf down and closed her eyes.

"Don't you apologize. I can see you've been hurt. I ain't tryin to make you feel bad with all this, and I sure as hell don't feel sorry for ya. Ease up a bit, lady. You're mighty fine, but I ain't tryin to get in your pants. Even if I had a chance, I'm too scared of Prissy and too respectful of Steve, so there. Can we eat now?" Colin asked hopefully.

Estrella nodded and turned to get the plates. Steve helped her set things out, and Sam came to get drinks for everyone. She could hear Bucky and Colin talking in the living room, telling tales about dogs. It must have been funny because they were laughing, but she wasn't paying attention. Her thoughts were turned inward.

She should have known. Steve drew good people to him like a magnet. Bad ones came around too, but he sent them away. It was her own fault that Colin bothered her so much. It was partly Bucky's fault that she had to fight an instinctual fear of him, but he deserved her trust.

"I'll try to do better," she whispered to Steve as he took the silverware from her hand.
"Eya, you're doing great. You impress me every day. Don't be hard on yourself when you fall short of perfection. Re-training your threat responses takes a while. These are easy fellas. Their feelings don't stay hurt. So don't worry about anything. The food smells wonderful. Let's enjoy it," he encouraged her.

"We have to get you a table," Estrella said to Steve after they all paused to give thanks.

"I know. Funny how I never had company 'til you started coming around," Steve smiled at her.

Estrella was seated at the bar. Sam sat beside her as a buffer between her and Colin, who sat on a stool borrowed from Clint's suite. They were a little crowded, but they made do. Bucky and Steve ate standing at the kitchen counter, facing them through the pass-through. There wasn't a lot of conversation at first, except for Colin and Buck. They'd shifted to talking about horses instead of dogs. Steve listened to their animated conversation. He hadn't known Bucky during time when he'd been around horses.

The tone of the horse tales got a little dark, and Sam spoke up just as Steve opened his mouth to do the same.

"Barnes! You can tell us that stuff later," Sam cut in.

Bucky cleared the fog of memory from his mind and shook his head. He turned troubled eyes to Estrella.

"Sorry, toots. Those were weird days. I was speaking English just now, right?" Buck asked.

"Yeah, you were, or it wouldn't have mattered what you were talking about in front of the lady," Colin said.

Colin looked to Steve.

"It's kind of like the VA in here. None of us got out alright," Steve explained.

"Speak for yourself. There's nothing wrong with me. It was my friend who fell down a little too hard, not me," Sam excused himself from the honor of the walking wounded.

"That counts," Bucky said.

Colin looked more closely at Buck's exposed arm. He waved his fingers in a 'come here' gesture while he chewed a mouthful of shepherd's pie. Buck reached his arm to where Colin could get a good, close look at the shining silver bands. Colin grasped the forearm in calloused fingers and he squeezed, testing its resilience. Then he twisted the limb a little and watched how the elbow moved.

"Is there more like this? I don't know if Priss would even want to try, after all the surgeries she already had, but I gotta ask," Colin said.

Buck took his arm back and shook off the cold feeling that being inspected gave him.

"It's unique. Wouldn't do anybody any good like this, anyway. It's internally powered by a radioactive cell. It's not the kind of thing you want spending time near your kids," Buck said.

"You seem alright with it. How long have you had it?" Colin wondered.

"Since before you were born," Buck said, clearly done with the questions.
Buck watched Colin intently, silently daring him to ask more questions. Estrella couldn't tell if he was Bucky, or the Soldier, or some mix of the two. Whatever was going on, he was far too quiet and hostile for polite company. Colin kept staring back with a cool almost-smile, refusing to cower or back down. Even Estrella wanted to smack him.

Steve nudged Bucky repeatedly until he was off-balance and being shoved away from his position in front of his plate. Steve stared at his friend with sharp challenge when Bucky turned cold eyes on him for the bullying. Then Steve made a funny noise somewhat like a chicken. Estrella had no clue what it was all about, but Bucky gave over into chuckles and got back to eating in much improved mood. He waited until Steve supposedly wasn't paying attention anymore. He lashed out and tried to palm Steve's face aside, but Steve grinned and knocked his hand up and wide as if he'd seen it coming all along.

"You people are uncivilized. Can't we have dinner without fighting? It's like y'all carry around a can of fight, and everything that comes along, you gotta sprinkle some fight in there," Sam complained mildly.

"I don't think they can stop. Did you see them before lunch?" Estrella asked Sam.

"I saw them before lunch when they caught all the bruises. Hey, you know you got a meeting tomorrow," Sam reminded Steve as he and Bucky pushed and shoved out of sight and into the darkened entry hallway.

There was the sound of smacking and punching, and then a thud against the wall. Through the scuffle, Steve and Buck were laughing and name calling. Colin looked at Sam and Estrella with a raised eyebrow.

"Is this normal?" he asked.

"I think it's going to be. Bucky came to us on Sunday, and it's been like this ever since," Estrella answered.

"You traveled in a closed vehicle with those fools?" Sam asked, then he leaned forward to call into the hallway.

"At least stay away from the face. He shouldn't be all busted up tomorrow," Sam yelled at them over the thumping against the wall. Sam and Estrella knew that the guys were being exceedingly careful because nothing was getting broken, but it was still noisy.

"That's what I said at lunch. But does he listen to me?" she asked rhetorically.

"They've got no home training," Sam muttered.


She was embarrassed the guys were so intent on their fighting that they were ignoring their guests. Steve strode into the kitchen smoothing his hair down, but his foot got ripped out from under him. He spun and kicked, and then his foot was free. Despite being in the air for an instant, he stuck the landing smoothly and returned to his dinner.

"Sorry about that, doll," he said.

Bucky came into the kitchen, got a rag from the drawer, and leaned against the counter while he put pressure under his nose.
"Is it broken?" Estrella asked him.

"No," Buck said, muffled through the cloth.

Steve smiled smugly and ignored Bucky.

"This is what you spent vacation with?" Sam asked again.

"Yes. It's more fun if he's not in a confined space. He stays inside too much when we're in New York. He's like a kid or a puppy. He needs room to run," Estrella said.

"Dancin's good, too," Colin said.

"Mhm," Steve agreed with a bite of bread in his mouth.

Things were more peaceful after that. Sam excused himself and left for the evening. She could tell that he wasn't really put out by Steve and Bucky's behavior; he just didn't know how he fit in now that Bucky was back in Steve's life. Estrella empathized with Sam. She felt some of that, too. The two of them together seemed to spawn trouble.

Estrella couldn't wait for the banana bread any longer. She made coffee while Steve and Colin discussed something about tomorrow. Bucky was quiet. He'd gone to join the guys in the living room. She put his bloodied cloth on to soak in a bowl of water. When the coffee was done she served them some banana bread along with it.

Bucky closed his eyes as he tasted the sweet, nutty bread. Steve looked at him and smiled.

"Like your ma's?" he asked.

"Nothing is like ma's, but its close," Buck said.

"The only thing that's ever as good as ma's cooking is maybe grandma's cooking," Colin agreed.

Estrella smiled. They'd already complimented her profusely on the meal she'd prepared, so she didn't feel slighted.

Steve and Estrella shared the couch. Tensions seemed to have disappeared, so she slipped off her shoes, turned sideways, and tucked her toes under the side of Steve's thigh. She made sure her stretchy dress was tugged down her legs so that Bucky and Colin didn't get views of anything she didn't intend. Steve laid his free hand on top of her ankles and his fingers rubbed at her skin.

"Eya, I expect things to go smoothly tomorrow. Natasha likes to think I'm worried, but I know her. She had that smile. The dangerous one. She's got another layer of safeguards in place beyond what I've already planned, so I'm doubly sure that everything is fine. I'm not taking any chances with you or Buck. I want the both of you out of the tower. Street clothes. Disappear for a little while," Steve told them.

"We could go to the libr-" she began.

"Ah! I don't want to know where you're going. Keep your phone with you but turned off," he instructed her.

"You're gonna take credit for my work, pal. I'm not alright with that," Bucky said.

"You worked under the pay of my organization, cash or not. Your work is my work. Now is not the time for the big reveal, Buck. I need you loose as long as we can keep you that way," Steve said.
Buck's brow pinched to a small crease in the middle, but he nodded.

Colin sat quiet until he figured something out.

"Your work. Are you saying that you did everything that happened in the prisons? Everything on the street? By yourself?" he asked.

Buck nodded.

"It was a one man job, almost until the end. Nobody can keep Creed in a cage, so I doubt they'd go after him if they knew I subcontracted him," Buck bent the truth just a little.

Jarvis wasn't a man, so he wasn't lying.

" Haven't I heard of this Creed guy?" Colin asked.

"It's better if you didn't. He doesn't exist. He doesn't fit in the system, so he doesn't exist," Steve told Colin.

"Just like I don't exist, and she doesn't exist," Bucky said. He gestured to Estrella.

"So what am I supposed to say when they ask, tomorrow? Who is she?" Colin needed to know.

"Call her my girl, but don't mention her name. No descriptors. We can't deny her existence, or none of this makes any sense," Steve said.

In the quiet of the suite, Colin's Texas drawl stood out from the kinds of voices she usually heard around here. It drew her attention. Steve was blissing her skin with his touch, but she turned her eyes toward Colin over her coffee cup. It was as if his accent was more pure than most people's. Was there anything about him that looked particularly different from people she saw on the street? What about him kept his identity so strong that he sounded more remarkable than her Latino accent passed down to her from her family? Maybe it wasn't so much his accent as it was the brassy maleness he saturated it with. He was different. Interesting.

Colin set down his coffee. He'd tried all evening to resist really looking at her, but he'd finally messed up. Soon as he knew he was in trouble, the thought of it faded from his mind. He was caught in her gaze while the other guys talked about something.

A man had his hand on her pretty little feet, claiming her. That didn't matter just yet. For now, he only needed to see her. She was beautiful and dark and lovely and inviting, and her eyes were saying something to him. She was interested in him. Heat gathered under his collar and in other places. It was time to move. She would welcome him closer. He was sure of it.

A cold, hard hand pushed him back in his chair. The intrusion was rude, and if it wasn't so important to keep looking at her, he could have turned his attention to fighting off the guy instead of just shoving at him. Had to get to her.

"Eya. Sweetheart," Steve said to her while Bucky kept Colin in his chair.

Buck was having no trouble holding Colin back, but Steve didn't want his new friend bruised.

He leaned over and picked up Estrella. She blinked at him, then put her arms around him and hid her face under his chin.

"I didn't mean to," she said.
"I know. It's alright. I'm awful with women, but I can smooth a guy down easy. I've got this," Steve assured her.

He kept Estrella against him with her face tucked into the bare skin of his neck, which he liked anyway. Buck eased his pressure against Colin's chest as the man cleared the confusion from his mind.

When he was fully himself again, he looked to Bucky and then to Steve as if he didn't know why they were watching him. The middle of his chest ached like he'd been fence-mashed by livestock. Everyone was calm, so the odd silence didn't make sense. Cap's girl sure was getting cozy in his lap. He felt a bit warm, but the girl'd had him half hard all evening, so that wasn't the confusing part. He'd lost a few minutes of time and he knew it.

"What happened?" Colin asked.

"Remember at the dance hall, when you had to interrupt our dancing to get me to look around?" Steve asked Colin.

"Sure I do. You were staring at her like a laser beam, and I couldn't get your attention for nothin. Had walk out on the floor and get in your way," he said.

"You got stuck, like I do sometimes. You looked at her for a little too long. Keep it under two seconds, and you'll be alright," Steve told Colin.

"Well, shoot! That's powerful. Are you alright, Miss?" Colin asked.

"Embarrassed," Estrella said, muffled into Steve's skin.

Colin noticed the contented-lion smile on Steve's face and he didn't blame the man one bit. He was thankful that the Captain was forgiving enough to not pound on him for paying too much attention to his girl. He'd always heard Steve was a nice guy, and this proved it.

"No need for that, miss. You being embarrassed is like a river apologizin for being deep. I was dumb enough to fall in, is all. Steve, it's been a long one. If it's all the same to you, I'll head for wherever my bed is," Colin said.

"Door on the left, right there by the bathroom," Bucky said to him.

Colin nodded and got up. He got his bag from the hallway and disappeared into the guest room which Bucky had prepared for him.

Estrella untucked her head and turned it to look at Bucky curiously.

"I'm sleeping on Natalia's couch tonight. You two should take some time together before you dry up and blow away from unrequited passion," Bucky told them with a fond smirk.

"You're sleeping with Nat?" Steve asked.

"Natalia," Buck emphasized the Russian pronunciation, "on the couch."

His last few English words came out heavily flavored with Russian cadence.

"You want a bottle of vodka with that?" Steve asked as Buck left.

"Hush! Leave him alone. Leave them alone. They're both lonely," Estrella hissed at him.
Steve got them up from the couch.

"So am I," he admitted.

He followed her to the kitchen, gathering coffee mugs and dishes as they went. It didn't take them long to have the kitchen cleaned up.

"I don't want to intrude on them at Natasha's place," Estrella said when they stood in the quiet kitchen with nothing more to do.

"Natalia," Steve copied Buck's pronunciation of Nat's birth name.

Estrella giggled at him, because he put on an air of European uppityness. It was something to do with the way he tilted his head, just like Bucky. Bucky, who was also thoroughly Brooklyn. It was a delightfully confused identity play, but Steve made it funny instead of sad. Bucky was strong. They could laugh. He would, too.

"Estrella," Steve said, again in a Russian accent. It didn't sound much different from the Spanish, only more guttural. She laughed again, because he added more eyebrow and tilted his nose even higher.

"If you sleep with me, I promise I'll be good," Steve said in his normal voice.

She pouted at him, then smiled when he gave her a warning look for tempting him to misbehave.

"I'd love to sleep with you, but I need a t-shirt. I'll sweat too much in this fuzzy dress. You're always so hot," she said.

"I have plenty shirts," Steve offered.

They turned off the lights except for one dim lamp, in case Colin needed it. Steve could hear his voice through the bedroom door, likely talking to his wife on his phone before bedtime.

It felt good to be settling down for the night with Estrella. Almost like vacation. He had no intention of pursuing her sexually tonight. There was a lot on his mind for tomorrow. When he was with Eya that way, he wanted to be fully with her, not distracted.

She borrowed a shirt and his toothbrush, and it tugged at his heart to share space with her in the familiarity of his bathroom. He wanted her here all the time, but she wasn't ready. Tonight was gift enough, for now.

Steve wore the same pajamas he'd worn the night after the dance hall, when they'd stayed at the bed and breakfast. Estrella spooned back against him and cuddled his arm against her chest.

"I've been really good," Steve murmured into her hair.

"Oh yeah?" she wondered.

He partially squished her to reach across and turn off the bedside lamp. He returned his arm to her so she could hold it to her chest again.

"You aren't wearing a bra, and I've wanted to touch you all night," Steve admitted.

"It's awful. I didn't want to go without, but Natasha wouldn't let me wear it. It didn't fit anymore," she said.
"You're gorgeous. I'm dyin to touch you, but I won't. Not right now," he said like he was convincing himself.

Estrella lay in the dark and fought with temptation. It wouldn't be difficult to start something with him. He had a big day tomorrow, and she wanted him to sleep. She had to prove to herself that she could be more than just sex with him. That she could be more than just sex, with or without him.

"Okay," she said.

Steve sighed and wiggled in the large bed. He tugged her back against him forcefully, but he was only getting comfortable, she thought. He didn't mean anything by it. His erection fit neatly into the crease of her bottom. All felt right with the world. She was safe in the peaceful dark, and her skin was happy. Her heart was happy.

"I need to talk to you some more," she complained.

"Lots more. We'll have time. Go to sleep," Steve assured her.

He kissed her on her temple and let his lips linger there. His breath ruffled her hair. She was lost in comfort.

Steve stayed awake for a while in the night, listening to the sedate sound of her heart. Colin moved around some and used the bathroom and then he went to sleep too. Steve's mind tried to rush ahead to tomorrow, but he used some of the focus he had learned from Thor to stay present in the moment. Time with Estrella in his arms was more important than all of the rest.

This was all he had, and nothing mattered more.
Chapter 49

This ended up 70 pages. Once again, split into 2. Chapter 50 posted very soon, after I'm done editing. Interesting tidbit: Lookup images of stereograph erotica.

The light and sound of Steve moving around in the bathroom woke her. She frowned at his absence from the bed, though his place behind her was still warm between the sheets. She could hear Steve brushing his teeth.

"I'd make coffee for us, but I ain't never seen a coffee pot like this. Am I supposed to talk to it?" Colin called from the kitchen.

Steve stuck his head out of his bathroom door with shaving cream on his face and opened his mouth to call out instructions to Colin. Estrella grumbled at him that she would go make the coffee. She felt inexplicably better about Colin's presence this morning, possibly because her body still felt warmed from Steve holding her all night. She found a large comfy shirt in Steve's closet and buttoned it on over her borrowed t-shirt while she went to the kitchen to help with the coffee.

"Thanks," Steve said to her.

"I want coffee too," she commented.

She tried her best to ignore Colin while she put some fresh beans in the coffee maker and adjusted the settings for more coffee than she and Steve would usually drink. She yawned and rubbed her eyes as soon as the coffee was on. Colin's presence in the kitchen with her was not as annoying as last night because he was as far away from her as he could get, and he wouldn't look at her when she glanced at him. The small piece of banana bread that was left over from last night was calling her name.

"Please thank Prissy for the banana bread for me. It's very good," she murmured just to make conversation.

"I'll do that. She'll be pleased that you like it," Colin said.

He was in a full suit this morning, still in tones of gray with a white shirt and his boots. She allowed herself only a brief glance, then she turned away to get the coffee cups. She would have asked him what he was doing looking in the refrigerator, but it became quite clear in less than a minute. Colin found eggs and sausage links. He frowned slightly at the tube of biscuits, but he set them on the counter and turned on the oven. Estrella got out the pots and the pan that they needed for the food he'd found.

She managed to keep her shiver to a minimum when he passed behind her to throw away the egg shells. Her legs felt far too bare sticking out from under the long shirt she wore. She reminded herself that the oversized shirt was longer than some of the shorts she'd worn on vacation. She didn't feel like talking to Colin but the silence was too thick.

"My eyes. My voice," she patted her fingertips to the copper butterfly at her throat, "I'm not normal. I wasn't supposed to be around men anymore, but then Steve…"

"He kinda grabbed ya up and shook things?" Colin guessed.

Estrella nodded. She was glad that he already had a basic understanding of what being around
Steve was like. Unlikely things happened, Steve had his way of reacting to things, and everyone went along with Steve's plans because he was usually right.

They got the eggs scrambled and the biscuits into the oven. Colin seemed very capable once she put a spatula in his hand, so she got the plates for them.

"I'm still learning how to be around men without anything bad happening. Last night…my eyes… I don't want to disrespect Prissy," she told him.

"Like I said. Not your fault," Colin said with easy forgiveness, but he avoided looking at her while he lifted scrambled eggs onto a plate she held.

Her mind shifted around to think of something else to say to fill in the silence. The one thing that still worried her from last night moved to the front of her mind. For a moment during supper, she'd been afraid that Colin would get hurt and then Bucky would feel bad. Colin shouldn't stare at Bucky when he had that look about him, as if he wasn't sure who he was.

"You shouldn't challenge Bucky. He's…" Estrella stopped, once again at a loss for words.

"Sometimes you gotta stand up to a dominance play. If I'da hunkered down we'd never be on even ground. I didn't figure Steve would let things get too far, seeing as I'm just a regular guy and Barnes is somethin else. It turned out alright, so you can quit yer ditherin," Colin told her kindly.

Estrella gave up trying to talk to Colin. He seemed to have an answer for everything. Steve came in and saved her from any more attempts at conversation. He looked fresh and sharp in his dark brown suit. His arms went around her at the counter by the coffee pot and she was the recipient of several kisses to her cheeks and hair before she could get out from between him and the coffee.

"Good morning," Steve said to her, and it was clear that he was talking to his girl by the tone he used.

Colin smiled at them and plated another serving of eggs. He stirred the little sausages in their skillet and peeked at the biscuits through the oven door. Steve tugged at Estrella's shirt tails and she happily leaned against him. He sipped his coffee. She enjoyed the early morning feel of domesticity, even with Colin underfoot to bother her.

"I didn't fly you out here to cook for me," Steve commented, his voice taking on hints of Texas from being around Colin.

"Ain't cookin for you. I was hungry and figured it'd be rude to just make for one," Colin reasoned.

Breakfast was ready in only a few more minutes. They had time to sit on the bar stools and take a few bites, and then there was a knock on the door. Before Steve could set down his fork, Natasha and Bucky entered.

Buck looked casual in a long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves pushed up, dark jeans, and sneakers. Estrella made a face at the horrible iron bracer on his right wrist. Buck tossed his brown leather jacket over the back of the couch in the living room. Estrella frowned.

"That's Steve's jacket," she accused.

Buck shrugged.

"I need it today, 'til I can go get my stuff," he told her.
She would have said more about how she disliked him using Steve's beloved antique jacket, but the sight of Nat distracted her.

Natasha stood in the kitchen and held her morning coffee mug. She said nothing, but she gave Estrella a friendly greeting with her eyes. The look seemed to indicate that she was pleased to see her tolerating a man other than Bucky or Steve. How did Natasha say so much with no words? And her clothes! That said a lot, too.

Her tailored jacket and skirt were cut to show her killer figure to best advantage, though the knee length hem and three-quarter sleeves were technically modest. The deep navy blue color was almost but not quite black. The glossy red of Natasha's hair made a sharp contrast against the suit at her shoulders. The lapels of the jacket were never meant to button closed. The plunging V front swooped gracefully to present her bosom under a silk shell of pale blushed cream. In the bright kitchen light, Estrella couldn't tell if she was actually seeing the inner curves of her pert breasts through the silk or not. Estrella stared in awed wonder at the picture of elegant, deceptive charm she presented. Colin grinned.

"That'll do," he told Nat in a brief grunt of compliment.

Natasha turned a precise and predatory smile to the cowboy. Colin choked on a sip of coffee. He barely preserved the white of his shirt by a quick application of napkins to his chin. Buck chuckled and handed him the napkins, but he didn't gloat. Natasha knew better than to try her wiles on Buck, but he had empathy for any man on the receiving end of them.

"Easy, Nat," Steve told her.

She obeyed him by ignoring Colin and turning her attention to Estrella instead.

"You're straight from the bed. Your hair is slept in," Nat told her.

Estrella ran her fingers through her hair then resumed eating her scrambled eggs. Nat's voice sounded like she and Bucky had been speaking Russian all night. Buck looked unusually relaxed. He turned to get some coffee. His metal hand made a soft click sound when he grabbed a ceramic mug from the cabinet.

"You should get ready to go out. James has plans for you," Nat told Estrella.

Estrella nodded and finished her food in a hurry. Steve's warm hand came to rest on top of her left leg. She downed the last of her coffee and looked to see if he meant anything by the contact. In comparison to Nat's calculated expressions and Buck's unpredictable moods, Steve was steady and deeply honest. She got lost in his gaze and felt herself smiling at him like an impressionable fangirl. He was very handsome in his suit, and the way he looked at her made her want to see him take it off.

"We should be finished by early afternoon. Can I see you again after I'm done?" he asked.

The tone of his voice was low and intimate, as if they were in his bedroom or the back of the truck. She wished they were. She'd wanted to be with him before everyone was up this morning, but it hadn't happened.

"I should do some work today. There's a backlog because I was gone. But yes, I want to see you," she told Steve.

His hand rubbed gently on the skin at the inside of her knee. His eyes made it clear that he would have liked to spend more time with her this morning too. He certainly didn't look as relaxed and
open as vacation Steve, but he couldn't look like the Captain either, with that heated look in his
eyes. She had to turn away after a second and a half or they would do something embarrassing in
front of their friends. She wanted more skin with him and she also needed to talk to him about
some things. Things they couldn't mention in front of everybody.

"Come on little dove. We gotta be out of here soon in case the goons show up early," Bucky said to
her.

He'd done that thing again, where he'd moved to her side without her noticing his movement. It
was startling and she gave him a displeased look. Steve put a hand in her hair and bent to kiss the
side of her neck. His face lingered there until she turned to kiss him back. She wanted to get to her
toothbrush, and she was feeling more and more naked in a room of fully dressed people. When
Buck tugged on her sleeve to hurry her off her stool and away from Steve, she stopped thinking
about kisses and skin entirely.

"Be careful," she told Steve.

Today was a risky day for him. She didn't understand how he was going to tell the truth about
killing all of La Eme's Ix-Chel faction, yet stay out of trouble with the federal authorities. The last
thing she'd wanted was for him to get into trouble for her. She'd rather have stayed on the street
than to bring him down with her problems.

"You know I will be," Steve said.

Finally, she saw a bit of his work persona in him. It gave her some confidence that he would be
alright, even if she didn't see how that could be so. She nodded and went with Bucky.

Estrella wanted to go through the kitchen to get a better look at Natasha's marvelous ensemble.
Nat's shoes were delicate looking, but had sharply pointed heels. Estrella wondered how she could
walk on them. They kissed each other's cheek briefly and fondly in passing. It was strange to feel
Nat's hand ghost down her body from shoulder to hip. Nat said something to Bucky that none of
the rest of them understood. Estrella had no choice but to be tugged along behind Buck when he
grasped her fingertips in his.

Once they were in Natasha's suite, Buck didn't precisely dress her but he did tell her what to wear.
After a quick shower she put on an unremarkable pair of jeans and a plain black top. Bucky had a
thigh-length lambskin coat for her that Estrella had admired in Nat's closet. She pocketed her phone
while Buck hurried her out of the suite and to the elevator.

Buck drew her close and draped his arm across the back of her shoulders. Hard shapes pressed
uncomfortably against her ribs through the leather of Steve's jacket and hers. She didn't like Buck
being so close to her, but he didn't let her loose when she squirmed. If she'd ever had an annoying
big brother, she imagined this is what it would have been like.

"What are you carrying? It's poking my side," she complained.

"You don't wanna know. That's why I need Steve's coat til I have my own gear," he told her.

Though Colin had spent a few hours in planning meetings with the Avengers the day before, he
still struggled to look unimpressed when they re-convened for the morning in the conference room.
There was business to tend to, and they didn't waste time waiting for the feds to show up. Colin
didn't fully understand some of what he heard in the early morning meetings, and he was surprised
they spoke candidly in front of him.
"We have Catherine Guillory scheduled for relocation and a fresh ID. Dana and Melody Harding didn't request protective assistance. With your authorization, Captain, we'll release them to whatever address they give us. Are we ready to put this matter away?" Maria Hill asked.

"We should keep at least light surveillance on the Harding woman. This won't be the last we hear of her," Tony pointed out.

Steve nodded. It was unpleasant to have to discuss this on official time, but Dana Harding was going to be an issue. With how they knew things would go, she would likely become a mission for the Avengers sometime in the coming months. His name connected to the woman created a liability because of who he was in his professional life. Hill had handled the matter with cool decorum when she'd been presented with the likely outcome. Again, Steve was humbled by the quality of the people he worked with.

Maria made some notes on her pad regarding Tony's suggestion, and they moved on to the next topic.

"Miss Potts is in consultation about the PR campaign. We have a few decisions to make. Captain, are we going to tug at heart strings, or at something a bit lower?" Hill asked.

Steve looked to Natasha's face to see what she thought, and he tried to ignore Sam and Colin's curious stares. Thor and Clint were only mildly interested, and Bruce was almost asleep over his coffee mug. Tony looked sharp and eager.

"Can't we do both?" Steve asked.

Tony grinned, in agreement with him for once.

"Maybe, but that depends on how careful we are with the message. Public misunderstanding is easy to get if we try too hard to make the message complex," Maria warned.

"A virtue and patriotism message could be aired any time day or night. A message based on carnal appeal would have a narrower time slot, depending on how far we go with it," Natasha said.

Steve lifted his fingers to call a stop to Nat's line of thinking. Sam had been about to say something, but he waited.

"I've seen things on daytime television that I wouldn't be willing to put myself out there for. We can use what I've been given, but let's keep it classy. I'm not doing anything lewd enough to need a late PM time slot. There are other things I want you and Miss Potts to consider in messaging. This is war, not entertainment. Whatever we do, Hydra can counter. Natasha. Thor. Tony. I want you on this. Use your perspective, experience and media knowledge. I want countermeasures anticipated at least four steps ahead of anything we put out there," Steve told his team.

"It's just sexy pics to win hearts and… metaphorical ass. It's not a game of chess," Tony said.

"It is indeed a strategy game. Our Captain must tread carefully with this message so that he gains the attention and favor of younger minds, while not alienating the older minds who feel generational affinity with him because of his birth age," Thor pointed out.

Steve smiled. He knew Thor's input would be valuable, being part of a ruling family who likely had to consider the opinion of the people of the realm when making decisions.

"The good news is that media is already saturated with most messages that Hydra interests could craft to counter you. Their best tactic will be to ignore or downplay your appeal, rather than to
directly speak against you. If we tread carefully, you'll be the fresh voice. Keeping it classy, as you put it, will create more intrigue than if we pandered to the lowest denominator. I think we can keep your older base and bring in the youth, too," Natasha said.

Steve nodded. Tony sat still and looked thoughtful. He was beginning to understand, and the vacant look in his eyes meant that his powerful brain was taking Nat and Thor's ideas and running with them. This was going to work, and it was going to be good. Better than his old films from the forties.

"Hydra presence in the US congressional body and representation by lobbyists is already established. There is some resistance to their agenda, but that resistance needs shoring up. Folks need to get the message that they're not alone in what they're thinking when the Hydra agenda stinks but they can't put their finger on it. I'm not trying to win a ground war with my face or my ass. All we need to do is to provide reinforcements, tap into sentiment that's already in people's minds but not expressed. Older folks see the similarities between the old Nazi agenda and what's happening in our country today. I have firmer ideas for later, but those will have to wait until we get the last of Hydra's ground bases. We keep pressure on these last bases we're having trouble hitting, get the media campaign going to begin to address congressional infiltration, and I'll keep thinking about the next step after that. No rest, no mercy for Hydra. I want to finish them and move on to other things," Steve said.

"You're really good at making speeches. You should do something with that," Sam pointed out.

"You're not off the hook, Sam. I want your eyes on this. I'm not going to be embarrassed of these pieces like I am of my earlier work. I need you to pick through what we do and find anything overly campy or that has the potential to not age well," Steve said.

"Did you just say 'campy'?

Steve sighed.

"I have the internet, Tony. I don't sleep much," Steve reminded him yet again.

"Campy can be good, if it's done right," Sam said with a smile.

"So make sure we don't have any of the wrong kind," Steve said.

"Our guests for the nine o'clock meeting have arrived," Jarvis interrupted them, "Nine persons for whom we have dossiers. Sensors indicate no unexpected materials or equipment. I will perform more detailed scans after they enter the building. Captain?"

"I'm coming. Hold them in the lower level lobby," Steve said.

Colin started to get out of his chair when Steve did, but Steve indicated he should stay. Hill fitted Steve's nearly invisible comm device into his ear, and then he was away from the conference room and to the nearest elevator.

When he reached the main lobby, there were eight men and Detective Smythe waiting for him. They stood in a loose group and people went about their business around them. Steve took a moment to put names to faces in his mind. He'd read files on all the personnel who were likely to be sent to this meeting. If his suspicions were correct, one of them was likely to be a problem. Billy, the courier, was taking a package from the receptionist, but he looked over as Steve strode toward the visiting agents. Steve tilted his head a bit to indicate that Billy should hang close and pay attention.
Smythe noticed him first and called the agents' attention to Steve as he approached. It was easy to
tell the Rangers from the federal agents and all of them from the officer, the deputy, and the
detective who were local from Corpus Christi.

"Major Nichols. Assistant Director Shaw. Detective Smythe," Steve greeted them, "Welcome to
New York. I'm Steve Rogers."

"It's kind of you to greet us personally," Shaw said with a patently shallow smile, "I have orders
here to remove you for questioning to the local office."

Steve quickly read the order in his hand. It appeared legitimate, but he was prepared for that. Jarvis
gave him some information privately over his comm, and Steve didn't let his eyes shift away from
Shaw, despite what he learned from Jarvis' sensors.

"We both know that jurisdiction makes those orders problematic. You'll need to take them a few
levels higher to possibly make them enforceable, and that's not likely to happen during our time
today. Or you could attempt to enforce them here and now, and jurisdiction and damages can be
determined afterward. I'm sorry, but I'm not inclined to comply with removal until your orders are
more direct and legally binding," Steve said.

He stood politely at ease while he waited for Shaw to decide if he wanted to proceed with the day's
meeting diplomatically, or if he wanted to try less polite tactics. One of the Rangers didn't bother to
hide a smile, and Detective Smythe was biting her lips hard. Apparently Assistant Director Shaw
wasn't very well tolerated by the other agencies in the investigation. Shaw made a disgruntled face,
but he folded his papers and put them away in his suit jacket.

"This way, please," Steve said when it was clear that everyone wanted to proceed by less
aggressive means.

Jarvis had an elevator open and empty for them. Steve gestured for Billy to come closer before he
followed their visitors into the elevator. The young man hurried to see what Steve wanted, but he
looked to the agents and to Steve and the elevator with trepidation. He didn't want to get into the
confined space with Steve and the agents, but he would probably do it if he was ordered to even
though he was clerical staff for the tower.

"I'll need a collection vial in the office lobby," Steve told him on a low whisper.

Billy nodded, his eyes wide. As soon as the elevator doors slid shut, Billy took off under Jarvis'
direction.

Steve faced his guests in the large elevator. Timing was critical, so he acted casual until the
moment was right. Out of the corner of his eye, he kept watch on Special Agent Danville. Jarvis
knew where they needed to go, so no verbal directions were necessary.

"Your facility looks soft," Major Nichols of the Texas Rangers commented.

"It does, doesn't it?" Steve agreed.

He knew not to offer more information than he needed to. Maybe Nichols was fishing for
information, or maybe he was passing the time.

"This is a Stark facility. I'm sure- thauw!" Special Agent Danville squawked around Steve's thumb,
which suddenly appeared in his mouth.

The struggle was brief, and Danville tried to bite down on Steve's thumb. It did him no good. Steve
was mindful of not damaging the tall, thin man or Tony's elevator too much, but he subdued and immobilized Danville by crushing him against the wall with a force that the man's arms and ribs weren't meant to bear.

"Captain!"

"Wha-?"

"At ease," Steve told the nervous people around him.

Danville knew he'd been found out and caught. His heart was hammering, and he kept trying to use the fake tooth embedded in his jaw. Steve didn't let him. A firm grip with his fingers, then a twist and pull had the tooth out and in his hand so they could all see it.

"Detective Smythe, we've got a Hydra agent. Cyanide tooth, concentrated and weaponized for vapor deployment in confined space. Kindly disarm agent Danville, if you would," Steve directed the woman.

"You're seeing ghosts where none exist, Captain. Did you just pull his tooth? Let go of my agent!" Shaw demanded.

"I'd be careful claiming Danville as yours, Shaw. Our information indicates that he's not one of yours and hasn't been for a little over two years," Steve warned.

Detective Smythe removed Danville's service pistol from his holster and handed it to the other FBI agent.

"Knife in a forearm harness," Steve told her.

Smythe worked the long, thin blade out carefully and handed it over.

"Syringe in his left coat pocket. Careful. We don't know what's in it, but I'm sure it's not good," Steve cautioned.

"Is that all?" Smythe asked dryly.

She was a tough woman, but she had a sense of humor. Steve liked that. Steve put out his hand to take the syringe. Its cylinder contained a small amount of opaque black liquid. Danville looked at him defiantly.

"Who was this for?" Steve asked him.

"You. Hail mmphhh!" Danville said.

"Not today," Steve obstructed his words with his hand across the man's mouth.

The elevator stopped on the Avengers office level and the doors opened. Bruce and Billy stood waiting. Steve handed the syringe to Bruce and dropped the extracted tooth into the sample vial that Billy held for him.

"That's my evidence, Rogers. If he's bad, then I have primary interest," Shaw demanded.

Everyone got out of the elevator and Steve held onto Danville until Natasha came from the conference room to secure him. Danville was infuriated that not only had he been found out before he could execute his mission, he was also prevented from seeking an easy death.
"You can have him back when our business is done. Hydra is everywhere. I won't hold it against you personally that someone you brought today was here to do harm. I don't like you, Shaw, but your record is cleaner than Danville's. Has the Bureau scrutinized its personnel since Shield fell?" Steve asked.

Natasha escorted a struggling Danville to the nearby holding cell and shut him inside it. She made it look easy, despite her feminine attire and manner.

Shaw didn't have much to say, but Major Nichols did.

"We took a look through the ranks after what happened in D. C. If it could happen at the top, we knew we were vulnerable. We found a few," the Ranger said.

"Stay diligent. They won't give up until there aren't any more of them," Steve said as he led them into the conference room.

He took the cleansing wipe that Sam offered him and cleaned the Hydra agent's fluids from his skin. He tossed the wipe in the waste bin and sat in his chair in the middle of one long side of the table. The eight remaining investigators took seats across the table from the Avengers.

"Is that it? Can we get on with it now?" Shaw asked.

Natasha returned with a stack of file folders in her arm. She and her folders took a seat beside Steve while he introduced Colin and the rest of the Avengers to the visiting agents. It wasn't field combat, but Steve was pleased how well his team worked together to guide the meeting to a satisfactory resolution. It helped that the investigative team was off-balance from the start by one of theirs being revealed as an agent of Hydra.

Bucky didn't let her bring her laptop, or even a purse. She tucked her new false state identification card into her jeans pocket along with her debit card and what cash she had. Buck said that Natalia had set them a mission to get her some new underthings, so Estrella headed for the closest department store she knew that sold things for a reasonable price. It would be a long walk. She bristled under Buck's handling as he bustled her along on the train and up again to the sidewalks. His hands weren't careful and gentle like Steve's. Only the thickness of her coat kept her from bruising.

"You don't have to hang onto me all the time," she complained at him while they stood waiting for traffic so they could cross.

"Go on, then," Buck urged her with a smirk.

He let go of her elbow and Estrella pushed ahead through the crowd moving around them. Her body felt great and the crisp, cold air was invigorating in her lungs. She knew Buck was with her, just behind. Habitual worry caused her to scan the faces around her for possible Mexican gang members. There were Latino people, but they were ordinary, going about their business like everyone else. They didn't lurk and search like la Eme did.

Still, there were men. Most people were too busy to look at her, but it was happening again, just like it used to. When she got close to men, whether they were walking the opposite direction, or whether she passed them going the same way, many of them glanced at her. It was like their eyes were drawn to her if she got within a certain distance of them. On city sidewalks there was no way to keep her distance from people.

For a while, she tried to ignore the looks. She wore no makeup today. She wasn't dressed in any
way that would call attention to herself, but it didn't matter. She was healthy again. Her body moved strong and free and she couldn't help the way her hips moved when she walked. Her bones didn't let her move any other way. Men noticed her. Older guys and distracted guys looked at her briefly in passing, but there was a certain sort of man who always looked harder and for longer. As if they were an instant away from doing something to stop her and get her attention, even though she walked by quickly.

She found herself moving faster and faster, hoping to get by people before anyone had the chance to stop her. Her breath came fast, and the way her heart was racing made her light-headed. A strong hand reached from behind and clamped around her wrist. She yelped and startled, but felt a shocking sense of relief when she recognized the harsh feel of Buck's metal grip. He forcefully drew her aside from the moving crowd and pulled her into the brick and masonry of a tight alley. People passed them by, but Buck pressed her against the stone wall of the bank building and she was swallowed in the scent of Steve's leather coat.

"Hush, now. If Banner hadn't fixed your ticker, you'd have given yourself cardiac arrest," Buck shushed her.

Estrella didn't see anything because she didn't want to. She tucked her head down until her nose pressed painfully against Bucky's collarbone. Her eyes squeezed shut, and her hands gripped his sides under the familiar coat. Her feet dithered and her legs squirmed, still wanting to get away from the distress of being out in the crowds of men. Buck was solid and harsh against her. He felt like a weapon, all hard edged muscles under his clothes, like Steve was when he fought. Her fingers fiddled at the edge of a strap under his shoulders. A holster. The shape of a gun dug into her shoulder and her hands encountered other hard, unfriendly objects on his body.

"I know it feels good to move, but would you slow the hell down and walk with me? I want you to stay close in case some wise-ass gets any ideas," Buck reasoned.

Estrella tipped her head up to look at him because his smart tone held an odd note of sweetness. His flesh hand pawed her hair over her face and forced her to keep her head tucked down. Any hint of kindness in his voice was soured by his abrupt handling. It was a comfort, she realized, that he wasn't trying to impress her or stay in her good graces. She could count on him to be practical and efficient at keeping her safe. He was supremely dangerous, but the danger was for her, not to her. Her heart started to slow its racing. She took deep, slow breaths like Natasha had taught her to do after she woke from nightmares. Her body and mind had no choice but to calm when she breathed slowly.

"Did you see them?" she whispered, knowing Bucky would hear her.

"Yeah. You're like a magnet, toots. Ya got half the guys in town trippin over their feet to get a look at you. Why? You got some kinda smell?" Buck asked.

"I don't know. It used to be that way, before. I couldn't go anywhere unless I was all covered up and I walked carefully," she explained.

"I can't do this," Estrella fretted.

More repressed memories were littering her mind like slips of paper falling from the pages of a shaken book. Catcalls. Groping. Guys stopping in her path, attempting to get her to talk to them. She'd forgotten how it was because being sickly and then being with Steve had kept her safe for so long. Her fingers curled at Buck's side, digging into the holster strap there. More slow, deep breaths calmed her again when her heart tried to race ahead with anxiety.
"What do you think I'm gonna do to anyone who messes with you?" Buck asked, low and steely.

"You can't kill people for that!" she hissed at him.

Buck chuckled.

"I don't need to go to extremes. You think I got no finesse? Never mind that, anyway. We're gonna walk. Stay close. Look around at the buildings like a tourist, or look at me. Don't look at the men. You got no need to notice them," he assured her.

She nodded.

He expected her to trust him, and she did. When they moved out onto the sidewalk again she walked with his right arm over her shoulder. He kept a slower pace and most people moved around them. Estrella could feel the men's attention, but she clung to Buck's fingers beside her arm and she looked ahead, over people's heads. Nerves made her chest feel fluttery, but Buck was steady and cool.

She tensed again when they walked into the broad doors of the department store. There were metal detectors, but no alarms sounded. Buck had an arsenal under his coat. She looked curiously to him and his lips only quirked a bit in acknowledgement. She'd have to ask him about it later.

There were far fewer men in the ladies' section of the stuffy old store. It felt odd to have a male shadow as she approached the display that held the bras, but Buck didn't hesitate to stay with her. He only gave her a little more room to browse by herself.

Estrella fingered across the sizes printed on the ends of the boxes the plain cotton bras were in. The prices were reasonable. She could afford two, one to wash and one to wear. She planned to get a package of panties, too.

"You're not gettin this granny gear," Buck grumbled from beside her.

Estrella turned to give him the stubborn side of her chin.

"This isn't the place Natalia said we should go. Come on," Buck insisted.

"Natasha isn't paying for my things. I am," Estrella argued.

"Neither of you are. I'm paying," Bucky said.

Estrella seethed and narrowed her eyes at him. Her eyes flickered down to where his fingers rubbed an obscene looking bulge near the front of his pants. She almost lost her composure and yelled at him, but then she realized he wasn't being vulgar. He had a sizeable fold of cash in his pocket. Before she could say anything, he leaned in and tugged her close.

"If I don't spend it on you or on Stevie, it was gonna get spent for Hydra. Shut up and let it ride, girlie. We're stickin it to the bad guys," he murmured.

Estrella chuckled. He sounded like a rascally kid up to no good, perhaps stealing pies.

"Hydra in lace panties?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Little pink panties with bows. No more laser guided missiles," Buck said and she could hear the smile in his voice, though his mouth was too close to her ear for her to see his face.

She grimaced at his iron wrist bracer, but she took his hand anyway. Buck turned them around and
they left the department store. She didn't like the direction he was walking, back toward the more expensive part of town.

"I don't want to shop where Natasha said. If you've got the money, then there's somewhere I want to go," she insisted.

Buck let her lead him. She stayed close, and he heard her heart kick up a little bit when a guy brushed too close as they walked. Her eyes worried at him, afraid he would do something to the man, but he stayed easy. Relaxed as he seemed to the girl, he was alert to their surroundings. It was a kick in the pants how men paid attention to her, and how the attention made her nervous, but he was watchful for more dangerous things.

Estrella pulled at him and he let her lead him into a large, pink lingerie store. Buck had seen women's stuff before, and even shopped for it, but it had been a long time. The places he had shopped had been more like the fuddly old department store they'd first gone to. This place was the Taj Mahal of girly stuff.

He followed Estrella as she cautiously perused table after table of whimsical, colorful panties. There were so many that they had drawers under the tabletop with more and more of them. A sales guy simpered over, looking hopeful and helpful, but Estrella was too overwhelmed to say much when the young man asked if he could help.

"We'll find you if we need you," Buck told the guy.

He took the shopping basket they were offered.

Estrella wandered around, looking more awed than decisive.

"You're crap at shopping. How it works is you're supposed to put stuff in the basket, see?" Buck said.

He picked up a bright fuchsia pair of boy shorts covered in soft sequins and dropped it in the basket. Estrella looked at him skeptically.

"Those better be for you. Oooh! You're just like him. You put stupid things in the basket just to make me put them back," she complained as he walked away with the gaudy underwear still in the basket.


Estrella paid no mind to his absurdity. Bucky was Bucky and who knew what he really meant with his comment about wearing the panties? He just meant to annoy her.

An array of beautiful colors got her attention. She went to a table that displayed somewhat modest bikini underwear. They weren't thongs, and the fabric was soft and sleek with only one seam near the back of the gusset. How did they make the edges so smooth, without any hems? They were kind of stretchy, so she supposed they didn't need any elastic. There were bras nearby, pretty and unpretentious. The colors and patterns matched many of the panties that she so admired.

She chose four panties and two bras. She guessed on the sizes. They went into the hand basket, and she looked around for the cashier counter.

"No," Bucky frowned into the basket, "get more."

"How many? I'm probably going to outgrow this stuff in a month or so," she said.
"Twice as many," Buck advised.

He chose a cherry-red pair of undies and a sweet looking bra to match. Both items had heart-shaped eyelets along the edges and a tiny, fancy bow front and center. Estrella almost shook her head, but the set was gorgeous.

"C'mon. Stevie will love it. His eyes'll fall out. He had a pinup card in his footlocker and she was doo-dadged up almost like this," Buck said.

"Are we shopping for me or for Steve?" Estrella asked dryly, but she put the items in her basket.

"Some for you and some for him. Have some fun," Buck challenged her.

Estrella looked at him suspiciously. James Barnes was in residence this morning. No Soldier at the moment, despite enough weapons to overthrow a small country hiding under his coat. Steve's coat. He had that dapper, teasing look about his eyes and mouth, and his head cocked just so. He was deadly charming and he knew it. Handsome practically leapt off the edges of him, but he was all sass and no thunder. She could feel that his sexuality was numb. He was operating on memory, she suspected. It made her feel sad for him because she could see hints of what Steve had said about him in their youth. He would be a force to be reckoned with if he was 'there', but he wasn't.

Before she could let any hint of pity show on her face, Estrella turned away.

"Okay," she said.

She walked toward the fitting rooms that she knew must be at the back of the large store. Buck followed, never far away.

"Hey, what about this stuff?" he asked her.

She paused and looked aside at the wall of pajamas and sleepwear he indicated. There were comfy looking flannel pants, but she noted how snug they would fit around her crotch and bottom, and the waist band was low. There were cute little tank tops, ribbed and stretchy like the ones Steve sometimes wore, but in gray with pink hearts, or in yellow with white clouds. There was blue with cherubs, too, and lavender with roses. Buck pointed to the sleep shorts. She assessed that not much of her bottom would be covered by the thin, stretchy denim-look shorts.

Estrella put out a hand and pulled Bucky closer. He looked at her expectantly, still with that hint of a dare on him.

"I can't wear this in front of Steve. It would be cruel to tease him. You know that," she admonished him.

"Maybe he needs teasin. You wanna get him to the altar, and he's dragging his feet," Buck said.

"No! He's trying to drag me there. I don't want to get married yet," Estrella insisted.

Buck pulled back to give her a stern look.

"Why not? You think you're too good for him?" he asked.

"I do not! What's wrong with you? Is everything a joke? Steve is really serious. When he says 'forever', you know he means it. I'm strange, Bucky. I have to be sure that my weirdness isn't messing things up. What if he's all into me because of this thing he's got going with his hormones? What if it's my fault? What if it wears off, and then we made the wrong decision? I'm not even
done yet! What if I have to leave him for his own good? I'm not going to play with him, push him farther than he wants to go, and then leave him if it doesn't work out. We have to be sure. I have to take my time. Don't you think Steve is worth being absolutely sure about? I don't want to be a bitch and rush in and take him, then leave if it's all wrong. He'd be so sad," Estrella fretted, and she had to gulp in a breath.

Her eyes watered up and she looked away. The longing and the frustration she felt welled to the surface and she sighed. Why did this have to be so complicated? She'd never imagined that love could hurt, even before anything went wrong.

"You really care for him," Bucky murmured.

She didn't say anything. Buck was a guy. A fighter. A killer. What did he know of soft feelings and of love? Nothing. She probably seemed silly and emotional to him. She took a deep, brisk breath and lifted her chin.

"They're really pretty, but I don't want to tease Steve by wearing them around where he can see all the time," she decided.

Bucky patted her shoulder in an odd way. She continued on to the fitting rooms in the back and the salesperson from before came to help measure her. He was quick with his tape measure after she took her coat off, and she was alright with the young man touching her to measure because Bucky was there, sitting in a chair in the corner.

The young man took her five bras and hurried off to get the correct sizes for her. She didn't need to try the panties. With her hip measurements, she was sure they would fit, except they would be tight around her bottom and probably ride up some. That was okay because they were stretchy and seamless. When her bras were handed over the fitting room door for her to try, she only had to try two before she sent them back for the next larger cup size. They were snug and perfect now, but that meant they wouldn't fit her for long.

She still needed at least a few plain, sturdy panties. She gave Bucky the evil-eye until he backed away some to give her some space, and then she wandered around until she found a display of pale cotton underthings. They were still very pretty, with tiny flowers printed on them, but they would serve for when she needed them.

Bucky paid the cashier for her purchases without comment or hesitation. She happily carried out her pink shopping bag.

"Thank you, Bucky," she said.

She wasn't sure how she felt about him buying her things. It was sort of like he was a mob boss and she was getting her goods with dirty money. That felt exciting in a glamorous, fictional way, but it was scary when she really thought about it. Hydra was very real.

Estrella kept her eyes on their feet as she walked. There were a few times when men on the sidewalks came too close, but she squeezed harder against Buck's side and shut her eyes. She was glad for the heavy coat that somewhat concealed her down past her hips. Maybe her jeans were too tight and showed her legs too much? She should wear a long skirt next time, she decided.

"I get a kick out of spending the cash, doll. Don't mention it. Let's go spend some more. How about a book store?" Buck asked, and then he turned them into the entryway of one.

"Oooh," Estrella cooed softly as the smell of new books and magazines reached her nose.
Bucky smiled and let her out from under his arm. The guys in the bookstore on a midmorning were mostly young, thin and harmless. He followed her as she made a bee-line for the magazines. He watched curiously to see what she would pick. Fashion? Celebrity gossip rags?

"Southern Living?" he asked with a grimace.

"Be quiet. It has the plants I like," Estrella fussed as she thumbed through the images of lush homes and jungle-like vegetation. Bucky took note, and scanned the racks for more jungly things.

He handed her something called *Venture Costa Rica* that looked like it was mostly pictures of rainforests and bright, tropical houses. She cooed even more over that, until he thought for a moment more and got her a travel guide that had jungles and beaches with crystalline turquoise water. She actually wiggled with glee and made happy noises while she flipped through that one.

Buck smiled proudly, and guided her with a hand at her back toward the gardening book section while he checked around to be sure they were secure. The girl didn't even notice where they were until she reached the last page of her travel magazine. When she looked up and saw the glossy, full-color gardening books, he took the travel mag from her fingers so she could browse.

She sat and read among various books for a half hour, and then she looked up as if she'd just remembered him.

"What about you? You've got to be bored," she said.

It tugged at something inside him that she looked genuinely concerned that he might not be enjoying himself, though her sentiments were entirely inappropriate. The girl had a good heart, and it made him glad for Steve. She wasn't selfish. Sure, she'd forgotten about him for a little while, but she'd been desperately impoverished for years, so the luxury of new books was an understandable distraction.

"I've had way worse jobs than this. Don't worry about me," he said.

Still, she insisted. She took her favorite garden book, checked its price, and then dragged Bucky back toward the magazine section. She sat to read her book there, where Buck could peruse the magazines.

Estrella watched him look through the guns n ammo section of periodicals and listened to him grumble about what he saw. He kept watch unobtrusively, so she knew he wasn't truly distracted. Finally, he replaced the magazines.

"Nothing you like?" she asked him.

Buck made a face and shook his head.

"You're a gun snob," she hissed at him.

Buck shrugged.

"It comes with territory. There's some new stuff in those, most of it hypothetical trash that's not in production yet and won't ever be, and the rest of it is all flash and no function. It's fun to look at," he admitted.

They stood in line for coffee at the little café off to the side of the bookstore, and then Estrella noticed the art supplies. She looked to Bucky with wide eyes, and he nodded.
They chose a few interesting pencils in sepia tones and a new sketch pad for Steve. Estrella liked a package of artisan handmade paper and she gathered that up too. Instead of paying for underwear, she spent her money on a gardening book and art supplies for Steve. She added another shopping bag to her arm.

"Living with you guys is different," she said as they walked back outside again.

Buck didn't carry her bags for her, not that she would expect him to. People carried their own stuff, but she knew that as old as Buck and Steve were, they certainly would have carried a lady's things had their jobs not changed them and made them more cautious.

"I know you need to keep your hands free, but you're holding coffee," she pointed out.

"Coffee is easy to drop. Useful if it's hot, too," Buck commented.

It was getting easier to pay attention to Bucky and not to the men who would otherwise have been bothering her. Buck was easy. He didn't stare at her. He didn't react at all to whatever was making some other men act like idiots around her. He kept his gaze ahead and around. Again, she thought how young and at the same time jaded he looked. Buck was someone's boy, someone's brother and he'd been treated rough. He was having a hard time finding himself. She wanted to fix that a little bit if she could.

"Have you talked to your sister?" Estrella asked him.

She could see that she'd surprised him. It was only a momentary blankness across his features, as if he couldn't figure out what she meant.

"Steve runs his mouth too much," he said.

"He doesn't. We were on vacation and he told me how your family used to take him with you sometimes when you went swimming in the summer. He didn't mention names. What is your sister's name?" she asked.

"Lucille. Lucy. She was little when the war started. She used to follow us around if we'd let her. Ma didn't like to let her go over when Steve was down sick because she was afraid it was catching, but Lucy would have helped me all the time with Steve if she could. She's a good kid," Buck reminisced as he walked.

"How old is she now?" she asked.

"She'd be eighty-six," he said, and he shook his head.

They were nearing a small neighborhood green space, and Estrella wanted Buck to go sit with her. He shook his head and insisted that they go into a deli instead. There were a few booths off to the side, so they got sandwiches and had a seat.

Estrella noted that his way of keeping watch in public was different than Steve's. They both did the quick glance with their eyes, but Bucky looked less friendly when he did so. She supposed that Steve had to look pleasant in case fans noticed him. Buck never had that concern. If he saw anything he was suspicious of, if wouldn't be a far step for him to go from cool assessment to deadly intent. She sighed and finished her sandwich. Here wasn't the right place to talk about his sister. He couldn't relax. There was too much to watch.

They made their way back toward the tower. It was lunch time, and surely Steve's meeting was almost over? Estrella led Bucky through the little mall where the library was and kept on through
to the alley. It was quiet on the backside of the buildings and Buck was already relaxing some. He seemed to know where she was going.

When they got to the brick wall that backed her old home, she stopped. She set her shopping bags down and looked to him expectantly.

"You wanna wait in the schoolyard?" he asked her.

"No. I want the last of my things, and we can wait for Steve to be done," she said.

Buck made a standing jump up the brick wall and perched atop it with barely a scrabble at the brick on the way up. He crouched down and held out a hand for her shopping bags. Estrella handed them up and Buck set them on the brick to one side. Then, Buck lay down on his belly and extended a hand. He made a face and stripped his gloves off, then tried again.

Estrella hopped up and grabbed his hand. Buck pulled her up, and her toes dug at the wall to help.

"I got it. Don't scuff up your shoes," Buck grumbled at her.

He already knew her alley was empty, just the way she'd left it. In a less than a minute, he had her over and down, and he handed her the shopping bags. Estrella looked around and frowned at her alley.

The place was cool and damp. A November breeze swirled a few leaves from the park around in the corner. She went over to inspect her pallet bed. She'd forgotten that the carpets smelled a little musty when the weather turned toward winter. Gingerly, in case there were bugs, she poked at her folded blanket. Things seemed fine, so she moved her cruddy old bag and her blanket to the far end of her shelter. She climbed inside. It still felt cozy, up off the ground and tucked away under the tin roof. The wooden pallets creaked under her weight as they never used to.

Buck came to stand beside the shelter and peered in at her. He looked different now too. Better. His hair was cut and styled neatly and he didn't have that dead, determined look on his face.

"May I?" he asked.

She shrugged and scooted over some more. Buck climbed up beside her. Estrella didn't want to go through her bag while he was watching, so she set her small collection of possessions at her feet. It felt strange to be here, like going back in time. Or like the recent months of her life had been a dream. She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. It was glossy black and getting long. She wrapped her arms around her folded knees and hugged herself. She felt thick and strong. Not bones.

"Time is… confusing," Bucky admitted.

They both seemed to be thinking it. She, about her life here in this alley, and he about his geriatric little sister. Her family wasn't just a faded fairy tale to her anymore. Franny was married and had babies, little Val was as big as her and had to wear a necklace, and Jesse was much the same, only beefier and with no pimples. Tia Rita still had the best hugs and Uncle Alberto was still grumpy and barely comprehensible.

"I didn't know who Steve was anymore. I forgot my own family. Ma, Pa, my sisters. I think I forgot myself. I didn't know who Steve was, but I knew he was important. How can you remember that you forgot? They kept mind-wiping me, but his stubborn little punk face kept coming back to me. I think I knew more about him at first, but eventually it was just his face, and then it was just his attitude, I think. Stubborn to the death. The little shit never let me give up, even when I wanted
to die. Especially then," Buck said.

Estrella laughed.

Buck shook himself out of his melancholy reverie, and he chuckled too. He liked the girl more and more. Instead of giving him pitiful looks, she was imagining Steve in his head, pestering him eternally. That was just like Steve and it made them both smile.

"Why was he so important? More important than your Ma?" Estrella asked.

"I've been thinking about that. I think we save each other. For a while, I saved his scrawny ass when he'd get in trouble. He used that angel-face and lied for me a few times. Kept me out of trouble with the cops and with my boss down at the docks. Damn if he didn't make me pay when he had to lie for me. Hell, I never asked him to lie. He just did. Felt obligated, I guess. That made me feel worse than anything, making him lie. Then, he got big and he came to save me. All through the war, we took turns. I don't think I remember all the times we pulled each other's asses out of the fire. Maybe when Hydra got me and put me in the ice box, it was natural as breathing to think he'd come get me out of there. I went in knowing he was alive, so part of me never gave up hope. If Stevie was alive, then he would come for me. I didn't know he went into the ice too," Buck said, more like he was talking to himself.

"Do you resent that he never came for you?" Estrella asked.

Bucky looked over at her, looking for judgement. There was none. The girl had been through hell too. Not like his hell, but still. She was mildly sympathetic, but mostly curious.

"Naw. By the time my memory got fuzzy about whose face kept showing in my head as I iced over again, I didn't recall that he was supposed to come for me. There was just that jaw and those determined eyes. Whoever he was, I was supposed to hold on strong, like him. I couldn't do any less with him staring back at me in my head. I was starting to forget even that much of him, and then there he was on the bridge. Same jaw, same eyes. I would have just been confused until they iced me again, but he said my name. Pierce gave me some bullshit, but it was too late. Goddamn I was angry. If Fury and Natalia hadn't killed Pierce, he'd have been my first hit. Hah! I didn't even know why I was angry, or what I should do about it," he mused.

"Are you still angry?" she asked him.

"Yes," Buck said.

Estrella shivered at the look of cold, determined fury on his face, but then he put it away. He perched on his heels, much like her. They probably looked ridiculous, two clean healthy people in expansive leather coats huddling in a street hovel as if they belonged here. She didn't care about the appropriateness of it, and he didn't either. Buck stopped staring off into the distance at the brick wall opposite them and turned to look at her.

Something about him so easily looked smug and superior, but she was starting to see that he sometimes put on that face when he was trying desperately to keep above his troubles. That, and his features just easily conveyed a polished, debonair persona when he was hardly even trying. It felt right to equate his apparent uppityness to her bossy, empty bravado that Steve kept warning her about.

"What about you? Aren't you angry? At La Eme and all the men who hurt you?" Buck wondered.

"I used to be. I think I was more angry at life or at fate or at God, whatever had made me this way.
But then I gave up on the anger because it was only hurting me. None of those people cared what happened to me or even knew if I lived or died, so what use were the revenge fantasies? I had no power to make it happen. Then I came to know that it was nobody's fault. Things are the way they are. I'm born the way I am, and some men feel entitled to take what they want. I'm powerless to change anything but the future," she said.

"That's probably healthy," Buck grudgingly admitted.

"It works for me. They didn't mess with my head much. They only hurt my body. Bodies heal easier than minds," Estrella said.

"My mind shouldn't have healed. I didn't remember anything except that stubborn face. They cooked my brain with electricity. I understand that with the serum enhancements, my brain itself healed from the damage. But the memories? How do they last, if the media they're recorded on is scrambled and cooked? Am I remembering things correctly? Do I have some things mixed up and I'll never know it?" he wondered.

"You're second-guessing yourself. Stop it. You remember how to speak with Natalia. You remember how old your sister is. You remember that Steve lied for you. And you probably remember the exact shape and function of every part of every gun you've used. Don't you?" she challenged him.

"It really bothers me that you call them guns. It's a rifle. A pistol, a shotgun, or a firearm. Weapon, if you want to be really generic," Buck said.

"Bah. Heifer, steer, cow, calf, bull, yearling. It's all cattle, and when you sit down to eat a steak, you know what kind of animal it is," she denied him his preferred specificity.

Bucky stared at her hard, but his lip curled up a little when her eyes crinkled at him and then she laughed.

"I'm not a shooter. I've never used a gun. A pistol, whatever. I don't want to. I'm weak. Men could just take it away and use it on me," she reasoned.

"Not if you shoot them first," Buck grumped at her.

"So you shoot them first. Or Steve can. Or I can just run. I'm good at running now," she pointed out.

"God, kid. You're gonna be the death of me. Someday you're gonna wish you could shoot," Buck predicted.

"Tell me about your sister, Lucy. Steve said you can't go see her because they're watching you. He said he already had her declared dead, so she's not there in the records, if Hydra tries to find her," Estrella changed the subject.

"He did, huh? He thinks of everything. All I know is that she's old, and she lives in Michigan. Her husband is gone, but she's got kids and grandkids. It's better if I stay away," Buck said.

"You can stay away. But, Bucky, you said she adored you and Steve too. She's probably still sad, thinking you're dead. You should at least call her," Estrella insisted.

"I never said she adored me," he denied, aside from the point.

"You said she tried to follow you around everywhere when she was little. That means she adored
her big brother. I'm sure she was heartbroken like the rest of your family when you didn't come home from the war. Call her. It will make her happy. You can give her that," she said.

"What, now? I don't know her number," Bucky tried to evade.

"Don't play dumb. Jarvis knows everything," Estrella said as she turned her phone back on.

"Jarvis, what is Bucky's sister Lucy's phone number in Michigan?" she asked after she woke up her phone.

"Hello, Miss. Transferring her home phone number to you now," Jarvis said.

Estrella looked at the number that appeared at the top of her phone screen and turned it to show Bucky. He made a face.

"Jarvis, does she have a heart condition? Is she going to have a heart attack if Bucky calls her?" she asked.

"It is against ethics parameters to look into people's records, but since I understand your concern, I will do so. Records show it is unlikely that she will be harmed from receiving a telephone call, but the risk cannot be ruled out entirely, given her age," Jarvis told them.

"See, I could hurt her. I don't want to upset her," Bucky said.

"You're an old man, from back when guys weren't supposed to admit to feeling anything. Of course you're terrified of your emotions. It's not just for you, though. It's for her," Estrella encouraged him with teasing and appeal.

"Alright, but this is some twisted shit. Nobody's gonna believe me. They'll think it's a prank call," Buck said.

He looked around, assessing the daylight available in the alley. Estrella agreed with him. They needed to send video so they would be believed. They eased down off her pallet bed and moved across to where the daylight reflected from the north alley wall onto the south one, making good, diffused light. Bricks were generic. Nobody would know where the video was made by looking at a brick background.

Bucky actually looked nervous. He took off Steve's coat and the holster and the heavy pistol. He set them down on her bed and moved back into the good light. He ran his fingers through his hair. His eyes shifted around their surroundings, uneasy about setting his firearm down out of reach when he was supposed to be protecting Estrella.

"Jarvis, does Lucy have any family who lives with her or near her? Someone we can contact first so they can ease the surprise with her before Bucky calls?" Estrella asked.

"There is a grand-daughter named Shannon. Call records indicate that she lives in the area and calls Miss Lucy most frequently. I believe that she would be a good place to start," Jarvis offered.

"Shit. I don't know what to say. How the hell am I supposed to do this? I'm dead to these people. I'm a ghost. This is crazy, toots!" Buck said.

"It's okay. I'll do it for you. How about this… You don't call them at all. I talk to the grand-daughter, and then we just send a short video message of you for her to show to Lucy. You can say any little thing, even "Hi, Lucy," and as long as it's you, it's good," she said.
"Alright. Jarvis, you can scrub this call from the system, right? There can't be anything linking me to her. I don't want her in danger because of me. They'll use her to get me if they can," Buck said.

"It will be easy for me to remove evidence of your call, and I would be happy to do so," Jarvis agreed.

Bucky nodded and fidgeted, tugging at his bottom lip with his thumb and forefinger while he thought of what to say to his sister in the video. It felt strange, like he was reaching back in time to a part of himself he'd considered lost. Like he was gonna talk into his past, literally.

Estrella smiled at him. More than ever, he looked like a lost young man. His arms were crossed in a contemplative pose. His plain dark shirt would do well to hide his metal arm, but he still had a few things wrong. She looked at him with the critical eye Natasha was trying to teach her. Bucky opened his stance when she moved close to pat at him. The smooth curves of his arm muscles looked somewhat lumpy and interrupted. Her hand felt at knives under his sleeves. Under the shirt at his chest there was more gear that she didn't understand the shape of. Buck cocked an eyebrow at her and reached into his shirt to remove the things she indicated which made him look a little out of the ordinary. She didn't bother looking at the stuff he set aside. She didn't want to know.

"Jarvis, please put a call through to Shannon on my phone," Estrella said.

Bucky looked at her with slightly widened eyes. While her phone rang and she held it to her ear, she pushed Bucky back toward the spot they wanted him in to film the video.

"Hello? Who is this?" a woman's voice said.

She sounded busy and suspicious, as if expecting bad news or a robo advertising call.

"Hi, Shannon. I'm a friend of a friend. You're related to James Buchanan Barnes through your grandmother Lucy. We wanted to call and let her know that Bucky is alive, but we thought it would be better to call you first so it wouldn't shock Miss Lucy. Do you think you could get a video of him to her for us?" Estrella said as gently as she could.


"Buck, they call you 'Uncle Jimmy!'" she said aside to Bucky.

"Yes, he's here with me. You know how men are. He's a nervous mess and doesn't know what to say, so I'm calling for him. Do you think it would be alright to contact Miss Lucy?"

"Is this a joke?" Shannon asked.

"I know it's unusual. It's not a joke. I promise. Do you want to talk to him?" Estrella offered.

Buck's eyes got wider.

"I guess so? I wouldn't know him if I heard his voice. I only know the stories. Who are you?" Shannon asked.

"I'm Steve's girlfriend," she told the woman. That was generic enough, especially since Jarvis was going to erase any evidence of the call.

"Oh," Shannon sounded lost.
Estrella handed the phone to Bucky. Buck took it, stared at it for a moment, and then put it to his ear.

"Shannon? You all call me Uncle Jimmy now? Who's responsible for that?" Buck finally asked.

"I think my brother Charles is. You don't sound old. Listen, I don't know what's going on, but I'm not putting my gramma through hell for somebody's idea of a sick joke. You better prove it's really you, and you need to explain why you don't sound old. You should be almost a hundred," Shannon gathered her wits enough to demand.

"There's a good girl. I'm like Stevie. I was in ice for a long time. So yeah, I'm old, but I don't look like it. If I can send a vid to Lucy, she'll know me when she sees me. Proof… My ma's favorite flower was lilacs, and Lucy has a scar above her right knee from when she fell trying to climb down the fire escape when she was seven. We had a dog for a little while before things got bad. Its name was Raffy. Ask her about that stuff," Buck said.

"Stevie. You mean Captain America? The one in New York?" Shannon asked.

"Please. Please tell me you don't all call him Cap all the time. He's a family friend. You should call him Steve. I swear Lucy had a crush on him, the way she followed his skinny ass around. If you tell me she calls him Captain America, I know you're the one who's fake," Buck challenged.

"Oh my god," Shannon mumbled.

"Hey, now. Don't take it in vain. Did nobody teach you better?" Buck admonished.

"Oh…" Shannon's voice trailed off to nothing.

"I think she believes me," Buck said to Estrella.

"Yes, because you're an asshole. Give me my phone," Eya insisted.

"I'm sorry, Shannon. Now might not be a good time. Would it be better if we tried again later, or should we drop this and forget about it? You know Lucy better than he does, I'm sure," she told the woman.

"No, no! Don't go. She'll be so happy! You have no idea. How is he still alive? Ice? You mean, the Captain America in New York is the real Steve Rogers? The same person Gramma knew? We thought it was some guy the government groomed to take his place," Shannon said.

"Steve is the same guy your Gramma knew. It's weird, I know. So weird. Look, there are reasons why you can't tell anyone outside the immediate family that you know he's alive. Steve's enemies, Buck's enemies are still out there. They can't know that Bucky called you or contacted Lucy, or Lucy might be in danger. Any of you could be," Estrella warned them.

"Enemies?" Shannon asked.

"Hydra. I know it sounds like history books or something, but it's real. You can't talk about it," she said.

"Alright. I understand. I can't believe this is happening. I have to think. You said you wanted to send a video? How did you get my number?" Shannon asked.

"Steve has connections. We can do searches for things like that. I'll record a message of Bucky for Lucy. Do you think you could show it to her so she'll know he's alive?"
"Yes. I'm going there now. She's going to be so happy. I'll have to apologize. We all will. We didn't believe her that Captain America was the real Steve Rogers. You'll send the video? You really will? I'm not dreaming?" Shannon said.

"It's not made yet. As soon as Bucky, Uncle Jimmy, thinks of something to say, I'll record and I'll send it to your phone. Steve will be pleased to hear that somewhere out there, somebody recognizes him and not just Captain America," Estrella said with a smile in her voice.

"You have to come visit! You don't know how happy that would make her," Shannon insisted. The woman sounded like she was in tears.

"They'd really love to, but they can't. It's dangerous. We can't let Hydra make the connection between the guys and Lucy. Steve has already taken steps to protect Lucy. We all have to be careful. Keep it quiet," Estrella said.

"Thank you," Shannon whispered.

The woman was definitely crying. Estrella's eyes watered too.

"You're welcome. I'll send the video soon," she said.

Shannon said thank you again and Estrella gently ended the call.

Goodbye didn't seem appropriate.

She turned to face Buck.

"We've upset those people," Bucky said with disapproval.

"It will be worth it. Shannon was very emotional, and the whole family will be glad to hear about you. Have you thought of something to say to them, Jimmy?" she teased with a smile.

"Yeah. Get me framed up," Buck said.

He ran his hand through his hair again, and he waited while Estrella got her phone set up just right. He nodded to the girl, and she touched the phone and nodded back to him.

"Hiya, Luce. It's been a while, and everybody thought I was dead and gone. You should probably let em keep thinkin that. I know I don't look right for how old I am, but I was on ice, kind of like Steve, but different. The details don't matter. What's important is that I'm thawed out now, and I'm back. I can't come around to see ya right now because the ones who put us down for a nap are still out there lookin to do us wrong again. Steve's got a really swell gal, and it was her idea to get a message of my ugly mug to you. I hear you're an old bat now, so I hope getting this doesn't make ya keel over, kid. I'd give you a thump on the ear and a piggy back ride if I could, but… it is what it is. Love ya," Bucky said.

Estrella's heart thumped a little faster at the way Bucky looked at the camera. It was how he sometimes looked at Steve. It was how he looked at people he loved. For the few moments that he was making his message to his sister, he was soft, sweet and open. Everything the Soldier wasn't. Estrella pushed the end button on the video and watched Buck's demeanor melt away to the gruff man he usually was.

Bucky frowned and turned away. He went to the carpet covered stack of pallets and briskly put all his gear and Steve's jacket back on. He looked emotionless as he took the phone from her hand and critically watched the video they'd made. His metal hand didn't show, and he hadn't said anything
that was too specific. He hit the send button and directed it to Shannon's number.

"Make sure it gets to the woman's phone, then scrub the tracing," Buck said.

"It is done," Jarvis confirmed for them.

Estrella tugged at Buck's arm before he could turn and get far from her. He looked at her again with that aloof tilt of superiority. She felt for him.

"You did so good," she said simply.

"It's not a drop on the bad I've done," he told her.

"I don't care. Shut up about that. That's all gone. This is good, right here, right now. There's a family in Michigan that's going to be celebrating and telling stories tonight. Your sister's face is going to be sore from smiling so much," Estrella told him.

Bucky made a stiff face, and it didn't fool her into thinking he was untouched. He ruffled her hair until it was all messed up, then he gestured to the wall. She grinned and smoothed down her hair.

"Get your bags. This place is crap. Let's go sit at the library until we hear the jet leave," Bucky told her.

"He said not to go to the library, because I already mentioned it," she pointed out.

"And you agreed that you wouldn't go there because you didn't argue with him, so he thinks the library is the last place you'll be. If anybody was to ask him about where we are right now, he still won't know how to answer them. So we're not asking him to lie, see? Let's go," Buck said.

Wanda was happy to see her come in, but she stared hard at Bucky. Estrella hugged Wanda anyway and asked about her mother. In a gruff voice, Wanda told her that Alzheimer's had finally taken her mother away. The woman was obviously determined not to get emotional about her loss, so Estrella offered brief, quiet sympathy. Wanda nodded, but didn't say more.

Estrella and Bucky went to sit in her favorite corner and they waited to hear the sound of the quinjet. That would mean the meeting with the investigators was over and that Steve was taking Colin back to the airport for his trip home to Texas.

As soon as she let go of her sadness about Wanda's mother, Estrella couldn't stop thinking about Lucy. She quietly asked Buck to tell her about the woman as he remembered her from their childhood. Buck was twelve years older than her, so the stories he told were mostly of a pesky little sis whom it was clear he had indulged despite his complaints of her antics. Estrella's new gardening book sat across her knees, mostly ignored while she listened.

"You think she had a thing for Steve? I'm so jealous! She got to know him when he was small and I didn't," Estrella said.

"Either she had a thing, or she was really kind-hearted, or she was fascinated by gimpy artists. Who knows? If me and Steve were ever getting up to anything fun, I had to check to make sure Luce wasn't sneaking along behind. She almost caught us looking at Pa's peepshow girls once. That would have been hard to explain," he told her.

"Peep-show girls?" Estrella wondered.

They had to keep their voices really quiet even in the back corner of the library or Wanda would
come and fuss at her, no matter how much she liked her. Bucky leaned toward her a little bit across the end table that separated their chairs. She leaned eagerly to hear his explanation.

"Yeah. You know, those little viewers with the cards you slip in? Pa had a hidden stash. He thought he was sly, but we found it in the bottom of the winter coat trunk. I don't know how he kept it from Ma in there. Maybe she knew," Buck said.

"Do you mean old black and white photos of scantily clad ladies? No lights or film? Just still images?" she wondered.

The idea of him and Steve huddled around naughty pictures as boys was intriguing. Adorable.

"Hey, we used what we had. And they weren't ladies. Ladies didn't pose for pictures like that. It's nothin on the porn you get today, but for two Catholic boys, it was plenty," Buck smiled.

"Didn't Steve pitch a fit when he saw you with them? He knew it wasn't right to look at that stuff," Estrella predicted.

"Yeah. I knew not to tell him what it was, or he'd never have looked at it. I said 'Hey, Stevie, take a lookit this thing I found.' It was worth it to see the confusion on his face. Punk couldn't figure out what he was looking at! His eyes were bad, so maybe he didn't see as much as I think he saw. He had to've seen somethin, though. He choked up and ran outta the room fast enough," Bucky chuckled.

Estrella didn't know whether she should smile or frown. Steve had been embarrassed, but it must have been painfully cute.

"How old were you?" she whispered.

"Probably sixteen. I dunno. Pa must have put his things away real particular, because I got my hide tanned a week or so later when he found the stuff not like he'd left it. Steve tried to lie and take responsibility for that, too. Dumbass. He's never gonna change, is he? He's up there right now lyin to the Feds about my work," Buck grumbled.

"So stop doing bad things. Then he won't have to lie for you," Estrella pointed out.

"There's an idea," Buck said.

His smirk told her he might think about it.

They waited until they heard the jet leave, then come back again. Estrella forcefully ignored the rude man who commented about her looks when they took the short walk back to the tower. Buck's brow lowered a bit, and he spent a moment too long studying the man, remembering.

"Leave him alone," Estrella fussed at him.

They entered the tower and Jarvis welcomed them back. Estrella eased away from her nearly clinging grip to Buck's side. Everyone here knew not to gawp at her, except maybe for visitors, and they quickly passed through the public levels below and into the elevators.

"Miss, The Captain is requesting your presence at the office," Jarvis told them.

"Take me to him," she said.

She was eager to see Steve and to tease him about the peep-show girls Buck had mentioned. She
idly swung her shopping bags while they went up several levels.

"Thank you for being with me today, Bucky. You saw the way it was. I couldn't go alone," she said quietly.

"No problem, doll. It's what I'm here for. When you need to shop or anything, let me know. I gotta start working on my head with Natalia tomorrow, so not then. We gotta work on teaching you a few things, but we'll do that later," Buck said.

Estrella was going to protest about Bucky teaching her 'things', but Steve's voice caught her attention as soon as the elevator doors began to open.

"Take her bags, Buck. Eya, there's someone you should meet," Steve said.

He was all business. It worried Estrella, but she handed her things to Bucky. Steve took her hand and settled it in the crook of his arm. He wouldn't look at her beyond a brief glance and a quick peck on the cheek as soon as she stepped from the elevator.

Estrella looked around with wide eyes. She'd never been on the office level. Steve was the only person around. The central cubicles were vacant as far as she could see. The private offices around the perimeter of the space were shuttered for the day, except for the one brightly lit doorway they walked toward. This felt ominous, like trouble. Steve was stiff in that way he had when there was something he didn't want to do, but was going to do it anyway. It made her anxious. He looked at her kindly for a half-second, something like an apology, but he ushered her toward the open conference room.

"Is everything okay? Are you in trouble?" she asked, not really knowing why she whispered.

"The meeting went well. Nothing to worry about. Estrella, I'd like you to meet-" he said as he presented her to a large, imposing man who stood up from where he'd been leaning against a desk. He moved toward her in a frightening advance of authority and looming intimidation.

"So this is your new answering machine," the man said with dry sarcasm.

"Nicholas Fury," Steve finished the introduction.

Estrella wanted to back away from the man, but Steve touched a hand lightly to the small of her back. She looked up and up at the one searing eye that observed her like a hawk would a mouse. He stood square and still, with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Hello," she whispered as bravely as she could.

"You don't have anything more to say? Good. It must be my turn to say few words. You have no idea the size of the pile we narrowly avoided stepping in today. Had I been allowed to communicate with the Captain when I first attempted to call him, there may have been nothing to avoid stepping in at all. Miss, do you have any understanding of the level of complexity your boyfriend is required to manage for this operation, even on an uneventful day?" he asked her.

Estrella shook her head and stared at the man's shoulder. His attention was too harsh to face directly.

"So in the future when I pick up my phone and call him with information that he needs, who is going to answer my call?" he asked with terrible focus.

"He is," Estrella mumbled, trying to duck down into her shoulders.
Her feet edged to back away, but Steve kept a light touch at her spine. She thought she heard a sort of rumbling behind her, but maybe it was her mind imagining hopefully that the floor would open up and swallow her. There was a moment of tense silence, then Nick carried on with his dressing-down in a gentler tone.

"I had his job before he took it. Now that I'm free, there's not enough money in this realm or the next to pay me to step back into those shoes. I know what his responsibility feels like. I know he needs help, though he looks like he could carry it all on his own. I understand this business and I have contacts who only trust me. I can get him the information that he needs. Let me help him," Nick told her.

Estrella nodded. She felt about two feet tall. This was definitely the man she had been rude to and had hung up on when they were in the truck and everybody had been calling and interrupting Steve's vacation. She hadn't understood that Nick was trying to help.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

A weathered hand came to tip up her face. Nick Fury was considerably less scary when he looked like a grandfather rather than a drill instructor.

"I'm sorry too. This is a tough business to live with. It eats people up. Be sure that you're where you want to be," he said.

He let go of her chin and he walked around them to leave the room.

"Does he ever get a real vacation? Is he ever not on call?" she asked after the man.

He paused at the door for a moment and looked back at them.

"He gets a vacation when the bad guys go on vacation," he told them.

"How do we know when that will be?" she wondered.

"I don't know anyone who's figured that out yet," Nick said, and he walked away.

Estrella stood staring after him for a while. The anxiety of the confrontation faded as her heart settled down. She didn't feel like she'd been very brave. She should have stood up for Steve more, but it hadn't felt possible. At the same time, she was a little grumpy that Steve had walked her into the encounter with little warning.

"Do you trust him?" she asked Steve.

"Mostly. I wouldn't ever ignore what he says. He's not your boss, and he's not mine anymore, but I respect him. He's one of the dead. There's a cemetery headstone with his name and dates on it. I didn't know he was here today. After the meeting was over, he called me in. He had additional information which would have kept them from taking me into custody. Things went well, so it wasn't needed, but he was ready to sacrifice his anonymity to let me get away," Steve said.

Estrella turned and hugged him. He was all stiff from the stress of his job. She didn't like his suit because it made him look harsh and powerful. Unapproachable. Like Nick Fury. Under that, somewhere, was Steve.

Steve loosened his posture gradually and he set his hands on her shoulders. The weight of what he did pressed down on her. All day, the gloom of what Hydra had done to Bucky had troubled her. They both were good, kind men. Sweet boys. Their responsibilities forced them to be hard men.
Sometimes bad men. She sighed.

"Eya. Are you sure you want me?" Steve asked.

She didn't like the uncertainty in his voice.

"I want you," she assured him.

"Where is everyone? Are you done here?" she asked.

"It's over. I'm off for the day," he said.

She urged him to walk with her to the elevator. The lights went out behind them as they left the office level. Jarvis took them up to the residence levels. Estrella enjoyed the moments of solitude in the elevator while she didn't have to share him with anybody.

"You're my friend. You love me. I know we want to be together. But are you ready for all the rest of what comes with who I am?" Steve asked her.

"No. I don't think anyone can be ready, but I'll go with you anyway," she said.

Steve folded her into his arms and breathed into her hair.

"I'm sorry about Nick. I should have warned you," he said.

She shrugged and rocked her head back and forth in the center of his chest.

"If he's going to be interrupting our life, then I'm glad I met him. He's very loud for a dead man," she smiled.

Steve chuckled and rubbed her back.

"If this thing with the FBI and La Eme is over with, can we go out somewhere tonight and celebrate? I need to talk to you," she said.

What she didn't say, but what he clearly understood was that she missed being alone with him. They were doing alright at making time with each other, but that time was almost always shared with other people.

"That sounds great. We'll find something to eat. I don't want you to have to cook all the time," Steve said.

They walked to his suite holding hands. Inside, Bucky stood in the living room frowning at something on his phone. Steve dropped her fingers and went to read over Buck's shoulder. His eyes read a few lines of whatever was on the phone and he looked to Estrella. Steve set a hand over Buck's shoulder and Bucky closed his eyes. Whatever was on the phone was disturbing to them both.

"Eya, I'll come by Nat's place and pick you up around six?" Steve asked.

She could see that he and Bucky needed some time alone for now, to sort out whatever was the matter on Buck's phone. Estrella noted the way Steve's hand gripped into the meat of Buck's shoulder, and how the man seemed to lean into the support. She nodded her head. She gave Steve a brief kiss when he lowered his lips for her, and then she touched Bucky in sympathy for whatever seemed to be upsetting him. She left them to their business. She had work to catch up on, anyway.
"I'm leaving. I'm a goddamn dirty bomb, and somebody out there has the detonator," Buck said after the door closed behind the girl.

"Not for long. Bruce said that Tony is working fast on a replacement for the power source in that arm. Soon as they're done, we'll make the switch and you'll be safe," Steve said.

"This could have gone off anytime! It could go off right now. I'm outta here," Buck said.

He pulled away from Steve's grip, the tense hardness of his shoulder making him impossible to hang onto with one hand unless Steve wanted to dig in and crush something. Steve followed him to the door of the guest bedroom, intending to not let him out again until he'd had his say. Bucky grabbed his old pack from the dresser top and shouldered it. He stared mutinously at Steve where he stood blocking the doorway, both hands gripping the frame and his feet planted firmly apart. Steve didn't like the way Buck looked around, clearly thinking about going through the wall to make a new exit.

"Take a minute to think, Buck. Chances are, if anybody had control of detonation, they would have blown it already. We've got a containment room that's built for the Hulk. It's comfortable. Go there. Nowhere else would be safe, anyway. Leaving the tower would only expose more people to danger. This isn't a big deal. I mean, sure it's bad, but we can manage it," Steve assured him.

"Bomb, Steve. I'm a bomb in a thousand-foot skyscraper. Get outta the way," Bucky said.

"Tony overbuilds things. The room will hold you even if the worst should happen, and it won't. If we thought you were that dangerous, don't you think I'd be more worried? My girl lives here. My friends do. I wouldn't leave you anyway," Steve reasoned.

"Yeah, 'cause you're a dumbass. Where's the room?" Bucky asked.

"C'mon," Steve said, and he walked with Buck out of the suite.

"I'm a dumbass, but I don't take other people's safety lightly," Steve insisted.

Bucky grumbled about Steve's idiocy and self-sacrifice until they got to the containment room, which was conveniently located between Bruce's suite and the labs. It was a small round room barely large enough for the Hulk to fit inside. It was designed to not enable the big green guy to get a running start or a full swing of his arms. For a regular guy, it was comfortable enough. There was a couch, a television, and a mini fridge. Bucky looked around skeptically. The space had soothing lighting and drab, unremarkable décor. It was as soft, bland, and inoffensive as it could be.

"It's like a nursery room in here," Buck commented.

"Yeah, so lie down and take a nap or something. It won't be long til they're ready for you. Power
sources are Tony's specialty. Thor and Heimdall are on standby to take the old power unit as soon as they get it out of you," Steve said.

"Get out and shut the door," Buck told him.

"Alright, but I'm not worried," Steve said.

He ambled away at a leisurely pace and smiled at Buck from the doorway. The only thing that looked ominous about the containment chamber was the thickness of the door. It was thicker and heavier than a bank vault, and Buck couldn't tell what it was made of. When Steve shut him inside, the silence was the thick kind that made his ears ring.

"You good in there?" Steve asked through some kind of intercom system.

"Yeah," Buck sighed.

He dropped his pack on the floor and felt stupid for bringing it in here with him. The couch was too soft when he sat on it. He leaned back into the cushions, propped his feet atop the mini-fridge, and laced his fingers behind his head.

"Hail fuckin Hydra. You can kiss my ass," he snarked sarcastically.

No way had he meant to put himself in a box like this, but Steve's safety was at stake because he was too stubborn and stupid to clear the building or leave him alone. He'd put up with the confinement until they could get the bomb out of his arm. Buck snorted at a random funny thought. Wouldn't it be swell if this Heimdall guy could drop the dirty bomb right into a Hydra base? If any of their science freaks were still alive, Buck would like to see the look on the man's face as he recognized what it was, right before it went off.

Buck snapped to awareness when the safe room door opened. Banner and Stark hurried in, and before the door closed he saw Thor waiting outside. He'd read files on these people. He knew what they could do. It was very difficult to let them advance on him in a small space and keep his cool. Decades of learned instinct urged him to use the mini-fridge as a projectile to clear the doorway, then to get away from whatever Stark had in his hands. Stark sure as hell didn't owe him any favors.


Bucky's lips peeled back from his teeth. He locked his thigh muscles immobile to keep himself from attempting to get to the door as it closed. Thor was strong, but he was faster. He knew that now. When the door locked shut Buck took a quick, deep breath then eased it out slowly. His chance was gone. Time to comply.


He moved forward slowly and did as he was told.

"Tony, go easy. He's not-" Banner urged.

"Rotate the arm and open it up. Hurry. I've got dinner plans," Tony snapped at them.
Stark touched a little device that appeared to be stuck to his temple and a small blue heads up display glowed in front of his left eye. A tiny bright light blinked on and illuminated what he was looking at.

"This is going to hurt," Stark said coldly.

He held a long, hook-like tool in one hand.

Compliance required that he flare the arm bands open and be still despite the coming pain, so he did so. Banner put his fingers inside and pulled hard and wide. There was nothing to do but grit his teeth and breathe through it as pain and pressure bloomed through his nerves like a spreading ink stain. He remembered this. Some shred of his newfound human dignity clawed its way up and clamped his throat shut against a scream.

Banner's strong fingers dug deep, pushing aside tensioned cables and sensitive things. When the arm's power cell was exposed, Stark reached in and worked with a steady hand. It felt like electrocution and a chunk of his flesh being extracted. Banner murmured something, but it wasn't understandable over the sound of his heart pounding in his ears.

"Hold still, dammit! Thor!" Stark barked.

The door opened and Stark tossed something toward it. The arm felt dead and heavy. Its weight pulled at his spine. Numbness made a cold vacancy in his brain, almost as bad as the previous pain. Stark clipped something else free from inside the arm and dropped it to the floor. There was a shove and a jostle and something snapped into place, forced among other components with a tight grind.

Stark worked nimbly and quickly. Power and agony jolted to life in his arm again. His body, his legs jerked and he couldn't stop the grunt that he tried so hard to keep inside. The arm was wrong. Banner said something, then it was right again. Stark and his evil little tools stepped away, then Banner got his fingers out from between the bands of his arm.

He slumped to the floor and curled his arms to his body. Ghost pain lingered along his nerves, then began to ebb away. Someone spoke. He looked up and got to his feet. If he wasn't in the chair or being worked on, he was supposed to pay attention.

"Barnes! I asked you how it feels," Stark said.

Barnes. James Buchannan. Bucky. Yeah, he could be that. He rotated the arm and flared the bands, then laid them down proper. It was soothing, like a bird laying its feathers just right. He fanned his fingers, rotated his wrist, then made a fist.

"It works. What's in there? Is it a blue thing, like you use?" Buck asked.

"You don't get an arc reactor. It's the same material that we took out of you, only better shielded and without the triggering mechanism. They can try to detonate but it won't do anything," Tony said.

He bent and picked up a small component attached to a wire which had fallen to the floor.

"See. No more signal receiver. No more trigger. That doesn't make you harmless. Is the electromagnetic field generator a voluntary or involuntary function? Do you even know what EMF is?" Stark persisted.

"I know what EMF is. It's voluntary. I coulda killed all your toys anytime I wanted to," Buck told
him.

He looked at his arm and wondered. Would the EMF generator still work? If Stark knew it was in there, he probably wanted it taken out. Buck was tempted to try it, but didn't want to risk being seen as hostile if the tower went dark. He felt a little too fried to have reliable control of things.

"No need to test. You've still got it. You can thank Banner for that. He says you don't like things in there being changed. He convinced me that if you haven't wiped Jarvis yet, you likely won't. I don't know that I trust that, but Steve insisted too. Steve owes me more than he can ever repay if I'm making a bad bet on you," Tony warned.

Buck clenched his jaw against several things he wanted to say. Tony didn't stand around to hear what was on his mind.

"Open it," he said to Jarvis, and he strode out.

"Hey, Stark. Thanks," Bucky forced himself to say before Stark disappeared out the door.

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for the rest of us," he replied.

He was left in the quiet room with Banner. Buck looked over at him expectantly.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm sorry about… everything. About Tony, and about the pain," Bruce said softly, as if to make up for Tony's harshness.

Steve came in to join them. He'd left his severe looking suit jacket off somewhere. He tilted his head at Buck in question.

"I'm not a bomb anymore. I think it feels warmer," Buck said.

He looked at his left arm and felt of it with his other hand. Now that the last sear of pain was fading away, he could better feel current sensations.

"It should. The rad shielding that Tony invented for you is thermally active. It will shorten the life of the new power cell by twelve percent, but you aren't leaking radiation anymore and your skin should stop itching," Bruce told him.

Steve smiled. Buck didn't understand why.

"That's good news, Buck. It means that at least Tony doesn't hate you like it seems he does. With him, you gotta listen to his actions more than his words. His actions say that maybe he understands what happened with his parents, but he's not ready to let go of his feelings yet," Steve explained.

Bruce nodded once.

"I'm not here to make friends with Stark," Bucky said.

"I know. Nobody expects you to be pals. Bruce, thank you for your help," Steve said, and he set a hand on Bruce's shoulder for a moment.

"Please," Bruce lifted his hands and shook his head, "it shouldn't have happened that way. There wasn't time to follow procedure. I'm sorry, James. You should have had anesthesia for that."

"Quit apologizing. It had to be done," Buck said.
He pivoted and took a step to leave, but Bruce spoke up again. Buck stopped and gave him the courtesy of listening.

"I didn't put everything in the email. There's still a process in there that we don't understand. It's got a tiny trickle of power routed to it, so it's probably not dangerous. Another thing… I didn't tell Tony, but I'm telling the two of you. There's an ampule of fluid in there. It tests as a powerful hormone suppressant. Hydra wanted to keep you docile and focused. They could have surgically castrated you but that's irreversible and your genes are too valuable to them. The suppressant appears to be almost depleted," Bruce said with an ominous lift of his eyebrows.

He didn't want to spell things out for them.

"How long?" Steve asked.

"I don't know. I would have to know the rate at which the suppressant diffuses into his endocrine system, and that information is unavailable. It could be years, or it could be next week," Bruce explained.

"Is that all?" Bucky asked.

Bruce nodded.

Buck picked up his pack and left. Not only was the pain of the power cell replacement gone, but his arm felt different. It wasn't buzzing at him anymore. No more pain to ignore. At the same time, he still had his sensors. The lack of constant low grade irritation made him feel mellow, almost like that time he'd found a whole plant of-

"Hey, wait up!" Steve jogged to catch up with him on the way back to their suite.

"See, I told ya we'd get you fixed," he said.

"Yeah, yeah. What'd they do with the old power cell? Send it to Thor's place?" Buck wondered.

"No, I think they spaced it. It's probably drifting somewhere between here and Asgard. Its exotic material, and it would be too hard to explain to local disposal facilities. Buck, quit evading. You know we gotta talk about what Bruce said," Steve nagged.

"Chemical castration? That's no surprise. I'm relieved that it's not permanent. Maybe Banner should study what it's made of and get me a refill," he said.

"Buuuck," Steve said, low and disappointed.

They went into the suite and Bucky dropped his pack on the coffee table. He flopped into the big chair because he knew it was no use retreating to his room when Steve wanted to chew on his ear. When the punk's face was set like that, it was better to hear him out sooner than later. He wouldn't ever forget about it, especially if ya wanted him to.

Steve made sure the door was shut, then he sprawled on the couch opposite the chair. The afternoon sun angled across the room behind the couch. The window tint was partially engaged, so it wasn't too bright. Buck wore that barely patient look, resigned to hear him out and ready to argue as soon as he was done talking.

"It can't be good for you to stay under the influence of that stuff," Steve said.

"I hope it lasts a while. A few years would be good," Buck denied.
"You're not obligated to stay around Estrella for me. Let the stuff wear out. Let your body adjust back to how it's supposed to be," he argued.

"No way. If I can't get Banner to make more, I'll buy it on the black market. Somebody somewhere can cook some up, or something like it, for the right price," Buck insisted, partly just to enjoy the pinched look he knew would appear on Steve's face. There it was. He smiled and Steve scowled at him.

"I'm gonna have a say in this. I'm done letting people steer my life. I'll ask Banner to make more, but I'll wait til I feel it running out before I decide if I want the hassle of your Testosterone poisoning. We've got more than enough dirty old men under one roof," Buck conceded.

Steve stared at him, but Buck stared right back. Two could play the refusing to argue game, and he'd gotten the last word. The fact that Steve was unwilling to argue further was proof that he was right. And right about now he'd start feeling ashamed and selfish for letting Buck have his way. Yup. Steve hung his head and sighed.

"You need me how I am. She needs me like this. You haven't been out on the street with her in a few days. Not since you've been back. She's like a magnet, kid. You remember how Moira used to walk down the street and stick her nose in the air and all the guys would hoot and whistle? It's worse than that. They weren't even smiling. She scared the crap outta herself running ahead before she realized what was happening. After I got her calmed down, she stuck to my side like a barnacle and stared at her toes or the rooftops all day. If you take her out, you have to keep moving. The effect appears to pass with short exposure. I think if somebody had time to stare like Colin did last night, there'd be more trouble than you could handle," Buck advised.

"She wasn't meeting anyone's eyes?" Steve wondered skeptically.

"Nobody. It's the way she looks, the way she moves. She got used to you and your pals acting like gentlemen and then the street reminded her what everybody else was gonna do. Do you want her beat down and subdued, or never able to go out and shop?" Bucky asked rhetorically.

"I'm not a gentleman inside, Buck. I wanna do the same as everyone else," Steve said.

"I know, but you don't act on it. You're used to her and used to restraining yourself. You know the rest of her, the part that happens in her head, and what comes from her heart. She's a lot to handle for a regular guy. Her shyness gets attention too because most women who have looks like her flaunt it around. Don't see many like her on the streets. Girls like that usually belong to somebody who rides them around in private transport. She wasn't even dressed nice. Just a long coat and jeans. She needs escort, and I need to stay the way I am to do it. She's a sweet little lady, Steve. I don't mind," Buck insisted.

Steve remained unconvinced.

"We heal from anything. The suppressant stuff isn't doing me any long-term harm and you know it. Ease up. I want you to get the girl this time," Buck smiled a bit.

"She's not a fruit to pick," Steve grumped.

"Hmm," Buck agreed or disagreed ambiguously.

Steve stood up and moved to his room. Buck could hear him getting undressed, putting his clothes away carefully. A drawer opened and closed, likely him getting clean underwear.

"I don't need you getting in my head. It's wild enough in there already," Steve grumbled, then he
shut himself in his bathroom.

"Yeah, right. Maybe she's not the fruit. That's probably you. You better work one out while you're in there or she's gonna eat you tonight," Buck called to him.

The shower was already running, but he knew Steve heard him.

They took Steve's bike again. Doctor Kalfey had said that Estrella's bones were at least as strong and dense as anyone else's now, so Steve felt easier about her safety. Strategically, it was better for them to take the bike anyway. Estrella could keep her helmet on until they were inside of their destination and her face would stay hidden from cameras on the street.

Estrella tucked her long skirt around her legs on the bike so it wouldn't get blown around as they rode. She wore one of Steve's nicer wool jackets over her top so she would have some concealment and shelter from the cold. Steve's backside and legs helped her to stay warm where she pressed against him. She missed the truck because of fond memories, but the bike was nice too because she got to touch him so much.

There was curbside parking waiting for them with a nicely uniformed man standing to hold the spot. Estrella was agog over that more than most things she'd seen so far. This was a difficult restaurant to get into, never mind the parking. The man took Steve's helmet and offered to take hers and the jacket, but Steve politely refused until they were inside.

Estrella felt mis-dressed again. It was dark and elegant inside. Steve looked very nice in his slacks and refined sweater. Her clothes were of decent quality, but they weren't the latest style. Natasha had let her go dressed like this and the woman probably knew where they were going. She fumed at Natasha until she reminded herself that it wasn't Natasha's job to be her wardrobe assistant.

They were shown to a secluded table off to one side of the restaurant. Steve escorted her with perfect gentility. Estrella tried to finger-comb her hair into order after it had been squashed in her motorcycle helmet. That wasn't the thing to do, apparently. A woman gave her a stiff look while she passed their table. The husband got stuck looking at her, even in her frumpy skirt and outdated top. Estrella hurried ahead to their table. Steve lengthened his stride and stayed with her.

The wait staff was courteous and unobtrusive. Candlelight spilled over the linen tablecloth. Estrella was reluctant to touch the expensive looking things on the table, lest someone come out and fuss at her for misaligning the perfect order. Steve smiled at her. His eyes did that quick flicker around, but he never lost his happy, relaxed demeanor.

"You were a poor boy. How can you be so at ease with all this? Someone stood in the street to hold a parking space for you!" she whispered to him vehemently.

Steve didn't waver from his determination to enjoy the evening.

"Pepper owns half this place. She called ahead," he explained smoothly.

"Steeve! I don't want to live like this. Hamburgers or pizza would have been good," she said.

Her fingers rubbed the copper butterfly at her throat in a gesture he hadn't seen her make in a while. It let him know she was uneasy about something. Maybe more than one thing.

"I know this place is a lot. We won't do this often, but I wanted to celebrate, Eya. You said you did
too," Steve reminded her.

She slid her hand across the table to where his rested palm up in invitation. His eyes were intent and compelling in the candlelight. Instead, she played loosely with his fingers. He played back with light touches and evasive caresses when she tried to entangle him in a clasp. It was amazing to see his strong, broad hand move more like that of a piano player. Or an artist. She knew what these hands could do. She suppressed a shudder and put away the memory of bodies twisting, breaking, hitting the ground. It was much nicer to remember him stroking himself in the moonlight, this same hand slicked with their pleasure.

She concealed a quiet giggle by tilting her face down to hide in her hair. Steve smiled at her in a way that made her forget judgmental women and that her clothes weren't exactly right. Maybe he was imagining the same thing she was. For one brief stroke, he gathered her fingers into a point and glided a loose fist up them, then away. Her mouth fell open, and the waiter walked up just then. Steve ordered wine and appetizers for them while she bit her lip and tried not to gasp at his behavior.

When she dared to glance back at his eyes, they were crinkled at the corners and merry. His short beard was neatly trimmed along his jaw from his careful shaving this morning and she sighed at how handsome he was. It's not that she meant to ogle him as a collection of body parts, but his eyes were dangerous tonight. She could already feel that it would be so easy to get stuck in them.

The wine gave her something to do. It wasn't clear what the appetizer was. Some sort of vegetable, steamed still firm and set in a light oil with herbs. Or was this meant to be a kind of salad? She didn't know. Estrella furtively watched how Steve ate his and copied him. It was different but good. Again, his hands had her attention. Why did they look so masculine and attractive tonight? They were only hands. Maybe everything looked better by candlelight, and Steve was already delicious to look at without extra assistance.

Her heart fluttered a bit when she realized that he was intentionally indulging their sensual natures to distract her from the distress of the day. She'd left him in the afternoon when things were tense between them, but he'd been loose and warm with her since he'd picked her up at six. His evening attire was refined, but it showed the organic curves of his muscles rather than the stiff lines of his suit from the office today. She kept her hand on her wineglass instead of rubbing her fingers over his bicep like she was tempted to.

Oh, no.

His head tilted down and his face took on a frighteningly sly little smile. His eyes gleamed at her so that she had to immediately look away. He bit his unfairly lush bottom lip for a moment, then let it go. His jaw moved to say something, then he refrained from it. She could see the tip of his tongue, which brushed once, twice at the inner edge of his teeth. Estrella held her breath and closed her eyes to keep from making any indecent sounds in public.

"Buck said you went shopping," he said.

It was a quiet statement, but when she looked again, he was studying the shape of her breasts under the burgundy drape of her blouse. The neckline was low, but not scandalously so.

"Who are you and where did my Steve go?" she hissed at him.

"He's in here, shuffled to the back somewhere. Still me. Just a different part," Steve told her. Even his clipped, simple sentences told her that he wasn't processing with the higher part of his
brain. She sat up a little straighter and her posture adjusted to better display herself for him. She couldn't seem to help it. He wanted to enjoy her, and she loved seeing him in touch with the less stuffy side of himself. It felt like freedom. No bad guys right now. No fear of danger just because she'd indulged in the feminine urge to look good for him.

Gradually her attention turned to the waiter who stood silent beside their table. Steve had looked first or she would not have noticed him, she was so attuned to her boyfriend.

The man visibly called himself to order under Steve's attention.

"Pardon," he said, and then he offered them several choices of entrée.

Estrella chose something with chicken. Steve made his choice. Their wine was refilled, and the waiter left them alone.

Steve scooted his rump back to lean closer to her across the table. She did likewise, but found herself admiring his shoulders and throat.

"You wanted to talk?" he wondered.

The low, lazy pitch of his voice shivered her skin, and she took up playing with his fingers again. If she looked at his face, they would end up kissing in the restaurant.

"Now I don't think we should. We're already…" she tilted her head and flashed her eyes at him.

"Yeah, we are. Go ahead anyway. I'll behave, sweetheart," he assured her.

His thumb rubbed back and forth over her knuckles. It didn't feel like he would behave. It felt like he was going to pull her over the table, split her on his lap and forget about dinner. She shook her head and proceeded anyway, voice barely a whisper.

"I want you to help me with my scars. Inside."

His thumb pressed uncomfortably hard against her middle knuckle for a moment of arrested motion, then he lifted his thumb away.

"You've said that. I'll help you. We'll find a way to ease things so it's more comfortable for you," he promised.

"Not just anything. I'd prefer you," she said.

Another brief look showed his pupils wider than they needed to be in the low light.

"I'll think on it," he agreed.

"I know that tone, Steve Rogers. I don't want cold plastic. I don't like it like you do," she said, still quiet enough for only him to hear.

"Plastic isn't my preference either, but I'm waiting til my girl's ready for me," he said.

She knew by now that one word for him could have several conditions and meanings attached to it when he was trying to be truthful but evasive. Natasha told her that was a recent development for him. When the situation best called for a lie, he was wise enough to not try that anymore. Instead he applied his mind to finding words which were true but maybe not in the way a person first assumed them to be. So his choice of 'ready' in reference to her and sex surely meant several things, not just her willingness to be with him.
Instead of arguing, she chose to go a different direction with his comment.

"You're waiting for me?" she asked him, looking at him long enough that he had to look away or risk getting swallowed in the depths of her curiosity.

Oooh, he was getting skilled with avoiding entrapment. He looked away for only a moment to flicker his attention around the restaurant, then at her again, and then she had to look away.

Damnit! He knew she wouldn't force him to submit when he was doing a good job watching to keep them safe. She burned at the unfairness of his tactics, but still smiled at the banter.

"No. Not waiting. I'm gonna go off, Eya. It happens lately. I'd rather guide it so that I'm not criminally inappropriate at the office," he explained.

She was learning him. She could tell now that he was still being evasive. It was something in the way he held his head. An ever so slight downward tuck of embarrassment.

"Only at the office?" she asked.

"Are you sure you wanna hear this, doll? I'll tell you, but it might be more than you're asking for," he warned.

Real caution made her pause before she answered. He didn't give warnings lightly.

Slowly, she nodded her head. She hoped she wouldn't regret asking for the truth.

"It would be a possible legal case of indecency, maybe considered some kind of harassment, if I lost it at the office. Hill's team isn't directly under me. It's complicated. Things are a lot simpler in the training room," he told her.

Was that a blush across his cheeks, though he hadn't really said much yet? The fact that he was getting rosy confirmed for her that when he said 'lost it', he meant having an uncontrollable orgasm. The thing he was trying to avoid by relieving the pressure at home in his suite with his plastic toy.

"Why is the training room different? Because it's just your friends? Just the Avengers?" she wondered.

"Yeah, partly. The same legal issues would apply if I was training security personnel, so I don't take part in that kind of training lately. I won't since yesterday, anyway," he said.

"Quit leading me around! Tell me what happened! Come on. All out at once, like a story," she complained at him.

The waiter brought their meals and Steve paused and clenched his jaw. He looked different for a moment, entirely focused and non-sexual. She smirked. He was taking a moment to pray over his food. It would have been funny, except that she knew he was sincere and stubborn. He refused to let his physical difficulties and temptations drive him completely away from his spiritual life. The waiter had gone away. He was done praying. The food smelled good, but it could wait. She nudged his leg under the table. Steve took a bite, nodded, and glanced around while he chewed. After a sip of wine, he was ready to talk. She leaned in to listen.

"I've seen it happen. When some people train hard, especially the core torso and pelvic muscle groups, it can trigger orgasm if you don't stop and let the muscles rest," he paused to smile a bit when her lips parted in surprise, "it had never happened to me. Maybe I thought that being what I am, I was immune to that sort of thing. No, no. Hold your questions til the end. You wanted this all
out at once. See, you're slowing me down. Ah! Don't do your eyebrows like that. Do you wanna hear this or not?" he teased her.

Estrella let out a pressurized, impatient sound like a steam boiler with a leak. The humor in his eyes made her squint at him. The lousy tease was playing around, making her wait when he knew she wanted to hear! She pounded her fist on the table in protest and Steve chuckled at her. He looked around at someone who probably didn't like their lack of silent decorum. Then he turned back to have mercy on her.

"I was feeling pretty sore about things yesterday morning before lunch, and Buck was trying to cheer me up. We found Thor and he agreed to let us try to beat him. Eya, they teamed up on me. It was difficult enough with the both of us working at Thor, and then Buck switched sides. Offense to defense so fast that they almost ended it with a hard pin. I got out from under that, then I had to move faster than I think I ever have. Thor wasn't much trying. He was laughing at me, the prick. But with Buck on his side, all I could do was jump, edge around, and try to block. My eyes. My brain. There's a point where I almost couldn't see fast enough. My brain shunted to auto-pilot, and Buck had that smirk. He knew I was going to fall eventually, but I was determined not to," Steve paused to take a sip of wine and she fluttered her hands impatiently.

"I think I felt it coming on. My muscles had been burning for several minutes. I was sweating like- I don't know anything that sweats like that. It didn't matter. Thor had this irritating knowing look. Buck wouldn't let up. No way I was stopping. Right before it doubled me over, Thor caught Buck's fist before it would have broken my face again. That's the last thing I remember seeing for a few seconds. Buck caught on 'cause he's seen it happen to people too. I think he said something about a leg cramp and they helped me off to the shower. That's when I called you and asked to meet for lunch," Steve told her.

Estrella was undecided between rabid curious questions, trying to visualize what he described, and a hot burst like a fuse popping over the idea of Steve getting off with his friends in the middle of a fight. That was erotically interesting? Why? She felt threatened by it too. If fighting was so good that he got a sexual rush from it, then why did he need her!?

Steve saw her conflicted sputtering. He felt a mix of humor and fond remembrance of the event, fear that Estrella was going to be hurt and angry, and the urge to draw her in and comfort her. She ended up taking a gulp of wine and setting the glass down none too gently. He used the opportunity to take a few bites of their excellent ignored meal and he urged her to do the same. She chewed angrily and gave him squinty looks between cutting and stabbing her food with her fork.

He felt the compelling urge to explain himself, so he did.

"I didn't mean for it to happen, Eya. I wasn't trying to have a sexual thing with other people. Nobody touched me like that. It was a buildup of muscle tension and exhaustion, then it tripped over into the nervous system. If I hadn't been so determined not to lose, I would have called it off. It snuck up on me," he said.

She sighed. The innocence and transparent honesty on his face made it difficult to be angry with him. It was hard for her to imagine what he said happening, but she wouldn't bet against him that she couldn't find what he was talking about with an internet search. When she let go of her upset that he was having fun of a sexual nature with other people, she felt a bit of concern over his lack of control. He wasn't joking about this stuff.

"What if this distracts you when you're working? Wouldn't that be dangerous?" she wondered.

"Yes. That's why I try to guide it into happening at more appropriate times. I'm never in a playful
mindset when I'm focused on work. I've never been pushed that hard and long without a break in battle, either. Not with my whole body. In battle it's a mix of muscle use at different times instead of all at once. A lot of the work is done by weapons. If I ever find myself fighting that desperately at work, I've got a lot more dire things to worry about than making you angry, love. It's really unlikely to happen outside of training. Now that I know what to watch for, I can tap out to stop it," he assured her.

It was plain to see that the idea of intentionally conceding a fight bothered him like a bad taste in his mouth.

"You said Thor looked like he knew what was going to happen. It sounds like Bucky didn't know until it was already there," she commented.

They were eating more casually now, and he was glad for it. He was very hungry, and it meant that she wasn't upset anymore.

"Right. What do you think they were working me over about when we came down to the diner for lunch? I got em to give their word that they won't tell anyone that I popped in the training room, but it's my prerogative to tell you about it if I want," he smiled at her.

She smiled back. It all made sense now. Thor's teasing had seemed out of place for a person of his dignity, but she could see how the incident would be a source of man humor. Of course Bucky would hound Steve mercilessly for a while. He already did that over less interesting things. Now that she thought of it, the way the guys had stopped teasing Steve and had helped them have a private meal together and even kept guard at the door while they ate made her feel better. Everyone involved recognized that Steve's relationship with her was more important than a one-off curiosity during training. And then Thor had helped her with the women. He'd backed her up.

Estrella let go of her odd feelings about it. She looked to Steve over her wineglass.

"Thank you for accepting this and all the crazy things that are happening to me right now," he said.

She hurried to set down her glass.

"It's my own insecurity. Can't you see it? Wouldn't you feel the same, at least for a moment?" she said.

Steve began to shake his head, but then he thought about it.

"Alright. Sure. Please, Eya. You gotta know… I'd rather have that happen with you all soft and slow than when I'm getting my as-sets handed to me on the mats. It was embarrassing," he told her.

She reached across to touch his hand. It probably had been very embarrassing for him. He'd been teased all through his shower and down to lunch and he'd had to take it in good humor.

"I think I'm angry with Thor. He knew," she realized.

"He's not that way. He was teaching me a lesson. Some things are hard to absolutely believe in your bones unless you've experienced it. Yesterday morning I thought it couldn't happen to me. Now I know. Some people are unbelievably manipulative and cruel. If anyone ever tries to force that on me as a distraction during battle, I won't fall for it. I'll be wiser for Thor's teaching," Steve said.

Estrella allowed their meal to finish quietly. So did Steve. He could see that she was thinking hard. He moved them through coat check and got the helmet and jacket for her and helped her into them.
A valet stopped him before they could step outside.

"Captain, there is someone from the news agencies outside. We have refused them entry, but we can't keep them off a public sidewalk. What are your wishes?" the older man said.

"I'll handle it. Thanks for the warning," Steve said.

He made sure that Estrella was obscured by the helmet and jacket. He tucked her hair into a single twist at the back of her head, then pushed it up under the helmet. The visor was down and tinted so that no one could see her face in the dark of the evening. He turned up the collar of her coat to conceal as much of her neck and jaw as he could.

"Stay close to me and get on the bike. Ignore them. Don't speak. I've got this," he promised her.

"How did they know to find us here?" she whispered before they walked outside.

"Someone at one of the tables recognized me and is affiliated with whichever news agency. They texted it in. It happens. Best not to linger. Let's go," Steve said.

He took her hand and the valet bulled ahead of him to keep the camera out of his face. It allowed them to get to the bike and for Steve to quickly help Estrella onto it. She arranged herself, and Steve put his leg over the seat. He kept his attention partly toward the journalist and the camera man. Sometimes it was worth it to give them their minute of time.

"Captain, there was a rainbow bridge event at the top of Avenger's tower today. Are there more aliens in town this evening?" the pushy woman babbled at him.

"There were no visitors today from that event. It was hazardous waste disposal. The city is safer because of it," Steve answered patiently.

"Was there any danger? What kind of waste was it? Don't the people of New York have a right to know what sort of hazardous materials you keep in that building?"

"We have fully accredited and permitted lab facilities. Anyone can check with public records to look at our compliance and safety documentation. If the people of New York want to know about our waste disposal procedures, they should ask Tony. I'm not a lab technician, so I don't know what it was. I think there's a form you can fill out if you want to request that information," Steve said.

"Who is your companion, Captain Rogers?" was the next question.

Steve didn't like how the bright light from the camera beamed at Estrella. Her face was turned away and she held the jacket collar up. He hoped that Jarvis was listening and that the visor glass of her helmet was on darkest blackout because he didn't think she knew how to control the visor tint settings. He set his hand reassuringly on her knee.

"She's a human female. That's as specific as I'm going to get," Steve said.

He noticed the engine start in a van with the news agency's logo on the side. It was parked a few spaces down, blocking traffic.

"I know you have a right to film in public. I ask that you do so from here. Don't follow me. If you follow me, I'm going to feel threatened. If you cause me to feel threatened, I'm going to disable your vehicle. Then you'll have to send a claim to the tower. Claims take a long time to process. Are you going to cause that to happen?" Steve asked the reporter.
She was silent for a moment.

"No, Captain," she finally said.

"Thank you. Have a good evening," Steve told her.

He gave the camera a tightly calculated smile because it wasn't the public's fault that reporters could be assholes. He kicked the bike to life and let it roar over any more questions the reporter tried to ask as he buckled his helmet on. The woman's mouth was moving. He gestured at his ear and shook his head. Then he pulled out into traffic and got them away from the restaurant.

"Are you alright?" he asked Estrella through the helmets.

"I want to scratch her face off, but I'm alright," she answered.

"That's another part of my life, Eya. I'll try to keep you anonymous for as long as I can," he said.

The news van now had flashing police lights behind it for illegal parking. It didn't make him feel any better. People like that considered a traffic fine as part of the cost of doing business. They'd make a buck off of putting his face on the news. Anger flared up in him, but he let go of it. He wasn't going to let them ruin his time out with Estrella.

Steve drove around for a while until he was sure they weren't being followed. There was a tight cluster of lights high in the sky that was easy to recognize against the backdrop of light pollution and stars. Tony on standby.

"Thanks, Tony, but I think we're alright. No one's following," Steve told him.

"How's Pixie Chick?" Tony's voice came into his helmet with the same quiet clarity he heard from him in battle.

"She's good. A little angry," Steve said.

"Angry is better than afraid. I think you're right. I'm not picking up any tailing patterns in ground traffic. You kids don't stay out too late," Tony teased mildly.

"Get some rest, Tony. It's been a long day," Steve said.

Tony made a kissy sound over the comm. Steve smiled at the razzing. Traffic was slow enough that he could pay attention to Tony's repulsors peeling away from his surveillance stance and heading back to the tower.

"Who were you talking to?" Estrella wondered.

"Tony. He was in the suit up there, making sure no one is following. We're clear," he told her.

"That's really nice of him. It's kind of neurotic how you all stay in each other's business. You know that, right?" she asked.

Steve chuckled.

"You've been talking to Sam, haven't you? That sounded like him. Living as a team has its ups and downs," Steve said over the helmet comms.

They drove for a little longer and Steve checked the time.
"Where are we going?" Estrella asked him.

They had to stop in traffic because of a congestion of vehicles all around them. Steve grit his teeth at the smell of exhaust. He didn't mind impure air for himself, but he wished better for Estrella. The heat of traffic felt nice on a cool evening, though.

"Movies?" Steve offered.

Estrella nodded her head and her helmet clunked against Steve's. He laughed and got them to the cinema in just the particular time slot he was hoping for. They parked the bike and hurried in to get tickets in the odd slow time between the crowds pulsing in and out of individual theatres. Popcorn and big soda in hand, they smiled as they rushed under the janitor ropes. They laughed and whispered together like kids in the back of the theatre. The lights were up at the moment and the cleaning crew gave them a few looks, but left them alone. Steve hunkered down and kept his face turned aside to whisper in Estrella's hair while people began to fill in to the other seats.

Estrella fed him popcorn with her fingers and he lipped at her fingers with each bite. He alternately blew strands of her hair out of his mouth while she laughed at the heat of his breath on her neck. Steve nibbled and tugged at the side of her necklace a bit until she squealed at the tickle and he had to leave her alone before they called too much attention themselves.

All the breathing on her neck and the laughing was making her hot in the already warm air at the top of the theatre. She shrugged out of the large jacket. It was likely expensive, and she wouldn't want to let it touch the mysteriously greasy floor even if it wasn't expensive. She pressed at Steve's hand while he was distracted with popcorn and movie previews. He moved the popcorn bucket and she laid the jacket out across their laps.

She saw one last flicker-glance from Steve as the lights went down in the theatre and the movie began to play to a crowded room. There were people all around except for behind them. Now she could appreciate the loud public seclusion she'd read about. No one was watching them. All attention was to the big screen in front.

Steve had asked her which movie she wanted to see. She'd told him to choose because she didn't care between the offerings available. It was more important to her to spend time with Steve. It was a nice novelty to be at the movies again. She hadn't been since she was a teenager living at home with her mother, and then they'd only gone for special treats like her birthday.

It was annoying to feel tiredness creeping up on her. She blamed it on Steve. Being in close contact like they were in the dark made her want to cuddle up and sleep. He happily made room for her under his arm when she snuggled at his chest and rested her hand across his lap. The jacket was in the way and she wanted to feel his warmth, so she slipped her hand under the drape of wool.

Despite the noise of the film, she felt safe and drowsy with him. Steve shifted in his seat and laughed a little at something on the screen, just like most of the rest of the movie-goers. Estrella smiled and was happy for him to have a normal moment like everyone else.

His belly was inviting under her hand. She'd wanted to take time to explore the contoured plane of it for a while now, but there hadn't been much opportunity. Her palm rubbed at him just above the band of his pants. He was sensitive, so she wasn't surprised that his muscles tightened. She used her fingers to trace the shapes she was interested in.

Steve's chest made a rising huff of breath under her ear. His heart thumped a little harder. She wondered and her fingers wandered down. He was covered by the jacket, so it shouldn't matter. No one would see.
Steve grunted at the initial contact and her fingers traced the expected hard shape of him. She was delighted to feel that the tailored slacks he wore were much thinner and roomier than denim jeans. Her fingertips glided up and down the shape of him. She could feel his heartbeat both under her fingers and under her cheek on his chest.

His hand came up to hold and pet at her head. It was intentional that he brushed her long dark hair messily across her face. He leaned down to whisper at her ear again. She liked what the movement did to his belly and the happy erection under her hand.

"If you're gonna do me like that, doll, then you gotta play it cool. Don't forget that cameras are everywhere. Keep your face covered," he told her.

Implicit in his words was permission to continue what she worked at. When he was satisfied that her hair was messily disarrayed enough, he went back to eating his popcorn. He was nearly digging at the bottom of the container. She glanced up to see Steve looking placidly at the big screen, but his nostrils were flared slightly as her fingers glided and explored.

The movie was of no interest to her. He kept good outward control that she was certain most people would never suspect. From gliding fingers to a massaging palm, then to gripping him through the fabric, it didn't take long before she felt his flesh straining and pulsing heat through the fabric of his pants.

After that it was she who had difficulty sitting still through the rest of the film. All evening he'd been a little on the wild side. She was truly thankful for the jacket now because he wasn't going down. Her hand cupped over him but didn't move. If the front of his pants was wet, she didn't want him to feel chilly. Nor did she want to incite him to more incautious behavior. Only after she brought him off did she start to think about how bad it could be for them, for him, if anyone got pics or video of him being naughty in a public theatre. People got arrested for that.

They waited until the theatre was almost empty. They rode the back edge of the crowd out the exit doors, and Steve tucked her into the jacket while they stood beside his bike. She couldn't read the expression on his face and it scared her a little bit. They rode home and he held her hand all the way up the elevators to his suite.

It was dark inside, but she suspected that Bucky was home from a few new boxes of possessions in the living room that hadn't been there before. Steve towed her through the suite and into his bedroom. She was glad that she knew the place well or she may have banged her hip in passing.

"I'm going to shower. You can stay here and wait for me to get out, or you can go home to Nat's place for the night. Either way…" Steve said.

He kissed her tenderly but thoroughly. She could feel the vibration in his body even without touching her teeth to his. He'd been quiet since the start of the movie, but she felt that was about to end. Slowly, he drew away from her. He retreated into the dark and she heard the bathroom door open, then the shower start. His stupid eyes! He was so out of it that he wasn't thinking that she couldn't see.

Estrella was nervous, but she wanted to stay. Maybe not to sleep, but for the resolution of whatever was shaking him so much. He shut the bathroom door. Still no light from under it. She felt for the bed and started taking her clothes off. She was very pleased with her new underthings, so she left them on. Steve had the nicest bedsheets she'd ever felt, and she slid between them.

His shower was quick, but she didn't miss the muted sounds of rhythmic grunting near the end.
Poor man. He couldn't get enough. Her fingers pressed down her belly and rubbed back and forth restlessly at the slick smooth fabric of her panties. She was more nervous about being here when he got out. Would getting off again make him better or worse? She didn't know, but it was too late to retreat now.

The bathroom door opened and Steve strode to the bedside table to turn on the lamp. He was already looking at her when the light clicked on. Her eyes went wide. A whole lot of man stood there flushed and dripping onto the carpet beside the bed. He was still rampant and tight against his belly. The focus of his eyes on her was frightening. He was done playing. Her airway closed up nervously, and she shoved her jaw forward to open it again.

Steve's eyes softened when he saw her fright.

"Easy. I'll slow down," Steve said.

She watched as he turned away and went to close the heavy fabric curtains across the glass wall. She'd never seen them closed. He usually used the privacy tint. After the day's events she was glad for a little old fashioned privacy.

"Am I slowing you down?" she asked him. He passed by the nightstand that housed Rosie, but he crawled onto the foot of the bed instead.

"Yes, but that's a good thing. You wanted me to do something for you," Steve reminded her.

She couldn't keep the trepidation from her face and Steve paid attention to it again. He sat on his heels at the foot of the large bed. His knees braced wide and his hands rested atop his thighs.

"You don't look like tonight is a good night to work on my scars. Are you okay? Didn't you already get off twice?" she asked him.

"Four times. Twice before I went to pick you up," he said, brief and clipped. No hint of a playful Texas drawl.

Again, as at the restaurant, she wondered what was going on in his head. He wasn't her usual sweet Steve. He was too still. Faintly predatory.

A shape against the wall by his dresser drew her attention. His shield. She looked from it to him. His eyes never left her. Only her face and her curled fingers were above the top of the blankets.

"It's not gonna save you by itself. If you want to go, then go," Steve told her.

He was probably a beautiful sight, perched there waiting for her to move, but her vision had tunneled down to a narrow swathe. Perfect stillness. Explosive power. A leaping pulse point at his neck. His chest moved deeply and a little fast.

"How much do you trust me?" he asked.

His voice was deep like it got after she screamed at him, yet she hadn't screamed.

"How much do you trust yourself?" she whispered.

"I'm gonna move slow. Don't run away from me, Eya. We'll be alright," he said instead of answering her question.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Steve's weight shifted on the bed. Slow, like he said. His heat moved
over her and the weight of his hands and knees pressed her tight under the covers. That pressure diffused as he lowered his body to touch her in a slow motion capture.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. His body was hard all over like when he was fighting. She'd said he would forgive him if he ever hurt her, but this wasn't how she'd imagined it. Men who raped her were all drunken animal passion, not this deliberate, meditated ferociousness. Tears squeezed out from the tight clamp of her eyelids.

Divinely soft lips kissed her tears. He licked them from the tips of her eyelashes. She could hear his heart thumping in his chest. Slow but so strong.

"Estrella," he rumbled.

When she opened her eyes, the senses she'd inherited from her family flared to life. Steve was a blazing abyss of life and love. She wanted to curl away from his intensity like paper too close to flame. He was terrible yet ecstatic to look upon, and he gave her no choice but to see him. It was beyond comprehension how a man could contain all that and keep it hidden, as if he was ordinary most of the time. She shook her head. He was too much for her to bear right now, but she finally understood that it wasn't rapacious violence he had for her. He was thinly leashed virility. Exuberant, decadent creation, and he intended to flood her with it.

"This is me. For you," he said.

Her head fell back against the pillow and she felt faint with the shallow uselessness of hyperventilation. Dizzy euphoria roiled her until Steve dragged her upright by her shoulders. He supported her lolled head and smiled at her.

"Won't hurt you, baby doll. Wanna give you everything. Want it bad. Sorry if it scares you," he grumbled.

The pull of her own bodyweight hanging from her shoulders opened her lungs more deeply. After a minute, she came to tingly awareness in his arms. The overwhelming power of him was more ordinarily concealed again, but there was still a hint of it in his indulgent smile.

"I'm flattered that I can make you all breathless and swooned, but what was that about?" he asked.

She blinked at him and rubbed his head and shoulders.

"Too much," she mumbled.

Her throat was dry. He uncapped the water bottle he kept at his bedside and offered her careful sips. Her dry tongue felt much better. She nodded her thanks and he held her to his chest with one arm while he set the water bottle down. Estrella giggled at him, only a bit delirious.

"Too much?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you. Jesse said we get it from Grampi, and those before him. I can sense you. You're so big and deep. You feel kind of endless. So much. Too much," she smiled.

She wanted to look at him some more, to search for the depths in his eyes because it was so wonderful, but she was afraid, too.

"Too much what?" Steve asked.
She was playing shy, refusing to look at him.

"Just too much. Don't ever do that to Jesse. He'd go into a coma," she laughed.

"I'd never look at Jesse like that. I don't love the guy. You're my girl," Steve said.

"You're not going to explain, are you?" he realized.

She shook her head.

"I can't, Steve. Let it go. How did you do that, anyway?" she wondered.

"What? Look at you? I wanted you to see what I feel. When I'm trying to take the edge off by myself it feels shallow. Pointless. I've told you that what I really want is to be with you, but I don't think you believe me. You think I'm over here having a party with Rosie for the fun of it, don't you? You think I'm gonna run off and spend all my time in the training room with Thor and Buck," Steve said.

"Isn't it fun?" she asked him pointedly.

"It's fun like having cotton candy and soda when what you crave is steak. It's empty. Doesn't serve much purpose," he said with a shrug.

Estrella slipped from his grip and pushed herself back to lean atop the covers against his pillow and the headboard. Steve looked and admired her changing body.

"Your new things are real pretty. I may have to draw you in them," he said.

His hard posture still confused her.

"Why are you so stiff? All over?" she asked.


"You scared me. It looked like you wanted to fight or do something bad. It still looks that way," she said.

"Sorry. I'd have to use the same body for fighting or for loving, huh?" he reasoned.

She nodded. Now that she wasn't confused and terrified, she could admire how outrageously attractive he was. Her hands hovered over his skin but sought permission to touch.

"Please. Yeah," he said.

He inched closer to her. Her hands skimmed over his sides, down to his hips. The tremble in him became visible.

"It's gonna happen again. I'm addicted to your candy and your steak, Eya," he smirked.

"I want to kiss you," she breathed.

The heat in her eyes told him just what she meant. Steve lay down next to her and reached to grip the root of his cock for her. She moved down the bed and brushed his hands away. She wanted to hold him this time.
His body curled around her a little and he shuddered when she took him in two hands, as far down and firm as she could. That left the top part of him to tickle and lick with her tongue.


His hands hovered for a moment, wishing to guide her head. She eyed him sharply and he chuckled.

"Hmmph!" she fussed at the irony of them both wanting 'inside' but torturing themselves instead. They couldn't seem to stop.

Estrella wanted to close her eyes and pay attention to the luxurious feeling of him in her mouth, but his body was twitching and grinding beautifully with the lashings of her tongue. It would be a shame to miss the show. Too bad she couldn't kiss him all over at once, or even see all of him at once. She turned her head some and looked at his chest and face while she played.

It thrilled her to watch his eyes roll back when she tried sucking on him. She had to do that again. And again. In her eagerness to get that gorgeous response from him, she did it over and over. A few more seconds of that, and he was gone again. Having his length fully gripped in her hands, the strength of his pulsing was just as distracting as the hot mess he gave her. The blissed growling sounds were enough to get her heart pounding.

"No. Don't use your hands on yourself after getting me all over you. Oh sweet, let me help," Steve urged her.

His clean hands moved her to a drier spot on the bed, then he sat up. Steve pulled the top cover over his lap, then laid her across his spread knees in a cradle. She was too aroused to hold her legs primly together. One nudged against his belly and hip, and the other stretched languidly beyond his knee. The sight of his large hand rubbing down her belly toward her curls made her arch up in eagerness. Her new stretchy panties were easy to work under and around.

She made an excited keening sound as his fingers contoured over her pubis and to the slicked flesh of her labia. He knew his way well enough to watch her face instead of his hand while he deftly massaged her to relief. In the small part of her mind that could still reason, she noted that he was right. This was like candy. The spark they greedily observed in each other's eyes was bright, but fast and shallow. Much like the orgasm. Definitely fun, but not very filling.

"Do that again while I go clean up. You're way behind on the score," Steve smiled and kissed her briefly on the forehead, then he dumped her and took himself off to the bathroom.

Estrella laughed at his boyish rudeness. It was playful, not crude, and she enjoyed the bounce of him dropping her on the soft mattress. While the water ran she shimmied up to the headboard again. He wanted her to catch up? She wanted him here with her. Why did he have to wash so much? It was getting late and she wanted to put in a full day of work tomorrow. She wanted sleep, but he'd moved with purpose like he had a plan.

She slipped off her panties and diddled herself idly, but stopped when he strode back and leapt onto the bed naked. He tossed his drying towel aside and reached over her to the night stand. With a slide, a grab, and a bang of the drawer, he'd retrieved two condoms. Estrella didn't know quite how to feel about that, but she wasn't given much time to think.

Steve bounced himself over beside her at the headboard. He had far too much energy for a man who'd come five times already. He was a confusing mix of eager boy, a man who was trying hard not to be too serious, and an old guy studiously trying to ignore that he'd been taught that this kind
of play could burn him in hell. The stuffy, responsible part of him rolled on not one, but two condoms. She giggled. His poor penis looked more like rubberized fetish gear than an organic appendage.

"Hey, no laughing. I'm doing this for you," he smirked at her.

"Are your sperm that strong, even when I'm not ovulating?" she asked.

"I dunno. It's not for that so much. It's to dull the feeling later," he explained.

"Oh," she said.

Steve encouraged her back onto the cradle of his lap again. She'd been reminded that he could practically see in the dark, but he arranged her so that he could enjoy the sight of her in the lamplight. She was still swollen and slippery, not much change from a few minutes ago when he'd last touched her.

"Eya. Honey. You're beautiful. I can't even- I don't know that I could mix paints for these colors," he said softly.

He may not have looked last time, but he did this time. She felt shy about the way he gently parted her outer labia to wonder at the deep pink and gold tones of her skin. She felt very naked. She shivered. The antsy feeling caused a hard tug in her muscles down low. She felt even more exposed.

Steve made a sound like a swimmer coming up for air.

"Your… clitoris. I don't think it was like this the last time I kissed you," he finally said.

"Like what, Steve? You're freaking me out," Estrella said.

She curled to sit up and look at what he meant.

"Oh. It's kind of. There," she agreed.

So it was a little poofy. A little tewaky. Prominent. Still just a little pink thing, and girly. But a bit more attention getting than it had been a few weeks ago. Especially with him staring at her and making her clench up.

"It's glorious. I wanna take it for a drive," Steve winked at her.

Estrella laughed. At least he liked it and didn't think she was a freak.

"Well quit staring at me like a bug under a magnifying glass. I'm not a car-Nnng!" she fussed, then moaned.

She usually avoided direct stimulation in large doses, but Steve was doing something that felt liquid and electric. She didn't care what it was as long as he kept doing it. Estrella laid back and let her mind melt away. She wasn't aware of the sounds she was making, but they licked like water up his spine, even with her necklace on.

Steve nudged slickness toward her cute little nub and pressed and slid all around it. His left pinky finger was smoothest, so he used that. Every now and then, he'd curl the side of his finger over her clit, like he was trying to grasp it, but letting it slide away. He wondered if he could get off just from the sounds she was making. He looked to make sure her body was comfortably stretched and
her airway open so she wouldn't get lightheaded again.

When her sounds indicated that she was going over soon, he pressed two fingers from his other hand through the succulent flesh at her entrance. Oh, God. He couldn't wait to get in here. He tempered his lust to pay attention to her needs, and he regretfully sought out the scar tissue they needed to work on. He had to concentrate on his lungs and his breathing to keep from swooning a bit himself at the contractions around his fingers. Steve petted his hand soothingly up her pretty belly to her ribs and gave her clit time to rest. His other fingers rubbed gently inside, seeking.

There it was. Natasha had told him that it would be denser flesh, like burn scars. There was a slightly tougher ribbon of tissue running crosswise in the back wall of her vagina about two inches in. Blind rage seized him unexpectedly for a moment, and he let it roll over him and pass on. She was a delicate enough person now as an adult. She'd been a kid. Just a teenager when they'd torn her.

"Steve," she called to him.

He didn't want to look at her. Anger was ugly, and he was trying to keep ugly things out of the bedroom.

"I'm alright," he ground out.

"I am too. It feels like you found it. Steve, don't feel bad. It was a long time ago and I feel really good tonight. Help me catch up on my score," she said to distract him.

He didn't smile, but at least he stopped scowling. She was becoming okay with feeling so exposed to him. It seemed that he loved the way she looked, and he was certainly having fun playing. There was some pulling discomfort from the fingers inside her. It felt like when he would press at one point, the scar would tug and burn at other points.

It was hard to pay attention to the tug of the scar tissue when he started to rub circles over the root of her clit. It felt even more exposed when his rubbing tugged her little nub all around. Then he blew on it. It was cold!

Hot!

She shrieked and spasmed, her eyes gone wide to see him bent over and sucking on her with soft lips. Orgasm roared through her, but her brow crimped in pain. Pain inside.

"Nn! Nn. No. Please," she pleaded.

The burning pressure of him massaging the scar tissue faded away. He gentled his touch inside her and kept to shallow circular rubbing that wasn't as bad as what he'd done while she was distracted.

His dear face was conflicted with regret, excitement and determination. He gave her a minute, then flickered wet fingers near her clit again.

"You've got to slow down. I'm not like you. I need time," she panted tiredly.

"I think you're going to be like me Eya. Someday we'll get everything worked out, and then there'll be no stopping us. I wonder how long we'll be able to go. How many times?" he pondered.

"It's talk like that that makes me worry about you, Steve," she made the effort to roll her head to face him and arch an eyebrow at him.
He chuckled.

"We'll see. As long as somebody puts a shock collar on me, they ought to be able to call me away for an assemble order," he said.

"Aren't you the one who's supposed to call everyone to assemble?" she asked skeptically.

Steve put his arm under her and urged her to sit upright. He moved so that his feet were propped up on the bed to make a backrest for her of his thighs. Estrella saw what he intended. He didn't immediately press himself into her. He kept working at the scar with his fingers. It was achy, but she was getting used to it.

She felt somewhat sore and used all over down there, and wasn't sure she wanted the intrusion of something so large as his rubberized penis. He saw her doubt and he removed his fingers from her. At least she was abundantly wet.

"Steve-" she cautioned when he put his hands under her bottom to guide her further down his thighs.

"Your bra is much prettier than the other ones you had. Do you have matching panties and bras?" he asked her.

He rolled her clit gently between finger and thumb and gave it little tugs as he eased her down onto his tip. Estrella gasped and fell back against his knees. A little scowl tensed her mouth and he knew that was her fuss at him for distracting her at a time like this.

"Do you want me to stop? We can try later, some other day," he said.

"Go slow, but quit-mmm- that. Can't concentrate," she told him.

He knew what mmm-that was because it had been timed exactly with the movements of his hand. He left her alone to feel the stretch of him entering her, if that's what she wanted.

Estrella slapped her hands onto his chest to brace herself into a stop. She re-arranged her feet for leverage. She didn't want to look at him while they did this. It was a painful travesty of what she hoped they could do in the future. Of course Steve couldn't leave well enough alone. He had to ask questions.

"I know it hurts. Does it hurt everywhere? Or does it just hurt where you felt the scar tissue pulling?"

She stopped herself from getting him any farther than half inside. He was warm and firm, but the squeaky rubber feeling was odd. She shook her head.

"The pain is mostly near the scar tissue. I think it's drawn everthing around it tighter, but it's not so bad deeper in," Estrella said, her eyes still closed.

"Alright. My plan is to go deeper and then sit still. We only had a short while of that on vacation. Do you think you can stay for longer this time?" he asked her.

His voice annoyed her, it was so calm. She had to keep her eyes shut and assure herself that it was only the scar tissue that was making her hurt, not anything Steve was doing.

"Shhh," she said, but she nodded.
Steve took her down slow and smooth. There was more achy stretching when her weight pressed her fully down onto him, but it wasn't the same kind of burn as the scar tissue. She could ignore it if she tried. The bad burning eased a bit when he was all the way in because he was slightly thicker around the middle and him being all the way in put his widest part well past the scar.

She hissed at him when he twitched inside her.

"Don't move," Steve sounded strained, finally.

Estrella nodded at him. She didn't plan on moving.

"How bad?" he asked her.

"I want it to stop, but I'm not crying so it must not be as bad as last time," she admitted.

Slowly, Steve hugged her forward to his chest. It increased the pressure on the painful area, but she tolerated it.

"See if you can sleep," he said.

Estrella tried to relax her thigh muscles. Every time she did, her angle changed and Steve twitched inside her.

"I don't suppose you can stop that?" she asked him.

"I'm doing my best. Shhh. Stay as long as you can," he reminded her.

Estrella fully relaxed her legs, her whole body, and endured through the twitchy fit it caused inside her. She wanted to laugh, but that would likely set him off too.

"How are you, Steve?" she asked.

"Good," he said on a tight breath.

Sometime later she startled awake. Steve's hand moved on her hip and he kissed her temple.

"You stayed for twenty-two minutes. You're sore. Is the pulling sensation any less?" he asked her.

"Mmm-hmm," she mumbled sleepily.

A slight shift of position when she yawned pressed her clit against his pubic bone. She reflexively clenched around him. There was pain, but there was something else, too. Her eyes opened fully and her hands slid up to hold his shoulders. She could feel his smile in his cheek muscles flexing against the side of her head.

She did it again, but on purpose this time. Pain. But fullness. Good fullness. She made a sound.

"Feeling a bite of steak at the end of all that cotton candy?" Steve asked with a gravelly voice.

"Say that with some Texas," she breathed.

"How 'bout a bite o candy with all that steak, ma'am?" Steve drawled, lazy and with plenty of suggestive attitude.

Estrella squealed with delight, then winced when she moved too much. It really did hurt, but she would put up with moving if her clit wasn't too sore. She slowly sat back and they both made
embarrassing sounds when his fit of twitching was met with an answering greeting from her inner muscles. Pain, side of pleasure. Steak fries? She giggled. More twitches. They both groaned.

"Gawd, darlin', you're gonna kill me with laughter," Steve did his best to maintain the accent through the sensations. It came out a little quivery, but all the more interesting for its imperfections.

Steve smiled at her with a good deal of politely banked heat. She looked down at the lewd sight of him rooted into her. His lower abs were shiny with her wetness, as were her inner thighs. A final cringe of pain, and her clit was available enough to try for a little more.

"Self-service. I'm gonna enjoy the show," Steve said.

"Shhh, I have to concentrate," she told him.

Her fingertips were soft and slick, circling and pressing. She had to do mental tricks to get over the pain enough to let the pleasure take hold. It helped when she played over the hard ripples of Steve's belly with her spare hand. All that muscle meant danger, with the pain she was feeling, but he wouldn't use it on her. Her eyes got caught in the burn of his, and her fingers stopped working.


"Looking at me is better than sex? Thanks, but let's finish this feast and get to bed, sweetheart," Steve said.

Estrella moved her fingers again and kept her gaze untangled from his. She didn't bounce. He didn't thrust, but her hitches of breath and his twitching provided some sense of movement. It kept prodding her with that heavy feeling of fullness. Something was building. Inside as well as outside this time.

"Steeve," she whimpered.

"Aw. Eya. So pretty, baby. Don't be surprised if it hurts," he tried to praise and soothe her.

"Steeeeeve," she called more loudly.

Her hips moved, circled a little instinctively. Pain! She rubbed more frantically to overcome it. The urge to ride him set in deep in her bones and muscles. She tried it and he grunted and grabbed her hips firmly. Pain. Pleasure.

"Eya, no,"

Twitching, rocking, pain, ecstasy! The fullness of him inside her was deeply gratifying and excruciating too. Something was noisy and it was probably them, but she couldn't care. She couldn't take a second more of this. A yip of sharp pain on the dismount, and she flopped herself down beside him. Steve rolled toward her and rutted against the outside of her thigh for a vigorous ten seconds. She kissed at his chest and cooed to him in encouragement.

"Ow, ow, ow," she chanted.

If Steve looked silly, she couldn't see it because her eyes were shut against the soreness. He settled down carefully to breathe against her shoulder. They both could hear Buck chuckling in his room. Estrella hid her face.

"Hit him for me?" she asked.
"Sure thing, doll. There'll be one with your name on it," Steve promised, but she could hear the smile in his tone.

He carefully picked her up and brought her to the bathroom. He turned on the water to a nice warm temperature in his tub and would have set her in it but she wiggled. He set her down in front of the toilet instead. He left her alone for some privacy. His used condoms went into the trash and he washed his hands.

There was ice cream in the freezer and he fixed her a bowl of it. Estrella was in the tub when he brought it back to her. He didn't try to share her bath. He figured she'd had enough of him for a while.

"You went to the kitchen naked?" she asked.

He shrugged. The answer to that question was obvious, but that wasn't really what she was asking.

"Peace. It's only Buck. He saw everything a very long time ago when there was a lot less of me to see. He or his Ma tended my fevers when money was too tight for my Ma to get away from the hospital. In the war, he probably picked more shrapnel out of my hide than both our body weights. It's nothing new. I don't make a habit of it. He's in his room, and I wanted to get you ice cream," Steve placated.

Estrella enjoyed the hot water and ate another spoonful of ice cream. Steve's tub was better than Natasha's because it was deeper. She appreciated his naked perching and the long, strong lines of his legs. Some rocking on her bottom told her that she would be sitting carefully for a few days.

"Thank you. I hurt, but I think we made progress," she said.

Steve looked at her with dopey happiness. His fingers pushed at her new bra which was folded on the toilet lid.

"Did you lose your bottoms?" he asked her.

"I didn't see them," she admitted.

"It's alright. I know where you live," he said.

She didn't like the idea of leaving her new things here, misplaced from where she wanted to keep them, but she was too tired to bother. Steve brought her clothes while she towel-dried her hair. He was kissing her against the door when Natasha opened it. His reflexes saved him, and both he and Nat caught the girl when she stumbled.

"Love you," Steve said, and rubbed her nose with his.

"Love you back," Estrella smiled up at him.

She touched his cheek and Natasha made retching motions behind her to taunt him.

"'Night, Nat," Steve said, his good mood more durable than her foolery.

He turned and left them. She frowned at Natasha for making fun of Steve's old-man bath robe. It had been hanging on the bathroom door and it was better than him walking her home naked.

"Are you sore?" Natasha asked.

Estrella walked gingerly to her room.
Nat brought her a jar of ointment.

Estrella felt the dragging need for sleep, but first she had to move her laptop and several notebooks off of her bed. She'd been intending to do some studying. She had some questions that needed answering about what she wanted her future to look like. Once again, Steve had sucked up all her spare time and some of her work time like the gravity well of a fiery sun. It had happened so many times now. She'd wanted to find out something for herself or to make plans and then it all flew out of her head as soon as Steve suggested how they should spend their time.

That had to change. She was in love with Steve and also in love with loving Steve, but she felt like she was being swallowed whole. Not that her life had much value or self-determination before. Maybe she was aware and healthy enough now to get the idea that she could be her own person. Once again, thanks to Steve that she was alive. The ointment sat aside unused. She carried the ache of Steve's attention into dreams with her where it once again displaced whatever she might have dreamed about otherwise.

Steve tapped on Buck's door before he went to bed for the night.

"It's open," Buck said.

Steve pushed it wide but didn't bother going into the dark room. He just hated speaking through a closed door when he didn't have to.

"I know you owe me one with her name on it," he admitted.

Steve dropped his head a notch and leaned his back against the doorframe.

"I don't wanna be quiet and she's too sweet to silence. You and me can't help our hearing. I know that putting my fingers in my ears doesn't do much good. But did ya have to laugh?" Steve asked.

"Didn't mean to. Wasn't laughin at you or her. I'm happy for ya, Steve," Buck admitted.

"Right. Well, keep your jollies where she can't hear em, huh? And it looks like I'm going to have to wear this damned robe around the house," Steve complained.

"Not even hitched yet and you're bitchin," Buck pointed out.

"Worth it," Steve mumbled.

He turned away and shut Buck's door.

"Sounded like it," Buck agreed.

Yeah. This is what he needed to get him through tomorrow.

Natalia was friendly enough over lunch and for some mutual itch scratching, but he knew she was going to put his brain in the blender tomorrow. James was comforted somewhat that he had some strong new memories to ground him. His arm felt better, too. All in all, a good day.
Chapter 51

Steve was long gone from the suite and it was midmorning. Buck had time to get bored, but his boredom was threaded through with uneasiness because Natalia was supposed to begin work with him today. He didn’t know when.

Meet me at suite 2720, Natalia texted.

Buck had been dressed for hours, waiting. He didn’t know if he should be in gym clothes or tactical gear, so he’d been standing around in plain clothes, a compromise between the two. His combat boots were familiar, comfortable. Around here people didn’t question his choice of footwear even if he wore the boots with slacks and a nice shirt.

It wasn’t hard to find the suite on the second floor of the tower. He could have asked Jarvis, but he didn’t want to rely on the AI for everything. The place was just off the main second floor public lobby, through a broad open archway. It was among several similar retail shops in the tower. Buck walked under the arch and into the well-lit seating area outside the shops. 2718 was a florist. 2722 was a place that sold perfumes and crystal nick-knacks. 2719 and 2721 was a larger space devoted to a hair salon. Women were all over the place, shopping and having their hair done.

One woman was different from the others. Natalia stood outside of the one apparently vacant shop. 2720. She was also in plain clothes, but Buck noted that she was dressed for action. Her boots were stylish but sturdy. The snug bracelets she wore probably had something which would bite hidden among the bangles and beads.

A small utilitarian toolkit rested on an end table by where she stood waiting. It looked out of place among Stark’s glamorous décor and the floral arrangement on the table. Also, Thor sprawled in one of the cushy chairs. The big blonde spared him barely a glance in greeting, then turned his attention back to the newspaper he held. He was reading the comics and smiling. Women stared blatantly at the Norse legend. They lingered in the doorway of the hair salon and watched him. With Natalia so close by and looking business-like, the women didn’t have the courage to come over and talk to Thor.

“Remove the door,” Natalia told him.

Buck looked at the closed door of suite 2720, then around at the civilians in the area. He flexed his left arm a bit and let the mechanics whir to life, anticipating using it to bring the door down.

“What, did you get locked out?” he asked her.

There was clearly no emergency here. He had time to run his mouth a little.

“Use the tools, not your arm,” Natalia told him.

She sat in the chair beside Thor. He offered her the international news section from the front of the newspaper. Bucky picked up the toolkit and approached the door of the vacant suite.

Buck tried the door and found it to be unlocked. The handle easily turned, making not so much as a squeak. He was aware that this wasn’t about gaining access to the suite. The door needed to be removed, so he did it.

Like a regular Joe, he used a screwdriver to detach one side of the exposed hinges. It wasn’t the
kind of door where you could tap the hinge pin out. It felt antiquated to spend the time turning the screws manually with a hand tool. He wished for the fast cordless drill he’d used on the construction site at his last job. Buck dropped the screwdriver back into the toolkit and carefully opened the door by its handle. He used his other hand to support the door while he tipped it out of its frame. He looked to Natalia for further instructions.

“Bring it inside the room and set it down against the wall,” Natalia told him.

She stood up and laid her section of the newspaper across Thor’s knee. The man ignored her as she moved around him to go into the darkened suite with Bucky. Dark was relative. The overhead lights weren’t on, but sunlight lit the space from one side. The room was vacant except for an object which Bucky recognized and chose to ignore. The far wall of the suite was floor to ceiling glass, just like in their residence suites above. Because they were so close to ground level he could see the mostly bare autumn branches of street trees which grew from the sidewalk outside the tower. Buck set down the removed door and leaned it against a bare wall. Natalia gave him no further instructions, so he went to look out the window.

The bright morning sunshine beamed through the tinted glass and he could see hundreds of people just below. Life went on as usual outside, pedestrians and vehicular traffic unaware of his anxiety at being in a room with that thing. Natalia gave him a while to get a feel for the place. Empty. Pale walls marked by the absence of retail shelving which had once been there. Short industrial carpeting underfoot. It was quiet, muffled somehow despite the activity outside the suite and outside the window. The thing in the room with them took up all the empty space in his mind, screaming at him. He refused to react to its presence.

“Take your time. Do what you want with it. I’ll be back later,” Natalia told him.


Buck took a slow, calm breath and forced the rational part of his brain to consider the situation before he slipped over into the wild-eyed ape rage that welled up inside of him. This was all carefully staged. So casual, with Thor out in the lobby reading the funnies, but not casual at all. Natalia had him remove the door with his own hands so that he knew he couldn’t be locked inside. He had clear means of escape. He hadn’t been led to the chair by a team of Hydra operatives. No one shoved him down and strapped him in. If the wide-open doorway wasn’t enough, he could leap away through the loosely set ceiling tiles. He could make a path through the wall. He could go through the window and quickly slip away into the street crowds. But he wouldn’t do any of that. She’d brought the heavy. Thor sat outside. Not only that, civilians were all around. The proximity of innocent bystanders certainly wouldn’t stop him from doing anything he felt he needed to do if things got crazy, but he wanted to stay sane, here. He would not fail because Steve needed him.

Buck turned from his stance by the window and looked at the chair. It was one of the older models. Ugly. Gray. Angular. Cut wires dangled to the floor, resting on the carpet as if they’d tried to search for a power source, but had given up. The seating area of the chair didn’t bother him so much, when he looked at it all together. It was the arm restraints and the head gear that made his muscles twitch with the urge to fight or flee. The electrical plates that were custom made to fit his face were retracted up in the air near the ceiling, waiting. The arm restraints dangled open, ready to receive him. On the metal plates where he would sit rested a red leather journal, the one he’d given to Natalia.

The thing was dead. Inert. No instrumentation was arrayed around to get readings on him or to control the mind wipe process. No gas canister was attached to the cut hose, and the respirator
mask was missing entirely. Buck walked over and looked at the thing. A sharp bubble of rage burst inside him and he kicked the heavy chair over, off its base. It made a loud clank against the concrete floor, and another kick tore the carpet as it skidded a few feet.

Women’s voices rose outside in the lobby and Thor said something jovial and soothing. Buck stood over the chair, breathing hard, his hands twitching. He wanted to pick up the awkward, ugly, gangly thing and launch it through the window. He wouldn’t do that.

Instead, he laid hands on it and tipped it back onto its base. As he moved it, he saw that someone had missed a spot when they’d cleaned it up. His dried blood from fifty years ago still was embedded in the stitching of the underside of the arm rest. He’d been dragged in, barely conscious and gut shot. He’d bled all over the place, still fighting until they’d clamped him in and gassed him to start putting him back in order. Buck leaned on the arm heavily and let the broken bits of memory wash over him. Bright surgical lights, harsh voices. Cold instruments, no anesthesia. The thick, coppery smell of blood and the rank smell of the contents of his perforated intestines nearly gagged him merely from the memory.

Buck shook his head and snorted a breath, like blowing out the bad thoughts. He stood, gripped the heavy metal chair, and lifted it. The raised arm stanchions made the balance odd, but he took the thing over by the window. He set it down with a clank. Wires and hoses flopped, then settled. The smaller restraint for his right arm fell closed, and he used a finger to open it again. He bent and picked up the journal from where it had spilled onto the torn carpet. He slapped the book against his thigh and looked at the chair some more. He sure as hell didn’t want to sit in it, but he was going to. A step toward it felt wrong if the intent to sit was on his mind. Instead, he walked away to stand at the window.

Fear. He hated it. It was weakness. It couldn’t be tolerated, especially when it wasn’t reasonable or useful. The chair was dead. Not connected to anything. Not even bolted to the floor. There were no Hydra operatives to torture him. Multiple means of egress, he reminded himself. Still, he wasn’t ready to sit in the thing. He needed something else and he hated the weakness of needing a mental crutch. The associations with the Hydra gear were too strong, too sharp. He had to dull his aversion somehow if he was going to accomplish his self-imposed goal of sitting in the chair.

It looked odd and inexplicable in its current civilian setting. He tried to see it through the eyes of someone who didn’t know what it was. It could be a dental chair, of sorts, if he ignored the arm restraints and imagined that the mind-wipe apparatus was instead an overhead light.

It could be gothic bondage gear, if someone was into that. The way the seat panels were designed left the centerline of his body exposed underneath. If somebody was kinky enough, all kinds of things could be done with that kind of access. Hoses, plugs, vibrating things. Buck barked a laugh. It was absurd. The closest thing to kinky sex that they’d done to him was harvesting his semen to try to make more freaks. That hadn’t been any fun. Only Hydra would think of electric shock to the prostate to force ejaculation. Too bad the electrocution had killed the sperm cells. After that, they’d tried a more natural approach, breeding him to the girls from the program. Girls like Natalia.

Again, Buck shook his head. This wasn’t working. He needed something else to think about. Something nicer that wasn’t related to dark memories of Hydra. He needed something bright and hopeful to think about. He looked at the chair again. What could Steve do with it?

Buck laughed, this time with some real humor. Living with his friend these past few days had been an exercise in patience. Since he’d joined them in the truck during their vacation, the sexual tension between the couple was thick enough to choke on. He’d felt envious at first, but then reminded himself that when Steve had been small, he’d had his share of hanging around and watching Buck
Steve was getting his turn now and wasting every bit of it. Estrella was willing to have sex with him, but not to marry. Steve was willing to get married, and determined to torture himself until then. What desperately aroused, awkwardly chaste positions could Steve and the girl get themselves into on the old Hydra machinery? Buck imagined Estrella leaned over the arm of the chair, gripping the opposite arm, and Steve ineffectively but avidly rubbing himself at the girl’s well-rounded bottom. Steve could have her in the chair while he knelt above her, and she could work him over with her mouth. Steve would have to reach up and grip the head restraints when she curled his toes with sensation. Buck smiled. Yeah, with the odd shape of the chair, there was a lot he could imagine his friend doing with the girl on it.

The thing sat there looking old and clunky, attempting to be sinister in the sunlight. It wasn’t working anymore. Horny little punk Steve would violate the Hydra right out of the contraption, and Estrella would be glad to help him do it. Buck smiled, imagining it smeared with spunk and smelling of sex. The good kind of sex.

He walked over to the chair and flopped down onto it before he could think too much about it. Anxiety spiked in his blood because he couldn’t help but remember the feel of being restrained against the metal surfaces. The mind-wipe device loomed above him, ready to descend and scramble his brain again.

No. Not gonna happen, he assured himself.

Buck laid his arms in the open restraints and grit his teeth together with a clenched jaw. He’d made it into the chair. Mission accomplished. The red leather journal fell from his hand as he made fists against the urge to struggle. There was nothing and no one here to struggle against, but it was what he usually did after they strapped him in. He allowed his body to writhe a bit, fighting against something that wasn’t there. Then he stilled himself. He wasn’t crazy. It was just muscle memory.

The images of Steve and Estrella playing around on the chair had been a useful distraction, but it faded quickly. The feeling of sitting in the chair chased away amusing thoughts. Instead, he looked out the window and tried to imagine that he was sitting on something else that held no negative associations for him.

A few brown leaves fluttered on the trees outside the window. A delivery truck went by on the street and he could see the top of it. Across the street a block away, he could see people walking. A filmy food wrapper blew up into the air and snagged on a barren tree twig, then gusted away out of sight on the next breeze. If he squinted, he could narrow his field of view to not see the mind-wipe apparatus overhead. Trees. People. Sunlight. No Hydra. He could walk out of here if he wanted to.

A few minutes after he’d fully calmed himself, Natalia returned. She strolled in without looking at him. She went to the window and looked down, her arms crossed over her chest and her stance relaxed. Deceptive. He knew a thousand things she could do from such a stance. He’d taught her probably half of them. Maybe he could teach her more, since he’d learned a lot over the years they’d been apart. She could probably teach him some things, too. He didn’t need to think about combat training right now. Thoughts like that circled his mind back around to the dark years when they’d first known each other, when they’d been broken and re-made in Hydra’s image. Instead, he studied her ass. It was a fine enough distraction.

“What do you want to do now?” Natalia asked him.

He didn’t feel like responding in her native tongue. It pushed his mind too close to where he didn’t want to be, given the memories he was fighting against. Instead, he went far opposite with his own
“Whaddya mean, what do I wanna do? You got a job here, lady. You’re supposed to fuck with my head,” he challenged her.

“I’m doing my job, Barnes. What do you want to do?” she said with an easy transition into plain English.

Her pure lack of an accent riled him. It reminded him that she was an elite operative, fluidly switching from guttural Russian to precise English, or to any other dialect or accent she needed. She could copy his Brooklyn if she wanted to, but she wouldn’t. She was here to manipulate, even without wires or hoses or live machinery. It made him angry. Not insanely enraged. Just simple anger. It felt good.

“I want you to bring that ass over here,” Buck told her.

Natalia didn’t so much as lift an eyebrow at him. She unfolded her arms and came over to stand next to him and the chair.

“How do you want my ass?” she asked.

“Mount up. Facing me,” he told her.

His mind was desperately pressing on, dodging through conflicting feelings and urges. Fear, anxiety, aggression, anger, brash defiance. Natalia nimbly slid onto him. He moved his left arm to accommodate her thighs over his hips, then he set it down again. Accidentally, his eyes met hers. He hated that in his distress, she could probably see that he wasn’t alright, despite his play at careless lewdness. It helped some that he could tell from her eyes and certain tiny postural moves that she wasn’t alright, either. She was fearful of him, of what he might do. He could easily grab her and break her from this position and she knew it. She displayed trust, despite her fear. That evened them up some, until she dropped the red leather journal onto his belly.

“What are you gonna do with that?” he asked.

“Nothing. It’s for you to read,” she said.

He needed a distraction because being pressed down in the chair by Natalia’s weight over his groin wasn’t enough, like he’d hoped it would be, not with those words sitting on his belly waiting to be read. Buck wished he could feel lust. Natalia was a great piece of ass, visually pleasing in every way. She was willing to take the time to work him into sexual performance, as she’d already proved, but that wasn’t going to happen right now. This room was open to the public. Anyone could look in on them. Not that he cared much, but he didn’t want to make trouble for Steve or for Stark with a public indecency charge. If they trusted each other and they weren’t gonna fight, and they weren’t gonna fuck, then he desperately needed something else to think about or he was gonna launch himself out of this chair, and to hell with whatever kind of mind-fuck session this was supposed to be.

“You shoulda heard em last night, Talia. Do you know how noisy they are?” he asked.

“Steve and Estrella?” she asked for clarification.

“Yeah. She’s mouthy until he gets her attention real good. When she’s got him high and tight, it’s like he can’t talk anymore. Smart-ass kid goes all cave-man. Can you believe that shit? Prim little Stevie runs off and something else steps up. I know she’s got the eyes and the voice and the voodoo pussy, but he gets to her too. I don’t think they even realize what they sound like,” Buck
“What do they sound like?” Natalia asked.

Something in her tone caught his attention and Buck decided to get on with his own version of devious and manipulative. This was mostly to distract himself from the horror of sitting in the damn chair, but he could make use of the moment if Talia was going to give him hints of weakness.

“It’s like porn, but it hits harder. Know what I mean? Fucking is fucking. Nothing new about that. But knowing those two, and knowing that they’re not even doing it… It makes those sounds reach in and mess with your head. What the hell do they do that makes it sound like she’s taking him apart and shaking him? She doesn’t even know what she’s doing. He has to instruct her. Little words, suggestions. Things you’d never hear him say anywhere else. He didn’t have a thing to say to the working girls, but he takes his sweet time turning Estrella inside out. Her voice is real pretty, too. It’s almost like she’s singing. She should do something with that,” Buck said.

“He says things?” Natalia asked, and she chuckled, clearly having a hard time imagining Steve Rogers talking dirty.

“Yeah, Talia, he says things. Ends up sounding nasty, not even trying. He tells her how to make him feel good, how to get him off, what to do with his dick. Some of it isn’t words, just sounds. Ya know how his voice gets all messed up and growly lately,” Buck toyed with the flicker of interest he could see in Natalia’s eyes.

“Steve. You’re talking about our Steve Rogers?” she wondered.

“Oh, yeah. Ya know, if you want some of him you should get him fast while you still can. I think he’s almost totally gone on the girl, but he ain’t in control of himself yet. You could take him,” Buck suggested.

He could feel the increased heat of her nestled against his soft groin. She was playing it cool, even controlling her pulse with careful breathing and physiological conditioning, but she couldn’t stop the heat. Buck knew he was getting to her.

“He’s pretty,” she admitted, “I would enjoy debauching him. Then I would get bored of him. That’s all it is, so it’s not worth it. These are the best people I’ve worked with, James. I’ve worked to get Steve and the girl together. I won’t damage that, even if I could get Steve to lie to the girl about us fucking. If I allowed myself to try for him, he would be too angry to play into it. You know he would,” Nat denied.

“Ah, you’re no fun, little flower. This exercise is about what I want, yes? So humor me. I need something to distract myself from the chair and the book. Go along with it,” Buck told her.

Natalia smirked at his switch to Russian. His mind was in a strange place, and she had some understanding for that.

“Say what you want,” she said.

“You are correct. He would not allow you to seduce him under ordinary circumstances. Any attempt would cause him to be suspicious and disappointed. Let us imagine instead that Steve has gone missing. The team searches and learns that he is held captive in some facility, for whatever purpose. You are on point with the retrieval team. You find him first. He is naked and restrained, angry and embarrassed for you to see him in such a condition. The battle to take the facility is
going well and easy, or maybe the place is already abandoned, yes? No need yet to radio in that you’ve found the Captain. There’s time to play while he can’t stop you. His restraints would be sturdy. You could climb up. He would be spitting mad, but he’s such a pup that he would be hard for you despite himself,” Buck painted a picture for her.

“I would need be careful of his head, his teeth,” Natalia played along.

“Indeed. If he could, he would knock you unconscious and take his chances waiting for Barton or Wilson to set him free. But if you would mount him and ride only a little bit, he would lose his will to fight, Natalia. Once he feels your heat, he would no longer fight you. Under those circumstances, you could have him,” Buck suggested.

It didn’t much matter if she was suspicious of his motives in telling the story. He was testing himself at the same time he tested her. Could he sit here and completely forget what he sat upon? Would he be able to tell from her response if Natalia had it in her to take Steve against his will, thus destroying his chances with Estrella? She was fully capable of arranging circumstance to make something of the sort happen, fantastical as his make-believe story seemed. Natalia was many things but through it all she was a spider, trained to destroy. Steve had taken her in as a friend and let her dangerously close to his heart. Could she be trusted with Steve’s best interests? Inside, she was as cold and broken as he was, capable of justifying anything if it pleased her.

Her soft female center was hot against him. It was the only part of her which was soft. She looked down at him with frigid calculation, but she was incapable of hiding that one response. If she had not suspected him before, she did now.

“A pretty story, to be sure, yet the result remains the same. There would be guilt and resentment from him. It would be the ending of our working relationship, as he would never trust me again. I remain convinced that the temporary pleasure of having him is not worth the consequence. I like my job here,” Natalia said.

James was satisfied that at the least, he had distracted himself from fear of the chair. He’d managed to anger himself anew with the thought of Natalia manipulating Steve into her not so secret desires. She could do it, and Steve would blame himself for not being strong enough.

Natalia was partly impressed that James had worked her around into revealing more than she wanted to, and partly impressed that he had found a way to distract himself from his anxiety. He’d always been good at multi-tasking. His mind was not like Steve’s, but it was nimble in its own way, more nefarious than noble.

“Are you ready to read?” she asked.

“I already told you a story,” Buck said flatly.

Natalia idly reached to toy with the arm restraints. She flipped them closed, then open again. His body gave a twitch under her. He didn’t like the restraints closed. It was to be expected. She picked up the journal and opened it to the dog-eared page. The words were there, ready to make him into whatever he would become when they were said.

She turned the open book toward him. As he had twitched at the closing of the restraints, she had an instant of fear, sitting atop a bomb as she was about to light the fuse. They knew the danger. Thor, Tony, Sam and Clint were waiting on standby in strategic positions to slow the Soldier down if they needed to. Steve was away, unaware and unable to interfere.

“The words are here. You will read them. The Winter Soldier has a master. He is James Buchanan
Barnes. The Soldier’s mission is to comply with the wants of James Buchanan Barnes, whatever those wants may be. Now read the words,” Natalia demanded.

Bucky wished that the arm restraints had stayed closed and locked. He could refuse to do this, but he wouldn’t. She was the spider and she always planned her moves. Steve’s people were probably prepared for whatever would happen.

He shifted his eyes down to the handwritten page and took a breath.

“Longing…

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“You need one that will seat four people,” Estrella argued.

“I like this one. It could seat three. Me, you, and Buck,” Steve said stubbornly.

“You want me to make supper for you and then serve it to a table where I can’t sit and eat if you have any company? You just had Colin, and Sam was there too. I like cooking for you, but I’m not going to eat in the kitchen like a servant,” Estrella said.

Steve tipped his head down and clamped his teeth on the tip of his tongue. Estrella had been snippy and sharp with him since he’d gone around to get her after the team’s morning meetings were over. He loved that she wasn’t timid about speaking her mind and arguing with him.

Nobody argued with him except Tony, and Tony wasn’t endearing about it like Estrella was. Where Tony’s points made him grind his teeth in frustration, Steve had to try hard not to smile while his girl sniped at him. The way her Latina accent peeked out when she was arguing warmed his heart and made him think of other times, other places. If he smiled now, she’d get offended and misunderstand him. He bit his tongue harder until the urge to grin passed.

“I wasn’t going to spend a lot of money on a big dining table,” he pointed out, “all I need for now is a little one that fits near the window. I know I had friends over, but that won’t happen often.”

What Steve didn’t say was that he was thinking ahead. Someday, he hoped he needed a big dining room table, with lots of chairs and room for plenty of little bottoms all around. He imagined a big house with several bedrooms to go with the big table. Right now, he imagined romantic dinners for two by the window in his suite at the tower. Maybe some candles, and probably some food which Estrella didn’t have to work at cooking.

“Fine,” Estrella said.

He was cautious of her tone. Something told him that it was not fine, and that he would pay some sort of price later if he went ahead and bought the small table that he wanted. He almost smiled at that, too, but he quickly bit his tongue again to squelch it. If he did as he wanted and she was angry with him, what would he have to do to make her sweet again? She’d be all stiff and huffy, but if he pushed her hair aside and nibbled at her neck just below her ear, would she-

“Steve! What’s wrong with your face? Are we buying a table?” Estrella asked him.

He let go of his tongue and laughed. It was hopeless. He had to laugh, or he was going to grab her and drag her to the mattress section of the furniture store and then the sales clerk’s eyes would really pop out of their heads.

As it was, the staff of the store hovered at the main desk and watched him with curious eyes.
They’d offered to help him find what he needed after he and Estrella had come in the door, and they’d done the big-eyed celebrity recognition thing. He’d had to pitch his voice just so, on the thin edge of polite, to get them to back off and let him shop in peace.

Estrella gave him her mean, squinty look but she kept her face turned away from the sales staff and their cameras like he’d asked her to.

“Which table do you like?” Steve asked.

He knew that she wasn’t ready to think about a big table for later, and just a little table for the two of them right now. He surely didn’t want to have that discussion in front of the rapt attention of the furniture store employees. Estrella looked satisfied that he’d asked to see her pick, and her posture wasn’t quite as stiff while she walked over to a larger, higher table than he would have chosen. God, her legs and her ass in those jeans…and the way her hair swished down her back while she walked. He’d follow her anywhere. She would have worn a long skirt, but he’d told her that skirts weren’t safe if they were taking the bike. It was true, but he was happy to see her in her Western jeans again and the boots that she liked so much.

“This one,” Estrella said.

She’d stopped by a high table. It was dark wood with a wrought iron central pedestal and a foot rail underneath. Four bar stools went with it. The stools had brown leather seats and wrought iron backs.

“I like it. It looks sturdy. It reminds me of Texas. Isn’t it too high, though? What if we have little people over?” Steve asked obliquely.

“Little people? Like dwarves?” Estrella leaned closer to whisper to him.

She didn’t want to offend anyone, but she didn’t understand what he meant. Everyone they knew was pretty tall. Estrella was the shortest person, and she could manage the barstools just fine.

“I guess that could happen, but I meant children. Children are short. If a kid fell from the chair…it’s kind of high,” Steve said.

Estrella looked at him.

“We don’t know any little children,” she pointed out.

“We could. Someday,” Steve suggested.

“I can’t believe this. You’re nesting. I’m the woman here and I’m not nesting. You’re thinking about high chairs and sippy cups. I’m thinking about tall men who like to fight and break things and to have room to spread out when they sit,” she told him.

“I’m not nesting. Or if I am, it’s not a girl thing. I want…” he bit his lip and did a quick glance to see that the sales staff was still far away and leaving them alone.

He stepped closer to his girlfriend and leaned a bit to speak quietly at her ear.

“I want to bend you over this table and see if we can break it. We might get a kid out of doing that someday, but for right now, I want a table for the two of us. If that’s nesting, then fine, but it doesn’t feel very ladylike. This table is too tall,” Steve pointed out.

He smoothed his hand along the tabletop and its nice satin finish. It was at chest height to her. Too
tall for sex. She stepped aside and smiled coyly at him. Her hand rested on the seat of one of the stools. It was exactly at hip height on her.

“The stool is just the right height for me to bend over,” she said, “and if we break it, there are three more. We could break two of them, and still have two.”

Steve didn’t have to bite his tongue against his smile this time. She was smiling too, and he was sure that the look on his face matched hers. Compromise. He could do that, especially if it got him that kind of smile and the little wiggle of her hips that she let him enjoy so that he wouldn’t get stuck looking at her eyes. He turned and made a gesture to get the attention of a sales clerk, needless as it was. They were already watching. A middle-aged woman, likely the senior sales associate, came over to help them.

“Is this the one you’d like, Captain?” the brunette lady asked.

“Yes. Can you have it delivered to the tower? Avengers tower?” Steve asked.

“I’ll be glad to arrange that for you. Is there anything else you need?” she asked.

Her name tag said “Cindi.”

“That’s all, Cindi. I just need the table and the stools,” Steve said.

He handed her his debit card.

“If you’ll follow me, we can get your information in the system and I’ll schedule the delivery for you,” Cindi said.

“You don’t need my information. You know who I am. You know where I live. Swipe the card,” Steve told her.

“I’m sorry, Captain. It’s our policy to keep customers on file so that… Yessir. I’ll be right back with your receipt,” Cindi capitulated to the stern tilt of Steve’s head when he gave her a particular look.

“You should go. Don’t let people get out of sight with your card,” Estrella whispered beside him.

“I can see her from here,” Steve argued.

“You’re so pissy today. You can see her, but you can’t see where she’s swiping the card. Go!” Estrella urged him and gave him a little push at his back.

Steve stalked toward the sales desk that Cindi and the other associates gathered around. Estrella hung back, partially hidden behind him. She didn’t like hiding like a weird person, but she understood the need. The thought of Hydra knowing who she was made Steve twitchy, but he was determined to not keep her confined to the tower. Estrella wasn’t sure how she felt about all of that, or if she really believed there was any danger like he thought there was.

“Are you the Captain’s girlfriend? You’re the one who made the barbershop vid?” a younger clerk asked.

“She’s an assistant. She works for Stark Industries,” Steve said.

Estrella rolled her eyes behind closed eyelids. He hadn’t denied the question and him being overly protective was doing more to confirm their suspicions than to deny them.
“You look like one of the dancing girls in the clip from Romero’s. Is she your girlfriend?” a male clerk asked.

Estrella heard Steve’s teeth grinding. She got a firm pinch of skin at his back where no one could see. He flexed the muscles down his side to make her grip slip off, but he got the message. He was to let her handle it.

“Really, I just work for Mister Stark. Men aren’t good at décor. Most men, I mean. *He* isn’t any good with it. I’m only here to help the Captain,” Estrella insisted.

Cindi swiped Steve’s card and handed it back to him with a receipt to sign and an ink pen. He bent to sign the paper against the desk. The sales staff was visibly torn between staring at Steve and looking at Estrella in speculation.

“You’re cute together. You could be his girlfriend,” yet another clerk commented after she got a look at Estrella without Steve in the way.

Estrella felt like she was in the bible and a rooster was about to crow for the third time.

“I don’t need a man! I’m here to help pick a table,” she fussed.

“Whoa, alright,” the girl said.

She put her hands up in surrender momentarily, and looked instead at Steve. The store manager hurried out with a camera. Steve put on his public smile and nudged Estrella behind him again.

The youngest sales associate made a face at Steve’s protective gesture and Estrella grimaced and shrugged at her. Steve was wrecking whatever believability he’d earned with their denials that she wasn’t his girlfriend.

“Captain, can I get a picture of you for our wall?” the manager asked.

Estrella prodded him gently.

“Sure,” Steve said.

He stepped away from Estrella and posed with Cindi while the manager took the picture. If Steve’s smile looked a bit constipated, likely only the people who knew him well could tell. One of the junior associates tried to take a picture of him, but Estrella was in the line of sight and would have been in the picture with the Captain and Cindi. They found that for some inexplicable reason, their phone camera would not function. As Steve and Estrella left the store the associate repeatedly touched their phone screen, trying to get the camera to work.

“Oh, sure! Now that he’s gone it decides to unfreeze!” she complained at her phone.

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“You wanna take a walk? Weather’s nice,” Steve offered to Estrella.

She kept her head down and nodded. She needed to talk to him. It didn’t seem like a good idea to be out on the street if he wanted to avoid them being seen together and talked about, especially since she had to stay really close to him so that men wouldn’t bother her. But if he wanted to walk, she trusted him to take care of things. They left his bike at the curb in front of the furniture store and turned left to walk along the avenue. Estrella threaded a hand through her long hair and mostly hid behind it. Her other hand worked at buttoning the wool fleece coat she’d again
borrowed from Natasha.

“You said you don’t need a man,” Steve grumbled unhappily.

“You said I wasn’t your girlfriend,” she replied.

“I didn’t say that, exactly. I-”

“I know, I know. We said what we had to say to get out of there, so don’t pout. You know I need you. I’d be dead without you,” she assured him.

Steve looked at his watch. He was distracted by something. Normally her offhand comment about being dead would get a response from him, but he said nothing. He couldn’t walk with his arm around her or they’d be in the media for sure as a couple, but she could feel how tense he was when she bumped into him.

“Papi, what’s wrong? Something’s bothering you and it’s not a table or what we said to those people,” she asked with gentle sympathy.

Steve looked at her briefly. He was thankful to have someone who could read him so well.

“Buck. Nat’s got him right now. I don’t know what she’s doing, but it can’t be good. Everybody rushed me out of the tower as if I’m blind and can’t tell something’s going on,” he said as they made their way among the almost lunchtime traffic.

The bustle and noise made its own kind of privacy around them. A few people paid attention enough to recognize Steve as the Captain but the crowds stood still for no one. Faces brightened in recognition, then were swept away in the current of movement. Estrella was glad to see that it was the same way with the men who noticed her. There might have been trouble because Steve didn’t keep her as close as Bucky did, but trouble was swept along and away, too.

“Whatever Natasha is doing to Bucky, is it official Avengers business?” she asked him as they waited to cross the street to the next block.

“No,” he admitted.

“Does this thing with Bucky have anything to do with you, personally? Do they need you to get it done?” she asked.

“No, but…” Steve said, and he got her point.

“But you don’t like it,” she said for him.

The set of his jaw answered that question for her. They hurried across the street along with everyone else going the same way. Her fingers brushed his briefly and they held hands for an instant of comfort, but then Steve wiggled loose of her grip. He looked around as if he was concerned that someone had a camera on them all the time. Maybe someone did, but the constant worry was annoying.

“Bucky is tough. He’s strong. You know he is. He can take it, whatever Natasha is doing, or he wouldn’t have asked for help,” Estrella tried to assure Steve.

“I know he’s tough, but there’s only so much a person can endure and still keep their soul. What they did to him was inhuman, and Nat’s going to take him back into it,” Steve said.
There wasn’t much she could say to comfort him against that. Trying to comfort him didn’t feel very effective, anyway. Steve was deeply worried about his friend and nothing she could say would change that. She even tried to catch him with her eyes to take his mind off of his concerns, but he was too busy being alert and looking around.

She knew his ears weren’t too busy to hear her, so she could maybe change the subject.

“Steve, don’t take this the wrong way, but I need some time during the days,” she said.

That got his attention.

“I have a job. I really do work for Tony. He was nice enough to let me have vacation after I had just started with Stark Industries. I want to keep regular working hours as much as I can. I love going places with you. I want to spend time with you, but I have to pay my bills too,” she told him.

Steve assessed her intently for a moment, glanced at his watch, then he turned them around as soon as pedestrian traffic allowed. He made a path for her in the heavy flow of the crowd and she hurried behind him.

“We don’t have to rush back now. I’m already out with you! I wanted to shop for a table and I want to be with you, but I’m saying that-”

“It’s not you. Extraction in forty-five seconds,” Steve said.

He lifted his watch a bit to indicate the message he’d received. She moved her feet faster and pressed against his back side. Her hand twined fingers with his. She didn’t care if anyone with a camera was looking at them right now.

“You have to go to work? Now?” she asked him.

“Thirty-two seconds. Gotta get you to the bike,” Steve said.

He was already gone. Steve’s body was here with her, but his mind was on his work and on getting her back to the tower. How could he do that in thirty seconds? It would take longer than that just to get back to their parking spot in front of the furniture store.

Estrella’s frustrations with Steve and his job evaporated as worry for him took hold. Wherever he had to go, it was dangerous or they wouldn’t have called on the Avengers for help. She could hear the quinjet approaching from somewhere overhead, but her eyes were only for Steve. It was possible that he wouldn’t be coming home.

She tugged hard on his hand. It didn’t slow him down much, but it got his attention. As the people around them began to exclaim and back away in surprise at the sight and sound of the Avengers jet, Steve turned to her.

“I love you!” she shouted over the noise of people yelling and the howling of the jet’s wing turbines.

“I love you, Eya,” Steve said, and she more saw his mouth make the words than heard him.

Right before Tony swooped down in his Iron Man suit and grabbed Steve’s raised hand, Steve kissed her hard on the lips. A dark shape fell from the sky and landed in a hard squat beside her. It came from the back of the jet so she wasn’t scared.

Tony sent Steve on a flying toss into the open rear hatch of the jet. Estrella and everyone
on the street gasped at his hazardous speed and trajectory, but Steve trusted his people. He reached for the cargo netting inside the back of the jet, and Clint skewed the craft at the last instant so that Steve made a perfect entry. He didn’t bother setting his feet on the deck but hung confidently from his grip in the cargo netting. The last she saw of him, he was reaching for his personal gear locker with one hand while the rear hatch of the craft closed. Tony waved briefly to the people below, and then he and the quinjet shot off toward the northwest.

“We need to move,” said a male voice beside her.

Her heart was racing from what had just happened. It was Bucky who had dropped in to take over her security and transport back to the tower and he meant to get her there in a hurry. Before the crowds were done watching the jet streak away, Buck nearly pulled her off her feet. Her shoulder ached from his tugging and she had no choice but to run after what seemed to be no more than a brisk stride for him. If dancing with Colin was tricky work, then this was punishing. Buck weaved them through people and traffic with a breakneck pace and agility that had her stumbling. The bones of her hand hurt in his grip.

Sooner than she thought possible they were back to Steve’s motorcycle. Buck shoved Steve’s helmet into a side saddlebag with one hand and thumped her helmet down over her ears with a fist.

“Ow!” she complained about the pain of her ears being bent down.

“Get on,” he said in a clipped voice.

With the way he was moving and acting, she was uncertain that she wanted to go anywhere with him. He was scary and making none of his usual efforts to either calm her or to anger her into distraction. It was like when he’d surprised them at the gas station in Corpus Christi, standing there outside the window of the truck looking dead and evil with his face painted black and his eyes burning at them. “Get on now,” Buck told her once more.

The bike roared to life and he looked around at traffic as if he was ready to pull away without her. Estrella whimpered, but she got on the bike behind him.

“Hold on to me,” he said.

Words were lost to her in a shriek as he accelerated away from the curb. Estrella clutched hard at his middle with both arms and tucked her head down so that she wouldn’t see when they died.

There was no way they could go this fast in lunch hour traffic! It wasn’t possible! She gulped and held her breath in terror as Buck’s body shifted them both, the engine of the bike contorted through gears at what seemed a mechanically unhealthy pace, and they managed to not die in any of the instants that followed hard one after the other. There was the blare of car horns that changed tone as they roared by, and people yelled. A hard bump that felt like it compressed her spine, and then they were airborne. The bike’s tires chirped as they landed, and only her frantic grip around Bucky’s torso kept her on the seat as they made a sharp, leaning turn. The sound of the bike’s engine changed so that she knew they were inside some structure. She peeked up to see the concrete interior of the tower’s parking garage. Buck slewed the bike sideways into a stop a foot and a half from the entry doors, and Jarvis quickly opened the doors to accept their bodies as momentum threw them off the bike. She would have hit the wall and cracked her head, but Buck held her grip around him with one hand and bounced them off the wall and into the waiting elevator with the other hand.
Her legs wouldn’t hold her up, they were shaking so bad.

Bucky carefully set her aside, tugged the helmet off her head, and moved her hands to the rail that went around the inside of the elevator. He dropped the unneeded helmet to the floor and turned to face the elevator doors. He stood in the middle of the box as if he was a stranger who cherished his personal space. The elevator went up at a sedate speed. The quiet inside the tower felt ludicrous after the drama Bucky had put her through to get home.

Estrella gasped in the first deep breath she’d had since getting onto Steve’s bike with him.

“What the hell was that for?! Why couldn’t you drive like a normal person?” she yelled at him.

Her voice came out broken with belated terror instead of strong and angry like she’d hoped it would.

“The Captain could have been called away on a false flag with the true goal being your capture. Speed and unpredictability are essential to evading capture or sniper fire,” he explained.

“Sniper… why?” Estrella asked, bewildered.

She wondered why anyone would want to shoot her. Kidnap her and rape her, certainly. She was used to that. But to kill her for no reason? Just to hurt Steve?

“You’re safe now,” Bucky said.

Estrella gawked at him and his dreadfully calm demeanor. Maybe Steve was right, and Bucky had cracked under the pressure of what Natasha had done to him. Maybe Steve was also correct that some people really wanted to hurt him because he was the good guy. Bucky seemed to think it was a possibility. Or, Bucky’s judgement could be bad because of whatever was wrong with him.

“Are you sane right now?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

“Does Steve know you drive his bike like a homicidal maniac?” she accused him, only now feeling her outrage flooding in to overcome her fear.

“The Captain has done worse. I was present when he destroyed an armored personnel carrier with a bike rigged to explode. He jumped off of a bike as it went over a cliff. He was launched with a bike during a small nuclear detonation. The incident melted his uniform to his skin. That was unpleasant. He was almost decapitated by an unexpected power line while driving a motorbike. The enemy strung it across the road at night. If it wasn’t for the speed of his reflexes, the enemy would have succeeded. The man on the next bike behind him did not survive,” Buck listed off a litany of near misses Steve had been through on motorcycles.

Estrella felt nauseous imagining the things Buck said with such lack of emotion. She clutched at the hand rail until they walked across to the other elevator in the mid-level lobby. Buck watched her closely, but he didn’t offer to help her when she hunched and gagged at the thought of how often Steve had almost died.

Why was Bucky walking like that, as if his muscles were tensed to do something? It looked scary and she didn’t like it. He’d said they were safe, but he still watched all around without moving his head much. She recognized quick flickers of surveillance now when she saw it from
“Steve is a careful driver,” she denied belatedly in an effort to get him to talk. He was too quiet, not at all his usual wise-ass self.

“He is careful when he’s with you,” Bucky said.

Her mind didn’t want to linger on the things he said. She tried to comprehend the possibility that any man could cheat death so many times, but she had a very fresh memory of him getting thrown through the air straight into the back of a jet. Steve hadn’t looked concerned or excited by it, merely determined to get on with his job. What was she getting herself into with these people?

Estrella stripped off the warm fleece coat she wore and draped it over her arm. The wool was making her sweaty now that they were in the precisely climate-controlled environment of the tower.

“Where are the Avengers going?” she asked.

“To a chemical refinery near Chicago. There is a fire which the chemicals have made impossible to extinguish. Emergency responders are limited by unenhanced human mortality. People are trapped,” Buck said.

Estrella gave up asking him questions because she hadn’t liked any of his answers so far, and he was all too willing to tell her horrible things. He was acting even weirder than usual.

“Something’s wrong with you,” she told him.

Bucky neither confirmed nor denied her observation. He escorted her to Natasha’s suite and told her to get her laptop and anything she needed to do her work. She left the coat and got her things. Estrella resented being bossed around, but it was what she wanted to do anyway so she didn’t argue with him.

They went across to Steve’s place and Bucky secured them inside. He walked around everywhere in the suite and checked things, then he sat at the end of the couch facing the door. He ignored her as if she wasn’t there. His thoroughness in checking the place made her uneasy, as if Steve’s suite could possibly contain unseen dangers. She didn’t like that because she thought of the high residence levels of the tower as a safe place, difficult for unauthorized people to access.

She got comfortably setup in Steve’s chair and logged in to the Stark Industries web hub with her employee ID. She kept looking at Bucky and expecting him to say something and act like the annoyingly overbearing male he usually was, but he sat unnaturally still and silent. It was like he was watching, listening, waiting for something to happen. It felt creepy, but she had work to do and at least he was quiet.

For several hours she got lost in her work. Every now and then she shifted position or got up to get a drink or to use the restroom. Bucky didn’t move at all. It was midafternoon when his belly grumbled. She looked up from the complaint response she was typing. The only part of him that had moved was his eyebrows. He still looked cold and creepy, but now he looked displeased on top of that.

“I want you to make a sandwich for me,” he said.

Estrella stared at him. She would have laughed at his chauvinistic request because it was so clichéd, but she could tell that he meant what he said. Circumstances were strange. Steve had said
that Natasha did something to Bucky this morning, so maybe this was part of it and his behavior wasn’t his fault. She set aside her work and went to the kitchen.

She didn’t resent making his food. If he’d made his request politely, or even just said that he was hungry, she would have been more than happy to help him. It was his implication that she should be eager to jump and run because he wanted something that set her teeth on edge.

“I’m not your woman. Steve doesn’t ask me to make sandwiches,” she griped while she made food for him.

She cored and sliced an apple, opened a bag of chips to go with the sandwich she made, and fixed him a drink too. She brought it all to him and set it on the coffee table by his knee. He still didn’t look at her or move, except to talk.

“I didn’t ask you. I’m James Buchanan Barnes and I want a sandwich. I’m on duty because Steve is away, so I want you to make the sandwich,” he said as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world and she was the one being crazy.

“You’re James Buchanan Barnes. And you want a sandwich,” Estrella said with a dose of very dry sarcasm.

Finally, he looked at her. Why did he look confused? She’d made the damn sandwich.

“I am. That’s who I am, right? That’s my name. I’m the only one in here,” he said, and he tapped a metal finger to his head.

Estrella had a sinking feeling in her belly. She’d misjudged the severity of what was wrong with Bucky. In all the excitement of Steve’s extraction and getting back to the tower, she hadn’t caught on that Bucky was more than just a little weird. She sat down next to him slowly and carefully.

“You shouldn’t fear me. I won’t hurt you more than I have to. It’s his duty to keep you safe,” he told her.

“Bucky,” she said.

He picked up the sandwich and looked at her.

“That’s me too?” he said, clearly asking for confirmation rather than making a statement.

“Buck. Bucky. James Buchanan Barnes. Your sister’s family calls you Uncle Jimmy. All of those names are you. Those are all the same person. Do you have other names?” she asked.

She didn’t want to step into something deep that she knew little about, but he seemed to be having an identity problem. Natasha must have left something in him unresolved from their morning session, maybe because the Avengers had been called away.

“I was not allowed to identify myself, but I want to tell you. James wants to tell you, and I am James. They call me the Asset. The Soldier. The American,” he said.

“Those names don’t sound very nice. I like Bucky. I think Steve likes to call you Buck because you’re not kids anymore and Buck sounds older than Bucky,” she said in an effort to make conversation and pretend things were normal.

Again, she felt guilty. Would she ever learn to give Bucky the benefit of the doubt when he
acted strangely? This incident wasn’t about the stupid sandwich at all, but about his confusion. She’d been mean to him again, thinking he would tease her right back like he did sometimes. She would never admit it, but she enjoyed it when they bickered. It didn’t seem that he was able to bicker with her like usual when he was being creepy and weird.

“I’m sorry, Bucky. I didn’t understand,” she apologized.

He didn’t react to her apology, except to eat his sandwich. There was no resentment in his expression, merely a lack of emotional response of any sort. Her apology and her misunderstanding didn’t matter to him at all. What he wanted was what mattered. He’d wanted a sandwich, and he’d wanted to tell her his other names.

“Did Natasha tell you to do what you want?” she asked him.

“Natalia said I am to do what James wants. That is the assignment. That is my work. Buck. Bucky. He is my handler,” he said, and his brow pinched slightly.

His eyes shifted to her for confirmation.


“I am him,” Buck said.

“Right. You are,” Estrella agreed, though she didn’t know which name she was agreeing to.

This felt like something she should very carefully back away from, like a sudden encounter with a poisonous snake. Whoever he thought he was, he’d seemed devoted to her safety from the moment she’d met him but he was confused right now. Life had taught her that confused people were dangerous, and Bucky could be dangerous even when he wasn’t confused.

Steve and Natasha cared for her. They had both left her with Bucky and they knew what was going on with him. She would have to trust their judgement until they came back. Buck had resumed his sitting and staring so she took his empty plate and glass to the kitchen and washed them.

She’d reached a stopping point in her work and was satisfied with how much she’d accomplished today despite Steve interrupting her to go shopping for a table. Bucky, or whoever he thought he was at the moment, didn’t appear to need anything that she could help him with. It looked like as long as nothing happened, he wasn’t going to be dangerous or unpredictable. She could work around that.

It was difficult not to worry about Steve and she tried to tell herself that it was just like he was a fireman or policeman who’d been called out to an emergency. If she had to get used to a creepy bodyguard because people wanted to hurt her boyfriend through her, then she should probably also try to get used to a busy and absent boyfriend. She made a deal with herself that if Steve wasn’t home by nightfall, then she would allow herself to worry about him and to ask Jarvis what was going on. It was three-thirty. She had a few hours until she would allow herself to focus on the worry.

Since they’d returned from vacation and she’d had some time to think while Steve wasn’t eating up all her attention, Estrella had been trying to make some time to find out about music and singing and which instrument she might want to learn to play. Now that she had the stability of a home, a little bit of extra money every week, and the luxury of not constantly watching out for people who tried to hunt her down, she wanted to explore what she could do with herself other
than merely surviving. She was deeply thankful to Steve and his friends for making all of it possible for her, but she found that she wasn’t content being only what they expected her to be.

Music called to her. Singing and dancing were wonderful now that she was healthy enough to enjoy them, but maybe she could buy a musical instrument so that she could express the sounds that bloomed in her head. Before she could spend the money she was carefully saving, she had to know how to get the most accomplished for her limited funds. She needed information in order to pursue her dreams.

She was afraid to reach for her laptop. For days now she’d barely been able to get her work for Stark Industries done because Steve always seemed to need her for something when she wanted to work. For days, she’d longed to start learning what she could about making music. Yet every time she reached for her laptop to search the internet Steve would call or text her. Or he would take up all her time so that she was too exhausted to do any searching before bedtime. He was gone right now. Working. Probably doing something dangerous and terrifying that she didn’t want to think about.

Estrella reached for her laptop. Nothing happened. She looked at her phone on the end table. It was silent. In a hurry, she opened the laptop and turned it on. Her fingers flew over the keyboard to open pages on music lessons and the prices of used instruments, to begin deciding which instrument she might want. She had tabs open and there was so much to read, she wanted to learn it all right now! She wiggled down in the chair and scanned the local ads for gently used flutes and guitars and things more exotic. Her mind greedily sorted and noted all the things she saw like a dog that was certain its bone would soon be taken away. Some music lessons weren’t very expensive if she didn’t mind being in class with children, and-

Bucky’s head moved in a slight tilt. She could see him over the top of her computer.

“What?” she asked him.

“They’re returning,” he told her.

Her phone made Steve’s text tone, and then she could faintly hear the sound of the Avengers jet approaching. She picked up her phone, anxious to know that Steve was alright.


Her relief that he was alright was immediately overtaken by the absurdity of it happening again. It was like he was magic or had brain powers and didn’t want her doing anything but him.

“Bucky, is his brain enhanced? Can Steve read my mind?” she asked incredulously.

He looked at her.

“Can he?”

“Steve makes deductions from available information. He doesn’t read minds,” Buck answered.

“Jarvis, is it you?” Estrella asked, more like an accusation.

“Is what me, Miss?” the AI asked.

She stood up and slapped her laptop closed.
“Again! Every time I try to look on the internet or read a book he texts me. I can barely get my work done, but if I try to find something about what I want to do, he eats up all my time, and then I’m sleepy! Jarvis, are you helping him?” Estrella demanded.

“I am not. I apologize for the unfortunate timing Miss, but-” Jarvis said.

“It happens every time! Where is he? I know the jet just landed! He needs to know, because he can do his drawing and he has hours to do what he wants while everyone else is sleeping, but if I try to look at music for two minutes, he’s all over me! I’m going to tell him! Where is he?” she asked.

She stood up and stared at the ceiling with her fists on her hips.

“The Captain is processing through decontamination with the rest of the Avengers team. Sir permits me to tell you that they are a “hot mess”, chemically speaking. The Captain is unavailable at the moment. If I may have your attention on another matter, there is a Miss Shannon on hold for you. Madam Lucille has gone missing and her granddaughter inquires if we know where she has gone,” Jarvis explained.

“Lucy is missing? Do we know where she is?” Estrella asked.

Her upset about Steve once again interrupting her attempts at learning faded away in her concern for Bucky’s sister. Fear that Hydra had already gotten to Lucy because they had dared to contact her yesterday shriveled Estrella’s concern about anything else.

“I have traced her credit card. Madam Lucille purchased a bus ticket to New York City from her hometown. She has overpaid for taxi transport from the bus station. I am currently holding the door open for her entry into the front lobby. The lady’s arrival here is what caused me to search the call log to find the record of Miss Shannon’s inquiry earlier today. I have taken the liberty of returning her call so that you may reassure Miss Shannon of Madam Lucille’s safe arrival,” Jarvis told them.

“You’re amazing, Jarvis! Thank you,” Estrella turned to the man on the couch “Bucky! Your sister is here. Go down and meet her while I tell Shannon that Lucy is okay.”

“I don’t want to,” Buck said.

Estrella looked at him.

“It’s your sister and she came all this way to see you. How can you not go down to meet her?” Estrella asked.

“I don’t want to,” Buck repeated.

The man looked unmoved and absolutely unbothered that Lucille was here. He’d been anxious about contacting her and then he’d been warmly emotional to her in the video they’d made yesterday. Now he ‘didn’t want to.’ From the looks of him, Estrella could tell that he wasn’t moving, unless…

“Bucky, if you don’t go down, I have to go by myself. What if it’s not safe? Shouldn’t you go with me?” she asked.

“Jarvis, security report,” Bucky said.

“We are currently secure beyond the sixth perimeter,” Jarvis said.
“Have the visitor meet the Miss at the mid-level elevators,” Bucky said.

“The visitor is your sister!” Estrella exclaimed.

Bucky looked at her to assess if her statement had any relevance to his wants. He remained where he was on the couch.

“This is a crazy house! Fine! I’ll go get your sister since it’s probably my fault that she’s here anyway,” Estrella said.

She left the suite and got in the elevator. On the way down, she tried not to laugh at the absurdity of what was happening at the moment. Steve was probably covered in hazardous materials and having a naked scrub-down with his teammates. Bucky Barnes was acting like a creepy assassin-toddler. And now there was a geriatric baby sister to take in from her runaway road trip.

Estrella got to the mid-level lobby before Lucy arrived. The place was opulent and vacant.

“I am sorry for the delay, Miss. Madam Lucille says that her legs are not what they used to be. She requires a slow elevator,” Jarvis explained.

“Thank you for being considerate, Jarvis. I don’t mind waiting for her,” Estrella said.

“Of course, Miss,” Jarvis said.

While Estrella waited for Lucy to arrive, she crossed her arms and shifted her hips. This morning she’d wiggled and fought into her western jeans which they’d bought at Colin’s store because today was probably the last day she would be able to wear them. The boots still fit her feet well, but it wasn’t her feet which were growing. Across her thighs and bottom the jeans clung to her in a restrictively tight hug. The center seam of the jeans aggravated the soreness she felt between her legs as she shifted her weight from one boot heel to the other.

A smile crept across her face as she thought about how she’d earned her soreness. It was from Steve last night, in his bed. She’d expected the pain, but it hadn’t been any worse than before. What she hadn’t known to expect was the gratifying feeling of fullness of Steve inside of her. She’d not known it could feel so good to have a man inside. There had always and only been the pain. Near the end the sensation had grown tender and intolerable, but still the fullness had felt amazing despite the hurt. Even now, it was the feel of him inside her that she remembered best rather than the pain of working on her scars. That and the achingly sweet intimacy he melted her heart with.

Steve could have surprise attack orgasms in the training room while he was fighting and it only bothered her a little bit. He could take decontamination showers with his friends. She understood the need for that, so it wasn’t so bad. After all, somebody had to scrub the middle of their backs to make sure any dangerous substance was completely removed. But she had something with Steve that none of them had. He’d let her see into him. She couldn’t imagine Steve showing any of the Avengers what she’d seen in his eyes or heard in his voice.

The elevator doors had opened sometime in the last few moments and she’d missed it. Estrella noticed an old woman standing with a cane, smiling at her. Ooooh! Steve had done it to her again! Thinking of him so completely distracted her that she went off into her own little world in her mind. Heat flushed up her face and neck. How long had Lucy been standing there watching her think about Steve? Jarvis could have warned her!
“Lucy!” she said warmly and she walked over to greet the woman.

The lady took careful steps out of the elevator. She picked up and moved her cane forward in a short, steady cadence that looked well-practiced. Her cane was one of those silver metal utilitarian ones with a big rubber tip. She was a medium-large woman, rounded and not very tall. Maybe she had been taller, once upon a time. Her dowdy polyester dress was plain dark green, and she wore a faux amber necklace with big, clunky stones. Opaque compression hose and taupe granny shoes finished her ensemble on the bottom, and on top her hair was a pale white pouf of short curls around her head. Her cane thumped to a stop with the rest of her, and Estrella was startled by the sharpness of her clear gray eyes when she looked up from the floor.

“You’re Steve’s girl. Most people call me Lucille or Gramma. I didn’t think to hear “Lucy” anymore,” she said.

Estrella looked past her crepey skin and age spots and the wattles under her chin. Lucy was like Bucky. Her look was Barnes from her forehead to the debonair set of her cheekbones. Her thinned skin made the family resemblance even more visible in her bone structure.

“How can you tell I’m Steve’s girl?” Estrella asked.

“He always did like ‘em with dark hair and movie star curves. You were standing there with a dreamy smile on your face. Who else could you be? Got a name?” Lucy asked.

“I’m Estrella. It’s nice to meet you, Lucy. Bucky told me some things about you. We should go meet him. He’s up at Steve’s place,” she explained.

“I’ve got a bag there,” Lucy gestured back to the elevator she’d come out of, “If I bend over to get it, I’m not getting up again. Get it for me, will ya?”

Estrella hurried over to get Lucille’s large bag from the floor of the elevator. It looked like an embroidery bag, or maybe something that a lady might take to bingo night or to hide food from a buffet. The bag wasn’t overstuffed, and not too heavy for a lady to carry. She’d only packed the essentials. Estrella smiled. This indicated that Lucy had decided to go on an adventure and she knew exactly what she was doing. Estrella returned to her side with the bag’s handles looped over her arm. She led the way toward elevator on the other side of the lobby which would take them all the way up to the residence levels. Lucy sighed.

“This is ageist bullshit! Somebody needs to talk to that Stark boy about his building. The floors are too slippery. That’s not an elevator, it’s an amusement park ride. There should be a warning label. Why does everything have to be so far away? I’m about to lose my breath and there’s no place to sit down. How are people supposed to get around? There aren’t even any buttons!” she grumbled all the way across the marble tiled floor and into the elevator.

After they were inside and the doors slid shut, Lucy thumped the wall panel beside the door with her cane. Estrella bit her bottom lip hard and managed to not laugh. Lucy sounded as if the journey had been more adventure than she’d expected or wanted.

“Boy!” Lucy snapped.

“Yes, Madam?” Jarvis answered indulgently.

“Get us up to Steve’s place, if you know where the buttons for this death trap are,” she demanded.

Estrella leaned against the handrail and took deep breaths to keep from insulting the woman
with her amusement. It was impressive, really. The lady probably didn’t understand what Jarvis was, but she’d already figured out how to make use of him. The elevator started moving incredibly slowly. The ride was going to take a while.

“Jarvis please connect a call to Miss Shannon for us,” Estrella requested.

“Is that girl pestering you already?” Lucille asked.

She turned to look at Estrella.

“Hello?” Shannon’s voice came from the audio system.

“You don’t have to chase me down everywhere I go. I’m a grown damn woman,” Lucy said to her granddaughter’s voice in the ceiling.

“Shannon, we have Lucy with us at Avenger’s tower. I wanted you to hear her voice to know she’s okay,” Estrella said.

“Gramma! You should have told us where you were going. We called the police and the sheriff to look for you!” Shannon fussed, sounding exasperated and desperately relieved.

“Well you can call them right back. I didn’t tell you I was going because you all would have got up under my feet and tried to stop me. You tell that Charlie that my car better start when I get home! Had to spend my Sunday money on a bus ticket!” Lucy griped.

“What are you going to do now that you’re there? Where will you stay? You have to think about these things, Gramma. You can’t just run off! Nobody there knows how to take care of you,” Shannon fretted.

“I’m going to visit with my brother and find a hotel room. New York City is a big place. They’re bound to have hotels. Steve and Bucky didn’t get to be who they are by being dumbasses. We’ll figure things out. Now leave me alone. I’ve got my own damn money and I’m not dead yet,” Lucy said.

Estrella couldn’t stop smiling.

“Shannon, she’s right. We’ll be fine. When Lucy is ready to go home, I’ll tell you when to expect her. We have everything here that she could possibly need,” Estrella assured.

“But she needs to remember to take her medications on time, and if she eats too much tomato sauce-”

“I know you worry Shannon, and I’m grateful for everything you do for me, but I’ve gotta live before I die. I want to do this. I have to do it, and nobody was gonna let me. Pray for me if it makes you feel better. I’ll be home when I’m good and ready. Not a minute before,” Lucy said in a more kindly tone.

“Okay, Gramma,” Shannon said reluctantly.

“You tell the sheriff and the police that you found me at Esther’s house. That’s important. You understand, child?” Lucy said.

“Yes, Gramma,” Shannon agreed.

“I’ll put my number in your phone for you to keep while she’s here. You can call me,”
Estrella offered to Shannon.

“Who are you?” Shannon asked.

“She’s Estrella. Steve’s girl. Now you go along and leave me to enjoy my evening,” Lucy said.

“Okay, Gramma. Bye. Call us some time, and don’t stay too long?” Shannon begged.

“Goodnight,” was all Lucy said to that.

The call disconnected and they still weren’t done with the ride up.

“Why do I have to put up with that kind of nonsense? As if I hadn’t learned how to wipe my own nose since long before her daddy was born! You got kids?” Lucy muttered, then turned to look at Estrella for an answer.

“No. I only met Steve a few months ago,” Estrella said.

“That doesn’t stop a girl nowadays,” Lucy said.

“It’s Steve,” Estrella pointed out.

“That’s the truth. If you didn’t have ‘em before, you won’t have ‘em til after he gets a ring on your finger,” Lucy said, but she squinted at her, then at her left hand.

It didn’t matter what the woman was about to say, because there was something more important than small talk.

“Lucy, your brother is not the same as you remember him,” Estrella gently warned.

“Of course he’s not. It’s been seventy years. Things change. I don’t care what’s happened. I’m gonna see him,” Lucy said with certainty.

“Okay, but you should know that he has good days and bad days, and I think today is…” Estrella stopped, not sure how to describe Bucky’s mental condition.

“It’s a bad day for him. Alright. Gerald had bad days too. Tell me what not to do,” Lucy said.

Estrella was again impressed with Lucy’s ability to manage things she didn’t understand.

“I think he’s confused today. When you see him, give him time to know who you are. If he’s not very friendly, please know that it’s nothing you did. He’ll probably be better tomorrow,” Estrella said hopefully.

The elevator finally stopped to let them out. Estrella could see that despite Lucy’s brassy determination, the old lady was nervous. She paused and her hand trembled before she moved her cane forward to take a step.

“I’m glad you came, Lucy. I think Bucky needs you. I don’t know what happened to him because nobody will talk about it, but he’s getting better since he found Steve. It can only help him to see you and remember his family,” Estrella told her.

Lucille nodded once and there was no mistaking the shine of tears at her eyes. She paused on her progression toward Steve’s door and wiped her eyes. Estrella waited with her while she
regained her composure.

“He’ll be happy to see you, even if he doesn’t show it right now. Oh, and he has a metal arm. It’s a high-tech prosthetic and moves like a real arm. He’s not sensitive about it, so don’t worry,” Estrella said as they finally reached the door to Steve’s suite.

Lucille nodded again, and Estrella pushed the door open. The lady moved as briskly as she could through the short hallway. Bucky was exactly where he’d been on the couch. He watched dispassionately. Estrella was concerned about how this would go, but she’d done everything she could to prepare his sister for meeting him again.

Lucille watched her footing until she was well into the living room, then she stopped and looked up.

“Hiya, Bub,” she said.

Bucky stood up slowly. He inspected Lucy as if she could be some sort of threat or deception. Several emotions played over the old woman’s face while she watched him, but Buck remained cool and analytical. He tipped up her chin with his left hand and stared into her eyes like he expected to find the answer to a puzzle there.

Lucille let the first moments of seeing him wash over her and away. It didn’t seem real. Their father had gone quiet and gray and had died younger than he should have, never eager to celebrate the ending of the war that took his only son. Their mother, she and her sisters had cried buckets of tears for Bucky’s loss and she was the only one of them left to see this day. This hardened and silenced man had none of the wit and charisma of her memories, but it was her brother. He had the same forehead, the same chin, and the same lips which so easily grinned or pouted.

“Bucky, I’m Lucy. Do you remember me?” she asked, and her voice quavered and broke on the words.

Years of sadness piled up and spilled out. She’d carried decades of regrets and what-ifs for both him and for Steve. She felt like a damn fool for crying, but it couldn’t be helped.

He observed that the woman was in emotional distress. The woman was his sister, the youngest one who used to follow him around and get into all his things and rat him out every time he wasn’t careful enough at hiding his fun. She was the one who faithfully saved half of her holiday candy for him to pass along to Stevie. James wanted something.


He felt a rush of relief to be free of the Soldier again. Lu didn’t need that part of him. She needed who she’d come to see. Instead of making her take a step to close the distance, he moved and hugged her. It was sad to see the spunky little mite turned into a tottering old dame, but that’s what time had done, and he’d missed it all. Fuck Hydra, anyway. Lu needed him right now, no matter what she looked like.

Lucille let herself cry for all the sorrow and loss, for all the pride of his wartime heroism, for all the life he hadn’t lived, and for the joy of finding him again. She wished her sisters had lived to be here with her. Bucky held her and patted her shoulders through it. She was heavy and graceless now, but Bucky picked her up and set her on the couch when her tired legs gave out. Her cane clattered to the floor, but nobody cared.
Estrella looked on and wiped her eyes dry. Whatever had paralyzed the life and emotion out of Bucky was gone now. His Brooklyn accent was back and he gently smiled and teased the old lady through her tears in ways that Estrella couldn’t fully understand. At least half of what he said must have been pet names or inside jokes.

Lucy finally sighed, smiled, and patted Bucky’s face.

“Where’d ya go?” she asked him.

“Eh, I was right here,” Bucky blithely acknowledged his day-long mental lapse with a wave of his hand as if it had been inconsequential, “I get put in the backseat sometimes. Nobody likes the driver.”

Lucy took a moment to consider his words.

“Do you have schizophrenia? One of my great-nephews has it,” Lucy asked him.

“Sorry to hear that. Nah. I was trained to be something else. It’s useful sometimes, but not right now,” Buck explained as simply as he could.

Estrella felt a draft of air blow her hair forward and Bucky’s head turned.

“Whoa! Hi. Company,” Steve said from behind Estrella.

She turned and they all stared. Steve blushed beautifully over yards of skin, except for where he clutched a towel at his hip. He’d almost plowed down Estrella in his hurry to get to his bedroom and some fresh clothes. He looked shiny, freshly scrubbed, and very underdressed.

“Steven Grant! Put on some clothes so I can have a visit without my eyes burning outta my sockets! Wait til I tell your ma that you’re running around nekkid!” exclaimed the woman on the couch with Bucky.

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Footnote:

More soon. I wanted to write the other half, but this is a good stopping point and I’m tired.
"Ma'am!" Steve said.

He squeezed past behind Estrella and hurried into his room. Estrella enjoyed the sight of his towel-clad rump, and then his bedroom door slammed hard enough to rattle the wall. Lucy chuckled. Bucky smiled at how easy it was for someone who knew Steve to tease him.

While Steve dressed, Estrella watched how the brother and sister stared each at the other like they didn't quite believe the other one was really there. Lucy looked to Bucky and her eyes continually watered up. Buck went through moments of contemplation and smiling that made him look happy, but uneasy. His flesh hand held hers. It was odd to think that the strong, young hand holding the thin, bony wrinkled one was actually the older of the two.

Steve came out of his bedroom almost as quickly as he'd gone in. It hadn't taken him much time to pull on a t-shirt and sweatpants. He went straight to Estrella where she sat in his chair. He bent to kiss her cheek, but then he turned to go and squat down next to the old lady.

"Lucy? Gosh, it's great to see you!" Steve exclaimed.

The lady reached her free hand to touch Steve's cheek so that she had Bucky at one hand and Steve at the other. More tears accumulated in her eyes until they spilled over and ran down her face, but she didn't take her hands away to wipe them.

"I would think this was a dream, except I wouldn't dream you like this, Steven. I'm not sure I like this muscle-bound oaf look of yours. I liked you better before. Tell me that you still take the time for your drawings," Lucy said hopefully.

She let her hand drop to his shoulder, where she patted his muscles and frowned. Then, she lifted her hand to wipe her face dry yet again.

"I'm still me, only better. I can breathe now, Lu. The things I draw are more accurate because my eyes are better. Don't let the muscles fool you. My mind is sharper. I think faster," Steve assured her.

"Lord help us, then. You were trouble enough as you were," Lucy said with a fond smile.

She continued to look at Steve critically. She reached for one of his hands and he gave it to her to examine.

"Your poor hands. They used to be so elegant," Lucy said sadly.

"They are different, aren't they? Let me show you something," Steve said.

Estrella was fascinated with the changes Lucille was describing in Steve. He used to have elegant hands? It wasn't difficult to believe he could be a trouble maker. Steve hurried into his closet and he came back with sketchpads. He handed one to Bucky and flipped open one that looked old and yellowed.
"They were keeping this one at the Smithsonian. See, that's the old neighborhood, and the bell

He settled the old sketchpad on Lucy's ample lap, then he took the newer pad from Bucky and
opened it for Lucy to see. Estrella got up to stand behind Lucy so she could see what Steve was
showing.

"Oh! These are better. I thought your work was the bee's knees before. Steven, you need to do
something with this talent, young man!" Lucille said archly.

Her frail hands turned pages in one sketch pad, then the other. Estrella could easily see how Steve's
old work was beautiful and evocative, but it lacked a detail and almost realistic clarity that his
newer work had.

"Who are you calling 'young man'?" Steve teased.

Steve looked pleased that Lucy could see the difference in his work. She began to turn the next
page and Steve's eyes widened with alarm. Before he snatched the sketch pad away Estrella caught
a glimpse of the curvy form of a nude, reclining female. From the angle of the page, she was
certain that Lucille had not seen it.

Lucy was happy that Steve hadn't stopped drawing. Estrella turned curious eyes to Steve. She
wanted to see what he'd hidden from Lucy. Steve hurried his sketches back into his closet. Maybe
she could see them later.

Steve didn't want to bother Buck and Lucy while they got reacquainted, so he came to his chair and
sat. Estrella joined him. He pulled her across his lap and she settled happily against him, turned
sideways. His left hand held one of her feet and fiddled with her bare toes.

"Was everything okay at work?" Estrella asked him quietly.

She didn't try to suppress a wiggle of contentment as the warmth of him soaked through her clothes
all along her side and her bottom. Steve smiled at her from only a few inches away. She couldn't
help but to return the expression. It was wonderful to have him home safely.

"Problem solved. I'd rather not talk about it," he said, and his smile faded a little.

His eyes were momentarily troubled, so she gave him a lingering kiss at his temple.

"Mmm. That's what I need. Did you order anything to eat?" Steve said.

"How do I order something for here? Is there a list of places that we choose from?" Estrella
wondered.

"Jarvis, would you please put our regular take-out list into Miss Estrella's contacts?" Steve
requested.

"Certainly, Captain," Jarvis said.

"Is that boy everywhere?" Lucy asked while she stared at the ceiling.

"He's everywhere in the tower. He works for Mister Stark. If you need help while you're here, say
his name and he'll hear you," Steve told Lucy.

"I don't think I'd like someone listening all the time," Lucy said.
She stared at the ceiling with a shrewd eye as if she was looking for where Jarvis was.

"He only listens when he hears his name," Bucky told her.

Lucy made a huff that sounded skeptical.

Steve showed Estrella how to place an order for food.

It seemed rude to intrude on Bucky and Lucy's quiet conversation, so they focused on each other. Estrella liked how Steve's fingertips rubbed lightly up and down her spine. She used both hands to turn his face to hers, then she scratched under his jaw as she knew he liked it. He leaned his forehead against hers and groaned softly. Their eyes slid shut, but they didn't need to see. The feelings of contentment were more than enough to pay attention to.

Steve liked her hands on him, but there was something else. Something about her smelled nice. He shifted his face into her hair beside her neck. He parted his lips and drew in a slow breath. She was wonderful and he couldn't get close enough to her. As it had been for him since he first met her, she was able to distract him from all his concerns. That felt really good after coming home from a mission where they hadn't been able to save everyone. His hand moved from massaging her foot. For a moment he held her ankle, then his hand started a slow slide up her shin. He couldn't figure out what scent he smelled. It was subtle and nothing like the harsh chemical fragrance of perfume or soap. He wanted more of it. Maybe she would taste good, too. He opened his lips to try his tongue on the warm skin of her neck.

"Hey, show some respect in front of the lady!" Buck fussed and threw a couch pillow at them.

Steve was so into Estrella that he didn't notice the pillow in time to block it. The stiff cushion clobbered Steve in the head, narrowly missing Estrella's face. His hand snapped up to catch the pillow, and he tossed it back to the couch where Buck had snatched it from.

"I'm sorry, Lucy," Steve murmured.

Estrella turned her face against Steve to hide her embarrassment. Neither one of them had meant to act so affectionate in front of Lucy. Steve had been relaxed when she'd first sat down with him, but of course he was aroused now. Estrella shifted to take the pressure off of her hip.

An unmistakable ripping sound came from the vicinity of her bottom.

"Oh!" Estrella exclaimed.

She hopped up from Steve's lap and turned her back side away from Bucky and Lucy. Her hand felt of her jeans. There was a rip in the tough denim going down her bottom right alongside one of her back pockets. She looked to Steve, her eyes wide.

"I guess we'll have to go back to Texas for some shopping. Wait til I tell Colin you've outgrown your britches again," Steve teased her.

"We can shop, but Colin doesn't need to hear about my pants," Estrella hissed at him.

She grabbed his hand and Steve got up to cover Estrella's backside for modesty's sake. He followed her to the door so she could hurry across to Natasha's place and change into different pants.

Before she could open the door, Steve checked the angle of view from the hallway to the couch. When he determined that Lucy couldn't see them, he shifted Estrella against the wall and carefully pressed against her.
"You make me feel so good," he murmured at her ear, and then they were kissing.

The kiss was particularly nice. Estrella's fingers clasped his scalp and rubbed through his short hair while he held her hips in his hands. Steve moved to part her knees with his, but there was a knock at the door.

Steve made a disappointed sound as he pulled away from his girl. Estrella pouted at him and moved to answer the door.

Steve took the bags of food from the courier who was not Billy this time. He made small talk to the slightly dazzled new hire while Estrella hurried past the young guy and to the elevator. Once her exposed bottom was safely to Nat's place across the way, Steve thanked the courier and brought the food in to his kitchen.

Bucky helped his sister up from the couch and got her cane for her while Steve took plates and glasses from the cabinets. Estrella came back in one of her long skirts in time to pour drinks for them.

As soon as Lucy had her plate served, Steve realized that they had nowhere appropriate for her to sit and eat. The bar stools were too high for her to sit on and the new table hadn't been delivered yet. Even if it had been delivered, it would also be too high for Lucy to use.

He ran to his room again and got one of the lap-sized boards he used to set his sketchpads against. Lucy settled nicely onto the couch with Bucky to help her, and Steve and Estrella ate at the bar. Steve pulled Estrella's stool closer with a screech so that their legs could touch while they ate.

"Steven, there are pencil doodles all over this board. I don't want to get supper on your art supplies," Lucy told him.

"It's nothing, Lu. If food gets on it, I'll wipe it off or use the other side," Steve assured her.

"Are you ever going to finish art school, or is all this Avenging in your way?" Lucy asked him.

Steve took a drink and noticed that Estrella and Bucky also waited for his answer.

"There's been no time to go back to school since I woke from the ice. I haven't thought about finishing school. I'm sure my credits are expired," Steve told them.

"You should make the time and go if you want to. I know your job is important, but you should have a personal life outside of work," Estrella said.

Bucky nodded slightly while he chewed his food.

"I dunno guys. What would I do with an art degree? I don't have time for a studio on the side, even if anyone would hire me," Steve said.

He made an unenthused face and went back to eating.

"It's not about getting a job, dear. It's about doing something that pleases you," Lucy told him.

"You've got a lot of talent. You should do something with it. You can be more than a headknocker," Bucky agreed with his sister.

"I don't know," Steve said pensively.

"If you want it, you should make it happen. You have all the hours when everyone else is sleeping.
Working on your art skills would be better than spending your spare time on the internet," Estrella said.

She stared at him intently. She meant for him to get stuck in her gaze and to feel her desire for him to consider Lucy's idea of art school. Steve stared at her for several seconds, then shook his head and smiled.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Lucy was tired after supper. They could see it in her face and in her posture. It was only early evening, but she'd had more adventure than she'd bargained for.

"Boy!" she called to the ceiling.

"How may I be of service, Madam?" Jarvis answered her.

"Would you look in the phone book and find a hotel for me? Nothing too pricey, mind you," Lucy requested.

"Belay that, Jarvis," Steve said.

"Lu, you're stayin right here with us," Bucky insisted.

"The hell I am. You two young fellas don't need an old granny like me underfoot," Lucy told them.

She struggled to rise to her feet and grimaced when her tired legs and body refused to comply. Bucky got up and helped her.

"No, Lu. You hafta stay here, now that you've come all this way," Buck told her with a careful mix of insistence and mildness.

She was old, but she was still his sis. He knew if he got too demanding that she would balk at being bossed just like she always had.

"Look at those two, Bub. I don't wanna get in the way of anything. That's not why I came here," Lucy grumbled while she made her way to the hall bathroom.

"I don't live here, Lucy. I'm across the elevator in a different suite. I'm going home for the night soon anyway. You should stay and visit with your brother," Estrella said.

She tried her eyes on Lucille and the woman stopped moving along with her cane. She was stuck in Estrella's will like a startled rabbit. Estrella didn't like the feeling of influencing her, so she looked away quickly.

"C'mon, Lu. I insist. We can't have you seen coming into the tower, then leaving after hours. The shops downstairs are closed now. If Hydra's watching, they'll figure out that you're with one of us. It's not safe. Buck can sleep on the couch, no problem," Steve insisted.

"Alright," Lucy finally conceded.

She went to the restroom and Bucky made sure that his room was once again available for a guest. He took Lucy's bag from by the door and brought it into his room. Steve and Estrella got busy putting away the small amount of leftover food and washing the dishes.

After the dishes were done Steve wanted some more time trying to find whatever it was that was so delicious about Estrella this evening. He lifted her to sit on the kitchen countertop and stepped
between her knees. Lucy was getting settled into Buck's room, so they didn't have to worry about being too affectionate in front of her.

Steve pushed his fingers into Estrella's hair and held her head while they kissed. She shut her eyes against the bright light in the kitchen. They didn't usually do a lot of kissing so she enjoyed having him close and exploring him so intimately. They both were soon lost in the sensations. She gripped at his shoulders and let him lead. It was warm, silky bliss.

"Get a room," Buck said to them dryly as he came into the kitchen to fill a glass with water.

"I'm not taking her into my room with Lucy here!" Steve turned away to whisper at his friend.

"Then go to her room," Buck suggested.

"We're not going to any room. I don't wanna..." Steve's words ended in a frustrated grimace, "I can't."

Buck looked at them, both a little flushed and breathless. He nodded his understanding. On his way out of the kitchen, he turned off the light. He brought the glass of water in to Lucy, then he closed her bedroom door for her. They heard him get a blanket and a pillow from the hall closet. The light in the living room went off. Steve stared at Estrella in the dark. His hands pulled her hips closer to his until he rested against the sweet heat he wanted so badly.

"I should go," Estrella whispered near his cheek.

"You don't have to," Steve said.

He brushed the corner of his lips against her temple, then moved to her hair to enjoy more of whatever made her so irresistible tonight. His fingers spread to feel the curves of her hips. Estrella reveled in the heat and size of him, the feel of his skin against hers, the thrill he gave her just from being him and male and wonderful. She barely managed to keep her resolve before Steve drew her into another kiss.

"I need to go. I want to get something done before bed," she told him.

Steve rumbled a disappointed sound, but he backed away from her some. Reluctantly.

"We can't be all over each other every night. I'm still sore from last night," she reminded him as quietly as she could.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Is it too bad? I can go easier on you next time," Steve said.

The memories of what they'd done last night in his room seduced him into moving closer to her. She let him kiss her for a moment, then she pushed at his shoulders.

"Steve! Let me down," she hissed at him.

He abruptly realized that he was pushing himself into her space when she didn't want him. He stepped back and took his hands off of her to give her some room.

"Geez, I'm sorry, Eya. Let me walk you across," he said.

Estrella shrugged away from him and to the living room to get her laptop from the coffee table. She got the power cord by feeling along it and pulling it from the wall. She turned too short and stumbled over her boots where she'd left them beside the chair. Bucky laughed softly at her while
she gathered her things in the dark.

Steve took her free hand and led her to the door. Light from the foyer came into the suite as he opened the door to escort her out. She let him take a few steps with her outside, then she turned and stopped him with a hand in the center of his chest. He stopped at the feather-light press of her fingertips against his shirt.

"I'm real sorry, doll. I don't want to make you feel pressured," he apologized again.

"It's okay. I was having fun too. Now go back inside and look up art schools you could go to," Estrella told him.

"I don't know about that. It might not be a good idea," he said.

While Steve lifted an ever-impressive arm to rub his hand at the back of his neck, she watched his eyes shift from hers to somewhere down at her neck or shoulders. The want in his eyes was obvious. He was distracted and amorous, not at all the sharp man he usually was.

"Then go do whatever you want. I'm going to bed. I'll see you tomorrow sometime, not too early. I want to sleep in," she said.

"You're not gonna work all day, are ya? It'll be Saturday," he said.

"I'm going to bed. Goodnight," she said firmly.

She arched her feet up to kiss his lips briefly, and then she pushed away from him. She didn't look back as she walked through the open doors of the elevator. She was afraid that if she did, he'd find some reason to start in with her again. She let herself into Natasha's suite. It was dark inside and she didn't know or care right now if Nat was home. She went to her room.

With her door shut, she turned on her bedroom light. If she hurried before she got too sleepy, she could finish the search that Steve's return from work had interrupted. She hadn't made up her mind whether she'd prefer a guitar or a flute, or even a dulcimer. She would never be able to afford a piano and she had no space to put one. Her clothes felt restrictive against her skin so she stripped down to her underwear and put on a night shirt.

She'd just settled into her bed with her laptop when her phone sounded a text alert. Estrella blew out a pressurized breath and picked up her phone.

*Sweet dreams, my love. If I can sleep I'll try to dream of you*, Steve texted.

"Oooh!" Estrella growled in frustration.

He was making her crazy! She loved him so much and she longed for his touch just like he did hers, but she needed some time. He was smothering her! At the same time that her heart melted at his words, her mind seethed in frustration. Why couldn't he leave her alone when she wanted to learn about music?! Once again, she found her patience and texted him back.

*I love you too,* she texted back.

It wasn't an exact match for what he'd said, but it would do and she meant it.

He sent her a kiss emoticon and she nearly threw her phone.

"Leave me alone," she whispered.
She sent him back pink hearts. Then she set the phone on her night stand and turned to her laptop. She had a craving for bread and ice cream. Instead she took twice her normal amount of calcium supplement and hurried to click the internet tabs she’d left on her desktop.

Morning light and the needs of her body finally woke her. Estrella moved under the covers to stretch. The bed felt good but her stomach demanded food. She hurried to get out of the bed, then had to lunge to catch her laptop. She’d almost kicked it off the bed to the floor. Grumpiness crimped her brow. Time seemed to move strangely when she was half asleep, but she was sure that she remembered looking at the different kinds of guitars, so many guitars! She’d fallen asleep while trying to learn about them.

Her computer must have been pushed to the foot of the bed while she slept. She moved it safely to the dresser then hurried to the bathroom. Her stomach complained to her while she brushed her teeth.

In the kitchen she found bacon, which set her mouth to watering at the thought of it. While the bacon cooked in the skillet she poured a bowl of cereal. She wanted milk and meat and calories! There was yogurt in the refrigerator. It was Natasha's but she was so hungry. She would have to buy Nat more yogurt later. Estrella flipped bacon with a fork in one hand and ate either cereal or yogurt with her other hand. She didn't have her necklace on, but that didn't matter. No men could come into Natasha's place without Natasha home to give them permission.

The bacon finished cooking piece by piece and Estrella forked it out onto a napkin-covered plate. Bacon and cereal and yogurt. Her belly was happy. Orange juice! When she thought of its sweet tanginess, she had to have some. Her body needed it. She hurried to get a glass and pour some.

Once she'd nearly satisfied her hunger, her thoughts turned to music again. She promised herself that after doing the dishes she would get her laptop and sit in the sunshine under the windows. Last night she'd asked Steve to let her sleep in so maybe she had some time before he texted her. It was only a little past nine o'clock.

The door to the suite opened and Natasha came in. She smelled bacon and came to fish the crumbs out of the bottom of the skillet with the fork. A look at the dishes and empty containers around the kitchen made her smile.

"You've got a healthy appetite," she commented.

"You've got bruises! What have you been doing?" Estrella put down her spoon and went to look more closely at Natasha's skin.

Nat didn’t stand still for her inspection. She poured a glass of juice and then went to get cookies from the hall pantry. Estrella waited for her to come back to the kitchen. Then she pulled at Nat's snug, stretchy top to see if the dark marks extended down past her collarbones. They did. Natasha ate crunchy cookies and the woman’s eyes dared her to ask about the bruises.

"Who did you let beat on you? It better not have been Steve. He shouldn't be so rough with you," Estrella said.

"It wasn't Steve. Barnes doesn't know the meaning of 'practice.'" Natasha said.

"Yes, he does. He and Steve have practiced. I saw them. Thor has been with him in the training room too," Estrella said.

"Let me rephrase that. The Soldier doesn't know the meaning of 'practice,'" Natasha said, "but I'll
"You mean Bucky… while he was…?" Estrella fumbled for words.

She didn't know what to call him when he was creepy and quiet.

"You should be careful of startling him when he's quiet," Natasha warned.

"I know. He makes my skin crawl when he's like that and I stay away from him. Does Steve know he's dangerous?"

"He knows. It's not Barnes's fault. I'm manipulating his mind. We're doing our work in the early mornings. I won't let him go until he's more his usual self. You normally sleep late, so it shouldn't be a problem," Natasha said.

"Okaay," Estrella mouthed.

Natasha's bruises appeared to be fading already. She wondered how bad they'd been a half hour ago. Estrella hurried to get the breakfast dishes washed. Natasha ate yogurt after she was done with cookies. She passed Estrella the used spoon and put the empty food container in the trash bin. Estrella was in a hurry to get to her laptop, so she washed quickly.

Halfway through drying her hands, Estrella's phone alerted her to a text message. She sighed heavily and let her head bang against the door of an upper cabinet. Natasha passed her phone to her. When Estrella refused to take it, she set it on the countertop by her hand.

"I'm done for the day. Wanna try the pool? The water's warm," Steve texted.

"It's like he's psychic. How does he know when I'm about to sit down with my computer? Jarvis, are you sure you aren't helping him?" Estrella asked.

"If you are implying that the Captain has me spy on you and then inform him when you intend to use your computer, no Miss. I am not assisting him," Jarvis assured.

Natasha arched an eyebrow at her from across the small space of the kitchen.

"I want to learn about making music. Every time I try to find things on the internet, it's like Steve has an extra super power devoted to stopping me. I love him, but he's making me lose my mind! I have to move out. If I'm going to get anything done, I have to move out of here!" Estrella said.

She started to text Steve back but Natasha took her phone before she could hit send. She glanced at the message, then erased it while Estrella glared at her.

"That's not yours," Estrella pointed out.

Natasha handed her phone back to her.

"You're upset. Think before you respond to him. Have you told him your frustrations? How is he supposed to know how you feel if you don't tell him?" Natasha questioned her.

Estrella let out a breath and seemed to deflate from her stiffly agitated state.

"I don't want to hurt him. If I tell him to back off, he'll feel hurt. I know he will," Estrella said.

"Do you want to end this with Steve?" Natasha asked.
"No, I don't want to end it! I only want him to stop smothering me," she said.

"Then tell him that," Nat insisted.

"He already knows. He can't help himself. I can't help myself. This is what I am, Natasha. He knew last night that he was all over me too much, and I knew we were doing too much in front of Bucky's sister, but we couldn't stop. Restraint goes right out of our heads!" Estrella said with a fly-away hand gesture.

"Does he know that he's managed to interrupt you every time you get to your computer?"

"That part doesn't matter. It's selfish of me to want things, anyway. It doesn't matter because I have to move out of here. I'm going to-to be fertile, to ovulate, whatever you want to call it. I can't be around men when that happens. They lose their minds even worse than with my voice. I have to go before then. There's no reason to make Steve feel bad about a small thing like interrupting my study time when I have to go anyway," Estrella said forlornly.

"Where will you go? There's no place safer than the tower. We could put you in isolation until you're past your fertility," Nat offered.

"You don't understand how it is. Everything about me is manageable so far, but this isn't. The tower would be the worst place to be. Tony is curious. You know how he is. If he found out, and he would, Tony could override Jarvis to get to me. Then when Steve found out what Tony was doing to me, Steve would come. It would take Thor to break them apart, if Steve didn't kill Tony by then. The door would be open, and – and…" Estrella stopped talking in a sputter of anxiety.

She didn't want to say that Thor and Steve were so strong they would surely kill her, and if Bruce came… the idea was too horrible to think about. She covered her face to hide her fear from the strongest woman she knew.

"You have to go. Do you have a plan?" Natasha asked in a gentle tone she would not have expected of her.

"Wanda. She's my friend from the library. I already asked her if I could stay with her. She's expecting me. I have to go soon," Estrella fretted.

"You're not going anywhere until we get a security check on Wanda's place. Where does she live?" Nat demanded.

Estrella found the address in her phone and passed it to Natasha. She wondered what good it would do. Were they going to post guards outside Wanda's apartment? Then the guards would come in and get her. It was better to take her chances with normal men who weren't trained fighters. Her mind worried at the problem. She'd been desperately trying to distract herself with the idea of making music because there was nothing else she could do about the imminent problem of her fertility. She would go to Wanda's place, but Steve wouldn't like it.

While on the street, she'd been too emaciated to have fertility cycles. That had been part of her plan to stay safe. Before New York, she'd lived with a foster family in Utah. She'd tried to run away and hide in the desert when her cycle brought danger to her, but it hadn't always worked. She'd been in a juvenile detention center for running away the time before that. It was hopeless. She wished she was still skinny. It had been stupid of her to dream she could live like a normal person.

Estrella wrapped her arms around herself and leaned against the edge of the countertop so she wouldn't fall down. Her vision went dim and she couldn't get enough air. A strong arm went
around her and held her steady in a painful grip. The feeling of security helped her to calm down until she could see something other than gray and hear something other than her blood rushing in her ears. Natasha knew what to do, as always.

"Tony, we've got a problem. I need you to get a tech team to the address I'm going to send you. We need the place reinforced against civilian entry. It's Estrella. She needs isolation and she can't do it here. Talk to Bruce. He'll understand what she needs," Natasha said.

"We've got the best isolation facilities here. Why would we put her out-"

"No, Stark. It's not happening here. Get a team to this address," Natasha sent him the address, "and have the place reinforced. Get Bruce on this with you. Do it and do it now, or me and the girl are leaving without your help."

"I'm on it. What else do you need?" Tony asked.

Nat could tell from the distracted sound of his voice that he was working. Tony sent orders through Jarvis while giving her half his attention.

"I'm hungry," Estrella whispered.

"Food. Stock the place. She can't go out while this is happening," Nat said.

"While what is happening?" Tony asked.

"Talk to Bruce," Natasha said.

"I'm going to swim with Steve," Estrella interjected, and she texted a quick positive response to him.

"Are you sure? If you're having a problem, that might not be a good idea," Nat murmured aside to her.

"There's time. If I'm going away, then I want to be with him while I can," Estrella said.

"Stark, I'm going to meet with her friend Wanda. We don't want to surprise the woman with the tech team showing up unannounced. Estrella is going to the pool with Steve. I need you and Pepper to chaperone," Nat said in her same business-like tone.

"Chaperone? Me?" Tony laughed at the idiocy of the concept.

"No. Not you. You and Pepper. Pepper alone would be too obvious and you alone would be worse than useless. Get to the pool and be there in case she needs help. Stay out of the way if you're not needed. Try to act natural," Natasha said.

"Whose name was on this building? Did it say Romanoff in great big letters? If I'm not mistaken, I think it said…. Stark? Yeah, that's what it said. You know, you're being-"

"Tony," Natasha paused, "This isn't about us. It's for Steve."

The audio was silent for a long moment, then they heard a tightly blown out breath.


The comm went dead in Natasha's kitchen. The suite was quiet for another moment.
"I'm sorry," Estrella finally whispered.

"Don't be. Let's find a swimsuit. The one you brought back from vacation won't fit you," Nat said.

They went into her closet. Natasha chose something to wear for her because she couldn't focus on something as trivial as swimsuit selection. Estrella didn't complain much when she needed waxing again.

"When are you going to tell Steve that you're moving out?" Natasha wondered as they left the suite.

"When the weekend is over. With the way I feel, I should have until then. I want this time with him, if I can have it. Please tell Wanda that I'm sorry about the work at her apartment. I don't want to be so much trouble," Estrella said.

She tucked her towel tightly around under her arms. The borrowed bathing suit wasn't anything she could imagine letting Tony and Pepper see. Natasha thought it would be alright, so she trusted her judgement.

"Try not to worry so much about the future. Go and be with Steve," Nat advised.

Estrella nodded.

Jarvis directed her to the pool which was just below the residence levels. Estrella was in no hurry to get there even though she looked forward to seeing Steve. He was so perceptive. He would know something was wrong if she couldn't get her mind in the right place before he saw her. She needed the time of a slow walk to make everything alright in her head before she got to the pool.

This change in her life felt very real and frightening now that she'd told someone about her problem. Natasha going to oversee security at Wanda's place meant she couldn't disregard the approaching crisis anymore, no matter how much she'd tried to distract herself with learning about music. Estrella was terribly nervous about Steve finding out what she had to do. He wasn't going to like it. She knew he would argue with her so she didn't plan to tell him yet. It made her feel guilty to know she was going to upset him so much, but it had to be done. He would feel even worse if she stayed and he hurt her.

Steve was already there when she walked into the warm, humid atmosphere of the pool room. Her worry eased some because he was in the pool and couldn't immediately see her. The water rushed against him in the little section off to the side of the main pool and he swam hard against the artificial current. She was surprised to see that he wore his blue and white swim shorts, the ones he thought were too immodest to wear in public.

She lay on the cushioned lounger next to the pool edge. It was nice to watch Steve without being under his direct scrutiny. Estrella calmed at the feeling of merely being near him.

Since he was busy, she had time to look around. Very few places in Tony's tower were plain or utilitarian, and this wasn't one of them. The pool room was a beautiful design of ivory and honey-colored stone with stately columns and arches. Sunlight was reflected into the space along the upper walls and ceiling in a way that was ingenious and didn't require artificial lighting at this time of day. The pool's custom design, the placement of potted plants, and the classical statuary was lovely to see, but Steve was even more pleasing to look at.

Only when he finally turned his head aside to take a breath did she realize how long he had swum without breathing. He saw Estrella and smiled, but swam for a little longer. She was in no hurry for him to stop his exercise. She knew he needed it.
It was cold outside. The air in the pool room reminded her of the warmth of a beach day back home, but without the breeze. To one side of the long room there were loungers in the sunshine near the glass wall. She wanted to go there later. For now she was content to be wherever Steve wanted to be.

He swam harder for a moment, then he relaxed and let the current push him back against the side of the pool alcove. Steve twisted a little and tapped a control panel on the pool deck. The water current stopped gushing and the low hum of the pump motor went quiet. He looked irresistibly sensual with water running over his skin. His smile and the awareness in his eyes didn't make her bashful. It was far too late to pretend they didn't want each other.

"I didn't know how much you like water until vacation. I should have told you about the pool. The water's warm. Wanna get in?" he asked.

Estrella shook her head. She had her necklace on but she didn't feel like speaking.

Last night Steve had been more handsy than usual and reluctant to let her go to her room when the evening was over. How would he be today? She'd come here to spend time with him, but the intensity of their attraction made it hard to be politely civil. There was a harder degree of definition to his muscles under his skin. He wasn't as relaxed as his casual demeanor pretended to be. The tension between them was sweet but she felt cautious.

Steve set his hands on the rounded stone coping at the edge of the pool and smoothly lifted himself from the water. He took a moment to let the worst of the drips run down him, then he sat on her lounger near her hip. Estrella rolled from her belly onto her side so they could talk.

"I've noticed that you get quiet and shy like this when I've scared you. I'm sorry. I was way outta line last night. I know we shouldn't have carried on like that in front of Lucy. Can you give me a chance to do better today?" Steve asked sincerely.

Estrella nodded.

"It was probably my fault so of course I forgive you," she told him.

Steve lifted his hand from the cushion to run a finger along the top edge of the towel she wore. His fingertip skimmed across the skin of her upper chest. His touch was both comforting and exciting and she marveled that the two seemingly opposite feelings didn't cancel each other out. He looked wet and sharp and handsome. She wanted more of his touch, but she didn't want a repeat of last night's loss of control. She didn't fear him. It didn't feel good when she had to stop him and tell him 'no.' She wanted to be able to tell him 'yes.'

"I could have done better. I need to keep working on my resistance to your charms, doll. It was weak of me to give in to it so easily. I think I messed up because I was upset from work. I know that I can't always save everyone, but it bothers me sometimes. When you sat with me it felt so good that I didn't want to let go of you. You always take my mind off my troubles," he said.

It was a plausible explanation, so she didn't try to make him think any differently. She knew it wasn't all his fault no matter what his work day had been like.

"Come on, Eya. If you don't want to swim, what do you want to do?" Steve urged her.

Estrella rolled to her feet. Instead of telling him what she wanted, she walked around the curve of the pool toward the windows. Knowing he was at her back gave her a shiver. She wanted to lie in the sunshine and feel it on her skin. Steve anticipated that. He pulled another lounger over beside
the one she wanted to lie on. His eyes squinted against the bright light that bathed them but he lay back and smiled at her.

She was reluctant to show him what she was wearing beneath the towel. A stern look served to warn him as she unwrapped herself. Steve tried very hard to stay lighthearted and unaffected when her towel came off. He made only a slight sound while she laid the towel over the lounger and stretched out on her belly in the sunlight.

When she found a nice position with the warmth on her skin, she turned to look at Steve. He was clearly having some difficulty paying attention to her face.

"Nat's trying to kill me, isn't she?" he groaned.

"I don't think it's that. She wanted me to look nice for you," she explained.

"You look real nice, babe," he said.

Nat had hurried her to get dressed for the pool before Estrella could notice how the plain beige swimsuit was very much more showy than it looked when it was neatly folded. Somehow the natural color of the fabric emphasized the rich, warm tone of her skin. The string between her buttocks and across the top of them felt more like decoration than coverage. Her hair down below had to lose more real estate to fit neatly under the small front of the bottoms. At least Steve couldn't see how the material clung to her every contour while she lay on her belly. All she had were thin strings in the back. She'd thought her white floral swimsuit had a daring top. This top covered her more like an afterthought at decency than any real effort at it. The little triangles didn't conceal much more than the important parts. She wasn't bold enough to lie on her back.

Steve looked like he needed help. His swim shorts were having difficulty being adequate coverage for him, too.

"Was there a nude picture of me in your sketchbook? The one that Lucy almost saw?" Estrella asked with a tease in her eyes.

"Uh, yeah," Steve managed to look at her face, "I didn't expect her to turn the pages."

"Anyone who sees your work is going to want to see more. Of course she turned the pages," she said.

Talking seemed to help Steve to focus on something other than her body.

"Did you get your computer and look for art schools after I left?" she asked him.

"Some," was all he said.

"You're not helping me. We're trying to have a conversation, Steve. One word answers make me do all the work," she fussed.

"How do you look toned when you don't train?" he asked her abruptly.

"You should know because it's like you. It comes with being me. I look like this when I'm healthy. I still have fat on me, so it's not like I compare with you or Bucky or Natasha. I'm not completely done recovering yet, but I will be soon," she told him.

"Then God have mercy on me. Eya, you're beautiful. You call it fat, but it's in all the right places. You're what a lady is supposed to look like," Steve said with understated feeling.
"You're not telling me anything I don't know. I said I would have to wear a trench coat when I was done if I didn't want to be stared at all the time, and look at you," she pointed out.

"That's not fair. What do you expect, sweetheart? You've been changing fast and I haven't seen you naked in-"

"A little over twenty-four hours," Estrella said.

Steve opened his mouth to argue, then realized she was right. He grumbled something plaintive against Natasha and Estrella again had mercy on him. The man could hardly keep his wits long enough to form sentences. She could see it in the dilation of his pupils and the way he breathed with his lips slightly parted. It was worrisome because they'd barely touched at all.

"I want to make music Steve, and you keep stopping me," she accused gently.

"What?" he asked.

"You heard me. I keep having sounds in my head and I want to put them together and make songs. I can sing and I want an instrument to play. I have to learn how to write the sounds I think of down on paper, you know, with the lines and the symbols. Every time I try to learn, you text me and then I can't," she told him.

"Music? I know you like to sing and dance, but creating is a lot more involved. Honey, that's great! If you want to write songs, then you should," Steve enthused.

"I'm trying, but you always stop me. It's like a joke. If I can finish my work and then I start to get on the internet to learn, you text me or you call me every time. When I'm done for the day with you, I'm always so tired that I fall asleep and I don't get to search for any information. It's so frustrating!" she said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," he defended himself.

Not only was she telling him of her frustrations like Natasha said she should, Steve was also distracted from looking at her body. He looked to her eyes and her face in turn, as they had learned to do because of the effect of her gaze.

"I know you didn't know, so I'm telling you now. I want you to give me some time in the mornings before work and some time before bed to look up what I need to know. And I need to work regular hours for Tony or I won't be able to afford an instrument," she said.

"I've got plenty and I'd love to help you," he offered.

"No! You're not listening. It's like I'm your kept woman. I'm your little pet, always ready for you to call and for you to spend money on. I owe you everything, and I shouldn't want anything more than I already have. I don't want your money. I want to do this on my own," she insisted.

Steve lay there with a subtle tension around his eyes. Dammit, she'd gone too far and she was hurting him. Estrella reached across from her lounger to his and rested her hand on his arm.

"Don't try to solve this for me. I know what I want. I need you to give me the time to do it," she implored.

"So you want time from nine to five to work for Stark Industries. You want to be left alone before work so you can study music. Then after work you want more time. Where do I fit in to all of this?" Steve asked.
His face was getting flushed and he sat up. Estrella didn't feel that she could continue to lie passively on her belly for this. She rolled to her side then sat up. Steve gawked at her front, then his eyes shifted down so he could frown at his hands in his lap.

"You fit in in the evenings, before and during supper," she said.

"That's all? That's when you've got me scheduled?" he challenged her.

"Steve, you have a whole job, a whole life outside of me. You have Bucky and Sam and now Colin and you train all the time, and then you go away for work. Do you expect me to sit in this tower and only wait for you and think of you, all the time? Can't I have something for me, other than you? Can I be Estrella if Steve isn't there? Is there even an Estrella without Steve? You saved me so I could live exclusively for you. You fixed me, and now you own me. Is that the way it is?" she raised her voice.

Steve looked stricken. Her tirade had hit him hard and she was sorry. She didn't want to be so mean, but he wouldn't understand how important it was to her if she limited herself to kind and sweet tones. He always argued because he was usually right. He wasn't this time, and she could see that he knew it.

She could also see that he hated the moment when he couldn't control his eyes. He glanced at her chest, then rubbed his face with his hands in frustration. Yes, she knew her nipples were pokey. She was angry, dammit!

"Rrrrgh. You're making me crazy!" Steve said, muffled behind his hands.

Estrella laughed, sharp and harsh.

"That's exactly what I say about you!" she told him.

She sprang up from her lounger and strode to the pool. It was gorgeous with midnight blue tiles and sparkling clear water, but she barely noticed. She needed away from him until they cooled down or she would hurt him more. Estrella dove into the water.

Steve stood up and paced the length of the empty space next to the glass.

Panic. That's what he felt. And rejection. It made him want to crawl out of his skin and find a less painful reality to inhabit. This was alien.

He'd suffered loss before, so many times. Hardship and sacrifice was like breathing to him and he knew how to push through it. His ma's passing had been a long-suffering gradual thing. Tuberculosis wasn't a quick way to die. He was mature enough to realize now that he hadn't really lost Peggy. He'd lost the idea of Peggy, the chance of Peggy. He'd hardly known her, and she'd gone on to find a happy and full life without him. There hadn't been time to get to know Peggy personally, other than as a hope for the future.

Estrella had come to feel deep and necessary to him, like breathing or food. The thought of her setting him aside and putting limits on their time was frightening. Nothing had felt sharp and urgent like this… except the day he'd thought Bucky had died. That was admittedly more awful.

The thought calmed him some. Nobody was dead, here. All she was asking for was time. Some space. Something niggled at him about those words. Didn't it mean something when your girl started talking to you about time and space? Fresh panic spurred him and he paced faster.

He hadn't considered that he could lose Estrella. Was that what was happening? Did she want no
more time with him at all? That's what it would feel like if she rationed him down to meager minutes around supper time. Didn't she feel the need, the craving to be together like he did? It was easy to understand that she should be her own person. He'd thought she was. Was he really demanding so much of her time? It felt to him like he didn't see enough of her.

Her desire for him to look into art school appeared to have an ulterior motive now. She wanted him busy so he wouldn't bother her as much. Was that it? Steve shook his head. He knew he was being ridiculous because he was upset. Estrella wasn't under-handed like that.

As he breathed and walked it off, Steve began to get control over his emotions. He pushed away the embarrassing rush of feelings and tried good old logic.

She said she wanted time for writing music. Alright. He liked to have time for art when he could, so that was fair.

She said she felt like he owned her. He could understand that too, though it wasn't the same from his perspective. She had trust issues from living on the street and people treating her rough. She'd told him that anytime someone had given her anything, there'd been expectations attached to it. He'd helped her because it was the right thing to do and it made him happy to do so, to see her health improve. And he liked her. It was nothing more than that, but her life experience might make her think differently. He never thought that she owed him.

She'd asked if she existed outside of him. That part still stung, but he could see what she meant if he thought about it. He didn't need much sleep. His job was demanding. Other people depended on him. There were a lot of hours in his day and he had to spread himself around over all his obligations. Estrella's life was more limited. Since she was healing, she slept a lot. More even than a normal person would sleep. She didn't have as much time and he was taking up a much larger portion of her available time than she was of his. Alright, that made sense now. His raw hurt over that eased but didn't go away entirely.

Steve had to admit, at least to himself, that part of the reason his emotions ran so high around her was because she turned him on. When he was aroused as he was now it wasn't so easy to think clearly and he wanted to feel instead. The luxury of letting his desire show around a dame was new, and he'd let himself run too far with it. He had to do better than this.

He knew he had the ability to control himself even when emotion wanted to intrude. He couldn't get through battle knowing he was going to lose men and allow himself to be emotional about it. Anyone with combat leadership experience knew that. The mission objective had to come first, and then you could allow yourself to feel when the action was well and truly over with, all the bodies patched up, counted and tagged, all the equipment readied for the next round.

He didn't feel better after his auto-pep talk. He felt less. Messy emotions were properly squared away. He thought he understood the nature of their problem. It wasn't so bad as to seem catastrophic now. Steve ambled over to the poolside to wait for Estrella like she had waited for him to finish his swimming.

He squatted down and allowed himself to admire her nimble strength and grace in the water. She wasn't just beautiful. She moved like the water was her element. Being only human and mostly unenhanced, she tired. When she stopped making laps in the pool she floated upright and looked to him.

Steve gave her a guarded smile and she swam over. He tipped his head down to look at her when she put her hands on the poolside next to his feet. She didn't say anything, but he could see the apology on her face. He felt it in her eyes. She hadn't meant to hurt him. She was frustrated. Like
he was.

Steve put down a hand and was about to slide into the pool with her. The door into the pool room had a slight squeak to it which alerted him to Pepper and Tony coming to join them. *Now?* Tony had never come to the pool when he was here. Maybe Pepper had something to do with it. She smiled at him and twiddled her slim fingers in a wave across the room.

Steve noted that Tony looked strange in swim shorts, even though they were Iron-man red and the color suited him. They never saw much bare skin on Tony, and Tony seemed to be thinking the same about him. Oddly, Stark smirked and shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe he'd been talked into something. Steve's suspicions stepped up a notch. Why were Tony and Pepper here? Something felt contrived but he wasn't sure what it was yet.

Estrella distracted him. He looked down at her again. Her wet fingers pressed between his toes on the edge of the pool, like holding hands. Her dark hair was slicked down to her head and the ends of it waved freely in the water. With her brief top, she looked nude beneath the water. Steve thought that a necklace of shells would make her look more like a mermaid than she already did.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Me too. I'll back off and give you more time. I want you to be able to do things that make you happy," Steve told her.

"Come try to relax with me. No more fighting," she promised him.

Steve slid into the water and pushed away from the side of the pool. After their upset, they naturally sought the comfort of touch. Estrella came to him. He turned her in his arms and hugged her loosely. He walked them along the bottom of the shallow part of the pool just to feel the water moving around them. Their mostly bare skin touching along her back and his front helped to soothe the upset of moments ago. Steve let out a slow breath and Estrella hummed a contented tone. He kissed her wet cheek.

"You never told me you had music in your head," he said.

"I didn't used to. All I had before was headaches," she told him.

Steve wanted her to tell him everything about her dreams regarding music. He waited for her to say more. Most of his attention was on Estrella, but another part went to Pepper and Tony. The other couple set their towels on a lounger then got into the pool at the end nearest the hot tub and the waterfall. Why were they here? The question nagged at him, but Estrella distracted him.

It was difficult to imagine that the lush young woman in his arms had been so thin a few months ago. Now she felt soft and curvy. He wanted to pull her tight against him- No. He'd resolved that he was going to try harder to resist her.

Steve kept her loosely held, seated on his bent knees while they talked.

"When it's quiet and I'm alone, little bits of melody string themselves together in my head. What they sound like depends on my mood. It's not like I think I would be famous or anything, but I want to write them down and play them so I can hear them. I think I was too busy in my head when I was younger. Did you ever want to stop and draw something during the war, when you were busy?" she asked him.

"Nah. People depended on me to be focused at the job. I noticed things while we were marching. The light through the mist in the trees, or a pastoral scene, or a bombed-out town. I remember it all.
I could still draw it, but I'd rather think about what's going on now. So, yeah, if you were busy or on the run and scared, there's not a lot of mental space for creativity," Steve commiserated.

"Who told you I was on the run and scared?" Estrella turned her face aside to look at him sharply.

"Nobody. I meant that I was on the run and scared," Steve said.

"Captain America, scared?" she asked incredulously.

"Pshhh," he made a face, "Some of the things I've been in, you'd have to be dead to not be scared. I can die, Eya. My team can die. Fear serves a purpose sometimes. It can keep you alive."

Estrella turned in his arms to hug him. Steve guided her so that she was side-saddle on his lap, rather than astride him. He happily accepted her hug. She saw that Tony and Pepper had joined them in the pool, and she whispered in his ear.

"Be careful when things are scary. I don't want to lose you," she said.

It felt great to know that he had someone who would be at home when the job was done. He was sorry that she might have reason to worry, or that he might hurt her someday if he didn't come back, but they'd both known the risks from before the beginning of their relationship. All he could do was hold her a little closer right now and hope that God would bless them with a long time together.

"I'll always want to come home to you, doll. I keep you in the back of my mind when I'm working. I've got someone waiting for me to get back to. I don't want to disappoint," he murmured near her ear.

She hugged him tighter, and he rubbed her bare back with his hands. So good. He could take this memory with him when he was working and things were miserable. She smelled fantastic, unhindered by any chemical smell from the saltwater pool. He still couldn't tell what her subtle scent was, but it was sweet and compelling and exclusively Estrella. It was so faint that other guys probably couldn't smell it. He was glad for that. He wouldn't want to share even that much of her.

Steve cracked his eyelids to see if they were being watched. They were, but it was only Tony. From the things Stark had said and done, there's no way that a little kissing was going to offend him. Pepper was turned away from them. Steve took a chance to do what he'd wanted to do last night before Buck threw a couch cushion at him.

Estrella gasped as the heat of Steve's mouth closed on the side of her neck. His teeth brushed her skin, but it was more a coincidence of his lips and tongue working against her skin than any intent to bite her. She wasn't aware that she moaned a little, though she definitely heard the pleased sound that Steve made low in his throat. It was all good until his arms pulled her to him too tightly. Steve's back bumped into the poolside, but neither of them noticed.

"Mmm, Eya, what are you wearing? Is it perfume?" he asked quietly, then went back to kissing and tasting her neck. He tipped her head the other way and tried her other side. The wonderful scent and buttery vanilla-musk-girl flavor was there too.

"Steve, let me go" she gasped, and she pushed at his chest with her hands.

His erection was bruising her hip again. He carried on, and his mouthing was starting to worry her as much as his tight grip. It was like he was hungry and she didn't want to be bitten.

"Steve!" she tried again and shoved at him hard.
He lifted his head from her neck and let her loose from his arms suddenly. It made her sad to see the blown-wide state of his pupils and the dumb-founded look on his face. He was somewhere lost in the base area of his mind, but he quickly shook himself out of it when she pushed away. His expression changed to one of self-disgust. He looked at his hands and licked his lips. She could almost see his mind working, then he looked to her. She'd backed away from him a little more than arm's length.

"I did it again. Why?! It's not your eyes. It's not your voice. Eya, what's that smell, that taste on you?" he asked.

"Don't feel bad. I told you, it's my fault," she said.

"I don't think so. I'm the one holding you too hard and not letting go when you want me to. Why do you put up with me? Eya, what's that smell? Is it something Natasha gave you? If you stop wearing it, maybe I can-"

"It's not perfume. It's me," she said.

She glided close to him again, but not so close that she was in his face. He tried to back away, but he couldn't. Instead, he stood taller to get his nose farther away from her. He crossed his arms so he wouldn't thoughtlessly reach for her. He looked cautious and determined. She smiled at his attempt at self-control, then nervousness took her smile away. She had to tell him something or he would wonder and jump to conclusions.

"You were there when Bruce told you about my fertility cycle," she reminded him.

He nodded once, briefly.

"I'll be fertile soon. I didn't think pheromones had a smell, but maybe that's what it is. Or maybe it's because you're you and your senses are sharper. It's not supposed to happen so soon. I don't feel feverish and anxious yet, so you shouldn't smell anything, even if you have an enhanced nose. I have a taste?" she wondered.

Her hand rubbed at the side of her neck where he'd been so interested in her. She sniffed at her hand, but couldn't smell anything.

Again, Steve nodded. Estrella wasn't sure she liked the look on his face. He was playing at being the stern and responsible Captain, but there were sly ideas slinking around in his head, trying to take hold. He shook his head and snorted out a breath. Estrella stepped back from him a little.

"So this is going to get worse. You have other symptoms when you're fertile, and none of the rest of it is happening yet?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You'll need to be somewhere safe," Steve said.

She nodded again.

Steve turned and waded through the water toward Tony and Pepper. Estrella followed along behind him. She knew what he was going to do and it made her nervous.

Tony and Pepper looked to Steve when he came close. Estrella would have stood beside him to make warning eyes at Tony, but Steve urged her behind him. She frowned at him, then stepped aside where Tony could see her face. Of course Stark looked at her chest. She wasn't surprised.
She sank down in the water until it came up to her shoulders and Tony's gaze shifted to Steve again.

"Do we have a comfortable isolation room that we can set up with negative air pressure, vented to the outside? Something more like a suite than a hospital room?" Steve asked Tony.

Estrella made pleading faces to Tony, if he would only look. Pepper tried to unobtrusively poke Tony in the side to get his attention for her.

"We're already on it. Romanoff called me a little while ago, and everything is being set up. Bruce knows what's needed, so he's in charge," Tony said.

"That's... that's great. Thanks," Steve stammered in surprise.

Estrella felt a rush of relief at Tony's careful wording, but this wasn't over with yet.

"You talked to Nat?" Steve turned to ask her.

Estrella nodded, her eyes wide. There were so many ways this could go wrong. Steve looked mildly betrayed, as if he thought he should have been the first to know. He turned back to Tony briefly.

"I really appreciate your help, Tony. It means a lot," Steve said.

Tony waved a hand at him and smiled the slightest bit. Estrella was relieved that the man didn't look to her at all. He probably knew Steve very well, and he knew that any hint of a knowing look toward her would give away that there was more going on than he'd said. The butterflies in Estrella's belly fluttered more intensely.

She got the feeling that she was doing wrong if Tony had to tell a lie of omission for her. There was little choice. She would face Steve's reaction about her moving out when she had to, and not before. If he knew now, he'd use up the rest of their time trying to convince her otherwise. Her decision couldn't be changed, so there was no point in letting him argue.

Steve put back a hand and she took it. They went to the other part of the pool so they could have privacy. Estrella couldn't completely put her nerves away before he looked at her again, but maybe that wasn't so bad.

"Why does everyone else know about this and I'm the last to find out?" he asked.

"Not everyone knows. Natasha knows and Bruce knows. Tony doesn't know everything, only the technical stuff he needs to make things ready. I need their help for this, Steve. Did you want me to keep it a secret? I have to get ready. Don't forget, you're the one who wanted me to eat. This is what happens when I eat," she pointed out.

"It's a mistake to think you can tell Tony only part of something. If you give him anything at all, he'll end up with all of it," Steve warned her.

"Okay," Estrella said.

She took his hand and he let her pull him toward deeper water. He was being stubborn now, and she could see it in the set of his jaw. He refused to look anywhere but her face. She stroked backwards away from him when she couldn't touch the pool bottom anymore. When he looked grumpy the best thing for him was to expend his energy doing something, so it was a good thing to get him treading water with her.
"I won't be able to see you for ten days," Steve said.

"I know. We'll get through it," Estrella said.

"We can talk on the phone, right? I can hear your voice, with your necklace on," he said hopefully.

"For part of it," she promised.

"Why only part of it?" he asked.

"I don't want to tell you everything. It's not easy for me. It will be best if we don't talk when I'm…" she didn't know how to explain things to him, and didn't really want to.

"Then we can text," he offered.

"Steve! You can leave me alone for a few days! I could study in peace," she complained.

"Yeah. Sorry," he said.

He sounded like a mopey little boy, but that was an improvement over his hurt feelings earlier. She could see that he was reluctant to be away from her for even a few days. He was thinking, thinking, thinking. It made her worry.

Before she could react, he reached out a hand and gently tugged her over and onto him. He rolled onto his back like an otter with her on top. Steve stroked hard at the water and had them to the poolside in a few seconds. He put his back to it and held her close.

"What-?" Estrella asked.

"I can practice. I can resist you. If I learned to resist your other charms, I can get through this too. How long do I have to get used to the changes? How long before you'll need to go to isolation? If I try hard enough, I can visit you," he said.

"A few days at most, but no. This is different, Steve. It's not meant to be resisted. I know you're strong, but you're still a man. You'd be even more dangerous to me than a regular man. Don't fight me on this, papi. I have to go away. If it wasn't for what Bruce and Natasha and Tony are setting up for me, I would need you to bring me out to the desert or the wilderness somewhere," she insisted.

Steve scowled.

"That's no good. There could be hikers. Or other dangers. Let me try, Eya. I can beat this," he insisted.

Again, he was too close. He put an arm around her lower back and nuzzled at the side of her neck. She sighed. Stubborn! Fine. She would let him do, and he would see for himself. She enjoyed the feel of his shoulders under her hands, then her hands moved to his jaw and his hair so she could caress him while he indulged his silly attempt at resistance. He didn't understand. He would.

Estrella yipped a little in surprise when his teeth grazed her, but it didn't hurt. The potential was scary but she wanted to trust him. She was tired of cautioning him and resisting him when it was Steve who didn't want to go too far, not her. His strong, hard body felt amazing around her and she gave herself over to enjoying him.

She tried to shift her legs around him, but his hand beside her knee kept her to one side. His
propriety seemed odd because he was certainly enjoying kissing, sucking, licking at her neck like a practiced lover. She arched her neck to allow him to do all that he would.

He grunted at her and his hand slid to get a grip on her bare bottom. She took the opportunity to twist her hips and align with him. The hardness of him felt better against her belly than against the bone of her hip.

His teeth nipped at her and that was too much. She pulled her neck away and butted his jaw with her forehead. He seemed to understand that.

"Sorry," he grumbled.

He may have been sorry, but it didn't stop him. Both his hands went to her bottom, and he started nudging at her belly. His movement made her want to move with him. It was like a dance, but not the kind done to music or on a dancefloor. It felt right to writhe with him, to cling to his shoulders. She loved it when he let go of all the things that troubled his mind and went to this deeper place with her.

"Mmm. Ya," he said.

"Mm-hmm," she encouraged him.

She knew he wasn't agreeing to anything, but letting slip a shortened form of her name. She'd heard him say it that way in the shower in New Orleans, when she'd been on her knees for him. The thought of him inside her awoke the desire to feel that fullness again. Even if it hurt. Having him so close at her belly was a terrible tease, now that she knew he could give her more than just the pain.

Steve's nose and lips were near her ear, but he didn't put his mouth on her again. She opened her eyes to look at him. Poor man, he was almost gone but still fighting. His eyes were hot with lust but he wasn't dumb with it. Not yet. She knew that she probably looked the same.

"If you really want to torture yourself, there's another place you can kiss me. I'm sure the smell, the taste is stronger there," she taunted him.

Steve made a rough sound, then he moved. The motion was a blur, and she found herself on the stone tiles beside the pool. He laid her down carefully though his hands shook as he pulled them away. A gentle swat with his hand opened her knees and he hovered, poised to get her bikini bottom out of the way. His large hand splayed over her belly, then he ran one finger along the cleft he could see through the clinging fabric.

Estrella whimpered and tilted her hips for him. She wanted to be touched there. His fingertips skimmed aside to curl around the delicate string at her hip. She shivered at having him above her, but not from fear. She wanted, but things weren't right. Steve's naturally decent inhibitions were almost gone. It was clear that if he was aware of Pepper and Tony in the room at all, he didn't care.

"Not here," Estrella whispered to him.

She put out a hand to touch his face, to guide his eyes to hers. He began to look where she wanted him to, but a sound, a movement beyond their heads drew Steve's attention.

"Time to cool it, big guy. I don't think public sex is a normal offering from you, even in home field," Tony said.

Estrella craned her head to see Tony standing, dripping a few feet away. He looked down at her
and his smile was odd from being upside down in her perspective. Steve's body tensed above her. His hand left the string at her hip to brace against the floor, ready to launch himself at Tony.

"Don't look at me. He doesn't like it," Estrella hissed to Tony.

"Now I can see why Romanoff wanted me to chaperone this pool party. I thought she was joking at the time. Not joking. C'mon, Steve. Be a mensch and step away from the girl," Tony said.

Nobody liked the warning sound that Steve made in his throat, but then Pepper was there. She slipped nimbly past Tony and knelt by Steve. She dripped on Estrella's shoulder, but Estrella was glad she'd come.

Cool, soothing hands clasped Steve's face and he turned to see Pep right there, almost nose to nose with him. Pepper wasn't a threat. Tony belonged to her. She wouldn't let Tony near his girl. She could stop him, and she would.

"Steven. Honey, you have to go. This isn't like you," Pepper urged him sweetly.

"I'm s-"

"No. Don't you apologize! I told you this would happen, but you didn't believe me, so I let you do it. Now you go away and think about it," Estrella told him.

Steve respectfully slipped away from Pepper's hand. He pulled Estrella up and walked behind her until they were at their loungers and her discarded towel. He wrapped her in it and kissed her briskly on the forehead.

His shoulders were stiff as he strode away from them toward the exit of the pool room.

"Don't feel bad, but maybe you could learn to believe me when I warn you," she called after him.

Pepper stood between her and Tony and they watched Steve stalk out of the room. They all knew that he was angry at himself, not at them.

Pepper fanned herself with her hand, then laughed softly after the door closed behind Steve.

"Shh, he can probably still hear you. I don't want him to think you're laughing at him," Estrella told her.

Pepper smiled and covered her lips with her fingertips, as if to remind herself not to say anything until Steve was farther away. Tony wasn't smiling.

"Meters," he said.

"One hundred twenty-two. The Captain is inside the elevator and going up. He should no longer be able to hear you," Jarvis answered.

"Are you trying to get me killed? Steve hates me, and he barely had that, whatever it was, on a leash," Tony said.

He waved his hand at the floor where he'd first intervened to stop Steve from stripping her on the pool deck.
Estrella shook her head.

"He doesn't hate you, Tony. He respects you. I know he does. Natasha knows it, or she wouldn't have asked you to come here. Thank you," she said.

She looked to both Tony and Pepper.

Pepper still smiled faintly.

"He's very different with you," she commented.

Estrella nodded.

"You had me lie to him. He thinks you're staying in the tower. When are you going to tell him that you're moving?" Tony asked pointedly.

"Probably Sunday night. I'll have to go by then, if not sooner. It depends if he's stubborn and keeps trying to prove me wrong, or if he admits that he's human and stays far enough away from me until then," Estrella murmured to herself.

She felt bad for Steve. He was likely being very harsh with himself right now. People always expected him to not be able to do things, and he nearly always could prove them wrong and do the impossible. Not this time. He had to learn that some of the things she said, she meant.

Tony took a small step toward her. Estrella turned to frown at him. Pepper put her hand on his shoulder and tugged him a step back again.

"It's going to be even less fun working with him after you go," Tony grumbled.

"I'm sorry. You saw how he was. I can't stay," Estrella said sadly.

Tony waved a hand at her. He'd seen. He understood.

"Things may be difficult now, but you guys are going to have so much fun later," Pepper smiled kindly at her.

Estrella bit her lip. She suppressed an embarrassing sound at the memory of their bodies moving together. It had felt so perfect. So right. She really wanted to have fun now, but it wasn't time.

Pepper walked her back to Natasha's suite. It was very kind of her to do so, but Estrella didn't like the implication that they couldn't trust Steve to leave her alone if he found her in the hallways.

"I don't want you and Tony to think he's bad. Steve wouldn't hurt me. He can't rape me because I want him," Estrella pointed out to her.

"I saw that. What shocked me was the way he acted. I expected more nobility and restraint," Pepper said.

"You didn't see how he was fighting it. He tried so hard. Any other man wouldn't have been such a gentleman, but then no other man would be able to smell me yet. What you expect is the Captain. That was Steve," Estrella told her.

They stopped in front of Natasha's door.

Only Pepper could look so stately in a damp swimsuit cover-up.
"He's only starting to let us see Steve. You've seen him all along, haven't you?" Pepper asked.

"That's who he was when I met him," Estrella explained.

Pepper smiled at her and walked away.

She entered to find Natasha sprawled on the couch in front of a documentary about the history of ancient Russia. She asked how the visit with Wanda went and got a positive-sounding grunt. Estrella showered and got into bedtime clothes. It wasn't even noon yet. Nat didn't comment when she settled on the couch with the entire tub of cherry cordial ice cream. They wiled away the rest of the day wordlessly in front of the television. After Russia was a crazy-haired science guy who wanted to convince everyone that the Egyptian pyramids were bases for ancient aliens. Estrella laughed at the guy's earnest enthusiasm, and she was relieved that it momentarily took her mind off of her concern for how Steve must be feeling.

Later, just after sunset, she couldn't stand it anymore and she had to text him.

_I don't expect you to be perfect, you know. Only you do that. I love you how you are. Are you still mad at yourself?_ she asked.

_I'm fine_, he replied a moment later.

"Oooh, he's feeling sassy. That's better than depressed," Estrella said.

"Steve doesn't get depressed. He gets angry or he gets determined, usually both," Natasha said.

Estrella was tired of people deciding who Steve was supposed to be. Maybe Natasha was right about what he showed on the outside, but she knew he was a lot more complex internally.

She went to the kitchen. Then she went to her room with a re-heated plate of roasted chicken breast. Natasha raised an eyebrow at her and the plate, but then Estrella closed her door. She looked at her laptop and decided not to use it.

She washed her hands when she was done eating chicken and she called her Aunt Rita's house. The phone rang and rang. She remembered when she was a kid Tia Rita's house didn't have caller ID or anything fancy. The only phone was in the hallway between the living room and the kitchen. She almost hung up, but then a gruff voice answered.

"Bueno?"

"Tio! Hola. Is Tia Rita home?"

"Si, Eya. Como estas?" Alberto asked.

"I'm okay, thank you," she said.

It made her feel nice that Uncle Alberto had asked how she was doing. She heard him yell across the small house for her aunt and it brought tears to her eyes. She missed her family, now that she'd seen them again.

"Niña! Why are you calling me? Is something the matter?" Rita came on the line with a flurry of concern.

Estrella chuckled. It was so good to hear their voices.

"Nothing is the matter," she paused, "nothing is a _big_ matter. I miss you. I could use a hug."
"I wish I could send you one. Is that man making you sad?" she asked.

"Yes, but it's not his fault. It's me. It's the way I am," she admitted.

"You don't make excuses for him! You are the way you are, and if he's not good for you, then you leave him. Understand?" Rita told her.

"He's good. He wants to marry me and I'm not ready to get married," Estrella tried to explain.

Internally, she was already cringing because she knew what was coming.

"Why don't you want to get married? You're twenty-three. You're not getting any younger, you know. Frannie was already married by then. I was already married at twenty-three, and so was your mami. If he's good, and if you like him, and I know you do because you blushed and hid your face when you were talking about him, then you should marry him. You said he's not gay, and that he's nice to you, so why, Eya? You and Jesse make me pull out my hair!"

Estrella held her breath tightly. Her ears popped from the pressure, and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. She could almost feel Rita's warm hug through the phone but she didn't want to laugh.

"Okay, I'll think about it. Maybe I'll tell him yes next month. Not that he really asked yet, but he's said that he wants to marry me," she offered to mollify her aunt.

"Oh, he just said it, did he, like he snaps his fingers and expects you to do it?" Rita was off on another suspicion.

"No! I told him I wasn't ready for that, and he said he was, and that he wanted me," Estrella insisted.

"Maybe he's trying to get in your pants. Are you sure he means married, or is he only trying to get you to have sex with him?" Rita asked skeptically.

"I want to have sex with him! He wants to wait 'til we're married! He's so old-fashioned, Tia. Quit trying to make him sound bad. You met him. He's nice," she said.

"Oh. Then you should marry him," Rita stated again, as if that solved everything and Estrella didn't have to worry about it anymore.

Estrella sighed.

"You're not telling me everything," Rita said in a softer tone.

"I know. It's about the family things, and I know you don't want to hear that," Estrella said.

"If you need help, niña, I'll help you. Jesse was right about that, and I'm sorry. I don't like those things, but I don't want you to be alone and so far away with no one to help you," Rita conceded.

"Thank you," Estrella said, and her voice cracked with emotion.

It was no small thing, what Rita offered. All her life, Rita had refused to acknowledge that anything was unusual about their family. The fact that her aunt was unbending for her was important.

"I'll call you from my cell phone," Rita said, and she hung up.

Estrella held her phone in her lap and waited.
It rang a few moments later and she answered.

"Estrella? I'm in the car so nobody will hear. You can talk now," Rita said.

"You went outside to talk? At night?" Estrella asked.

"There's time zones. It's not dark here yet. You wanted to talk," Rita reminded.

"I forgot," Estrella said, and then she went quiet.

Now that Rita was ready to listen, she didn't know how to begin. Rita probably didn't want to hear these things, and she just now realized that it was likely that neither Rita nor Valeria nor her cousin Fran had long cycles and pheromones like she did. They couldn't. They lived in a house, in a neighborhood, and they went to school and to work and nobody bothered them. That made it all too much to say, because Rita would ask questions, and then she wouldn't want to hear the answers.

"Niña?" Rita prompted her.

"I'm different, tia. I think I can't be like you, or you would live differently than you do. I have to stay away from men for a few days and Steve is unhappy. He won't want me to go. He doesn't understand. I'm sad because he's sad and there's nothing we can do about it," Estrella explained.

"Sometimes life is sad. You know this. Steve looks like he's been sad before. It's not the first time for either of you, and it won't be the last. Do what you have to do. It won't be sad forever," Rita assured her.

Estrella sat up straighter. Rita was right. What she said was simple, but simple could be good and true.

"Thank you," Estrella nearly whispered.

"You can't be around men. You have a safe place to go?" Rita asked.

Estrella smiled.

"Yes. My friends are making a safe place for me. I'll be okay," she assured.

"You feel everything so much. That's good, but protect yourself," Rita advised.

"I'll try, but I really love him. I don't like to see him sad," Estrella said.

"Be strong. Do what's right," her aunt encouraged her.

"Okay. I will," Estrella said.

They hadn't really talked about family things, but she thought that her aunt understood what she wasn't saying. Rita urged her to call more often. It was cheeky to tell her elder that the phone worked both ways and that she could call too, but she did it anyway.

"You live with all those important people. I don't want to bother them," Rita said.

"I'm not an important person. The place we live is so big. You can call me anytime," Estrella assured her.

"I love you too," Estrella said in closing.

She called to talk to Valeria, who was in her room. The girl was very happy, with not a worry in the world. It was good to hear her teenage optimism and enthusiasm. She asked about the Avengers, and Estrella told her a few things that probably anyone could know. Val talked about her friends at school and Estrella listened. The girl had homework to do so they didn't talk for long.

Jesse was somewhere with loud music but he answered his phone anyway.

"Eya! Wait. I can't hear you. I have to go outside," he shouted into the phone.

She waited patiently. The call got less noisy as Jesse walked to wherever he went. It sounded like a big metal door slammed and then it was quiet except for Jesse's breath.

"Why are you breathing like that?" she asked with a grimace.

"I was dancing. Are you okay?" he said, still almost shouting.

"Yes. You don't have to yell," Estrella complained.


There were some sounds, and then she heard the distinct sound of a cigarette lighter.

"You smoke?" she asked him.

"Sometimes. Are you going to bitch at me?" Jesse asked.

"No. I should. If you're still smoking next year, I will," she promised him.

"That's two months from now," Jesse pointed out after a prolonged silence during which she could imagine him drawing on the cigarette and exhaling.

"Mm-hmm," Estrella agreed.

"You don't heal," she pointed out.

"Everybody heals," Jesse argued.

Estrella bit her lip and had to think of something different to say. She was too used to Steve. And now herself. Even Bucky and Natasha healed fast, and Thor and Bruce didn't really get hurt at all. Jesse seemed fragile to her, now that she thought of his lungs and smoking.

"Did you call me for something? Because if you did, I want to hear it. If you didn't, I'm going back in after I finish my smoke," Jesse told her.

She got up her courage. She knew she could talk to Jesse.

"Is there anything different about you? With sex, I mean?" she blurted out.

"You're getting like him. You go hard right from the start," Jesse said, then he laughed uneasily.

"I didn't. Not from the start. I let you get outside, and then I let you smoke. I need to know if it's just me. Answer the question," she grumped at him.

She knew she sounded ungrateful, but it was their way. They weren't going to be all soft and sweet
if the conversation was difficult. Until a few weeks ago, she never would have imagined asking Jesse anything like this at all.

"I can smell them," Jesse eventually said, "It's how I don't get anybody pregnant."

"You mean, you can smell the time of the month to not have sex with women?" Estrella wondered.

"Yeah. That's when I want them the most, but I don't want to pay child support. I'm not stupid, chica," he told her.

"Okay. That makes sense," she agreed ambiguously.

"You're going to call me off the dance floor for that?" Jesse asked flatly.

"You got to go outside for a smoke, too," she pointed out.

"I could smoke inside," he argued.

"You like to dance? You like music? Didn't I see a guitar in your room? Do you play it?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"You didn't used to play guitar," she said.

"I do now. I needed something for my head. Estrella, why did you call?" Jesse asked somewhat impatiently.

Estrella heard the metal door slam again, then a female voice.

"Not now. Look, I'm on the phone," Jesse said with his mouth away from his phone.

There was the indistinct female voice again, questioning.

"Leave me alone, bitch! This is family," Jesse told whoever it was.

"I hope that's not your girlfriend you talk to like that," Estrella said.

"I don't have a girlfriend. Just some girl I met tonight. Won't leave me alone," he grumbled, and she imagined that he was smoking again.

"You're an asshole," Estrella pointed out.

"Is that what you called to tell me?" Jesse asked sharply.

"What's wrong, Jess?" she asked softly.

"I lost my job, is what. I worked for that dick for seven years, and then a fresh load of Guatemalans shows up. He hired three of them and let me go. 'Times are tough, Jesse, I have to make ends meet,' Fucker!"

Estrella didn't know what to say about that. His cursing was harsher than she was used to anymore, but this was Jesse unvarnished. It was as familiar to her as Aunt Rita's concern and Val's chatter.

"I could try to find you a job around here," she offered tentatively.

"Thanks, but I don't want to live in bum-fucking New York. Too damn cold. I'll find something around here," Jesse said.
Estrella chuckled. Maybe he didn't like the cold, but she knew that he really didn't want to leave the family. He was protective of his mother and of Val. He always had been, no matter that he tried to act unconcerned.

"You could be a stripper, Jesse!" Estrella teased him with a smile in her voice.

Jesse laughed long and hard. Too hard.

"Jess?" she asked.

"If you tell ma, I'll fuckin'… think of something to torture you with," he said.

"Wait. You-? You're a stripper?" Estrella shrilled at him.

"Shit! Don't break my ear! Only on the weekends. It's what I'll get by on until I find another day job," he complained.

Estrella clapped her hand over her mouth and guffawed.

"Rita would kill you! No, she would skin you, and then she would kill you!" Estrella gasped.

"First she'd have to find out about it. To do that, she'd have to know someone who comes to the show. She won't find out unless you tell her," Jesse grumped.

"Okay," Estrella said.

She thought for a while, her mind going through all the possibilities she could think of in a short time.

"Do you use your eyes to get money? Grampi would be ashamed of you!" she told him.

"No. I tried that. They just stand there in a trance and forget to tip me," Jesse admitted.

"I didn't want to know this," Estrella fussed.

She rubbed her forehead then smoothed her hair back. Another thought occurred to her.

"You have sex with all the girls! I know you do," she accused.

"Not all of them, Eya. I don't bring any of it home except the money. It doesn't hurt Val, and I help with the bills," he pointed out.

Estrella was quiet while he finished his cigarette.

"I don't like it. You're better than that," she finally said.

"No, 'm not," Jess told her stubbornly.

"But you're good," she insisted.

"I can't be good and be a stripper?" Jess challenged her.

"Do you ever get paid for sex?" she asked him.

He didn't answer.

"That makes you a sex worker! You're going to get a disease," she warned him.
"I don't get diseases. I might die from cancer from the cigarettes, but I don't get venereal diseases. Do you?" he asked mildly.

"I've had them before, but I probably wouldn't get them now," she admitted.

Jesse made a curious sound.

"I was dying. My heart was messed up. Steve gave me some of his blood, and Tony did something with a machine and my heart healed. Now I heal faster everywhere. I probably have a better immune system. There's no way to know because how am I going to know if I don't get sick when I was supposed to?" she said.

"You're part super now? Are you strong, too?" he asked.

"No. I can run faster, but only a little. I never liked to run anyway, so that doesn't do me any good. I heal a little faster, but that's all. You can't tell anyone," she said.

"Add it to the pile of secrets," Jess said.

"Are you going to be alright?" Estrella finally asked him.

"Yeah. It's just a job," he said.

"A job you had for seven years," she pointed out.

He made a sound as if it was nothing.

"Don't tell him," Jesse said.

"Don't tell Steve about your weekend job?"

"He'd be disappointed," Jess said.

"It's on the pile of secrets," Estrella assured him, but then she had a thought.

"If you ever come here to visit, Tony will know everything about you. I don't think he would tell Steve directly because that wouldn't be as much fun for him, but he might make a joke," Estrella warned.

"Stark? How would he know unless I mention it?"

"They can find out anything, here. Why do you think the Avengers are so good at what they do? If you come to the tower they'll have to run a security check so you can get inside, and then Tony will know. I don't want to discourage you from coming, but you should know that," she said.

"Thanks. I gotta go," Jesse told her.

"Okay. I love you. Be careful and take care of yourself," she said.

"You too," he said, and then he was gone.

Estrella put her phone on her bedside table and got into bed. Talking to her family helped her feel better. It seemed Jesse had needed someone to talk to more than she did. She turned off the light and hoped she could get to sleep before she got too hungry again.

Her phone received a text and she picked it up.
Church at eleven? Sam's going too, Steve texted.

I want to go. Please come get me, she replied.

Sure thing, doll, he sent back to her.

Maybe Steve really was 'fine', but she didn't think so.

Note: Ch. 53 is already written, awaiting final edit. Gotta sleep. Thank you to my readers and especially those of you who review. I love to hear from you to know which parts were thought provoking for you. Please review.
Chapter 53

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a few months since my last confession," Steve began.

He took a fortifying breath. This was going to be his worst confession, ever. Hopefully.

"Go on," Father Miller encouraged him gently.

"I've really abused what you said I could do. I don't wanna confess it, because I don't think I'll stop 'till I'm married, and she doesn't want to get married yet. So, I have this plastic… silicone. Toy," Steve sputtered.

"I understand. Is there anything else?" the priest asked.

He knew from long experience that people tended to say what they thought of as their worst offenses either first to get them over with, or last out of dread. Steve didn't sound like he was finished yet. It was Steve's habit to be courageous, eager to be absolved and to try harder. He didn't normally need prompting yet he was hesitant today.

"I'm listening," he said kindly when Steve seemed to want to sit there silently.

"I paid a stripper and had a lap dance. It was like sex, except my shorts were on. After that, on a different day, I paid for three prostitutes and stayed with them all night in a hotel room. We had sex. A lot. This was when I was still only friends with my girl. She knows about it," Steve confessed.

Father Miller carefully hid his surprise and dismay. It wasn't Steve's fault that he had a touch of hero admiration. It seemed that Captain America was no more than a man. The Lord loved humble sinners and lost, bleating sheep best of all.

There was again a disturbing quietude on the other side of the screen. Father Miller was reluctant to prompt him to complete his confession. His hero admiration was falling, but his love and understanding for the person held steady. He tried merely clearing his throat to get Steve moving on this last, hardest bit.

"I killed two hundred and forty-seven men with my bare hands. I wasn't on the job," Steve said miserably.

Father Miller was momentarily stunned to silence. His hero admiration faltered entirely, then he set it aside completely to serve the man in front of him. There was probably something that Steve had left out of his bald statement. There had to be. He was certain that Steve was blaming himself for something that wasn't his fault, once again.

"What was the worser evil?" Father asked.

"They'd come to take my woman. To rape her. To kill her. I couldn't let that happen. I just couldn't," Steve said.

"That sounds farfetched, but I will trust that knowing you and the people you work with, it's possible," the priest said.

"Thank you, Father," Steve said with humble sincerity.
"Couldn't you have incarcerated these men? Stopped them in some other way, or found other crimes to have them removed for?" he asked.

"I couldn't let it happen like that. I killed many to save one, and it was my choice to do it like I did. I could have knocked them unconscious for law enforcement to pick up, but I was angry and afraid for my woman, so I chose to kill them to end the threat permanently," Steve admitted.

Father Miller cast around in his mind for precedent. There was none, really. There were home invasions and there was war, but this was nowhere in between. Two hundred forty-seven? It was excessive. Granted, the circumstances Steve managed to find himself in were rarely ordinary. He wanted to absolve Steve, but this was wading into deep waters. The poor man had already abused the partial dispensation he had been given for masturbation and moved on to greater sexual sins. It was possible that absolving his previous killings, while valid because they were in the line of duty, had caused him to think that killing was more acceptable. Father Miller held himself responsible for the state of his parishioner's souls if he had done anything to guide them wrongly, and he may have done so in this case.

"Father?" Steve asked.

Doubt plagued the priest. He knew that Steve was a good man. Or, he had been. Many good people went bad. Was that what this was? Had Steven gone beyond a lost sheep and become a wolf?

Father Miller pushed aside the screen that separated them. He had to know more than just the tone of Steve's voice. Steve knelt on the hard floor instead of on the cushioned kneeler. There was sorrow and regret in the man's eyes. That wasn't unusual. Many a criminal felt such things after they were caught and being held responsible for their acts.

What falsely repentant sinners didn't have was the stubbornness and conviction of character that Steve Rogers had.

"Steve, these are hard things. You try my ability to discern whether I should absolve you or to get protected advice from my superior. Let us proceed in this way...Given the same situation with the men you killed, would you act in exactly the same way again?" Father Miller asked.

"Yes," Steve said.

The look on his face was not one of indecision or moral ambiguity. It was one of righteous anger. Certainty.

"You call her 'your woman.' What does that mean?"

"I love her. I'm going to marry her or die trying," Steve said, once again absolutely certain.

"In your heart, in your mind, she isn't just any person, that you would weigh her life against that of others with simple mathematics," Father Miller asked for clarity.

Steve shook his head emphatically.

The old priest sighed. Things were clearer now.

"We are allowed to defend our loved ones, our family. Do you have any other sins to confess?" he asked.

"I'm guilty of lust and of fornication. No debate about that," Steve said.
"Do you intend to stop this fornication, or are you merely confessing it?" Father Miller felt compelled to ask.

"I want to want to stop it. That's where I am with it," Steve said.

"You don't want to stop fornicating, but you know that you should," the priest began.

"I'm sorry for offending the Lord and I want to have the will to stop it," Steve finished.

"That's a start. Try your hardest to do what you know is right and ask for strength from the Holy Spirit. Now make an act of contrition," his confessor told him.

Steve was humbled and joyful to have been absolved of his sins. He had to try harder and do better from now on. More than his strength alone was required. He had to be a better person in honor of the Lord's mercy and for Estrella.

He slipped into the pew beside Sam and Estrella. He had only enough time to do part of his assigned penance before the bell rang to signal the beginning of the mass. He stood beside his friend and his girl and sang from the book that Estrella held for him. He'd never heard the song but she seemed to know it even though it was an old one in Latin. He did the best he could.

Estrella was happy to see Steve hurry from the confessional with a happier set to his face. She knew he'd been feeling down since yesterday. He'd been polite and quiet with her on their way to church. He also stayed carefully away from her. He held her hand, but he wouldn't kiss her or go near her neck. She knew what he was doing and it might work.

She felt thrilled to open the hymnal and be able to follow along. The music was like reading a book and seeing the story happen. She didn't only see the symbols on the scale when she glanced briefly, she heard the sounds in her head. When she patted nervously at her copper butterfly choker, Steve smiled at her and nodded slightly. He reassured her that her voice was safe to sing as she wanted to in a church full of people.

The mass was lovely and communion filled her with reverence, but she was ashamed that the music was what set her alight. Though Steve and Sam both had good singing voices it was the lady's choir that she looked to with envy. They smiled while they sang. They made beautiful music together. One of the older ladies saw her looking and she smiled bigger until her already wrinkled face crinkled more. Estrella turned away and did her best to pay attention to the rest of mass instead of only the music.

She and Sam waited quietly when mass was over while Steve knelt to finish his penance. Steve shook the priest's hand when they met him outside the front of the church. The other parishioners had finished visiting with Father Miller and he turned his attention to Steve.

"You can call me if you need me," he told Steve.

"Thank you, Father."

The man patted Steve on the shoulder kindly as they turned to go to Sam's car.

Steve's mood was much improved on the way back to the tower. He sat in the back seat with her but he was quiet. He looked out his window as they made their way through traffic. His only connection to her seemed to be where their fingers twined together on his knee. She knew that he was probably more aware of her than he appeared to be.

Estrella thought he looked so handsome in his tailored church clothes. He looked young, strong,
and robustly healthy. She idly wondered, not for the first time, what their babies would look like. It was still hard to believe that a man like him was hers to love. She wanted to unbuckle and slide over closer to him, but that would be bad. He was doing so well today staying away from the influence of her pheromones. Somehow his quiet dignity and his lack of direct attention made her want to provoke him, to get his attention. So very handsome! She resisted the urge to wiggle or sigh in order to not disturb him. She longed for his touch. His fingers through hers seemed not enough.

She couldn't stop the rumble of her belly. It was lunchtime. Lately she was hungry all the time whether it was mealtime or not. Steve turned his head to glance down at her middle as if he could see her complaining belly through her skirt and her long sweater. He smiled a little.

"Come up to the common room for lunch with us?" Steve invited her.

Estrella nodded. She shouldn't. She had to pack her things for going to Wanda's place. She planned to tell him that she was leaving tonight and then go in the morning. Her anxiety was so strong about telling him and how he would react that she couldn't stand it. She couldn't upset him now when he was finally serene and at peace. She could pack later. It's not like she would be able to sleep tonight, anyway. She knew they both would be too upset after she told him for her to get much sleep.

Sam parked them in the garage under the tower.

"Y'all are acting weird. You're too quiet," he commented as they walked inside to the elevator.

"We're alright," Steve told him.

Estrella kept her face turned down to let her hair cover her neck. Steve stood tall, his face as far away from her as he could get with their hands clasped. Sam made a skeptical sound, but that was all.

Everyone was in the common room near the top of the tower except for Darcy and Bruce, Buck and Lucy. Lucy was leaving for home soon, so Bucky was at Steve's place spending what time he could with her. There was a large spread of food and Estrella headed straight for it.

"Is there any liver?" she asked on a whim.

Natasha looked at her with a hint of a smile at the corners of her eyes. Tony looked horrified. Clint studied her with his head cocked a little to the side.

"I could order some for you. I think there's a place on-" Pepper offered and started thumbing at her phone.

"No, it's alright. There's roast beef. Thank you, Pepper," Estrella said.

She filled a plate until even Thor looked at her askance.

"Your lady is of hearty appetite," he commented to Steve.

Steve could tell by his friend's expression that he insinuated something by the comment. He smiled and filled his plate. He knew that Estrella's body was clamoring to heal itself, but it was alright to let the guys speculate.

He wanted to stand closer to her or carry her plate for her, but he restrained himself. He'd learned his lesson. Her pheromones were powerful and not to be toyed with in a public social setting. That's
likely why Bruce wasn't here today.

He almost broke his resolve when it was time to find a place to sit. Estrella sat at the big table between Pepper and Natasha. His urge was to have her close, maybe sitting in his lap. His free hand fistled against the desire to be near her, to touch her some more. Instead, he settled across the table from her in the seat that Sam had saved for him.

"Thanks," he murmured to his friend.

Sam looked between him and Estrella with a brow slightly raised, but he nodded. Steve, Sam, and Estrella bowed their heads briefly, then they ate.

"Was that a glitch? Did cyborgs take your place while you were out, and you had to shift to 'pretend to eat like a human' mode?" Tony asked from the head of the table, mostly joking.

"It's prayer, Tony. Grace before meals, you know? Pass me the baked beans. I'll sit next to you all afternoon and prove I'm not a cyborg," Sam said smoothly.

Clint chuckled and Natasha almost smiled.

Estrella nodded gratefully to Sam but her mouth was too full to thank him. She noticed the way Steve's attention shifted to Tony. Tony noticed it too. Stark let the issue go instead of making the expected remarks about faith versus science. He turned to talk to Jane about something.

Estrella was very hungry. The food was good and plentiful. Not much distracted her from it until Steve went still over his plate halfway through the meal. She glanced at him with her fork almost to her mouth.

Steve's pupils were wider than usual. He watched her with his lips slightly parted. This time it was her who got caught in his eyes. He wanted her. No words were needed. Steve managed the willpower to blink his eyes a few times, then he turned his attention back to his food. He'd maintained decorum among their friends, but she knew.

She had to go. Soon. His sensitive nose had scented her over all the smells of the hot food between them. The Avengers crew talked and carried on around them but the mood of the afternoon became a haze of false, polite friendliness for Steve and Estrella. When everyone was done with lunch they moved apart, he to one side of the room and she to the other.

Steve played darts with Clint and Thor but his eyes didn't stay off of his girl for long. As a result, his score was far below that of his teammates. Estrella enjoyed listening to Jane and Pepper as much as she could about which places had the best holiday-themed mixed drinks on offer in the city, but she couldn't have repeated the conclusion the ladies came to about where they decided to go for drinks. Her eyes kept straying to Steve's shape as he moved among his friends and threw the darts. Her ears kept listening for his voice among the teasing he was getting from Clint and Thor. Unnoticed by either of them, Tony and Natasha observed.

Steve grunted in frustration as yet another dart went where he didn't want it to. Estrella sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. His sound was the tiniest bit like the one he made when he was working at Rosie, almost where he wanted to be, eager to finish. Her eyes opened slowly.

He stared at her from across the room. Thor jostled him and tried to hand him another dart, but Steve ignored him. Clint turned to look for what Steve was staring at and Estrella lowered her face quickly.

Natasha startled her by squeezing in next to her on the couch, semi-politely displacing Jane. Nat
tipped her head so that her shining red hair slid forward to obscure Steve's view of her mouth. She spoke quietly, barely a whisper. Estrella had to read her lips more than she could hear her.

"You should tell him. It's time to go," she said.

Estrella squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath, then she let it out. Steve was happy right now, enjoying his friends. She didn't want to make a scene in front of everyone.

"Tonight, after this," she agreed.

Natasha was going to say more, but then Steve was there. He sat on the other side of the arrangement of couches, between Pepper and Sam. Nat and Estrella watched him cautiously for a moment, and then Estrella turned to grumble at her friend.

"Look at him! Yes, I know you can hear me, papi. I could pinch you! He's still trying to prove something, Natasha. It was good between us this morning. I was good, he was good. Now this! Why, all of a sudden?" she asked, then she turned to challenge Steve with the question.

He folded his arms over his chest and smiled at her. He'd untucked his shirt tails and taken his church jacket off. The shirt tails were inadequate to conceal his condition, and if there was any doubt, the heated smirk on his face smashed it.

Estrella narrowed her eyes at his challenge. He was daring her to go sit with him in the empty space between him and Pepper. Pepper was distracted from her conversation with Jane. Sam shook his head with long-suffering tolerance. He gave Steve a flat look that Steve failed to notice.

"You're losing," Natasha taunted Steve quietly.

"Am I?" Steve's mouth moved.

Estrella shivered with want. She couldn't suppress the way her hips moved a little, but she did bite her lip against the whimper that tried to get out. Oh, God, he was so hot! She tried hard to remind herself why it wasn't a good idea to go ahead and be with Steve right now, but she couldn't remember any reasons.

Natasha poked at her until she was annoyed enough to stop staring at Steve. The woman texted furiously with her other hand.

"What?" Estrella asked her.

"There are easier ways to do this. You're being just as stubborn as he is," Nat said.

"I can't talk to him when he's like that!" Estrella fussed.

"He's not the only one who's 'like that'," Natasha made idle conversation while she texted.

Estrella dared to look at her boyfriend again. He was frowning at Natasha, his smile gone. She didn't like his knowing, displeased scowl. What? What did he know?

Bucky walked into the room. He made brief eye contact with Tony then headed past him and over to the couches.

"Heya, toots. Wanna come see the new table? They just delivered it," Buck offered.

Steve stood up abruptly.
"I didn't invite you, pal," Buck told him.

"Ya don't need to. It's my place," Steve said with a tilt of attitude to his head.

Everyone made an effort to carry on and ignore the tension between Steve and Bucky but it made the atmosphere in the room feel strained. Jane's laugh was nervous. Thor went to stand behind her to rest a comforting hand on her shoulder. He frowned at Steve.

Estrella got up and went with Bucky. Nat touched her fingers before she was away but it was more of a push for strength than anything. Estrella trembled as Steve fell in beside her and they followed Bucky to the elevator in the hallway.

Buck turned and stopped to confront him. The elevator doors stayed shut when they would have opened. Steve glanced to the ceiling briefly and a crimp of grumpiness lined his brow.

"You're not going with," Buck denied him.

His tone was halfway between challenge and empathy. It was easy to see that Steve was going to fight this. He didn't want to be parted from his girl. Estrella couldn't stand to see panic in his eyes behind his stubbornness. He thought she was leaving right now. His words proved it.

"If you have to go now, then don't pretend. Don't lock yourself away without telling me goodbye, sweetheart. I can behave for a little longer, I promise. Please," Steve pleaded quietly.

Estrella pushed against Bucky's restraining hand to reach and take Steve's. His eager grip was almost too painful.

"I'm not going to isolation now. I want to talk to you first. I'll say goodbye to you before I go, Steve. I want to see the new table before you eat on it for days without me," she told him.

She hated the way he looked for truth in her eyes, as if she could lie. As if she would. There was no way she could leave him right now. Steve looked to Bucky next.

"Don't play me, Buck," Steve warned.

"Alright. I was gonna, but look at her. She doesn't want to go now. You probably waited too long. We're a bunch of idiots. You're gonna make me carry her away kickin and screamin, aren't ya? Or am I supposed to let you stay together? Is that what should happen here, pal? You told me just last night that I was supposed to help you, remember?" Buck said.

Steve clenched his jaw, then he stood taller. He let go of Estrella's hand. Next, he shoved Bucky a half-step toward Estrella. Buck was surprised so it off-balanced him for a half-second.

"Put your face at her neck, Buck. Get a good smell of her. Go on. Do it," Steve ordered.

Bucky looked at Steve like he was crazy, but he bent to do it. Estrella tolerated him close to her for the instant it took for Buck to do as he was told.

"You smell like buttered rolls, girlie. Is that supposed to mean somethin?" Buck asked.

He looked to Steve for an explanation.

Steve studied Buck with a critical eye. Pulse normal. Pupils sharp and constricted. Buck was pale under his tan, not rosy with any kind of flush like Steve felt in his skin. He didn't lick his lips or try to get close to Estrella again for more of her scent. Steve checked his pants. Unaffected, as usual.
"I'm alright. I'll bring her around to show her the new furniture, then I'll send her to Nat's place where she's safe from you, ya dumb muck. She wants to talk to you, but you gotta knock it off with the heavy. Hell, you're makin Natalia nervous," Buck told him.

"I'm going to talk to you later tonight. I will," Estrella assured him.

She let him look into her eyes for a moment to see that she meant it.

Steve nodded and he stepped away from them and the elevator.

"Captain, please. I beg you," Jarvis implored for a little more distance.

J could read his tension, Steve remembered. The AI knew that he was at least considering making a rush for Estrella. It was in the tension of his thighs and the ever so slight twitch of his fingers that no one but maybe Buck could see. Buck trusted him more than Jarvis did.

"I'll need to get home soon. Please let me know when you're back at Nat's," Steve said.

Estrella nodded.

Steve turned and walked away, back toward his other friends in the common room. Bucky pushed Estrella into the elevator as soon as the door was open wide enough. When they were alone Bucky was a lot less casual than he'd been with Steve.

"You should go now," he said.

"I told him I wouldn't. You told him I wouldn't," she pointed out.

"He'd thank us for it later. This is past due. You're gonna make a mess of him, and he doesn't deserve it," Buck told her, low and cold.

"I can't leave him! Not now," Estrella cried.

Nerves and sadness finally got the best of her and she hugged herself while she sobbed. Buck glanced at her, then walked out of the elevator toward Steve's suite.

"You will. If it takes me and Thor, you will," Buck promised her.

They went inside. Estrella wiped at her tears while she walked to the new table and stools by the window. They looked great there just as she'd imagined them. She could hardly care at the moment. She hitched her hip up and slid onto a stool, the one she imagined Steve would use, closest to the window and facing the door. She drew a shuddering breath and smoothed her hand over the brand new table.

"Here. Write him something for later," Buck said.

He'd come out of Steve's room with a few sheets of paper and a pen. He tossed them down in front of her.

"Hurry it up. He needs to get home so he can let go before he pops," Buck said.

Estrella glared at him when Buck sat on the stool across from her. She didn't want to think about exactly what Bucky's words meant. She picked up the pen and stared at the blank paper.

"Go away. I can't write anything with you staring at me," she told him.
Bucky went. It took her several moments to think. She wanted to say so much, but most of it wouldn't be good for Steve to read until after she was gone. She limited herself to how she felt and a few words of love. She kissed the edge of the paper and wished she was wearing lipstick or at least some gloss. Impulse had her raise the paper toward her neck, but Buck's metal hand snapped out to grip her wrist.

"Don't you fuckin do that to him. It's gonna be bad enough with your scent lingering in here. Leave it," he growled.

"I'm sorry," Estrella whispered.

Buck wanted to have mercy on the girl, but he couldn't. She hadn't seen the way Steve was when he came back from the pool yesterday. Both of them needed harsh handling, at least until they were in different parts of the city. Steve was too smart, strong, and fast to take any chances with her safety or his sanity.

Estrella got up and Bucky took her across to Nat's place. He put her inside and hardened his heart against her tears.

"Get packed," he told her.

He pulled the door to the women's suite closed with a solid thump, then texted Natalia.

"Jarvis, don't let her out of there tonight unless the building's on fire. If Steve's the one who sets the fire, then wait for Thor to get her," he told the AI as he crossed back to Steve's place.

"Surely you jest," Jarvis replied.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Buck asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Jarvis said.

Estrella was packed and ready to go, except for a change of clothes for the morning. She cried quietly on her bed. She was going to tell him at ten o'clock. Twelve minutes. For twelve more minutes, she could imagine that he was just across the hall and that they were fine. Natasha had come home and made scary, glaring disappointed faces at her until she shut herself in her room. That was three hours ago.

Her phone rang. It was his tone. She sat up and took several quick breaths to hopefully keep the hiccups away, then she answered his call.

"I know you have to go to isolation, but I have an idea," Steve said immediately.

"Okay?" she asked.

"I don't wanna go visit Mrs. Stiles tomorrow morning by myself. It's the church ladies, and it'll feel awkward if it's just me. You can take a shower and give your neck a good scrub right before you meet me. Wear some of Nat's perfume. She has a French one that I hate. She knows which one. We won't travel together. Go with Buck to Mrs. Stiles' place and I'll meet you there. We stay apart, across the room, across the house, whatever. It's little old ladies. I'll behave. We get through that, and then you go," Steve explained.

"I don't know, Steve. Today started out good, but then we couldn't…anymore. Tomorrow will be worse," she said.
"That's what the stinky fragrance and the distance is for. I won't even look at you. I just want to be there with you, to hear your voice one more time before you have to go," Steve said in a calm, reasonable tone.

"You talk like I'm going away forever," she said.

"I've gotten used to having you around, Eya. You're a part of me. I know I'm not gonna feel right while we have to be apart," he said.

"You know this isn't a good idea. Something is going to happen and we might end up on the news. It could be bad. I'll go through anything with you, but you don't need that kind of publicity," she told him.

"Eya, there's more to the plan than that. I'm taking care of things on my end. I'll be good," Steve assured her.

She smiled.

"You've got a hot date with Rosie right before you go see the church ladies?" she teased.

"Whatever it takes, doll. I told Mrs. Stiles that I'd be there and I don't want to let her down. It's too late tonight, but I'm going to see you again before you take a break from me. If you want to see me, that is," he said.

"You know I want you. Too much. Did you read the letter I left for you?" she asked.

"I didn't know you wrote one. Buck must have it," Steve said.

"Save it for later," she told him.

They were quiet on the phone for a moment. She cherished the connection between them even though it was only electronic.

"Bucky was going to take me to isolation in the morning," she said.

"So we'll have him take you across town for the visit first, and then you can come back for isolation," Steve said.

"Okay," she agreed.

"Goodnight, sweetheart. Have a little faith. We'll get through this," Steve said, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

"Okay," she agreed again, "I'll see you in the morning. Then I go."

"Right," Steve said.

The silence on the line stretched out.

Estrella hicced a tortured breath and closed her throat against a sob.

"Don't cry. I can't stand it if you do," Steve croaked, low and just as tortured as she felt.

"Okay," she repeated tightly, desperately.

"I love you. Get some sleep," Steve said, then he ended the call.
She hated the perfume too. Bucky's face was scrunched up because of the stuff, and because they weren't where they were supposed to be. The two of them stood on the sidewalk in front of the steps up to Mrs. Stile's place. It was a nice neighborhood and the apartments were old brown brick.

Bucky kept giving her evil looks. She held her chin high and tried to ignore him. He'd tried to wrestle her back on course to Wanda's place when she went astray, but people took notice. A guy in a city utility uniform started to make a fuss at Buck's handling of her and Estrella was thankful for that one, brave soul. Bucky kicked at her heels from behind her like a petulant child while he followed her to where she was supposed to meet Steve.

The lace curtains moved aside in the window above them. Estrella smiled and waved at whoever was peeking at them. A moment later she could see Steve walking toward them on the sidewalk. It was a gray, foggy day so he wore a coat, but his head was high and his step was brisk. He smiled at her, wide and cheerful through the remaining distance of foot traffic between them. When he got close to where she and Buck waited he turned and went up the steps as if they weren't there waiting for him. No closeness, no greeting, no touching, as agreed.

"You're stupid as fuck, the both of you," Bucky grumbled behind her, but he shoved her shoulder to get her moving toward the steps.

"Be nice, Buck," Steve warned over his shoulder just as the door opened.

"Steve! So nice to see you! Come in! Oh, you've brought your young lady. We're so glad. Hello," the frail old lady said.

Bucky entered and shut the door behind them.

"This is James. He goes with me places," Steve explained.

Steve kept his word and didn't look at Estrella. He could feel her near him like water, and he was parched. Mrs. Stiles showed them to the front parlor, just steps away from the door. Inside were six other ladies, all with bright smiles for the guests.

He'd thought it was going to be horrible but it wasn't. They all greeted him as people tended to do, with pats and too-wide smiles, but then they cooed and exclaimed over Estrella. Steve breathed deep of the bad perfume she wore. The pheromones were there but they were like Valeria's voice with a bad modulator. All messed up, harsh enough to resist.

Mrs. Stiles invited Buck in to sit with them.

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'll be fine here," Buck said.

He took a place on a little chair he moved to the arch of the parlor door, where he could sit and watch Steve and the rest of the house.

"Oh, poor dear. You must be security. That's no reason you can't have coffee and cake. Marge!" Mrs. Stiles called into the kitchen.

Bucky accepted a little plate of fancy cake and a cup of coffee. Estrella looked at him and giggled. He looked like security. He was in a dark suit but without a tie. It was supposed to look business-casual. Bucky made it look menacing despite the cake and coffee.

Introductions were made all around. Estrella sat as far across the room as she could get from the big overstuffed chair they'd offered to Steve.
"Wouldn't you two rather sit on the loveseat?" Gladys offered to him.

She looked between Steve and Estrella.

"Thank you, but no. I'm really sweet on her and I tend to get lost in her company. I should stay where I am if I'm to get any visiting done," Steve said with a charming smile.

Estrella grinned at his honesty. The smile might be charming but it was real and the ladies could see that. A round of coos and chuckles went around and everyone settled as coffee was served. They were offered three kinds of cake. Estrella and Steve wanted some of each. It was very good cake, home-made and warm from the oven. The coffee was rich and simple.

She'd never been in a place like this. It wasn't like Tony's tower. This was old. The feel of wealth was understated and burnished with time. Trinkets were small and tastefully displayed, not too many around the room. There was a glossy, mahogany-red piano nearby. Estrella's fingers itched to reach out and touch it. The ladies were classically coifed and dressed, no gaudy colors or costume jewelry among them, even if their outfits were a little past the current fashion. Only one of them had faintly blue hair but she carried it so well that Estrella was certain the color was intentional.

"Steve, we know a secret about you," Marge said archly.

"It can't be a secret, Marge, it was on the world wide web!" Gladys said.

Estrella inwardly cringed, but she kept her smile on.

"Well, maybe so, but my grand-daughter showed me, and then I saw it for myself yesterday in church," Marge insisted.

"Ladies, you're killin me. What's the big secret?" Steve asked.

At that moment, something eased Estrella's nerves. She glanced to Bucky. He wasn't so sure, but it looked like maybe he agreed with her. Steve was going to be alright. He was too easy and glib to be faking it. He wasn't that good at deception.

"You were in a barbershop and Miss Estrella here recorded you singing in a quartet. You sing very well," Mrs. Stiles said.

"How do you know it was me? It was edited so that nobody would know," Estrella wondered.

"I know because he looked at you this morning the same way he looked in that little movie. My grand-daughter and all her friends were daydreaming if the Captain was in love with somebody from that song, but now we know," Marge said.

"You gotta do me a favor and keep it a secret. I fight dangerous people. If they knew about Estrella she would be in danger. Don't tell your grand-daughter," Steve said with quite a bit more seriousness.

The ladies went quiet and wide-eyed, but then they smiled again.

"Hurry with your cake then. We'll keep your secret, but we want to hear you sing! Do you sing too, Miss?" Theresa turned to ask her.

Estrella nodded.

"Are you sure? You're so shy!" they teased her gently.
Coffee and cake was set aside. Mrs. Stiles went to the book case by the piano to get down a sheaf of pages. Steve stood quickly to help her. Estrella sat back abruptly when he drew near. She clenched her hands in her skirt to keep from reaching out to touch him. His thighs looked wonderful in those pants. The firm curve of his rump was right there! Estrella bit down on a moan. Steve looked sharply to her for only an instant and she looked away. He went back to his chair after handing the music pages off to Gladys.

Estrella slowly let out her breath then smoothed the creases her damp palms had put in her crisp A-line skirt. She crossed her ankles one way, then the other. Steve was stronger than her this morning. Her fertility was coming on fast. She suspected that it was his fault. She'd never had a specific man to want, before.

They could sing, and she could even sing along with Steve. Then they would go. And she would go. Away.

Gladys moved to sit on the piano bench and she gently folded the cover back.

"Do you play, dear? You seemed to quite enjoy the music during mass yesterday," she said.

"I don't play, but I would like to," Estrella said.

"Then come and sit. Anyone who enjoys music so much should learn," Gladys said.

It was irresistible. She looked to Steve. He nodded at her with a softness in his eyes that had nothing to do with sex. He knew she wanted this. Estrella hurried to where Gladys patted the bench beside her.

The woman shuffled music around and settled on a page to put on the stand.

"I need it more for the words," she murmured.

She set her fingers to the keys and played a few notes.

"I bet you know this one, Steve," Theresa said.

Gladys played the opening, and Steve nodded. Estrella was mesmerized by the music. Everyone except Bucky and Mrs. Stiles sang. She'd never heard the old song, but the sheet music was right there in front of her. The rich sounds of the piano were so close that she could feel the vibrations against her skin.

Steve's voice was a constant base in the background under the lady's voices. She drifted into the music and didn't come out until several songs were done. Gladys looked aside to her and smiled at the dampness in her eyes.

"You know these old tunes, dear?" she asked.

Estrella shook her head and nodded toward the sheet music. She twiddled her hands, eager for more.

"If you don't play, then how do you know them? I wouldn't think any young people without a theater background would know these," Gladys said.

"I can read them. Please," Estrella encouraged as politely as she could.

She wanted more! If only her fingers could know the keys like Gladys did, so she could play it for
herself!

Gladys hurried them along to the next tune and Estrella joyfully sang, testing her range against the high, angelic notes. This one was an old church hymn, in English. The depth of Steve's clear voice countered her, with the ladies almost unnoticed in the middle. Estrella was seduced by the effect. It was like they were dancing together, she and him. Their tones met in the middle across octaves. She could imagine them touching, swaying, but she couldn't close her eyes or she wouldn't see the music. The song closed sweet and soft.

"Please do tell me you'll join the church choir, Missy. We need a voice like yours. Practice is Wednesday afternoons at three, then we meet at ten on Sunday for the mass. Will you?" Theresa implored.

Estrella tipped her face down and held her hands in her lap. It was rude to stay lost in the sounds, but she wanted to hold onto them for a little longer.

"She's committed to something for the next week and a half, but I think that's a great idea, for after. What do ya think, doll?" Steve encouraged her.

She couldn't say no. There was no money for this. No price. The ladies wanted her, and she wanted desperately to learn. Estrella nodded.

"Wait til we tell Father! He'll be so pleased," Gladys said, and she patted Estrella's knee, then took her hand briefly.

It was a blur after that. Estrella tried very hard to be attentive and polite. Steve brought their visit to a gracious close like a man long accustomed to making his escape from charity events. Bucky escorted her out onto the sidewalk behind Steve.

He kicked at her heels again, then tugged her hair once, hard.

She looked back at him and shook her head. She was going to talk to Steve. To tell him what was happening. He deserved to know the truth, difficult as it was.

Buck stalked along behind them all the way back to the tower. Estrella stopped into a fast food place to use the restroom. Steve noticed and waited for them outside. She scrubbed soapy wet napkins at her neck until her skin was red. She couldn't stand the powerful perfume for one more minute. When she thought it must surely be gone into the restroom trash bin, she scrubbed one more time, then washed her hands vigorously. Bucky glared at her some more when she came out, then they carried on as before to the tower. If men stared at her, she didn't pay attention. There was too much on her mind. On her heart.

Natasha joined them in the middle lobby. She and Bucky made a resolute barrier between Estrella and Steve in the elevator.

"I'll sting you, Steve. Don't think I won't," Nat warned.

"I'm counting on it," Steve replied.

Steve kept his face to the doors, his back to everyone until they got to his floor. They followed him to his suite. Bucky shoved the door wide open so that the handle punched into the wall and stayed there. Steve noticed but he didn't say anything about it. He sat on the stool she thought he'd take. He gestured her to take the one across.

Estrella was going to, despite the dire looks Natasha sent her. Then she smelled him on the current
of air coming from his bedroom. She could smell what he’d done with Rosie this morning. The lingering scent of him, tart and potent in the air stopped her. When she opened her eyes, Steve knew. He already had that look about him. The wanting. It answered in her with an emphatic yes.

Natasha moved toward her. Bucky toward Steve. They didn't try to be subtle about it.

"I've sent your things ahead," Nat murmured to her, "just go. You can text him later."

Estrella shook her head. She belatedly noted that Natasha was wearing her snug black combat uniform, bracelets and all. The sight of her lush curves on display in front of Steve made Estrella want to scratch her face.

"We can do this, Eya. Talk to me like you wanted to," Steve said.

His voice was low, nearly purring desire to her.

She shook her head again. This was too hard. She should go, like Natasha said. No. She was going to do it, and she was going to do it fast.

"I have to leave," she began.

"I know,"

"Please, please be quiet," she held up her hand and clenched her eyes closed.

"I'm going away. Not here. To Wanda's. And I'm going to stay there," Estrella rushed her words out.

There was the sound of thumping flesh. She looked to see Bucky across Steve's path, chest to chest. Steve struggled and shoved at Buck. His face was a grimace of effort and anguish.

"You mean you're moving. Out. You're leaving me, like you always said you would. Don't do that, Estrella. It's only ten days," he half pleaded, half growled.

Bucky shoved again, growled back in a different language, maybe German. Whatever he said got Steve's attention and he quit fighting so much. Bucky kept his feet braced, kept pressure on Steve, gripped his shoulders and leaned into him. Steve tried to shake him off, but Buck persisted.

"I'm not leaving you, papi. I'm going to live somewhere else, but we're still together," Estrella assured.

"This is because I bothered you too much. I- I take too much of your time. I can fix that. Don't go. I can't protect you out there," Steve said.

"You don't need to. Wanda's place is reinforced now and it has the negative air pressure thing for my room like you talked about. I'll go and do my work. Wanda will do the shopping for us. I'll stay home and work and cook. I don't need to go outside much," she told him.

The smell of him was getting to her where she stood by the kitchen bar behind his big chair. She took a step closer to where he struggled with Bucky so she could get out of the air current. Natasha pushed at her to keep her back. Steve fought and grappled with Buck more strenuously.

"You don't touch her! Get away from her," he said through his teeth.

"Steve! Stop it! Listen to me," Estrella pleaded.
She raised her hand to him, as if she could touch his face. Steve stilled. He stared at her over Bucky's shoulder and whined softly. His eyes were dark, his lips parted. He tipped his head aside and butted gently at Buck's. The contact was affectionate, a sly appeal to their friendship, an unfair plea against Bucky's loyalty.

"Lemme go, Buck. I can get loose, but I don't wanna hurt ya," he murmured.

Estrella lost what she was going to say with the scent of him in the air and the terrible intimacy between Steve and his friend. He spoke to her that way, with that tender tone. Why was he using it with Bucky?!

Bucky almost gave in. He set his forehead to Steve's shoulder in defeat. His hands eased from a fighting grip to a clasp on his shoulders. Natasha and Estrella saw it just before Buck felt it.

Steve threw a powerful shove and Bucky launched away. Natasha was there in a flicker to fill the gap. Estrella was stuck staring at Steve's grim, determined face as Natasha attacked him and Bucky somehow got behind him. Nat's bracelets pressed up under Steve's jaw, poised to do whatever it was that they did. Buck climbed him and got both of Steve's straining arms locked behind his back. Estrella heard an odd mechanical whirring sound, then Steve stood stiff and arched back, pinned on his feet by his friends.

"Take the girl and go. I can't hold him like this for long," Bucky said, straining.

Natasha turned to do as he said, but she was too late. Estrella rushed past her and right up to Steve. She put an arm around Estrella to take her away, but the girl got her arms around Steve first.

They kissed. Steve struggled to get his arms loose so he could hold her like she held him. He didn't try to step away from Buck. He didn't need to. His girl had come to him. Natasha didn't want to forcefully rip Estrella away. It could damage her, and she wasn't a combatant.

"Don't go," Steve said against her lips.

"You know I have to," Estrella pleaded tearfully.

"Then come back. Don't leave me," Steve urged her.

He moved to lip at her neck, but Estrella pulled away from that. Bucky jerked at Steve, made him clear his head for a second at least.

"You'll see me Sundays at church. Ask me and we'll go out," Estrella told him.

Steve shook his head.

"Wanna hold you. Wanna sleep with you," he promised.

Estrella hummed her agreement. She wanted to feel his lips on her again if she couldn't have his hands. She pressed up on her toes and offered her neck to him.

"Gotta end this before he-" Buck strained to say.

Estrella didn't care how, but she ended up on the floor with Steve partly over her. Bucky's weight was painful where it pinched her legs. Natasha was trying to cut her in half at the middle, but Steve had her too. He got a leg over her hip and his pinned arms didn't matter so much.

He was stronger than they were. Steve shoved to where he wanted to be and then he kissed her,
nipped her. He wasn't conscious of her scent, but he was drowning in it. Gonna...yeah. Like that.

She didn't care if it hurt. Steve rutted at her like they wanted and she clung tight to share the taste, the smell of them. Nobody was holding her arms, so she squeezed him and moved with him, reveling in the perfect rhythm he started. She bit at him as he did her. Their clothes were in the way, so they wanted to feel skin any way they could get it. They were loving bites, little kisses and explorations. She felt so hot, smothered until she had to pull away to breathe. Steve was sweaty and flushed against her, gone to the lure of her skin and her sex.

"Talia!" Buck barked.

There was pain, then strong arms ripped her out from under the weight of Bucky and Steve. Steve roared denial while Natasha hauled her away to the door. She didn't want to go! Just another minute with him!

She looked back through the open doorway as Natasha took her. Steve was fighting insensibly, thrashing with his legs and torso. Buck flipped and pinned him again.

"I've got ya, pal. Gonna keep her safe for you. Let- ah, dammit!" Bucky grumbled.

Estrella hurt to see Steve convulse under Bucky. He cried out harshly, then sobbed in defeat. Natasha put her in the elevator and the doors snapped shut.

"You're a selfish brat. Is that what you wanted?" she cursed at the younger woman.

Estrella cried quietly. Things weren't as she thought. They were worse. She ached for Steve. It felt wrenching and hollow to leave the tower, to leave him. The street outside was a jumble of noise before she was put into a car. Natasha hustled her across the seat, then jammed down a button to raise the privacy glass between them and the driver.

"We need him and you're fucking him up," Natasha bit out.

"I need him," Estrella whimpered.

Shakes seized her body, withdrawal from being so close to Steve when they wanted each other so badly. The thought was bitter that he was back in his suite with Bucky. Bucky, who didn't mind being very close to him. Bucky, who would do anything for him. Estrella ground her teeth and hot tears rolled down her face.

"Get yourself together. You can't walk up to Wanda's door looking like this. You look like a druggie," Nat instructed.

As minutes took them further away from the tower, Estrella's breathing started to ease. Steve was on her, his sweat, his kisses, his scent, but the air carried it away. The rear vents that Natasha turned on her replaced him with fresh diesel and gasoline smells from the street. She glared at the woman.

Her mind began to clear with each breath. Want still ached in her, but it was tolerable without him to keep it going. Estrella calmed and as she calmed, she tired. She felt let-down. Hopeless. Natasha guided her up to the fifth floor of her new building, stood her in front of the new steel door, and knocked.

Wanda made comforting sounds at her and took her in.
Back in the suite, Bucky huffed from exhaustion. The place was trashed. Walls were broken. Furniture had overturned, but not the new table. Steve sprawled in the middle of the shattered coffee table.


"Had to let her go. Didn't want to. Needed somebody to fight other than me," Steve said. 

"Anytime," Buck offered. 

"Turn on the fan, will ya?" Steve asked after a minute of waiting for his skin to cool. 

He was sticky, sweaty. 

"Fan's busted," Buck denied him. 

"I'm busted. We're busted," Steve rambled. 

His hand flopped down from gesturing and a little cloud of sheetrock dust puffed up from the floor. 

"You're not busted up. She still loves ya. Wants ya. Look at it this way, Stevie. Now that she's not underfoot anymore, you get to chase her. Court her proper. It could be fun," Buck said. 

Buck had a point. Steve dragged his overturned chair close enough to lean against it. He already missed her. She would miss him too. He knew they craved each other's touch. It was like a hunger for a person instead of a drug. 

His eyes unfocused and strategies flowed through his head. He was lost in thought and possibilities until Buck grunted. Steve glanced over. 

"You'll figure it out. But first you're gonna have to explain why you lost your sauce under your best pal. I think she saw that and she probably wasn't happy about it. Gonna have to explain," Buck smirked. 

"You know it wasn't you. It was her, all the way. I had her, and I almost-" 

"Almost nothin. I get it, but you're gonna have to explain it to her," Buck warned him. 

Steve's head cleared enough that he could look around and see the mess they'd made of the place. It didn't matter. He needed something to do, anyway. 

"Is she going to be safe over there, Buck?" Steve worried. 

"Yeah. I checked it out myself. Stark's upgrades are good. I'll take shift guarding her when she needs it. She'll be safer if you stay the hell away." 

"Want her," Steve complained one last time. 

His voice was still hoarse from yelling it. 


Note: Fun times ahead! You know Steve likes it best when he has to work for what he wants.
Chapter 54

Note: I thought all along that I was misrepresenting things and being lazy by calling the language that Buck and Nat speak Russian. I thought it should be properly called Cyrillic. After a little bit of reading, I found that the spoken language is properly called Russian, but that the alphabet the Russian language is written in is called Cyrillic. Other Slavic languages which are not Russian also use the Cyrillic alphabet. So much to learn! I know it's been a long time and I'm sorry for that. There's so much going on in the world right now. I probably read the news and worry too much. I should distract myself from distressing news with writing instead, right? This story is not over. I haven't given up. I think we're about 2/3 or ¾ done with it. Steve still has some development to do. Thank you for your patience. (Or if you're not patient, then I thank you for your tolerance) Oh, disclaimer... Any account of a real person in this story is for entertainment purposes only and is fictional, of course.

The Soldier hit the mat with a grunt but he didn't stay there. Natalia was too fast to risk lying around for. She was on him in an instant, giving him no mercy, no time to get his weight squared on his feet. Her body hammered him, elbows, knees, fists, all in the brief moment it took her to slither around him. He knew her intent was to use her momentum to pull him off his feet again. He'd taught her that. He bore the blows, then locked her in a hard grip as she moved past him. At the last moment when her weight had him almost on the mats again he pivoted on his heel and used her momentum to put her down instead. His left shoulder plowed into her sternum hard, all his weight behind it, and his hand gripped tight around her throat. She wasn't done, like many other opponents would have been. Her heart was painfully squashed between her sternum and her spine and she couldn't breathe, but she didn't give up. Her legs and body were powerful and she used them to try to lever him off of her. He used that against her too. The more she bucked and fought against him, the more pressure and weight ended up over her heart and throat. He admired and anticipated her moves, balancing his body above her and countering to keep his weight where he wanted it. She was serum enhanced almost like he was, but she had to breathe eventually.

"Stop," he told her.

Her eyes glittered up at him from a red face, oxygen deprivation beginning to make her sluggish. Natalia quit fighting him as he asked. He'd had enough of fighting for now. He wanted something different. She was delightfully sly, likely to strike at him after a call for peace, to make him fight some more for what he wanted. He took away the pressure from her chest and her throat and rolled to lie beside her. His open posture left him vulnerable, but she would correctly interpret that as refusal to fight anymore. He didn't want to fight and his standing orders were to do what he wanted.

"You use this as an opportunity to be lazy like a child," she accused him.

Her voice was rough and she coughed.

"Those are your instructions, boss lady. If you do not like this sort of situation with me then you should change the rules," he replied.

"The rules stand unchanged for now. I can see that you enjoy having your way," she smirked.

"Certainly. Am I not a poor, mistreated victim? Shouldn't I have what I want?" he asked.
"Steve would be confused. You speak like a Brooklyn boy, but in the wrong language," she said.

"You are good at this Natalia, so credit yourself with my progress. I no longer know who I am. Possibly I am all of them? Bucky Barnes has learned to speak Russian somewhere along the way. Or the Soldier has learned to appreciate American humor. Prepare me, Natalia. Whoever I am, I think I want to fuck you," he said.

"Jarvis," Nat said.

"Privacy protocol engaged," Jarvis automatically responded.

The lock bolts slid into place on the training room doors and the windows looking out to the hallway went opaque white.

"You're a lot of work, Barnes," Nat said.

She rolled to her side and propped her head on her hand. Her other hand worked at freeing him from his athletic shorts. It took quite a bit of time and manipulation to get him from a soft state to something usable.

"Why are you doing this? You tell me to do what I want, but I feel I might be forcing you to participate. This is not good for a man's conscience, if I chose to be the kind of man who has a conscience," he said.

Buck rolled onto his side to face her. He frowned at her. This didn't feel much different from a medical procedure. At least Kenya pretended to be turned on when he'd paid her to spend time with him. Natalia gave him no such performance. She worked him dutifully, patiently in her hand.

"And now you speak English with a Russian cadence. Your mind is as nimble as your body," she said, ignoring his plea to salve his guilt.

"Talia, stop," Buck told her.

He put down a hand to still her motions. He smirked at the momentary clash of wills over his dick. He'd said that he wanted to fuck, so she was determined to see that Bucky Barnes got what he wanted. She was plenty complex enough to punish him with guilt for daring to use his reconditioning to get sex. Fortunately, his left hand was strong enough to make her stop trying to tug at him.

"Is this what you want?" he asked her bluntly.

"You're the only one here I can have sex with without things getting complicated. So yes, this is what I want. We both get what we want, though a girl could wish it wasn't so difficult to get some enthusiasm out of you," Nat said.

Bucky let go of her wrist and she resumed trying to work him to hardness. It wasn't possible to tell if she was lying, but he suspected that the simple truth served her just as well at the moment as a lie would have.

"I'm telling you that I want to. Isn't that enthusiasm enough, all things considered?" he asked.

Natalia rolled her eyes and worked at him harder. Hell, even if he didn't have a chemical suppressing his sexual response, her bored tedium would have made it difficult for him to get it up. Buck knocked her hand away from him and moved atop her. He reached down to do things himself, his left hand bracing his weight above her shoulder. He took a moment to push her legs
open and tug her shorts aside. She looked slightly more satisfied.

"That's a little better," she commented.

"Yeah I know I'm a job and all, but your attitude isn't helping," he grumbled.

"It makes me angry," she said out of nowhere.

He liked the crimp of tension in her brow. She rarely showed real emotion, but that little crease was more genuine than any of her words.

"We were good together before they did this to you," she said.

"We were," Buck agreed.

He got rougher with himself. Pain sometimes spurred a reaction when gentleness wouldn't. It worked well enough for him to get inside. Natalia made a face, but she accommodated him.

"You were larger then," she commented.

"Geez, lady, you're gonna kill what little I've got," Buck grumbled.

Natasha surprised herself with a tomboyish gurgle of a laugh and he smiled briefly. More than all the mental manipulation and the anguish of the reconditioning therapy he was enduring, that strange, genuine laugh from Natasha seemed surreal. Her laughter was always carefully charming, sexy, or chilling. The odd outburst of awkward humor was like catching a glimpse of an exceedingly rare species of animal.

His mind began to second-guess the authenticity of her laugh, but then he made himself stop thinking of it. Too much thinking and he'd lose what progress he'd made toward being sexually functional. It felt moderately pleasant to be inside of her. As long as he kept moving, it should be enough to eventually get him off if she didn't nag him to death first.

"Take me with you," she said into the quiet.

"Where?" he asked.

The pace he set certainly wasn't athletic enough to keep him from talking in a normal tone. The sex wasn't very exciting, so he was far from out of breath.

"The next time you hit a Hydra base. I want to burn them for what they've done to you," Nat told him.

"We'll see. I was thinking about taking Steve along if I can get him to unbend a little and throw out the book," Buck said.

"Never. He'll want to keep casualties to a minimum," Nat told him.

Bucky sighed in resignation.

"He made me promise not to go it alone again," Buck grumbled.

Natalia felt warm and nice inside. He was a little harder now, so maybe she wouldn't stay disappointed through to the end. It pleased him that she rested a hand companionably on his arm while they talked. It was a small gesture, surely not a passionate one, but all the more genuine for its willingness.
"You're going to keep your word?" she asked.

"C'mon. It's Steve. He made me promise," Buck complained.

Nat smiled a little and nodded. She seemed to understand the compulsion of not disappointing Steve unless you really needed to. For that, he changed the angle of his hips for her. Nat laid her head back and closed her eyes. Her fingers tightened on his arm.

"I don't know what to wish for, Natalia. I could wish that it could be like it used to be for me and you. But then I wouldn't be able to help Steve with the girl. I got so much when I was a young punk and he didn't get any. Don't you think it's worth a miserable fuck now so he can finally have his turn?" Buck asked.

Things were feeling better. He was relieved that it was building this time, not fizzling out as it sometimes did. He doubled-down on his efforts before the hint of pleasure could slip away. Natalia did something and tightened around him. Yeah, that was good. He was less likely to lose it now.

"Barnes, shut up," Natalia said.

Finally, he felt fully hard. He used it to get her there. The only outward sign that she was coming was her slightly deeper breathing. At least he could feel her clenching around him, so he knew she'd made it. It took him another minute and a half of hard work to get himself there. The pleasure was mild and brief. It was better than nothing. He could admit to himself that it helped his ego to fight past what Hydra had done to him. Then he grunted in anger that he'd thought of Hydra during orgasm. Anger spurred him yet again. It wasn't much of an orgasm if he could think through it.

"Fuck!" he cursed.

Buck clasped his head in his hands and rolled off of her.

"Barely," Nat commented.

She snapped her underwear and the leg of her shorts back into place and got to her feet. Buck squared himself away and followed her over to the stack of unused mats. She got her towel and wiped at her clammy skin. He did the same, then frowned at her when she used her towel to wipe at the excess fluid on her thigh. She started to toss the towel in the laundry bin by the door on their way out, but he caught it.

"You know better," he said.

He shoved the soiled towel in his bag.

"I wasn't thinking," Nat told him.

Bucky looked harshly at her. Either she had been testing him to see if he was unfailingly vigilant about his DNA, or she was trying to get him to believe that she was a mere human, forgetful sometimes when her guard was down.

"You can shower with me at my place if it makes you feel more secure. Honestly, Barnes. I haven't had to worry about bio-security like you have. You know my ovaries are gone, so there's nothing for anyone to take from me. I was treating you like a regular guy. I'm sorry," she said.

Buck nodded. He went with her to her suite. She wasn't hurt that he didn't trust her with his semen. Personal security measures became a habit that was hard to break. She let him wash her in the shower so that he could know that everything went down the drain. It had been two hours since
he'd said the words that turned him into the Soldier and he was acting more like it now than he had in the training room. It felt like progress that she wasn't afraid of him, especially with her naked and as vulnerable as she would ever be with him. He was cold and efficient while he cleaned her, but he didn't feel threatening.

Something about his gorgeous hard body and that silver arm aroused her more than their utilitarian fumbling on the mats had. She hooked a slick, soapy leg over his hip and pushed him back against the shower tiles. The move was open and nearly off-balance. Vulnerable, almost clumsy. He wouldn't read it as an attack.

"I can't get hard again this soon," he warned her.

She took his right hand and guided his fingers to where she wanted them.

"That I can do," he agreed.

Buck wasn't excited about more sex, but it felt good to be wanted. Natalia was working hard to help him get his head straight and he was grateful for her efforts. The least he could do for her was a little thing like this. For whatever reason she'd tolerated crappy sex from him, it was probably the same reason he applied himself to the rote memory of how to get a girl off manually.

There was no love here, nor any real affection. Time and misery had beaten the possibility of that out of them. What they had was history and understanding. A common enemy, and a common friend. It was enough for now.

"No, Tony. I'm funding this," Steve argued down the length of the conference table.

They stared each other down. Steve wouldn't have minded splitting the cost of production of the PR short films they were going to make, but the way Tony was trying to insist, Steve knew his angle. If he let Tony put cash into this, Tony would insist on getting his way in some ways Steve was sure he would regret. Like revolvers at high noon, they stared each other down. Another comment from Tony, and Steve would have to fire back another refusal. Tony knew why Steve was insisting on paying for everything. Steve saw Tony's resentment at being thwarted from having his way. Steve held his ground and stared at his billionaire friend with silent tenacity.

Tony snapped his cushy leather chair upright and got up to fix himself another cup of coffee at the sideboard. It was an effective way of ending the staring contest without looking like he'd conceded.

Pepper smirked and shared a tight smile with Maria Hill.

"Now that that's settled… Makeup. I know the artist who did-" Pepper stopped talking because Steve was already shaking his head.

"No makeup. I want this to look real, not touched up. You've got free reign with wardrobe, Pep, but I want this to look more like home-made movies," Steve said.

Natasha pushed into the door of the conference room and took her usual place next to Clint's empty seat. The archer had asked for some time off and Steve had gladly granted him leave. Nat's hair was slightly dark and damp and she smelled like she'd just showered. Tony set a coffee in front of her and she looked at the man, surprised at his kindness.

Tony carried his refreshed mug back to his seat.
"If you'd let me help, you wouldn't have to go low-budget," Tony commented.

"Budget isn't the issue. I want the pieces to look approachable, not glossy and removed from anything that could happen in the viewer's daily life," Steve insisted.

"Gopro," Natasha said.

"No. Not professional. Didn't you hear what I just said?" Steve frowned at her.

"Relax, Cap. A Gopro is a high resolution personal camera, made for people to take on vacation to capture action videos of them skiing, mountain climbing, landscapes, having fun with the family, anything they do. It's decent quality imaging, but it doesn't scream high production value. People will recognize the format and know that the shorts were recorded with a camera that almost anyone could purchase," she explained to him.

Steve felt heat flush his face at having over-reacted and snapped at Natasha when he'd merely misunderstood what she'd meant. She was being helpful and she had a good idea. He knew he was irritable today. It was difficult to keep his mind off of Estrella, wondering how she was settling in at Wanda's place, hoping she was safe outside of the tower. He missed her. He wanted to at least touch her hand or hear her voice, but she was gone. Steve closed his eyes and ground his molars together. He had to focus on work.

Thor grunted briefly at him, a low sound of encouragement and understanding. Steve loosened his jaw and looked to Natasha.

"No apologies. Let's move on," she said before he could open his mouth, "Do you have ideas about content?"

"We could do something with the bike, get some scenes from all around the country. I want people to recognize their region and feel included," Steve said.

Pepper got up from her seat and came toward him. He heard her murmur to Jarvis about illumination and the lights got a lot brighter in his end of the room. Steve squinted his eyes at the brightness, but Pepper came to take his chin and tilt his face up. She studied him impersonally, his hair, his skin, his eyes.

"You're right. I could use you to sell skin products. You don't need makeup," she said.

Steve ignored her cool touch on his face and got his thoughts back to business.

"We should do a group piece with all of us. Something funny, with a soft edge. People only see us tearing things up. It wouldn't hurt to humanize the Avengers for them," Tony suggested.

"I am not human," Thor pointed out.

"You look human. It could work," Tony said.

"That's a great idea. Flesh it out and we'll do it," Steve said.

Tony looked surprised.

"You like one of my ideas?" Tony asked.

"Sure," Steve said.

They both startled and Bruce applauded them with a slow clap.
Maria looked around the room. Her brow was low and serious.

"We might have a problem with optics," she said.

Steve looked to her curiously.

"Blonde, blonde," she pointed from Thor to Clint's empty chair, "Redhead, blonde, rich guy."


"We're not using Sam or Rhodey as tokens. They're in it with a major role that's worthy of who they are, or they're not in it at all," Steve said.

Sam shook his head.

"I don't do bikes and I don't want my face everywhere. I'd never hear the end of it back home with the family. I'm just here to work. I don't need an action-figure," he said.

"Alright, but be aware that an apparent lack of diversity could give the wrong message," Hill said.

"Does green count as diverse?" Bruce asked quietly.

Pepper and Thor smiled at him. Tony made a thoughtful face, then shook his head.

"We know who we are. Nick Fury is the father of the Avengers if anyone is, but we can't out him. Sam, if you don't want to be on film we'll respect that. Colonel Rhodes is welcome if there's a natural role for him, but he's not a regular part of the Avengers and people know it. I'm not going to shoe-horn in a person of color just for the sake of doing so. We're damned if we do and damned if we don't on that issue," Steve said.

They were quiet for a moment, then Bruce spoke up again.

"I'm serious. If I do this, I'll be green. I don't want my face out there either."

Steve waited to hear more of his thoughts.

"He likes ice cream. Ice cream is non-threatening," Bruce said.

Steve smiled and nodded.

Pepper quickly typed notes onto her pad. She looked enthused about Bruce's idea though she didn't comment.

"Creativity isn't like battle planning. It's not all going to happen here at the table. I have ideas when it's quiet and I'm alone. We should group message for when we think of things. Everybody has input. Keep in mind that our goal is to counter Hydra's divisive, selfish aims and to appeal to a sense of service and community. Stay positive. If you think of anything at all, get it to the group. Jarvis, will you sort our ideas for clear presentation at the next meeting?" Steve asked.

"Certainly," the AI answered.

"We've already begun an effective PR campaign thanks to you, Captain," Maria said.

"Have you looked at the numbers?" Natasha turned to ask him.

"What numbers?" Steve wondered.
"Roll it, J," Tony said.

"How can you not be aware?" Thor asked.

The room darkened and the viewer in the presentation frame lit up. The barbershop video that Estrella had taken with her phone appeared in still frame, then began playing.

"Guys, come on. I don't need to see it. I was there," Steve said.

"You need to understand what's happening and how things are received by the public," Pepper told him.

Steve set his jaw and watched the three minutes of edited singing that he'd already heard too much about. This wasn't meant to be a PR piece! It was personal. Had everyone seen it? He noticed the hit count at the bottom of the YouTube frame. It was staggering. Half of the population of the United States had seen it globally, and maybe the residents of some small village somewhere hadn't liked it. He studied the piece critically and tried to be aloof from the funny feeling that watching himself always gave him.

Tony clapped theatrically at the end of it and Thor smiled. Steve supposed it wasn't too bad. Then he noticed some of the viewer comments that Jarvis scrolled down to. 'OMG! He sings?' was a common theme. 'That shit auto-tuned' was shouted down by long screes of cursing in defense of Steve's vocal skills. Lots of people demanded to know who had done the recording, who the Captain was in love with. Several rebutted that he wasn't in love with anyone, it was just the words of the song, or that he was gay, or that it was heartbreaking and meant for Peggy Carter. It all made him think hard about public response.

"Exactly what they're saying doesn't matter as much as the fact that they're saying it. There's massive interest in the Captain. This lets us know that any PR pieces we put out with you in them will have high circulation. It's worth putting our time into this. We're going to hurt Hydra's ability to influence people toward their way of thinking. What little recruitment they have left should diminish further, if we do this right," Hill said with a confident smile.

Another image replaced the YouTube comments on the viewer.

Steve grunted.

It was him and Estrella on the street from right before the last Avengers mission. The back of Estrella's head and shoulders were all that could be seen of her, and one of her hands touching his arm. His right arm was up, hand extended, Iron Man's metallic gauntlet in view coming to grip and lift him. Steve's eyes were shut and he was kissing the girl with the long dark hair. Their mouths couldn't be seen from the camera angle behind Estrella's head, but from the romantically intent look on the rest of his face, it was clear what the Captain was doing. There was a dark blur at the very edge of the image, nothing detailed enough to identify Bucky. The rest of the New York City street background and the surrounding pedestrians were out of focus.

"It's an iconic shot Steve, whether you're comfortable with it or not. I know you don't pay attention to television or mainstream news, but it's been all over the media for the last few days. People love it. Jarvis, comments please," Maria said.

Lines and lines of comments scrolled on the viewer. Some people appreciated the image because it was iconic, as Maria suggested. It was being compared to the Kissing Sailor V-J Day image of 1945. 'Steve Rogers finally celebrates the end of the war' was a common sentiment, along with people madly interested in knowing who he was kissing. A comment which set off cold alarm in
"Get rid of it," Steve growled.

"I'm afraid things have gone beyond that possibility," Jarvis said apologetically.

Jarvis flashed images of fan art that was already out there, the kissing image of him and Estrella manipulated so that Steve was wearing his old Cap uniform from the war, the shield on his back, his uplifted hand instead showing a 'V for victory' sign, and a white nurse's uniform on Estrella. Someone had left them as they were, but made it black and white and snipped them into the original V-J Day image instead of the kissing sailor and the nurse. A few were racier, but Jarvis respected his sensibilities and blurred past those quickly enough to merely let him know that the images were out there. There were children's line drawings which made Steve grumble in disapproval even more, and several with flowery embellishments and rosy coloring. Many of those were just plain embarrassing.

"Get rid of it," Steve said again, and Jarvis understood that he meant merely the image on the viewer in front of him.

Steve ground his teeth as hard as he ever had. Loud exclamations of curse words shouted in his mind, but he squeezed his eyes shut and made do with the quiet grind of his teeth. The lights in the conference room brightened to normal, but his team was silent in their seats until Steve unclenched enough to let out a slow, controlled breath.

The smell of ink assaulted his nose. His hand felt slick and goopy. Steve looked down to see a splintered ink pen dead in his fist. He set the messy thing down atop the blank legal pad near his elbow. Tony got up and brought him a wad of paper napkins. Steve absently began wiping ink from his hand.

Tony's grip was warm on his shoulder.

"It happens. You can go public and brazen it out, or you can hide her away and play dumb. That never worked for me, but you've got us and you've got Jarvis. Maybe you can play it off if Estrella isn't seen with you anymore," Tony said low and calm.

"Can we stop talking about her for five minutes?" Steve asked testily.

Tony studied Steve's pained, stiff expression.

"Yeah. We're done here. Break for lunch," Tony announced.

"It's nine forty-five," Bruce said.

"Then it's brunch. Go," Tony said.

The team left the room. Steve stayed sitting. Tony flopped gracelessly into the chair Natasha had warmed.

Steve didn't want to hear anything else. He almost warned Stark against opening his mouth, but he didn't. Tony sat with him and waited. Steve finished smearing around the blue-black stains on his hands and set the mangled napkins down.

"Nat's right. I'm going to get her killed," he said.

Tony made an ambiguous noise.
"You think there's any possibility that Hydra hasn't cross-analyzing every bit of recent imagery of me with any dark-haired woman? What have I done?" Steve seethed quietly.

"I already had Jarvis run the probability. The only known identifying link that would be any danger was the Mexican gang web page devoted to Ix-Chel. It was an obscure page with a modest hit count, one outdated image of her, and J scrubbed it before anyone would have thought to make the connection. There's plenty of stuff from our night dancing at Romero's, but we had you dance with several people that night. She's there in the videos that people uploaded, but her hair is a lot shorter and spiked red and she's much slimmer. Without a face on this new street image, I don't think people will make a hard connection to the girl you danced with at Romero's," Tony said.

"Call everybody back in. I want those last three Hydra bases gone. I don't care what we have to do to pin them down. Someone is going to use this to get at me, with her," Steve said.

Tony sat forward and leaned his elbow on the corner of the table between them. If he wasn't going to move, then Steve would do it himself. He started to get up and go call the team back, but Tony grabbed his arm.

"Sit down. We have time to think," Tony told him.

"She's out there with nothing but civ-level hard structure around her. I'm going-"

"No, you're not. You feel raw right now. Everything you think of feels urgent and you want it done yesterday. Stop feeling and think, Steve. God, you're useless. Shouldn't have even come to the office this morning," Tony chastised him gently.

Steve's automatic response was to lash out verbally and he almost did so. Then he didn't. Tony was right. He was acting like an idiot. Too reactive to everything.

"I'm not going to try to tell you how to feel because it won't matter. You're a miserable bastard and nothing is going to change that until you get it through your head that she didn't leave you," Tony said.

"She did," Steve pointed out, "and you knew she was gonna do it. You didn't tell me, and you knew."

"The girl didn't have a choice, Rogers! Lie to me, boy scout, I dare you. Tell me that you would have let her leave like she needed to if you knew about it ahead of time. Barnes knew she was moving out, and so did Romanoff. Go bitch at them about it," Tony said.

Steve temporarily burned away his worry for Estrella with the dear desire to punch right through Tony's face.

"Astin Reeve," Tony said.

Steve narrowed his eyes and refused to ask for more details. Tony ignored him and went on anyway.

"Astin Reeve was the first girl I loved. Dad didn't approve of her because the Vanderbilts didn't approve of us. We're all 'new money', but Stark money was a little newer than Vanderbilt money, so it wasn't as good. Security was ludicrously easy to get around back then and me and Astin were bored. It was just dogs and simple wiring. No internet at all. Grand-mammy Gloria spewed a brick when her precious one turned up breeding with a lowly Stark whelp. Am I going too fast for you here, Cap?" Tony wondered.
"Gloria Vanderbilt. You knocked up her grand-daughter," Steve said with a frown.

"Right. You were paying attention. I'm flattered," Tony said with false flirtatiousness, fluttered eyelashes and an effeminate hand gesture.

Steve was too concerned about Estrella and impatient to get out there and protect her to have much time for Tony's theatrics, but he couldn't stop a faint smile at the effort Stark was making to tell his story.

"Granny Glory called in her clan plus my father. They and their egos inadvertently ripped any social standing Astin had to shreds. Gloria demanded a remedy for damage done to her family's pedigree, and of course Howard had to get prickly at the insult. So then came the headline that Astin was going to marry into the vastly superior Stark fortune, thus snubbing her nose at her family. Nobody asked me or Astin what we thought about it," Tony said.

Steve couldn't resist asking, though he told himself that he didn't want to know. Tony was going somewhere with this and he may as well hurry him along.

"What happened?"

"Astin went into depression and never came out. There were drugs, then more drugs. A brief stay in private rehab, which I busted her out of. We went on a road-trip that stopped at the business end of a very unamused U. S. Marshall. The whole thing was in the papers for months. I couldn't turn on the radio without hearing my name connected to the old woman and her family," Tony said irreverently, but Steve could see something else in his eyes.

"How did it end?" Steve asked somberly.

"Astin committed suicide after they brought her home. I still don't know whether to be sad or relieved that she never was pregnant to begin with. She was a good girl, but intelligent and shy. I knew from the start that I was only an adventure for her, a little taste of rebellion. The family drama and the media frenzy were too much. If our families had left us alone and let it go quietly, nothing ever would have come of it, and Astin would likely be a snooty society mama like all the rest of them today, but with some blue-blood's kids rather than mine. Not for lack of trying on my part. I was thirteen. Probably still shooting blanks," Tony said.

"Thirteen? Tony! That's-" Steve sputtered.

"I know. I was a horrible little cretin. Not like it changes your opinion of me. Can anyone here tell me the moral of the story, as relates to current events?" Tony asked like a school teacher.

Steve slumped back in his chair and let out a breath that seemed to deflate his urgency.

"Haste makes waste, tragically for Astin. Tony, I'm really sorry that happened to you and to her," Steve said.

"Yeah, yeah. It was decades ago. Old pain, lesson learned and all that. Will you cool your nads long enough to think before you go out there and draw what's left of Hydra right to your girl? I'm telling you that they don't know about her yet. If you go roaring across town to save her right now, you'll only make things worse. Sit tight and try to use your brain, no matter how much your heart and your balls are aching," Tony told him.

Steve winced. Despite the story, Tony was a master at begging to get punched in the teeth. Sad anecdotes didn't equal hard data. Tony's experience might not be equivalent to where he found himself with Estrella. Gloria Vanderbilt wasn't exactly Hydra, though Tony's tone when speaking
of the woman let Steve know she was thought of as a close runner-up.

"How do you know Hydra is unaware of Estrella?" Steve asked.

"There's no chatter. I was going to tell you at the next meeting, because this one was all about the PR campaign. Me and Jarvis bugged into some of their communications. We've got them on the run. They're mostly defensive, but they're desperate to get a hit on us. It's difficult for them to organize anything tactical because we've taken down so much of their infrastructure, but they're angry enough that they'd find a way if they knew about her. They fucking hate you more than ever. Let's give some credit where it's due... they hate me too, but you're their absolute all-time favorite. If they knew anything about Estrella they'd have already tried to get to her, but there's no mention of her at all," Tony assured.

Steve sat and tuned Tony out momentarily. His mind hummed through strategy, probability, options, logic.

When he had a plan, he focused his eyes to the room again, surprised to see Tony still sitting there.

Stark was smiling at him. Why was he smiling? It didn't matter. He had things to do.

"We're out until after lunch. I gotta go," Steve said.

Tony got up to leave the room with him. The man was still grinning.

"What?" Steve asked him suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing. I'm continually amazed by the wonders of Stark technology," Tony said.

He patted Steve on the shoulder like a proud papa.

"It was Doctor Erskine, Tony. And my parents. And God. And Howard. You weren't around, so you can't take credit for me," Steve said.

Estrella wasn't happy to see him. Bucky knew that the security monitor showed him waiting outside the door of the apartment. The girl took her time letting him in.

"Morning," he said.

She barely stood aside to let him enter. Buck shut the door and secured it. Wanda was already away to work. His look around showed an unremarkable city apartment. The building was middling old, refurbished several times. He wouldn't call the place nice but it was respectable and comfortable, a hell of a lot better than his abandoned place in Brooklyn.

"I have work to do. Why are you here?" Estrella asked him.

"Lots of hits on social media, images of you and him. Hydra's itching to get at him. He's antsy," Buck said and shrugged as if that completely explained his presence in Wanda's apartment.

Estrella narrowed her eyes at him. The girl was a looker, even in a slouchy oversized shirt and unflattering sweatpants. Her skeptical pout made him grin. A pretty girl sticking out her lip at him was vaguely familiar and made him feel young again.

"Never mind me. Go work. I'll stay outta your way," Buck promised.
Personally, he'd let her get away with it if she wanted to smack him for intruding on her work day uninvited. Lucy's recent visit was all because of her and he was thankful.

Buck took a walk through the apartment to get a feel for the situation. There was the usual hum of latent appliances in the kitchen and the living room. Wanda had a smart alarm clock in her bedroom, and the energy meter for the rental unit pinged updates to wherever power meters sent such things. Then there was the known Stark surveillance tech that went with the security system. He was fast learning the subtle feel of Stark tech. It was somehow quieter and smoother than other electronic signals, more like a refined personality than a mindless data ping.

"J?" Bucky asked quietly as he settled on the couch in the living room.

"How may I assist?" Jarvis replied so low he was sure the girl wouldn't hear.

As usual, the AI's voice projected from an angle designed to make him sound like he was everywhere, rather than coming from a point source.

"Just checking," Buck murmured.

Jarvis let it pass without further comment. Bucky had grown accustomed to working with Jarvis during their op to exterminate the Ix-Chel gang members. For more than a week, he'd lived with the AI in his ear, at his side like a physical partner, nearly omnipotent in its ability to predict immediate events and see around corners and through walls. The AI had likewise become accustomed to James Barnes' terse, nearly silent mannerisms. There was no need to chit-chat unless and until action was needed.

He could feel the presence of a few discreet other devices, and likely Jarvis could sense them too. The tiny specks of tech in his awareness had the sharp, faint feel of Natalia's gear. Expensive, precise, expendable; like imaginary needles prickling across his skin.

Nothing would happen in this place without Jarvis and Natalia knowing about it. He wouldn't tell Estrella. She would be angry to know about all the surveillance, but he didn't care so much about her feelings. It was more important that she stay safe for Steve.

Buck settled on one end of the couch and let his awareness drift easy around the place. All he heard was the familiar hum of electricity, the rush of air through the vents, and Estrella's fingers typing on her laptop.

The girl sighed. He couldn't see her in her bedroom from where he was in the living room, but he knew agitation when he heard it. Buck turned sideways on the couch so he could at least see part of her if he looked into her bedroom doorway. All he could see of her was a sock-clad foot.

As the hours of the morning crept along she sighed many times, each sigh seeming more tense than the one before. Her typing fingers didn't slow down, but she was becoming agitated.

"Take a break. C'mere," Buck called to her.

He hoped she got angry at him for telling her what to do. Maybe if she had somebody to yell at she'd feel better. Steve was just as miserable as she was and neither of them wanted to talk about it.

Estrella reluctantly left her bedroom in the hall and joined Bucky at the other end of the couch, where his foot moved aside to make room for her. Again, she glared at him with a put-upon pout.

Buck leaned near her until he had his face at her neck. He took a deep sample of her scent today, then retreated back to his seat. Estrella pulled away from his intrusion of her personal space and
glared at him.

"No worries. Needed to know. You smell better today, but it's nothing to me. You feeling alright?" Buck asked.

Estrella turned her face aside and jutted her chin. It reminded him strongly of the time on the bench in front of the coffee shop when he'd had to come down and save her unconscious ass from a pack of street thugs. Same pretty bones, but a lot more flesh and attitude.

"You want him," she stated and cut her eyes aside at him accusingly.

"Fuck, no. I told him he was gonna have to explain that to you, but he didn't. Why the hell do you think I want him? I don't want anybody. Ask Natalia," Buck said.

Estrella looked at him suspiciously, clearly unconvinced.

"You gotta understand. Things were different. When me and Stevie were kids, young guys, and all through the war, men could be pals. Good pals. You could be close and nobody thought you were gay. People could walk with their arms over each other's shoulders and nobody looked at you twice. That shit at his place yesterday, it's not like you're thinking. And besides, he'd have never popped off under me if you hadn't just been winding him up. Your fault, girlie, not mine," Buck assured her.

Estrella turned to look directly at him and gave him a narrow-eyed glare. Her demeanor was so typically that of a dangerously irate Latina that Buck could hardly keep from laughing but he managed to keep a straight face.

"How many times did I tell you it was time to go, that you were waiting too late? I warned you it was gonna be a mess, didn't I? You know that he's all soft inside. If you get past his shell he's like melted chocolate all over ya. You know he's smart, too. Wily little shit isn't above taking advantage of our friendship if he thinks he can sweet-talk his way past me to get to you. That's what that was. You shoulda heard him after you left. Caterwauling about wanting you. If you think he's after me, then you don't know how wrong you are," Buck said.

"I didn't say he wanted you. I said you want him," Estrella told him.

"And I just told you I don't. Not like that. I wanna be near him, sure. He's all I have left. Well, not really, now that you got Lucy to come around for me," Buck grinned at her and Estrella had to stoke up her anger to avoid smiling back at him, "I'm not right in the head yet, Estrella. I need Steve. I can't help but remember who I used to be when I'm around him. You should let it go because it's nothin like you make it out to be. You know you're just a hormonal broad, anyway."

Outrage flared up in her and she was on him before she could think better of it. Buck sprawled back and raised his hands defensively while she climbed over to pound at him with her fists. He laughed and it made her angrier. She aimed for his smiling face but she couldn't land a punch on him. That enraged her even more. How careful he was to avoid hurting her while he pushed her aggression aside made her see red with fury. He wasn't even trying! His eyes were closed, he was laughing so hard! How was he still blocking her hits?

"Ah, kitten, you gotta stop or you're gonna bruise up your hands," Buck finally gasped.

He sat up on the couch and tumbled her back onto her end of it. Her wrists were caught in the careful circle of his hands. She tugged away from him and he let her go. She scowled at him, but his good humor was damnably infectious. That made her mad, too. She was tired of fighting. Tired
of stress. And she was only at the beginning. Her being a 'hormonal broad' was going to go on for days. It was going to get much worse.

"Okay," she said in defeat.

"Okay, what?" Buck asked.

The girl was curled into her end of the seat. She'd let her hair fall down to cover her face.

"Okay. I believe you. And I'm hormonal. It's only going to get worse. I don't want you here. You'll see, and you're loyal to him, and I don't want him to know. When it gets bad, he'll come over if he knows, and then all of this will be for nothing," she said, then sighed, "You could have let me hit you at least one time."

"Nah. I'da let you hit my belly, but bones are hard. Aim for the gut next time, not my face. Didn't want you to hurt your hand," Buck explained.

"I don't want you here," she repeated.

"Did you hear anything I've said? No way in hell am I tellin him what goes on with you here. He's already just about crawling outta his skin to get over here. We didn't tell him Wanda's address, but I bet he knows it. For the duration of whatever's gonna happen to you, you don't talk to him on the phone. No facetime, and don't text him if you don't trust yourself. That door," Buck nodded toward Wanda's new steel entry door, "might hold against a gang of street guys, and probably against a SWAT team for long enough to get help to you, but it won't hold against Steve. He'd rip it outta the wall or he'd go through the wall. We don't tell him anything. Far as he knows, no matter how bad it gets for you, we're cool as cucumbers over here. Alright?"

Estrella nodded. She glanced at him through her hair cautiously.

"You're not mad?" she asked.

"Why would I be mad?" Buck wondered.

"I attacked you," Estrella pointed out.

"You didn't attack me. You tickled my funny bone,"

"I still don't want you here," she said.

"Tough shit. We found out some things and Steve is worried. He sent me over here to keep an eye around the place. It's gotta be me for now, because Talia has work to do. You feel better now that you let off some steam?" Buck asked.

Estrella shrugged. She did feel better physically, but some things still bothered her.

"Your heart rate is slower. Your muscles aren't so tense. If you start winding up tight again take some slow, deep breaths. Fix us some lunch, then get back to work. It'll keep your mind off your troubles better than sitting around fretting over every little thing," Buck told her.

She whipped her hair aside and behind her shoulder to glare at him. He was so chauvinistic and infuriating! He- was being that way on purpose. She could tell from the smug grin he gave her that he knew he was being a shit. His mouth curled up at the corner until his teeth showed a little bit and he tilted his face up proudly.
"Oooooh!" she growled at him between her teeth.

Trying to fight him didn't do any good. His smart mouth was always ready to explain away anything. Instead of retaliating, she ignored him. Estrella got up, washed her hands, and fixed sandwiches for them. She thought of spilling his cold drink in his lap when she brought him his plate but she didn't want to stain Wanda's furniture.

She took her lunch to her room so she could be away from him and get back to her work as soon as she could. With her sandwich in one hand, she took a moment to text Steve with the thoughts that troubled her.

_I'm sorry I acted the way I did these last few days. I'm sorry I made you act up, too. It's embarrassing that our friends saw us that way. I feel better today. I think being around you was making it worse, but it's not your fault. Bucky is here. He's still an asshole, but I see why you like him. He's loyal to you._

Estrella waited for a response. It was lunchtime. Steve should have the time to get her message and text her unless the Avengers were called out for something. He'd been so adamant about her not moving out, and about them being able to communicate while she was in isolation that she was sure he'd be eager to respond to her.

When he didn't, she eventually got her laptop and went back to her work for Stark Industries. It worried her that Steve was nonresponsive but there was nothing she could do about it. Working kept her from worrying too much. It was irritating to admit that Bucky was right. Slow, deep breathing did seem to help against the tension that wouldn't go away.

Tony had finally left him alone and Steve felt strangely calm for just having ended a conversation with Stark. Maybe because it had been a conversation instead of an argument.

Buck was away, so Steve knew that Estrella would be safe in a few minutes, soon as his friend got to Wanda's place.

Lunch. It was a little before noon. He could eat.

Steve didn't want to bother anybody to get something delivered and he didn't feel like putting on a polite face for the public outside the tower. He made his way down to the ground floor café. A quick scan of the room showed him that Sam and Thor were already there talking over their mostly empty plates. Both of his friends went quiet and Sam gave him a not-quite-smooth smile so he knew they'd probably been talking about him. Thor wasn't bothered to be caught talking. He smiled at Steve and gestured to their table.

Once he had a tray piled high with his favorites, Steve went to join them.

Sam talked about football and Thor argued with him while Steve ate. It was clearly busy-talk meant to take up the time while Steve fed himself. When his eating slowed enough that he felt he could talk between bites, he cut through the bullshit conversation to what they'd probably been talking about before.

"Tony said I shouldn't have come to work today. He's right. I apologize for being distracted," he told them.

Sam shook his head.
"You were on task. We got things done. It was Hill who derailed things with the media analysis. If not for that, you would've been fine. This all just went down yesterday, man. Cut yourself some slack," Sam said.

Thor didn't say anything, but he nodded agreement with Sam. There was kindness and understanding on his face, but also stern expectation that Steve would do as he should. That was comfort and encouragement stronger than words. Again, Steve felt warmed at the support of his friends. He looked away, down to his food. Buck was the best, but his newer friends were solid too. His emotions were running high today, making it hard to keep the cool demeanor of a good leader. He paid attention to his dessert instead of letting himself show undignified emotions again.

The chocolate pudding with dark chocolate shavings was very good so Steve took a moment to savor it from his spoon. Some chocolate things tasted synthetic and waxy these days, but not this. Tony and Pepper wouldn't have fake chocolate in any establishment they owned.

Before he ate the last bite of his pudding Steve felt his phone vibrate at his hip. It could be Buck. There could be trouble. Or it could be Estrella! He set his spoon down with a messy clatter and hurried to pull out his phone before it could even complete the buzz sequence to indicate who was texting him.

It was a message from Estrella. She was embarrassed, just like him. Steve smiled in relief at her complaining about Bucky. That felt right and normal, like nothing was wrong between them and she wasn't gone. He swiped to start responding to her message, but Sam's hand tapped at his.

"Uh-un. You don't wanna do that," Sam advised.

"Why not?" Steve asked sharply.

He so did. More than anything, he wanted to talk with Estrella while she seemed to be in a sweet, forgiving mood. Her words might even be implying that she understood about him embarrassing himself yesterday as she was leaving. He really needed…

"Remain aloof," Thor agreed with Sam.

"But she feels-"

"And you feel too. I get that. You feel a lot right now. Keep your cool. Let her wonder for a few hours. If you're always running to her, she's never going to feel the need to run to you," Sam told him.

The tables in the cafeteria were beginning to fill up with the usual lunch crowd but the three of them were back in a corner. Thor sent a slight frown to those who would have taken tables near them and people quickly decided it was best to sit elsewhere. Steve barely noticed. Estrella's message weighed heavy in his hand, begging a response.

He firmed his jaw against the impulse to text. Buck had said much the same thing. The distance between them could be put to good use, despite the pain of missing her.

"There you go, Cap. I knew you had it in you," Sam teased him.

Steve blew off that he'd been called by his title instead of his name. He knew what Sam meant. He could feel how his face looked. It took a strong dose of determination to slip his phone back into his pocket.

"Don't worry. You know she wants the D. She's not going to forget about you if you leave her be
for several hours, or even til tomorrow. She's not the kind to go looking for it anywhere else," Sam assured.

Steve snapped a powerful frown in his direction. He didn't like anyone talking that way about Estrella, even if it was true.

"What does the lady desire? I don't underst- ah! Indeed," Thor said, at first confused, then smiling when the meaning became clear from the context of the conversation.

"I don't wanna hear that. Not about her," Steve ordered.

"I know, but you need some logic in there to grab onto while you drift in all those feelings. You know what you want. So does she. That's all I mean. There's more to it than that but if you're all about the feelings today, then that's an easy fact to comfort yourself with. Do you see her chasing after anybody else?" Sam asked pointedly.

Steve's lips pulled back from his teeth a little and a quiet growl was all he could get out through his clenched jaw. Sam's brows went up at the unexpectedly feral look on their normally mild Captain, but he knew Steve went a lot deeper than the super-hero persona.

"Easy, friend," Thor said.

He moved his hand to touch Steve's arm and distract him. It appeared uncertain whether Steven would make good on his unspoken threat. As Samuel said, the man was running more on feelings today than his usual good sense.


Steve sat back in his chair, away from Thor's hand, away from Sam's helpful attention. He looked out the glass wall at the crowds on the sidewalk instead. People. Movement. Traffic. It all blurred to gray disinterest while he thought.

No way would Estrella go seeking after another man just because she wasn't under the same roof with him anymore. She was still cautious of him sometimes, for brief moments when he wasn't careful enough. For all that she inherently disliked Buck, she still clung to him for safety when the attentions of other men turned to her on the street. She liked Thor and Bruce as long as they were kind and non-threatening. Tony was by turns endearing and annoying to her, certainly not a romantic interest despite his wealth or his looks. Clint… Steve still didn't understand why she felt comfortable around the archer. She didn't know him at all. Estrella was even suspicious and reserved around Billy the courier, who Steve considered harmless. Nick Fury had her literally cringing away.

Colin was the best example of someone who might be a threat to Estrella's fidelity to him, and she intentionally kept her distance from him with prickly impoliteness if she felt the need. Sam was right. The only kind of guy Estrella might tolerate would be someone completely non-threatening, barely male at all. And then, she likely wouldn't be interested in the man if her attraction to Colin and himself was any indication of her natural preferences.

Steve cleared his throat and nodded. He looked to Sam and opened his mouth.

"You are not at liberty to apologize. All of the women have instructed me that I am to remind you of it," Thor said.

Steve turned to Thor. He wanted to spit out a heart-felt 'fuck you.' Instead, he shut his mouth and returned Thor's teasing grin with a bright, false one.
"You may go fornicate with yourself, as well," Thor murmured.

Steve laughed.

"Are you sure you don't read minds?" he asked Thor.

"Mind reading is not needed when the sentiment is clear on your face," the big man responded.

The tension was broken. No apologies were needed. Sam tapped him on the shoulder and indicated that he should finish his pudding and also that all was forgiven.

Steve ate his dessert and was tempted to lick the bowl. It was good stuff. He still very much wanted to respond to Estrella's message. He thought hard, wondering when would be the right time to do so if he wasn't supposed to right now.

"Restrain yourself at least until the dusk when our day of work is done. If you are so strong of will, then waiting until just before your lady's bedtime would be even better," Thor told him, again as if he was a mind reader.

Steve frowned, but he nodded.

He could hear her breathing. As she worked through the afternoon, the girl became more and more tense. She was trying hard to control herself and stay focused and on task, but with increasing frequency the sound of her fingers on her keyboard would pause and she would take several slow, deep breaths. Bucky smiled. This wasn't easy on either of them, but they were doing good. Steve wasn't over here pounding the door down yet and the girl was keeping calm and busy. Estrella went from her room to the kitchen to get snacks several times but she always went back to work.

Near four o'clock she'd had enough. Buck heard her laptop snap shut and then she hurried into Wanda's kitchen. He could hear position by her banging of cabinet doors and clattering of pots even if he shut his eyes and stopped watching her stiff movements. He got up to stand in the kitchen doorway.

"Whatcha makin?" he asked.

"You go away. You'll get yours, and I'll send you home with some for Steve. Let me think. I haven't made this before," she fussed at him.

She tied her wild black hair away from her face and paused to look at something on her phone. Buck liked the worn, comfortable feel of the little kitchen in Wanda's apartment. There was a green plant of some sort hanging in the window and an old set of ingredient canisters on the countertop among the more modern appliances. A well-loved spice rack was nailed to the wall near the stovetop and Estrella hurried to search through the spices and choose some of them to use.

Buck took a bathroom break after assuring himself that no threats from Hydra or anything else were imminent. When he came out Wanda was home and the kitchen was starting to smell like chicken, roasting flour and something spicy.

The large woman came to stand in front of him. She looked him in the eyes. If she was hoping to intimidate him by her size, her black uniform, or her unfriendly demeanor, she'd be disappointed. Buck gave her a charming smile and she frowned at him.
"Why are you in my house?" Wanda asked.

"Steve sent me over to keep her company. He's concerned that she might not be as safe as she was in the tower," he explained.

"James," he said, and offered his hand.

Wanda looked at him like he was a fly that needed to be swatted, but she briefly touched his hand. The woman walked away to the kitchen after she hung her bag on the peg behind the door.

"You got it smelling good in here. How come a half-starved girl like you can cook?" Wanda asked Estrella.

She wasn't interested in Bucky anymore. That was fine with him. Buck sat back down and paid attention to his duty. The women chatted in the kitchen and the smells of food kept getting better and better. Eventually Buck's mouth began watering. He swallowed and tried to keep his belly quiet.

Wanda came through the living room and ignored him until she disappeared down the hall. Buck shocked himself into stillness by saying the words in his head. The Soldier was better at resisting physical temptations like heavenly food aromas. Buck could use the assist, since he was still on the lean side and intended to stay that way.

After another hour and a half Estrella called to him. Buck or the Soldier, whichever mix he was at the moment, went to join the girl and the unwelcoming woman at the small kitchen table. They ate in near silence, except for the sounds of appreciation Wanda made for the excellent food.

"My thanks," he told the girl.

She looked at him strangely and so did Wanda. It didn't matter.

Estrella made a large bowl of supper for him to bring to Steve and she slipped the hot food inside an insulated carrier.

"Go. Bring this to Steve. Tell him I'm fine here. I don't need anybody watching for me," she told him.

He took the food and left. He waited a moment outside the apartment in the hallway to be sure she had properly secured the door behind him.

"All is well," Jarvis assured him.

He noticed everyone in the building on his way out. No one wanted his attention. People hurried away, out of his path.

She and Wanda were getting started on doing the dishes when Estrella's phone rang. Estrella hurried to wipe her hand dry so she could tug her phone from her bra. It clattered to the floor and she scrabbled to pick it up. She couldn't not smile because it was Steve calling. Finally, after hours of waiting to hear from him!

"Hi," she whispered.

She didn't know why, but that's all that would come out. Wanda waved her away to go take her
phone call in privacy. Estrella went to her room and shut the door.

"Why are you whispering?" Steve asked her.

He sounded a little breathless too but she could hear the smile in his voice. Relief flooded through her. There was nothing wrong. He hadn't been upset with her all afternoon. He was likely just busy.

"I don't know. I was worried about you," she said.

"S- uh, I was... yeah. I'm fine," Steve stammered.

"Are you sure?" she asked him.

His stumbling over words meant he was stumbling over thoughts, changing his mind as he spoke.

"I'm sure. How was your day? Are you feeling alright?" he wondered kindly.

His deep voice was sweet and thrilling. It made her want to go to him, to feel his touch. He was probably in his room right now. She could tug him over to the bed and they could sit together. His skin was warm. She could pull his arms around her and it would feel wonderful to be near him.

But then she would have to tell him what she was thinking. Nervous butterflies crashed in her belly. She should tell him now what she had to say, but she was afraid to say it. He was probably still upset from yesterday.

"Eya?" Steve prompted her.

"Oh! What did you ask?"

"Are you alright?" he asked again with a hint of humor in his voice at her distraction.

"I'm okay. I don't know how to feel about yesterday. Natasha thinks I'm weak and stupid. I'm sorry that I made you... you know. In front of our friends," she said hesitantly.

She could feel the heat in her cheeks. There was embarrassment, but thinking of Nat, she was angry that the woman had seen Steve in that state. He wasn't for her to see.

"They're good friends. They were trying to help us. Try not to let it bother you, sweetheart. Nat's been all business today, like nothing happened. You don't need to worry about her. Or Buck. Nothing bothers him much. Did he behave for you today?" Steve asked.

"He doesn't need to come around, but yes. He was okay. He made me so mad! I know he does it on purpose. I just sent him home. He should be there soon," she said.

"You sent him home already? I wanted him to stay until later. Why did he-?"

"Don't act like Jarvis isn't here watching, and like Thor or Tony couldn't get here in under a minute if Jarvis knew anything was wrong. You worry too much," Estrella fussed at him.

Steve didn't want to scare her by mentioning his new concerns about Hydra so he smiled at her fussing instead. It was nice to hear her scold him. It was so typical of her.

"I want you to date other people," Estrella said out of nowhere.

It took him a full second to comprehend what she'd said. He was having trouble understanding what she meant by it. It was like she was speaking an unfamiliar language because surely her
words couldn't mean what it sounded like she meant.

"What?" he squawked.

He stood up abruptly and began to pace the short distance of carpet in his room beside his bed. It wasn't enough, so he ripped his bedroom door open so he could stalk the length of the living room too. Cold desperation jolted through him like when they'd been at the pool and she said she needed more time and space away from him.

"Bucky and Natasha said you never dated other people. I want you to use this time while I'm away from you to go out with somebody. No, with two people. Before I decide to marry you, I want to know that you had the opportunity to pick somebody else. You never even tried with anybody else. What if there's somebody out there who's better for you, but you don't know because you didn't try? What if you need all the women and I won't be enough for you, with the way your body is now? No. Before I decide anything with you, I want you to try with other people. You go on two dates before you see me again. We can go out, but you have to do two dates between dates with me," she insisted.

"Wha?" he squawked again.

Steve tossed his phone onto his bed in passing and made fists in his short hair. He pulled until it hurt. His hands had to get busy with something. He didn't want to break his phone because he needed it to talk to her and his suite didn't need any more damage.

What the hell!? What the bloody fuck was she saying? He could hear her voice calling insistently from the abandoned phone but he finished his hair pulling circuit into the living room and back again before he could safely pick it up. She'd wanted time and distance. Now she wanted him to date other women. He wasn't an idiot. He knew what this sounded like. But she'd mentioned marriage.

"Eya. I'm not dating other women. I'm dating you," he said, determined.

Marriage. She'd said 'marry you'. But… His emotions were in turmoil.

"Yes, you are. But you go find some other people to go out with. I'm going to be away from you for at least nine more days. Get on the internet and find a date. Get Natasha to help you, or Bucky, or Pepper. You go out. I'd better see pictures of you out with somebody before I see you again," she demanded.

"No. I don't want to," he told her.

"Too bad. You don't always get to have what you want," she held her ground.

She heard him make a frustrated sound, then the phone muffled against something soft again. On his end of the call, Steve paced some more while he tried to get his brain out of crisis mode and back to thinking again. He grabbed at the phone. The glass screen cracked in his grip but it still glowed, still worked.

"Why?" he managed to ask her.

"I told you. We never dated anybody! We're like high school kids on our first crush. Women look at you all the time, but you never give them a chance. I don't want you to think you're sure about me now, and then wonder later when we're bored and twenty years married because we never dated anyone else. I want to know that you can be around other women and you'll stay true to me. Or, if you can't because of what your body needs, I need to know that too. So you get out there and
"This is a test? You want to throw meat at me and see if I can resist biting?" he griped.

"Call it whatever you want to. Just go do it," she said.

"You said 'we.' Are you going to date other guys?" he asked.

"If I want to. I never had the chance. Mami was going to let me start dating when I was sixteen, but then…that never happened. You shouldn't worry, papi. I won't have sex with them. I think I'll be too scared," she said.

Steve sat down on his bed like his strings had been cut. There was noise in the hallway. It was Buck coming home. He couldn't pay attention to that right now.

He wanted to rage at the idea of her dating other men. With her beauty and her eyes, she wouldn't be safe! He'd have to find out the time and place of her dates and then send Buck to keep an eye out from a distance, or… no. He couldn't go himself. That would be wrong. It felt wrong.

She was talking about marriage, finally. She wanted this, apparently needed this to feel sure about them. Unlike him, she'd never had the opportunity to go out. He'd had opportunity before the war, but no one had wanted a little bony guy who looked like he could blow away. Other thoughts came to him as calm and logic seeped back into his mind around the edges. He hated this, but he could use it.

Sam had told him to play it cool. It was too late to pretend that he was fine with them going out with other people, but he could try to scrape up some dignity at the last minute.

"If you want out of this, if you don't want me, then tell me. I can take it. I've been hurt before, Estrella. I'll get over it. Tell me to stay away and I'll leave you alone," Steve said.

He knew his voice sounded chilly. He couldn't help it. He was braced for the pain if she wanted to end this. She didn't say anything for a long moment. He could faintly hear her heart tripping faster than normal. Was she afraid? Was she getting her courage up to tell him what he didn't want to hear?

"That's stupid. I know you didn't read the letter I wrote to you. Get Bucky to give it to you. I'm not throwing us away, Steve. I have to be sure. I love you," she said.

"Right. See ya later," Steve bit out, then he ended the call.

He tossed down the cracked phone again. Steve went to see what Buck had that smelled so good. He was raw inside, burning. He pasted it over with a stiff face as he walked into the kitchen. Buck looked at him while he slid something out of an insulated carrier.

"What's that?" he asked.

"She sent it for you," Buck said.

Steve's stomach lurched. She'd sent him supper?

He peeled the plastic wrap off the bowl.

It was chicken and sausage gumbo, with fried rolls perched at the side. It smelled delicious and steam rose from the freshly made food. It was the same meal they'd been served at the restaurant in
New Orleans while they were on vacation. She'd gone to the trouble of finding the recipe and making it for him because she knew he'd really liked it.

Steve felt low. He was hungry, but he felt more like throwing up than eating. He'd just been very rude and cold to her and she'd sent him something wonderful. Something meant to remind him of their time together. She didn't want to end their relationship or she wouldn't have done this. He leaned down and braced his elbows on the countertop, his hands fisted in his hair again. His eyes felt hot so he squeezed them shut.

"Buck," he ground out.

"Yeah?"

"The letter. The one she wrote," Steve said.

"I'll get it. You should eat while it's hot," he told him.

Steve ambled to his bedroom, feeling hollow and crunchy inside. He carefully picked up his abused phone and went back to the kitchen. He got a spoon, then sat at the bar. He pulled his food close but he ignored his watering mouth. He took the folded hand-written letter that Buck held out to him.

"You read this?" he croaked.

He didn't care if Buck could see the look on his face. It was only Buck. Useless to try to hide anything from him, anyway.

"Sure," his friend said with a shrug.

Bucky went to take a shower and left Steve alone in his misery.

While his food cooled Steve read her words of love and wanting, worry and conflict. There was no lie in them. He could hear her voice in his head as he read, trembling and emotional as she would be, saying words like this to him. None of this was easy for her. She did what she had to do, and all the while her heart was hurting. Like his. Part of the paper smelled of tears and he caught the faint scent of her lips on a corner of it.

He picked up his phone. An edge of cracked glass sliced his finger a little, but it was nothing. He absently rubbed around the bead of slick blood and thought for a moment before he texted her.

I was rude and unkind. I'm sorry. Thank you for supper. I love you too.

He sent the message then ate his supper slowly. He was really hungry but he wanted to enjoy the flavors. After only a few minutes his phone buzzed at him, rattling a sparkling shard loose onto the bar top.

It's okay. I understand.

She didn't say she forgave him. She didn't send him a little red smooch emoji, or the pink hearts. It was good enough. Better than he'd done today. She'd at least responded and not left him hanging for hours.

Steve washed his dishes and set the bowl out to be returned to Wanda's place. He went to the living room and looked at the supplies stacked against the wall. New panels of sheetrock, a bucket of drywall mud, screws, power tools, and hand tools.
Buck got out of the shower and came to help him. They made a pile of debris out in the hallway on a tarp. When the wall studs were bare and clean Buck taught him how to put up the new panels. They worked quietly until past midnight.

He kept thinking in circles. How was this going to work? Could he do what she asked and walk the narrow path that would keep him out of trouble? He liked women. He loved Estrella, but he really liked women. Always had. Now that his needs drove him more harshly he was afraid of what her demands to date other women might bring. Was he going to mess up and lose her? Like he'd messed up and lost Buck?

He shook himself out of those thoughts. Buck looked at him every now and then. His hands, both the flesh and the metal one, worked steady at smoothing mud onto the panels Steve screwed into place.

"I should have gone back for you when you fell. You wouldn't have had to go through all those years if I'd just gone back to look for you," Steve said.

"Nah. Things are how they're meant to be. If you'd come after me Zola would have gotten away. Red Skull would have bombed half the world dead and enslaved the other half. Life would be hell for everybody. It turned out better with the way you did things. We need to move on from that crap and get happy with where we are," Buck said lightly, like it didn't matter to him.

"Yeah?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. You did good, kid. Quit agonizing over it. We're too tough to die anyway, ain't we?" Buck said with a crooked smile.

Steve huffed a subdued laugh. This was the Bucky he'd grown up with, easy to shrug off even the worst things life could stick them with.

"Alright, then. If I'd gone back for your sorry hide, we'd be ancient and gumming our food by now," Steve agreed.

"I don't think so. Do you know how old Natalia is?" Buck asked.

"Her file says she was born in nineteen eighty-four," Steve said uncertainly.

Buck wouldn't have brought it up unless there was more to it.

"She's over sixty. I don't know how much over," Buck told him.

"But Zola's brain said-"

"I know. Zola was a damn computer. He trusted his data because that's what computers do. She was a kid, not a woman yet, when I met her. That was a long time ago. She hasn't changed much since then, except to mature into a woman. She doesn't have the exact same kind of serum that I have, and I don't have quite the same kind you have, but you and me, Steve? We're not gonna be gumming our food for a long, long time yet. If we don't find a way to die first," Buck told him.

Steve grunted. He kept working. What Buck said about Nat and the implications about their life expectancy didn't surprise him. He'd had the thoughts before.

They weren't physically tired, but they picked a spot to stop working. They cleaned up their tools and headed to bed.
"I'm gonna need to find girls to date. Women, I mean," Steve told him.

"Have fun with that," Buck said.

Steve watched him move around in his room, strip down to his shorts and get under the covers. Buck's skin wasn't irritated at the edge of the metal anymore. That made him happy.

"What, you're not gonna help me?" Steve complained.

Buck turned off his lamp and rolled his back toward the door.

"Nah. You got the internet for that. Or ask Natalia. I'm busy. Got a girl to watch. Find your own dates," he said, then he yawned.

Steve frowned all through his shower and brushing his teeth. His body was aroused, the dumb thing, but his mind and heart were too troubled to want to do anything about it. He was still frowning and thinking when he turned off the light and laid down for the night. He rubbed at his skin; his arms, his shoulders, and his chest with his own hands but it did him no good. It wasn't his touch he was missing. He shifted restlessly under the covers and his movements only made him more irritable. Tomorrow he would push away his emotions and be the man he was expected to be. For tonight, he'd allow himself to feel the hurt, the uncertainty, and the loneliness.

Estrella tried not to let Steve's abrupt end to their call make her cry. His cold closing told her that he was hurting and trying to hang onto some of his pride. Unlike before when he'd been pleading with her not to leave him, her pheromones weren't there to influence him today. Steve's hurt and his rudeness were probably what was natural to him as a man not under her unfair influence. She took a few moments to breathe deeply again, then slipped her phone back into her bra. She had no pockets to put it anywhere else right now.

She couldn't leave Wanda to clean up alone. Making gumbo dirtied a lot of dishes. There was still work to be done when she joined her friend in the kitchen. She didn't remember where she'd gotten all the dishes from, so she cautiously bumped Wanda aside and did the washing while Wanda dried and put them away.

"The walls in here are thin. I didn't mean to listen in, but girl, are you crazy? You want your man to date other women?" Wanda asked her.

"No, but he needs to. I want him to be tempted and to show me that he's strong. I want him to have a chance with somebody else. He wants me now because he has no choice. I am what I am. With everyone else he's shy, like he's still a man that nobody wants. Wanda, what if he only finds his confidence after we're married, and then he wants to test it, and I get hurt, and our children get hurt? He's got a strong sex drive but his self-esteem is holding him back from using it. He needs to learn his value, to see it in other women's eyes. If he still wants me after that, then I'm okay," Estrella explained, partly figuring things out as she spoke.

"He knows women want him. He tried to get past me with it once," Wanda cautioned her.

"He did?" Estrella laughed, then she shook her head.

"It's not the same. He's shy if he's really got a chance for sex, except for a few times, but that's different because there was money. I want him to see and know that he could have women, but then to choose me anyway," Estrella said.
Wanda made a disapproving sound and turned her mouth down.

"Why are you insecure? You're fine now. He wants you. Men don't stay true, anyway. Accept that he's going to cheat and take him if you want him. You'll have him most of the time," Wanda advised.

"No," Estrella denied, "I'm not like that. If he cheats on me, I think I would kill the woman. If he's going to be mine, then he's only for me."

"You don't go to jail for a man," Wanda said.

"He's not just any man," Estrella pointed out while she scrubbed at the inside of the big pot.

"You're not just any woman. Why do you have to come hide behind a steel door and a reinforced wall with me? They tore the whole wall open, out in the hallway. They put some more stuff inside the wall before they closed it up. That door's not just a door. The frame is bolted into the whole wall. Why'd they do all that?" Wanda asked.

"I thought Natasha told you. Men won't leave me alone. It might get bad this week. If you want me to go, Natasha can take me somewhere else. You have her number," Estrella said.

They put away the last dish and let the big pot sit in the rack to dry. Wanda tossed the dishtowels into the laundry machine.

"Nothing's coming through that door. You can stay here. Whatever it is with you, I'm glad to see you healthy. You were two steps away from dead and you looked like a bum, smelled like a bum. He didn't want you then, not like a woman, but he took you up and tended to you like a real friend. You shouldn't make him jump through hoops. You already know he loves you," Wanda challenged her.

"Love isn't enough. Not for people like us. We're different, Wanda. If I have babies with him they'll be different too, and people will try to take them. It has to be this way," Estrella said.

Wanda didn't argue with her any more. Her friend looked plainly skeptical, but they left it at that.

"Bucky says Steve can get through that wall if he wants to. If it gets crazy here and you get scared, tell me and Natasha will take me away," Estrella assured her.

Wanda looked insulted.

"It's not just the wall he'd have to get through," she said.

Estrella smiled and tipped up to hug her friend. Wanda didn't know what she was offering to go up against, but it was okay. Steve would stay away. Their friends would see to it.

They went their separate ways and Estrella shut herself in her room for the night. She wanted badly to text Steve, but she messaged Jesse instead.

What kind of guitar is yours? How much did it cost? Do I shop at a pawn shop to find one I can afford? How do I know I'm not buying a piece of junk? I think a new one would be too expensive.

She settled into her bed and picked up a piece of paper off her night stand. It was her cell phone bill, but it worked fine as a fan to cool herself. It would be nice to take a tepid bath but Wanda was in the only bathroom.
She needed something to distract herself from how much she was dreading the next few days so she hoped that Jesse would text her back. This was just the beginning, but already she was feeling hot. Estrella paused her fanning to fold the paper so it would be stiffer and move more air. She suspected that she couldn't open the window to the cold November night. It looked like a new window, and not a normal one. Jarvis would probably notify Tony or Bucky or Steve or all three if she tried to open the window.

Estrella fanned herself with one hand. She peeled the bed back to just the sheet with the other hand. She pushed off her sweatpants and struggled out of her bra. Her phone made Jesse's tone and she picked it up.

*I probably paid too much for it, but it's good. I need sleep. I'll talk to you later about it,* Jesse sent to her.

It wasn't even late in New York, and Texas was a time zone earlier.

Okay, old man. Get your sleep, she replied.

Jesse responded with a middle-finger emoji. Estrella smiled a little, then put her phone away. She turned off the lamp and lay on top of the covers.

She fanned herself and worried until she fell asleep. Steve would probably do as she asked him to. It already hurt to think of him going out, spending time with others. She didn't want him looking at another woman as he looked at her, but she had to give him that chance.

She had to do the same. As soon as her fertility faded away, she would find somebody to go out with. Steve was her friend, her hero. His libido was all amped up, so maybe what she was had hooked into him more than she should be. What if what she really needed was a plain, nice guy who wouldn't provoke her into the kind of helpless wanting she felt for Steve? Maybe she could live as a normal person without Steve around to push her to extremes. If she had children with a normal man, people wouldn't be after them because of Steve's DNA. She felt guilty to think that way, but she had to think of everything before she decided to marry him. It was crazy to consider marriage so soon, anyway. She'd only known Steve for a few months.

Estrella slept fitfully, moving to fan herself when being too hot woke her up. Halfway through the night she got up to fix a bowl of leftover gumbo. She stood in front of the open refrigerator door longer than was healthy for Wanda's utility bill.

When her belly was full again she tried her best to sleep until morning. Soon she knew she would be too restless to sleep.
No more putting it off. He had to do it, so he may as well get it done. Plus, it was cold. If he pulled over to stop he could get a hot drink from his thermos. Steve put on his right turn signal so Russel, the security agent who was acting as chauffeur for Pepper and the film crew, would know that he was pulling over. He gave Russel a hand signal to keep the large SUV far back on the shoulder of the highway. He wanted some privacy for this.

Steve took his time looking around at the countryside while he got his thermos from the bike's saddlebag and had a drink. The hot cocoa was great, almost a shocking heat against the early winter chill around him. He was the only fool to be found riding a motorcycle across the frosted roads of northern Minnesota.

It was worth the chill in his extremities for the view. Nordic-looking pine forest stretched on forever just outside of the tiny town of Bruno. The silent landscape was covered in a crisp, clean layer of new snow. The bright glare of sunshine on the snow made him glad he'd bought sunglasses in Minneapolis.

His other sunglasses from Texas were back in New York in the parking garage with his truck. His lips firmed in determination not to think of her but it was too late. His mind already went there. Steve had to forcefully pack away thoughts of Estrella. He needed to focus on his work here and have faith that Buck would look after her. Hell, he'd stopped to make this phone call, like she wanted him to. That was enough thinking about her for now.

A brown hawk shuffled its wings and looked at him from its roadside perch atop a power pole. Steve smiled at the reminder of Clint, who was still out on leave. His breath huffed billows of vapor into the chill air. When he was a little guy enduring the New York winters he'd never had the body heat or the lung capacity to make such a cloud of vapor. Odd, how a simple thing like a hot breath on a cold day could remind him of how much he'd changed.

He knew he was bullshitting himself, wasting time. The cold was no excuse for not texting Natasha. His fingers worked perfectly fine even when his core body temperature was ten degrees south of where it should be. The thermos went back in his bag and he got out his phone. He touched Nat's number from his short list of favorites.

*Can you get me S Carter's personal number? I already have her business extension.*

Nat replied by adding a new contact to his phone almost immediately. Steve's finger hovered over the new contact. Before he touched it he heard a vehicle coming. It was a quiet little two-lane highway. He waited for the vehicle to pass by, another excuse for a small delay.

In his rearview mirror he saw that it was a large black pickup truck overtaking them. The truck had a decorative license plate on the front bumper that proudly displayed the orange and black Harley Davidson logo. Steve stowed his phone away as he saw that the truck was slowing to stop beside him. His defensive instincts clamored in his mind but he saw through the window tint that there
was an ordinary family in the vehicle. He made an at-ease gesture to Russel behind his back while
the truck stopped beside him on the empty highway. The passenger side window went down and
Steve smiled at a winter-bundled lady and her husband who leaned across the seat to see out of her
window.

"Are you alright there, fella? How can you ride in November? Ya got anti-freeze in yer veins?" the
guy asked in a classic Minnesotan accent.

"I'm fine. Looking forward to making a stop in Duluth for the night. Thanks for asking," Steve
said.

He politely took off his sunglasses and slid his black leather cover off his head. It felt wrong to
chat with friendly folks when he knew he looked intimidating. A second after his face was clear
little hands were pounding on the inside of the rear passenger window of the truck. Calls of "Dad!
Dad! Put down the window!" let Steve know he'd been recognized.

The driver looked at his kids in the back like they'd lost their minds until they exclaimed that it was
Captain America on the roadside. He got off the bike and walked up beside the truck to chat with
the kids. He signed his autograph for them on both a red and blue rubber boot and a road map. The
wife looked dazzled and the man, Tucker, shook his hand. They exclaimed over how cold his hand
was and once again asked him why on earth he was riding a bike in the north in November.

"I've got a little time between missions. Thought I'd get out and see the country. Cold doesn't
bother me much," he explained to them.

After a few more minutes of friendly chat he waved the family on their way and got back on his
bike. He marveled at being out in the countryside in a place so rural that folks just pulled over to
talk to somebody stopped on the side of the road. In the time he'd been visiting with them, not
another car had passed by. The highway in either direction was empty of traffic. No more putting it
off this time, really. He touched the new contact that Nat had sent him and waited for the call to
complete.

"Who's this?" asked the soft voice he remembered so clearly.

Even when she was being brief and business-like, he'd always thought her voice had a nice tone.
Fury had probably thought of that when considering who to place on his security detail at his D.C.
apartment.

"It's Rogers. I had Romanoff get your number for me. I hope you don't mind," Steve said.

"Captain. It's nice to hear from you. Can I help you with something?" Sharon asked.

"That's for you to decide. I could use a date. Tomorrow night, if that's good for you," he bravely
forged ahead.

Sharon was quiet for a moment on the other end of the call. She took a breath like she was going to
answer him immediately, but then she reconsidered. Steve's heart thudded a little faster. Sharon
was an associate. She'd proven herself to be a loyal ally in a time of need. How would he pull this
off smoothly if she turned him down? Crap! How could he stay professional after a negative
response? Maybe he shouldn't have called Sharon. He should have started fulfilling Estrella's
request with some nameless girl in a bar somewhere along the road. He shouldn't have-

"Time and place? What kind of gear should I bring? Will it be formal or should I dress down?" Sharo
"I'll be in Duluth. I was thinking we could find a nice restaurant for dinner. You don't need any gear unless you expect trouble. Tell me what time you usually eat and I'll get you a flight," Steve offered.

"Business expense, Cap. I'll cover the flight and turn the receipt in. Duluth, Minnesota?" Sharon asked.

"It's not a business expense, Sharon. It's a date. For dinner," he corrected.

"Oh," she said, then "Oh!"

Steve chuckled.

"This is about as awkward as I imagined," he acknowledged the moment.

"If, if it's a date, actually a date, then I should tell you..." she paused.

"I already know, Sharon. I see your picture on Peggy's bedside table when I visit her. You're just a kid in the photo, but I can tell that it's you. Are you her grand-daughter?" Steve asked.

"No. She's my great-aunt. Um. If you're okay with that, then I guess I'm alright with it. I'm flexible on the time. I stay late at the office sometimes and other times... What works for you?" Sharon wondered.

Steve could tell by the tiny tremble in her voice that Sharon was nervous and excited. For once, he wasn't the one feeling anxious. It was a good feeling to be at ease but he wanted to reassure Sharon.

"I'll get you a flight for four tomorrow and send you the details. We could meet for dinner at seven? You've got my number. Call me when you get into town and we can talk about what we're in the mood for," Steve said.

"I'll look forward to seeing you, Captain," she answered.

"You won't be seeing the Captain, Sharon. Please. I'm Steve," he said with some confidence she would understand that he meant it.

"In that case, Steve, I'm really looking forward to seeing you," she said.

The call ended and he couldn't suppress a grin which felt like it would be right at home on Bucky's face. If he was going to do this dating thing, then he was going to do it right and make sure it looked real to anyone who might notice.

By the time Steve and the film crew drove into Duluth that afternoon Steve was ready for a workout. Darcy had arranged a nice hotel for them, far more comfortable than Steve would have required for himself. He wanted Pepper to be at ease while they travelled so he didn't comment about the unnecessary expense. Steve thought it looked odd to see a uniformed valet drive away on his bike but he kept his mouth shut about that too. One thing he did insist on was a room far away from the rest of his company. They had three suites on the fourth floor, south wing of the place and he had a room on the second floor to the north side.

He mentioned to Pepper that he was going out for a run but that he'd like to have dinner with her in the hotel restaurant. Darcy eyed him again before they parted ways in the hotel lobby. Steve ignored Darcy's gaze and Pepper called for her distracted assistant. Pep was taking care of both his wardrobe for the PR pieces and handling most of her work for Stark Industries so Steve couldn't begrudge her Darcy's help. She'd done a good job so far of arranging accommodations for them.
while they travelled. The food was good at the stops they made and he was thankful for that. For those reasons, he tolerated Darcy's somewhat teasing attention.

Steve was learning that you could tell the class of a hotel by its smell. There were the places where you didn't want to walk barefoot on the carpet and you didn't want to sleep in the beds, but you had no choice. There were the places that were alright and nothing was really out of place, but you wouldn't treat it like home by eating dropped food off the floor or drooling on the pillows. Then there were places like this. His room was pristine as if he was the only one who'd ever been there and the air smelled fresh, not artificially deodorized.

He secured himself inside and checked his phone for messages. Then he opened his suitcase and changed into his sweats to go for a run. His heavy biker leathers came off, as well as the black jeans and shirt. He slid his boots under the hassock and put on his running shoes. Just like being the only biker on the road in cold weather, nobody else would be out dressed like him, in only sweatpants and a shirt. He tucked his phone and room card into an inner pocket and went down to find a running path around the city of Duluth.

There was a lot of interesting stuff to see and he enjoyed the views along the shores of the lake. People bundled against the cold looked at him strangely and he smiled. Some folks recognized him and he stopped to visit with them and give his autograph. It reminded him of Estrella, but the more he scrawled the circle with the star in it and wrote "Cap", the more he got used to it being a publicity thing, and not directly related to his girl.

He had to stop so often to chat with people that he had to extend his run to twice as long to feel that he'd accomplished anything. After all day sitting on the bike he needed the physical activity or he would make the film crew nervous with his high-energy attitude.

Back at his room, he texted Pepper about meeting for dinner in a half hour.

Rosie had made the trip with him and was serving as a faithful companion. He took the toy into the shower with him and used it hard for twenty minutes. It was early in the evening yet. He hadn't heard anyone moving in the hotel rooms around his. Steve didn't bother with much vocal restraint when the warm water, slick soap, and Rosie's grip around him did what he needed it to do. Mental images of Estrella in that tiny beige string bikini had served as his fantasies for days now. He was still coming up with new ideas of what he could have done with her that day at the pool. What would she taste like if she would let him kiss her like he'd wanted to? He'd loved her flavor before. Trying to imagine what she'd be like while she was fertile never failed to send him over. Would her voice have a stronger effect on him if she took her necklace off?

Steve's toes were tingling with residual pleasure as he dressed nicely for dinner and went down to meet with Pep. He was never fully satisfied lately. All he could do was take the edge off so that he'd be a decent travel companion. Rosie would have to be enough for now. It's not like he had a choice.

Pepper was already seated in the hotel restaurant waiting for him. She was her usual elegant self, not at all frazzled from a day spent on the road. He apologized if she'd had to wait on him. She smiled and indicated her wine glass. Steve slid into the private booth.

She looked at him in the dim light from overhead, then wiggled the fingers of her free hand at him to get him to lean forward to the small lamp on their table.

"What?" Steve asked her.

"There's something different about you. Let me see you in the light," she said after she took her
wine away from her lips.

Before he thought much about it, Steve moved closer to the light as she requested.

"Ah. Hot shower? Quickie or two? You're flushed and your pupils are blown. You've been pale and cold all day. We could use this look in the close-up pieces. Do you think you could do it again later to get the same effect for the camera?" she asked.

"Pep," he fussed at her mildly.

She was being clinical about it or he was sure he would have felt like sinking under the table to hide.

"You're trusting me with your look, remember? Now answer the question," she said.

The waiter came to take their order for appetizers, then went away.

"No. That's not for the public eye. What I do in my time is my business," Steve said.

"I understand, but it's a shame. That look could say a lot on screen without having to say anything at all," she told him.

"It's not for me," Steve said.

Someone brought him a large mug of the house brew and he was thankful for it. Pepper perused her menu and he did the same. He didn't notice much about the food, other than that it as hot and filling.

"So what's this about?" Pepper finally asked him over their meal.

"I've got a date with Sharon Carter tomorrow night. What should I wear?" he asked.

Pepper set down her fork, which she'd been about to lift to her mouth. The question was easy to see on her face.

"Estrella wants this. It doesn't make much sense to me but she insists, so I'm doing it. Dress me, please?" he said.

"Alright," Pepper took up her wine glass and curled her wrist close as if she was hugging it.

"What are you going for? Are you establishing a business relationship, rekindling a friendship, or looking for romance?" she asked.

"Romance. This is strategic. I don't mean to play with these women, but it has to look real. I'm not an actor, so it has to feel real for me. People will recognize me while I'm out. There will be pictures and uploads to YouTube. I want to keep my dignity and have some fun, but it needs to be clear in the images that the intent is romantic. I'll need to go out with several different women over the next few weeks," Steve said.

Pepper didn't discuss his goals while they were in a public dining room, but from the look on her face he was sure she understood what he was doing.

"For romance with a side of dignity, I'd go with the navy blue and black," Pepper said.

"The navy blue and black what?" he asked.
"I have it in wardrobe. I'll take care of it. When is dinner?" Pepper wondered.

"Probably around seven," he told her.

"Come to my suite around six and we'll get you setup," she assured him.

"Thanks," Steve said, relieved.

His smile was genuine, but Pepper looked back at him thoughtfully.

"What?" he asked again.

"Steve, do you know what you're doing?"

"I'm planning. This is what I need to do. I've thought about it and I'm doing it," he said, calm and confident.

"You're treating these dates like mini missions," Pepper guessed.

He nodded.

"Then I'm sure you'll do fine as long as you keep your goals in mind," she said.

Pepper's phone rang in her purse with an AC/DC ringtone. She apologized while she dug for her phone.

"I'm sorry. It's impossible to keep my phone on mute when it's Tony calling and he really wants to get through," she said.

"It's fine. I know. Go ahead, talk to him," Steve said with easy understanding.

He knew what was going on. Tony trusted Pepper. It bothered Steve that Tony didn't fully trust him to be a gentleman, but he had to concede that his behavior hadn't been the best lately.

Steve got out his phone. Pepper might have put on a show of tolerance when Tony first interrupted their dinner, but she was fully absorbed in talking to Stark now. Her face was soft and affectionate while she stared down at something on the table and pulled a lock of ginger hair repeatedly through her fingers. Steve took a pic and sent it to Tony.

Stop worrying. She never looks at me like that. I've got my own girl. You keep an eye out for mine, and I'll look out for yours, pal, he sent along with the image.

Tony didn't respond and Steve didn't expect him to.

Later, Steve sent Estrella the red smooch emoji they sometimes sent to each other at bedtime. He didn't expect a response from her either.

He turned off the light and settled down to try and get some sleep.

His phone buzzed.

Missing you so much it hurts, Estrella responded.

He felt the same way but he was still cranky about her wanting him to date other people. He set his phone down and went to sleep.
"You don't need to be here tomorrow," Estrella griped at him from her room.

Buck turned up the thermostat in the hallway to return it to where Wanda had it this morning. All day the girl had been sweating and fanning herself while she tried to work. The cold didn't bother him so he'd lowered the temp in the apartment by ten degrees while Wanda was away for work. She'd be home soon, so it was time to turn it back up.

"I said you don't need to be here tomorrow," Estrella said more forcefully from her bedroom door.

Buck turned to glance at her. She was in shorts and a top more suited to summer weather but she looked clammy with sweat. It would only get worse as the heat rose in the apartment. Hopefully-

There was a knock at the door and his attention turned from the girl. He went to the security display on the wall by the door. Their visitor was expected. He checked a few perimeter monitors then started the brief process of opening the door.

"Why is he here?" Estrella asked.

"Hey!" Buck fussed as Estrella dodged around him and jerked open the door.

There wasn't any danger he couldn't handle so he let her do it. Estrella stood and glared at Billy the courier. The young guy smiled his usual friendly smile then glanced uncertainly to Bucky. He lifted the box fan he'd brought and started to speak.

"Hi, Miss. I hope this is what you were..." Billy's words trailed off.

Bucky smirked. It was plain to see that the kid had gotten stuck in Estrella's gaze and the girl was too out of sorts to want to look away. Billy stepped forward like a hypnotized zombie. Buck took the fan from his hand and shoved him back out into the hallway.

"Thanks, kid. Beat it," he told Billy.

He had to push Estrella back a bit, but he got the door shut and secured while she stood there and frowned at him. The girl looked bottled-up, like she wanted to fuss at him for sending Billy away. A glance at the monitor showed that Billy was moving down the hall toward the elevator.

Estrella followed Bucky back to her room and watched while he set the box fan up on a chair and aimed it toward her bed. He turned it on and she eagerly bounced onto the twin sized bed to get in front of the moving air. She held her hair up off of her neck.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"No problem. I've got nothing else to do except work with Natalia in the mornings and maybe get some PT with Thor in the evenings. I don't mind coming around. I told Steve I'd be here so he won't worry so much while he's out there working," Buck tried to mollify her bad attitude about his presence.

She had her eyes closed and her skin was starting to dry under the moving air. She still wouldn't look at him.

"I don't want you here," she said.
"So I'll stay out in the hall and play checkers with Mister Kaminski. You won't know I'm here," he said.

Estrella cracked her eyes open to give him her 'go away' look. Buck shut her bedroom door and got his coat from the peg. She heard him secure the heavy door as he left.

Her shoulders slumped and she bit her lip. She knew she was flushed with heat and hoped that it had hidden her embarrassment. She didn't have any affection for Billy. He was skinny and not at all strong-looking or athletic. He was a normal young man, not particularly attractive or unattractive. But he was male. She frowned and tried to reason with herself that it wasn't her choice to want him, but he was the only man she'd seen for two days. Bucky didn't count.

James Barnes was certainly everything most girls could ask for if a brooding, pretty face and a strong body was her preference. He was nothing but frustration for Estrella. Despite the clues his body gave that he would be a good mate, his sexuality was dead inside. It was confusing, how his looks were so at odds with his scent, his feel. He may as well have been a pre-teen boy. Useless to her. Impervious to her needs.

The kind and rational part of her brain reminded her that Bucky was being nicer than he needed to be, considering how crabby her attitude was. He'd brought her cookies and coffee this morning. He'd caught her attention and reminded her to calm herself by taking deep breaths, especially in the afternoon when she couldn't work anymore. And now he'd gotten her a fan so she would feel at least a little better tonight while she tried to sleep.

Estrella got a banana and peeled a mango. There were grapes. And cheese. She ripped at the paper wrapper on the loaf of dark bread and tore off a chunk of it. Pickles! She dropped several small bumpy pickles among the cheese cubes and the grapes. There was a can of sliced beets in the pantry. She drained the juice and poured the deep red slices into a bowl. She hugged a cold glass of milk to her face while she took all of her kitchen loot back to her room.

Eating was the only thing that temporarily distracted her from the faint aching pressure in her lower body. She bit off a piece of bread and tossed a cube of cheese into her mouth. Tension crimped her brow. The pressure was going to get worse. She didn't want anyone around when it got bad. The anxiety of knowing she was going to embarrass herself, either in front of Bucky or Wanda, made her want to think of only her food while she finished eating.

She set her empty dishes aside and hugged her pillow to her body. She glared mindlessly at the fringe around the bottom of the lamp shade until her phone startled her.

Steve! The mere thought of him flushed a wave of heat through her until her skin prickled. She hurried to check his message.

It was red kissy lips. Just the lips. No words. No sharing of how his day had been, or who he was with, or what kind of people he was meeting. Usually he chatted with her before bedtime and she could easily imagine his voice, his face, his mouth…

Thoughts of Steve's mouth and how he liked to use it on her made her momentarily lose rational thought. Not that she'd been very rational today.

She'd quit trying to reply to Stark Industries memos when Tony himself had messaged her.

I'm not opposed to F-bombs as a rule, but I think they're against SI comm policy. Pepper's fault, not mine. Take an early weekend and get back to it later. No worries. I intercepted before it posted.
Her mind wasn't right. Typing bad language on the job, being momentarily attracted to Billy, and her unfounded frustration with poor Bucky told her so.

She wanted to call Steve and hear his voice, hear that wonderful rough tone he used when they were talking about sweet things. Despite her miserable heat, she shivered thinking of him. Instead of texting back something provocative, she tried hard to be smart for a moment. Bucky had said that she shouldn't let on to Steve how she was feeling.

*Missing you so much it hurts,* she sent to him.

That wasn't so bad.

Her skin felt too soft. Too bothered by everything. Estrella took her necklace off and set it on the night stand. She changed into brief nightclothes. Her hair blocked the flow of moving air over her skin, so she put it up in an elastic. She kicked off the covers. Even her pillow wasn't tolerable once it heated up and started radiating her body heat back at her. She tossed it to the foot of the bed and clicked off the lamp.

She heaved a sigh and tried to sleep, knowing it was probably a useless effort. Wanda came home, clattered around in the kitchen and watched some television, then went to bed without bothering her. She lay in the dark and her mind drifted into fantasies which only made her feel more restless and unsatisfied.

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Wanda found him outside her door in the morning. Bucky was sitting with her neighbor at the rickety little folding table the man put out in the hall every day. The checkers weren't moving on the board at the moment, but Mister Kaminski's liver-spotted hand hovered, waiting.

"Morning, Wanda. This Mick says he's with you?" her neighbor asked.

Bucky huffed a quiet laugh. It had been a long time since anybody called him a Mick. It was kind of nice to hear. He was tempted to respond by calling Mister Kaminski a Polak, but the guy was neither a soldier nor an old pal, so he didn't.

"For now," she said to the old man then turned her attention to Bucky.

Wanda looked at him with a certain calmness that didn't contain any of her usual dislike. The woman was worried about something.

"You should go take care of your stuff," she told him.

Buck picked up the covered foil dish he'd brought and hurried inside. He paused only long enough to make sure the door was secure, then went to Estrella's room. The muffled sounds from inside got louder when he opened her door to find out why Wanda was concerned.

Estrella was on her bed, curled over her knees, rocking side to side. She hugged her pillow to her face but it only slightly helped to muffle her unhappy moaning. The girl was showing a lot of skin. Buck recognized the little multi-colored panties she wore as some they'd bought while shopping. Her top was a ribbed undershirt which hugged her golden curves. It was thin enough to show her skin tone through it, especially with it stuck to her.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked.
Estrella stopped rocking and making noise. She seemed to hold her breath. Then she whipped around, grabbed and hurled her phone at him.

"Get out!" she yelled.

Her brown eyes looked tired, even in her anger. Buck caught her phone before it could shatter against the door frame. She was a mess. Sweat soaked her and her hair was half falling down, half knotted up at the back of her head. If he'd had the ability to respond to a pretty dame, he surely would have.

For a moment, he obeyed her demand. He took a few steps in the hallway and adjusted the heat down by fifteen degrees. He got her a real fork from the kitchen and a glass of juice. The food he'd brought was still warm on the bottom.

She turned and growled at him when he came back to bother her. It was funny because as soon as she saw the food and drink in his hands she stopped making noise at him.

"What is that?" she asked sharply.

"Bacon, egg, and cheese. Stopped at a cart on the way. Here," he said.

When he got close enough to the bed she lunged at him and grabbed the food. She almost spilled the juice, but saved the slosh by catching it with her mouth at the rim of the glass. She eyed him for less than half a second and he understood that was all the thanks he was going to get.

Since she was distracted with food he took a moment to check with Jarvis and the overnight images from the security system. Nothing unusual had happened. She was so into the food when he got back to her room that she didn't react at all when he leaned into her space to get a sniff at her neck. He didn't have words to describe her smell, but it was getting stronger each day. That was just the scent his nose could detect. He wondered what her pheromones would be like if he could feel their effect.

Buck moved the fan onto the dresser closer to the bed and adjusted its angle. He settled into the chair and waited. The girl was under a thin veneer of civility today. There was no telling what she would do.

He planned to be a fixture around her, to try not to bother her too much, but to make sure she didn't do anything crazy. This was like a strange flavor in his brain. He was used to long hours of watching and waiting, but it had usually been with the goal of ending a life, not tending to one. The remembered smells of dust and rifle oil, heat or cold, one eye closed and the other one looking through the scope, finger light as a whisper on the trigger, waiting, waiting… he mentally shrugged off that stuff. That's not who he needed to be today. At least, not right now. He had to reach back further in his memories to get what he needed for this job.

It started feeling nostalgic when he recalled the hours sitting bedside with Stevie. The kid had been hot or cold or coughing or ominously silent, never vigorous and angry like the girl was at the moment. Still, it was nice to recall that he'd done this before. When Steve was small he'd been frailer than the girl was now, so he was fairly confident that he could do this without breaking her.

Estrella scraped the last of the breakfast food from the foil dish. She washed it down with juice, then she set it all aside. Modesty and tidiness was normally her thing, but none of that was in sight this morning. Other dishes were piled on the night stand and she made no effort to unstick her shirt from her damp skin or to even sit with her legs closed. She faced the fan and basked in the moving air as much as she could. The room smelled like overheated girl.
"You didn't have to bring food. Why are you being nice to me?" she asked.

"Because my ma taught me right," he said.

Buck watched her try to control her breathing, but shallow panting seemed to be what her body wanted. She eyed him suspiciously. He was glad that even with her necklace discarded and fallen to the floor, her voice didn't affect him.

Estrella managed to ignore him for a while by closing her eyes. The air felt good but it wasn't enough. She was so tired, but she couldn't rest, couldn't relax. She sat on her heels and made sure the fan pushed air at her hottest places. Biting her lip hard enough to hurt was all she could do to hold back the miserably embarrassing moans her throat wanted to make. Her hand rubbed at the pressure inside her lower belly. It didn't help much to rub from the outside, like tonguing at a sore tooth. When her mind fuzzed out to try to endure the discomfort, she was unaware that she started swaying slightly, rocking side to side from her hips. Not enough breath. Her teeth let go of her lip so that her mouth could open.

"You look feverish, but you're sweating. Is that normal for you?" his voice disrupted the mindlessness she'd briefly achieved.

"Get out!" she shrieked at him.

It was like she'd turned into a wild harpy. If he wasn't fast she would have been able to claw him. She leapt from the bed onto him and tried to swipe at his face. Her bare feet perched on his thighs and she shrieked at him again when she failed to bloody him. What he could see of her eyes through her messy hair was manic, shrewish rage.

Before she could pull a muscle from trying to scrap with him, he turned her around and locked her down in his lap. The girl tried to writhe and buck, but he bore down as tight as she could to take without her bones creaking.

Estrella moaned again, her frustration spiking intolerably because of his show of dominance and strength. But he was false! Fake! Not even hard for her!

"Useless! You're broken!" she accused him.

"Yeah, I know," he agreed calmly.

Her damp skin slipped against his arms when he loosened his hold on her a little. She was going to bruise but it would likely fade before Steve saw her again. She wasn't so much struggling as she was shifting around, testing his strength. It gave him a nice feel for how much force he should use to hold her securely. Her skin was too hot.

While she panted and wiggled, he shifted her into one arm and used his teeth to tug the glove off of his left hand. He pushed his shirt sleeve as far as he could up his metal arm. Stark had said that the arm's power cell wasn't dangerous anymore, so he flared open the bands and held his arm out in front of the blowing fan. The falling temperature in the room and the moving air chilled the metal until he could feel the cold seeping up toward the flesh of his shoulder.

Estrella side-eyed the ominous way he'd exposed his arm and was holding it out as if he meant to strike her with it. What little rationality she had left told her that he wouldn't hurt her. She tried to wiggle away a few minutes later when he brought his arm in close to hold her. Cold, cold metal touched her skin and she gasped.

"Hnnn," she whined.
She pressed her face to his hand and snuggled in until she was touching all she could of the blessed coolness.

"I'm not completely useless," Buck chuckled at her.

He got up and moved them to sit on the bed in front of the fan.

"C'mon. Talk to me. Do I need to take you back to the tower or call the doc over here? You're too hot. What should I do with you?" Buck asked.

"I'm okay. It's always like this," she said.

The chill of his arm had distracted and calmed her even better than food.

"You're not okay. What do you need?" he asked.

"Steve. I need him. Take me to him," she said, panting again.

"He would love that, but no. He's gotta work and you gotta tough it out on your own this time. I know he'll be real sweet to you next time this comes around, if you marry him," Buck told her.

"No! He's going to fuck other women. I want him now!"

Bucky laughed.

"The both of you are idiots. He was sayin the same thing after Talia took you away. He trashed his place, you know? He got hold of me and broke half the stuff in his apartment slingin me around. You mooks deserve each other," he said with fondness.

Estrella did a slow, strong writhe in his lap and made some eager sounding noises.

"You like it when he loses his cool and acts like a cave-man, huh? Nobody's ever made him lose his shit like that. I think he likes it. Hey, you know it's your fault if he goes with other girls, 'cause you told him to," Bucky kept up a running commentary in a low, soothing tone.

He didn't think she was paying attention, anyway. He eased her down onto the bed. She was more clingy than combative now that he'd made her think of playing with Steve rather than fighting with him. When he attempted to get up and go back to the chair she didn't want to let go of his arm. When he lay down to let her stay close to the cool metal she liked, she tried to get on top of him. Buck ended up belly-down on the bed beside her with his forearm pressed to her sternum and his hand at her jaw. Every so often he flared the metal bands open to super-cool his arm for her. She eventually quit fighting him and stayed down.

The games on his phone were better to keep his attention on than looking at the girl. Steve wouldn't like him staring at all the skin she was showing. He split his attention between monitoring her for changes, playing on his phone, and being aware of their security status as the morning crept by. The girl was near constantly wiggling, shifting her hips, moving her legs, rubbing at her belly and making little whiney noises when she breathed. Every so often she would crack her tired eyes open and frown at him as if this was all his fault.

Around noon, the coolness of his arm and the daytime temperatures outside weren't enough to keep her fever down anymore. Her eyes were starting to look glassy. Her movements were more active and restless.

Buck took her with him to the bathroom and sat her on the toilet. He filled the tub with tepid water
then put her in it. Estrella thrashed in surprise and got water on the floor. He held her down like he'd done for much of the morning. If the little undershirt she wore was showy before, it was absolutely useless now. He kept his eyes on her face or he watched and counted her pulse at her neck. It was real easy to see because it pounded right at the water's edge, making little vibrations on the surface. After a while she seemed more aware of his presence.

She blinked her eyes at him and crossed her arms over her breasts. He got out of the way and let her. Her legs pulled up and together to make some attempt at modesty. Bucky pushed her wet hair back from her forehead then poured a cupped hand of water over her too-hot scalp.

She bit her lip and looked away. Her moan was of a different sort. Embarrassment. Shame.

"I didn't want you to see this," she whispered.

Her fingers felt of her throat and she glanced at him.

"It's fine. I'm broken, remember?" he murmured.

"You're not broken. You're numb," she said.

"It's all the same. I don't mind. The water helps you," he mentioned.

It felt good to have coolness all around her, rather than just on one side from the fan, or just from his arm.

She looked at him again, having a difficult time believing that she was practically naked and he wasn't looking anywhere but at her hair or her neck.

"I didn't want anybody to see me like this. It's going to get worse," she grumbled.

"Worse? If you get much hotter, I'm gonna have to take you to medical, doll," he warned.

"I don't think I'll get hotter. I go crazy, Bucky. I can't stand it, it's so bad! I don't want you to see," she said miserably.

"So I won't look," he smirked and glanced briefly at her face, then away again to trickle more water over her head.

She was thirsty, so she stuck out her lip and caught some water for her dry mouth. It wasn't the best she'd had, but she needed it.

"I know it gets bad because I don't remember. When I could get away, out in the desert, I would wake up hungry and thirsty when it was over. I don't remember the days in the middle," she said.

Large, worried eyes turned to him. What was crazy was how pretty she was, even with her hair all messed up, her face pinched with discomfort and tiredness, and no attempt at makeup or girly decorations.

"You're bashful about it. I get that. But here's the deal. You're acting unpredictable. You're making noises and you'll probably get louder if it's going to get worse. I'm not gonna let you go without food or water, and I'm gonna see that you get some rest. So I'm staying. Fuck being embarrassed, alright? We're getting through this in good shape and I'm gonna help you," he promised.

A speculative spark sharpened her gaze and she bit her lip.

"No. I'm not helping you like that. Think about whatever makes you happy, but you're not getting
anything from me," Buck told her.

"I don't want you! I know I don't," she complained, but she looked uncertain.

"Look. I've seen some shit that still doesn't make sense to me. Stuff that shouldn't have been medically or biologically possible. Whatever happens with you, it's nothing on what I've seen before. I'm good with it and I'll never mention it after this is over," he assured her.

"Not even to Steve?" she asked.

She was beginning to shiver from the cool water.

"I won't give him any details that he doesn't need to know," Buck promised.

Her body shook harder as her temperature fell. He got off his knees and sat on the side of the tub. He looked down and away as she ran soap over herself and worked shampoo into her hair.

She was rational enough to drain the sudsy water and run fresh to rinse with. Since Bucky was really not looking, she slipped off her top and panties to rinse all the sweat off of her skin. Buck turned his back to her and went to the cabinet to get her a towel.

It didn't take her long to heat up again. By the time she was wrapped in a towel and she went to her bedroom to put on fresh clothes, she'd stopped shivering. Bucky left her alone for a little while and went to the kitchen. He made sandwiches for the both of them. He found a whole box of chocolate candy bars in the pantry, so he brought some of those. Big glasses of soda seemed appropriate because she was burning through a lot of calories and he liked soda pop.

Estrella turned toward his knock at her door, then made happy sounds when she saw the food. He noticed her hand was rubbing at her belly again.

"Do you hurt?" he asked.

She shrugged off the pain and didn't answer him.

"You made a sandwich for me," she said.

"I think it's about time," he agreed.

As they sat and ate he could see her returning to a more primal and agitated mental state.

While eating her second candy bar, she moved to sit in front of the fan again. She turned worried eyes to him.

"You won't leave me?" she asked.

"Nah. Try to relax. I'll make sure you're alright. I told Stevie that I would. The only way I break a promise to him is if I'm dead or frozen," Buck said.

"You said I was making noise. Was I loud?" she wondered.

"Hah! Yeah."

"Don't let me get loud. I don't want Wanda to be scared. I don't want the neighbors to hear me," Estrella said.

She finished eating and Buck took the mess of dishes that had accumulated in her room to the
kitchen. When he returned she was brushing out her wet black hair. He could tell by the half-there look in her eyes that she was going back toward the state she'd been in before. She wore the same style clothes as before her bath. Her panties were purple now and her shirt was pink, but just as much skin was showing.

"Heya, toots," he asked for her attention.

The sweet girl she'd been during her bath was fading fast. Already her face was tightening into something like that of a pained animal.

"When is the worst of it coming?" he asked while he could still get some useful information out of her.

"Tomorrow or the next day," she told him.

Her voice came out in growly, grumpy tones. He looked at the clock. It was only midday.

"Try to hold it together til I get back," Buck told her.

He took a quick bathroom break and grabbed two bottles of water from the refrigerator, then jogged back to her room. She was standing directly in front of the fan.

"C'mon. You look tired. Lie down and try to sleep," he said.

"You don't tell me what to do," Estrella said.

"Okay, I won't," he agreed.

She shrieked at him in outrage again when he picked her up and put her on the bed.

Estrella fought him. His strength, so like Steve's, infuriated her. Since he refused to do what he was supposed to do, she tried to do it for him. She got her legs around his hips. She had some success because his hands were tangled in her wet hair and he didn't want to rip her hair out by jerking free. He'd never had to fight with a soft little dame with the intention of not doing harm. By the time his hands were free she was pulling at his shirt and had it halfway up his body.

She growled and fussed at him for stopping her. He got control of her wrists and pressed her down to the bed. She made enthusiastic sounds, but then yelled at him again when he moved aside of her and unlocked her ankles from behind his rump. She was strong for a woman, but not like Natalia.

"Fake! You're not a man!" she accused him in barely understandable English.

"I know, sweetheart. You and Steve both better be glad I'm not," he agreed.

It didn't matter what he said because he doubted she was listening. Her words were no insult to him. He knew what the animal in her meant.

This time when he held her down, she didn't give up. Buck hoped she would succumb to exhaustion, but she was freshly fed and full of energy. That was alright. He didn't tire easily. Through the afternoon she struggled and whined at him while he kept his arm pressed to the center of her chest. She eventually gave up trying to strike at him with her elbows and fists. He was able to take out his phone and play a few games to ease the boredom while he restrained her with the other hand.

Her stamina and her ability to endure the heat were impressive. She was breathing ragged. The
fever that seemed natural to her didn't get any higher beyond a certain point and he was glad for that. It would take some well-planned intervention to get her to medical in the tower without causing a major incident with any men between Wanda's place and the roof of the building.

Toward evening the girl was truly miserable. She rubbed and pressed at her belly and her face was a tight grimace. Her throat sounded raw from hours of panting and making noise. It wasn't kind to let her go on like this. He knew what he had to do and he was about to do it when his phone went off in his hand.

*How is she?* Steve texted.

Buck had to move his right arm out and off the bed to keep her from slapping at the annoying buzz of the phone. She wiggled toward him and tried to nudge under his chest when his posture changed to respond to Steve. He let her get closer because it didn't matter much as long as she couldn't reach his phone.

*She's fine. You?*

*Bullshit. How is she?* Steve persisted.

*She's grumpy, but she's fine.*

*Why don't I believe you?*

*Because you're not as dumb as you used to be. Really, Steve. She's fine. Acting strange, but its alright.*

*Why doesn't she answer her phone?*

*Because it's probably dead. I'll have her charge it.*

Buck's phone rang once, then Steve's call was live without him even answering it.

"Let me talk to her. Put her on," Steve demanded.

"Fuck! Don't do that shit. Not now," Bucky said loudly to cover the noise the girl made when she heard Steve's voice. Her struggles renewed and she grabbed for his phone. She bit him. It hurt.

He punched his finger at the phone and ended the call, half afraid that it wouldn't end because Steve didn't want it to. Damn, what kind of skills was the kid getting to make his phone misbehave like that? Carefully, he pushed Estrella's face away from his chest and pressed her down again.

*What's wrong with her?*

*Why did she sound like that?*

*Why won't you let me talk to her?* Steve's questions flew at him too fast to respond to with one thumb.

*She's fine, I promise. Shove off.*

*Buck, start talking or I start makin miles back home.*

Bucky said a few choice words under his breath and adjusted his grip on his phone so he could exert more careful pressure to keep the girl down while she struggled against him.
shes acting strange all hot and bothered she says thats normal im keeping her cool her temp is holding steady she says shell forget to eat when its bad ill stay and make sure shes fed and hydrated ive got this leave me the hell alone before you really wake her up she needs sleep.

What about you? Steve wanted to know.

Bucky knew what he was asking.

shes not getting to me i check her smell in the mornings and its nothing to me youd probably like it find a gym or go for a run or fuck your toy were fine RS unless you dont want her to get any shuteye phone buzz pisses her off

Thankfully, Steve left them alone after that.

Buck noted that it was getting close to time for Wanda to get home. Estrella still was nowhere near sleep, especially with Steve agitating her anew with his call and his voice. He put his phone away.

"Eya. Sweet thing. Look here," Buck tried to soothe her down from her restless fit.

A kind voice alone wasn't working. He knew what would get her attention, so he gave it to her. He lifted up some and got her in the middle of the bed. He let her hold his weight and she seemed to like that. Her hands went to his shoulders and her eyes turned to his.

"Can you understand me?" he asked.

She continued to stare at him but she didn't answer other than to whine and roll her head back against the mattress.

"You need sleep. I know you're tired. I'm gonna put you down for a nap, toots. Don't be scared. It won't hurt you none," he assured her, though he was certain she didn't hear a thing he said.

She was focused somewhere deep in her head, likely happy to have a man over her, useless and broken as he was. Bucky gently put his right hand over her mouth and her nose. He sealed off her airways and waited. She struggled some, but then gave up the fight. When she went limp he took his hand away and made sure that she started breathing again.

Her breaths still came in pants and her pulse was high like it had been all day, but at least she was unconscious and she'd stopped moving. Buck got off the bed and watched her for a minute to make sure she was alright. As expected, she regained consciousness briefly, then she relaxed into the sleep of exhaustion.

He used the time to turn the heat up in the apartment and to throw the ingredients for a simple soup into a pot on the stove. He gathered up her wet clothes from her bath and wiped up the splashed puddles of water from the bathroom floor.

Buck didn't like having to put her to sleep like he had. Harmless sedatives weren't part of his routine gear loadout. He'd seen guys struggle for days, exhausted but too busy or terrified to sleep. It was a hell of a nasty feeling and it had looked like Estrella was headed for that. She had no mission to stay awake for. No sleep-deprivation conditioning was required of her. He'd choked enough people to know just when to stop. He was hoping she could get at least a few hours of sleep before her restlessness woke her up again.

He frequently checked in on her until the soup was done. She was staying hot but holding steady. Wanda came home and looked at him, waiting for a report.
"Rough day for her. She's tired," he said.

"She alright?" Wanda asked quietly.

The woman was long accustomed to speaking softly when an unwell person was trying to sleep.

"She's healthy and she's got a lot of attitude, so yeah. She's doing great," he told her.

Wanda went to the kitchen and lifted the lid on the pot. Steam and the smell of savory meat and spices wafted to her face.

"You cooked?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"It's just soup. Anybody can throw stuff in a pot."

"Smells good," she said.

Wanda went to change out the laundry loads. Buck got a spoon to mash up some of the potatoes in the soup. He set the spoon down when he heard Estrella's voice.

She was sitting up on the bed rubbing at her belly but otherwise calm and lucid.

"We've got soup. You wanna eat in the kitchen, or…?" he offered.

She got up and came to the bedroom door as if she meant to go out like she was dressed.

"Nah, let's get a robe or something," he denied her and pushed her back into the room.

"Hungry," she complained.

"Just this, then," Buck said.

He draped a large men's shirt over her shoulders from where it had been on the chair. Estrella shuffled through the living room and toward the kitchen table rubbing her eyes. She still looked tired.

Bucky brought her some soup and a glass of milk. He served himself and sat. He didn't dare wait for Wanda because he wasn't sure how long Estrella would stay calm. They ate in a hurry, both of them hungry.

Estrella moved her soup bowl across the table closer to his, then she tried to get onto his lap. He held her off but she started to growl at him again. It wasn't worth fighting in front of Wanda. Bucky allowed Estrella to slide onto his lap. He ate around her while she snuggled back against him. As long as she ate, he didn't care where she sat.

Wanda got her supper then came to join them. She made a stiff face at Bucky for having the girl in his lap.

"I think she's gotta have somebody right now. I don't care as long as she eats," he commented casually.

"I bet you don't," Wanda said.

"She's Steve's girl. I'm not getting in the way of that. He trusts me to tend to her, so will you cut me
some slack?" he asked.

"She's her own woman," Wanda corrected him.

"I know she is. You know what I meant," Bucky said.

Wanda started to reply, but Estrella growled at them both. She looked at them like they were annoying. They figured out she meant them to not argue.

"She doesn't have her necklace. Why doesn't her voice hurt you?" Wanda asked in a low, soothing tone.

"I'm immune to her. Handy trick," he answered.

Estrella followed him into the kitchen when he went to refill his bowl. He served her more soup and refilled her glass of milk. He noted that her hand was pressing at her belly again. The pained look was back on her face.

She got clingy before he was done eating. Her food was forgotten as she tried to turn in the chair and straddle him.

He grimaced and prevented her from doing so. She whined at him and shoved, trying to make him open his posture so she could do as she wanted. Wanda looked at them skeptically. Buck held both of Estrella's wrists to keep her from doing anything she might feel bashful about in front of Wanda if she was in her right mind. Wanda watched her struggle and she frowned.

"I think she's gonna be antsy all night. Could you distract her for a minute?" he asked.

Wanda nodded. While he headed to the bathroom for the quickest stop he could make, Wanda guided a mostly mindless Estrella into the kitchen to distract her with washing the dishes. The man had shut himself away in the bathroom so she let Estrella do as she would while the hot water filled the sink.

"Girl, you're all soaked through with sweat. Are you feeling alright?" Wanda asked her friend.

Estrella was acting funny. She'd never seen the young woman with her hair such a mess since she'd gone to live with the people up in the tower. She always wore more clothes than this, too. Rather than answer her, the girl took her phone. Wanda didn't mind. If she would rather mess with the phone than do dishes, that was alright with her. The girl was obviously mentally altered at the moment, so whatever made her happy and kept her out of mischief was good.

She had a little trouble managing the phone, but Estrella eventually figured it out. Wanda thought it was nice that she called her boyfriend, though she wondered how she was going to talk to him in her odd mental state. It turned out that she could talk fine but her voice sounded low and husky. She said some things that Wanda wasn't comfortable hearing in her kitchen, but she figured the boyfriend could take it, wherever he was.

Bucky got back to the kitchen as quick as he could. Estrella wasn't doing dishes but instead had something clutched in her hands. The things she was saying… her voice. No necklace.

Buck snatched the phone from her and turned it off. He set it on the countertop and scooped up Estrella to get her back to the bedroom. He felt bad for the punk because he'd probably gotten an earful, but he had the girl to worry about. Steve could take care of himself. Estrella yelled and scratched at him in her rage for taking Stevie away from her. He restrained her hands and hauled her toward the bedroom.
"Put her down," Wanda demanded loudly.

The woman strode after them while she wiped her hands dry on a kitchen towel.

Buck turned and set the girl on her feet. Getting into a physical confrontation with their host could only lead to bad things. Wanda looked ready to fight to defend her friend.

"Why can't she talk to him? You won't let her go out the door. You're handling her way too much. You better explain yourself or I'm putting *you* out the door," Wanda told him.

"She can't talk to Steve on the phone because he'll come over here and we'll have more trouble than we can handle. She can't go out because she'd get used by every guy out there. I've got to handle her some. It's not right to just let her do," Buck told her.

Wanda wasn't buying it.

"Let go of her," she demanded.

Bucky took his arm from around Estrella.

Immediately she cozied up close to him. Her face went to his neck and her hands wandered over his clothes. She groped and fondled him, then grumbled unhappily because he didn't smell right and he wasn't hard. She bit him and growled a warning at him.

"Quit that," he said, and pushed her hand away from his groin.

He looked to Wanda with an 'I told you so' expression. Again, he had to get her hand away from him. She started to lift her knee to his hip and he pushed that down, too.

"She's not herself. It's like…” Buck stopped.

"Like she's a dog in-

"Don't talk that way. She can't think like normal right now unless I put her in a cold bath. It might get strange," Buck said.

"It's not her fault, what she's going through. You gay?" Wanda asked.

"Asexual," Buck said.

"Hmmph," Wanda grunted.

She turned away and came back with a heavy rolling pin from on top of the refrigerator. She set it down on the table with a firm whack, looking at Bucky. Her message was clear. Estrella jumped at the abrupt bang and snapped her head around to hiss at Wanda, her teeth bared. She huddled around behind Bucky and glared at Wanda from beside his shoulder.

"She doesn't mean it like that. You startled her," Buck said.

"I know she doesn't. People do weird things when their mind's not right. Take care of her. If you need my help, come get me," Wanda said.

Buck nodded and urged Estrella into her bedroom. She didn't fight him as long as he let her hold onto him. She didn't like it when he stopped her from messing with his clothes or groping him through them. Fending her off was like fighting a cloud of annoying gnats. It wasn't difficult, but it never stopped. It was going to be a long night.
Filming was going well. Steve spent some time on a park bench where he could talk to people. He'd toured an iron ore ship and visited a train museum that would have blown his mind as a kid. It was still different and fun even though he'd been on plenty of trains. Word had gotten around that Captain America was in town, so people sought him out. Steve and his film crew, Marley and Jack, had lunch at a hugely popular barbecue joint. Several people had been hanging out with him most of the day so they pushed tables together and talked over ribs, wings, and messy sauce.

It seemed that folks were dazzled by meeting the Captain at first, but Steve refused to do the celebrity song and dance. He was in casual street clothes and trying his best to act like himself, whoever that was. Instead of letting them ask incessant questions as if he was the subject, he'd ask them questions about their lives instead. Pam owned a fishing resort up the river. Doug and Kyle flipped old houses in a historic neighborhood of Duluth. The Spettz family ran a machine and fabrication shop in Wisconsin. Tina, who sat across from him during lunch, didn't say much. Steve had learned from her that she was a cashier at Walmart and that she'd rather listen than talk. Nobody seemed to mind that Marley had a small camera or that Jack discreetly monitored for sound and light.

Pepper had supplied some consent and release cards for their venture. Anyone who was likely to make it into the PR piece got one. After lunch some people wandered away from their group and others recognized Steve and joined them. He'd let them ask a few things, then he'd steer conversation in a different direction. It wasn't difficult to do. All he had to do was ask what they did for fun. People were eager to describe their passions and their hobbies. He'd met Jason and his mother at the train museum in the morning and by late afternoon the boy was still walking at his side, supplying him with trivia about steam engines and famous train crashes.

The day was surprisingly relaxed and comfortable because Steve refused to let it be any other way. Occasionally giddy strangers would run up to him and pose for a picture with him like he was a statue, then run off again with barely a word. His entourage of new friends made room for those moments, then they'd continue walking with him by the lake or to the coffee cart.

"How do you get used to that?" a big guy named Darrel asked him.

Steve shrugged.

"I'm not used to it yet. I've learned to smile and stand still. That's about all you can do," Steve answered him.

Darrel gave him a 'better you than me' look and they walked on.

When they had enough recorded for the day and Marley was starting to look like her feet hurt, Steve shook hands with everyone and told them it was nice to meet them. Jason looked up at him with a frown.

"I'll probably never see you again," the boy said, clearly unhappy about that.

Steve squatted down to get at eye-level with him. He was an intelligent boy and wouldn't appreciate being sent off like a little kid.

"You're gonna be busy going to school and growing up, and I'm gonna be busy doing what I do. I won't forget you, though. My memory is like a computer. I never forget things. No matter how
much else I see or do, I'll remember you even if I never see you again, Jason from Bemidji," Steve told him.

"Okay, Mister Steve," Jason said.

He walked away with his mother looking a little happier than he had before.

Marley and Jack followed him to the SUV Russel had brought to get them back to the hotel. Steve signed a few more autographs and posed with a few more people for pictures, then he made his escape.

"Lots of good stuff to work with today, Captain," Jack told him as they loaded into the vehicle and buckled up.

"Good job," Steve said.

His mind was on other things. It was almost five o'clock local time. It would soon be six at home. He wondered how Estrella was doing. Many times today he'd wanted to have her with him to share the things he was seeing and doing. It was only wishful thinking. In reality, he wouldn't want her with him in front of all the cameras. He frowned. After this PR campaign, would there be anywhere he could go without being immediately recognized, even in plain clothes?

To take his mind off his concerns, Steve texted to ask how Estrella was doing. Buck's answers stirred up just as many concerns as they laid aside, but at least he knew she was fine, whatever that meant. He couldn't allow himself to think about Estrella for long while he was in the company of the film crew. He had to keep his thoughts about her G-rated, even in his head.

"This isn't like I expected. The tone you're setting with people is easy and friendly. Is that you, or is it a persona you invented to float the PR work?" Marley asked him after he got off the phone with Buck and stopped scowling.

"A little of both, probably. I'm trying not to analyze it too much," Steve said.

"A word of advice?" Marley offered.

He looked to her.

"Don't be too open. That last thing with the kid, about your memory. Maybe you shouldn't tell people so much about yourself?" she speculated.

"I'm well aware of operational security. The bit about my memory is common knowledge for anyone who's been to the Smithsonian exhibit. Thanks for your concern," Steve told her.

"Sorry, Captain," Marley mumbled.

Steve tried not to look like he was hurrying away to his room when Russel dropped them at the front of the hotel, but he was. Nice as it was to meet people, he wanted some time away. Sharon had called him and they'd agreed to meet at eight o'clock for Italian. Steve was glad she didn't expect something more exotic. He was hungry and not in the mood for little bits and pieces of things on his plate.

Only when he as alone in the shower did he allow himself time to think of Estrella. It felt inappropriate to think of her when he was about to meet with a different lady for the evening. He didn't care. All day he'd done what he was supposed to do. There was no time card to punch out and no office to walk away from, but he considered himself off-duty. He'd think about his
girlfriend if he wanted to, when he wanted to, as long as it didn't inhibit his job.

He didn't bother with Rosie. The toy was sometimes too intense and right now he wanted to take his time. If he couldn't be with Estrella, then he wanted to think about her and imagine. One hand kept him going while he braced his feet apart and leaned his forehead against his other arm, which was up on the mosaic wall.

Buck had said he would probably like her smell. That meant she was different now. Stronger. She'd been hard to politely ignore before she moved out. Her smell made him want to suck at her skin, to lick her. He'd been able to do that only a little before she left. He wanted more. Not just at her neck where the scent was strongest.

Steve turned his head and opened his mouth on the skin of his bicep. It was strange to feel his own tongue pressing and moving, his lips and teeth sucking and gripping. In his head, it was her he explored, her he savored and adored. The additional sensation from his arm was a distraction so he put it to the back of his mind like the pain of an injury. Buck had said she was hot and bothered. It was a quaint phrase now, but it used to mean horny. Turned-on. Aroused. How could Buck tell? Was she hot-eyed and touchy, affectionate and pushy? The sound of Estrella's voice teasing and laughing danced through his mind. It spurred his excitement higher. When she laughed like that, she was eager for him and unafraid.

He lost coherent thought when he imagined her with him, slick and wet, rubbing her soft skin on him, tempting him to fuck her. He would! Steve slammed his fist hard to the bone and gasped through his first orgasm of the evening. It only made him hotter. He brought both fists down, pressed his forehead to the tile, and worked torturously slow and hard until he came again. He wanted more, but didn't want to do to himself whatever he'd done last night to make Pepper comment about his looks. It was difficult to let go of himself. His dick stood firm, waiting defiantly for him to continue.

Steve grimaced at the bite marks on his arm, then turned the shower from warm to cold. He leaned back and let the frigid water get him down to a size that wouldn't be so noticeable under his clothes. He scrubbed his toes against the stone of the shower floor to make sure all his DNA went down the drain.

He had an hour to kill in which he had to avoid thinking about sex or his girlfriend. It wasn't easy to do. Now that he was out of the shower, he wanted to imagine the friendlier, more cerebral things about Estrella. He missed having her to talk to. Instead of allowing himself to think of her, he sat in his room in his shorts and undershirt and watched the most distracting, ridiculous thing he could find on television. When his alarm went off he decided that jeans and a sweater were good enough to get him to Pepper's suite.

Darcy wasn't around when Steve got to Pep's suite. He was thankful for that.

Pepper pretended not to notice the faint but still visible bite marks on his arm while he slipped his dress shirt on over his undershirt. He pretended to not notice that she'd noticed them. Her lips tensed and her eyes tried to crinkle in an ever so slight smile, but they ignored that too. Pepper knew things. She was too sharp to not notice, so there wasn't much use in trying to deny what he did in the shower. She didn't tease him about it like Tony would. He was quick to tuck in his shirt and put on the tie she handed him.

"Jack said things went well today," Pepper made small talk while she checked his tie, folded his crisp collar, then sat him down to work on his hair.

"I think so," Steve said lightly.
He was aware that he'd been a little too harsh with Marley, but he wasn't supposed to apologize anymore. If he wanted to not feel socially awkward this evening then he needed to stop thinking about work. Pepper took his cue and changed the subject.

"Did Sharon have a good flight out?" Pepper asked.

"It was fine as far as I know," he told her.

She put some stuff on her hands, rubbed them together, then massaged the stuff into his hair and scalp. It felt good but he didn't want to shut his eyes or make any undignified sounds. Just because he felt touch-starved and desperate for someone else's hands didn't mean he had to let anyone know that.

"You're going to have to be better at conversation than this if you want your date to go well," Pepper said.

She gave him a concerned little frown while she combed his hair.

"I know, ma. I've got conversation topics in my head. I'm ready," Steve teased her gently.

She used a damp cloth to wipe away any hair product she'd gotten on his skin. Then she inspected his ears, nose, and teeth. She made him exhale so she could smell his breath.

"That's unnatural," she commented.

"What is?" Steve wondered.

"Did you use anything?" she asked him.

"In my mouth? Other than toothpaste? No," he said.

"Must be the serum. Most guys have at least a slight breath problem that needs to be covered up with something," she said.

"Sorry," Steve said with a little smile.

"No you're not," she grinned back.

"Nah," he agreed.

Pepper scoffed at the condition of his hands. She got a little tool from her manicure case and dug at something painful under his thumbnail. Then she trimmed his nails. He stopped her when she wanted to polish his nails smooth with a buffer.

"They're fine like they are," he said and held his hands away from her efforts to catch them.

She looked at him like she was determined to prevail. He stared back, just like he did with Tony.

Pepper gave up and laughed. She was familiar with that look on him and knew it was pointless to keep trying to perfect his hands.

She put away her manicure things and picked up the shoes he was to wear for the evening. He reached to take them from her after she brushed them to perfection. She held them away and instead sank to her knees in front of his chair.

"Let me put them on. Bending will crease your shirt," she told him.
He let her do it but he had to practice a heavy dose of cool detachment while she did so. There was nothing inappropriate here, it was simply hard to disregard a pretty lady kneeling between his knees. She ignored his uncomfortable silence like she'd ignored the bite marks on his arm. It felt like she was testing him. Maybe she was. She rose to her feet and turned away to get his jacket.

He stood and buttoned the jacket then looked in the wall mirror to be sure he approved of what she'd done. He would have trusted her completely, except that those damned red underwear lingered in his mind.

The dusky navy blue of his coat and tie were only a few shades from the soft graphite black of the rest of his clothes. It reminded him of a dark, subdued version of his stealth suit. He looked sharp, a bit like the Captain, but maybe more aggressive rather than patriotic. Steve liked the look. It fit his mood.

"Don't touch your hair," Pepper told him when he lifted his hand to feel how stiff the goop might have made it.

He turned to thank Pepper. She handed him a foil-wrapped condom.

He handed it back.

"Thanks, but I won't need it," he said.

She pushed his fingers to curl around the little package.

"Humor me," she insisted.

There was an inside pocket in the breast of his jacket. He stowed the condom there to make her happy.

"Do you know what you're doing? Are you thinking about the future you want?" she asked him seriously.

A few years ago he'd have been annoyed at someone reminding him to do the right thing as if he was a careless teen. The hassle of dealing with Catherine and Dana was fresh for all of them, so he swallowed his pride. Instead of brushing off Pepper's concerns he reassured her that he wasn't going to run out and get into trouble tonight.

"I have a plan. My long term and short term goals are right here," Steve said and tapped his forehead.

Pepper smiled up at him. She looked appeased because she didn't know him as well as Bucky did. He decided to leave before she had any more pointed questions for him.

He turned to leave her room, then paused and looked back at her.

"What about your future, Pep? What do you want?" he asked her.

Her mouth parted in surprise and her fingers fluttered at her sides.

"I want a baby, but Tony isn't changing his mind and I'm almost too old," she admitted in a quiet rush, then covered her mouth with her fingers.

Her eyes went wide at the horror of saying such a thing to him.

"I hope he changes his mind. You'd be a great mother. Don't give up," Steve told her.
He hadn't meant to say it like an order, but it came out like one.

Pepper looked like she might be losing her composure. He let himself out to give her some privacy.

"You look great," she said before the door closed behind him.

"Thank you," he said.

As he strode away down the empty corridor, he pushed up his jacket cuff to check his watch. He should be perfectly on time to meet Sharon, if not a few minutes early. He was in the elevator when his phone rang. It was the generic, unassigned tone he usually set for acquaintances.

"Rogers," he answered it.

"Steve! Bucky says I shouldn't, but I want…"

Estrella's unmoderated voice melted into his ears and his brain like a sledgehammer made of hot honey. There was no trying to resist or control his reaction. Immediate arousal blurred out her words, leaving only the tones of her voice. Overwhelming sensation rushed through his nervous system. Her voice kept clenching him, pulling at him for long, interminable seconds. Fear of loss of control and determination to resist her were washed away in the flood of painful pleasure.

Steve regained awareness to find himself down on knees and knuckles on the elevator floor. He heard his own voice, rough and ragged, then choked it off abruptly. Thank God the elevator was still empty and there was no one around to gawk at him. When he had control of his brain and body again, he heard a brief bit of Bucky on the other end of the call, fussing at Wanda for letting Eya get the phone. The call ended and he stared at the phone on the floor between his hands.

It had been one minute since he looked at his watch. Less than one minute of her voice had wrecked him. Steve grabbed up his phone and stood. Shit! The wet heat in his pants urgently needed to be dealt with before semen could soak through his shorts into his slacks. He looked around to verify that no one would see, then pinched the fabric of his pants away from his shorts while he rushed to his room.

Before his door had a chance to close fully he got his pants down, then tugged his shoes off his feet. While he cleaned up and changed into fresh shorts, he decided that Estrella was alright and that he didn't need to be concerned. Buck had sounded resigned and plaintive instead of coldly determined. Eya had sounded happy and eager before the effects of her voice had blurred his mind.

Steve tied his shoes back on and stood to tuck in his shirt. Even minutes later, he felt a peculiar tight clenching sensation through his genitals all the way back to his ass. It was like Estrella had him by the root and wouldn't let go. He smiled and shook his head. His girl was strong medicine. He couldn't wait to get a chance to spend some more time with her.

Sharon. He'd had a few minutes of extra time before, but now he was going to be late.

*Things are taking longer than I thought they would. Looks like I'll be six minutes late meeting you,* he texted her.

He hurried out the doors of the hotel and into the evening. It was dark and cold out but the lights of the small city were plenty enough for him to see where he was going. He enjoyed that sparse street traffic and empty sidewalk. It was nothing at all like Manhattan. This was a working man's town. People went home to rest at the end of the workday, rather than out on the town to party or socialize.
Sharon Carter was waiting for him in the restaurant bar. She was easy to spot, even among the generally Nordic looking residents of Duluth. Her very feminine blouse and slim skirt were classy but they did little to hide the lithe, toned body of an agent. Her legs were crossed on the bar stool and she was turned sideways from the bar to watch the ballgame on the muted television.

His entry caught her attention, as it should. People in their line of work often keyed into the way a person moved even in peripheral vision and she was waiting for him. She turned her head to watch his approach. It made him feel good almost to the point of squirming when she couldn't stop her delighted smile. Geez, she had a sweet face. He'd always thought that her unpretentious blonde hair and brown eyes softened her beauty into a girl-next-door look, especially when she'd been his actual neighbor.

There was a touch of awed admiration on her face, but that was alright. He admired her too. She was a hero. Her integrity and courage had helped to save a lot of people on the day the Insight carriers went down.

Steve felt himself smiling. He'd gone through the process of preparing for this date like it was a duty. Now that he was here, he was genuinely glad to see her. He walked into her space and she turned toward him.

"It's great to see you. I hate to keep a lady waiting," he said.

He leaned in to give her a genteel half hug and clasped her hand briefly with his free one. It was quick and polite, a thing he'd seen Bucky do with women he respected.

"You're an expert at the waiting part, especially if a lady happens to be a Carter," she responded.

"Ooh," Steve made a pained face through his smile.

"Sorry. That one was too easy," Sharon said.

Steve appreciated her humor and moved on before he could get stuck in painful thoughts of Peggy.

"Shall we? Or would you like to finish your drink first?" Steve asked.

He turned as if to offer her the dining room. She slid off her stool.

"I need food. I hope you're hungry because I don't think I can be coy over dinner," she said.

"I can always eat. Don't let me hold you back," Steve said.

There was a moment when he didn't know whether to walk beside her like a business associate or to escort her properly like a lady. He settled for a close place beside and slightly behind her, his hand not quite touching the small of her back.

A hostess seated them at a table to the side of the dining room. Both of them were long accustomed to being aware of security, but Steve could tell that he had his wits about him a bit more than she did tonight. He took the watch seat, facing the exits.

The ambiance of the place was romantic as he'd hoped it would be. By the time they were served water and dinner drinks were inquired about, he saw that Sharon had her pulse under better control. She kept glancing at him as if she couldn't quite believe she was sitting across from him. It felt odd for him too but he was determined to move past it.

"You look happy. Is the Agency treating you well?" he asked to smooth away the moment of
"It's a good job. I can't complain. There's not as much excitement as my last job," she said.

"You make that sound like a bad thing," Steve teased mildly.

Their eyes met when they both looked up from their perusal of the menus. The last day they'd worked together had been too much excitement for everyone. They smiled faintly over shared memories. At least they could commiserate about it now. Not everything had turned out well. Their smiles faded as they remembered the dead.

"I still can't believe he's gone. He was larger than life," Sharon said solemnly.

He knew she was talking about Nick Fury. If she knew anything or had any ulterior motive in mind by mentioning Nick, he couldn't tell. He raised his glass in a quiet toast.

"To those who gave all," Steve said.

Sharon touched her wine glass to his water goblet and they drank.

"I'm glad you're not among them. I was worried. A lot of people were worried," she amended her statement before it was finished.

"Either I've been very lucky, or I'm meant to be here for a little longer," Steve said easily.

"Have you seen your friend? Since that day?" she asked as if it was an afterthought.

"You have different data points, different sources than we do. Have you seen him? He's got to be out there somewhere," Steve said, only a touch too quickly.

It could be passed off as hopefulness on his part instead of his fledgling skills at misdirection. Sharon probably thought of him as unfailingly direct, so there was that in his favor.

She shook her head.

"The last lead the Agency has is you on the news in a construction site scuffle with someone who looked something like Barnes. If that had been him, you wouldn't be asking," Sharon said.

Now he knew she was messing with him. There was a little twinkle in her eyes.

"Right," he agreed.

He couldn't keep a similar sentiment from his face. Sharon was telling him that her professional opinion was going to be that James Barnes was still unaccounted for. He accepted the bar drink the waitress brought him. They ordered a large appetizer and their meals.

"We shouldn't be talking about work," Sharon said.

"Where else were we going to start?" he said.

She seemed to agree with him. They were both still hungry. They looked to the last piece of bread where it sat near its dish of olive oil and garlic. Sharon was fast, but Steve was enhanced.

He held the toasted treat at his end of the table while Sharon shook her sore fingers.

"You're not the gentleman I expected," she accused.
"I used to be," he said with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"Oh?" she asked, wanting to hear more.

Steve broke the bread in half and held a piece out to her.

She accepted it and dipped it into the oil, pushing to get a load of roasted garlic. He noticed that he may have gotten the bread, but she'd claimed the oil while he wasn't paying attention. He reached across and she allowed him to dip his bread.

"You're not going to tell me what that comment means?" she fished for more information.

"Natasha tells me there are times when I should keep my mouth shut," he said.

Sharon made a pleasantly disappointed face.

"I'm glad she's still with you. Are you guys...?" She pondered.

Steve shook his head.

"I don't get romantically involved with co-workers."

"You know, there was a pretty big betting pool on whether you got romantically involved with anyone at all. It fell apart when Shield did," she said.

"Really?" he asked, "That's too bad. You could win it, but it wouldn't be fair."

Sharon looked to him, not certain what he meant. The appetizer came, a large tray of mixed delicacies to sample. From their faux competition over the bread, he didn't figure she would hold back. He served himself almost half the dish and she looked relieved. She did the same, but she was curious enough to talk when she'd barely swallowed. He didn't blame her. He felt famished.

"What are you saying? Let's stop being agents here. This is supposed to be a date, right?" she got to the point.

"I think I'm ready. To try dating, that is. I'm not sure I know what I'm doing," he admitted.

What he said was true. He didn't want to outright lie to her or mislead her, but he had a purpose to which Sharon's knowledge had to be secondary.

"And you picked me to begin?" she wondered.

She stopped trying to load her fork and looked at him with wide eyes.

"Are you surprised? I recall trying to make progress with you by way of my laundry machines, but you weren't having it," he reminded her.

Sharon looked genuinely flustered.

"I couldn't. We- Fury-" she said.

"I know that now. No hard feelings. I got your number and called you, didn't I?" he said.

Sharon smiled but looked away, down to her food.

Something about that smile told Steve that he was going about this the wrong way. He'd been
treating her almost like one of the guys, or like Natasha. He realized that he'd closed his mind to the idea of romance or attraction because of Estrella. That wouldn't work if he wanted things to go as planned.

While she used her food as a distraction for whatever she was feeling, he made the mental adjustment that he needed. The remnant of what Estrella had done to him in the elevator was still there, tugging at the base of his spine. He tapped into that and found who he needed to be.

"Hi. I'm Steve," he said, and reached his hand across the table to her.

Sharon looked up at him, then at his offered hand. She slowly reached out to take it in a brief greeting.

"Sharon. It's nice to meet you, Steve. What are you doing in town?" she asked casually, leaving aside their history and everything they'd talked about so far.

She was smart. He knew she'd get where he was going with this.

"I'm with a film crew. We're on the road for a PR piece. A friend of mine is kind of a big-wig, but I'm just a graphic arts guy. What do you do?" he asked.

He sat back in his chair and undid his jacket button so it wouldn't be so fitted across his ribs and shoulders. He considered the pretty lady across from him as if she was an art piece, because she was. Instead of flickering his eyes away too quickly for an unenhanced person to notice, he let her see his interest in the feminine way she'd chosen to present herself tonight. It felt risky to let her see him looking but he took the risk.

Sharon shook her head after a moment of distraction, "I've got a desk job in the city. Other than that, I water my plants and feed my cat. I like to run when I have time. I've got a mountain bike, but I haven't found a trail to ride it on. Do you run?" she asked.

She looked him over is if she was deciding whether he had the build to be a runner.

"I do," he admitted.

He felt a little warm, so he slipped the jacket off and laid it over the back of his chair.

"Whoa," Sharon said quietly, then her eyes met his again.

"Hmm?" he asked.

"You're bigger than…when I last saw you, Steve," she made sure to add his name to not ruin their game.

"I've put on a few pounds. Sometimes I need more than a run to burn off the end of the day. Work can get stressful," he commented.

"Graphic arts is stressful?" she teased with a straight face.

"Sitting in a cubicle all day gives you gams like that?" Steve fired back.

"Gams? Did you say gams?" she chuckled.

"I'm a little old fashioned," he murmured, then took a sip of his whiskey.

They'd decimated the appetizer. Their entrees arrived just in time to keep their bellies happy.
They'd fallen into a quiet moment, but it wasn't strictly because of the food. Since they'd started over the mood of the evening had changed. They were feeling each other out. He could sense it. There was a possibility in the air, something he'd never had the opportunity to experience before. It was heady. She liked him. Through all the hero/agent bullshit, she was interested in him as a man.

He could see it in the way she looked at him briefly, then away. She wasn't brazen like Darcy, nor crude like some others. He could tell she was excited and cautious, but trying to put forward an unruffled front. That had always been his painfully awkward role with women. He sympathized with her feelings, but enjoyed the novelty of being on the other end of the sentiment.

Sharon was good at what she did. Professional. She'd deceived him for the better part of a year while she pretended to be merely his neighbor. The fact that he was getting to her in a way she couldn't fully control heated him up. For the first time with a woman, Steve felt that he had the advantage. She was the one flustered at the attraction between them. He was content to bask in the heat and see where it would go.

"So what kind of place does a film crew stay in?" Sharon asked to get the conversation going again.

"The producer's loaded. He's got us in a swank place. Where are you staying?" he asked.

Sharon giggled at his antiquated wordplay. Giggled. He smiled a slow, satisfied smile because of what it told him. It always meant the same thing when a grown woman made those sounds in combination with looking at him like she was. Her humor faded and her eyes went a fraction wider. Yeah, he could feel the expression on his face. It wasn't how he used to allow himself to look at ladies, but it was who he needed to be right now. He was waiting for her to answer his question, but he already knew how this was going to go.

"I'm at the Sheraton. It's probably not as nice, but…"

Her eyes said what her words stopped short on. She was inviting him back to her room after dinner. Steve felt like standing up from his seat and making some sort of victorious gesture, but he didn't. Bucky would be slapping him on the back and grinning right now. Steve kept his smile and his tone evenly relaxed as if the success of a mission depended on it.

"I'm sure it's fine. I'll walk you back," he offered.

Sharon didn't know what to say to that. While they finished dinner she continued to glance nervously, excitedly at him. He saw her come to the conclusion that she wanted to pursue things with him despite their baggage, despite her nerves. Her pulse was acting up again.

"I'm sure it's fine. I'll walk you back," he offered.

It was humbling. Whatever game they were playing was running deeper than he needed it to. Steve didn't want to be cruel. He respected her and allowed that she was having a purely human moment which overcame her usual professionalism. He leaned closer across the table and touched the back of her hand.

"Sharon."

She looked to him slowly, in increments. From his hand which touched hers, up his arm, across his shoulder, a lingering pause at his lips, then finally directly at him. God, help him. It was there in her eyes. She was his if he wanted her. Everything male in him urged him to take. To enjoy. She'd chosen to say yes to him and there was no money changing hands. He didn't think she'd mind seeing the struggle in his eyes. She was brave and honest with him, so he could do the same. Sure, he wanted her. He took a slow, deep breath and let it out with his words.
"I can be a gentleman for a lady who deserves it," he assured her.

He'd made up his mind. She didn't look like she knew what he meant precisely, but his assurance set her at ease. They ate and talked over dessert about inconsequential things. The attraction remained like a live thing between them. She seemed confused by his quiet, confident manner. Steve was too. He didn't know where it was coming from.

Sharon did most of the talking while Steve listened and asked a few questions. The night had gotten colder by the time they left the restaurant. Neither of them wanted to call a cab or part ways. Sharon looked surprised when he put his jacket around her shoulders over the top of her fuzzy wrap. She would have protested something along the lines of being able to handle the cold for the duration of a short walk, but he used a look to tell her 'just don't' when she started to try to hand his jacket back to him.

A few cars passed through a well-lit intersection beside them. The sidewalk led on to a dim stretch before they would reach the next street light and a busier part of town. Steve marveled at the feeling of walking with a woman toward an opportunity he'd never had before.

Sharon went on in disbelief of how it appeared her date with her childhood idol was going to end. This wasn't what she'd expected at all. The Steve Rogers she'd lived next door to had been almost painfully awkward. Agent Romanoff had encouraged her to help him out of his shell of shyness. It appeared that he didn't need that sort of help anymore.

"Did you change, or was this you all along?" she asked him as they walked the lonely sidewalk.

"I changed. It gets old, always devoting myself to who other people think I should be. Other people don't always have my best interests in mind. I was too dedicated to the job to see that for a long time. Maybe it's time to find out who I want to be for a change," he said.

Sharon nodded. It seemed that she had something to say, but then she decided not to say it. Yeah, he knew. Peggy would want him to move on from the past and make something of himself other than a science project. The weight of history almost drained the eagerness he felt to spend time with Sharon, but then he heard something.

Steve put his arm around Sharon's shoulders and held her close as if they were a cozy, familiar couple. He leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"Two, behind us. Probably armed. Street thugs, nothing professional," he informed her.

Sharon laughed as if he'd said something naughty.

"You've got to be kidding me. In Duluth? This isn't exactly gangster's paradise," she whispered back.

"Times are tough. It can happen anywhere. Ahead, at the-"

"at the dark spot under the awning. I get it, Captain," she murmured.

His touch across her shoulders and down her side was a thrill. She couldn't tell if it was because of the spark between them, or if the mature, rational part of her was eager to face a moment of action with him as her partner. She chided herself for being giddy about the situation. It's not like an attempted street robbery was any kind of serious action.

Sharon laughed in relief and looked up at him. Their would-be robbers had at least broken the heavy sexual tension between them and given them something else to think about for a moment.
"Having fun?" he asked.

"Almost. Ask me again in twenty seconds," she whispered.

"Seventeen," Steve said, then he kissed her.

Or, he almost kissed her. She got to feel a mere hint of firm lips before they both spun away to tend to their attackers. She trusted him to turn her in the right direction and he didn't disappoint. Two big guys in heavy coats rushed at them. It was obvious they were reaching for weapons concealed in their coats. Both Steve and Sharon advanced on them to meet the threat before they could get their weapons clear of their clothing. Steve got control of his thug's weapon hand and bounced the man hard against the wall next to the sidewalk. Sharon disarmed her guy so fast he didn't have time to do more than make a surprised face before she knocked him cold out with the back of her elbow to his jaw.

Both guys fell into a limp heap, unconscious on the sidewalk. Sharon did a quick scan for more danger, but saw that Steve was keeping watch. The nearest vehicular traffic of any sort was two intersections away and it made a right turn away from them.

"We should call this in," Sharon acknowledged.

"Nah. Too much paperwork. The weapons aren't loaded. I think they planned to scare us, not shoot us. Weapons down the street drain, then we keep walking," Steve said.

"Captain," Sharon rebuked him with a grin.

"Not tonight, Sharon. If he was here, we'd be spending the rest of our night doing paperwork," Steve smirked.

Sharon took a moment to study him. He was so unlike what she'd seen of him working at Shield that she had to reach back into some stories Aunt Peggy had told her to find a glimmer of who this man could be. This was the punky little guy under the muscle who had flummoxed a training squad by taking down a flag pole rather than trying to climb it. Peggy had been particularly pleased with that story and had told it more than once.

Steve held out his arm to escort her properly. She took it. They kicked the firearms into the nearby street drain, stepped around their failed attackers and continued on their way. Sharon couldn't help but laugh.

"Luck was not with them," she said.

"Hey, we did a good deed. They would have scared the stuffing out of the next civilian they met and probably robbed them too. Don't feel sorry for them," Steve reminded her.

"Right. I mean, of all the people..." she stopped, not wanting to point out the obvious.

"What? I'm just a graphic arts guy, and you're just a nurse with an office job," Steve teased.

"Do you even know what graphic arts is?" Sharon asked as they approached her hotel.

She was determined to keep him talking in case he turned shy at the last minute.

"Sure I do. That's comic books, illustrations, advertising logos, c'mon, play along. I'm trying, here," Steve said as they got in the hotel elevator to go up. Two other people were in with them, but they minded their own business and got off on the floor below Sharon's.
Steve followed Sharon down the carpeted hallway. She looked to him as she touched her card to the door. He was quiet, but certain. The look in his eyes threatened to turn her knees to jelly but she managed to get them into her suite.

"Mind if I?...I'd like to wash my hands," Steve gestured to the restroom.  

"Good idea. I think there's a bar. Would you like another drink?" she asked as they went their separate ways.  

"Sure. Thanks," he said.  

Sharon washed any work-related nastiness off her hands, then found the mini-fridge and the tiny bottles the hotel offered to its guests. He'd had a simple whiskey at the restaurant, so she fixed him the same in a hotel glass.  

When he came out of the restroom he found her in the sitting area. His drink was on an end table near one of the chairs so he sat near it. Sharon took off his jacket and laid it over the back of an unused chair, then she hung up her wrap and sat across from him in the other chair.  

She'd only put water in her glass. Steve looked at it and lifted a brow in question.  

"It would be stupid to try drinking with you. Only one of us would make a fool of themselves, and that's no fun," she said.  

"No fun. That's me," Steve admitted.  

"Not true. I've enjoyed my evening. I didn't know what to think when you called yesterday, then when I did know what to think, I didn't know how to dress. No one has asked me out in ages. I had to go shopping and bring a girlfriend who's better at this than me. It was great. I was having fun because of you before I got on the plane. I had my nails done. See?" she said.  

She wiggled her fingers at him. Her nails looked shiny and classic pink, almost the color of Estrella's. No. He wasn't going to think of that.  

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble. I really don't know what I'm doing. I asked Pepper to dress me. This is from wardrobe," he lifted his arms slightly then let them fall, indicating his clothes.  

Sharon laughed softly.  

"We work too much. High fashion isn't in our training because a suit or a uniform is always appropriate. You look great, Steve. You look..." she stopped, studying him.  

He sipped his whiskey from his slumped, relaxed position in the chair. He thought she was very pretty tonight and the effect of his admiration was plain to see. He wasn't trying to be vulgar. He was merely attempting to follow Pepper's advice. Concealed carry was no option right now, not without his jacket for cover. There was no way to hide unless he wanted to sit prim and hunched on the edge of his seat. He didn't. Sharon's gaze flickered to his lap, then away, then back for a longer look.  

"You're safe, Sharon. I've always admired a strong woman. Nothing I can do about that," he tried to excuse himself.  

She was having difficulty mentally adjusting to the idea of Captain Steve Rogers and sex. He looked blatantly sexual sitting across from her casually dangling his glass from two fingers and a thumb. His arousal strained the suit pants which were already snug over the muscled bulk of his
thighs. With the way he was slightly slumped, the fine fabric of his shirt pulled across the lean plane of his belly. Likewise, his shirt faithfully displayed the hard contours of his arms, his chest and his shoulders.

Since when had he given up his grandpa style? She wanted to respect him for who he was, but the image he made tonight was too carnal for lofty thoughts. Did he even know what his eyes were saying to her? Did he realize that the same implacable expression he issued orders with as the Captain was telling her without any words to lie back and offer him whatever he wanted?

Sharon shook her head and looked away to the boring glass of water in her hand. If she looked at him anymore, she wasn't sure she could stay in her chair. She really wanted to be on her knees near him so she could slide her hand up the inside of his thigh to feel... She shook her head again, trying to think clearly. Was that the tiniest bit of a smirk on his lips? He was confusing her. Why hadn't he made a move yet?

"Steve, you said you don't know what you're doing. Do you intend to have sex with me?" she asked for plain honesty.

It wasn't possible that he would lie to her about such a thing, or the man across from her wasn't Steve Rogers at all but some sort of imposter.

"No. I thought about it, but I've decided not to," Steve told her.

Sharon let out a quiet breath. She felt both relieved and terribly disappointed. From one moment to the next, she pulled her thoughts up out of the steamy rut they seemed to have fallen into. He needed some guidance, especially if this was his first date.

"If there's nothing on offer you should put away the high intensity sex appeal. It's physically painful when you lead someone on so hard," she advised him gently.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that to you. I'm familiar with the feeling of denial. It's a form of endurance, like the last half hour of a hard run. How do you suggest I put it away the intensity? Am I supposed to pretend? I'm no good at that," he said.

He looked stubborn, as if by asking him to tone it down, she was asking him to lie.

"Dating is complicated, especially if you go back to a girl's place at the end of it without intending to have sex. You should probably leave them with a kiss at the door or a polite 'good night' before you get anywhere private. There's a big difference between sending the nonverbal messages 'I'm interested in you' and 'Oh my God, please fuck me now'," she said.

Steve's fingers gripped the chair where they rested. There was a tinkling sound, then a thunk as his whiskey glass shattered and fell to the carpet from his other hand. He frowned down at the glass, then across at her.

Steve was startled at the sudden spike of eagerness he felt when those last words came out of her mouth, even though he knew she didn't mean them to be actionable.

"You did that on purpose," he accused mildly.

"I did. If you want to date women, you need to know at least that one thing from the beginning. If you wanted to date men, it would already be too late for you," she warned him.

Steve laughed.
"Yeah. Guys don't believe in putting off what you could be doing right now," he agreed.

Sharon looked shocked. Steve laughed some more.

"You think women are the only ones I have to deal with? Come on. I've spent a lot of time around men. At least guys don't act all heart-broken when you tell them no. The worst has got to be teenage girls. It's easier to change a bear's mind than to tap-dance around the feelings of a girl," Steve said.

He twisted sideways to pick shards from the carpet and set them inside the jagged remains of his glass. He thought it was odd that Sharon didn't move to at least get the trash can. She was sitting tight with her shoes kicked off and her feet tucked up under her skirt. She avidly watched his hands move.

"You like hands?" he asked her.

"Not all hands. Ones like yours… are good," Sharon murmured with a low, husky female tone.

The attraction between them was heady and delicious, but he'd about had his fill. He could feel what she'd meant about coming back to a lady's room. He shouldn't have, even though he knew he was strong enough to resist acting on the temptation to have sex with her. It wasn't socially polite to make her reveal this much of herself; what her voice sounded like when she was turned on, or the fact that her fetish was men's hands like his was lady's ankles. Since he'd decided that he wasn't going to follow through, he should go. He never should have come up, even with the intent to only talk and to test himself, to explore this new dynamic he was feeling for the first time. He understood that now.

Steve got to his feet and took the broken glass to the trash can. He rinsed whiskey residue from his fingers at the suite's mini-bar. Sharon got the cue that he was leaving and she rose to see him out.

"You're barefoot. There could be shards in the carpet," he said.

"I know. I'll be careful," she said.

She stood near him. Maybe a little too near.

"Sharon, I'm a klutz. I didn't mean to do this to us," he apologized without saying he was sorry.

"This wasn't meant to be a date? Was there never meant to be a possibility we could learn that we like each other's company?" she questioned him.

"No! I mean, yes, it's a date, but I didn't mean for us to get to this point. It happened and I wasn't thinking like I should. It felt good, so I ran with it. I didn't mean any disrespect," Steve told her sincerely.

Now Sharon was confusing him. She still had the look of an interested woman, but she was thinking like an agent again, finding holes in his reasons for asking her out. Could all female agents do that? Peggy had certainly turned him to mush. For a while he'd had trouble thinking around Natasha, and now Sharon was tempting him down a velvet path.

He stepped away from her to get his jacket. She watched him put it on and there was no mistaking her eyes on him. Somewhere in the last few minutes he'd lost the advantage in the social dynamic between them. He buttoned his jacket but refused to back away when she stepped closer.

"Please, forgive me," she whispered.
Her hand rose to his chest. He could easily have caught it and stopped her. He didn't. She slid her palm against him, between his tie and his jacket lapel. Her fingers toyed with the edge of his collar and he reached to hold them still before she could touch his neck. His skin was hungry and she wasn't the one he wanted touching him.

"There's nothing to forgive. We haven't done anything wrong," he assured her.

"You've set a hard limit. You've got a reason for denying yourself," she observed.

Steve smiled. He didn't think he needed to hide how Estrella made him feel from her. Sharon was loyal. She'd put her life on the line for him already.

"I do. She's amazing. She's the reason I have to get out and be seen with other women," he admitted.

"You're laying a diversion," Sharon guessed.

Steve tipped his head aside slightly. Not an admission, but not a denial either.

"Hydra would kill her if they could," he whispered.

"If you've found someone, I'll help you. I want you to be happy. Peggy wants you to be happy," Sharon said.

He could see the truth of it in her expression. Though their bodies were interested in each other, they were much more than their bodies.

Steve drew her into a hug and held her there for a long moment.

"Thank you, Sharon. Thanks for looking out for me and for being there when Fury needed you. Thank you for delaying the Insight launch and giving me the time I needed. Thank you for coming here to see me. Thanks for your advice," he spoke warmth into her soft hair.

She felt good against him. It wasn't easy to set her away.

Sharon steeled her expression, kept a tight leash on her body, and walked him to the door.

When he would have bent a little to kiss her goodnight like she had advised him, she put her fingers to his lips. There was no way she'd be able to kiss him without making something deeper of it. As it was, she was tempted to explore his lips with her fingers. She drew her hand away instead.

She sighed and let the dream die. Steve gave her a sweet, soft smile that let her down with a gentle burn.

"Call me if you need me, Captain. I'm available if you need a friend or some backup," she said.

Steve stepped into the doorway she held open for him. She meant what she said in exactly the way that she said it. A sense of professional courtesy had returned between them. He was pleased that he hadn't ruined their working relationship. Carter was a real class act.

"I will, Carter. I need every friend I've got," he said.

"Understood," she agreed.

They smiled at each other one last time, then he was away. She watched him go. He didn't look back. Much as it stung to find out that a chance with him hadn't really been a chance at all, she
understood his motives. She was pleased to see him walk away happy and not injured, not grieving.

Steve walked back to his hotel with only enough attention to keep aware of his personal security and to be sure he wasn't hit by traffic. The goons they'd left on the sidewalk were gone, probably on their own feet.

He let himself into his room, then carefully hung up his clothes for returning to Pepper's wardrobe collection later. He felt like he was bubbling up inside. His first impulse was to call Estrella and tell her everything about his evening. That probably wasn't a good idea. She was his friend so he wanted to share his excitement with her. It wouldn't go over so well, because she was also his girlfriend. Plus, if he tried to speak with her, her voice would set him off again.

While Steve stripped down to take another shower before bedtime he called and left a message for Bucky. He knew Buck wouldn't answer his phone right now but that was alright. He told Buck what he probably shouldn't tell Estrella. Then he set his phone aside and imagined what could have happened in Sharon's room tonight.

The images kept him company while he showered. There was no stopping it. After the unexpected excitement of his date with Sharon, the dumb male part of him wouldn't let it go until he scratched the itch. He would have thought of her while he was trying to get to sleep if he didn't take care of it, and he wanted to reserve his last waking thoughts for someone else.

As he lay in the dark, Steve touched himself in different places than he had in the shower. His hands were too big, too rough. What he needed was the touch of one woman. No one else would do to ease the ache under his skin.

While the girl stuffed her face with a midnight snack in the kitchen, Buck stole a moment in the bathroom to check the message Steve had left on his muted phone. He was surprised and proud of Steve. It was plain in his voice that he considered his evening with Carter's niece a success. If Buck hadn't spent these last few weeks with Steve and the girl and seen the changes in his friend for himself, he would have been skeptical that Stevie Rogers could pull off a smooth date with a woman like Carter without tripping over himself.

Estrella watched him over her bowl of ice cream. The dim light over the stove and her unkempt condition made it feel almost like they were still on the street and she was the cautious, wild thing he'd first met. She'd been sleeping fitfully so far. She'd mumbled something about being hungry, so he'd put ice cream in front of her to give himself a chance for a bathroom break. She was quieter while she ate, her moans and grumbles pacified while she satisfied the other need that drove her.

Buck studied the structure of her vaguely heart-shaped face. Her bones were changing fast these past few days. She was still recognizably herself, but subtle differences were emerging beneath her skin like the finishing touches of a sculptor. She scooped ice cream into her mouth and looked at him suspiciously. He took out two of the calcium pills Natalia had told him she was to take. He pushed them at her. She pulled away her ice cream bowl and crimped her brows at him.

"You gotta eat those," Bucky told her.

She made a negative noise at him and continued with the ice cream.

"C'mon, doll. Don't make me force you. Your bones need it," he said.
Estrella ignored him until she finished drinking the last of the melted ice cream from the bottom of her bowl. Soon as she set it down, he caught her by the jaw and pulled her face toward him across the table. She struggled until he tightened his hand and stared her down.

"You're gonna eat these if I hafta choke you on em. Here," he said, and he pushed the two pills past her lips.

He expected her to bite his fingers and she didn't disappoint. Buck used the opportunity to tip her water bottle against her lips. She sputtered and let go of his fingers.

"Ah! If you spit those out, I'll make you eat em anyway," Buck warned her.

She looked defiantly at him and chewed the powdery pills up before swallowing, probably because she knew that wasn't the right way to get them down and she wanted to spite him. Her unconventional way of getting the pills down left white at the corners of her lips.

"That's real charming. Here, wash that off," he said and pushed the water at her.

At least she didn't argue with him about drinking water.

She tried to push him out of the bathroom when he brought her to pee but he wouldn't let her. There was a window in the bathroom and he didn't trust her to act rationally.

"Geez, kid, does every blessed thing have to be a fight? Just piss already so I can get you back to bed," Buck said irritably.

As jobs went, this was by far not his worst assignment. She was fairly entertaining in her animalistic, non-verbal state. Even without words, her rudimentary motivations were easy to understand. He could see why Steve hadn't had much trouble getting to know her before she had her necklace to protect her voice. It was plain as day that her intent was to make life difficult for him as long as he had to be the boss of her and refuse her what she wanted.

A bit of shoving and a firm hand on her shoulder got her to sit on the pot and do her business. Unfortunately he had to fend off her other hand from trying to undress him. Buck was used to that by now to the point that it was tedious and expected. She didn't balk when he handed her a cup of warm water to rinse herself with. The girl had a natural inclination to be tidy. He let her up when she was refreshed and ready for bed again.

"Yeah, sure, you can grope me all the way back to the bedroom, but it's not gonna help you any. Shh. Hush up. Wanda needs to sleep and so do the neighbors," he murmured at her in the dark.

He'd found that she was quieter if he spoke to her some. Maybe she didn't care what he said, but she seemed to like his voice and his attention. Buck tumbled her down to her mattress. She growled and fought with him half-heartedly until he got her settled down. She was tired and fidgety but she'd learned that she couldn't win against him. She'd been fed and had a bathroom break so Buck hoped she would get some sleep. He subdued her restless limbs and pressed her down under his weight. She seemed to settle best when he kept her down like this.

Estrella shifted under him and he let her arms loose. Not much she could do to the backside of him. His jeans and sweatshirt were tough cotton so she couldn't get at him except for a few scratches to his back. He didn't mind. It was nothing.

Jarvis already knew to alert him to anything he needed to know pertaining to the apartment's security. He knew J was on duty because of the occasional red flicker when he looked toward the security panel in the girl's dark room. The little red light didn't flicker on a regular schedule, only
when Buck turned his head toward it. Jarvis was good like that. The prissy digital fucker knew he
was paranoid.

Bucky had stayed up for long, long hours, past exhaustion and into delirium. This wasn't like that.
It was soft and pleasant. This was easy duty, almost an insult to his skills, if it hadn't been so
strange and necessary.

The girl tried to sleep. He could tell she did. The problem was that holding herself still caused her
to tense up against the movements her body wanted to make, so that she ended up cranky and even
more tired.

"Rrrnh," she grunted at him in misery.

Her hands fist ed and beat at his hips in frustration, then she moved one up to pull at his hair.

"I know. I'm broken. Useless. You ain't gotta say it. Here," he said, and offered her his arm.

The cool of the metal was no longer enough to distract her much. Her temp was still high. Her skin
and her clothes, what little she wore, were damp with sweat. She smelled earthy but nice. If he
wasn't broken, the heated female scent of her would likely have made him a little crazy. The heat
didn't seem to bother her anymore. She no longer sought to stay in front of the fan and she didn't
mind his body heat against her. Her little whines and growls were getting loud so he pressed his
hand across her mouth to muffle her.

"I did some reading when I needed to a while back. They kept sending women at me. I wanted to
understand how things worked so I could fuck up their plans, see? I think I've got your fever
figured out. Did you know a guy's balls gotta stay cooler because normal body heat activates the
sperm and wears out their battery? You've got some natural selection going on, girlie. Any guy gets
at you, his swimmers gotta have the endurance to make it through the heat of your fever before
they run outta juice. Hardly anybody's gonna have what it takes to knock you up unless they get
lucky at just the right time. I know somebody who could get the job done," Buck babbled along.

He wondered if she was capable of understanding him or even listening.

"Steeeve," she moaned quietly behind his hand.

"Hah," he chuckled.

It could be coincidence that she'd said his name just then. She said it fairly often. Or maybe she
understood more than he thought.

"Eya," he began, but she pulled hard at his hair with her hand.

"I know you don't like me calling you that. Try to sleep while you can, sweet-cheeks. If this is
gonna get worse, then you won't be able to sleep later," he said just in case she could understand
him.

Buck stayed awake through the remaining hours of the night. The girl slept some but by morning
she was an unmanageable mess. It was a chore to keep her quiet enough so that Wanda could get
away to work without thinking she should go check on the strange noises from the bedroom. Soon
as the woman was gone for the day and the door of the apartment closed behind her, Buck let the
girl go so she could breathe again.

Estrella pushed out from under him and he let her. She went to stand by the window in the morning
light. Her eyes were alternately mean or pleading. She pulled at her hair just as much as she pulled
at his. Even standing, it was impossible for her to be still. One hand tugged at her hair while her other hand rubbed firmly at her belly.

"Fuck you!" she seethed at him.

It seemed to be one of the few things she had no trouble saying lately.

"No thanks. You gotta wait for Steve. You want breakfast?" he asked her.

"Steeve," she said.

"I know. Breakfast," Buck told her instead.

It took a degree of tolerance he was proud of to allow her to attack his back side while he walked away toward the kitchen. Everything in him was trained to turn and cut her down. It wasn't allowed that anyone but a handler should approach him from behind with the speed and impact that the girl did. Bucky kept walking as she tried to climb him.

She was unarmed, unskilled. Not a threat. Steve's girl was a vicious, demanding kitten with hardly any teeth or claws. What she wanted didn't register as a threat to the Soldier in him, and it only amused James Barnes.

Halfway through the living room and to the kitchen Estrella unexpectedly moved away from him. She made for the door. It wouldn't do her any good.

"J," Buck said.

"The Miss will be unable to open the door except in the case of an emergency or with your permission," Jarvis told him.

Estrella stopped working at the door and yelled her frustration at the ceiling, at Jarvis' voice.

"I am sorry, Miss," Jarvis apologized.

The girl turned and slid down the door until she was sitting on the floor. She looked like a madwoman, all crazy hair and half-dressed. Buck had spent a lot of time like that, so he could empathize with her inability to care about her appearance. All she wanted was to get out. To get to Steve, or maybe to any man who wasn't 'broken', he imagined.

"Sorry, toots. You're stuck with me," Bucky told her while he searched for the oatmeal and set a kettle of water on to boil.

He grabbed two oranges from a bowl and went to sit near her while the kettle heated. She watched him through her hair but she didn't try to run away or attack him.

Her face was flushed. One hand pressed at her belly while the other one went to her panties to rub there. The girl was shy. She'd never touch herself in front of him, but it wasn't her normal personality in residence behind her eyes. The need to appease her body's demands drove her far beyond the limits of normal behavior. He could understand that too.

"S'good," he said around a juicy slice of orange, "want some?"

Buck held out the next section of orange that his fingers had worked loose from the peel. She was interested, but not enough to take her hands away from what they were doing. She easily took the fruit from his fingers when he put it near her mouth. She quickly chewed and swallowed, then
looked to him for more.

"Alright, so we're down to hand feeding. Stevie's gonna have some fun with that later," Buck said with a smirk.

"Steeve," she moaned, and she rubbed a little harder.

He chuckled and gave her another piece of orange. She took it, but then she slid down to lie sideways on the shiny wood floor. She had great legs. They weren't long like a ballerina or a dancehall girl, but they were shapely and very girly. Full and softly rounded, with pretty knees and ankles. Never mind what she was doing between her thighs.

Buck was deeply pleased for his friend. Steve would pop his cork for sure if he could see the girl now. Smooth golden skin and all those curves, plus her outta her head with wanting a man. No way would Steve be able to handle all this without going down the rabbit hole himself and probably putting twins in her belly.

The kettle started whistling from the kitchen.

"Don't choke on that. You should finish eating before you-"

The girl went off, moaning and shaking on the floor.

"Come on, kid. Chew and swallow. I can't watch you every second of the day," he grumbled.

Whether by will or coincidence, Estrella finished eating her mouthful of orange. Buck hurried to the kitchen to make bowls of raisin and walnut oatmeal for them and to pour glasses of milk. The dishes were piling up but there was no time to tend to that now. He set the food on the table then went to get the girl.

"You're getting a shower after this. With soap and everything," Buck told her as he hauled her toward the table.

She made no effort to walk or to hold onto him. One hand kept at her belly, and the other one grabbed at his groin through his jeans. Again. He had nothing for her. Buck tipped his head down to catch her head-butt on his forehead instead of his nose. It made her angry that he refused to respond to her like a man should.

He ended up having to feed her spoon by spoon because her hands stayed busy. She took half her milk, then knocked the glass over. Buck's patience wasn't without limits.

"That shit smells when you leave it and I've got no time to clean it up. You're done," he barked at her.

He threw a kitchen towel at the puddle of milk in passing and grabbed the girl up again. She fought with him on the way to the bathroom, probably more for the fun of it than because she was aware of anything to protest about. Buck marveled that she was a nice armful, not at all like the smelly bag of sticks she'd been on the street. Sure, she was smelly, but it was the kind of smelly a guy would be into.

Buck flicked on the bathroom light and shut the door with one hand, then set her down. She crouched in front of him and looked confused. He reached into the shower enclosure and turned on the water. Not too hot, but not too chilly, either. He was going to have to get in with her or nothing effective would get done.
"Go ahead, then. You've been wanting to strip me down for more than a day now. Have at it," he told her.

Estrella didn't seem to understand him.

"I'm getting you clean, girlie. We can't do that with our clothes on. Here, I'll go first," he offered.

She didn't want to straighten her arms out from her body, so Buck ripped her thin shirt from her. The panties were just as easy. He dropped the torn garments to the floor. She didn't care about them or that she was naked. He'd known she wouldn't. Soon as he started working on the button and the fly of his jeans, she got the idea. He laughed while she grunted and struggled to get the tight jeans down his legs. She grabbed at the waistband of his boxers next, but he stopped her. A quick pull got his shirt off over his head.

Estrella was startled that he would suddenly let her have so much skin. He picked her up and set her in the shower. The water was nice, but touch is what she really wanted. The man got in with her and she hoped that he would finally help her with the terrible aching emptiness. No. A feel of him through the shorts he refused to take off showed that he was still useless.

"You don't give up, do you?" he taunted her.

"Rrgh!" she complained for his lack of help and his annoying, smug smile.

Their wet skin slipping together was better than anything yet. He had strong shoulders and his hair made a good grip. He started putting smelly shampoo in her hair while she found a good mount on his thigh. She didn't care what he did with her hair as long as he let her ease the incessant pressure. His thigh was hard and he held it just right for her. That helped a little. It was maddening that he had nothing to get inside and ease the need she felt. Couldn't he at least use his hands?

She let go of his shoulder and grabbed at his fingers.

"I can either wash your hair or keep you from falling, 'cause you're sure as hell not helping any. No, you can't have my fingers. Stop that! Fine, bite me, but let me get the shampoo before it runs in your eyes," Bucky fussed at her.

He gave up doing anything but holding the shower spray on her head and keeping their balance. She wanted his hands, she wanted his dick, she wanted anything, but she settled for hanging onto him like an octopus and getting off on his thigh. Steve would probably try to kill him for letting her do this, but it wasn't the girl's fault. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him, especially if the girl couldn't remember any of it to tell him about it afterward.

"Gimme a second, would ya? Stand on both feet so I can get your hair rinsed," Buck told her.

He pushed her off him and pretty much wrestled her upright by her hair. She yowled at him, but he got her head rinsed. Her hair was tangly, too squeaky clean to let go of his hands easily. Dutifully, he worked conditioner into her long black mane until his fingers could slip easily through it. She seemed fascinated with his chest while he soaped the rest of her. That was fine if it kept her busy and out of his way while he worked.

The water started going cool. She didn't like that but they weren't done yet.

"You'd probably want to shave. We're not trying that. Yeah, your armpits are ticklish. I get it. You want to smell? Quit thrashing around, I'm tryin to clean you! Who am I askin? You don't care right now," he made conversation while he worked soap over her skin.
Buck couldn't make up his mind if this was groping his best pal's girl's tits, or if it was more like bathing his baby sister. Sure, she had a great rack, all a guy could ask for and more, but there was a lot more of her to get washed. He moved on. Her ribs were ticklish too. He smiled to get a laugh out of her after all her growling and fussing. He hadn't yet figured out how he was going to wash her girly bits, so he put that off by kneeling down to get her legs and feet.

Estrella went still and quiet in her over-wrought excitement. He could use his hands or his mouth on her. He had to. He'd touched her all over. There wasn't much left except where she needed it most. She let him lift one foot then the other to run his soapy fingers between her toes.

The water was cooling her skin. She didn't like the cold but she held still to wait for what he had to do next. Anticipation was winding her tight, clenching her insides. He was so confusing! She didn't trust him at all to act as he should. He looked like a good man, aggressively strong and capable, but he'd disappointed her time and time again.

Buck set her pretty little foot down and looked up at the daunting task that remained. He tried to imagine that this was his favorite girl, his only girl, and that Steve was the one who had to get her clean. What could he do to finish the job that he wouldn't want to tear Steve's head off for, if this was his girl and they'd swapped places?

"I don't suppose you'll do this part for yourself?" Buck asked her.

He offered her the soap. Instead of taking it, she set her feet apart and put up one hand to hold onto the shower curtain rod. Her other hand went to his shoulder. The girl's eyes burned down at him with certain expectation. A demand, really. She wanted. He was supposed to give.

"Geez. Alright. He's gonna kill me if you remember this and tell him about it," Buck grumbled.

He soaped his hands and slid the flesh one up her thigh so as to not startle her.

"Do me a favor and don't tear down the shower curtain. We're wrecking Wanda's place enough as it is," Buck said.

She didn't need soap to make her slick. Buck wasn't the kind of guy to primly not look while he worked. If he was in for a penny, he figured he was in for a pound. The girl was deep pink and swollen. That was definitely something he shouldn't touch; first because it wasn't his, and second because she looked shiny, delicate, and likely hyper-sensitive. His right hand was rough and the metal hand wasn't any better, with its seams and edges. Even a soapy washcloth would be too abrasive.

"Sorry, doll. Here goes," he murmured.

He pushed soap suds through to her bottom and cleaned between her nicely rounded cheeks. She wasn't really dirty there but he rinsed her well and soaped his hand clean. Estrella pitched her hips forward when his fingers skimmed her labia. She was slippery enough with girl juice that it wasn't all going to come clean with one swipe. He rinsed her and lathered up again.

"Bucky, please," she begged him.

Even numb as he was, her desperate body language and the pleading in her voice sparked some sensual empathy. He didn't want to fuck her. He wanted to ease her distress. The feel of her flesh on his hand was hot and inviting. The press and slide required to get her soapy, then clean and rinsed made it clear exactly where he would fit, where she needed him. Where she needed Steve.

Buck couldn't decide if it was better to have mercy on her and finish her off, to satisfy the pleading,
hungry sounds she was making, or if it was better to have mercy on Steve and leave the girl alone. God, she was strong. Even over the soap suds and the fragrant shampoo, he could smell the sweet female musk that was meant to get her what she wanted.

She rubbed against his palm with little twitches while he gently parted her to make sure the cool water rinsed away the last of the soap. She wouldn't stay clean for long. Her body was constantly making slick. He took his hand away from her. He wanted to lick it.

What the hell? Buck was alarmed to feel heat pooling toward his groin. Why the fuck would he want to get a taste of her? Estrella went a little crazy when he took his hand away. She was on him again, pushing at his thigh with angry intent. It was all he could do to keep her from touching his shorts. If she knew she was getting to him, he'd probably have ten times the fight on his hands.

"Bucky," she demanded.

"What? Back off and let me at the faucet handle. The water's gone cold," he said.

It was difficult to move her around, turn off the shower, and keep her away from his wet underwear at the same time. Her fingers were starting to claw at his back.

"You're different," she said with eager surprise, like a hound who'd found a scent trail to follow.

The tones of her voice tickled his brain. Fuck. This was bad.

"Yeah, you're pissing me off. Stop acting like a needy brat and get dried," he told her.

He shoved her away with a dry, fluffy towel to the face. He had to move fast. Before she could regain her balance and see that he was leaving, he made his escape from the bathroom and locked himself in her bedroom. It only took a half second for her to notice that he'd gone. She pounded on the door and growled at him in words that would make Steve's ears burn red. Buck dug in his bag for a clean pair of jeans. His soggy boxers hit the floor. There was no time to be neat. His skin was wet and his legs snagged getting into the jeans.

The sight of his cock half hard before he zipped it away made him smile. Then he frowned because he shouldn't be happy about getting hard on his own right now. It was the worst time possible. Had the suppressant in his arm chosen now to run out? It was more likely that the intensity of Estrella's fertility had overcome the suppressant, or that his body supplied the stuff as he needed it and being exposed to her had made him burn through it at an accelerated rate. Either way, this was a bad thing, not a good thing like his body was telling him it was.

Somehow the girl sensed that he was no longer indifferent to her. He had to fix this.

"You appear to be in distress. Shall I send assistance?" Jarvis wondered.

"No. Get me Banner. On a call," Bucky said.

"James?" Bruce's voice came immediately over the house comm system.

"I need whatever you've got but I can't leave her," he said.

"I can't go there," Bruce said.

"Natalia can spell me," Bucky said.

"She and Tony have a meeting with the mayor and the city council starting in twenty minutes. I
don't think she can cancel," Bruce said.

He sounded concerned. They both understood the implications of his suppressant depleting while he was tending to Estrella.

"Fuck," Bucky hissed.

Estrella had stopped trying to get into the bedroom. What was she doing? Her silence worried him. He was going to have to go out and check on her.

"I'll manage until her meeting's over. Estrella needs a sedative. She's tiring herself out and not sleeping well. Can you send something for her when Natalia comes?" Buck asked.

There was a loud thump and the door vibrated.

"Yes. What's that sound?" Bruce wondered.

"Battering ram. She's trying to get through the door," Bucky said.

"Sounds like you're stuck in a horror film," Bruce said.

Bucky could hear the dry smile in his words.

"Right, only she's the sexy part and the monster all in one," Buck smiled back.

"You're sure you won't become the monster?" Bruce asked.

"Yeah. She's just a girl. I've got this. Hurry Natalia along soon as you can," he told Banner.

The call went dead. It was quiet outside the bedroom. Too quiet. Buck made sure his dick was angled off to the side where even if Estrella saw it, she couldn't get at it. He had to get out there before she hurt herself or broke Wanda's apartment. A quick glance around showed him where her butterfly necklace was. He snatched it up and went to the door.

Estrella had the heavy couch half turned around toward the bedroom door. She looked up at him when he opened the door.

"What were you gonna do? Ram your way in with that? It's too heavy for you. Good try, though," Buck said.

She flew at him, her feet barely touching the couch between them. He caught her and slammed her down into the cushions. He had to get the necklace on her before she said much more.

Wild wet hair and over a hundred pounds of determined, naked woman thrashed at him while he fought to get the clasp closed around her throat.

"Fuckin hold still!" Bucky barked at her.

"No! Give it!" she shrieked back at him.

Fine. If it shut her up and distracted her, he would. Buck laid his weight into her and pinned her down just how he knew she would like it. She let out a happy yelp and started squirming under him. It was mostly her lower body wiggling and bucking around, so he was able to get the necklace secured onto her. She didn't seem to care that he'd collared her. It was all she was wearing. Some kind of clothes had to be next or it would look shady when Natalia finally arrived to help.
He knew she would follow him. Bucky got off of her and went back to her bedroom. Sure enough, she was right there when he stopped at her dresser. He took out a little shirt of the sort she'd been wearing and then he dug for some underwear in the top drawer. She kept trying to push the drawers shut and turn him around but he persisted in the task at hand.

Estrella grabbed the waistband of his jeans and tried to swat the clothes out of his hands. He grabbed her up by the ass and dumped her on the bed. She was easy, really. All he had to do was make her think she was about to get sex and she'd let him do anything. He had the skills. He could hit a moving target. While she kicked at him, he roped her panties onto one foot, then the other. He slid them up with his hand between her legs. She went still and compliant until she figured out that he was dressing her.

Bucky laughed with delight while she fought him. This was great. He loved a struggle and she was a beautiful handful. Rough hands at her hips and an upward jerk got her panties where they were supposed to be.

"Noo!" the girl yowled at him.

She tried to shove the garment off but he didn't let her. He forced her to her feet and pushed her against the wall. Her hands stopped trying to evade him when he gave her nips a rub. She liked that and it kept her attention well enough for him to slip her arms into the shirt one at a time.

Estrella growled and snapped at him some more when she found herself dressed. She wanted to get out of the clothes as soon as he had her in them. To stop that, Buck swatted at her ass. She had too much energy. He had to either make her dance or sit on her until Natalia got here.

He tried chasing her but she wouldn't run away. It was fun for a while to get her to chase him instead. She was quick for an untrained girl. He led her out of the bedroom, through the living room, over and around the furniture. She forgot about taking her clothes off in her haste to get her hands on him again.

Buck stopped after he leapt over the back of the couch for the fourth time. He had to move fast to catch her when she stumbled while trying the same move. His rough handling of her was leaving bruises and red marks on her exposed skin but a broken nose wouldn't heal so fast.

"Bucky," she pleaded forlornly.

He was glad to see she was tiring from the exertion.

He felt alive. Exhilarated. Almost like a kid again. It felt mighty fine to be fully hard without having to abuse himself at all. She smelled so good it made his mouth water. He had to look away from her eyes. Estrella wanted to snuggle and rub against him. That wasn't a good idea until he got himself under control. She'd figured out she couldn't catch him or force him against his will, so she was trying to play sweet and cuddly. He could see through her act. It was just another angle to get at him.

The problem was that he was starting to want to give her what she was asking for. He pushed her away as sharp recall of the sight, the feel of her hungry little quim played in his mind. He didn't need to remember her smell. It was in the air all around him.

"Bedroom," he groaned.

"Bucky," she agreed, and went with him.

"Steve," he corrected her thinking.
Her hands were all over him. It felt good. He was drowning. Steve's girl, he reminded himself. He shut them inside in case he lost track of time and Wanda came home unexpectedly.

Estrella was revved, on edge. Something had happened to the annoying, frustrating man. He was ready for her now. He'd said *bedroom*, so he was done running from her. She was pleased. She'd known that he couldn't resist her forever. Her voice, her eyes, her scent, something was going to work on him eventually. He was full and proud in his pants. She only had to get him out of them. His skin was hard and warm like fine leather. She rubbed at him and pushed her fingers along the firm curve of his ass, under the edge of his clothes. Soon as he turned sideways or she could get an arm around him, she'd have what she needed. He was headed for the bed. She liked his broad back, even with harsh metal for his left shoulder.

Her excitement leapt in the moment he turned and put his arms around her. Bucky let her fingers work at the button and zip of his pants. Then he spun her away, trapped her tightly in his arms and sat them down in the chair beside the bed.

She shrieked and bucked against him. His metal hand covered her mouth and pulled her back against him to silence her outrage. She could thrash all she wanted but she wasn't going to scream and make the neighbors call the cops, and she wasn't going to get away from him to cause more trouble.

Beside. And under. Useless, again! It was even more infuriating that he was hard for her now, but firmly put away where she couldn't get at him. What the hell was he saying? It made her spitting mad when he talked in his stupid, rough language and she couldn't understand him. Was he making fun of her or reading off a shopping list?

"...freight car," he said aloud.

Using his Hydra training to manage the girl felt like weakness. He did it anyway. His mouth watered from her scent. His body burned at the feel of her wiggling and pressing at his erection. James had alleviated what he could by getting her necklace on and turning her eyes away from him.

Her fractious, lusty sounds remained to tempt him. He muffled them with enough careful precision to let her breathe. If she wanted to inhale, she could do that. If she wanted to exhale quietly, she could do that too. It was only when she wanted to loudly whine and plead at him for sex that he clamped his hand down and cut off her air. She was trainable. Humans liked to breathe. She quickly learned to comply.

Estrella tugged at his hand over her face. He was merciless. His strength and defiance thrilled her. His left arm across her hips was like a steel bar, unmoving no matter how she struggled. The bruises were worth it to feel his power. She began a rhythmic squirm, helpless to do anything but breathe and to try to get some relief from the desperation he caused her.

"You like the fight, little night-flower. It rouses your desires. This will confuse him. I need to train him for you, yes?" he offered her.

"Shut up your stupid foreign words. Damn you! Nnph-!" Estrella groaned.

She attempted to get herself centered over his thigh. He had impressively hard muscles. She could make do. Rubbing was making her sore but she needed something against the pressure, something pushing back. James understood her goals and had no objection to them. He let her adjust herself.

"If you would only stop struggling, you could use your hand. I will allow you to breathe if you would not bother the neighbors with so much noise," he told her.
"English! English!" she fussed at him.

"If you shut the fuck up, I'll let you breathe. Then you could use your hand to get off," Buck told her snidely.

It blurred the line away from the Soldier mentality he needed when he spoke to her in English. He began to laugh at the back-asswards mind tricks he had to pull on himself to keep his cool until Natalia could come. It was a delicate dance to shock himself with memories of Hydra tortures and still not hurt the girl in his arms by either raping her or crushing her. The jolt of memory caused him to jerk and recoil. He heard her bones creak.

"You're killin me, doll. I don't wanna hurt you. Do us a favor. Think happy thoughts of Stevie and leave me the hell alone, would ya?" he asked.

Vivid memories of seeing the skin of his own face hanging tattered down his forehead pushed him further away from luxuriating in the scent of hot woman. He laughed again. He was fucked up in the head enough that he could learn to like a little dismemberment on the side of getting his rocks off. Steve was gonna be the death of his last sane brain cell.

"Why are you laughing?" she grumbled.

"You don't wanna know. Why are you talking? Doesn't matter. I'm askin, here. Be a pal. Do what you gotta do, but be quiet about it. There's an idea. Reach over there and get my phone. Yeah. Now get to the voicemail messages. I got several of him in there. Have a listen and keep your mouth shut," Buck said.

After that, he was able to retreat back into the refuge of the Soldier. The girl was distracted by the rumbly-pleased sound of Steve's voice in his mail messages. She listened avidly with his phone in one hand. She used her other hand as he'd suggested. He didn't have to keep her mouth covered because she was mostly just breathing and making soft sex sounds.

Heaven help him, his dick was feeling as angry and demanding as she was. Her smell, her sounds, her movements were pushing at the barrier of his calmness. Thinking in Russian felt cold. It helped remind him of who he was and the resistance he was capable of. The Soldier did not have physical needs, other than those necessary for imminent survival. He could endure until Natalia came.

Estrella got lost in the low, male timbre of Steve's voice. Bucky was finally functional, but he was only second-best. Second-best was denying her. Steve wouldn't deny her. If he was here now, he would give her more than sex. He would give her everything. All of him, like he'd promised. It was what she needed.

James listened to her whisper and fantasize about Steve, though her words were indistinct. He hoped some part of her remembered this longing when it was all over. James wanted the girl to show this kind of need and devotion to his friend. She was desperate enough right now to take almost anyone, but she'd prepared against that by getting herself to isolation. In her right mind, she knew who she wanted. With the kind of love and dedication Steve could return to her, James knew she wouldn't want anyone else once they stopped being idiots and got together.

James Barnes wanted his idiot friend and this idiot girl together. The Soldier was determined that he would get what he wanted. It was his job to not take what wasn't meant for him, so he wouldn't.

Hours later, Natalia found them much as they'd been. The two of them looked sweaty and frazzled. It was unusual to see James that way. The room reeked of girl sex. It was interesting rather than
James stood stiffly and set the girl away from him. Estrella immediately turned to him but he stiff-armed her away.

"She is your responsibility for a while. I am going," he said.

He tried to get past Natalia, but Estrella was in the way, not wanting to let him leave. Nat controlled the girl quickly and efficiently. Something was off about Barnes. Rather, something was finally on. She watched him while the girl whined and struggled against her. James dressed himself quickly and stomped into his boots.

"Hydra's suppression has failed. You are aroused. Where are you going?" Nat asked him.

"Away from here. Can you manage her without harming her? She is sly. She bites," he said.

"I am capable. James, don't-!" Nat called after him, but he was gone.

Buck made it into the cool darkness of Steve's suite in the tower. The place smelled of maleness and familiarity. Girl scent was all over him. He stripped off his clammy jeans and threw them into a hot, soapy wash load. He'd gotten a lot of confused attention from guys on the street. Estrella's scent on him was potent. He'd had to keep moving fast through the street crowds until he'd reached the safety of the tower.

"Would you like me to inform Doctor Banner of your arrival?" Jarvis asked him.

"Fuck off," Bucky growled.

He wanted Steve's shower for this. The punk had lots of bottles of soap and stuff lined up on a shelf. He might need all of it.

It took a half second of studying all the buttons and handles, but he got the shower going like a tropical storm. Buck grabbed the first bottle and slathered a generous dollop of it on. The first stroke along his hard, sore cock tumbled him to his knees.

Oh, God! This was like the sex he remembered. It'd been over fifty years since he'd felt anything like it. He was desperate to come, but the sensations were too dear to rush through. Buck couldn't stop staring at himself, at his hands working on himself. It worked! He wasn't broken.

The first time didn't last long, just like his first time with Maeve Dunbar in the stockroom of her father's general store. He was delighted and gratified that things worked like they should. The orgasm felt long and strong enough to make his body clench and curl in a hard arc. He almost shot himself with his own jizz. Buck laughed at the pure joy of it. He felt like a teenager and he intended to act like one too.

It was no use trying to get clean yet because he ended up targeting himself and much of the shower too. He got lost in it. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he didn't care where he let it fly. Steve's shower was safe. Nobody was waiting to get at his stuff. He could take his time.

The skin of his dick eventually got sore from abrasion, even with the slippery stuff from the bottles
and his enhanced healing. His ass was sore, his nipples were sore. His lip was bloody from biting it. He had to stop when even his threshold for enjoying pain was reached and crossed.

"Mister Barnes, I hate to interrupt. I must inform you that if I sense any additional blood in the air I will be forced to call for medical assistance," Jarvis said.

"I was done anyway," Bucky rasped through a hoarse throat.

He pushed himself up onto wobbly legs. There wasn't that much blood. Just a few smears here and there.

"You're a pussy, Jarvis. This is nothing," he said.

"Thank you, Sir," J replied.

Buck took a while cleaning himself and the shower. He picked the bottle with the strongest fragrance to get the girl's scent off of him and out of the shower. It was some sort of body wash with mountains and bears and axes on the label. Was this shit a joke? Probably so, because it looked like Steve hadn't used any of it.

The pleasant soreness from rough sex put a grin on his face while he shaved. Blood didn't soak through the white towel around his hips and his nipples were healing already. He considered it a job well done. His dick wasn't fully soft even after countless rounds of service. That pleased him too.

Most of the warm fuzzies vanished when he ambled into Steve's freshly painted living room to find Banner sitting like a Zen statue. This place was making him soft. He hadn't sensed Banner's entry at all.

"Jarvis, there's no privacy, is there?" Bucky complained.

"Not when my people are in danger. You may inform the Captain of my failings at your discretion," Jarvis admitted with icy resolve.

"You done?" Bruce asked him.

The man's gaze diagnosed the way he'd abused his body, the parts he could see, anyway. Buck expected some kind of rebuke or judgement, but there was none. Only mild concern.

"For now. You have what I need?" he asked.

"I think so. I formulated it differently from your previous suppressant. The percentage of-" Bruce began.

"I don't care as long as it works. Can I get a minute to eat something, or are you in a rush?" he asked.

"I've got time. James, you know Steve wouldn't like this. If he was here he'd try to talk you out of it," Bruce said.

"That's why I'm glad he's not here. Are you alright? Being here, I mean? I washed everything, but the girl's scent is strong. If you could synthesize something like it we'd make millions," Buck half-joked while he made a sandwich.

"It's not a scent. It doesn't smell like anything. Pheromones are odorless. But yes, I can feel it
faintly. Jarvis said it's through the tower along the path you took up to here. It's not strong enough in the air to cause any serious trouble," Bruce assured him.

"Smells like a scent to me," Buck said.

"Probably because your senses are enhanced," Bruce argued mildly.

It took Bucky a while to convince himself that he wanted to go numb again, even for Steve's sake. A capped syringe of fluid rested on the coffee table. Buck ate and stared at it.

"No one would fault you for keeping your virility, especially not Steve," Bruce said gently.

"Steve is a self-sacrificing schmuck. His opinion doesn't count," Buck denied.

He ignored the single eyebrow Banner used to point out the irony of him calling Steve names in this particular situation.

The danger was real. He knew the sadistic delight some of the remaining unaccounted-for Hydra officers and agents would take in breaking Steve into little pieces if they could get at his soft spots. Estrella needed protection.

Hydra wasn't the only threat. Slavery still existed in several parts of the world. If she was out alone and any scouts saw her rare kind of beauty she might end up in an underground market in Mauritania. By the time he and Steve found her, Steve wouldn't be Steve anymore and the girl would be useless at any kind of a normal life.

It was only sex. He could have more later.

"Natasha won't be happy with you," Bruce said.

Buck knew she wouldn't but it was his life, his choice. He had higher obligations than keeping Natalia happy. He got up and put his empty plate in the kitchen sink. Then he turned on the bright overhead light in the living room. The repaired coffee table would make a good work surface. Buck laid out his left arm across it.

"I don't want to do this," Bruce said.

He didn't move from the couch.

"You made the stuff. What did you think was going to happen?" Buck asked him.

"I thought your current suppressant would last long enough for you to not need it. I hoped that you would change your mind," Bruce said.

"Who in medical can do this? Where's Stark? He'll do it, won't he?" Buck asked.

He'd do it himself, but it was impossible to hold his arm open and work the syringe with one hand. Maybe he could find a spreader clamp down in the garage or a hack doctor in a back alley in Brooklyn. Buck got to his feet and picked up the syringe. He made it to the door before he noticed he was only wearing a bath towel. He needed to get fresh clothes on before he went anywhere.

"I would rather Mister Stark had no participation in this procedure. His sentiments toward Mister Barnes are beginning to change. This would mean a setback for him. Doctor Banner, as much as you find it distasteful, would you please reconsider? Mister Barnes does this with full consent and awareness of the consequences," Jarvis said.
Bruce made a pained face. Barnes was ready to head out the door to find another solution. No one was more familiar with that arm and the physiology of the man than him. He didn't want to do it, but if James was going to see it done one way or another, Bruce knew he could do it most gently.

"I'll do it," Bruce conceded.

Buck came back to the living room and put his arm across the table. He looked to Bruce with one wish.

"No tools, doc? I know you're strong enough. Could you just use your fingers?" he asked.

Bruce sighed heavily, but he nodded.

After it was done, Buck didn't stand around and wait. He had work to do. He went to his room, wiped on some deodorant and got dressed in fresh clothes. He didn't feel any different by the time he was ready to leave for Wanda's place.

"Are you sure this stuff works?" he asked Bruce, who was getting down Steve's bottle of bourbon from the upper cabinet.

"It's strong enough to temporarily emasculate me, so I know it should work for you. Give it time. It's got to make its way from the arm into your blood," Bruce said while he poured whiskey over ice.

"Time's wasting. I need to get back to the girl so Natalia can come home. Here. Use the syringe to draw some blood, then inject it back into my vein. That ought to get the last drop out of the syringe and put it to work," Bucky offered his arm.

Really, he was terrified. He didn't want to do this, except for Steve. Sex was great. Now that the stuff was refilled in the little capsule in his arm, he was afraid if he thought about it too much, he was going to rip into his arm and tear the ampule out. He knew where it was now. He'd seen it. He could do it before it took effect in his body. If he didn't get the stuff to kick in right now, he was afraid he was going to freak the fuck out and mess shit up.

Bruce was too resigned to the situation to argue. When Buck offered his arm and the mostly empty syringe, Bruce did as he asked. Dark red blood filled the chamber, mixed with whatever suppressant residue was left in the syringe, then Bruce plunged it back inside to circulate in his body.

The effect was almost immediate. Buck ran to the bathroom and hit his knees in front of the toilet. He puked until he could feel his eyes going bloodshot. It was worse than a kick in the balls. A concerned hand touched his shoulder. He smacked it away.

"-overdose. What are your symptoms?" Banner was talking before he could hear over his own noise.

"I feel great, doc. Thanks for askin," Buck said.

The wave of gut-wrenching misery passed as his metabolism kicked in and processed the overdose out of his blood. Bucky put his hand to the wall, flushed away his supper, and stood up. Bruce frowned at him and looked a little green around the edges while Bucky brushed his teeth.

"It's nothing to get angry about. I wanna do this. If you wanna smash something, help us get Hydra, and then maybe we can go after the slavers. Then she might be safe," Buck said.
"I've lived everywhere. Slavery will never end. I'm on board for Hydra but after that, I'll go back to being mad at the world in general," Bruce said.

Bruce was right. Natalia took one look and turned her nose up at him.

"I can't believe you did this to yourself," she said stiffly.

She got up from Estrella's bedside and shouldered the bag she'd brought. The girl was sleeping, sort of. She moaned and moved sluggishly. It was an improvement that nobody had to hold her down or keep a hand over her mouth.

Buck took the chair that Nat left empty. There was a little brown plastic bottle of prescription sedative pills on the dresser.

"I did this to myself, Talia. My choice," he pointed out.

Wanda was home, sitting in front of the television trying hard to ignore the people in her house. Natalia shut the bedroom door. She turned in the dim light of the bedside lamp to hiss at him over the girl in the twin bed.

"Do you think anyone is worth doing this to yourself? You know better. People will let you down. Steve is dangerously idealistic. I didn't think you were so naïve. If he gets himself killed and you're left with the girl, are you going to keep yourself like a eunuch for the rest of your life to protect her?" she asked.

Buck noticed that he was able to appreciate her beauty, her pale skin, and the fire in her green eyes. Her anger didn't make him hard like it used to years ago but he could remember the feeling. Maybe Banner's suppressant recipe wasn't as harsh as Hydra's had been. Sex was like an old man's fond memory when he thought of it. That was better than it feeling like something he'd read about in a textbook but never experienced himself.

"However long I keep myself like this, it'll be my choice, Talia. Thank you for your help. Was she any trouble?" Buck asked.

"Only at the beginning, before I tricked her into taking the sedative," Nat admitted.

She could see that James wasn't going to argue over his choices. James wasn't going to admit to her that he knew how to rip out the suppressant. If she didn't know that, she wouldn't stay at him to undo it.

Nat gave him one last venomous look, then she left.

Buck smirked at the broken glass on the floor. There was a rubber dildo lying on the carpet in the middle of a shattered picture frame. He glanced up at the wall, to the nail the picture had hung from. Talia had brought more than one kind of relief for the girl, but she'd clearly not wanted this one. He would have gotten a laugh out of flying dildos, but not in the state he was in when he'd left earlier.

"Steeeve," Estrella called softly from the bed.
Her hand rubbed at her belly. Her face looked pinched with discomfort even in her drugged sleep.

"No plastic sex for you, huh? I can't say I blame you. Ain't none of us getting what we really want, but only some of us are high-falutin enough to hold out for the real thing. Hats off, doll," Bucky told her.

Natalia wasn't really mad at him. She was pissed off in principle. He wasn't queasy about being numbed up again, now that the stuff was in effect. Banner would have his whiskey and move on to worrying about other things. If he had any luck, neither Steve nor Estrella would learn that he'd gotten a refill of the suppressant. The girl said she wouldn't remember things. Jarvis was logical, without the agonies of conscience that caused people to confess things that were better left silent.

Buck enjoyed a quiet evening while the sedative allowed the girl to rest. He did some dishes that weren't Wanda's responsibility, then he cleaned up a little glass and put away the dildo. Maybe when Estrella wasn't so cranky and demanding she'd want it later. Maybe not. It seemed she and Steve were fairly well matched in stubbornness about what they wanted.

Steve had indicated that he hadn't had sex with Carter but that he could have. Buck believed him. The girl had listened to his messages. She probably believed him too. He knew Steve wouldn't have wanted Estrella to listen to his latest message. There was too much plain male honesty in it for a girlfriend to appreciate. Letting her hear it seemed like a good plan to Bucky. If she didn't like listening to Steve go on about how fun dating was, maybe she would let him out of it and marry him.

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Chapter 56

Arthur's note: Mature content, last few scenes. I'd put a specific warning but I don't want to spoil it. If you've handled everything so far, you can handle this. It's not traumatic, merely sort of kinky.

...

He breathed deep of the frigid, dry air. There was the resinous scent of pine from below, the mineral smell of the stone in front of his face, and the fragrance of his deodorant. Not that he needed deodorant today. It was cold out on the exposed rock face and he wasn't likely to sweat.

Steve reached for the small ridge he could see in the rock above him and enjoyed the pull of his muscles as he climbed. Jack was waiting up above, and Marley hung from her rope along an easier path off to his side. He had to go up slowly to give her time to do the camera work. She was bundled in a thick foul weather suit and she depended on Russel and Jack to hoist her up while she worked. Steve didn't let himself get distracted at how her harness dug into the interesting parts of her anatomy. He had work to do.

His safety rope was annoying the hell out of him. It wasn't necessary, but he'd decided to wear it and the harness because it would be irresponsible to appear in the PR piece without safety gear. The problem was that the rope stayed slack and it brushed grit down at him as his movements rubbed it against the stone. Steve was not an experienced climber and he didn't pretend to be. He was sure that if he had some instruction, he could do things in a way that the gear wouldn't bother him so much. The film crew could take whatever snippets they needed from the day's work and piece it together so he didn't look like the beginner he was. The effort was what counted, so he chose a challenging path up the stone which made him reach and work for it.

Marley seemed to be having some camera difficulty, so Steve took a moment to look around. The day was cloudy, but they were those wispy high clouds which looked like veils across the sky. Sunlight moved across the jagged mountainous landscape in swathes of bright cloud shadow. Steve marveled how the pinkish tan color of the stone faded toward gray when the clouds dimmed the light, but incredible colors from iron-red rust to mellow gold blushed his surroundings when the light was sharp. The view was spectacular, like he was in a classic Bierstadt painting come to life. The austere green of the pines far below thinned among the chunks of boulder scrabble that sloped up to the vertical plane of their rock face.

He could see for miles. It was easy to think he had it to himself, except for Marley's nervous sounds. Steve made sure of his grip with his left hand, his fingers reaching to curl more deeply into a crevice. His left toe found a narrow perch, but there was nothing for his right foot at the moment so he let it hang loose. With his free hand he pulled his phone from his back pocket. He knew the little phone camera wouldn't be able to do the view justice but he wanted to capture a quick image he could send in a text. It looked like they were terribly high up, but then everything around here seemed either really high or really low.

A strong gust of wind scoured along the rock face. He could hear it coming, whispering and whipping along the contours of the stone. Steve let it buffet his body as he put away his phone. Marley made a miserable whimpering noise. Steve turned his head to look at her.

She clung to the rope which supported her, her eyes wide. Her face and her hands were pale; her
lips pulled thin with anxiety. Steve glanced at the grips available between them, then hopped over closer to her.

"Captain!" she squawked at him.

The damn safety rope got in his way again, almost making him miss the grip his hand was counting on. He stuck the perch anyway, then put a hand to Marley's back. She was clutching the camera in a tight, frightened claw. Steve turned her more toward the rock face, then pressed her to it so the wind wouldn't blow her around so much.

"Did you get what we need?" he asked her.

Her gray-blue eyes stuck to him for a moment longer, seeking security and a short view which wasn't so overwhelming.

"Marley. The camera. Look at the numbers. Do you think we have enough recorded for today?" Steve prompted her kindly.

That seemed to get through to her. She studied the camera, then shrugged at him. Then she looked down and quickly squeezed her eyes closed.

"Good enough. Let's get you up top. Russel, pull her up!" Steve shouted up to where the guys waited with the helicopter pilot.

Steve took one last look around to enjoy the solitude while Marley was tugged steadily up and away from him. He didn't want to rush away, but it was unkind to make Marley endure any more than she had to. He stayed to the easier path all the way up, then leapt the last bit to land on his feet near where Jack was freeing Marley from her harness. The helicopter pilot gave him a startled look.

He stripped off the annoying safety gear then went to his thermos in the open side of the aircraft. His throat was dry. He was cold from wearing only an athletic shirt and shorts, but it wasn't as bad as riding the bike for hours in Minnesota. Just like on the highway, he was the only fool enjoying outdoor recreation today. The winter gear regular folks had to wear in these temperatures made climbing dangerous for them.

Steve drank to replace the moisture the bone dry air had taken from him. Then he sent the new image from his phone to Bucky. Pepper was nowhere around. When they'd been scouting for a climbing site from the SUV yesterday, she'd looked skeptical. This morning she'd kissed him on the cheek like a nervous mother and said she didn't want to watch him hanging off of rocks, that she was staying at the house they'd rented for two nights.

When the gear was loaded and Marley looked less blanched by fear, they took a noisy ride in the helicopter back to the small Wyoming town that was home for the moment. Steve enjoyed the time in the air, taking in the awe-inspiring view around them. He wondered at the flat-mouthed unhappy face that Buck sent him in response to the phone pic. Steve shook the pilot's hand and thanked him. He helped carry the gear to the SUV, and Russel took them back to the house.

Marley hurried out of the vehicle and up onto the porch of the long ranch house. Darcy opened the door for them and the woman disappeared inside. Russel and Jack took the bags in and Pepper came out with coffee. Steve was reluctant to go inside, though the cold wind rasped and prickled at his exposed skin. He turned his back to the house and leaned on the grayed wood of the split rail fence. In the distance he could see red and white cattle ranging across the slope of the mountain valley. Pepper's steps came up beside him in a brisk stride. He could smell the lotion she used to keep her skin from drying and he could smell her coffee.
His coffee.

Pepper gave the steaming mug to him and rubbed a hand at the back of his arm. She felt feverish, almost scalding against his pale bumpy skin. She wore skinny jeans, shearling boots and a thick parka. It was unusual to see her without any makeup. Steve liked her natural freckles and pale eyelashes. He thought she looked younger without makeup, but he wasn't going to say so. Women were strange about things like that. They could find ways to feel insulted, even if you meant your words as a compliment.

"Thanks for the coffee," he said, and lifted the mug to his lips.

The beverage was too hot on his cold lips, so he drank it in thin sips and enjoyed the steam up his nose and against his eyes.

"We know you're enhanced. You don't have to brave the cold to impress anyone," Pepper said with a smile.

Steve reached out his hand to point so abruptly that he sloshed hot coffee over his fingers. It was worth it. He wanted to share what he saw with someone else.

"What?" Pepper asked.

"There. A fox. Can you see it?" Steve asked.

Pepper looked out over the low, brittle-looking vegetation to where he pointed. She saw what was maybe a flash of motion, but it was gone quickly.

"Your eyes, Steve. I don't have my glasses on. All I saw was something move," she told him.

Being around Pepper and the others served to point out to him how well Buck and Estrella knew him. His closest friends knew he didn't do things to showcase his enhancements. He simply lived his life and used his body as anyone else used theirs. Any normal person was accustomed to what they could do, and they acted within their limits. Buck, and now Estrella were accustomed to his range of abilities to the degree that the things he did were unremarkable.

It sometimes made him feel alien, something other than a person, when people pointed out his enhanced abilities. Pepper wouldn't know that, and it wasn't worth mentioning to her. She was merely trying to make friendly conversation. As long as he had a few people who understood him intimately, he could look forward to relaxing with them when he got home. Pepper was nice, but she wasn't Buck. Or Thor, or Nat, or Estrella. Even Tony's derision made him feel better than having his differences pointed out. What kind of mental place was he in, that he could find himself missing Tony Stark's insults? Steve smiled fondly.

"I'm cold. Not trying to pretend any different, but how can I go inside? Look at this view," Steve said.

He wished for his paints. He didn't have enough practice with paint to do anything but frustrate himself, but he longed to capture this in something other than monochrome pencil or the unimaginative reality of photography. Maybe later.

"We've been driving through it for days. How can you still be fascinated with it?" Pepper asked.

She gently looped her hand into his arm and pulled him toward the house. Steve turned his head and continued to look around while they walked across the barren, stony yard. It was midday. He was eager to see the sunset throwing dramatic shadows across the mountain behind the house.
"Minnesota was different. Then South Dakota. I wish I had time to see Yellowstone," he said.

He let Pepper tow him into the house. He took a last look out before the door closed. Russel was adding wood to the big stone fireplace. Steve resented the other man simply because he wanted to do that task. It was small of him, and he frowned a little and looked down to his feet. The house had a predictably western style décor, with a paver stone floor and peeled log interior. He stood at the edge of the brindle bull skin rug and watched the fire lick over the fresh wood Russel had fed it. There was a big leather chair to sit in near the fireplace, but he had too much energy to want to sit even though the spot looked inviting. Russel settled into the chair. Steve pushed out his frustrations with a controlled breath. He couldn't relax and it was nobody's fault but his own.

"You should come back and see Yellowstone later. Finish your coffee to warm your insides, then get a shower to warm your outside. And change into something that doesn't make me shiver when I look at you," Pep told him.

"Sure," he said.

Steve tipped back his mug and drained it. He handed the empty mug to Pepper, then went to his room to do as he was told. In defiance, he took a hot bath instead of a shower. Odd, how being around a scant five people was annoying him when he was around a lot more people in New York on any normal day. Pepper meant well. He understood that she was looking for someone to take care of but he sometimes wished she hadn't adopted him for the role.

He examined his grudging acceptance of the other people in the house with him. He'd lived for years with Buck in his pockets, then the Commandos were at his back for a grueling stint. His teammates' personalities bumped along companionably with his most of the time. A road trip with the film crew was different. There wasn't the same kind of knowing comradery. Pepper was really nice, but she wasn't a pal.

While the bath soaked heat into his chilled body he thought of his early days with the showgirls on the bond tour. That was different because he'd been too young and unformed to have preferences or to want much time alone. His new body and its peculiarities had occupied his thoughts, distracting him from other externalities which might have mattered. Being around all the pretty girls had kept him distracted. He'd been too busy to notice that he was lost in the tumult.

The change in his tolerance showed him that he was a different person now. Any amount of chaos was manageable while he was working. Steve had no trouble taking in details and folding all the tattered edges into a solid plan of action. He enjoyed it. It made him feel alive, like his senses and intellect were blazing along the front edge of a comet. When it was time to be off-duty he increasingly wanted solitude and quiet, or the company of a few good friends. He was learning the part of himself which enjoyed slower contemplation of broad ideas and a tranquil appreciation of beauty. He remembered being able to do that when he was small. He'd only recently begun to rediscover his simple humanity under the mental enhancement the serum forced on him. Steve was also discovering an appetite for fun. His childhood had only occasionally afforded him that.

What he really wanted was to be alone here with Estrella, maybe with Buck too. They could have some fun and be rowdy around the place, or he could cozy up somewhere with Estrella in the quiet. The polite, careful working relationship he had with Marley, Jack and Russel was becoming grating over time. He avoided Darcy as much as he could and lately he felt he was a few minutes away from having his hand slapped by a ruler if he got cross-ways with Pepper.

Passivity did not sit well. Rather than being directed, he wanted to lead. Yet he didn't know the technicalities of the filming or how to dress himself for best effect. He needed these people, much as he wanted to trade them off for others he could relax with.
He waited until he felt his body temperature rise to normal, then he scrubbed himself clean and got out of the tub. He dressed in warm layers, laced up his hiking boots, then went to find food.

Darcy was in the kitchen making French toast. She said nothing to him. Steve dug around in the fully stocked freezer then brought a ham steak to the sink. Darcy set a plate of French toast beside him while he submerged the meat in hot water.

"Thank you," he murmured.

He stuffed his face with Darcy’s offering while the ham thawed. It was really good French toast, just the right amount of fluffy and moist, with the salt, sugar and cinnamon nicely balanced. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. He went back to the freezer and got another ham steak to thaw. Darcy moved out of his way when Steve got a black iron skillet to bring to the stove.

"I didn't know you could cook," she said from where she sat at the table.

"Not sure I'd call this cooking. I don't need it to taste good," he answered.

"In that case, you could probably eat it straight from the package. Those are usually pre-cooked or cured," she told him neutrally.

"Thanks. I'll warm it," Steve said briefly.

He lit the stove burner then set his ham on to heat. Something soft smacked him in the back of the head. A slice of French toast bounced past his ear and flopped onto the countertop by the stove, shedding cinnamon and sugar as it flew.

"Dammit, Lewis, I just had a bath," Steve grumbled.

He picked up the toast and stuffed it in his mouth, then felt the back of his head for any food residue.

"You're going to be a whiney bitch about it?" Darcy asked dryly.

Steve turned a bit to frown at her. Something in her eyes and the set of her lips almost made him smile. She was taunting him. Daring him. He turned back to tend to his cooking. It felt good to have someone punk him a little instead of walking quiet around him and giving him "Sir" and "Captain" all the time.

He heard her move again.

"Lewis, if you throw toast at me, I'm not giving you any meat," he warned.

It took an unlady-like snort and a guffaw from Lewis before he realized what he'd said.

He smiled, but he didn't let her see it. Instead, he moved the ham around in the skillet with a fork. His mouth watered as the savory smell rose to tease him. Indeed, the set aside packaging said that the meat was pre-cooked. Steve didn’t waste any time being thorough. As soon as the lean cuts of pork started to brown, he took them off the stove and slid them onto a plate. A flying object nearly made him drop his food but his reflexes allowed him to set down the plate, close his eyes against the invasion of projectile sugar crystals, and snap his fingers around the edge of the paper plate Darcy had flung at him. He snapped it back at her with the same reflex.

The launched paper disc glanced off her face and to the floor. Her fingers rose to her cheek and came away with a smear of blood.
"Ow, fuck!" Darcy exclaimed quietly.

"You gave me a papercut. On my face," she glared at him.

"Don't be a whiney bitch. And don't throw things at me," he said back to her.

He got a knife for himself, another plate from the cabinet, and sat at the table adjacent to the annoying young woman. She looked at him with icy resentment while he cut two ham steaks into cubes with quick precision.

Steve slid a third of the meat onto the empty plate then put it in front of her. She quit pressing her fingers to her cheek when he held the fork out to her. It gave him an opportunity to inspect the cut he’d given her. He licked the pad of his thumb then wiped it across the tiny wound.

Her eyes cut to him and she spoke through a mouth full of ham while she chewed.

"Don't slobber on me. Aren't you going to apologize?"

"Can't," Steve denied.

He enjoyed letting her see he wasn't sorry at all that he wasn't allowed to apologize.

She narrowed her eyes at him. Her mouth was over-full. The chewing seemed to be a chore for her. Steve happily enjoyed his ham.

"Asshole. Give me the knife. You cut this too big," Darcy complained after she swallowed.

Steve poked another bite onto the tip of his steak knife, took it with his teeth, then handed her the knife.

"I didn't think anything could be too big for your mouth," he told her.

He made sure to inspect her as if he was truly pondering the size of her mouth.

She looked up from her cutting and over the rims of her glasses at him.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"Me? Nah," he said. He took the fork from her hand.

"How the fuck am I supposed to cut it if all I've got is the knife? Do you expect me to hold it with my fingers?" she complained.

"If you say another curse word, I'll take you to the sink and wash your mouth with soap," Steve promised her, "I'm hungry. You can have the fork in a minute."

"Fuck that. I'll get my own," Darcy said.

She got up from the table and moved toward the silverware drawer. She stiffened to a halt when Steve's hand gripped the back of her head.

"Are you shitting me?" she yelled.

"I gave you fair warning," Steve said calmly.

Darcy yelled at him angrily while he carefully but surely controlled her to the spot in front of the
kitchen sink. He turned on the water and reached for the liquid dish soap. She bit him when he shoved goopy soap fingers into her mouth. He didn't want to pull her hair, so he kept her skull firmly palmed in his hand. She had a clamp on his fingers, but he could still wiggle them around to smear her filthy mouth with soap.

"Nnnnr-Fkkkr!" she tried to yell.

He didn't intend for her to swallow the stuff. He moved her head to the running stream of water so she could rinse. Darcy struggled and fought his control. He stayed calm and kept her where he wanted her.

It was no surprise to him that her struggling turned him on. Almost anything would do it nowadays. He was used to the sensation and didn't feel that he needed to do anything about it. She was too bratty to arouse any genuine interest for him. Darcy made a lot of angry noises but she eventually stopped struggling and took in some water. She spit into the sink then rinsed again.

"What are you doing?!" Pepper asked as she came into the kitchen to investigate the noise.

"Lewis has a dirty mouth," Steve commented.

"Steven! Let her go!" Pepper admonished him.

He did so, and Lewis immediately turned and spat a mouthful of soapy water at his chest and neck. He'd expected no less.

Steve laughed.

Darcy had soap bubbles at her nose. Her eyes watered behind her glasses.

She opened her mouth to say something foul at him. He lifted an eyebrow and reached for the soap. Cool water soaked into his wool shirt and his undershirt. He didn't let it distract him from watching out for more misbehavior from Darcy. Pepper stood aside, aghast at his behavior. Her confused sputtering pleased him.

Darcy glared at him more than ever, but she bent to drink from the faucet until the awful alkaline taste was gone from her mouth.

"Is that blood? How was your face cut?" Pepper asked.

She hovered near them like she didn't know whether to help Darcy or slap Steve.

Steve handed Darcy a clean kitchen towel. She took off her glasses and dried her face with it, then threw it at Steve. He caught it and pressed at the spit-water on his chest.

"It's nothing, Pepper. It's a cut from a paper plate," Darcy said.

"How did a paper plate slice your face?" Pepper wondered.

Steve sighed. Darcy pointed to him.

"Hey, she threw it at me first! And she hit me in the back of the head with food before that," Steve protested.

"Food I cooked for you! You were supposed to catch it. I was trying to feed you," Darcy defended herself.
"I don't have a mouth in the back of my head, Lewis! I cooked for you too, so don't give me any of that bull-larky. We're even," Steve insisted.

"Bull-larky?" Darcy mouthed the words at him with a pained, disgusted expression.

"Children," Pepper admonished them, "Steven, you throw things for a living. You're a professional thing-thrower. You can't throw things at Darcy's face, even if she threw it at you first. Aren't we adults, here? I'm having trouble believing I have to lecture Captain America on manners. Geeze-Louise! Apologize to each other and we'll move on with our day."

Pepper was her boss and her friend. Darcy didn't like seeing her so out of sorts and distressed. It was painful to her pride to do it, but she complied.

"I'm sorry," she said to Steve.

He crossed his arms and stared down at her.

"Well?" Pepper prompted him.

Steve smirked at them both.

"Obeying previous orders, Ma'am," Steve told her.

Now it was Pepper who narrowed her eyes at him.

Steve shrugged and smiled angelically.

"I hate you," Darcy growled.

"Back atcha, doll," Steve drawled.

Darcy turned on her heel and left the kitchen.

Pepper looked after her for a moment, then turned to Steve.

"Am I dreaming? Did this just happen?" she asked him.

"'Fraid so," he said.

"Are you drunk? Did Thor send you some of that-"

"No, Pep. This is all me, no Asgardian mead," he told her.

"Are you alright?" she asked him.

There was a pinched line between her brows. He didn't like seeing Pepper upset any more than Lewis did.

"I'm fine. Just having some fun. Lewis gave as good as she got. She's tough," Steve said.

He wiggled his bitten fingers where Pepper could see. The deep red marks where Lewis had almost broken the skin were obvious.

"Steve, she's a woman. You're so much stronger. You know you shouldn't have... What's wrong with you? Why do I have to say this?" she asked.

"Exactly. She's a woman. She should have known better than to start things with me, because I'm
so much stronger. Pepper, just because I'm a man and I'm strong doesn't mean I'm going to let someone run over me. She got what she asked for and I made sure not to hurt her," Steve assured.

"But what I walked in on... I couldn't believe!"

"Justice, Pep. I don't like a bully. I'll have no trouble respecting her if she respects me," he said.

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Steve paused at the side of the house. Buck would make noise at him for going on a back country run completely unarmored, but he didn't want the weight of the shield or a firearm tugging at him every time he took a step. Much like time at the beach, this felt like freedom. It was simple and peaceful out among the rocks and the scrub brush alone. The landscape went on forever and he didn't feel done yet. The sunset was finally making the long shadows he'd been waiting to see so he stopped at the fence to memorize the details.

He'd run off in heavy jeans, a thick wool shirt, and hiking boots. The working heat of his body contrasted nicely with the evening chill. His ears picked out the sounds of small animals bedding down for the night, turning the watch over to the night creatures. At the moment, the brilliant blush of sunset was still victorious over the glooming shadows. That would pass quickly.

Steve didn't turn to look when the side door of the house banged shut. He could tell from the approaching person's size and shape that it was Darcy. Was she coming to snipe at him some more, or was Pepper making her apologize again? He held his position at the fence and continued to observe the details by which he wanted to remember his time in Wyoming.

Lewis quietly came to the fence beside him. She looked to him then away, as if to see what he was looking for. Her silence was unnatural for a person of her general sass and energy. Steve turned his head and smiled at the chorus of distant yips he could hear off toward the mountain. Coyotes. He'd never had a chance to hear them. It made him think of scenes from all the western novels he'd read. Scenes with campfires, speckled blue kettles and cans of beans. He shut his eyes and let the scenes play out in his head. Old cowboys, tired and sore. Horses with sleepy eyes and their tails swishing. Sounds of coyotes in the distant dark, just like this.

"What? Do you hear something?" Darcy whispered.

She looked wide-eyed toward the mountain. The angle of the shadows had changed in just the few moments Steve had closed his eyes. He wanted to run on, to spend a little bit of time getting to know the night creatures, just as he'd watched the day creatures for the past two hours.

"It's nothing," he told Darcy.

She was a city girl and likely wouldn't appreciate the idea of coyotes. She must have come out for a reason. He waited. She rubbed her arms anxiously and shifted foot to foot. She was cold. He had no empathy. She was free to go back into the house.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You've already said that," he pointed out.

"I didn't mean it the first time," she admitted.

Steve flickered a glance at her. Bulky sweater. Yoga pants. Sneakers. Her big dusky-blue eyes behind her glasses, her masses of tumbling brown hair, and the full contours of her breasts under
the sweater made her seem luxurious and female. Too bad she was so abrasive. Good thing she was so abrasive. Otherwise she looked inviting, like a blanket he'd like to wrap himself in. Warm and soft, yet deceptively prickly. A saddle blanket with sand burrs.

Steve chuckled quietly as more western clichés played in his mind.

"You're laughing at me? Why do people think you're nice?" she asked, her voice pitched low because of the quiet of the evening.

At least she honored the quiet. It was one point in her favor, along with the French toast she'd made for him. So many other points against her.

"Not laughing at you. Well, maybe, but only tangentially. A lot goes on in my head, Lewis. If you inspired a thought, it went somewhere else from there. No. Not anywhere dirty. I was laughing," he pointed out.

Steve looked up, toward the part of the sky in the east which was becoming dark blue. There were a few stars out plus Venus and Mars. The moon wouldn't be up for hours yet.

"You're completely anti-social," she accused him.

"I'm not here for you, Darcy. I'm trying to avoid confrontation. You got something to say? A reason to stand out in the cold?" he wondered idly while he watched the sky for shooting stars.

There was no light pollution, no metropolis glowing into space. The purple dusk slipped into black velvet night. The faint yipping of the coyotes turned into a few howls, then faded to lonely, beautiful silence. Except for Darcy Lewis.

"I wanted to say that I'm not angry. You might think I am. Pepper doesn't understand," Darcy said.

"What doesn't she understand?" Steve wondered.

Steve hadn't considered whether Darcy might be angry or not. He wasn't terribly interested.

"Sometimes I miss my brothers. We used to horse around. Throw things. Wrestle. It was fun. I used to beat their asses, until they got bigger than me. When I started losing, they wanted me to cook for them," she said.

"Sounds nice. I'm not your brother," he pointed out.

"I know. I guess I'm trying to make sense of it," she said.

"We already talked about this, Lewis. We want to fuck. That's why we're harsh with each other. You don't see me as a brother. You want a piece of me," Steve said, low and casual.

"Why do you get to curse and I don't?" she asked.

"I didn't curse. I used a verb in its most traditional definition, not as an irate expletive. Do you know how old the word 'fuck' is? It has a valid meaning and usage, you know," he said reasonably.

"You're misdirecting. I was trying to be nice to you and soothe your conscience if you felt bad from earlier," she said.

"I don't feel bad. Why should I? You started it. If you don't want to get handled, don't act like a child," Steve said.
"Do you really want to fuck me that badly? You're not this rude to anyone else," Darcy pointed out.

"See? Proper usage. I don't have a problem with that," Steve agreed.

Darcy stared at him in a way which seemed to have exclamation marks all around her face if he was to draw her expression in a comic.

"I'm not misdirecting. I didn't see a need to talk about it, but since you can't leave it alone... You're a cute lady, Darcy, but you're immature and a narcissist. That's unattractive to me. Since I have a lady I'd very much like to be with, I know what badly wanting to fuck feels like. You pale in comparison. So no, I'm not rude because I'm desperately turned on. I'm rude because you're rude and I'm done putting up with it," he explained.

"You think I'm a narcissist?" she asked quietly.

"You fit the definition, at least when you're around me," he agreed.

"By immature, do you mean that I enjoy having fun? I'm a responsible person. I take care of other people's needs and I pay my bills. Thinking fun is a sin is not a sign of maturity. It's a sign of priggery," Darcy said.

"So I'm a prig. Or, the Captain is a prig. It's all mixed up. I think I'm slowly learning how not to be a prig. No part of my life has been fun, Lewis. The desperation of survival tends to make one into a prig," Steve said.

"Now you're playing for sympathy," Darcy accused.

"You could see it that way, or maybe you're too fast to make a pessimistic assumption," Steve told her.

"We can agree that I'm a narcissist around you because I can't stop wanting a piece of you, and you're a prig because you righteously enjoy it, or because of all the reasons," Darcy laid it out for them.

"Excellent organizational skills," Steve commended her.

"Is that your way of saying yes? You could just say yes, you know," she said.

"Where's the fun in that?" Steve asked idly and tilted his head to look down at her with a smile.

She stared at him.

"Fun, Darcy. Get it?" he prompted her.

"Yes, yes, I get it. You're not a complete prig all the time. Only most of the time. Would you believe that I'm usually a nice, non-narcissistic person, except around you?" she asked.

"Alright, but you're still immature," Steve conceded.

"I am not immature. Life sucks! I am cheerful, irreverent, and playful in an attempt to strongly ignore how sucky life is," Darcy insisted.

"That's not what I meant. You are immature in that you don't control your sexual impulses for the sake of the social comfort of others who have already indicated to you that they're not interested. If you examine some of the things you've said to me, it would be considered definite sexual harassment if a man said them to you. Yet somehow you expect to be excused of it. What is that
but bigotry?” Steve asked.

Darcy remained silent for a moment. He gave her credit that she actually thought about it for at least a moment before she spoke.

"But you're not disinterested. I know you're not. I only wanted a chance with you," she said.

"Do we have to talk about consent, Miss Lewis? Either you're not as modern-minded as you claim to be, or you think I'm ignorant of what affirmative consent means and you're looking to take advantage of me," Steve said.

Darcy’s mouth worked for a moment, then she finally got her words together.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that you really don't want me. I thought you were resisting because you're a moralistic prig," she admitted.

"Narcissist. Immature. You want. That's all that matters to you. I don't have to give a reason for not wanting you, even if I'm hard. I've said no. You think you're irresistible and that I'm nothing more than a dick, so I'd have no choice but to want you. It doesn't matter if I'm the worst moralistic prig ever, you don't have the right to ignore my lack of consent," he told her in low tones.

Steve didn't want his words getting back to the house in the quiet of the night. This was between him and Darcy.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

Steve watched as she hugged an arm around herself and put her other hand over her mouth. She seemed to finally understand what she'd been doing. It was proof that she wasn't an awful person. Still, he waited to be sure of her sentiment before he said anything comforting or forgiving.

"Oh my god! I'm a fucking rapist," she said, again in a whisper. She turned and leaned on the fence rail.

Steve didn't like her using the Lord's name like that, and there was the language again, but it seemed genuine and appropriate for her at the moment so he stayed quiet. She wasn't thinking about him right now, anyway. Her attention was internal, on self-examination.

"That's not true. You didn't rape anyone. Thinking something, even wishing it or fantasizing it doesn't make it a real physical act," Steve said.

Darcy was quiet for several more minutes. He didn't hear any distressed breathing. There was no smell of tears in the air. He appreciated her lack of feminine histrionics. She turned and took a quick step toward the house.

"Don't go. We're not done here," Steve told her.

Darcy stopped still. He could tell that she felt horribly awkward and wanted to flee his presence. Their situation required more maturity and complexity than a juvenile response. Darcy turned to face him. She stood like someone expecting a harsh reprimand but Steve only felt necessity and empathy.

"We have to finish this. To resolve it. We're going to be on the road with Pepper and the crew for days yet. I want to avoid awkwardness back at the tower if we can. I need to work with Thor and you're important to him. Can you tolerate a few minutes of maturity?" he asked gently.
Darcy sighed, then nodded. She likely couldn't see him well in the dim starlight. He could see her pained expression just fine. Her attitude wasn't resentful or dismissive, but very uncomfortable. Women were frustratingly complex. If she was a guy under his command, Steve could simply say "you screwed up, don't do that anymore," and that would be the end of it.

"I'm so sorry. I..." she began.

He waited until it was clear that she didn't know what else to say.

"I appreciate your apology, but it's not worth anything if your actions don't change. I see two probabilities. Either you're the average sort of person and you'll quit pushing for what you want but you'll get resentful and vindictive. Or you're the exceptional sort of person who can rise above it and let it go so we can work smoothly among our friends and I don't have to see you as a threat to my future. If you tell me which sort of person you are I won't believe you. Your actions are what I'll believe, not your words. I think you might be exceptional because Thor isn't a fool. He's wise and has good judgement," Steve said.

"I didn't harass you on purpose. I was feeling instead of thinking. I can change," Darcy said.

"I understand. It's tough to keep the mind in control of the body. I struggle with that all the time. You don't need to fundamentally change who you are, Darcy. If you're cheerful, irreverent and playful because that allows you to cope then those are mostly good things. All I ask is that you stop pushing at me. You're cute and I respond to you but I don't want you. We're a bad match, all around," he said.

He knew it was a tough thing to hear when someone you wanted didn't want you, but she needed to hear it. She'd been very persistent at disrespecting his wishes. There was still more they had to do. She probably felt slapped down. Rejected.

"Can I go?" Darcy asked in a small voice.

"Sure you can, but I think it would be better if we didn't leave things like this," Steve said.

"What do you have in mind?" Darcy asked.

She sounded cautious. Skeptical.

"Let's go out. We need to walk off the awkwardness and the bad feelings. I have to go on dates. Now that you understand we're never going to be a couple, can you do that with me? As friends?" Steve asked.

"Right now? I feel like shit," she said.

"Life sucks. Let's go have some fun," he suggested, using her own outlook to persuade her.

"You're asking a lot. You don't like that I'm attracted to you. I don't know how not to be," she admitted.

"I was the ugliest, shrimpiest guy on the block. On several blocks. I was attracted to lots of people but I had to keep it to myself. I can teach you a thing or two, kid," Steve said with a smile.

Darcy laughed at his Bogart-flavored playfulness.

"That's the spirit. I saw a bar on the highway on the way in. They probably have music and a pool table. Good enough for you?" he asked as they walked back to the house.
"Can we take your bike?" Darcy wondered.

"No," Steve denied her.

Something in him didn't want Darcy on the bike.

"Are we really doing this?" she asked him as they went into the well-lit house.

Steve squinted in the bright light.

"Your choice, but I think it would be helpful. I don't hate you Darcy. We need to learn to work together and be civil. Maybe even have fun," he said.

Pepper watched them from where she was working at her laptop on the couch.

"Fun? Does the fun involve throwing things and blood?" she asked.

"No, Pep. Me and Darcy are trying to make peace. We're going out to the bar we saw on the highway," Steve said.

"That place looked rough," Pepper said.

She looked between the two of them. Darcy's downcast attitude was worrisome. Steve had patience and kindness on his face. Steve had alarmed her today but his behavior hadn't been entirely out of character if he felt he was dealing with an injustice.

"I've gotta shower, see you in a few," Steve said to Darcy.

He left the living room and headed for his room at the end of the hall.

Pepper waited until he shut his door and they could faintly hear his shower running. She patted the couch beside her and Darcy went to sit close.

"He'll never love you. He loves someone else," Pepper gave her as succinct a warning as she could.

"I know. That's what this is about. I was… I was wrong. I have to learn how to be his friend," Darcy admitted.

Pepper didn't want to say more, but she had to.

"Darcy, be careful. He's a good person but he can be dangerous," Pepper said.

"I know," Darcy said.

She squeezed Pepper's hand then hurried to her room to get ready to go out.

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Steve decided that since they were taking the SUV, they may as well bring Marley and Jack. He wanted Russel back at the house for Pepper. Nothing was likely to happen to her, but he didn't want her alone just in case.

The roadside bar was as raw as they'd suspected. The place was a simple concrete block structure with a metal roof. The door was rusty steel and the interior floor was old industrial vinyl that looked like it had needed sweeping months ago.
The four of them got noticed on their way in but it was the normal sort of assessment people gave to newcomers in a small town. After a moment the talking, smoking and billiards carried on as before. Steve made note of the three guys who might be any kind of trouble. He stared at them until they noted his attention, then they looked away. There could still be trouble, but at least they knew he was aware and unafraid of them. That tended to settle things before they got started sometimes.

People in the city had polite disregard tuned to a fine art. The patrons here showed none of that. Steve met their stares with curious looks of his own. He liked their casual, unpretentious style. Hardly anyone wore piercings or decorative tattoos and the ones who did were younger than the rest of them. It felt much like Texas with all the denim and leather, but even more remote and isolated. The people he led Darcy through on the way to the bar stopped scrutinizing him so closely when Steve allowed himself to show a bit of touristy gawking. That was an attitude they understood, so they seemed to sort of collectively roll their eyes and go back to their entertainments.

"Whiskey," Steve said to the bartender.

"Beer," Darcy said.

Steve tipped the man and they got their drinks promptly. The place was full but it was small enough that the bartender could give prompt service.

He touched Darcy's shoulder to guide her toward an empty stool in the corner behind the pool table. She wiggled up onto the seat then reached to set a stack of quarters in line with the other stacks.

She swigged her longneck bud light and Steve idly watched the local guys play pool. They were casually good, only playing to pass the time. Darcy was showing a lot of leg and their eyes kept wandering. She wasn't his girl so Steve didn't mind that she was getting the attention she'd dressed for.

His mind drifted to Estrella and Steve harshly shook his head to clear it. Buck was giving him the kind of silence that meant he was busy. Busy handling Estrella. Steve shook his head again and tipped his face down to pinch the bridge of his nose. He shifted his hips so his jeans wouldn't put as much pressure on his already sensitive groin.

"Cap? You alright?" Darcy asked him.

"Yeah, Lewis. Talk to me. Come on, you never shut up. Isn't there anything on your mind?" Steve asked for help.

"Mmm-hmm, but I'm not allowed to talk about it, like you're not allowed to say you're sorry," she said archly.

A glance at her face showed that she enjoyed the moment as much as he enjoyed not having to apologize to her. Her saucy, mildly repellent attitude helped to cool him down from thinking of Buck wrestling with…

"If we're going to take a turn at the pool table, are you going to use all your skills, or are you going to throw the game?" she asked.

Steve took a long, slow controlled breath and let it out again just as carefully.

"I haven't decided. It depends who's watching. I wouldn't throw the game for you, but I don't
wanna draw attention from that guy," he said.

Darcy looked toward where Steve glanced briefly.

"Holy shit," Darcy hissed.

"Lewis," Steve growled.

"Grow up, Cap. It's not like you'd take me into the restroom to wash my mouth out. I saw that guy last month in a pay per view championship," Darcy said.

"I know. Clint was watching and I walked through the room. So yeah, throwing the game," Steve said behind a sip of his whiskey.

"Don't throw it. Beat my ass and let him see. He'll come over and want to play you," Darcy insisted.

"I know. That's why I'm throwing the game. We don't need that kind of attention," Steve said.

"Yes, you do. It's what we're here for. Marley has the camera. It's perfect!" Darcy enthused.

Steve looked at her.

"Alright. But what if I win?" he wondered.

"So what if you do? You're Captain America. You're probably the one guy he wouldn't mind losing to," she predicted.

Steve wasn't afraid to lose. He could take it in good humor and he might even enjoy it. If he won and the guy got prickly it may get them bad publicity instead of good. Darcy likely didn't know men as well as she thought she did. He decided he'd let it go and make his decision when the time came. Until then, he should make nice with Lewis.

He stepped close enough to her stool so she could hear him over the jukebox, the television behind the bar, the balls clacking on the pool table, and the people talking. Before he had his words lined up, she took a turn.

"You don't like language from me because it turns you on," she said.

"No. I don't like foul language from you because I'm trying to learn to respect you and I have trouble doing that when you speak like a rebellious youth instead of an adult," he told her.

Her hand reached out to pull him down a little because she still couldn't hear him when he'd started speaking.

"I don't believe you. Don't get me wrong, Cap. I'm not trying to seduce you against your will or change your mind. I'm wondering why I have to act like a nun around you. If it's not that, then why?" she asked.

Steve gently pushed her fingers from their grip in the front of his shirt.

"Do you talk that way around Thor?" he asked.

Darcy thought for a moment. Her brows went up.

"No, I don't. Maybe sometimes I do, but not..."
"Not as much as you do in front of me. Because you respect Thor," Steve said.

"I hella respect you too, Cap, but there's the thing," she said.

The way she said thing with her eyes told him she meant the unwilling attraction between them.

"Thor's a great guy. You don't find him attractive?" Steve wondered.

Darcy made a face, something like a dreamy smile doused with sour lemon.

"He feels more like my brother. He was freaking me out when we first met him, then Jane got stars in her eyes. She likes him so much that he can make her forget science just by walking into the room. I would never hurt Jane. She's like a puppy. He's taken. Plus, there was the destroyer, and Loki, and the evil space elves," Darcy pointed out.

"Negative associations?"

"Overwhelming associations. Jane thinks on a cosmic scale. No, on a universal scale. She's comfortable with that kind of thing. Thor is…" Darcy made a swishy hand gesture while she searched for a word.

"Too grand?" Steve offered.

Darcy wobbled her head in indecision, then nodded as if she was ashamed to admit it.

"What, and Captain America isn't?" he teased.

"You're not Cap. Most of the times I've seen you, you're a shit-weasel in an inflated body," Darcy said.

Steve laughed loud enough to get people's attention. He didn't care. It felt good to laugh. As his delighted humor mellowed into a mere smile, he noticed that Lewis wasn't smiling anymore.

Darcy was staring at him. She looked painfully hungry, like a hollow, starving girl. Not like Estrella had been. Lewis was gloriously well-fed. She looked like she was starved for affection more than anything else. Sex, done right, could temporarily substitute for what she needed. It was a kind of grief to see that look in her eyes because it reminded him of himself when he'd been small and nobody had the time of day for him. His heart had always been willing to love someone, but nobody had taken him seriously. Just as no one took Darcy seriously.

Darcy looked away and bit her lip. She pushed up her glasses and pretended to watch the action on the pool table.

"I know how that feels, Lewis. Words are too weak for it. I'm not gonna make you any empty promises that your man will come along someday. I had to learn to be happy alone," he said near her hair so she could hear without him having to raise his voice.

"Now you have her," Darcy pointed out.

Steve moved to stand almost directly behind her stool as the bar got a little more crowded. He folded his arms on his chest to put some distance between them, but he bent to speak quietly near her ear.

"If you've ever taken me seriously about anything then listen to me when I ask you not to talk about her," Steve warned.
Darcy nodded almost imperceptibly. Then she shivered. She'd only been teasing when she'd called him 'inflated'. He was very large and solid behind her. His presence was almost as electric as Thor's. Maybe more so because she wasn't attracted to Thor.

Steve sensed her difficulty and had mercy. He eased away from her for a moment.

"I'm not super like everyone else we know. If you keep touching me and getting close to me and growling in my ear, I'm going to act like an immature narcissist and then you'll act like a prig.

"Fair enough," he said.

"You said you could teach me things about keeping it to myself. How am I supposed to hide from you that you make me hot? You notice everything," she whispered.

"It got beat outta me, when I looked at somebody's sister and they saw me. I was little enough that the girls could smack me down easy if I got caught looking. I learned to play it cool out of self-preservation," Steve told her.

"Are you going to assault me if you catch me looking? If you're not, then I don't see how this is relevant," she said.

He liked that she didn't give him any of the fake female sympathy that other women might have at hearing about his past. Lewis was tough. She'd learned to be, first from scrapping with her brothers, then from making her way as a woman alone in the world, and now because of Asgardian destroyers and evil space elves. Because she was tough, she had no pity for him. That felt good. It was a form of respect.

Steve felt like he was getting somewhere workable with Darcy Lewis. If what she'd told him during their time today was true, then he had a better understanding of her motivations.

"I don't want to assault you. I want you to act like something important balances on you controlling your attraction," he advised her.

"Come on, Steve. It's a crush. How can it be that important?" she wondered.

"Because I need to work with Thor. If you don't learn some restraint, one of us is leaving the tower. I don't mind at all if it ends up being me who moves out but that would force a slower response time on the Avengers. Slower response time means people stay in danger for a few minutes longer before we can get to them. I don't like that but it's a choice I'll make. I'll do what it takes to keep the peace in my household," he said.

Darcy twisted to look at him for his strange wording and his chilly tone.

"Your household? Do you think you're the papa of us in the tower? Of the Avengers? Wouldn't that have been Director Fury?" she said under her breath.

Steve shook his head in the negative. He still had that same cold, hard look about him. Determination. It was hot as hell, except when it was directed at her. He looked to her expectantly, like she was supposed to figure something out.

His household… not the papa of the Avengers, but his household. To keep the peace.

Darcy's eyes widened. He was going to marry his Latina chick, the one she wasn't allowed to talk about. He was planning to be the big ole papa of their household and he didn't want his girl upset by any interactions with her. Shit! He was really, really serious about this.
He was so serious that she now understood what Pepper meant when she'd warned that Steve Rogers could be dangerous. Pep wasn't talking about a few months of heartbreak or suffering through encounters with a painfully priggish attitude. The man standing behind her would burn shit down, explode it, and bury it in ice to protect what was dear to him. He would bare-handed snap the heads off of people who wanted to hurt his girl if what she'd heard was true, which was another thing she wasn't allowed to mention.

Yeah, that's what she was seeing.

Steve continued to look at her with the same wordless resolve. Darcy turned away from looking back and up at him. He was somehow too much to look at, knowing that he meant every idea he'd carefully, purposefully implied. It gave her the creeps that maybe his firm handling of her head today while he washed her mouth with soap was possibly a subtle reminder of what he could do with his hands if he chose not to be gentle. Was he that good with nuance? She had no idea and now she was second-guessing herself.

"I knew you had to be smarter than you let on. Do we understand each other, Miss Lewis?" Steve asked with chillingly formal politeness.

She nodded her head and kept thinking. Thor was powerful, wise, and incredibly strong. Steve was fast, intelligent, and strategic. He was completely devoted to his Latina chick, no matter what his dick seemed to say. Thor would be able to avenge her, but he wouldn't be able to save her from whatever wrath she earned of Steve if she upset his girl.

Steve lightly touched her arm in what was meant to be a gesture of peace. Darcy moved away from the contact.

"Don't touch me," she whispered.

"Alright," Steve agreed.

Their stack of quarters was next. Darcy finished her lukewarm beer which she had set aside and forgotten.

They took the pool cues the previous players passed to them. When the table was set for the game Steve let Darcy break.

She was a good player but she knew from the start that she was only window-dressing. Steve wasn't all that experienced with billiards but he had an intrinsic facility with the physical interactions of matter, mass, and velocity. Partly because he'd scared her out of any kind of arousal, and partly because he was amazing to watch, Darcy did her best then stood aside and waited to see what Steve would do with the table she'd left him.

The player they'd seen in Clint's pay per view championship came close and watched their game. It turned out that the gray-bearded gentleman was a good sport. Marley recorded some work they could possibly use in the PR campaign.

Darcy was tired by the time the evening was over and they drove back to Pepper and the house. Markey and Jack hurried inside. Steve walked slowly toward the house. Darcy would have made tracks away from him but a quick glance made her stay close to Steve when the others went inside. The night was cold like a knife blade to the skin. The lights from the house looked safe and warm.

"Lewis. Darcy. I- uh… I didn't mean to be so intense. I mean, I meant exactly what I said. And
what I didn't say. All of it. But I didn't mean it to come out so much like a threat...exactly," Steve said.

"Yes, you did," she argued.

"No, I didn't," he denied.

Darcy tried to breathe shallow of the biting cold air and she rubbed her arms.

"Okay, so the nice guy in you didn't mean it as a threat, but you didn't see you from where I was standing. Something in the rest of you meant it. That's alright. It should work, like you said. I'll learn not to mess with you if I get the feeling that my life depends on it, right?" she asked glibly.

"Crap. Lewis, I really didn't mean it that way. I wouldn't physically hurt you," Steve insisted.

"You don't know yourself as well as you think you do. I've seen enough of you now to know which parts are real and which parts are for show. Thanks for the date, Steve," Darcy said.

She gave him a smart salute which was somehow both respectful and sarcastic at the same time. Then, she went in the house.

Steve felt like a rotten bully. It had been his intent to talk Lewis out of crushing on him but he'd done something wrong and gone too far. Still, he'd done good work tonight. Some lessons were harsh but necessary. Good thing Lewis was a tough, smart lady. He hoped she let him start thinking of her as a lady.

Thinking about Estrella would require him to leave the house to get some privacy. He didn't want to do that. Steve stripped down and slipped into bed wondering what Lewis meant when she said he didn't know himself like he thought he did. He'd slept plenty last night, so he had hours of quiet ahead of him which he needed to fill with thoughts of anything but Estrella. The data they had about the remaining Hydra bases kept his mind busy while he lay in the dark and listened for coyotes.

....

Bucky didn't like keeping the girl drugged so much. With the healing effects of Steve's blood in her she'd probably be alright with the slight overdose of sedative he used to keep her quiet at night. If it was up to him they wouldn't be doing this in the middle of town where he had to keep her hushed. Since it was too late to move her to a better location at this point they'd have to make do.

Toward morning he stopped feeding her sedatives. Wanda tapped on the door before she left for work. Buck didn't think Estrella would want her friend seeing her as she was now so he was quick to get to the bedroom door before it opened. Wanda clearly didn't like the look of him shirtless, his skin scratched all to hell and his hair messed up, but she noted that his jeans were still securely fastened. Estrella made breathy unhappy sounds from the bed. Buck kept the door clamped firmly in his hand when Wanda looked like she wanted to get past him to check on her. The woman looked at the silver of his metal hand and changed her mind.

"Does she need a doctor?" Wanda asked in a whisper.

"We've got a medic available. I'll make the call if I need to," Buck told her.

The woman gave him one last disapproving look then left the apartment. Buck waited til the door was secured behind her then he went back to the bed.
Estrella looked, sounded and smelled like any guy's amped-up wet dream. Her skin was satin-shiny and slick with dampness, her dark hair stuck all over. Her damp top was a mere token effort toward decency, more provocation than protection with the way the fabric stretched over assets which hadn't been quite so bountiful a few days ago. Buck had allowed her to ditch the panties the last time she tried to get rid of them. When she wasn't drugged lethargic she was constantly moving, seeking relief she couldn't find. The panties had been like a twisted rope sawing at her. Her tender skin looked healthier without them.

He was tempted to take pics or video of her for posterity. Buck had nothing to prove to himself. He knew he was a depraved asshole when it suited him. He smiled at the thought of shocking Steve with how she looked right now. She lay still at the moment, breathing through parted lips, strewn with long sticky hair like a wanton. One of her arms was outstretched, tired from grasping and scratching at him. Her gorgeous gams were restlessly bent and splayed, drawing the male eye up to a view worthy of the very best porn shots.

Buck grinned at her and pinched at his bottom lip. All kinds of possibilities whispered in his head. He could do anything at all with her and not only wouldn't she stop him, she'd welcome him and likely not remember it.

Estrella's potent fecundity called to him even through the dampening effect of the stuff in his arm. Except for his loyalty to Steve he was pretty sure he'd indulge the urge. Instead, he stood grinning like an idiot at her. It felt great to feel anything. The hint of arousal he felt was mental instead of physical. It was tolerable, but like a persistent itch. He probably should find a way to thank Banner for the much-improved suppressant.

He wanted to call Steve home to get the girl thoroughly bred like she wanted. Sending Steve a short video of her would likely accomplish that. His phone was on the dresser within easy reach. Bucky balled up his hand and shook his head. It would be fun like he hadn't experienced in a long, long time to push all of Steve's buttons and get him in a frantic, undignified rush back to the city. Instead of indulging his inner asshole tendencies Buck left his phone alone and moved to tend to the girl like he was supposed to.

"C'mon, Wanda's gone. Let's get you fed," he murmured to her.

Bucky slipped an arm under her and supported her back and head. Estrella cracked her eyes open to look at him. Buck kept his gaze away from her face. Her incoherent mumblings and moans sounded sweet and encouraging. Thankfully she seemed to have forgotten that she was wearing her choker necklace. She'd stopped trying to take it off.

He hoped she was capable of eating despite the lingering effects of the sedative. Getting her to the kitchen was the easy part. Over the last few days she'd taken every opportunity to wrap her legs around his hips and cling to him with her arms. Right now she made little effort, other than to slump on him as he carried her first to the bathroom then the kitchen. He laid a towel on a kitchen chair and propped her up so he could get food for them.

While he got ingredients and turned on the stove he glanced to see her frowning at him. She tried to get up and come to him then decided she'd better stay at the table. Her legs were too weak to support her.

It didn't take him long to get oatmeal, cheese, orange juice, yogurt, and some pre-cooked beef hotdogs. Buck lifted her to sit astride his lap. Estrella rocked on him like he knew she would until he started pushing food at her. The lethargy of the drugs dulled her enthusiasm but he could tell from the way she gulped everything down that she was hungry. She made vaguely impatient gestures at him when he took a few bites for himself.
"Don't rub like that. Denim's too rough," Buck told her.

He set his left hand to her hip to still her grinding motions before she could abrade herself again. Buck hurried the last of the food into them. She needed a shower. He should probably burn his jeans. Or sell them for a million dollars. She was all over him and he knew they smelled like powerful sex-dope. Another grin curved his lips as he had an idea. He didn't put her damp shirt in the laundry. Instead, he set it aside for later.

His confidence in Banner's bio-chemistry work allowed Bucky to get the girl showered with a minimum of fuss. Maybe he didn't shampoo her hair as thoroughly as he'd done yesterday but his work was good enough to get the sweat and most of the scent temporarily off of them. He'd stopped counting the number of times she got off in various ways. None of her efforts calmed her for long but it wasn't hurting anything either as long as he could make her stop before she was sore.

The sedative was wearing off enough that she gave him some trouble while he put fresh sheets on the bed. She wanted his clean shirt off of him. Sweatpants weren't as effective at keeping her hands away from his junk but he was reluctant to put on his used jeans. Evasive maneuvers and a few careful shoves kept her off him long enough for him to get the bed ready.

Bucky wrestled her into a nightshirt then tumbled them both back onto the bed. He was getting bored of hours spent in the apartment, in the room, in the bed. Boredom didn't matter. He had a job to do.

What he would never admit to anyone was that he enjoyed how she touched him. His ma had shown him affection. His sisters, especially Lucy, had always been game for a hug or a piggy-back ride. Steve was a lot sparser with the contact because they were guys but they'd had their share of easy casual touch. Women were great back in the day when he could enjoy them. This was different.

Estrella squeezed, pressed and dragged at his skin. Along his sides, up and down his back, her mouth on his chest and shoulders as if she thought he tasted good. It had been annoying and too intense at first but he was adjusting to the sensations. Estrella wasn't trying to harm him, even when she bit or scratched or banged her head at him. She sought sensation. Comfort. Humanity. She made him feel like a person, a warm thing of flesh and blood and muscle, instead of the killing machine his mind warned him that he was. She wasn't afraid of him.

Bucky laughed softly when she unsuccessfully tried to push his sweats down with her feet. Her fingers tugged at his hair while her other hand squeezed at his lats under his shirt. It was difficult to keep his muscle groups relaxed. He'd found that when he tensed up from reflexive self-defense it excited her, tripped something in her brain which made her think she might get sex. That reaction wasn't good for keeping her quiet and calm so he forced himself to stay relaxed while she sought what she needed from him.

"Steve never stood a chance against you," Buck grumbled and turned his face away when she tried to make him look at her.

She was getting louder with her vocal demands and complaints so he talked to her. He'd learned that teasing her with short glances at her eyes kept her attention, probably made her think she was making some kind of progress in weakening his resolve.

"Heh! His Avengers are gonna have a hard time getting work hours outta him once the two of you are back under the same roof. He's not gonna put up with being apart forever, ya know. He's had enough waiting. A lifetime of it. You're pretty strong, girlie, but he'll get to you. Are you gonna make him leave his friends, his job? If you fuck around on him while he's away at work, I'll fuckin
gut you. I know you're outta your head right now, but other than that, don't hurt him, huh?" Bucky rambled in a half-affectionate version of a shovel-talk.

Steve had been hurt a lot. He'd seen a lot of losses. It's not like he couldn't handle some more but Buck didn't think Steve would come out the other side as quite the same person if this girl hurt him. He could already tell that Estrella was going to go deep and put down roots in his friend.

"How much blood do you want from him? How long are you gonna keep him waiting? I don't think you know how hard it is for him to hold it all in. Maybe just a little longer, alright? He's been on two dates already, like you asked. I've been looking and I found pics of both times. There was Carter, then he took Lewis out last night. He's doing everything you asked," Bucky told her.

Estrella growled angrily at him.

"Yeah, Lewis. You know, big hair, big tits, big blue eyes? Darcy Lewis. They didn't look too chummy in the pics I got from the web, but he went out with her. Are you gonna find a guy to go out with after this? Twist the knife a little for him?" Buck wondered.

For a brief moment, Buck thought to glance at the security panel on the bedroom wall by the door. Jarvis flashed the light to let him know all was well. While his mind was working properly Buck had the thought that he was failing at his job. She might not be getting to him sexually but he was distracted. It felt good to be held, to be touched. He was alert enough to know he was under some kind of fog from the girl. It was risky to depend solely on the AI for their security but it was what he had at the moment.

"J, expand the surveillance. Use tertiary sources and watch the streets. Alert me if suspicious traffic shows a pattern in our direction. I want a three minute window for response," Bucky said.

"With such a broad field I may alert you to many false positives," Jarvis replied.

Estrella made happy noises and looked around the room.

"Hello, Miss," Jarvis said warmly, recognizing her rudimentary greeting.

"She's messin with my head. I'd rather have false positives than get caught with my pants down," Bucky told him.

"As it were," Jarvis commented.

Bucky ignored his dry tone. He noted the brief green flash at the security panel. Jarvis would comply with his instructions.

It was a long, sweaty day. He found that if he curled on his side, the girl would crawl all over him but be unable to molest him too much as long as he kept his left arm to his groin. She made him laugh with her frustrated efforts. At one point she perched on his hip and rocked herself to satisfaction and he couldn't help watching. He got caught in her eyes but she was confused. Whatever she wanted him to do was so muddled as to not compel him into anything.

After that was a lot of rubbing, crying and sleeping. Jarvis alerted him eight times to security concerns which turned out to be nothing.

Bucky tried to put up a cold shoulder to her insistent cuddling. He found it impossible to be completely emotionally detached from her. The entire reason he was here was to keep her safe and healthy for Steve. She was Steve's soft spot and that made her an extension of Steve in a way.
Steve was his only real link to his humanity. Steve was his conscience, what little remained of it. To treat her harshly would be to do the same to Steve. He didn't want to do that again. Natalia had detailed for him the injuries he'd left Steve with the day they'd taken Shield down. Buck wouldn't hurt him again if he could help it. So when Estrella wanted to be held, he held her. When she wanted something solid to rub against, he let her. He didn't let her get his pants off and he didn't let her get her hands in his pants.

She followed him to the kitchen when he wanted to get a drink or some food in her. During the worst of it, she wouldn't eat unless he made a sex game out of feeding her. That was fun and Steve probably wouldn't like it but it got her belly to stop growling. If Jarvis was recording all this he hoped only Natalia would ever see it.

By the time Wanda got home Buck was getting Estrella back on the sedatives for the evening. It wasn't just because of Wanda. The girl had rubbed herself raw again and she needed a break. This time it was Wanda who made supper and Buck was able to go out to join her at the table.

The woman glared at his disheveled, molested appearance while they ate.

"Look, don't ask, because you're not gonna like any of the answers. Thanks for the food," was all he had to say to her.

He brought some broth and a dinner roll to Estrella. It took him over an hour but he got the calories into her. Buck carried the girl across to the bathroom while Wanda was busy with the laundry. Later, in the middle of the night, his phone buzzed.

Tell me about her, Steve said.

I'd love to, but she made me promise to keep mum about all this. When she's lucid she's bashful about it, Buck replied.

Lucid? Why wouldn't she be lucid? Steve asked.

Because I had Banner send over a sedative for her. Your girl's a hellcat. I can let her claw and yowl during daylight hours when Wanda's at work but folks need to sleep at night. You better eat your Wheaties, pal, if you wanna keep up with her next time she's like this, Buck teased him.

There was a long pause during which Steve didn't respond. Bucky smiled, imagining his friend squirming on a bed of denied passion, tortured between desire for the girl and jealousy that he wasn't the one with her right now. The little text bubble appeared and went away three times before Steve successfully formulated what he wanted to say on the fourth try.

Are you...?

Buck laughed out loud. All that effort, and that's all Stevie could string together? He had to mess with him.

Yeah, he replied.

His phone did that Steve-thing where it rang once, then went live.

"Yeah, what? What the hell does that mean?" Steve demanded.

Buck hurried to press the phone to his ear to hopefully seal in the sound. Estrella stirred fitfully and flailed an arm at him.
"It means I'm having fun and that she's doing fine. Better than fine. She looks great, she's got lots of energy, and I'm keeping her safe and fed. That's all you need to know," Buck said.

Steve was stiffly quiet on the other end of the call.

"You gotta understand," Buck explained, "this is intense. I can see why she's putting you through it. She's vulnerable and she's gonna need attention and support. When you finally nail her down it won't be okay for you to leave her home to deal with this alone."

"Mmf," was all Steve had to say to that.

"You're gonna need someplace that's not here in the city and not at Stark's tower. I don't like using the sedative on her. If she wants to make some noise, she should have a place she can do that, right?" Buck said, already knowing how his friend felt about it.

Steve made another noise.

Bucky smiled. Estrella was shifting around in the dark, seeking to get closer to what little she could hear of Steve's voice from the phone.

"Hey, I got an idea. She's drugged to high heaven to keep her quiet and let her rest but she likes your voice. I'm gonna put the phone to her ear and you say what you want. She'll love that," Buck suggested.

"'right," was all Steve said.

Estrella went still and attentive when Bucky put the phone to her ear and Steve started talking. He would have liked to pretend he couldn't understand what his pal said but his enhanced hearing didn't allow for that. It was all bedroom talk, half of it growly sounds that didn't make any sense unless a person could interpret the base-brain grumblings of fools in love. Buck didn't know much about romantic love, but he knew Steve. The guy was stupid-gone on her. The little keening sounds she made in return were pitifully hopeful. She clutched at the phone and tightened her thigh around his. There was the rocking again and she was probably still rubbed sore from earlier.

"Cut it out. That's enough," Buck announced loud enough for Steve to hear.

By the time he pried his phone away from Estrella and rolled atop her to keep her from fighting, Steve had stopped talking. Buck grinned at the sound of him trying to get his breathing under control.

"Buck, how can you...?" Steve rasped in the characteristic deeper tone of voice that came out when he'd been mixed up with his girl.

"The stuff in my arm works. She's trying hard but it's not her fault. Don't be sore with her. Like I said, she's real bashful about it when I can cool her down and get her to talk," Buck reminded.

"Cool her down?" Steve asked ominously.

"Shit," Buck bit his lip between his teeth, knowing he'd said too much in his mentally muddled state, "When I put her in cool water her mind works better. She needs a shower sometimes anyway."

He figured if he was in for a penny, he may as well go all the way.

"You showered with her?" Steve seethed.
"Well, yeah. Putting her in there by herself wouldn't have accomplished anything. I kept my shorts on, scrubbed her up, then got her dressed," he admitted.

"You touched her," Steve growled.

"Had to, to get her clean. She sure as hell wasn't doing it on her own. I offered her the soap and she wanted none of it," Buck said.

He couldn't stop grinning. If Steve wasn't all the way on the other side of the continent he'd get his ass beat in short order. As it was, his pal had some food for thought until he could get home.

Steve made an aggressive sound Bucky hadn't heard before.

"Hey, cool your nads. I had to tend to your skinny little ass in a tub. Three times, spring of thirty-five. We could hardly keep the fever down and your ma was away at work. Same thing except she wasn't trying to die on me, she just needs cleaning," Buck explained.

"Did you touch her?" Steve growled.

"Not more than I had to. Relax. She may be outta her head, but it's you she wants. I can talk to her all day and not get a reaction outta her like when she hears your voice. The two of you gotta stop futzing around and make this official. Believe me, pal, she wants you. She just needs to feel secure that you're gonna tend to her proper," Buck assured him.

Steve made a sound full of frustration and longing.

"Yeah. You need to get shit done and get home. And hey, grow some balls, will ya? Nobody's impressed. Ask out a girl you don't already know. Carter and Lewis already have the hots for ya and you know it. Work up some moxie and ask a stranger out," Buck taunted him.

More grumbling.

"What? All I can hear is little Stevie over there whining that girls are mean. Man up. Go out with somebody you don't know," he said.

Steve was quiet for a while. Buck was about to end the call.

"Thanks," Steve said.

It was only one word, but all the piss and attitude was gone. He meant it.

Buck had to think before he responded with something flippant.

"I'd do anything. I told ya so. We want this for you, Steve. Me, and Talia, and Jarvis," he said.

Steve made another sound, then the call ended. Buck smiled in the dark and tucked the girl's grabby hands back under them. The weight of both their bodies would hopefully keep her from grasping at the phone for at least a minute.

_No crying, angelface. For once in our lives, something good is happening. Go with it and try not to think too much_, he texted to Steve.

In California, Steve rubbed at his eyes. He wanted to punch Buck right in the mouth and then he wanted to hug him. If it weren't for the responsibility of his job he'd be all over getting Estrella to change her mind about waiting to marry. It was good to stay busy and away from her because he knew she needed time but the frustration was making him a little crazy. Buck knew that like no one
else did.

Everything Buck said about Eya and hearing her voice, listening to the pleading in her tone had him painfully hard. For tonight they were at Tony's new place in Malibu. His suite afforded him some privacy. Steve pushed the covers down and reached to massage the pressurized tension that made him feel like he couldn't stand to be in his skin if he didn't do something to ease it.

*Don't wear out your dick. You're gonna need it eventually,* Buck taunted him one last time.

Steve sent him back a rude emoji and tossed his phone away. If he wore it out, it would heal.

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"We need to get back to New York," Pepper said.

Steve rubbed a towel at his hair then passed it back and forth behind his back. There was sand in his shorts but that could wait until he got up to the house. He didn't want to be distracted with trivial things if there was trouble.

"How soon?" he asked.

They walked up the beach toward the path. Marley and Jack gathered the gear they'd used to get today's material. Steve suppressed a shiver at the memory of cold Pacific water around him, trying to suck him down. He could have drowned today. Since the water was merely cold and not freezing, his body may not have protected him the same way as when he'd been in the ice. He'd chosen to get in the water to get the video they needed for the PR work but he was glad it was over.

"Clint is coming. There's no emergency. It's not Avengers related. Tony wants to show you something, which is also unrelated to why we need to go home," Pepper told him as they made their way up the side of the beach cliff on the path.

Pepper's look told him that whatever the issue was, it was something he'd rather not discuss in front of the film crew. Steve looked to Russel, who nodded to him. A glance around at the beach and the ocean below them showed there was no reason he needed to linger. There was only a woman jogging with her dog and two surfers out in the water. Steve bounded into a run up the path to the house. He slowed to a jog across the terrace, then into the glass doors. The house was cavernous and showy inside as Stark houses tended to be.

"Over here," he heard Tony's voice to his left, past the main room.

Steve jogged into the doorway of the home office and shut the door behind him. The room smelled of leather and liquor and the big exotic wood desk which served as the platform for the glowing blue projection of Tony Stark.

"Help me, Obi-Wan. You're my only hope," Tony said to him.

"Are you being held prisoner?" Steve asked with a smirk.

It was good to see Tony, even if it was only a projection of him. He looked ragged and tired, as if Pepper being away from the tower wasn't good for him getting any sleep. Steve felt a moment of guilt for that.

"Talk to me," Steve said in a more serious tone.
"We've got a woman calling for you. And there's this guy…" Tony said.

Steve's phone buzzed in his hand and he looked at it and at the forwarded security camera image which Tony showed him from the lobby of Avengers tower. The familiar guy in the lobby of the tower was the same person calling his phone.

"Real time imagery?" Steve asked.

"You bet. Go ahead. Answer it. I want to hear this," Tony said.

"It's not your business, Tony. I'll call him back in a minute. Tell me about the woman. Is it her?"

"Yeah. Dana Harding wants your number. We know what she's after. You said you have a statement prepared?" Tony asked with a fair degree of sympathy.

"I wish it hadn't come to this but I'm ready for it. Can you put her through here? Record everything," Steve said.

"I'm seeing a swimsuit and a lot of skin. Are you trying to encourage her?" Tony asked with a trouble-making smirk in his expression that was visible even through pale blue imagery.

"Smartass. Audio only," Steve said.

He appreciated that Tony was here for him in this. Steve knew his mild teasing was meant to help him dilute how awful the next few minutes would be.

Audio of a call in progress came to him in the Malibu office.

"-ogers. Steve Rogers. Don't lie to me, bitch. I know he lives there!"

"Thank you, Cheryl. I'll take it from here," Steve said to the receptionist in New York.

The woman who'd been holding the call at the front desk left the connection. The tone changed slightly, indicating that their call was now private.

"Miss Harding. This is Steve Rogers. You wanted to speak with me," Steve said.

"Steve! You darling man. No one can find you anywhere except on the internet. Are you really out west somewhere?" Dana asked him with glaringly false cheer.

"Why are you calling me? My association with you was temporary, as we agreed," Steve reminded her.

"Oh, that! I know you really didn't mean it. We were amazing together. We had so much fun and I helped you relax. If you don't want to see me again that's alright but I need a little help, just this once," Dana nearly cooed at him.

"If you need assistance you should call the police, Miss. I'm not on duty to assist anyone," Steve told her.

"It's nothing like that. I don't need the Captain. I need you, Steve. To support me and our baby," Dana said.

"I don't have a baby with you, Miss Harding. Tests showed that you were not pregnant after our encounter. If you're pregnant now, it's not mine," Steve said.
"Your tests are wrong. Nobody can get a pregnancy test the morning after and have it come out true. Don't be that way, honey. All I need is a little support then I won't bother you again. Come on, how's it going to look if Captain America won't support his own child?"

"It doesn't matter how it will look because I don't have a child. I have the pregnancy test results to make my case. If you want money I suggest you find a different source of income. You won't be getting anything from me," Steve informed her.

"Listen, you rich prick. You got me pregnant and you owe me. You'll pay or I'll go public with everything. Your lily-white Captain act is a load of shit and I'll make sure people know it. You're nothing but a suit, like any other big daddy. You don't scare me. Now you can send me the money, or you can watch me on the news tonight spilling every juicy detail. Ten o'clock, channel four. I'm standing outside their office right now," Dana threatened him.

He could hear some street noise on her end of the call so she might be telling the truth.

Steve looked at the clock on the wall in Tony's office. Dana wasn't very good with numbers. It was already too late for her to make the ten o'clock news in New York. That wouldn't stop the NBC station from scooping up her story for the twenty-four hour news cycle but her threat wasn't as pointed as she thought it was. She was also missing some other important logic points but she didn't need to know that right now.

"Miss Harding, could you give me some time to get back to town so I can make this right? Like you said, I'm out west. I should be home by morning. I'll be able to help you then," Steve told her.

Tony's image on the desk rubbed a hand over his mouth and made a face like he was trying not to laugh. Steve didn't think this was funny.

"See, it's not that hard, honey. If you want to play nice I can make it good. We might even turn our relationship into something more rewarding for you. You've got my number now? You'll call me in the morning when you get home?" Dana asked sweetly.

"I promise I'll make everything right, first thing when I get home," Steve assured her.

"You're so sweet. But… you didn't ask how much I want," Dana said, beginning to sound suspicious.

"Does it matter? I'm rich," Steve assured her.

"Oh! If it doesn't matter, then… I'll think on it. I'll be waiting for your call. First thing tomorrow," Dana sounded supremely pleased with herself.

"Yes, Miss. In the morning," Steve agreed.

Dana giggled and ended the call.

Steve sighed and rubbed the towel over his face. He stepped closer to Tony's image and rested his fist and the towel on the desk.

"That was creepy. It was perfectly civil, except I know you. So it was creepy. You promised her you were going to make everything right and that you were going to help her. Legally, I wouldn't have advised that. Unless- you're not going to pay her, are you? You could. But then it validates her claims and she'll eventually be back for more. Tell me you're not-"

"Shhh, Tony," Steve made a soothing hand gesture, "I'm not paying her. I said exactly what I
meant. I am going to make everything right, by everybody. I will be helping her. She doesn't know that she's going to make herself a target for Hydra and I'm going to try to minimize that danger. I didn't say anything untrue and for now she's happy. That buys me time to do what I need to do."

"You're spending too much time with Romanoff," Tony said.

Steve let the implication that he'd lied to the woman pass without comment. There were more important things he had to do right now than argue with Stark.

"Who should I contact?" Steve asked.

"Ask Pep. She'll know the best answer to that. Since you don't trust me, why would you bother to ask me anyway?" Tony snarked at him.

"It's not- I trust-," Steve sighed again, and lifted his arm to grip a fist in his hair. He gave a satisfying tug, then let his hand fall to his side.

"I trust you, Tony. With my life. With almost everything. You've been great with this. Very supportive, very helpful, and it means a lot to me. I know you have more experience than I do in these things, but you gotta let me handle it my way. I'm thinking long. There's a reason," Steve explained.

Little blue Tony made a thoughtful face, then waved a hand at him.

"The man with the plan. Fine. I'll stay out of it. Let me guess, you don't want me listening in when you call back doppelganger guy?" Tony asked.

"It's family. You'll know soon enough. Goodbye Tony. Thanks for being on point for me," Steve said with genuine warmth.

Tony nodded slightly then his image blinked out to nothing.

Steve lifted his phone and returned his most recent call.

"Where are you, man? Why won't anybody come down?" Jesse asked.

"Because I don't want you associated with me or my pals and they know that. What are you doing in the city?" Steve wondered.

He'd seen the security image. He was pretty sure he had it figured out.

"Where is she? Just send her down if you're too busy. I didn't come to see you," Jesse told him.

"I'm not in town and you can't see her right now," Steve said.

"Tha fuck I can't. What have you done with Eya? Why doesn't she answer her phone?"

"It's family stuff, Jesse. She's indisposed right now. I wish you would have called ahead. I'll be home soon. Let me get you a room. You can see her if you stay a few days but you can't see her right now," Steve told him.

"Indisposed? What the? Oh. Yeah. She called me a little while ago and asked me some questions about that shit. I can handle it. We're kin. This stuff doesn't work that way with us," Jesse assured him.

"I don't believe you. Val's voice worked on you. Why should this be any different? She doesn't
need that kind of trauma, Jesse. Give it a few days. See the sights in the city. Then maybe she'll be ready for some company," Steve bargained for some time.

If Jesse said he understood what was going on, maybe he did. Steve wasn't privy to what she had or hadn't told her cousin about her personal things.

"I'm not leaving til I see her," Jesse promised.

"I don't blame you. You've come a long way. Let me make a call and see what I can do. You need to be careful. Those people, the ones I had to deal with in your territory…they're not the only threat. I want you to see her but I'm not going to let you lead danger to her. She's safe where she is, so if you go to her from the tower you'll take the long way around and you do it exactly how you're told to. Understand?"

"Sure, man. Whatever. I want her to be safe," Jesse said.

Steve could almost see him shrug.

It was funny how talking to Jesse, even though he was on the other side of the country, brought him a feeling of simple rightness and the feeling that he'd temporarily felt on vacation, like he was only a guy, not a science experiment. Steve considered Jesse to be family, like a new brother. Jesse wasn't business. He was a connection to Estrella. To Alberto and Val and to Rita. Hearing his flippant Tex-mex accent made him want a hug from Rita. It made him think of sunshine and fun on a warm beach instead of a cold one.

"Are you hungry? There's a diner to the south side of the lobby. It's open late. You can take a load off and eat on my account. Let me. I wish I was there to welcome you," Steve said.

"I could eat. Where are you?" Jesse said as he looked around. He found the entrance to the diner and walked toward it.

"California. I've got transport outbound to get me. I'll be home in a few hours. Sit tight and I'll get back with you in a few about Eya," Steve told him.

"I'm sorry I showed up at a bad time. I didn't expect everybody to be busy. I should have let you know. Or her," Jesse grumbled.

"It's alright, we'll work something out. I'll get back to you soon," Steve said.

He ended the call, then immediately texted Buck.

_Tell me how she is. Things are happening, I don't have a lot of time to chat. It's been eight days. Is she getting any better? How long until she can have a visitor? Not me._

Steve made his way through the Malibu house toward his suite. He had to get ready to move. He needed a shower and he needed to talk to Pepper. She was in the kitchen with Darcy. Steve slung his towel over his shoulders and went toward the women and the stools at the kitchen island. He was hungry from his time in the ocean fighting to get the video they needed and to keep from drowning. It wouldn't hurt to eat something while he waited for Buck to respond. He kept his phone in his hand and nodded a greeting to Lewis.

She did a good job of not-quite staring at him even though he wasn't wearing much. In the two days since they'd gone out they'd found a kind of truce. They were neither antagonistic nor polite to each other. They merely treated each other like humans sharing the same space. That was good enough for Steve.
Pepper handed him a fruit smoothie in a large glass.

"Thanks," he said before he took a sip.

He craved something more substantial than a smoothie but he'd take any calories he could get right now. The last light of dusk glimmered dully on the ocean beyond the windows, the night purpling to black.

Steve glanced to Darcy briefly.

"Darcy, please go get our things together. Clint is coming," Pepper said to her assistant.

"Dun-dun-duuuunhh," Darcy intoned ominously, as if Clint was an approaching boogey-man.

Steve and Pepper smiled a little as Darcy went.

Once she was gone, Steve was free to ask Pepper what he needed to know about trustworthy media people back home.

Pepper put out a hand to rub at his arm. It was soothing, along with the momish way she looked at him.

"I'm so sorry this is happening to you. If there's any other way we can help, Tony or I, just ask," she offered.

Steve pulled her into a hug, kissed her on the head, then let her go. Pepper smiled up at him and Steve frowned slightly at seeing a little bit of heat in her eyes. Pep was confusing sometimes. She was like a pestering mom. Then she showed hints of being a woman. Maybe he was pushing it, hugging her when he didn't have a shirt. He hadn't meant it that way. His skin heated in a flush and he stared down at his feet.

Pepper laughed softly then she took his head in her cool hands. She bent him down a little and kissed him on the head, as he'd done to her.

"Sweet boy. Silly man. Men tend to disregard women, to think of us as simple because they don't understand our motivations," she told him.

"Never claimed to understand em," Steve murmured.

He was still red, still confused.

"Darcy is making an effort, but don't ask so much of her so soon. Go get dressed," Pep suggested.

Steve almost shrugged off the resentment of being told what he already knew he needed to do. Then he didn't. He should be honest with Pepper. She deserved it.

He gave her a hard look and held her gaze until the moment became uncomfortable. Pepper looked away and pursed her lips to keep from smiling.

"Alright. I'll stop that. It's not like you're Tony and need to be reminded of everything," she said.

Steve felt he should apologize. Pepper saw that too. They stared at each other for a moment longer in a little contest of wills. They broke into quiet laughter at the absurdity of mentally arguing over a withheld apology. Steve squeezed her hand briefly, then took himself and his smoothie off to shower and dress in preparation for Clint's pickup.
She was way better today. I don't think I need to sedate her tonight. She was up talking but she's still sweaty and cross. Probably be almost normal tomorrow. Until her scent is gone, a visitor would be pointless. Unless it's a woman? Buck responded.

Steve stood in the luxurious guest suite bathroom. He stripped off his sandy swimsuit and reached in to get the shower going.

*Let's give it a try. Don't hurt him. Tomorrow morning,* Steve said.

*I was planning to get out of here tomorrow. I need a change of clothes. Can't it wait?* Buck complained.

*Sure, if you need it to. I can find a place for him to stay until you're available or until she's able to have company without you around. Let me know when,* Steve conceded.

*Nah, I'll hang around for longer. Send him in the morning. It's not like I have anywhere to be except this tiny apartment,* Buck said.

*What're you complaining about? Wanda's place is bigger than a cryo-cylinder, isn't it? That's gotta be an improvement,* Steve taunted him.

*Why, I oughtta…* Buck replied with plenty of implied attitude.

Steve smiled and got into the shower. He wasn't fooling himself. He knew what he was doing. He dreaded the public spectacle he was going to have to walk into because of Dana Harding and what he'd done with the woman. Tony was a pal, despite being annoying. Pepper mothered him a bit too much, but it showed that she cared. Buck was strong enough to take his shit and razz him, even when he didn't know something was going on. He needed his friends. Sam and Thor would be welcome, too. Nat was an odd bird. He knew she'd stand at his back no matter what, ready to cut down anybody who came at him, but she'd just as soon cut him for being stupid and messy and getting caught. She'd consider it a deserved and necessary lesson. He wouldn't get any teasing or sympathy from her, only cold, useful results. That was comforting in the way she knew how. The support of his friends, in whatever form, was a blessing that helped him face the coming mess.

He wouldn't think of Estrella. He was going to have to let her and Buck know what was happening before they saw it like the general public. That could wait a few hours. It was time to be smart, not emotional. He needed to consider how to avoid the worst damage to his associates and be mindful of legal matters. If Cap had to fall, so be it.

Steve got himself clean and sand-free then he got out of the shower. He dried the drips from his face and reached for his phone.

"Jarvis, listen in," he said.

"I am prepared, Captain," Jarvis responded.

The Jarvis in California didn't sound as personable as the one in New York. His tone was stiffer, not as nuanced with emotion. Weren't they the same AI? Steve didn't have time to think on that right now. He made the call he needed to make.

"Jesse, did you eat?" he asked when the call connected.

"Yeah, thanks. What do you know?"

"You can see Estrella in the morning. We need to get you away from the tower. Jarvis is my
assistant. He's AI. He'll be in your ear. He'll guide you around the city and to a place to stay tonight. Do what he says. It doesn't matter what it costs, Eya's safety is more important. I'll cover expenses and I don't want to hear any backtalk about it. I don't have the time right now," Steve instructed.

"Artificial Intelligence, AI? You're serious?" Jesse wondered.

"Yes," was all Steve said.

"Alright. Lead on," Jesse said.

"Please give Eya a hug for me. I haven't seen her in days," Steve said, then he ended the call.

He had time to shave, get dressed and get his bike ready for transport. Jack, Marley, and Russel would be taking the SUV home cross-country and editing video while they travelled. Pepper and Darcy would fly back to the tower with Steve.

He ate his share of the Chinese takeout Darcy had ordered for them. There was a little bit of time to find the contact information he needed, and then Clint arrived. The quinjet set down at the piazza in front of the house. Steve rode the bike up the ramp and secured it then went to greet Clint.

"Thanks for coming for us. Did you get enough downtime?" Steve asked him.

"I'm good," Clint said.

He looked healthy and well-rested. Maybe a little more padded and tanned than when he'd left. Clint's demeanor was frosty and sharp as he readied them for takeoff. The jet's wing turbines hadn't fully spun down from landing before Darcy and Pepper joined them. Steve helped them with their bags then went to take the co-pilot's seat.

"I need some flight time," Steve said.

"Suit yourself," Clint agreed.

Steve noted the long brown scab that ran from Clint's wrist up the outside of his forearm. It looked days old, thickly crusted but still seeping in places.

"Accident. Good memories," Clint said with a hint of a smile around his eyes.

Clint was a private man, even more closed off than Natasha in some ways. Steve didn't question him about the scabbed flesh wound. He ran through the pre-flight checklist in his head and his fingers and eyes moved to the necessary gauges and controls. He checked the atmospheric conditions and the flight paths of the other aircraft in the sky. Then he got them in the air and headed for home.

"Do I need to know?" Clint asked sometime later after the ladies were busy doing their own thing in the back of the jet.

"No reason not to tell you. Let me make some calls first," Steve said.

He engaged the sonic privacy barrier that separated the cockpit from the rest of the cabin. Clint listened to his side of the calls with open curiosity because it was clear that he was being allowed to do so.

"That bitch?" was all he said afterward.
Steve looked to him briefly and nodded. He'd thought it would be a longer conversation, but Clint got it with few words. The slight firming of his jaw was sentiment enough for Steve to know what Clint thought of it all. He wondered at how cheery and normal Clint seemed to Estrella. He still hadn't figured out why the man acted that way around her and it didn't seem the time to ask.

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Valeria groaned irritably and groped her hand toward her phone. She'd stayed up late texting a boy for half the night and she did not want to wake up for school. She fumbled for the alarm icon on her phone screen and squinted her eyes at the twinkle-bling flash of color. That didn't make sense. It was still dark outside. Not like almost dark because she'd snoozed the first few times the alarm went off. It was Dark dark outside. And the twinkle-bling? Her mind cleared some and she sat up.

The twinkle-bling setting was only for one person, not that he ever called her. She grabbed at her phone more securely and rubbed her eyes. It was him! She wasn't dreaming.

She thought she'd be excited if he ever called but the more she thought on it, the more her gut clenched with worry. Was Eya alright? Was something horrible happening?

"Steve?!" she asked in a hurry as soon as she decided she wasn't dreaming and answered the call.

Adrenaline raced through her veins. She felt giddy and dreadful at the same time.

"Put your necklace on, sweetheart. Wake up. I need to talk to you," Steve's low voice said.


She reached for her necklace and put it on but she couldn't wait in silence. Steve was far too calm, as if he had really bad news.

"Jesse is fine. So is Eya. I'm sorry if I scared you," he said.

"It's four in the morning. Are you okay? Why are you calling me, Gringo?" she asked.

She kept her voice down because she didn't want her parents to come and get nosey into her conversation. Nobody called. Everybody texted. Only old people would call. Like Steve.

"I need to talk to you," Steve said.

He didn't sound playful about her name calling.

"You already said that. So talk. You're being weird," Valeria told him in a whisper.

"I messed up, Valeria. It was weeks ago, before I met you and your family. Before I was dating Estrella. Me and Eya were friends and she knew what I did, but we weren't dating. I wouldn't do that to her," Steve said.

"Do what? You slept with somebody you weren't supposed to? You're Captain America. Cap doesn't do stupid shit like that," the teenager said.

Was she still asleep, still dreaming? This was too freaky. Why the hell would Steve call her and tell her this? He was really hot, but the more she knew him through listening to Estrella, he was really old, too. He shouldn't be calling to tell her sketchy stuff at four in the morning. The dream-like sense of unreality faded as Steve told her more.
"Don't do that, Val. I'm not my job. I'm a person like anybody else. I'm sorry. I don't want to put this on you. It's going to come out so I don't have a choice. If you don't see it on the news in Corpus it might be on the internet. Kids might talk about it at school. I think of you and your ma and pa as family. I don't want you to be the last to know and I don't want you to hear rumors or lies. I was with a woman I shouldn't have been with. She says she's pregnant but we know she's not. She was tested and we know it's not mine. She thinks she can get money from me because of who I am," Steve said.

"That bitch!" Valeria exclaimed, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Val," Steve admonished her.

"That's what she is. Okay, she wanted to get with Cap. I get it. She shouldn't do that to you. To lie like that. And now she wants money when you told her it's not yours? You tell me, what is she other than a bitch?" she continued in a furious whisper.

"To be fair, guys use girls all the time, get them in trouble, then claim the baby isn't theirs. It's going to sound like a plausible story to a lot of people," Steve reasoned.

"But you know it isn't yours. Doctor Banner isn't stupid. You've probably got the best medical staff in, like, forever. I think y'all can ace a pregnancy test," Valeria pointed out.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence. That's not why I called. I did mess up, Val. I was with that woman. I can't lie about that. I wasn't going to come out with it-"

"Because you didn't want to damage El Gringo, but now the puta wants money, so he gets a black eye. Couldn't you keep it in your pants? You're a hundred years old," Valeria pointed out.

Steve chuckled softly.

"Apparently not," he said.

His humor wasn't genuine. It was self-deprecating and sad. She looked at her Captain America poster in the almost-dark of her room. He wasn't supposed to sound like this. But this wasn't Cap. It was Steve, the regular guy Eya loved. Maybe he wasn't exactly regular but close enough.

"That's not a nice word, what you called her. Don't," Steve said.

"Shut up. I'm mad. She doesn't get to be mean to you, to lie about you," Val insisted.

"Yes she does. It's a free country. She can say what she wants. She hasn't had a good life and she sees this as an opportunity to make money. It's survival for her. Opportunity. I understand what she's doing but I'm not going to let her push me around. I'll be on the news. Or the internet, if it's not big enough for national news. I don't know how big El Gringo is down there," Steve said.

"Eh. He's at least as big as Rey Mysterio," Valeria said.

"I'll have to look that up," Steve said.

"Don't. I was joking. If you don't know who it is, then the joke didn't work and I don't want you to feel bad later. He's a performance artist. What you do is real," she told him.

"Thanks," he said humbly.

"So what are you going to do?" Valeria asked him.
"I've got a meeting with some people. I'll tell the truth, and then the woman-

"Puta," Val insisted.

"-won't have any leverage over me. I'm sorry, Val. Please tell your parents I called, and that I'm not saying I didn't do it. I want them to know it was before I was with Estrella, and we know the baby isn't mine, if she's pregnant at all. Estrella knows all about it. She knew from the beginning." Steve said.

"Be careful what you say. I know you're stupid honest and all, but you don't have to tell people everything. Maybe you could ignore the woman, like it's so ridiculous and not worth your time to respond, and she'll just go away?" Val said.

"I've got this. I know what I have to do and what I have to say. I only wanted to let you know what's about to happen so you're not surprised. Thank you for trying to help. Tell your ma I feel like I could use a hug next time I see her. If she wants to slap me first, that's alright," Steve said with a smile in his voice.

"You don't do that. You're a good guy. You made a mistake. We all do. Don't let it make you look weak. That's what they want," Val whispered cryptically.

"It's what who wants?" Steve asked for clarification in a whisper.

It was fun. Valeria was in that funny place between the wonder of a child and the growing wisdom of a young adult. He really wanted to know what she thought.

"You know, the bad guys. They don't just want to defeat you or kill you. They want to make you look bad and undo everything you ever stood for, to make your whole life look wasted," Valeria said.

"Yeah. I get that," Steve said.

He was surprised that she understood it as well.

"Oh, and Val?"

"Uh-huh?"

"If you hear or see people saying unkind things about me, let it slide. You can't let anyone know that you know me," he reminded her.

Valeria heaved out a resentful sigh.

"It's a safety thing. Please?"

"I won't say anything. You, go and be strong. Don't be sad," she told him.

"Aye, Ma'am," Steve said.

Valeria liked that she could hear a smile in his voice.

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"Put some real clothes on. Wear a dress or something," Bucky told her after breakfast.
"I don't want to. It's hot in here," Estrella said.

She'd volunteered to shower so she was clean, but that was mostly because she could use cool water in the shower. It felt good against the fever heat that broiled inside her. She pulled her heel up under her bottom to tilt more of her sweat-sticky skin off of the wooden chair. There was a magazine on the table. She picked it up and fanned herself with it.

She felt strange, like she wanted to snap and jab at Bucky, but there was knowledge in his eyes. He knew. He'd seen the worst that she could be and he'd held onto her through it. She knew he had because she woke up smelling him all over her. Another confusing thing was that Bucky wasn't dead to her anymore. He felt to her like his sexuality was sleepy or lazy, but it was there. Was it because of her? She knew she'd changed. Her face felt odd. Her body was finished healing. She didn't want to look in the mirror. It was possible that whatever had changed about her had merely changed her perception of him and that Bucky wasn't any different.

She shifted her eyes to him, then away. Shameful thoughts prowled around in her head. Bucky was very handsome. With the new way he felt to her it seemed possible that she maybe could – no. Estrella shook her head and looked away. Damn him, he knew! He knew what she was thinking. It was there in the steady, mildly predatory look in his eyes. It shivered her and made her mad at the same time.

"You're alright. We got through the worst of it. No harm done, toots," Bucky said.

His voice wasn't as low as Steve's, but there was a grittiness under the smooth that shivered her again.

"Thank you for helping me. Why wasn't I wearing underwear?" she asked.

Bucky smiled at her kindness and her crabbiness all in one breath.

"I told you I'd get you through it. No panties because they were rubbing you raw. You heal fast but you were busy a lot," Buck said diplomatically.

Estrella put her hands over her face and moaned.

"Not your fault. It was kinda sweet when you weren't trying to scratch my skin off," Buck teased her.

She peeked at him through her fingers as if checking for red marks on him. He healed faster than she did, so he was unblemished.

"Did we?" she dreaded asking but she had to know.

She knew better than to trust his blithe 'no harm done, toots.'

"You tell me. I know the answer to that, but I wanna hear what you think," Buck said.

"I don't want games! I need to know!" Estrella said.

She got up and brought her breakfast dishes to the kitchen. She ran the hot water, squirted the soap, then started working on the stack of dishes. She could feel Bucky standing in the doorway behind her. He wouldn't just be standing there. He'd be leaned against one side of the door frame with his sinfully thick thighs tight and his feet crossed. His arms, too, making his shoulders look even more impressive. She wanted to smack the lurid smirk off his face, except she knew she was irrationally irritable and he wasn't feeling as sexy as he was acting. It was a show from memory, like Steve
said. Her eyelids squeezed shut and she more felt than sounded a helpless whimper. She wanted, wanted, wanted. So bad. So good. She made a keening sound, then shrieked and jumped back when a soapy plate sipped from her hands. It almost smashed her toes but Bucky jerked her back so fast that her head bonked his nose.

"You're always getting hit in the nose," she mumbled.

Buck let go of her and she stooped to start cleaning up Wanda's broken plate.

"You should stop trying to do dishes and go get dressed. Put on some shoes," Buck told her.

"It's too hot for clothes! Did we fuck?" she demanded.

She stood there with broken, soapy crockery in her hands and the water still running.

"It's hot because you demanded food before I could get to the thermostat, and now you've got your hands in scalding dish water. Get to your room and put on a dress!" Bucky shouted at her.

He pointed out of the kitchen and toward her bedroom.

She almost opened her mouth, but then she didn't. Some dim memory warned her that after his words came action, and she wouldn't like how he handled her. She never did. Or, sometimes she did. It was all a mess in her head.

Estrella dropped the broken pieces in the trash, rubbed the soap bubbles off her hands with a dish rag, and shut off the running faucet. She refused to look at him while she went to her room to put on a dress.

There were more clothes in her small closet than she'd brought. The new-to-her things were a varied mix. Natasha. She'd been here. These were things from her closet. Stretchy things. Comfy things. Feminine things. Estrella burst into tears and found herself hugging the clothes hanging in her closet.

While she cried, she rolled her eyes at herself. She was being an overly-dramatic idiot and she knew it but she couldn't help it. It was hormones like Bucky had said days ago. How many days had it been? She didn't know. She had no idea what day it was. She found her phone on the floor under the edge of her bed. She got it and plugged it up to charge.

Estrella pulled a long, stretchy red dress down from its hanger. It was shapeless, except for the gathered, ruched band around the top where her breasts would be. There was a soft strap that went around behind her neck but she tucked it in her bosom. She didn't want the heat of the strap against her neck. Her breasts were medium-large and flagrantly prominent. There wasn't anything she could do about the state of her nips. She thanked Natasha in her head because at least that part of the dress was bumpy to partially camouflage them.

The loose, flowy dress clung to her in places when she moved but there was plenty of room to sit and tuck her legs up under her. She didn't want shoes. They were in the apartment, not going out anytime soon. Why should she need them?

She liked the deep, dark red of the dress. It looked good against her skin. She refused to look in the mirror though it was right in front of her. Maybe she would brave it later. By feel alone she took down her hair, added another elastic for strength, and put it up on the top of her head. She liked the sensual feel of her long ponytail brushing against her bare shoulders and back as she walked.
Bucky looked her over from where he was doing dishes at the kitchen sink. He did a double-take, then grinned at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Oh, nothin'," he said with faux-innocence.

She came to stand in the kitchen doorway, like he'd done behind her.

"Don't do that," he told her.

He rolled his shoulders and looked back at her.

From the look on his face, she could tell that he didn't like having people behind him. She moved around to hop up onto the countertop not far from the sink.

"Did we fuck?" he asked her.

She shook her head and wished her hair was down to hide behind.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I feel empty," she whispered.

She fingered the black velvet choker and the opal voice moderator. Her finger slid back and forth between the velvet and her skin.

"You can feel that we didn't?" Buck asked.

"It's more than that, but I know, now that I paid attention to it," she said.

There was a knock at the door.

Estrella looked to Bucky with wide eyes.

"Whoever it is, Steve sent them. Relax. Nothing's gonna happen to you as long as you do as I tell you," Buck said.

He dried his hands on the towel and left the kitchen to answer the door. Estrella slipped down off the countertop and crept behind him on bare feet. She stayed back in case she needed to get to her bedroom and shut herself inside. She tamped down hard on the part of her that was hopeful a useful male had come knocking.

Bucky looked at the security panel.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said, and looked at Estrella.

"What? Who is it?" she asked.

Bucky laughed.

He unlocked and opened the door.

…

Jesse didn't like feeling like a yokel but there was no other way to feel. Houston made his head hurt
with all the traffic and the crawling-ant masses of people. New York City at seven in the morning was insanity. Maybe Mexico City or Tokyo or Mumbai were crazier, but he couldn't imagine it worse than this.

Last night, right after leaving Tony Starks' tower, Jarvis had directed him to stop in a phone accessory store. In a voice of frosty British disapproval the man in his phone who he wasn't entirely sure wasn't just some dude directed him to get a Bluetooth headset and a pre-charged power pack for his phone.

"I can't afford this shit," Jesse said.

"If the Captain says you can, then you can. Take your items to the cashier, Mister DiAlba Castillo. Your card will cover the expenses," Jarvis said.

"You make me sound like my grandfather. I'm Jesse," he insisted.

"Are you not Jesus?" Jarvis asked.

Jess was thankful he at least used the correct pronunciation. He hated it when people called him Geezus. It made his skin crawl, like the eyes of God were turned on him, watching him like a bug. He felt his mother's smothering hand in it. She was afraid of the family's blood in him from the moment he'd been born, so she'd saddled him with the name to shame him into being good. It worked about half the time he had the opportunity to choose.


This AI dude was stubborn. And bossy. Nobody paid any attention that he was talking to his phone in his hand like he was old school. He'd seen several people talking to themselves, no phones in sight. Their smell and erratic behavior had been un-phone like.

Jess swiped his card and it worked.

Bullshit. He knew he had less than a hundred dollars in his account.

"Tank you!" the East Indian store clerk told him sharply, then waved him out of the way so the next customer could get to the barred cashier window.

Jesse squeezed sideways and hustled out of the little store and onto the sidewalk.

"Mister DiAlba Castillo!" Jarvis fussed at him when he'd almost walked in front of a yellow cab.

Jesse laughed at the honking horns and the crush of people and got out of the way. Jarvis had him walking generally north for what felt like two hours. He thought the city traffic would thin so late at night, but it didn't much.

"Aren't there trains? Underground? Right there? Should I go down the stairs?" he asked.

"I would rather you not. Please proceed to the highlighted route," Jarvis instructed him stiffly.

"You're not a fuckin Garmin. You gotta be a dude. Where are you?" Jesse asked, more to feel not so alone in the urban wilderness than of actual curiosity.

"I reside in the tower with Mister Stark and the Captain, among others. And among other places," Jarvis insisted telling him again.

"How can you exist among other places? Wouldn't that be in other places?" Jesse wondered.
"I am in the habit of choosing my words carefully, Mister DiAlba Castillo."

"Now you're just tryin to piss me off," Jesse said.

"Be that as it may, please consider that it feels as if you are being deliberately difficult. The crosswalks and lights are plainly marked. Please desist attempting to give me coronary failure. The Captain has put you into my care and I intend to bring you to safe lodging despite your best efforts," Jarvis said.

"Coronary failure?"

"It is merely a figure of speech. I assure you, Mister DiAlba Castillo, I am not an organic life form," Jarvis said.

"Whatever, dude. You're supposed to be smart. Because you're a computer. Did you ever consider that I can figure out the fuckin lights and crosswalks just fine, but every time you use my full last name I want a lil bit of revenge?" Jesse asked.

"Yes, I had noticed the pattern, Mister DiAlbaCastillo."

"You are a dude. With sweaty balls. Steve is somewhere laughing at me, isn't he?"

"I'm flattered by your appreciation of my skills. The Captain is not currently laughing. Nor is he listening to us," Jarvis said.

That had been last night. Jesse woke up in the Bronx in the dinky little room Jarvis had led him to. It wasn't even a hotel. It was just a little dark place with a door that was locked, and then it wasn't locked. Jesse decided to go along with the weirdness of it all. He was close to his goal for making this trip.

"Stop at the cart for breakfast and coffee," Jarvis told him.

Jesse stood back to observe. Morning was worse than night. There were so many people he could hardly see things other than the buildings. He used his height to advantage to see how business was transacted at the cart. It didn't really matter what the food was.

"They only take cash," Jesse said.

"That is untrue. There is a card reader. Please purchase food and coffee if you wish for sustenance," Jarvis said.

"You sound down this morning," Jesse commented as he timed a gap in foot traffic and fit himself in to the line waiting for food.

"I have had better days," the AI said, sounding positively mopey.

"Am I bothering you that bad?" Jesse wondered.

"Not at all, Mister DiAlba Castillo. You are but a tiny prick of brightness among the troubles of my day," Jarvis told him kindly.

Jesse moved up to order at the cart. The guy gibbered something at him fast and impatiently.

"Coffee and whatever the last guy had," Jesse said.

He passed the man a twenty and looked around him for the moment it took to have his food dished
up. A cute middle-aged lady caught his eye. She smiled at him for an instant, then pointed to the man trying to hand him his food. Jesse hurried to take the food and get out of the way. The cute lady was gone, lost in the crowd.

"Ahead, Mister Jesse. Your goal is the red brick building on your left," Jarvis said.

"You've got a conscience?" Jesse asked.

"I'm not certain. I am aware that my previous comment was inappropriate."

Jesse managed his burden and his double handfuls of sustenance through the throng of pedestrians. He looked up at the unremarkable apartment building.

"Don't I have to get buzzed in?" he asked.

"I will let you in. Now is a good time. Please go inside," Jarvis assured.

The inside of the apartment building was immediately quieter than the streets outside. He glanced politely to people he met in the halls but they all ignored him as if he was a ghost. People were coming and going to somewhere around the corner so he followed them to find the elevator.

"Fifth floor, please," Jarvis said aloud from his phone speaker.

Jesse's hands were too full to touch the button but someone else got it for him. Nobody would look at him except some of the girls and women and a random guy but people were helpful enough when prompted.

The fifth floor hallway outside the elevator was deserted except for an old man hunkered over a rickety table with a checker board. The bald, liver-spotted man watched him approach with an attentiveness the other New Yorkers seemed to lack. The hallway smelled like fresh paint and the wall was brighter and cleaner than the other walls.

"Lotta pretty boys at Wanda's place lately. Strange sounds. You tell her she can talk to me," the old man said.

"Yessir," Jesse agreed though he had no idea who Wanda was.

The old man looked surprised at his reply.

"Jarvis, do I knock?" Jesse said.

The old man reached out and gave a sharp rap to the door in front of him.

"Non-aggression is always the best policy, Mister DiAlba Castillo," Jarvis told him ominously.

He didn't have time to question the strange words because the door opened just then.

The guy who opened the door stared at him with a smirk. Jesse vaguely noticed Estrella standing in the apartment behind him. Jess felt like he was in a slow-motion horror dream where you want to run but you can't move fast enough. It didn't register in his mind that the guy was handsome or had brown hair, or was an inch or two shorter than him. What hit him was panic-inducing, mind-screeching terror. Jesse took a step back and wanted to turn and run from the smiling threat but a flicker of red drew his eyes to Estrella inside the apartment. He couldn't run. This man was a killer. No, a murderer. The deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands were on his soul and he was remorseless. A clear, happy curiosity was in his look, wondering if Jesse could be the next target.
Estrella was trapped in there with him.

Jesse spared a flicker of thought for his mother then he moved. Forward, not away. He might be heavier than the guy, maybe could push past him to get to Estrella and then do what, he didn't know.

"Jesse?" Estrella asked, "Jesse! How did you..? Jess!"

Bucky had a long moment to react. The man was young, inexperienced and encumbered with gear, his hands full. Buck had seen the expression on his face many times before. The guy was sure he was going to die but he was going to go down trying. He was in a dumb, adrenaline-fueled rage, a cover for his terror. The visitor's attitude didn't make sense but there should be time to figure things out.

Buck moved out of the path of the charge. First, he took the coffee and set it on the table inside the door. He checked the man over quickly to make sure he didn't have any hidden weapons Jarvis wouldn't have detected then he kicked him over onto his right side on the floor. He was already moving forward so another push with his boot and the guy landed clear of the door. Bucky shut the door and secured the apartment.

He held a hand out when Estrella wanted to rush to the aid of the downed man. She ignored him and Buck had to grab her by the hair to stop her. He could have gone for the dress but he didn't want to uncover her. Things were strange enough already.

The guy was big but it didn't matter. He was unskilled, unarmed and unenhanced.

"Let go of her!" the man roared.

He tried to knock Buck's arm away from its grip in Estrella's hair. Buck straightened his arm, putting the girl further out of reach. His right boot precisely dug into the man's spine to let him know he needed to settle down.

"Doll, you wanna tell me what's goin on here?" he asked.

"Jesse," she said, her eyes wide and worried, "He's my cousin. Let him go. He doesn't understand you."

Buck released her hair, then pressed at her chest to keep her away.

"Go sit over there," he told her.

He pointed to the couch a few feet away.

"Don't hurt him," Estrella pleaded, but she went.

"Eya, get," Jesse waved a hand at her toward the door, as if Bucky couldn't see the gesture.

Estrella shook her head.

Bucky brought out a little black knife from somewhere and swiped it at Jesse's ear. A single drop of blood welled up. Buck touched it with a finger then put it to his tongue. He was satisfied that the guy was at least human. Far as he knew, nobody had yet figured out how to keep warm human blood in a cyborg but anything was possible. The more he watched the guy, the more he believed he was what he appeared to be despite his hostile actions.
Jesse felt like his spine was about to bend in half. He couldn't move his legs. The boot in his back felt like a car parked on him. All he could feel was pressure from that point down. The guy was doing something to his spine.

Go! He mouthed at Estrella.

She shook her head.

"A few words of explanation would be nice," Buck said.

He scraped the pads of his metal fingers hard against Jesse's face. Nothing came off. No ident veil.

"You stay there," he told the guy.

Buck took his boot off his back and went to perch his hip on the back of the couch near Estrella.

"What's this about? What kinda guest makes a rush when you open the door? Not the nice kind, from what I know," Bucky said.

The guy on the floor moved his legs experimentally and watched to see that the dangerous man didn't do anything to Estrella.

"You have to tell him, Jess. Why did you do that?" Estrella asked.

"You can't feel him? Don't you know what he is?" Jesse asked.

"I'm the guy Steve trusts to keep his girl safe, is what I am. What do ya feel, kid? Some family hoodoo, like with her eyes and her voice?" Buck asked.

"Bucky, cut out the gangster talk. It's not funny," Estrella made a face at his accent.

"You don't want me to start thinking in Russian," Buck warned her.

Jesse shifted around off of his arm and belly. His breakfast was smashed on the floor underneath him. The bulky case on his back clunked then slid onto the floor as he shrugged out of the strap.

Estrella's eyes teared up and she put her hand over her mouth to cover a grimace of emotion.

"Let me go to him," she said behind her fingers.

"Soon as he explains why he rushed the door," Buck eyed Jesse carefully, still looking for any hint that he wasn't what he appeared to be.

He rubbed his knife blade clean then tucked it away. Jesse stared at his left hand, so Buck splayed his fingers and rotated his wrist for him to see.

"I- you're. I felt it. You still feel-" Jesse was reluctant to insult the man now that things were calming down and his heart wasn't racing so hard. Maybe the danger wasn't immediate.

Estrella didn't seem afraid of the man. She'd obeyed him. The guy wasn't reacting to the sweet, fertile smell coming from her as a normal man should have. This guy should be taking orders from his cousin, not the other way around but that was clearly not the case.

"Spit it out, kid," Buck rolled a hand at him impatiently.

"You're evil. A murderer. Like a monster," Jesse said half-heartedly.
It sounded silly when he said it out loud, like something a hysterical child would say.

"Yeah, yeah. I get shit done. That's why Steve has me here protecting her. You rushed the door because you felt I'm evil and you wanted to get Estrella away from me?" Bucky said.

Jesse nodded.

"Fair enough. That took balls. You can't go rushing into things with your feelings all on fire. We're lucky I'm having a good day. Head's clear," Buck said.

He tapped silver fingers at his temple.

"You're heinous, and you're insane?" Jesse asked.

He pushed himself up from the floor and pulled at the front of his shirt. It was hot and sticky with residue from bacon, pancakes, and syrup. Estrella got up and went to him.

"Idiot! Shit for brains! I don't live with regular people. You should have called," Estrella told him, then she hugged him carefully aside from the mess and kissed his face several times.

"I'm learning that. I stood in the tower lobby last night for ten minutes and everybody ignored me. Then Steve called back and sent me across town with some asshole robot in my ear. He led me to a roach-hole where I spent the night. Now he tries to kill me. I hate New York," Jesse said.

Estrella smiled up at him and pressed at the edge of his ear.

"You came all this way to bring me your guitar," she said.

"I wasn't using it," Jesse agreed.

Estrella looked to the backpack he'd dropped. She bent to unzip it and dig in it. She pulled out a long sleeve black tee while Jesse tugged off the obscure logo sweatshirt on which he was wearing his breakfast. Bucky had seen a lot of bodies. The quick moment of exposure showed him one of the more perfect ones, a few degrees short of Steve's engineered perfection.

Bucky laughed a little. They were cousins who looked more like twins. Of course Jesse was nearly perfect. Jesse looked to him curiously, then his brows lowered a little.

"Yeah, I know that too. I'm broken. Useless," Buck said.

Jesse pushed his head and arms into the clean shirt and pulled it down. Estrella immediately hugged him properly without the pancake syrup getting in the way. His attention turned from the only slightly muted feelings of threat which emanated from the man.

"If I'da known a guitar would have caused all this trouble I could have shipped it to you. Steve's busy, you're busy. I thought you lived at the tower. Did you guys break up?" Jesse wondered.

"No," Estrella said.

Bucky watched them intently. The girl tucked her head down to her cousin's chest. Jesse smelled her hair, the side of her face, then her neck. His posture changed some, became a little more overtly masculine. His hands came up to rest on the girl's bare shoulders.

"I get it. It's what you were asking about when you called me. This doesn't happen to Ma or Val. Not Fran, either," Jesse said.
"Lucky me," Estrella said.

"We had to get her out of the tower. Too many strong, smart guys there," Buck explained.

Jesse startled a bit at the sound of Buck's voice as if he'd forgotten the other man was there. Buck watched him like a hawk considering a mouse. It would be easy to get the girl away from him. A whole lot easier than getting her away from Steve. Jesse got the message. He put a little more distance between them.

"Let me see you," Jesse put a finger out to tip up her chin.

Estrella looked to him with reluctance. She wouldn't meet his eyes. Buck imagined that if they both had the sticky eye thing it could make for some awkward moments.

"Your nose, chica! You're beautiful, but you have Great-grami's nose," Jesse teased.

Estrella's eyes rounded. She felt of her face and her nose.

"I do not!" she denied.

"You do. You look like them. Want me to get you a jade spike to wear through your nose right here?" Jesse laughed.

He touched her nose on the upper bony part where the bridge of a pair of gasses would rest. Estrella ran off to the bathroom. She squealed in outrage and stomped back into the living room.

"Why didn't you tell me? You've seen me all day. For days! When did this happen?" she pointed to her newly Mayan looking nose profile.

"You mostly look the same, doll. You're still gorgeous. You got a little exotic thing happening now. If you don't like it, they have doctors for that nowadays," Buck assured her.

"No, Eya. That's our people. Our heritage. You should be proud," Jesse insisted.

"What has our heritage done for me? They hunted me! I almost died, and I can't speak without a thing at my neck. I can't look at anybody. I have to hide away every three months. I don't want this!" she said.

"No point stomping and shouting about it," Bucky teased, "Hey, now you got an enhancement!"

Estrella stood there and looked brave until tears welled up in her eyes.

Jesse began to reach across, like he wanted to smack Bucky.

"Kid, just don't," Buck said.

"Then don't make her cry, douchebag,"

"What if Steve doesn't like me?" she wailed.

"Hormones, ya flakey broad. Tough up. Don't be so vain. Will ya look at the rest of ya? You're ninety-nine and a half percent perfect, and the other half percent, he'll probably love anyway because it's you. Steve's not like that. He'd love you if you were a burn victim."

Jesse looked to Bucky in disgust, then tempered his reaction. There was something going on here. Jesse didn't know women to take a harsh comment like that very well but Estrella sniffed and
wiped her teary eyes. She nodded once at Bucky, then went to the kitchen.

"I'm an asshole. Tell me something I don't know," Buck said.

"What did you do to my back?" Jesse asked.

He twisted and flexed his spine, then rubbed at the tense area with a hand.

Buck smiled slightly but didn't say anything. He liked the kid but he wasn't giving away all his secrets on the first date.

"You started it. Clean it up. Don't make her do it," Buck said.

He sat down and turned on the television while Estrella made stuff in the kitchen. Jesse moved his things aside from the center of the floor and found the dustpan and some napkins to pick up his ruined breakfast.

Bucky kept an eye out while the cousins interacted. It didn't take her long to make more food for Jesse. They sat together so he could eat. He'd retrieved his coffee from where Bucky had put it. Buck gave him a hint of an informal salute when Jesse realized how easy it had been for Bucky to put him down. Saving the coffee had been an effortless gesture.

"Are you happy with them?" Jesse asked her quietly while he ate.

"I am, except I moved out to my friend Wanda's place," Estrella looked around.

"I want to be with Steve but he's inexperienced. I want him to live a little and prove to himself that he wants to come home to me, instead of all the other women he could have. I want time for music. Steve is a lot. He swallows me up like I'm a little rock in the sun's orbit. It seemed like a good idea to have some time apart but I miss him. I don't like this," Estrella admitted.

"You're not staying close to him. He was all the way in California. How do you know you'll be safe without him when you look like this?" Jesse asked.

He eyed her body, what he could see of it, above the tabletop and confined in her dress. There was a touch of male speculation there but Jesse wasn't like that. It was the same as her seeing and feeling the male essence in him. Jesse was impressive but he was family. They used to sing cartoon songs together and fight over the spongy ball in the kiddie pool. As appealing as they were, the feeling of family and familiarity was stronger.

"Don't think bad of Bucky. He's giving up a lot of his time and his freedom to help me and-"

A wad of paper smacked Estrella in the side of the head.

"I'm sitting right here. Don't say it like I'm your reclusive maiden aunt," Buck complained.

"Thank you, Bucky, for giving up so much of your time so me and Steve can be together and Steve can still do his work," Estrella twisted in her chair to speak directly to him.

Bucky gave her a faux evil-eye and wadded up another piece of paper. He tossed it up and caught it repeatedly, ready to smack her one again.

"You really can't feel him?" Jesse whispered.

"He can hear you, Jess. Their ears," Estrella rolled her eyes.
Bucky turned up the volume on the television. It was some morning talk show she was certain he had no interest in.

"I'm not joking. You shouldn't trust him. He's not a used-to-be killer or somebody who's turned over a new leaf and repented. He feels like he's actively looking for reasons not to kill people. He'll do it again, maybe soon," Jesse leaned close and whispered.

"I know, Jess. I don't feel it like you do. You're stronger than me in that. He kills to keep me safe. To keep Steve safe. You're right, he probably has to find a reason not to sometimes, on bad days," she reasoned.

Bucky threw another piece of paper at her. She tried to bat it away but his trajectory was too fast and direct. The paper bounced off and landed on the floor.

"He has you bullied," Jesse said.

"If I’m going to be with Steve I can't be soft. You felt what Bucky can do. The people Steve fights can do things like that too. I trust Bucky. He's on our side," she said.

"Does Steve trust Bucky?" Jesse asked.

"That's a dumb question. Would I be here if he didn't? Besides, Steve beats my ass six times outta ten in the training room. He didn't used to. Natalia teaches him the witchy stuff against me and our babydoll here is making a man outta him," Buck said over the television.

"Don't say that. He was always a man," Estrella said.

"Preachin'," Bucky said.

"What?" Estrella asked.

Bucky made a long-suffering face and muted the television.

"Didn't you come here for a reason?" Buck asked their visitor.

Estrella looked at Jesse's empty plate then she bounced out of her chair to come around and hurry him out of his. Jesse smiled at her enthusiasm.

He got his guitar case from the floor and set it on the coffee table. Buck watched while Jesse opened the case and took out the guitar. He got up and took the instrument before Estrella could get her hands on it. Buck walked off with it to her room. He gave the two of them a warning glance like he was the chaperone of wayward teenagers then he disappeared with the guitar.

"What's he doing?" Jesse asked.

Estrella shrugged. Buck didn't take long before he came back with the inspected guitar.

"Do I want to ask what you did or why you did it?" she wondered as he handed the instrument to Jesse.

"Nah," Buck said.

"Did you put a tracker in it?" she asked

"No," he said.
Bucky sat to mostly ignore the television again. Jesse handed her the guitar. He pushed at her shoulder until she scooted to the front edge of the couch, then he moved to get behind her. Buck's eyes shifted to them, then away again. Estrella was thrilled at the feel of the light, resonant wood of the instrument in her hands. Jesse showed her how to hold it and where to put her hands. He showed her the electric tuner and how to tune it by ear. He showed her a few strums and pick patterns. She wiggled happily when she made the first sounds which were in tune and pretty.

A piece of paper smacked not into her, but into Jesse's forehead. Her cousin went stiff behind her. She felt him slump into compliance when Estrella imagined Bucky was giving him that look. Jesse didn't hover so close as he had been.

"I'm sorry the timing is so bad. Are you okay?" she asked Jesse.

"I'm alright. You smell like home, like ma. It's not like he's thinking," Jesse said.

His hands moved hers to a different set of chords on the guitar and he told her what he knew about it, which songs played in that key. Estrella was delighted with his gift.

"Thank you, Jesse. Life has been so good to me lately, I don't know what to think of it. Things were really bad. Other than missing Steve and wishing I was closer to family, I'm happy. You should take a picture for Rita so she can see I'm healthy again," she said.

"You didn't look like this, even when you were a kid," Jesse looked to her nose and briefly to the rest of her, "What's the difference?"

"Good friends. They took care of me and made sure I ate. They're all so good to me, I don't think I deserve it. It makes me think something bad has to happen," she blubbered up into tears again.

Bucky grumbled something they couldn't understand.

Estrella heard a noise from her bedroom. Her phone. Jesse made room for her to get up and retrieve it. He held the guitar out of the way so it wouldn't get dinged in her hurry.

"Steve!" she said happily.

Jesse watched in confusion as Estrella seemed to fold down and curl around herself in the doorway of the bedroom with her phone clutched to her ear. Bucky was suddenly there. He scooped her up, phone and all, and carried her to the big chair he watched television from. Bucky turned off the television and let her listen to Steve's words in the quiet. When she put her hand over her face, Buck pulled the elastic out of her hair and encouraged it to spread over her face so she could hide.

It was a strange thing to watch. Jesse finally got it. James Buchannan Barnes, as he only now understood who the guy was, wasn't in this for any kind of attraction to or control over Estrella. He was in it for Steve. He took care of her and knew a lot about her, and it truly wasn't sexual, despite how it looked to see a guy like him wrapped around a girl like his cousin. Steve was the common denominator.

Bucky picked up the remote control and turned the television back on. He scrolled through channels as if he knew what he was looking for. The local channel Bucky chose showed a microphone and a plain glass podium in a sunny park somewhere in the city. Jesse could see tall buildings above the autumn-drab trees in the background. There was no one at the podium at the moment but Steve's name and some other stuff was in big text at the bottom of the screen. There were a few people standing back in the mid-ground behind the podium. It looked like an old priest, the hot red-headed woman from the Avengers, and Thor. Yeah. Black Widow, Jesse recalled her
name. Or her call sign, or whatever it was. The three of them, even Thor, were dressed in solemn
dark suits, the only spot of brightness being the priest's little square of white at his throat.

There was a group of people, anonymous heads in the foreground at the bottom of the screen,
probably reporters. As they watched Steve walked into the frame from the left. He first handed a
small object to Black Widow then turned to approach the podium. Estrella fumbled with her phone
to turn it off.

"That's right, Stevie. Shoulders back, chin up. You're gonna nail this," Buck said.

"What's happening?" Jesse asked.

"Shhh, I'll explain in a minute," Estrella whispered.

She had tears in her eyes, but that seemed par for today. She sat up straighter in Bucky's lap, then
she got up to stand. So did Bucky. Jesse didn't know why, but he did too.

Steve looked like a strong, dignified young man standing there in his sharp brown suit. Bucky
knew it was carefully planned to not show him in Captain America colors. The text banner at the
bottom of the page still showed only his first and last name, not his title. Cameras went off in the
press pool but the flashes couldn't be seen in the bright light of day.

"Good morning," Steve began low and firm, "I apologize for the spectacle. I'm sorry to take
everyone's time with this personal matter. We all have more productive things to do so I'll be brief.
Some weeks ago I had a lapse of judgement. I did things I shouldn't have done and I bear the
burden of consequence. There is a woman who now claims to be pregnant with my child."

After taking a breath to continue, Steve had to pause because the press pool and gathered
bystanders clamored with questions. His posture was tall and square, his feet firmly planted. His
hands rested on the podium and he watched the crowd with patience until they got the idea that
they'd get more information if they let him continue uninterrupted.

"Yes," Bucky hissed approval at the way Steve handled the crowd.

"She is not pregnant with my child. I have two pregnancy tests with full medical release showing
that she is not pregnant with my child. If this woman is pregnant, I reiterate that the child she
carries is not mine."

Again the questions jumbled over each other, a litany of people wanting to know the name of the
woman, the date he was with her and other salacious details. Steve's jaw moved forward just a little
and his head tilted in a mannerism that made Bucky smile. The crowd quieted more quickly this
time.

"If I was the father of the woman's child I would support her and the child. Because I am not the
father, I will not pay the cash support she demands of me.

"What most troubles me is that I have defiled the good standing of a cultural icon which was held
in esteem by many. My personal failing is a source of disappointment to my associates, my team,
and anyone who looked up to Captain America. I have insulted the lessons my parents taught me
and I have insulted my God.

"I'm sorry' are two small, weak words. They don't serve to adequately address the damage I've
done to the reputation of a national icon but in this case words are all I have to give. It's my hope
people will see that while I have come to define the identity of Captain America, he isn't all that
defines me as a person. I do my best behind the shield every time I pick it up but I've got to set it
down sometimes. Like everyone, I, Steve Rogers, make mistakes. It's my hope that you'll forgive me. Even if you don't, I will continue to do my job when I'm called. Thank you for your time."

Steve squared himself to parade rest then he turned and walked away as he had come. The priest, the Black Widow, and Thor went with him as he left the scene. In the noisy speculation that followed, a blonde journalist took to the podium. The chaos quieted by half so people could hear what she had to say.

"Steve Rogers will be a guest on the Clarence Wallis show tomorrow to answer your questions. He asks the public and the press to submit your questions for review to the Clarence Wallis show at C Wallis," the woman told everyone.

Questions flew at her but the journalist walked away. Media staff entered the set to clear away the podium. The television switched to an indoor news desk view. Buck recognized what was about to happen. The news personalities were going to hyper analyze everything Steve had said and try to imply and speculate on things he hadn't said.

"Turn it off," Jesse said as Buck was already aiming the remote for the television.

"I knew," Estrella said to Jesse, "We weren't dating yet. I was his friend."

"The bitch wants money so this is what he did," Jesse stated.

Bucky laughed.

"Steve is probably the only one who hasn't called her a bitch. He made a big effort to separate himself from the Captain just now, but anybody who knows him can see that's what he was to get through it and to minimize the damage. Steve would have been more stupid and said things he didn't need to say," Buck said.

Estrella nodded. She was proud of Steve. He'd told her what was about to happen at the very last minute so that he handed his phone off to Nat seconds before his statement began. That was enough. They'd known this was coming. Estrella picked up her phone.

She texted Steve.

You did so good. I'm proud of you. She's going to be angry.

Thank you, he responded.

Jesse taught her some more on the guitar but the visit wasn't the same. Estrella looked sad. Jesse and Buck could tell she was tired. She thanked Jesse for his guitar and hugged him. Jesse said he'd see her again before he left for home. Bucky shook his hand at the door. Jesse could barely stand to touch the man but Estrella clung to him fearlessly. Jesse left and allowed Jarvis to direct him to a slightly less horrible roach hole for the night.

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Steve eventually took the phone away from his ear. The shrill rant was ongoing. He set his phone down on the small glossy table in the middle of the limousine. Dana's voice went on and on with expletives, few proper words in between.

Father Miller reached his hand out to end the call.
Natasha stopped him.

"We need to record what she says for legal purposes," Nat told the old man.

Thor silently offered a cut crystal glass to Steve. He took it but didn't drink from it.

"She is needlessly incriminating herself. She is wrong, but human. Mercy dictates that we don't allow her to further damage herself," Father Miller said.

Thor nodded and touched the phone, ending the call.

They let Father Miller out at the church. Steve got out of the limo to walk with the priest up the steps of the rectory. Steve thought as the man wiggled his keys into the lock that the rectory ought to have better security. He shook his head. His thoughts were scattered. In his mind, key phrases from his statement to the press kept playing in his head. Especially the parts about letting people down.

"Steven, stop that. You know better. Evil wants to keep you down. The darkness wants to keep hold of you but you're a child of light. Come out of there. You've been absolved of your sins. You did right by the woman, safeguarding her person and her identity to the best of your ability. Be of good spirits and firm resolve," Father Miller put his hand atop his head and gave him a quiet blessing.

"Thank you, Father," Steve said.

"You're welcome. Go enjoy your evening with your friends. I'll be watching Clarence Wallis tomorrow to see what they try to throw at you," Father Miller smiled at him.

Steve smiled a little, then jogged back to the limo.

Natasha and Thor were arguing in good sport.

"You are vindictive," Thor accused her.

"Of course I am. I'm a woman," Nat admitted.

Steve got in, flopped down on his seat, and loosened his tie. He toed off his shoes, laid his suit jacket across the seat next to him and reached for the glass Thor had handed him.

He tossed its contents to the back of his throat and swallowed. His eyes went wide.

"That was no Midgardian swill," Thor cautioned him a little too late.

Steve took a moment to make sure he had control of his throat so he wouldn't cough like a lightweight. When the burn stopped, he took a breath and wiped the sear of water from his eyes.

Thor looked to him with a troubled brow.

"I thought you were aware what I gave you," he said.

Steve shook his head briefly and got a bottle of water from the limo mini-fridge.

"It's alright. I wasn't paying attention," Steve said.

"Does it matter? Unless we get a call to assemble there's no reason you shouldn't relax," Nat reasoned.
"It's alright," Steve said again after he downed the contents of the plastic bottle, "I'm going for a run when we get home. I'll work it off. I'll be fine."

Natasha raised her eyebrow ever so slightly in a look that questioned the wisdom of him going for a run in public immediately after making the media announcement he'd just made.

"If it is exertion you seek, I would work with you," Thor offered.

"Thanks, pal. I may want that later, but I need to think. I can't think about anything when I'm tangled up with you. You're too much of a challenge. Running and thinking, I can handle," Steve said with a smile.

His teammates left him alone to think for the rest of the ride back to the tower. Steve half listened to their arguing but his mind was on other things. An idea came to him. He opened a new contact in his phone list and entered Jarvis' name.

As soon as he touched enter, a new message arrived on his phone.

How may I help you, Captain?

Is there anything in need of my attention?

There is nothing which cannot wait until tomorrow. Haven't you accomplished quite enough today? It would not be inappropriate for you to see to your own needs. Is there any way I may assist you?

I'll tell you later, Steve replied.

Jarvis didn't respond. Steve knew the AI would wait patiently.

"Thank you, both. I'll try not to make a public spectacle of myself anymore," Steve said to Nat and Thor in the elevator on the way up to their suites.

"Our job is public spectacle," Natasha pointed out.

"So I'll try to not be that kind of public spectacle," Steve clarified.

He was glad to see a smirk on Nat's face. She thought nothing of standing behind him while he publicly smeared her team captain.

Thor rested a hand on his shoulder until the elevator stopped to let Steve and Nat out on either side. Steve almost leaned into the show of support. He surprised Thor with a quick, bracing hug then he went to his suite.

Hey, I'm coming home. I need you to clear out so I can shower, Buck texted.

I'm going for a run. Give me five to change and clear out. She's stable?

She's good. Rational today, getting better every minute. She's coming out of it faster than she went in, Buck told him.

Thank you. I'm not taking my phone when I run. If you wanna get in touch with me I'll have my comm in, Steve said.

He set his phone on his bathroom countertop and hurried out of his suit and into workout gear. Long sport pants and a hoodie were good enough. He hoped to get by unrecognized because of the
deep hood. If people knew him, he didn't plan to slow down and chat. He pressed a tiny comm unit into his ear and had Jarvis take him down to street level. The sooner he left, the better. He didn't want to cross paths with Bucky and smell Estrella on him. Nothing but embarrassment could come of that. He'd had enough of embarrassment for one day.

Estrella was thankful for what Bucky had done for her but she was glad to see him go. She was a little weary of his constant presence. She couldn't feel exactly what Jesse felt around him but Bucky's quiet intensity felt heavy sometimes. After he left and secured the door behind him the space around her felt light and free, blessedly peaceful rather than brooding.

She was tired of being stuck in the apartment. It was cool outside. She could tell by pressing her hand to the glass of the window. She wanted to go outside. The day was bright and inviting but she couldn't go out yet.

It was difficult to choose between her laptop and her guitar. She turned the box fan toward her bed and sat with the guitar. The mellow sounds made her smile as she aimlessly strummed the strings. If she was going to play anything, she needed sheet music and practice.

Ignoring the heat which made her sweat was easier to do while she opened her laptop in front of her on the bed and searched for simple sheet music. Her hair had slipped loose a little at the side of her face. She didn't want to take her hands off the strings to fix it. It was delightful to look at the music she found online and to try matching the tones from her fingers to what she saw on the page. She found familiar songs she wanted to sing but her fingers on the strings were too clumsy and slow to sing along with.

Over and over again, she played the same notes, working her fingers to stretch into what felt like awkward, contorted positions. She even loved the way the guitar smelled. It was like Tia Rita's house, with maybe an overtone of Jesse's room.

She almost didn't hear the knock. When it came a second time her fingers stilled on the strings and her eyes cut to the security panel by her bedroom door. The little light flashed red three times fast. Her heart tripped into a fast pace too.

What should she do? The reasonable part of her mind told her she could simply ignore the knock at the apartment door. What if she was playing too loud and a neighbor had come to complain? What if it was someone dangerous? She dreaded to think of La Eme or of the people Steve feared might find her.

Fear paralyzed her into stillness and nonreaction. What if there wasn't time for her to sit here doing nothing and she had to go look and see who it was right now and call Bucky for help? Or what if there was no time for even that and she should go out the window?

Estrella breathed out the panic. She slowly, silently set the guitar down. Just as quietly, she eased off her bed and through her open bedroom door. She padded across the living room on soft feet and dared herself to look at the image on the security panel.

It was only one man, not a brute squad like Steve feared. No short, stout Mayans, either. It was…

"Steeeeeeweeve!" she squealed in delight.

She hopped in place and swished her hands in excitement. Another glance at the panel showed him strong and tall, smiling inside his hoodie. He could hear her making noise. When she fumbled at
the door to open it, Jarvis wouldn't let her.

"Miss, I regret to deny you the Captain's company but do you think it wise to open the door?" he asked.

She could hear the caution and disapproval in his voice. Why wasn't she surprised that he was in Wanda's apartment? She hadn't thought he was, but that didn't matter right now as long as she could convince him to open the door.

"I want to see him. Open the door," she insisted.

Looking at the panel, she could see that Steve was also talking to Jarvis. She loved watching his mouth move. His eyes were obscured by the angle of the security camera and the depth of the hood over his forehead. It was easy to see that he was having a stern talk with Jarvis.

"Miss, if you would, please retreat to your bedroom and stay inside the doorway. The Captain believes he may visit with you as long as the airflow in the apartment takes your scent away from him. I must say I disapprove of this, as it was not in your original plans for your confinement. I fear seeing the Captain may be an error in judgement at this time," Jarvis continued to delay her.

"Let him in," she told the AI.

She complied with what he wanted because it was Steve's plan and maybe the door wouldn't open if she didn't move to her room. She sat on the smooth wood floor just inside her bedroom door and waited.

She was excited, but anxious. Steve hadn't seen her like this, all round and poofy. He hadn't seen her nose. Would the vent fan in her room take enough air outside to keep Steve from smelling her? Part of her didn't care what happened as long as she got to see him.

"What's taking so long?" she asked as she looked across the living room and waited for the sound of the bolts sliding in the heavy door.

"I must cycle the air from the living room into your bedroom. I will be able to open the door in twenty-two seconds," Jarvis answered her impatience.

Estrella fidgeted with her hair and tugged at her dress. She refused to tuck her feet under the hem. She thought she had cute feet. Steve had never seemed to mind seeing them. Her fingers felt of her choker necklace to reassure herself. Sly thoughts urged her to take the necklace off and use her voice to get what she wanted. Instead, she pressed the opal to her throat and waited.

Her heart leapt again and she gasped when she heard the door mechanisms unlocking. She bit her lip and tried to control her breathing when the door swung open. There he was. She squealed again and wiggled as Steve stepped inside and locked the door. He was smiling but he refused to look at her before he was certain the door was secure. He took an instant to put his hood back on his shoulders and glance around the apartment.

Then he looked to her as he walked toward her. Estrella moaned softly at the longed-for sight of him, so strong and male in his sweaty jogging clothes. He looked much like when she'd first met him, but better, as she was better now. Steve stopped grinning and walking when she made the needy, appreciative sound. He looked to her face and then away, almost too late to avoid getting caught in her eyes.

She was powerless to stop looking at him. She wanted them to get stuck. Her insides clenched with desperate wanting. He was perfect, just what she needed. The running pants weren't snug but her
greedy eyes sought the shape of his genitals under the polyester fabric.

Her muscles tensed to get up and go to him. She had to feel him! To hold him. She wanted to smell him and kiss him and take him in any way she could.

"Sweetheart, you gotta stay right there or I have to leave. Buck said your mind is clear today. Can you understand me?" he asked.

She nodded but her eyes rolled under closed lids. His voice directly in the air with her instead of over the phone was almost like a touch to her skin. In her eagerness to see him she forgot to worry about what he would think of seeing her.

"I'm gonna sit right here and that'll be close enough," Steve said.

She opened her eyes to watch him cross his feet and bend his knees to sit on the floor across from her behind the couch. He wasn't far away. If they both leaned forward they could touch. She swayed toward him, but he lifted a hand to indicate to her that she should stay where she was.

"God, you're gorgeous. Do you feel alright?" Steve almost whispered.

His gentle tone seemed reverent.

Estrella met his eyes and was too shy of the intensity there. She looked away.

Steve hissed a quiet sound and she had to look at him again for just an instant.

He'd shut his eyes, deeply affected by the magnetism between them.

"I feel good. Except for the emptiness. You make it hurt," she said.

She rubbed at the intensified ache in her lower belly.

"Eya. You're killin me. Jesse brought you his guitar?" Steve said, floundering to find something coherent to say.

Estrella only nodded.

Steve fought the urges of being near her. It was like right before she'd left for Wanda's place nine days ago, but worse. He'd thought she looked like a knockout before, but she was bordering on fantasy now.

He tried hard to see his girl, his friend. That's who he'd come to see. She was there but the haze of the last bit of her fertility cycle made it very difficult to just see her as a dear person he loved and wanted to spend time with. To talk to. To enjoy the comfort of her presence and her ability to help him not think of his concerns for a while.

Since there was no helping it, he let himself look. She stared at him hungrily so he tried to avoid her eyes. Estrella was far from chubby. Her figure was lush and rounded, with fine bone structure showing everywhere she wasn't soft. It was hard to tell from the dress she wore, but the curve of her hip and the space under her breasts hinted at a trim belly. Her exposed arms and shoulders seemed to beg for the touch of his hands, his lips. Even her toes appeared to be in need of kisses.

Heated imaginings flashed through his mind, spurring an urgency to action. He sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. Every gracefully turned curve of her, every sinuous contour was calling to his hands. His skin. Steve balled his fists and set them on his knees to keep from reaching for her.
He had to look at something other than her breasts under the red elastic gathers of her top. She made his mouth water even with her scent being sucked away from him toward the outside. In a sort of desperation he looked to her face instead.

"Your nose…" Steve breathed.

Estrella frowned with her eyes shut. Her palms rubbed restlessly at her thighs through the thin fabric of her dress. She wanted to lie back on the floor, stretch out for him and writhe under his gaze.

Her lips parted when she felt the warmth and touch of his finger on her forehead, then lightly down her nose from top to tip. It startled her enough that she looked at him in surprise.

"I want to kiss your nose. Nibble on you right there," Steve said.

He rubbed the upper half of her nose with his thumb. Estrella moved fast to capture his hand to press her cheek into. She needed him to touch her more! With soft, insistent grasping she pulled at him, tried to draw him over her on the floor.

A feeling of heated languor overcame him. He wanted to cover her, to give her what she wanted. Her beauty alone was nearly irresistible. If he wasn't holding his breath he was sure he'd not be strong enough to resist her. Estrella was soft and warm. All he wanted to do was hold her, sink into her. She was clingy with her hands and pleading with her eyes. Steve pressed their lips together then rubbed his cheek against hers affectionately. He carefully pulled away.

Estrella pouted at him when he moved away to sit across from her. He studiously busied himself with taking off his running shoes and socks. She smiled and straightened her legs when she understood.

Steve's feet looked ridiculously large and pale but they were his so she loved them. He stretched them toward her and they met in the middle. She pressed her soles to his and sighed. Steve released a long-held breath and smiled at her, seeming to feel the same comfort at their touch as she did.

Knowing that he'd been holding his breath so he could come close and touch her gave her mixed feelings. She was impressed he could do that for long enough to matter, but also mildly annoyed he didn't want to be influenced by her scent. It was an unworthy thought because she knew it was better for him to resist.

Steve was so big and vibrant that she once again felt small next to him. It wasn't a bad feeling. She wanted to say something to ease his feelings about the awful press announcement he'd had to make. The soft, open expression on his face kept her from mentioning it. He wasn't here to talk about his problems.

She wanted to ask him about being out west and the filming and about the dates he'd gone on but it didn't seem time for that, either. This felt like time just for them, not for all the other things. It felt good that he'd come to her, somehow working around Bucky and Natasha and Jarvis to get into the apartment.

"I heard you with the guitar. You're good, like you're already getting it. I recognized the beginning of Hotel California. Is that what you were starting to play?" Steve asked.

"I was trying to find the notes. I need lessons," she said.

"Do that, or I bet you could learn just from stuff on the internet. You're already great at reading music and you've got an ear for tones. You'll learn fast," Steve smiled like he was proud of her.
Estrella wiggled happily at his vote of confidence. Steve's eyes flashed down to how her body moved and his face pinked with color. He looked away, to their feet. His fingers twitched in his lap. She noted that he was hard. It wasn't surprising.

She bit her lip and tried to suppress a moan, then was embarrassed when Steve shifted uncomfortably. She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned aside against the doorframe. She desperately wanted to lie down, to have him lie with her.

Her eyes smoldered at him, demanding that he do something to ease her terrible need.

"Eya, baby… I can't. We can't. What I just had to do, and all that I have to do soon, I can't get you like that and leave you. I won't. Not if we're not together," he reasoned gently.

"Please. It hurts to be empty," she frowned at him.

Her hand pressed into her belly and her hips tilted to get at least some pressure where she needed it.

Steve looked at the pinch between her brows. It looked like what he felt. The urgency to be with her was heavy and painful. He'd already thought about it. A lot. Estrella gasped softly when he got up to go to the bathroom in the hallway.

It took him several minutes to pee, but he got it done. It wasn't easy to force it past the constriction of congested tissues. He was taking a chance but it was a small chance.

Estrella was standing in her doorway when he came out. She saw the intent in his eyes and welcomed him when he reached for her. Steve lifted her by the hips and pressed her to her bedroom wall inside her door, beside the security panel.

They were anxious and determined like people who expected to be interrupted. Estrella somehow got her dress out of the way and freed him from his pants and briefs. The primal excitement of knowing what he was about to do made his movements a little too abrupt. She guided him and then he was inside.

Steve pressed his forehead to the wall and tried not to breathe. The heat of her, her soft grip was more than his fantasies had accounted for. He hissed out a breath and drew another sharp one in. Her scent intoxicated his mind. Along with the blissful feeling from his dick, he was almost too lost to note her sharp yip of discomfort.

Estrella squirmed on him, overwhelmed at the feeling of finally being full, but split with pain too. Steve was harsh and strong around her and inside her. She reveled in it though she was afraid of him moving.

They made tortured sounds at each other. Steve locked his body still. Estrella didn't dare complain about the too-firm hold of his hands on her hips. Instead she ravenously focused on the feeling of fullness he sated her with. She wanted to move. Her hips tried to rock on him. The grip of his hands on her tightened and he leaned his weight into her.

Nonsensical sounds came from her mouth. He understood her well enough because he grumbled back at her with tones of affection and warning. His mind was reeling, desperate to move and imprint himself inside her. His hips jerked a bit in a moment of weakness, then he throbbed strongly under the influence of slick friction.

Estrella cried out in pain or pleasure, maybe both. Steve got himself under control and shuffled his feet in a satisfying way. He nudged deeper until their bones pressed together. He had to go soon. Pressure and desperation were rising in him, possibly pushing life-giving juices toward her. The
thought of it, of releasing into her was too much.

Steve pulled her off of him and turned toward her bed. In a hurry, he set her on it. She lay back and reached for him. He couldn't look at her. Instead, he pressed her down with one hand and smoothed her hair back with the other.

His exposed erection felt wet and sadly cold from the loss of her. Her internal heat was incredible. He missed it already. He kissed her quick, then pulled away. Estrella made a savage sound at him and tried to lunge at his retreat. He held out a hand and glared at her. Before she got much of a look at him, he snapped his shorts and pants up to cover himself.

Estrella was angry with pain and loss. She wanted more. She felt crazed with it. Steve's eyes burned at her, warning her to stay away. She'd seen that look of determination on him. His arm, his hand, his body looked tense. He wouldn't let her close, would likely shove her to the floor and away if she went for him. She hissed her frustration at him while he backed up to stand in the doorway.

Steve stopped at her bedroom door and held his breath until the air around him was likely clear of her scent. Jarvis had said thirty-five seconds was needed to move enough air so he wouldn't be surrounded by her when he breathed. He held his breath for a count of forty.

He knew he was visibly trembling but that was alright. She was affected too, writhing and rubbing on her bed. It felt like sweet, bold intimacy to let each other be seen this way. It was something just for them.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, his voice deep with want.

"More," she said, instead of answering him.

"Later," he argued.

She lay on her side but couldn't quit squirming. He couldn't look directly at her or he would have even more trouble leaving.

"Sweetheart, you better put away your guitar and laptop before you kick em to the floor. I'm gonna go now. I missed you a lot. I wanna see you again soon," Steve said.

He pressed the heel of his hand at the base of his erection. It was probably a useless gesture. It wasn't going down anytime soon.

Estrella nodded at him. There was a hint of sweetness in the squint of her eyes and the set of her lips. He smiled at her and blew her another kiss. He was quick to shut the door to give her some privacy. He tugged up his hood, stooped to grab his shoes and socks, then hurried out of the apartment to put them on.

After the door was secure he sat in the hallway and rushed his socks and shoes on to his feet. There was an old man with a checker board there. Steve barely nodded at him before he was away.

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Bucky looked up from the newspaper he was reading when Steve stormed into the suite. He hadn't seen his friend in a while. Steve looked like he was in no mood to stop and chat.

"Hiya, Buck," was all he said on his way to his room.
His door slammed and locked. The shower started less than a minute later. The air currents in the living room swirled with his passing and Bucky caught a very familiar scent. He grunted at the meaning of it. He wasn't surprised.

Steve should have been ravenously hungry after his shower but he didn't come out of his room. Buck heard his nightstand drawer snap shut, then one of Steve's familiar groans.

Buck sighed and shook his head.

"No time like the present," he murmured to himself.

He folded the newspaper and laid it on the new table. Then he got up and went to Steve's door. It was a simple lock. It yielded in no time.

"Buck, what the hell? Get out!" Steve griped at him.

Bucky calmly shut the door. He walked around the bed to sit in the chair in the corner. Steve must be really out of it because he hadn't engaged the privacy tint nor pulled the curtains.

"J," Buck said.

He waved a hand at the window wall. Jarvis darkened the tint so that it looked like night time outside.

Yeah. Stevie was outta his mind with it. He remained sitting on his heels near the head of the huge bed, more angry than bashful. The view wasn't surprising. He had a thick towel spread before him, he was naked as the day he was born, and his dick was buried deep in the rubber toy he liked.

Buck wondered that he hadn't worn the thing out yet. Steve had one hand fisted on his left thigh, the other around the toy. He was tense like he wanted to strangle something, probably his best pal.

"What?" Steve demanded.

"You went around for a little visit and got just wet enough to frustrate the hell outta ya," Buck said.

"What's it to you? She's my girl. She was willing," Steve said.

"I bet. Did you hurt her?" Bucky didn't stop with the questions.

Steve sat back more on his heels, obviously disgusted that he wanted to talk at this moment.

"No," he denied, then he stopped and thought.

Estrella hadn't confirmed that she wasn't hurt. She'd merely asked for more. She'd yipped in pain when he'd first got inside, but her movements and sounds had been eager after that. Bucky saw the doubt on his face. He pulled his phone from the back pocket of his jeans and texted a quick message.

*Did he hurt you? He's worried about it.*

*No. Tell him I'm good. Go away,* the girl replied after a long moment.

Bucky smiled and put his phone away. She hadn't really answered, but he figured she was alright. She sounded busy. Just like Steve was busy.

"She said she's good," Bucky said absently.
He relaxed back into the upholstered chair and steepled his fingers in front of his lips. He studied Steve's body, thinking.

"What do you want, Buck?" Steve asked with thin patience.

"She can't handle you. You're gonna hurt her. She's sweet on ya so she won't say anything. She's delicate down there and you're gonna bruise her all up with the way you go at it," Bucky said.


"Shaddup and listen. You're all bothered right now so you're not thinking. I mean it, Stevie. You go at it with that thing like somebody's gonna take it away from ya. Do you think you can train yourself like that, then strip the gears into making nice with a lady? It won't work. You gotta learn something different," Buck insisted.

Steve looked at him suspiciously. This was a weird situation. He wanted to throw Buck out of his room and get on with it. His balls hurt like they were in a vice. He had to do something and Buck was being an ass and slowing him down. He wasn't sure his pal wasn't messing with him. He'd pulled some pretty convoluted pranks back in the day.

"You think I'm bullshitting you. Alright. I wasn't supposed to tell you this, but you're being a dumbass so you need to hear it. She wants it bad. She won't pay much attention to the pain. You're an idiot, so you won't either. She rubbed herself raw, Steve. That's one of the reasons I had to get a sedative for her. She was mad with it and wouldn't stop trying to fix it until she was almost bleeding. You'll go forever too, then how would that leave her? How would you feel after your head cleared, seeing that you'd made her bleed, that she was sore for days?" Bucky asked him.

Steve frowned. He looked away from Bucky, down to this traitorous dick, still buried in Rosie. It was almost dark in the room but they both could see fine. Now that his blood wasn't pounding so hard in his veins he could imagine what Buck said. He wouldn't want to see Estrella in pain like that.

"What are you gonna do about it? Stand over my shoulder and bark at me to slow down? We're close and all, but I don't want you there for that," Steve denied him.

"You're stuck on yourself if you think I wanna watch your fish-belly white ass. No. You need training. You can do better than this. She deserves better than this," Buck said.

He looked disapprovingly at the silicone toy.

"Buck, you can't know. I think I did pretty well, but this is making me lose my mind," Steve tried to explain.

"I know. I remember. Soon as you rescued me from Zola's experiments and I healed up some, it hit me hard. You think I was really watching the perimeter all that time, all those nights?" Bucky made a face at the memory then tipped his head at him in age-old challenge.

Steve drew in a deep breath, then let it out slow.

"So, what? You want me to slow down and be careful, like this thing has feelings I need to be mindful of?" Steve asked.

He let go of Rosie and the weight of it bent his dick down slightly so the end of it rested against the towel. It had felt intrusive when Buck first busted into his room with him being naked, but now Buck was being business like and not making a big deal of it. Like he was serious about whatever
this training was.

Bucky got up to click on the bedside lamp then he sat back down.

Steve squinted in the sudden brightness until his eyes adjusted.

"There's more to it than that. You gotta learn to like it slow. Gotta learn to want it like a man, not a kid in a rush all the time," Bucky said.

Steve gave him a stern look. Insults weren't helping. He knew he was demanding. He'd figured he and Estrella would work that out between them with time. He didn't know a guy could make a girl bleed, just from friction and going at it too hard or too long. He'd thought things down there were made for it, so it would work just fine, however it went.

Bucky shook his head at him slowly. Right. Buck had always known more about these things than he did.

"What do I do?" Steve asked, resigned to it.

"First, I want you to get off like usual. I need to see your tells, learn your physiology," Buck said.

"Physiology," Steve snorted at the pretentiousness of the word, as if this was a serious thing, "You expect me to do this with you sitting there watching?"

"Yeah. You could read books about it or look it up online but we don't have time for that and you wouldn't even know what you were looking for. Go on," Buck said.

Steve stared at him.

"Now?" he asked.

His enthusiasm had gone cold though his balls still ached.

"Yeah. Never mind me. I'm like your conscience, except less prissy. I've seen it all and more, Steve. I'm not here to get my jollies. Get to it," Buck coached him briskly.

Steve tried. He had to shut his eyes to pretend Buck wasn't there. It almost worked except he could hear Bucky breathing and his heart beating. It was just normal sounds, not like he was perversely excited or anything. It was like a fly buzzing around, breaking his concentration. He was hard but he almost couldn't feel Rosie moving on him. Buck was too heavy on his awareness.

"Quit that. Think of her. You got a memory on ya. Think of the way she looked, the way she smelled, the way she wanted you," Bucky advised him.

Buck's voice wasn't as distracting as his breathing or heartbeat, especially in that low, easy tone.

His arm, his hand moved faster when he thought about Estrella as he was told. The whole run home through the city, through the traffic and the crowds and the long stretch of the park, he'd held off on thinking of Estrella. Now he indulged in memory. Rosie didn't have her heat or her living responsiveness. The clear, slick lube didn't smell at all like her but his memory was sharp. Desperate as he had been to get off, it didn't take long until he was on the approach.

Then he remembered Buck sitting there, watching.

"Don't slow down. Power through it. Get it done," Buck demanded.
It felt weird. He cracked his eyes to check Buck's expression. His pal studied him closely, coldly, like he was looking through a scope studying a mark. There was no passion in his regard.

Eh, it was only Bucky. He'd seen it before, the night he'd gotten himself in trouble with Dana. He'd heard it before, probably a lot lately. Still, it felt more personal, having Buck's undivided attention without a girl as distraction between them.

Steve shook his head at the mental setback and plowed ahead. He was close, if he could just stop thinking long enough to get over the edge. He stroked brutally hard and fast, determined to get this over with.

Bucky watched how Steve's muscles became more taut under his skin as he got closer to orgasm. There was that distracted pinch in his brow so he knew he wasn't really there yet. His lips eventually parted and his breathing got deeper. There was that classic Stevie blush, blooming all over his skin. Buck kept a careful notice of the pulse rate beating at the side of his neck. He nodded slightly in satisfaction when Steve's throat closed up and he started breathing hard through his nose, his pulse jacked up, and his posture changed into something more aggressive. The blush had happened first. That's what he needed to know.

Steve shuddered through the orgasm hard and fast. There wasn't any mess because of the cap on the end of the toy, but the wet sound changed. Through his last abrupt, jabbing movements, the toy overflowed onto the towel. Buck felt a pang of empathy at the momentary relief in the slump of Steve's shoulders.

Steve panted for a few breaths, his chest and abdomen shining with a light sheen of sweat. He closed his mouth, got his breathing under control, then looked to Bucky. The blush under his skin was still bright.

"Alright, now do it again," Buck said.

"Was I supposed to learn anything from that?" Steve asked.

His voice was medium-deep, merely reacting to the rush of testosterone, not as deep as when the girl twisted him up. That too was an indicator for Bucky. Just like the fact that he hadn't been vocal at all during any of it, not even at the end. Steve wasn't even warmed up yet. He was still too much in his head, not his body.

"No, that one was for me to learn from. Do what I tell you, punk. Get to it. You're not gonna like my instructions but do it anyway, ya hear? No pain, no gain," Buck told him.

Steve looked at him skeptically, took a brief moment for the sensitivity to pass, then started moving again. The toy made wet sounds and Steve looked to him apologetically. Buck kept his face stony and tipped his nose up a little, indicating for him to stop fucking around and get to it, never mind the squishing sounds.

It took longer this time. It was almost boring, except for the detached appreciation of Steve's physical appeal. They were familiar enough with each other, slouching around camp, tense and on-point during battle, pained from wounds, or exhausted from the effort of it all. They rarely noted physical beauty anymore. It was hard to ignore in the moment. Stevie could be in a painting or something, if the viewer didn't mind the obscenity of watching a guy work at getting himself off. Pretty or not, Buck was here to torture him a little, not to get aflutter over his looks. It was just Stevie, after all. It was like watching his right hand or his brother or something.

Buck couldn't help a smirk as he saw the blush start to rise under his skin. It wasn't as distinct as
before because he'd never fully returned to pale in between. Buck paid close attention to his pulse, his posture, the degree of aggression in his muscle movements, and this time there was a hint of his voice, brief little grunts of effort.

"Stop," Buck said.

Steve's eyes flew open. He looked desperately to Bucky and saw that he meant it. Not like an emergency and they had to get dressed and he needed the suit and the shield, but just… Stop.

Steve groaned with the frustration of arrested momentum. His dick was jumping mad, his arm trembled eagerly, and his body shimmied in a squirm of defiance. His right hand made the toy's outer plastic case creak.

"Uff," Steve complained at him.

He looked mildly angry.

"Feel yourself. Right on the edge, yeah? Balls are tight, dick hard all the way back to the root. Skin feels like it's gonna bust, you're so hard. So close. You wanna push over into it, right?" Buck asked.

Steve frowned at him and nodded.

Bucky was going mostly from memory. He'd had a refresher a few days ago from his jag in Steve's shower before Banner dosed him again. He might feel dull now but he could work from memory. Their junk probably worked the same, just like every guy.

"Still tingly, feeling urgent?" he asked.

Steve shuddered again and nodded.

"Stay still. Wait it out," Buck told him.

Bucky watched as the shudders eased off and his pulse calmed some. The angry frustration of denial faded from Steve's expression. He watched Buck closely, waiting for instruction.

"If you don't feel close, then go ahead," Buck released him.

Steve started stroking himself with the toy again. He looked to Bucky thoughtfully, playing with probability in his mind.

"Stop thinking ahead. I'm the lead on this one. Trust me, pal. I'll get you through it," Buck told him.

This would take forever if Steve couldn't get out of his brain and learn to feel what he was supposed to. Steve shook his head, but he got back to it.

It took less time and then he was back at the precipice. He made to go for it like a greedy kid, but Buck was fast and watchful.

"Stop!" he barked at him.

Steve groaned and struggled. He fell forward onto his knees and his left hand, Rosie jammed deep into his groin. His hips bucked abortively. He glared hatefully at Bucky but he held more or less still.

"Good, good. What we're looking for is the point of no return. Feel that? Right at the edge before
you go over?" Buck asked him calmly.

"Fuckin A!" Steve exclaimed.

His body did a strained, twitchy movement.

"Hey, hey! None of that. Cut it out," Buck fussed at him.

Steve's eyes were closed. It wasn't beyond possibility that a guy like him could push himself over with that big brain of his and a dose of sheer willpower. Bucky got up and moved. He tapped Steve on the cheek from the foot of the bed to get him out of his head.

Oh yeah. Pure hate. His angel face looked a little flamed around the edges.

Bucky smiled at the look his friend gave him. When the wrath in his eyes cooled a little Buck retreated to his chair.

It took Steve longer to back away from the edge this time. He sat back up onto his heels because being prone was too evocative of real sex, too likely to spur him over, especially if he let his hips move instead of his hand.

Steve didn't even consider that he should feel bashful about getting off in front of Buck anymore. He was barely thinking of Bucky, other than with resentment for when he was told to stop. He got the idea that he was looking to teach himself to be mindful of how it felt to stop before orgasm. Maybe he even had it figured out where all this was going and why. It didn't matter much, because his dick was on fire. Or was it ice?

He tried repeatedly to start moving again but everything tingled, refusing to calm down much. Steve threw Rosie aside, into the bathroom. The thing was a big clunky hindrance. It only had one sensation. Too intense.

His hand felt like a relief on his bare dick. It was smoother but rougher at the same time, calloused from work, but it didn't have all the extreme bumps and ridges as the inside of the toy. He could vary the pressure and the grip.

With a lighter touch, Steve started stroking again.

Buck nodded once. He'd been hoping Steve would put away the toy on his own. This kind of work called for finesse and attention to detail.

Steve's color stayed ruddy. He looked alive, finally fully engaged with his body instead of tied up in his mind. The grip of his hand was different, like he was petting a live wire instead of banging away at a numb thing.

Steve stared at his dick with concentrated wonder. He'd never felt like this while going slow. Hell, he didn't ever do slow. Every inch of slide felt electric. He wanted to go fast and grab at relief before Buck could tell him to stop, but he didn't. The sensation was so novel that he wanted it to last. He wasn't aware of the sounds he was making, but Buck was.

He watched his friend getting to know himself in a new way and he was proud. I was like unlocking the next level. Steve had it now. He was moving slow and deliberate, shaking all over like a bare nerve. His pulse didn't so much kick up as go deeper, harder.

Steve looked to him briefly, then back to his stroking.
"Can't stop it, Buck. Gonna…" he groaned and bucked, going off in his hand.

"I want you to feel it all. The movement of semen, the clenching in your ass, your balls up tight, the tension in your back. Pay attention to all of it," Buck said to him, knowing he might hear him over the moaning.

The towel caught almost everything except a few long shots. Not important. They weren't done yet. There would probably be more mess.

Bucky gave him a half minute to breathe and get himself upright again. He was still defiantly hard. Most guys would have to be drugged to stay that way after getting off twice and so thoroughly, but not Steve. His erection was as ruddy and ready as he was. His face and his body finally looked as revved and nasty as his dick. Now they were starting to get somewhere.

"Again," Buck told him.

Steve didn't argue. His hand was already there, fondly caressing, testing the sensitivity to see when he could stand to begin. He'd come a lot, so there was no chance of him running out of slick. Buck smirked at the tart scent of him in the air. It smelled like old familiar Army with a spritz of supersoldier potency.

"Good stuff, Buck, but what does this have to do with Estrella?" Steve asked lazily.

"You're only going at medium speed now, not beating it like a jack-rabbit, see? She can tolerate medium a lot better than hard and fast. You need to go for a long time, pal. Most gals are built to handle a five-minute Fred. What we need to do is get you all wrung out in a few rounds, instead of seven or eight of em. Gotta learn to make the two or three times heavy enough to equal eight times the jack-rabbit way. Are you getting it? When you stop before going over, you're priming the pump. Everything fills up, ready to go, but then you don't. You can load up like that as many times as you can stand it, then blow it all out at once. With practice, you might not want to do it any other way," Buck explained.

"I think I got it. Thanks. You should go," Steve said distractedly.

"Nuh-uh. You don't know it all yet, kid. Work with me. I promise it'll be worth it," Buck said.

Steve looked up from his stroking again but he didn't stop. Buck smiled at the heated, blown wide look of him. Steve had no idea why he smiled back, but he did. It was good so far, if frustrating, so he would play along. At least his balls weren't hurting so much.

"Alright. Don't go pansy on me. I know you got the guts. Feeling good yet?" Buck asked.

Steve nodded, not looking away from his handful.

"Pay attention to the build. Play with it. You can tease it, go fast toward it then slow down. Or you can go slow all the way. What I want you to do is think about her. You got a spare hand. Squeeze your balls, pull on em. Rub behind em. Try a little foreskin action. I know you don't like ass play, but you could try touching it, not going in. Pinch your chest, maybe like she's biting you. She likes to bite, right?" Buck asked.

Steve nodded again.

He got the idea.

While his right hand pulled and swirled around the tip, he scratched his left fingers at his pubes,
like Estrella enjoyed doing. It made him smile. He wasn't pretending his touch was hers, but it helped him relive the time they'd spent in the back of the truck on the beach. That had been a great day. One of the best.

He had a moment of hesitation once again because of Bucky's presence, but then he shut his eyes and reached for his balls. His own noise and respirations were enough to distract him from noticing Bucky's. He'd played around a little before when there'd been time. Now he luxuriated in the stretching, delicate feel of moving things around. The ample slickness made for an easy slide. He could grip fairly tight and pull, and the sensitive skin slipped through his fingers with a lingering, pleasurable glide. He did that for a while, marveling at the slow build that was sneaking up on him while he distracted himself with his balls.

He kept his thumb on top of his scrotum and pressed his fingers below and back. He wiggled his sac almost painfully while he pinched his foreskin and stretched it. The hard press of his fingers along the root of his cock behind his balls inspired a longer rub.

Buck sat back in the chair and watched. Steve was lost in bliss, maybe not paying attention to the sensation of inevitability. There was a kind of tenderness in seeing a guy go deep into the sensations he could give himself. Especially a guy who was usually all about hard and fast and who never slowed down to smell the flowers. Buck was wistful, for a moment wanting to spend some quality time in his room alone like this, but there was no use thinking it. His shit wouldn't work like Steve's was now. Instead of indulging in envy, he enjoyed and imagined what he knew Steve was feeling.

He was stroking faster now, not frantic, but he wasn't playing twiddly fingers with the strokes anymore or tugging at foreskin. His left fist kept a steady pull at his balls and his right worked with purpose. The shaking and gasping rose to a pitch and Steve seemed to realize it was time a moment after Buck did.

"Stop," Bucky said.

Steve honest-to-God whined, but he stopped.

"Let go of your dick. Pinch your nipples instead or something. Change the focus," Buck told him.

It's like he was a disembodied voice because Steve acted as if it was his idea. Buck was watchful, looking at muscle tension, at how distended the large blood vessels at his neck were. It was different than when they'd first began. His whole body was into it now. Rather than sitting back on his heels, he was slightly up in a squat. The tension of his thighs was probably enjoyable, a tease at the movements he wanted to make. Steve rubbed his hands over his skin, up his tensed belly, over his chest and face, then back down again. His large hands splayed at his sides and pressed down, fingers rippling over ridges of muscle until he gripped his hips, then slid inward to grasp at the thick meat of his thighs.

It was almost embarrassing, but powerful, to see Steve viscerally appreciate the epic body he now inhabited. Buck couldn't imagine little thin Steve making the same gestures. His hands gripped at hard muscle, then moved asymmetrically. This time his left hand went to his erection while his right fingers went up to brush across his chest.

Steve was in his own world, enjoying sensation. His hips thrust forward with eagerness as his stroking resumed and he started tweaking his nips. Bucky grinned, wondering where he'd gone in his mind. Changing hands could feel like somebody else was touching you.

"Yaa," Steve murmured, low enough to not be heard by most.
He was thinking about his girl. Whatever the fantasy was, it was strong. The rush to orgasm surprised them both. Words weren't going to be enough this time.

"Stop," Buck said, and he reached to grab Steve by the throat with his left arm.

Buck shoved his hand away from his erection.

Steve wasn't taking it easy anymore. He came off the bed and slammed Bucky against the wall across from the bed. He'd somehow managed to get the hand off his throat, probably because of how sweat-slick his skin was and because he had a high tolerance for pain. He held Bucky immobile instead. Buck didn't recognize his friend in the man who stared at him, then hauled back and head-butted him hard enough to dent the sheetrock. It hurt but he'd had worse. The aggressive reaction got his attention off his dick. That was effective but Buck wondered what to do with the situation.

He hadn't intended for things to get physical between them. It looked like his pal wasn't done punishing him yet. A hard fist drew back. Buck knew it wasn't gonna be a pulled hit, with the way he was tensing his whole body into it.

"Steve. C'mon, snap out of it, buddy," Buck said.

He deflected the worst of the blow but his ears rang and his brain felt a little sloshed. To get him back from wherever he'd gone, Buck pulled him into a hug. Acting defensive could encourage a guy, and so could aggression. Unexpected affection worked to diffuse things sometimes.

Steve jerked away from the wall and tore out of Bucky's grip. He got back on the bed like nothing had happened and went back to stroking. Buck rubbed at the side of his head and went back to his chair.

The aggression and the blows didn't bother him. Steve was clearly done with being told to stop. He didn't like being handled by a guy during sex. Buck got the message, loud and clear. What bothered him was the animal meanness in Steve's eyes through the odd episode of behavior. He hadn't seen that in his friend, ever.

Buck sat back down and decided to stay and watch instead of trying to control Steve anymore. He wanted to know who the guy on the bed was. When would Steve come back? Where had he gone? Buck wanted him to hurry up and get off already, he was so concerned. The look in Steve's eyes looked a lot like the deadness he felt inside when he was the Winter Soldier. He didn't want to see that kind of cold focus in his warm, sunny friend. If Steve wasn't acting right soon he'd have to call help.

It wasn't going to end soon. Steve had himself figured out now. For almost an hour, he played with and teased himself approaching the edge and backing off. For the last of it, he worked himself slowly. His balls looked tight and full. Buck should have recalled that Steve liked torturing himself into doing things the hard way. By the time he allowed himself to go off, he was a noisy, twitching mess.

Steve was laid out flat on his back with his heels dug into the mattress, both hands on his dick, and his head thrown back in a grimace. Buck knew he was particularly dangerous because of the slow, deep breaths he was taking. He was completely gooned. Buck rolled his eyes. Steve had always been an over-achiever. Show him something once and he would soon be doing it better than his teacher.

Buck stayed hopefully quiet through the drawn out, impressive orgasm. He felt he should get a
towel for Steve but the moment was tense. He waited until Steve relaxed and let go of himself, then he waited some more.

It took several minutes before his friend's muscle tension melted away and his breathing and the color of his skin returned to normal. Steve finally smiled, but something about it was wrong. He could tell when Steve sensed his presence. He stilled, the smile went away, and his head turned toward the chair in the corner.

Buck stayed cool and outwardly relaxed. He had a series of moves planned to get him out of the room if he had to. The shield wasn't far from his chair. He could use that, if he could get to it first.

Steve's eyes looked different. Maybe it was all the exertion, but they looked darker somehow. It was a big relief to see recognition and belated bashfulness in his expression.

He looked down at his sloppy skin then reached back to tug the bedcover over himself.

"I just did that?" he asked self-consciously.

He looked relaxed and happy, ready for a nap. Buck knew he had no memory of his strange lapse and he wasn't gonna tell him. Steve was back from wherever he'd gone. That was good enough for now.

"Yeah. Better than jack-rabbit service?" Buck asked.

"You bet. Is that another thing every guy knows, but I missed out on?" he wondered.

"Nah. Some do, some don't. Imagine that. You're not the worst rookie around anymore," Buck said.

He got up from his chair and went to put Rosie in Steve's bathroom sink. He made sure to keep the right side of his head away from Steve's view, in case he looked. His ear throbbed and felt hot. He knew it was swollen from taking a hit to the head.

Buck turned off the bathroom light and didn't linger for long. He loved the guy but he wasn't cleaning up after sex for him. He could do that himself.


Steve was all angel smiles again. He took the sass as the affection it was intended to be, then tried to change the subject.

"You should hear Estrella. She's already figuring out her guitar. She's had it for what, two hours? When I got there she was teaching herself Hotel California," Steve smiled in goofy relaxation. He rolled over to face Bucky, taking the covers with him.

"She's a smart cookie with a natural talent for it. No telling where she'll go with the skills. Hey, you figured out how this stuff is supposed to help with her?" Buck asked.

He waved a hand toward the bed to indicate what they'd learned.

"Yeah, Buck. I gotta pay attention to the small sensations, the details. I need to get more enjoyment outta less time and movement, more cargo in the load," Steve agreed.

"Good. It's early but I'm beat. Hey, don't do that stuff too often, huh? It can get addictive and then you might not want your girl as much," Buck said on his way out of the room.

"Loud 'n clear. Thanks," Steve called through the door after he'd shut it.
Buck stripped down in his room to get some sleep. Several days of tending to the girl and being alert all the time had worn him down. He lay in his bed in the dark and listened to Steve move around and get clean.

He had concerns about Steve. Maybe they were unfounded and whatever that was would only show itself when he was deep in the animal part of his brain and another guy bothered him during sex. That was a real possibility. It bothered him that Steve was capable of being that, whatever it was, and then not remembering it afterwards.

His ear and the bruises on the side of his head were already healing. He would be unmarked by morning. Buck decided he wasn't going to tell anybody, not even Natalia. He would, if he ever saw it again. For now, he'd let Steve be. If he'd needed to, he'd have taken Steve down however he had to and gone down with him, likely out the window to a fall that would surely kill them a thousand feet below.

It wasn't hard to sleep. If Steve wanted to do anything freaky to him, he could and Buck wouldn't fight it. It seemed the danger had passed. Steve sounded happy and at ease as he moved around his bedroom.

They sat at the table by the window early the next morning. Steve was dressed and ready to go down to the office. He perused the paper Buck had been reading the day before while they ate.

Buck decided that he looked entirely normal. The darkened intensity in his eyes last night had likely just been a holdover from recent vigorous sex. Steve caught him looking.

"What?" he asked over his orange juice, then he took a sip.

"Nothin. Just… your eyes looked funny last night after. I never saw that," Buck said.

"Hmm. Yeah, Pepper mentioned it when we were on the road. I was having dinner with her, just after I showered," Steve made a familiar hand motion.

"Physiology, I figure," Steve said, then shrugged.

"Fuck you," Bucky pretended to rile under his teasing.

Steve grinned at him, then kept eating.

Buck didn't feel completely cheerful because he soon had to head to a session with Natalia. It fluffed his mood to see Steve feeling so good. Sunlight spilled over the entire table. Steve's phone buzzed where it sat near the edge. He picked it up to look. He smiled. It was Estrella telling him good morning. He responded, then set the phone down again.

He looked sharp and curious to Bucky when a small black knife stuck the back of his hand. Steve didn't bother with the knife. Buck pulled it out of his skin, from between the bones. Then he wiped up the blood that welled from the cut and licked his finger.

Buck nodded in satisfaction.

"What would you have done if I wasn't me?" Steve asked.

"I dunno. I imagine Jarvis would have picked up on it by now. Just making sure," Buck said.
"I'm in a good mood. Is that so strange?" Steve wondered.

"I guess so. You've been a real tightass lately," Buck complained.

"Lot on my mind. I wish I could run off sometimes but I got a job to do. Don't go around stabbing people, alright? Some folks don't heal," Steve said.

He got up and took his plate to the sink. He rinsed the back of his hand clean.

"Right. I nicked Jesse. Only a little. He acted damn weird. Soon as I opened the door he rushed me. Idiot. You supposedly sent him, but I don't trust much anymore," Buck admitted.

"My fault. He feels people. Some people, not everyone. I should have told you but I wanted his visit to be a surprise for Estrella. I knew you could handle him. I didn't know he would react to you that way. He saw you as a threat," Steve guessed.

Buck nodded and put more bacon in his mouth.

"It's no big thing. He's fine. Go on. You have that thing on the Wallis show this afternoon, right?" Buck asked.

Steve nodded and shrugged into his suit coat. Buck didn't much like him in a suit. He'd rather see him in the uniform or casuals.

"Don't let em eat you alive. Be smart," Buck said.

"I know how to do my job, Buck. I didn't fall off the turnip truck yesterday. Neither did you," Steve said.

He paused before heading out the door.

"I wanna go out with Estrella. Got any ideas where I could take her that's not public? I want my time with the other girls to be in front of cameras, not with her," Steve said.

Bucky put up his hands briefly.

"I'm done holding your hand, pal. You'll figure it out. Hold off a few days before you ask her. Make her wait a little," Buck suggested.

"I thought you were done holding my hand?" Steve sassed.

"Ptttttt," Bucky blew a juvenile raspberry at him.

Steve laughed on his way out the door to work.

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End Note: Was that too much? Should I have put a specific warning for the bedroom scene with Buck and Steve? Part of the problem was I wouldn't have known what kind of warning to put.
Chapter 57

A/N: I had to think on this one for a while and start over a few times, too. Sorry it took so long.

Steve was surprised to see Sam sitting in the second guest chair when he was cued on set by Clarence Wallis. Sam hadn't ridden to the studio with him and Natasha, but he'd obviously decided to play a role in whatever was going to happen here. Nat apparently wasn't opposed to the idea, so Steve mentally adjusted his plans to accommodate Sam's presence. He heard his friend's voice making opening small talk with the host, likely something amusing because the in-studio audience laughed.

He strode onto the set to the applause of the audience, many of the people standing, smiling or waving. A lot of them were happy to see him. Steve returned the sentiment. He noted that some in the tiered seating of the audience weren't smiling. His stomach clenched a bit at the proof that not everyone was pleased with him. People mattered to him. Not that he let anyone dictate to him what he should do, but the reminder that he'd let people down by his tryst with Dana weighed on his conscience. As Cap, he'd not done anything to dirty his public reputation. It was difficult, even in his own mind, to draw a distinction between his job and his personal life sometimes. Yet that's what he was here to try to accomplish in the public eye.

Steve shook Clarence's hand in greeting. He smiled again at the excited people in the audience. He sat in the guest chair closest to the host's desk and turned to look at Sam.

"Funny meeting you here, pal," he commented.

"Yeah, well, you need some backup so you don't act funny," Sam told him.

The noise from the audience settled down enough that people could hear them talking. Everyone sat and the show host waited attentively for the two friends to get their chit-chat over with.

"You gonna do my talking for me, Sam? You weren't there that night. You don't know the answers," Steve said.

"No. I'm here to slap you upside the head if you start dragging yourself through the mud with misplaced guilt again. We've all heard enough of that," Sam said, then he gestured to their host.

Steve turned to pay attention to Clarence Wallis. He was a middle aged black man, distinguished looking and known for being sharp but fair. He wasn't likely to let the tone of the interview devolve into locker room talk, which is why he'd been chosen by Pepper to help Steve interface with the public today.

"Sam tells me that you were a little hang-dog after the events of the night in question," Clarence said.

"I was. I felt bad about it," Steve admitted.

There was a bit of sympathetic noise from the audience and Steve glanced through the bright set lights to the people beyond. He was here to interact and he didn't want to seem aloof.
Pepper had dressed him down, even more casual than Fridays at the office. His black jeans and dark gray shirt were unusually drab colors for him, but it served to look as non-Captain America as possible. His collar was unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled up his forearms in a way that made him feel like he was about to put his hands into dishwater or do a messy job. Darcy had assured him that the informal state of his shirt was a good thing.

"I have to say, it's hard to see you sitting here and think of you as Steve. It feels wrong to not call you Captain. I think we're all a little surprised and confused about what happened for you to end up making that press announcement yesterday. Maybe we should start with an explanation of how that came to be?" Clarence suggested.

Steve opened his mouth to begin, but Sam cleared his throat with attitude. Steve side-eyed his wingman with a sour twist of his lips and an unappreciative slant of his eyebrows.

"Hey, everybody, look. Cap's got eyebrows. You never get to see them when he's in uniform. That cowl makes him look like … all the time," Sam said, and made a stiffly expressionless face.

That got some humor from the audience and Steve eased into a smile. He appreciated Sam lightening the mood. It gave him the cue he needed for how to go on with his tale.

Steve looked a touch bashful, then he relaxed in his chair. He sat back and opened his posture as Pepper had coached him, so he'd appear more genuine and approachable instead of resentful of having to be here. Clarence and the audience seemed to wait eagerly to hear what he had to say, so he got on with it.

"Natasha is always trying to set me up with somebody, but I never have time. Pepper doesn't nag, but she's there with wardrobe advice and some not so subtle encouragement to find a girl and get a life," Steve began.

Clarence nodded and Steve went on. He split his angle and attention between Clarence and the audience, as if he was having a conversation with two people instead of thousands.

"I'm awful with women. Always have been. Between work and that, I don't have much luck. So, I found myself sharing a ride with this lady one evening. Work was done, I'd been out with friends, I wasn't worried about much at the time, and it was nice to have some conversation with a pleasant stranger at the end of the day, you know?" Steve said.

Clarence nodded and smiled slightly in understanding. Sam noted how the host and the audience had gone silent, rapt in their first glimpse of the man beneath the Captain America persona. He always looked so aggressive and confident when people filmed him in battle. Cap was typically stoic or business-like in public appearances for charity and special occasions. This soft-spoken, hesitant fellow Steve was revealing to them was an interesting surprise to most people.

"I was thinking 'maybe this is it. This is how I'm supposed to get a life'," Steve said.

He shrugged his shoulders and looked down at his fingertips sawing restlessly at the end of his chair's armrest. It was almost too classic, the blush that swept his ears and cheekbones. If Sam didn't already know Steve was crap at acting, he would have suspected he was playing around with people for sympathy. But no. He was uncertain of what he should be saying and embarrassed by trying to describe what he'd done.

"I got caught up in things, and it all happened. I didn't think about it much, other than to take reasonable precautions. Maybe I was even a little bit proud at the time to have shoved off my usual concerns and let things happen. I should have listened to that little voice in my head, the one that
usually keeps me from acting stupid," Steve said ruefully.

"No, I told you, you should have gone on vacation. Taken some time off. Do you know he hasn't had any down-time since…I don't know. Nineteen thirty-eight?" Sam guessed.

Clarence made a face, then went on with a gentle tease.

"Captain America has a 'stupid' setting?" he asked.

"Hah. No. Cap hardly ever does stupid, not that you'd notice. Steve Rogers, though…" Steve squinted his eyes and drew his lips into a pained grimace.

Some in the audience laughed to see the normally confident, composed Captain looking chagrinned at past embarrassments. Sam thought it was a nice touch, a beginning of distinction between Steve's work persona and his identity as a person.

"When did your nice encounter with the lady begin to go wrong?" Clarence asked what most of the audience was likely wondering.

Steve was acutely aware that kids could watch this. Father Miller would be watching, and the patients and nurses at the VA, and people like Alberto and Rita and Val. Anyone who had a passing interest in Cap might see this, including Hydra, so he had to choose his words carefully.

"Almost immediately after. I'd got caught up in the idea of acting like a regular guy, then I remembered I wasn't. I have to be careful, with who I am," Steve said with a shrug and a glance down at his body.

"I can't just-" Steve dithered over how to word his concerns, "When I was enhanced with the serum that changed me, I was meant to be the first of several people in the program. Things happened, and I ended up being the only one. The war was a constant struggle to outpace each other with technology and tactics, resources and supply, ground control and armaments. The Commandos and I were effective. Hydra and the axis powers were determined to match and nullify our effectiveness so they could achieve their goals. So they could win. Always, someone's tried to get my DNA. A sample of me, of anything they could work with. Anything to make more like me for their own purposes. I know what I can do. I have to keep that capability out of the wrong hands."

Steve paused and gave people a moment to get the meaning of what he was saying. Clarence didn't know what to say. The man looked appropriately concerned, as if he understood the implications, so Steve continued.

"For one night, I relaxed and took a chance with someone. The next day, I came to my senses and started damage control. The lady was nice enough to come back to the tower with me. She consented to some testing, then we agreed to part ways. Tests showed she didn't have anything of mine. I assumed it was over and done with. I resolved to not get stupid again and I went on with my life. That was months ago. Night before last, I got a call. She said some things which I knew weren't possible and she wanted cash," Steve explained.

"Steve, are you saying that being serum enhanced is contagious? People could 'catch' it from you like the flu?" Clarence asked.

"No. Contact with me won't make anyone enhanced. What I have to watch out for is anyone who would try to collect a sample of my DNA and take it back to a lab somewhere to tinker with. Even our staff at the tower hasn't been able to replicate the serum and we've got some of the most capable tech to do it. We don't know if anyone else could ever be enhanced the way I am, but it
makes me cautious. What can't be done in a lab could possibly be done by more natural means, so I have to be very careful with the ladies. Not that I'm ever with ladies. Except that one night, and it didn't go so well," Steve explained.

There were some sympathetic sounds from the studio audience but Clarence moved on after barely a pause.

"That's a lot to think about. I never realized. That makes you a walking, talking arms race, doesn't it? Isn't it dangerous to admit that to everyone? All someone has to do is get close in a crowd and stick you with a needle, then get away," Clarence speculated.

Steve smiled with a hard set to his features and glanced to where the camera was.

"It would be a bit more difficult than that. I'm watchful. Anyone who'd be interested in getting to me already knows about the potential, so I'm not revealing anything that wasn't already known. My point in saying all this is that I'm careful. The woman I was with was thoroughly checked. She has nothing of mine, or I wouldn't leave her out there by herself," Steve assured.

"What he's not saying is that everything being the way it is, it's really hard for Steve to relax and just meet people. With him being from a different century, being too damn busy all the time with responsibilities most people can't imagine, his lack of smoothness with the ladies, and some valid concerns about biosecurity, it's nearly impossible for him to get that life we tend to nag him about. I think it should be easy for people to understand why, under all that pressure, he had a human moment and went for it when opportunity showed itself," Sam said.

He stared hard at Steve, daring him to contradict and put in a mea culpa. Steve lifted his hands a little in surrender and sighed. Sam continued to stare at him until Steve looked sufficiently accepting of the idea that he shouldn't talk back this once. Sam nodded in satisfaction that maybe his friend would give up on the guilt already.

"Still doesn't make it right," Steve grumbled belatedly.

"Don't start. I'm ready for you today. Try me," Sam threatened with a smile.

Steve chuckled and shook his head.

Clarence smiled at the interplay between the friends, then continued the interview.

"I think we understand what happened well enough. Before we get to people's questions, and I have a list," Clarence waved a stack of note cards for the audience to see, "I have a question of my own, if you don't mind."

Steve looked to their host.

"Why did you go public with this? Why be so proactive about an accusation? You could have ignored it and waited for it to pass out of the news cycle," Clarence said.

Steve adjusted his posture to something less like a man caught in an embarrassing situation, and more like his usual determined and confident self. That was one reason to move. The clothes Pepper had him in weren't the most comfortable and he couldn't dig at things. Shifting to relieve the pressure was all he could do while he was on camera in front of everybody.

"I know how things work. You start with a little misbehavior, a little opportunity for blackmail, then you give in to hush things up. One lie piles on top of another, then you're trapped and people have strings on you, can jerk you around how they like. I'm not gonna live that way," Steve
"Another reason I spoke up is that it would be dangerous for the lady if I kept my mouth shut. Since I know she's not pregnant with my child, I have to get that information out there to keep her safe. If I don't, some of those people who've always wanted my DNA might do something with her that doesn't end well. She doesn't realize the danger she's put herself in by making her claim. I never wanted to tie Captain America to a sordid tale, but I can't keep quiet. I can't let her control me, and I can't leave her in danger like that," Steve explained.

Clarence nodded briefly then looked to the cards in his hands.

"People are curious. They sent their questions via twitter. Do you want to read these, or should I?" Clarence asked.

Steve looked to the audience when many of them called out for him to read the questions himself. He was inclined to do so anyway, so he held out his hand and Clarence put a card in it. Steve looked at the question, then to the audience and the camera as if they were naughty children.

"You want to know if Cap was a virgin before this. I'm not answering that. Clarence, what's this number at the bottom of the card?" Steve said.

"We combined people's questions since a lot of them asked the same things. The numbers are how many people asked basically the same question," the host explained.

Steve glanced at the number, which was pretty high, gave an admonishing smile to the audience, then passed the card to Sam. Sam laughed at the number on the card below the question. Steve took the next card from Clarence.

"Come on, guys! This is a daytime show. I can't answer that," Steve complained with good humor, then passed the card to Sam without reading the question aloud.

Sam smiled and shook his head. The audience made disappointed noises, but Steve moved on.

"Does this mean you're dating now?" Steve read from the next card.

He looked up to address whoever might have asked the question. There were several who were interested, according to the number on the card.

"I suppose it does. I don't have much free time. I already told you I'm lousy with women, but I think I'd like to try. I'm not eager to have a repeat of what happened the last time I spent some time with a lady so I'd better take things slow, don't you think?" Steve asked rhetorically.

There was a mixed response from the studio audience. Some laughed, some made disappointed sounds, and one woman shouted out a question.

"What's your number?" she asked above the noise of the other people.

Steve blushed and ran his hand through his hair. His grin was big, and Sam could hear the Brooklyn in his voice when he answered.

"Whaddya take me for? I'm not gonna tell national television how to call me up," Steve said.

Clarence smiled.

"She has a point. This is an opportunity, Steve. What guy wouldn't take it? There's got to be a way
interested people can contact you. Do you have a Tinder, OkCupid, Coffeemeetsbagel, anything like that?" their host asked.

Steve looked dumbfounded for a moment. Then he twitched. His hand went to his back pocket. His phone was silenced, but vibrating.

"You should probably get that," Sam commented.

"Now? We're kind of busy," Steve said.

"Now would be good," Sam said.

"Excuse me…" Steve said.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen. It was embarrassing to tend to his phone now in front of everyone, and he hoped Clarence's staff could edit this bit out before the show aired.

"Natasha says I'm on match dot com. I am? Is that one of the online dating sites?" Steve wondered.

The audience went wild. Steve's eyes widened while he slipped his phone back into his pocket.

Clarence laughed and Sam took the forgotten card from his hand.

"Yes, it's an online dating site. And yes, you're on it," Sam said.

Clarence handed Steve another card while the audience calmed itself.

"My child looked up to you. We're disappointed in what you've done. What am I supposed to tell my child?" Steve read solemnly from the card.

Everyone went quiet while Steve took a moment to appear to consider what he should say. He'd anticipated a question like this because guilt had weighed heavily on him when he thought of it. He wouldn't want to seem glib on such a question, so he made sure all sense of teasing had faded before he spoke.

"This is what I'm most sorry about. Setting a bad example. I know the world has seemed to move on from old fashioned values, and maybe it seems that I have too because of what I did. A lot of you think it's no big thing, having a casual night of fun. To a lot of us, it's still a big thing. I disappointed those people. All I can do is tell you that I'm sorry, and that I already knew I was wrong, even if she wouldn't have forced me to go public with it. I can't go back and change what I did. All I can do is make up for the damage the best way I can and then move forward. This card says that five hundred ninety-two people asked this question. To them, I humbly apologize. I'm sorry I let your kids down, and I'm sorry if you have to answer awkward questions because of me. But I'm not going to let guilt rule me. I've learned from my mistake and I won't make the same one again," Steve said.

He passed the card to Sam and took the next one from Clarence. He read it and shook his head.

"I'm not telling you the lady's name or when or where, or the details of what happened. Way too many people want to know that but I already explained that I have to protect her, in case the people who want a piece of me try to get at me through her. Even though she doesn't have anything of me, I wouldn't be surprised if somebody tried anyway. Lady, if you're out there and watching, you gotta know that it's in your best interest to not publicly identify yourself," Steve warned.

"Does that mean anyone who goes out with you should be concerned they'll get knocked over the
head by your enemies?" Clarence wondered as he handed Steve the next card.

"I hope that going out with me wouldn't be dangerous, since I'm not going to get personal after what happened last time. I've gone out with a few friends lately and everything was fine. I'd like to meet people and learn to relax on my time off. I don't have much time off, though. Not a lot of opportunity to build a serious relationship," Steve admitted.

He looked down to the card in his hand.

"You want to know who I was kissing in the photo right before Iron Man picked me up," Steve said.

He smiled fondly and handed the card to Sam.

"She was a friend. She was concerned about my safety since I was leaving for work," Steve said.

"That's all you're going to say? That kiss looked a little more than friendly. From what we can find on the internet, it looks like you have a lot of female friends," Clarence pressed him to give more details.

"Always in the friend zone," Steve smiled blandly and shrugged.

The audience made some noise, but Steve reached for the next question card.

"Do you go out with guys?" Steve read from the card.

Sam looked concerned, but Steve plowed into an answer without his help.

"I go out with friends, sure, but if you're asking if I'm gay or bi, then no. People of all kinds can be appealing, but I've only ever been romantically interested in ladies," Steve said succinctly.

Clarence's eyebrows went up with surprise.

"What? You think 'gay' is a new thing? Young people think they invented everything. I don't mean to sound condescending, but there's not much new out there, only re-packaged stuff with more options," Steve said.

"I think we have time for one more question," Clarence said.

"Then let me go through these…" Steve said.

He took the stack which Clarence offered him and quickly shuffled through them, looking for ones with high numbers.

"Pick something fluffy," Sam suggested.

"Fluffy? What if nobody wants fluffy? Let's see. Yeah, this one. People want to know what my favorite thing about the twenty-first century is. I get this question a lot. Air conditioning is good. The food is good. Nice cars, though maybe not the most modern ones, those are kind of all the same. Some of the music is good, some not so good. I'd have to say my favorite things about this century are that there's no draft and the whole world isn't involved in war. We're not on rations, so I'm not hungry all the time. Some of us have to fight, but it isn't as all-encompassing as when I went into the ice. People have the chance for peace and prosperity if they want it." Steve said.

"That was kind of fluffy," Sam said.
"Gimme a break. I'm trying to get that one answered and on the record so maybe people don't ask me it as often," Steve said.

Clarence Wallis ended the interview to disappointed sounds from the audience. They seemed to have warmed up to Steve, now that they'd met him and learned he was more than the action figure they saw on video and in the history books. Steve smiled at people and paid respectful attention to the ones who'd been chilly toward him at the beginning of the interview. Some were still just as cold, but many weren't as stiff-looking, even if they weren't smiling.

When the set lights dimmed and the studio lights came on for the audience, Steve and Sam stood to go. Steve shook Clarence's hand.

"I'm sorry if my people were pushy getting me scheduled. Thanks for fitting me in on short notice," he told the man.

"Don't be sorry. Ratings are going to be good. It's a mutual favor. Come back anytime you like," Clarence said.

"Do you mind if I keep these? I might like to answer some of them," Steve asked about the cards in his hand.

"Go ahead. Try twitter," Clarence said.

"Thanks," Steve told him.

The show was no longer filming as Sam and Steve walked off the set. People from the audience wanted Steve's attention, but Sam pressed steady at his shoulder. Natasha waited for them off stage and had been listening in during filming. Steve had refused a dressing room or makeup, so there was nothing to gather up. The three of them didn't linger. Natasha had plans for the rest of the day and Steve wanted some time in the training room with Thor before they needed to get to work.

Studio staff gave them a polite goodbye and held the rear exit door open for them. All three of them checked their surroundings as they walked through the parking lot.

"Don't look at me like that. You don't forget anything. You knew I made an online dating profile for you when I asked you all those questions and got your approval for the photo to post," Nat said on their way to the car.

"I know, but I wasn't aware which site and we never talked about it again. I assumed nobody was interested," Steve said.

Sam groaned at his ignorance and Natasha got that look she had when he was being deliberately obtuse.

"What? How was I supposed to know?" Steve complained.

They got into one of Tony's cars. Sam expected Steve to get into the back seat. He did it because Sam had been there for him today. It felt ridiculous to fold himself in half to accommodate the token rear seat of a sports car. His friends were good to him, so he put up with the cramped space until they got back to the tower.

"Where do you think I get the women I suggest to you? Other than Shield staff, I didn't pull them off the street at random. There's plenty of interest. I'm selective. Not many of them are right for you," Nat said as she drove.
"You get to determine who's right for me?" Steve challenged her.


"Who I didn't know was Sharon," Steve said.  

They rode for a while in silence.

"You did well in front of the cameras," Nat said.

"A little stuffy," Sam amended.

"He was charming, mostly," Nat disagreed.

"Charming like your grandpa or the boy next door, or the preacher on Sunday," Sam said.

"Who are these people? They want to know what sex positions I used," Steve said while he looked through the cards he'd gotten from Clarence.

"Your adoring public," Nat said.

"What positions did you use?" Sam wondered.

"Well, there was some…" Steve made a few different hand gestures which seemed improbable.

"Don't answer him," Nat fussed.

Steve smiled and tried to lean back so he would have more room to breathe.

"You're messing with me. What does that mean?" Sam demanded.

He copied the gestures Steve had made.

Steve grinned briefly, but he shook his head. He read through the cards, alternately looking sad, amused, or disturbed.

"I lied," Steve said as they got out of the car in the tower's parking garage.

It was clear from his tone that having to white wash the events of his night with drugs and prostitutes bothered him.

Nat glanced to Sam and it was decided wordlessly that it was Nat's turn.

"Let's not pretend it's the first time you've lied, Steve. You just did a better job of it this time. You don't owe anyone the details of your private life. Some truths do less harm when they're not told," Nat said without looking at him.

Sam watched Steve expectantly, waiting for him to protest. He wasn't sure he liked it when Steve accepted her statements and moved on to thinking about business as they went up in the elevator.

"I want intel updates on Hydra activity. Meeting after lunch?" Steve asked.

"Sixteen hundred is better for me," Nat said.

"Good enough," Steve agreed.

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It was Wednesday. She'd told the ladies she wanted to join them.

Estrella agonized about how to get to the church or if she should go to choir practice at all. Months ago, she'd have left hours ahead of time and walked. Months ago, she wouldn't have attempted to go to anything so lofty as choir practice because being social and singing had been impossible.

She wanted to go. She wanted to sing and to learn. Could she really go? How would she get there? There was no way she could take a bus. There would be too many men on the bus. All kinds of men. Men she couldn't control and couldn't get away from.

Estrella looked at herself in the mirror on the inside of the open closet door. Her panties were fine because they were stretchy, but her beautiful new bra was too tight. It was the one which fit her best right now, so she was going to have to wear it anyway. She flipped through the hanging clothes and tried not to feel so conflicted about everything. She was thankful Natasha and Pepper had helped her to have a wardrobe that included so much stuff. She resented that she'd needed help. Before, she'd only had the two cobbled-together outfits, one to wash and one to wear.

While she pulled on a long skirt and a cotton blouse, she looked to her guitar and its open case in the corner of her room. It was thrilling to learn and to experiment using her voice with the guitar, but she was already going to feel anxious about going across the city by herself. It would be awkward to take the bulky case on a ride. She was embarrassed of her fledgling skills with the instrument. She slipped her feet into low-heeled boots which didn't show under her skirt, then pulled on a big sweater over her blouse.

Her face was clean, her hair freshly washed, and she'd already had breakfast. She finger-combed her hair down around her face and put two elastics around her wrist for later. She studied herself critically in the mirror.

She looked frumpy and grumpy. Nervous. More than nervous. From the pulse jumping above the edge of her choker necklace and how wide her eyes were, she was plainly afraid if anyone were to notice. Should she call Bucky to go with her? Her pride prickled at the thought. Natasha? That idea chafed at her, too. She didn't need anybody to go outside.

Her chin went up and she rolled her eyes at the way it made her new nose profile look more prominent. Even without makeup, she didn't look plain enough. People would still stare. She knew they would.

If she was going to go to choir practice, she had to get going. Estrella got her phone and walked toward the door. She chose an app and looked for a ride.

"Miss-" Jarvis said.

"No! I'm not going to live locked up like a prisoner or wait for an escort like some rich woman. You open this door and I don't want to hear about it from you!" she told him.

Jarvis said nothing more and he allowed her to leave Wanda's apartment.

Soon as she closed the door behind her and stood in the hallway, Estrella felt exposed and vulnerable. She hardened her resolve against what she saw as weakness and finished calling a ride on her phone. It would be an estimated twelve minutes before the hired car could get to her building.

Estrella knew Mister Kaminski was there. She made a face at the irony of now being one of those people who hid from social interaction by having a phone in front of her face. She made a quarter
turn and smiled a little at the old man and his checker board.

The old man grinned and wiggled his scraggly, wiry eyebrows at her. He gestured hopefully to the folding chair across from him.

"Don't start with me. I haven't even left the building yet," Estrella said.

She sat down, if only to pass the time and to hide some of herself behind the table.

"Maybe you shouldn't leave the building if you're gonna be rotten to everybody who talks to you," Mister Kaminski said.

Estrella felt a moment of shame for being mean and disrespectful to an elder. But he was a man and he'd looked at her and wiggled his eyebrows in that suggestive way. It was hard to not be defensive. He was only a mostly harmless old guy. Being out on the street was going to be much worse.

She tipped her head down and took a quiet, calming breath.

"I'm sorry. Good morning," she said in not much more than a whisper.

Belatedly, she realized she was taking for granted that she could talk to a man at all. It was dangerous to forget. Her fingers combed her hair nervously around the sides of her face while her other hand touched her necklace.

"Morning. So you're why all the traffic is coming 'round here. What do you have to do with Wanda? Why'd she take you in?" Mister Kaminski asked while he made the first moves on the checker board.

"I'm sorry, I don't know how to play. Wanda is nice. I needed help, so she…" Estrella gestured vaguely at the apartment then let her hand fall.

The old man watched her closely. He pointed out how she should make her first move on the checker board. She picked up a checker and did as he indicated. She glanced at the time on her phone, wishing it would hurry up for her ride to arrive.

Her own sense of caution and spending time with Bucky made her feel like she shouldn't say any more about her situation to the curious fellow. He made his next move then pointed to what she should do. Estrella picked up her game piece and moved on the board. She didn't care about the game, but it was something to do.

"Course Wanda's nice, but don't tell anybody that or she'll drub you. Her mama was a first-class lady too. Why're you so spooked?" Mister Kaminski wondered.

"Why do you ask so many questions?" Estrella grumbled.

"Figured you might answer. Can't hurt to try," he said.

Estrella pressed her lips between her teeth against saying anything unkind. She figured out how to make the next move on the checker board, but jerked her hand back when the old man touched her fingers and showed her to go a different direction across the board.

"Where'd you come from? Been living under a rock? I'm not going to bite you. If you're going out, you better put your chin up and don't startle so much. I don't know nothin about you, but I can see. Whatever happened, you have to get tough or they'll eat you out there. You're too pretty to walk
around all timid. They'll notice," he told her kindly.

Estrella nodded.

She didn't say anything for a while. The closer the time came for her to go down and meet her ride, the more nervous she got. She did her best to play checkers and not flinch when Mister Kaminski corrected her novice moves.

The jumble of thoughts and feelings in her head pushed her toward anxiety. She was scared to go out, scared of a frail old man whom she could probably overpower, and eager to go outside and feel the sunshine and the air after being inside for over a week. She wanted to hear the choir and sing with them, but she dreaded having to dip into her gaunt savings to pay for a ride to the church. Part of her, the part that had always gotten her in trouble when she was healthy, was eager to see what attention she would get on the street, and part of her wanted to wear a veil to hide behind like an old lady.

"I have to go. Thank you," Estrella said.

Her heart was racing and she almost got tangled in her own feet as she got up from the table and chair. She barely glanced at Mister Kaminski before she hurried off toward the elevator. She'd really rather take the stairs because so few people did that, but the thought of coming across men in the stairwell was too frightening. There were probably cameras in the elevator, so that should be safer.

Estrella looked at no one. She saw shoes and the floor as she hurried down onto the sidewalk. The worst of the morning rush was past, but there was always foot traffic. It was cold and sunny outside. She hardly noticed.

She looked for a car with the logo of the company on its side. It was a nerve-wracking minute and a half while her skin crawled as men walked around her and the tree she stood next to. Finally, she saw a newer silver car that might be for her. She looked at the phone app and verified that the license plate number was a match, then went to the car before it was completely stopped in traffic. A man's hand reached for the door handle while hers did but she turned, growled and sneered at him. He startled back because she did a good job of looking like she might bite him. She hurried to slide into the car and shut the door. She pressed the lock down.

It was a female driver, as she'd requested. That was a relief. If it had been a man, she'd likely have screamed because she was so nervous. She told the woman where she wanted to go, and then laid her head back on the seat and squeezed her eyes shut. She breathed deep through her nose until her pulse slowed down.

"Are you alright?" the driver asked her.

She sounded gruff and like she didn't really want to know the answer so Estrella only nodded. The woman's eyes assessed her in the rearview mirror briefly, then turned back to pay attention to the driving.

The car was clean. It smelled faintly like cologne. She didn't like the scent but she was accustomed to tolerating things she didn't like.

It was a long ride to the church in stop and go traffic. Estrella felt mortified for having acted like an animal when the man tried to steal her ride or open the door for her, whichever he'd been trying to do. It had been fear and instinct which caused her to react like that. It made her feel uncomfortably like her foggy memories of this last week with Bucky. It made her feel like she was still a helpless
waif on the street. She didn't like being out of control and at the mercy of her instincts. It made her feel less than human, like something was wrong with her. She liked it better when she could forget that she was different from everyone else. Being out in public was a constant reminder that she wasn't the same.

The car went past Tony's tower on the way. Estrella tried not to be homesick for the people she knew there. She wondered what was the matter with her. For years, she'd lived on her own and hadn't needed anyone for company. She shouldn't feel lonely because she was maybe even missing Tony a little bit. What would Steve be doing right now? Was he in the office? In the training room with his friends? Out doing something that would make her worry? Then she remembered that he had to appear on a talk show today. Thinking about him calmed her. She smiled at knowing that he was probably somewhere nearby.

Finally, they arrived in front of the church. It was quieter here, less hectic with traffic. Estrella sighed with relief to see the blue-haired lady she'd met at Mrs. Stile's house going into the wooden front doors of the church.

"Am I supposed to tip you?" she asked her driver.

"I won't complain if you do, but you don't need to. There's some included in the fare. It'll show on your card statement," the driver said.

"Thank you," Estrella told the woman as she got out.

She made herself behave calmly as she crossed the worn brick sidewalk and went up the steps into the church. She was a few minutes early, but that was better than late. It felt good to be enveloped in the reminiscent scent of flowers and candles, welcomed by the hush of the carpeted vestibule, and to hear the happily talking voices of ladies somewhere beyond the sanctuary doors ahead. She took a moment to pull her hair back and snug it at her nape with the elastics from her wrist.

Once more, she touched her necklace. She looked down to confirm that the clothes she wore were clean, modest and perfectly acceptable. There was nothing she could do about how she was shaped and the way her body moved. She dipped her fingers into the font and crossed herself as she entered the sanctuary. The women congregated to the right side of the altar behind the choir rail made cheerful sounds to see her. She genuflected toward the tabernacle. Estrella said a brief prayer of thanks in her head that she'd made the trip to the church without any major incidents.

"I'm glad you could make it, dear. Estrella, this is Donna and that's Claire. There's Marilou, she's our director, and you remember Marge and Theresa?" Gladys said.

She took Estrella's arm in a motherly way and urged her toward the older ladies. It was surreal to be welcomed among these women. They were the kind of people who belonged. Estrella felt that she belonged in the church, and she belonged to the Lord, but she'd seen Mrs. Stile's house. Some of these people were wealthy. They weren't flagrantly rich and gaudy like Tony could be. They were established money and they probably would have never laid eyes on her when she'd lived on the street. They probably didn't even go to that part of town. But here in this reverent, happy place they could spend time together over the music.

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Estrella smiled shyly and lifted the fingers of her free hand a little toward Donna, who was a thin lady with dark skin and indeterminate heritage and to Claire, who was pale and freckled. Marilou looked possibly Italian and she had a dowdy manner to go along with the glasses on a chain that she squinted higher up onto her nose. Gladys already was familiar with Estrella's quiet shyness, so she didn't try to make her chat. She held onto her arm and drew her toward the piano.
They folded the linen piano cover and laid it over the marble rail. The ladies talked about what they wanted to practice and Estrella sat on the piano bench with Gladys. Estrella felt at ease and eager to sing with them. The large, open space of the sanctuary echoed with their voices more than it did on Sunday when people filled the seats. They sang a few easy songs to warm up their voices. Estrella hardly had to look at the music sheets for those.

Color from the tall stained glass windows gleamed softly on the terrazzo floor, the carved wood and the brass fixtures. It was dearly comforting to see the familiar items of her faith around her while she sang. This was a very different church from the one she'd grown up in, but Catholic was Catholic. Many things were the same in form and function, if not in exactly the same style or detail.

They sang several songs she'd heard before and a few she hadn't. Since getting her guitar, she'd learned more about reading music so it was easy for her to read along on the unfamiliar songs, even the complicated ones. Estrella got lost in the enjoyment of being in the sanctuary, of hearing some of the old songs, and of joining her voice with the other women in pleasing harmonies.

"Estrella, I think you could sing an octave higher through here, don't you?" Gladys asked after they all turned the pages in the hymnals and chose another song.

Her finger ran along under the music on the page. Estrella nodded, then became distracted by someone who entered the church. The other ladies noticed too, but when the new arrival crossed herself with holy water from the font and genuflected, then sat in a pew in the middle of the church they all went back to looking at their hymnals.

Estrella briefly narrowed her eyes at Natasha, then joined the choir at the beginning of the song. Gladys smiled at her when she shifted her voice up an octave. Marilou looked at her over her glasses and Theresa's eyes crinkled more deeply at the corners. Estrella soon forgot about Natasha and why she might have come. The harmonies of the hymn were sublime and she let her mind and her voice shift through the music in the way that felt most pleasing to her.

Donna quietly patted her hands together when the song ended.

"Wait til Father Miller hears! Estrella, have you had any voice training?" Claire asked.

Estrella shook her head and pressed her fingers to her throat. The idea of any kind of practice with her voice would have been impossible, but these women couldn't know that.

"She's fine, Claire. I don't think she needs any lessons," Gladys said.

"You're more than fine! I meant that you've got a gift. We could-" Claire suggested.

"Maybe later. Let's see how the Gloria sounds," Gladys hurried them along.

Estrella was thankful. She didn't want to answer any questions or have to make any decisions. It had been stressful enough just coming to practice today. The thought of formal lessons for anything was too intimidating to consider for now.

There were several versions of the Gloria to choose from. Estrella touched one with her fingers as Gladys turned the pages. The older woman played the first few notes of it on the piano to indicate to the rest of the choir which version they would sing.

They sang in Latin and Estrella had a difficult time keeping her voice from choking up. She wasn't from the older rite of the mass like Steve was, but the old Gloria was so traditional that everyone had heard it on holidays. It reminded her of going to church with her mother and grandmother when she was little. She carefully controlled the muscles in her throat to be able to sing despite the
bittersweet emotions and memories.

The ladies rested in silence when the Gloria was done. Estrella bowed her head and bit her lip. She didn't want to hear anything about how she sang. Gladys patted her knee and seemed to understand.

"Well, then. I think we're fine for mass on Sunday. Would you like to join us for lunch, dear? It's our habit to go to Johnny's down the block on Wednesdays," Theresa invited.

"I think I need to go, but thank you. Maybe next Wednesday," Estrella murmured.

Movement at the rail got their attention.

"Oh, you're Steve's friend. Natasha, isn't it? I think we all must have seen what he had to say yesterday. It's good you were there with him. Is he alright?" Marge asked.

"He's fine," Nat said.

Estrella studied Natasha suspiciously. The woman was in a smart suit that was suitable for the office and didn't look out of place in the church, except that maybe the neckline of her blouse was almost too low. Her face showed no hint of anything being wrong but Estrella knew that could be an act.

"He was stupid, and now he's got to embarrass himself. I hope the woman lets it go," Estrella said to her new friends.

There was no point in refusing to talk about Steve's very public situation. She knew him. He would stubbornly insist on coming to church and if anyone wanted to snub him for admitting he'd done wrong, he would take the censure as what he deserved.

"I suppose I never thought about how being so well known, like Steve, could put a person's every action under so much scrutiny. That's got to be hard for him. There's Mister Stark, but he's an entirely different sort from Steve, isn't he?" Donna said.

Estrella nodded. Natasha smiled at what an understatement that was.

"Tell Steve not to worry about all that. It looks like he's doing the best he can. None of us are perfect," Gladys said.

"Okay. Thank you. It's nice to meet you," Estrella told the ladies.

Natasha didn't genuflect on their way out of the sanctuary, but she did bow a little in customary respect. Estrella wondered if Nat knew the customs of Islam and Buddhism as well. She probably did.

"Did you have a chip put under my skin or in my necklace? Is it my phone? How did you know I was here?" Estrella asked as soon as they were outside.

"You don't have a chip. You told Steve you wanted to join the choir and they said practice would be on Wednesdays. It's not that hard to figure out. Get in the car," Nat told her.

Estrella stood stubbornly on the curb in front of the church. Tony's car was exotic and bright yellow. It looked perfect for Natasha, but Estrella didn't want to touch it. It was too much. Cars like this were not the kind she'd ever imagined riding in. The day had already been a challenge and it wasn't quite noon yet. She didn't know what Natasha wanted with her today and once she got in the car, she knew she'd have to do whatever the woman had in mind. She wanted to go home, make a
sandwich and get to her work for Stark Industries.

"Ooooh, Mamacita! Can I get a ride with you?" called a man who walked behind Estrella on the sidewalk.

His overtly suggestive tone and the laughter of his friends made her skin prickle and crawl. She could feel him come to a stop behind her. He was going to do something. Men like him always did. Natasha smirked. Estrella scowled and got in the yellow car as soon as she figured out how to get the door open.

Nat started the powerful engine and they pulled away from the curb. Estrella ground her teeth together, not happy that she once again owed Natasha for something. She had been resigned to calling another ride to get home until the rude men came along.

"Take me home," she requested stiffly.

"You need some things. I cleared my afternoon to shop with you," Nat said lightly.

"Thank you, but I want to go home," Estrella insisted.

Nat didn't argue with her. Estrella was used to her quiet, intense presence. Once again, the woman reminded her of Bucky. The air always felt charged, like a thunderstorm, when either of them was around. She sighed and sat back against the expensive leather seat. She wanted to keep resenting Natasha's presumptions, but she missed her. Tension melted away from her shoulders and jaw. A pleasant feeling pushed aside her angst. The interior of the sports car was showroom perfect and it made her uneasy, but something in here was nice. Maybe smelled nice.

"Did Steve drive this car?" she asked.

Nat glanced at her, her lips pressed into the smallest of smiles.

"He rode in the back three hours ago. Do you smell him?" Nat wondered.

"I don't know. I just know he's been here. How did he fit in the back?" Estrella asked as she turned to look at the tiny ledge of a seat.

"He's good at getting himself into wherever he needs to go," Nat said dryly.

Estrella stared at the woman blankly for a moment, then she giggled.

Nat smiled in acknowledgement but kept her eyes on traffic.

"Choir practice went well. Those women like you, but don't tell them anything they don't need to know. Vocal training isn't a bad idea," Nat said.

Estrella didn't want to think about that right now.

"Why did you come? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Don't you think you should go on a date? Steve went out twice. It wouldn't hurt to do the same," Nat suggested.

Estrella made a face and shook her head.

"It's too much trouble to try meeting anyone," she denied.
"It's easy. You could go out tonight if you wanted to. Make it a challenge for Steve. Let him think he's got competition, or at least the possibility of it," Natasha suggested.

Estrella laughed.

"That's ridiculous. There's nobody like him."

"He's too insecure to realize that. In this case, reality is not what matters. What Steve thinks is what matters. Let him feel a little pressure to perform. Don't allow yourself to be taken for granted," Nat said.

"Why are we going into a hotel garage?" Estrella asked.

Natasha parked the car and looked around at the busy parking garage.

"I don't want to be seen on the street with you. Wanda's building is on the next block, through there, out the other side. Get out and walk. I'll meet you at Wanda's," Nat explained.

"That looks like an alley. I don't want to go through there," Estrella denied.

The noise of the city was muted by the parking garage and the interior of the car. It was lively outside in mid-day, scary with movement and the energy of hundreds of people. If anything happened to her in a secluded place, no one would hear her scream over the loudness of it all.

"You'll be fine. Do it. I'll see you in a few," Nat told her.

She left Estrella no choice, as usual.

Estrella's resentment came back. There was no point arguing. It would be on Natasha if something happened to her. Estrella got out of the car, slammed the door and took off at a jog. Her eyes picked out a path through the concrete, architecture and automobiles which had the least likely chances for ambush from bored men.

"Don't run. It draws attention," Nat called after her.

Estrella cursed under her breath but she slowed her pace from a jog to a quick walk. Natasha was right about her needing new things again. It made her angry that her breasts moved around too much when she walked. A strong sports bra would be nice. A utilitarian one wasn't even in her budget right now and she liked pretty things. A pretty one would be even more costly.

She kept grumpy thoughts in her head while she made her way out the back of the garage, between two buildings, then through a long service alley. Anger was better than fear. When she came to the sidewalk she had to look around to orient herself. There was Wanda's building. She turned right and joined the traffic on the sidewalk.

Men noticed her. Estrella walked faster and tucked her head down. Her hand clawed at her elastics and pulled her hair down and around her face. A flash of red caught her eye. She nervously glanced past the hard gaze of a swarthy, bearded man. Natasha was across the street wearing a knit cap over most of her hair while she stood at a cart getting lunch. The man who relentlessly stared at her changed his trajectory so that they would bump into each other if Estrella kept walking. She couldn't stop or he would get her. She couldn't hurry to her building's door and duck inside because she didn't want the man to know this was her building. If she ran away she would be farther from Natasha's protection.

Panic and indecision slowed her feet to a halt, but then a cab's horn blared at the curb next to her.
Estrella jumped in startlement and gasped as a woman narrowly avoided being hit by the cab. Natasha stepped up onto the curb, slammed into the swarthy man and sloshed soda onto his coat. Immediately, he started ranting at Natasha and turned his attention to flicking the beads of liquid off of his coat.

Estrella ran into her building while he was distracted. Natasha could make her way up once she finished her altercation with the man. She was too adrenalinezied to wait for the elevator. She held her long skirts aside and bounded up the stairwell until she made it to the fifth floor hallway. When she rounded the corner toward Wanda's place, Mister Kaminski wasn't out front. His table and chairs were there but not the checkerboard. He was probably inside his apartment for lunch and a nap.

Jarvis unbolted the door without a word from her and Estrella hurried inside. She was about to secure the door when Natasha pushed at it. Estrella recognized her fingers curled around the heavy door so she stopped trying to close it. Instead she went to the sunlit kitchen and got herself a glass of water. Her throat was dry from breathing fast. Her heart pounded from fright and the exertion of running up the stairs.

She heard the door bolts slide into place, then Nat joined her in the kitchen.

Natasha set a lidded cup of soda down on the countertop beside her, as well as a bag of food.

"What is it?" she asked.

Estrella squinted at her. Nat had to have run up the stairs too or she wouldn't have come in right after her. The woman wasn't out of breath, nor did she seem at all bothered by an aggressive confrontation with a man.

"Tabbouleh, lamb and turnip. James is right. You need training. You panic and get yourself into trouble," Nat said.

She opened a few drawers until she found the utensils and got some out, then she pulled their lunch from the bag. Estrella got two plates for them.

"Leave me alone. I want to eat and get my work done," Estrella said.

They moved to the table and sat.

"No, you don't. You also want to go to choir practice by yourself. I didn't believe James. I should have. You didn't appear to be doing anything to get people's attention. You're not dressed provocatively at all. Changing your demeanor will only do so much if it's something else about you that's drawing attention. You need defense training," Nat insisted.

Estrella ignored her comment and bit at the lamb on her skewer. The tabbouleh was delicious and the spicy turnips smelled good. A glance at her friend showed her that Natasha was amused at her refusal to even talk about training. She had that annoying, patient look about her like she knew she would get her way eventually.

"I never asked to be saved. I wanted to stay skinny and hidden. You people wanted me like this. I don't like to fight and I don't want training. Bucky said he might teach me to shoot. I don't think I want that either. I don't want to shoot anybody," Estrella said.

Natasha got out her phone and took a turn ignoring Estrella. While they finished eating, Nat intently worked on something Eya couldn't see. She took a photo of Estrella unexpectedly.

"No! What are you doing?" Estrella protested.
"Relax. I've blurred it. Here," Nat handed her phone over.

Estrella took the Stark phone and scrolled down the form Nat had been filling out.

"This is a dating site. I can't-

"You can. You need to. I used the falsified info from your new ID and the photo will be blurry," Nat assured her.

"How am I supposed to go out with anyone when I can't walk on the street without trouble?"

"We'll make it work. Me or James can ghost you to make sure nothing happens. You don't need to do it often, only every second time Steve goes out, right?"

Estrella locked her jaw stubbornly.

"You've denied me on everything today. I'm tempted to work a little harder at getting some cooperation out of you," Nat said in that pleasant way she had which made a person want to look for somewhere to hide.

"I'm tired of not having any choices! You always make it so that I have to do what you want. I'm thankful for all that you've done for me, but none of you own me. I'm not your child or your pet project. If I owe you something, then tell me how many dollars and I'll start saving up to repay you," Estrella said.

"It's not about money for us. You have more choices than you think. Say the word and I'll get you out of here. If you didn't live in the city you wouldn't have to deal with men on the street. I can find you a small town or a secluded place in the middle of nowhere. You could join a convent. You could go to a women's university and live in a dormitory while you work on a degree," Nat told her.

"I can't do any of that. Money matters to me, even if it doesn't to you. I'm sure you know how much I make with Stark Industries. It's only enough to pay my share of things while I live with Wanda. I can't afford a house and I can't go to school," Estrella denied.

"You wouldn't owe me. I like having a safe house, somewhere I can fall back to when my cover's blown. I lost most of my previous places recently. I'm looking for a new place, so you'd be doing me a favor. We're not on record together. Nobody would think to look for me wherever you are," Nat said.

"How does Steve fit into this?"

"He doesn't. This is about you. If you want to stay with Steve, then none of those options apply," Nat explained.

"Are you trying to get me away from Steve again?"

"No. You said you don't have choices. You do. I'm pointing them out to you," Nat explained.

"But none of those choices are with Steve!" Estrella said.

Natasha looked a little less patient while she got up to bring her lunch trash to the kitchen. Estrella did the same then the two of them sat on opposite ends of Wanda's couch. Natasha didn't argue any further. She simply handed her phone to Estrella.
"If you want Steve in your life, touch the 'submit' button on the dating app," Nat said.

Estrella studied her. Natasha looked like she knew something. It pricked up jealousy in her like rubbing a cat's fur the wrong way, the way the woman knew Steve so well. She could ask why she needed to do this, but she wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer.

She tapped the button to submit her new dating profile to the website.

Natasha accepted her phone and slid it into her back pocket.

"Check your email later tonight. When you have someone picked out, let me know. We can do this so that you're not in any danger. How many dates you go on is up to you. When you let Steve stop dating other people, so can you," Nat said.

Estrella struggled to restrain a sharp response. Natasha was a weird kind of friend. A person felt managed more than cared for. Nat noticed that she was being glared at mutinously. She looked at the clock on the wall. She picked up the remote and turned on the television.

"You need counseling. You have PTSD. I know you don't want to hear it and you don't feel like taking on anything else right now. That's okay. You're good at managing your symptoms, so it can wait," Nat told her while they stared at the annoying ads on the television.

Estrella made a non-committal noise. Of all the ideas she'd heard today, counseling was probably the most reasonable one. She knew she had issues.

They watched an afternoon talk show and pleasantly forgot about their troubles for a little while. Estrella wasn't surprised when the Clarence Wallis show started and she saw Sam on the television. Natasha did most things for a reason so she'd been expecting this.

"How can Sam look so relaxed? I would be all nerves!" Estrella exclaimed.

"When you do what we do other things don't bother you so much," Nat murmured.

They watched Steve enter the set and take a seat.

"Steve does what you do, but he's nervous," Estrella pointed out.

"Nobody but us will see that. His nervous looks like everybody else's determined."

Estrella watched Steve squirm through his emotions during the interview and his explanations. He looked calm and relaxed, but she now knew him well enough to see how deliberate he was being with everything about the television appearance. She hurt for him when he had to answer for setting a bad example to the children. She also hoped that going through that moment would help him find closure and stop agonizing over it.

The interactions between Steve and Sam added a touch of humor and showed people that Steve had a personality and friends who knew him, rather than him only being an impersonal icon. It was clear at the end that it was Sam who wanted him off the set and that Steve had been willing to spend a little more time to talk with people in the audience.

"You've been managing his dating profile?" Estrella asked Nat.

"Somebody has to. He knows he has one but he actively avoids having anything to do with it. He refuses to check the email account it's linked to," Nat answered.
"You dressed him to look sexy. He wanted to roll his sleeves down. His pants were too tight. He kept shifting in the chair because it was too much pressure on his stuff. Why do you have to make him look like that?"

"I'm not the one who chose his wardrobe today but I agree with the choice. His looks are an asset. We'd be stupid not to use it. What else do you want to bitch about?" Nat wondered.

Estrella huffed out a breath and didn't say all the other things she wanted to say. She was angry that Steve had to do this, and she was angry that her life was limited by things she couldn't control, and she was angry that she was letting herself be angry. During another moment of slow, calming breathing, she reminded herself of all the good things in her life.

"I'm sorry. I'll go shopping with you some other day. Right now, I want to get to my work. If you see Steve… Never mind. I'll tell him myself," Estrella said.

"You can't go out by yourself. Jarvis is going to notify me every time you do. That's going to disrupt my work. We've got big things happening right now. I need to focus. Steve needs to focus," Nat said.

"So I'm a prisoner? You're going to lock me in?"

"You're a prisoner only of your own circumstance. Jarvis won't stop you from leaving. Nobody is going to lock you inside. We both saw what would have happened if I hadn't been there. That man I distracted for you is on a CIA watch list. He's suspected of operating a trafficking ring. You're free to do whatever you want, but I don't think you'll like the consequences," Natasha told her.

"He would have kidnapped me?" Estrella asked.

"He's only a suspect. There's no hard link on him yet or he wouldn't be on the street. If I had your looks and your relative lack of skills, I would be eager to avoid him," Nat advised.

"So I am stuck here," Estrella concluded.

"James is available sometimes. If you want to go out you should contact him."

Natasha got up to leave. Estrella followed her to the door. She hugged Nat and kissed her cheek. The affection was merely tolerated. Natasha gave her a brief uncomfortable smile which seemed more awkwardly genuine than her usual frosty demeanor. Then she hurried away. Estrella decided to hug her more often.

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"You're a traitor! I provide you the best lab facilities and all the toys you can dream of, plus a safe space for when you can't cope. The least you could do is not undercut my projects. You know I've been working on this for months!" Tony ranted.

"So we can micro-manage Steve's life after the fact, but nobody is supposed to say anything when you're about to make a mistake?" Bruce concluded.

"These situations aren't remotely related! Spangles can't keep his dick on a leash. I'm trying to protect the world from hostile invasion and tyrannical dictators!" Tony continued to rant and gesticulate.

His face was flushed. Stark was so angry that Steve could hear his heart pounding from the other
side of the table. Maria's eyebrows did a thing, though she didn't say anything. Steve was going to say something about lewd language during business hours, decided not to because it would only make Tony more furious, then he changed his mind because Maria shouldn't be subjected to it to appease Tony.

"Tony, you're out of order. Keep it professional," Steve said.

Tony stood up and his chair spun so that the back of it thumped into the table. He paced from the refreshment table, along the long axis of the room and back. His hands fidgeted and Steve wondered if something was going to get broken, the way Stark was seething.

"Steve's situation is only a social media circus. You want to crush the world under terminator dominance. You invented Cyberdyne Systems and Skynet and we're not supposed to care?" Clint asked with false mildness.

"This is not science fiction. It's science reality. Iron Legion will deploy the next time aliens come through a hole in the sky, instead of us! Wouldn't that be better, Steve? No need for heroics. No need for sacrifice. We'll have a pre-built team to clean up the nasties and we can manage it from the ground. What's your problem with that? Why would anybody have a problem with that?" Tony reasoned.

"Sure, no problem," Clint shrugged, "It's not like you've ever let your weapons get out of control."

Tony turned to snipe back at Clint, but then Thor got his attention with a thump of his hand on the tabletop.

"Such things are forbidden for a reason. If you persist with your artificial soldiers, I will take you to observe the fifth planet of Ibrulan. Their people suffer under metal monsters of their own creation. My people barely survived through such times. This is why Asgard relies on magic and not upon thinking machines. I would not see such tribulation come to Midgard if it can be avoided," Thor spoke up.

Tony looked at Thor and waved his hand dismissively.

"Asgard and Ibrulan didn't write the coding correctly. My system won't have those faults. Where's Romanoff? She'd see the value in this," Tony said irritably.

"People need to be governed by people, Tony. Not by machines," Steve said.

"Iron Legion isn't a system of governance! It's a defense system," Tony denied.

"I was a defense system of Hydra. Anything that protects the interests of an ideology can be called a defense system to try to justify it. Don't make autonomous machines that can do things to people, Stark. Look what I did to your parents when I was a machine," Bucky said.

Tony pivoted sharply to stare at Bucky.

"Who invited you here? You're not one of us," Tony asked, then he turned to look suspiciously at Bruce.

"He has intel. I wanted him here," Steve told him, "This was supposed to be about wrapping up the last of Hydra. Thanks to Doctor Banner, we may be avoiding a larger unrealized danger. When were you going to tell us about Iron Legion, Tony? Or were you going to deploy it when it was a done deal? I thought we were a team."
"I thought we were a team," Tony sneered, "This is to end the team, Rogers, so we can all go home. But you can't live without conflict, can you Cap? You've got a hard-on for being out at the front, but some of us would rather live by our brains than our balls. Of course you don't understand because you're only a-

"Shut your mouth and sit down," Steve said.

"Make me," Tony challenged him.

Steve got up from his chair and walked around the table toward Tony. Tony put his arms out and stood still. Steve stopped advancing.

"You don't need the suit. I wouldn't hurt you. I don't want a fight. I only want you to stop speaking inappropriately in front of the ladies. It's unprofessional," Steve told him.

"Hill is the only one here," Tony said.

"She counts, and you know Nat will review the parts she missed," Steve said.

"Are you shitting me? You can't think I'd believe you want me to shut up because of Hill. She's not a lady here, she's one of us. You want me shut up because you have no valid reasons to abort Iron Legion, you only have emotions. Fear. Science fiction," Tony protested.

"Reality. History," Thor insisted.

"Not Earth reality," Tony argued.

"We're not the ones turning red, pacing and raising our voices, Tony. If you can be honest with yourself, you're the one being emotional about it. I'm willing to consider the merits of your defense system, but let's do it later when you're calm. Can we get back to the matter at hand?" Steve asked him.

Tony stared at him.

"I don't need you to consider my work. Being part of this team doesn't dictate what projects I can take on," Tony said.

He was visibly less emotional, but Steve could still see the anger in his eyes.

"I understand. I know there's more to you than what you do with us. What I'm saying is that if you persist with Iron Legion on your own, you might set yourself against us. We're not going to sit back and let you bring an autonomous combat system online without our consideration when the rest of us see it as a danger, not a defense," Steve said.

"Are you threatening me?" Tony said.

"Yes," Steve agreed, "Not you personally, Tony. You're our friend. I'm telling you that we'll do what it takes to stop Iron Legion from happening unless you can reasonably convince us it's not a danger to humanity. I know your heart's in the right place. We both want the same thing, which is safety for people. Let's talk about Iron Legion later. We've got Hydra to kill right now."

Tony remained standing, looking stubborn. Steve saw that he wasn't going to stand down until he backed away. He could be the bigger man. Steve turned and walked back around to his chair. He sat. Tony stood for a moment longer, looking mad at the world. Then he sat down.
"I'm sorry if I offended your delicate sensibilities, Hill. Good thing you have white knight Rogers to ride to your rescue," Tony muttered.

"Such comments are beneath you," Thor admonished.

"Yeah, and everything is beneath you, isn't it? You know best," Tony said.

"Tony, we all love you man, but if you don't shut up your butt-hurt bullshit and let us get on with this meeting I'm gonna stuff my socks in your mouth and you'll have to deploy an Iron Man suit over my hands around your face," Sam said.

That took some of the wind out of Tony's angry. Steve used a strong dose of willpower to keep a satisfied look off his face. He'd have to thank Sam later. Tony had been a loner for decades. Having other people around to make him second-guess himself required some adjustment. Being denied by friends was a form of personal growth for Tony. Steve had some sympathy for that.

"Send his Iron Legion against the Hydra base in Sokovia. That one's remote. Let's see how it does by itself," Bucky suggested.

Tony's eyes went wide and he looked to James. He obviously hadn't expected any support from Barnes.

"No. We've got a distress signal from the one in Sokovia. Somebody's in there who doesn't want to be. Bruce also traced a chance of finding Loki's staff there. I'm not sending machines to finish that one. Really, Tony. Let's look at your system. We can give it a trial run if it checks out. All I'm asking for is oversight," Steve reasoned.

"Why do you get oversight?" Tony asked.

"Because you chose me to be leader. You wanna step up and lead this?" Steve offered.

Tony looked at his hands on the table. He thought for a moment, then he shook his head.

Bruce eased out a long, controlled breath. Tony scowled but he didn't say anything else.

"Alright. We've got three stateside, four international locations. We end Hydra, and we get it done in a month or less. I'm not giving them time to rebuild," Steve said.

"I agree we need to eliminate their military aspect as soon as possible but a month isn't enough time for that much work. We have to plan carefully or we'll suffer more losses than we need to," Maria cautioned.

"Then me, Barnes, Hulk and Thor take lead. We're less likely to get hurt. Anybody who wants to sit this out can do so," Steve said.

"Sit what out?" Natasha asked as she came into the room.

The scent on her distracted Steve, but only for a moment.

"Final ground assault on Hydra," Bucky said.

"You know I'm in," Nat said as she sat in her customary spot.

"I'm in," Clint said.

"Alright, let's see the latest satellite views and schematics of their facilities," Steve said.
Maria called up the information and laid it out across the viewers. They got to work. Tony was more quiet than usual, but he participated where appropriate. Steve was satisfied with that, but still cautious. He didn't trust Stark to wait for approval when one of his pet projects was on the line. Stark was emotionally invested in Iron Legion and he needed to find out why.

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"You like that shit? I think it's boring. If you're looking for classics, try Santana or something," Jesse complained about the music she was reading and trying to play.

"Shut up. It's closer to the things in my head. That's why I'm learning guitar, so I can express myself. Why do you care? You look pissy. What's wrong?" Estrella asked.

They sat in her bedroom, she on her bed with the guitar and Jesse on the chair by the window. Wanda was at the library and Estrella was taking a long lunch to visit with her cousin before he left for home. The whole time he'd been over today, Jesse was fidgety and had a sour look on his face. He was kind to her and he helped her with the guitar but she could tell he wasn't happy.

Jess rolled his head and rotated his shoulders like somebody who had a monkey on his back that needed shrugging off. He looked at her for a brief intense moment, then away again.

"How can you be around those people? They're like black holes. Tony Stark is a ditsy asshole unless you get his attention, then it feels like you're falling into a pit of chaos. The redhead, Natasha, she's exactly like a spider. She sucks me in but she's all prickly knives and I haven't even touched her. Banner is a bomb waiting to go off. I can almost hear him ticking, counting down. The Barton guy is like hard ice. He's locked down tight and I don't know why. I think he's hiding something. Steve is...Steve. Barnes is different around him. He's almost normal when he's near Steve, but I can still feel that sick, evil stuff under the surface. Thor is like Steve, like standing too close to the sun but even bigger. Sam is the only sane person there. Thank God I could hang with him until today. I moved out of Steve's spare room and in with Sam. How are you going to live with them when you go back to Steve?" Jesse asked irritably.

It was Thursday. Jesse had only stayed at the tower for two nights. If the Avengers personalities were bothering him that much, she was glad that her gift wasn't as strong as his. What he said made sense. She sort of felt what he meant about each of them, but it had never been strong enough to bother her except when she'd first met them and had felt awed by them because of who they were.

She shrugged.

"I don't feel it as much as you. They seem fine to me. Why do you think Bucky is different away from Steve?" she wondered.

She plucked out the song she was practicing and hummed instead of sang the words. She was paying attention to Jesse and playing at the same time. He was okay with having her divided attention. It looked like maybe he preferred it that way. Talking about their family gifts and how it affected him made him uneasy sometimes.

"I would say they're like an old married couple, but it's not that. They give each other plenty of shit, like guys do. They keep breaking the walls and furniture and shit. Steve threw out his chair and got another one. He bitched and moaned about it because he doesn't like wasting things, but it was toast. I think Steve's the only one who treats Barnes exactly like he used to. Maybe Barnes wants to be like he used to be, so he tries hard to live up to that expectation. Natasha mostly trusts Barnes, but she's a little cautious of him. Steve isn't afraid of Barnes at all. Shouldn't he be?"
"I don't think so. Steve knows he's dangerous. I've seen him be cautious around him before, but that was only because of me. We trust Bucky now. When you know Buck is loyal to you, it's not him you have to fear anymore," Estrella stopped playing to explain.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means that once Bucky is on your side, you have to watch that he doesn't over-react and hurt other people because of you. Like he did when you first came here. If Steve hadn't called to warn him you were coming and if you didn't look like me, he might have done something to you. You don't need to worry about Bucky. He knows you're with me. He won't hurt you or our family," she assured.

"Jesus! What's the enemy like if Barnes is your friend?" Jesse wondered sarcastically.

Estrella frowned at him.

"What? Oh, you're acting like Steve now. You don't want me talking rough. Fine. You're a lady now and all that shit," Jesse said.

"I curse sometimes too but I need to get out of the habit. I don't like to hear people say the name of the Lord like that," she said.

"He's getting you trained," Jess said with a little smile that was meant to dig at her.

"Steve? He's not wrong, you know. It doesn't hurt to be respectful of who you should be," Estrella pointed out.

"You're not much fun anymore," Jesse complained.

She could excuse him some because he was in a stressful situation, away from the comforts of home and forced to be around intense people who made him feel things. He'd been very sweet to bring her his guitar. But some things were going too far.

"What am I supposed to do, Jesse? I had to survive and you weren't here. You're a big man and you don't know what it was like. The things they - the things…” Estrella's throat closed up as she thought of the worst things from her past.

Even the everyday things she'd experienced, like trying to find a bathroom people would let her use so she wouldn't have to poop in the open were things Jesse couldn't imagine.

Jesse looked at her with contrite sympathy while she got herself under control.

"I wish I'd known where you were. We wouldn't have let those things happen. We could have kept you safe, like Val. Why didn't you come to us when you ran away?" he asked.

Estrella shook her head.

"What?" Jesse prompted her.

"You couldn't have kept me safe. You and Alberto would have raped me. No! Don't look at me like that. You would have. This last time is the only time in my life I've gotten through a fertility cycle without being raped or going out in the desert somewhere. I almost didn't make it out of the desert. I was so dehydrated when I found a road, and then the guy who gave me a ride back to town, he did it to me too. Bucky kept me safe this time, and Jarvis. He wouldn't let me go out of the apartment. Steve and his friends kept me safe. So I don't want to hear bad things about them."
They saved me, Jesse. They're good people. Tony is crazy and Natasha is scary, and I don't know why everyone is afraid of Clint. He's always nice to me. Thor is like a big teddy bear. If I need to change the way I talk to be with Steve, then I will. He's worth it. And you need to not take the Lord's name in vain, anyway, no matter who you hang out with. It's not cool. It makes you sound like an ungrateful brat," she said.

"Alright, alright. C'mon, I can't take it when you talk like that. It makes me want to hurt somebody. How are you alright after all that? Don't you need some help for your head?" Jesse asked.

"Maybe. I learned to cope. I had to separate myself from what my body is. This…this meat… it's not me. They could do what they wanted to this," she patted her hands at her chest, "and I learned that it wasn't me. I'm in here," she pointed to her head.

Jesse nodded.

"I get that. I've used it before to get by," he said.

"You've been raped?" she asked with quiet sympathy.

"Nah. If I do it for money, I still get to choose. I don't go with the ones I can't stand. If I need the cash and I'm not in the mood, I can do like you said and detach from it 'til I get the job done. I can put on a show well enough to make them think I'm good with it. I hate that people did it to you against your will," he said.

He had that look about him like he'd like to do violence. His muscles were tense and he looked more like a dangerous man than her easy, frivolous cousin.

"Bucky paid them back. And Steve. If you'd seen them, you'd feel better," she said quietly.

Jarvis bleeped one red blink at her on the security panel, a warning not to say too much. Estrella frowned at the ceiling defiantly.

Jesse looked around.

"What?" he asked.

"Jarvis. He's everywhere. He doesn't like me talking to you about that, but you already know," she said.

Jesse looked at the ceiling too.

"Hey asshole, you're there?"

"Always, Mister DiAlba Castillo. I am near for the Miss whenever Mister Barnes or the Captain or Miss Romanoff are unavailable. How may I assist you today?" Jarvis said in a tone which was a touch too cheerful.

"I don't need you. Smug fucker," Jesse grumbled.

"Jes," Estrella fussed at him.

"Sorry. I'm thankful that you're here for her," Jesse said.

"Understood," Jarvis replied tersely.

"Do you two really dislike each other? I haven't met anyone who doesn't like Jarvis," Estrella
wondered.

"I don't hate him, he's just a bossy prick. If he's good for you, then he's alright," Jesse said.

"I have no ill-will toward Mister DiAlba Castillo. My coding was written to have me perform as people expect. I am merely responding to Mister DiAlba Castillo's expectations," Jarvis said.

Estrella noticed the way Jesse's eyes narrowed every time Jarvis used his formal name.

"Why do you call Steve 'Captain' all the time, but you don't call Bucky 'Sergeant'?" Estrella wondered.

"Our Captain has never ceased to be the Captain in spirit, no matter his advances in technical rank. He is worthy of the respect implied in the venerable title. Mister Barnes has not been a Sergeant for a very long time. I will continue to call him Mister until he decides who he is most comfortable being. I fear that his mind is very complex, to say the least. I would not want to call him anything more specific until he decides who he wishes to be," Jarvis said.

"You're not a computer," Jesse squinted at the ceiling.

"You may think what you wish of me, Mister DiAlba Castillo. I will not argue. I have no ego to serve," Jarvis said.

Estrella thought Jarvis's explanation of why he called Bucky 'Mister' was incredibly nuanced and sensitive to the needs of the people Jarvis served. She could see why Jesse had trouble believing he was only an artificial intelligence system. Whatever he was, Jarvis's careful consideration for people's feelings, even his testy verbal sparring with Jesse, made her love him more.

"I would hug you if I could, Jarvis. Please leave us now," Estrella said.

"Yes, Miss. Thank you," Jarvis said.

She could hear the happiness in his voice. Or was he only sounding happy because it was expected of him? She shook her head. Whatever Jarvis had become was too deep to contemplate right now.

"Jarvis, are you gone?" she whispered.

"I was until you recalled me, Miss," he said.

"Okay, go," she chuckled.

After a moment, she looked to Jesse and picked up her guitar again. She'd set it down earlier when she'd become upset from thinking about her past. She didn't want to handle the instrument when she was feeling strongly and might accidentally damage it.

"You should have seen him, Jess. It was horrible, but it was good. I'm sorry they had to do that for me. I didn't want them to," she whispered.

She played while she whispered so that Jesse had to come and sit close to her on the bed if he wanted to hear. Estrella didn't know if it was enough to keep Jarvis from hearing her if he was listening in, but it was the best she could do. Jesse pressed his weight down on the bed against her hip and hunkered close to listen.

"Do what? That thing outside of Corpus on the highway?" he wondered.

She nodded.
"What was that? There were rumors of bodies all over the place, but it got cleaned up quick and the video from that guy's cell phone keeps getting taken down. It was all messed up anyway because the glass was broken. Half of the image was covered over with red, like blood. Did Bucky do that?" he asked in barely a whisper.

Jesse clearly didn't need warning to keep things quiet in case Jarvis might hear.

Estrella shook her head.

"If it was blood, it would have been because the guy with the cell phone cut himself on the broken glass. It was Steve, not Bucky. The way he killed them, there was no blood. It was only his hands, Jesse. He's gentle with me, but he broke them like toys. His hands are dangerous. He doesn't need weapons. It wasn't even karate or anything fancy. He's so fast and strong, people don't have a chance with him," she said.

"Steve? You're talking about Steve, not Bucky?" Jesse wondered.

Estrella nodded.

She strummed her guitar mindlessly, to make some soft noise.

"It was La Eme, the ones who were always after me. Bucky was getting all the ones in the prisons, like Natasha sent him to do. Then Bucky brought the rest of them to us when we were leaving to come home from vacation. Steve didn't know about them. Bucky told him what they'd done to me, what they'd come to do to me again. Bucky was using me like bait for a trap. He knew Steve would want a part of ending them, so Buck dropped them right in his lap, kind of. It was terrifying and horrible, but it's over. I don't want to see Steve like that again. He wasn't like you see him in fan videos. The FBI and the Rangers and the Corpus police and the sheriff of Nueces County came to the tower. I don't know what they talked about but it was a big thing. I don't know how Steve got out of trouble for killing so many people but he did. I'm telling you this because you need to know he'll take care of me even if he has to defy the FBI to do it. You can go home and not worry about me. Now take a picture of us for Rita," she said.

Jesse was close to her and she was holding the guitar. It was a perfect arrangement, so Jess held out his phone and took the pic for his mother.

"Maybe he's badass, but he's not here. You should get closer to him and quit fucking around. Why are you wasting time?" Jesse asked.

"You let me deal with Steve. I know what we need. Your flight leaves soon. You should go," Estrella said.

"I've got an hour and a half," he said.

"You don't know how long it takes to get around. You might already be late. Jarvis?" she asked.

"Miss?"

"Can you call a ride for Jesse to get to the airport in time?" she asked.

"Certainly," Jarvis said.

Jesse stood up and stretched his back. He picked up his pack that he'd dropped on her floor.

Estrella set aside her guitar to walk him to the door of the apartment.
She hugged him long and hard because she didn't know when she would see him again. He was very dear to her and he reminded her that she still had family, still had connections to her past before things went bad in her life. Her cousin understood her and shared some of her burdens. Jesse hugged her back and rubbed her shoulders. He didn't seem to want to let go either.

"Have a safe trip and give everyone hugs for me when you get home," she told him.

"I'm not hugging Alberto," Jesse teased.

"Not even for me?" she asked, smiling.

"Okay, maybe," Jesse conceded.

He slung his travel pack onto his shoulder and he stood in the hallway outside the door, ready to go.

"Don't talk about my people. And you need to quit that other job. It's not good for you," she told him.

"Watch yourself around those people. And move back closer to your man. Being far away from protection isn't good for you," Jesse argued with her.

She clasped his hand briefly and then he left for the airport. She could see in the way he walked that he was happier than he'd been. Jesse was more upright and alert, rather than broody and internally distracted like he'd been during the first part of their visit. He grinned at her as he turned the corner, then he was gone.

"Is that your man, or is it the Mick? Or is it the blonde one?" Mister Kaminski asked.

She looked at him and considered.

"That's my cousin. He came to visit but he's going home now. If you see him again, something weird is happening," she told him.

Mister Kaminski seemed to get a thrill from gossip so she made up that much for him to think about. He pushed the empty chair out, a hopeful offer for her to sit down and play checkers.

"I can't right now. I'm sorry. I took a long lunch and I have to get back to work," she said as kindly as she could.

She was in yoga pants and a little shirt. The old man only looked at her briefly, then away. It made her feel better that he seemed to pick up on her uneasiness about being looked at.

"You use a computer to work from home?" he asked.

Estrella nodded. She fluttered her fingers at him, then shut herself inside.

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Estrella touched her glasses and pushed them higher on her nose. A glance over the top of her menu showed that Devin was still staring at her. He couldn't seem to stop. She refrained from rolling her eyes, barely.

"What do you do?" she asked him again since he seemed not to have heard her the first time.
"Uh, I analyze data for risk assessment. It pays the bills. I have a side thing where I build webpages for older people, or for anyone, but my clients are mostly older people. What do you do?" Devin asked.

He looked unreasonably relieved to have something to talk about. Estrella wondered why he hadn't thought of the topic on his own. Didn't everyone discuss their work when they went out for the first time?

"I manage the complaint and suggestion inbox for my company. I'm learning guitar too. I like music. Working takes up more of my time than I'd like, but it's like you said. We all have bills," Estrella said.

She looked to Devin and waited for him to respond with something appropriate but he was stuck staring at her again. She sighed quietly and looked him over. She may as well since he couldn't seem to quit doing the same thing.

Her date was tall. He had brown hair and she supposed he was cute. He was slim and nothing was wrong with him, but she felt that any of the men she knew could knock him over with a sneeze. She reminded herself that the men she knew weren't normal. Then she realized that Tio Alberto was normal and could probably knock him over with a sneeze too. She chuckled.

Devin looked at her funny, as if he was startled she was a real person and not merely a doll to look at.

"What?" he asked.

Estrella shook her head.

"You keep staring at me," she said.

"I'm – ah, you're really… Sorry. I didn't expect-, I mean every time I meet somebody from a dating site, their pic is always better than..." Devin stammered.

"What are you talking about? I'm dressed like a librarian. Well, I know some librarians and they don't all dress this way. That's a stereotype, you know. Where are you from?" she tried to keep the conversation going.

They placed their orders and the waitress went away. It had been Devin's idea where they should meet. Estrella liked the loud, cheerful atmosphere of the sports-themed restaurant. All the noise was a good excuse to look around at things other than her date. All of the games on the televisions kept most of the men from looking at her.

"Devin? Are you from New York?" she had to ask him again to get his attention.

"I, yeah, I'm from here. You?" he asked.

Estrella shook her head.

"Texas. I've been here a few years, though. Have you travelled much?" she asked.

It was work to keep this going. She ate the yeasty pretzels in the basket on their table. Natasha had coached her on conversational topics because she didn't know anything about dating. Estrella was fairly sure the awkwardness wasn't her fault. Natasha knew things, so she was probably doing alright. It was her damn 'gifts' that were messing this up. Devin had almost no ability to sit with her and have a conversation at the same time.
"Devin! Do you like to travel? Do you have any stories to tell?" she asked.

She had to wave her hand between his eyes and her chest to get his attention.

"Oh! I spent a month in Cambodia last year," he said.

"And? What was it like?" Estrella prompted him.

This was hopeless. The food was okay. Devin wasn't horrible. He was merely not accessible. She could see that she'd have to wear a burka to get any conversation out of him. Maybe even then it wouldn't work. Estrella wondered if Bruce or Tony or Jarvis could study her and determine what it was other than her appearance that made men stupid. It couldn't be pheromones because men didn't seek her out to stare at when she was nearby but hidden, only when they could see her.

She figured she may as well try to get some information out of Devin since this wasn't working as a social moment anyway.

"Devin, hey! Look here," she said.

Estrella took off her fake glasses and stared at him until he looked at her eyes.

"Why can't you talk? What is it about me that you only want to look?" she asked plainly.

He blinked in confusion and she let him free from her eyes.

"What?" Devin wondered.

"Why can't you talk to me? You can't be stupid if you're a data analyst," she said.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why… I just want to…" his words drifted off again.

She banged her fists on the table enough to make the silverware rattle on her plate to startle him.

"Do you feel drunk? You did it again. Why can't you think?" she asked.

"Can we go somewhere?" Devin asked instead of answering her.

He reached out and took her hand in his on top of the table. She drew her hand away and shook her head. Her heart thumped faster with nervousness, but Devin let her go. He reached out again to touch her hand, but she stared at him with hard denial.

He stopped reaching for her and went back to staring like a hopeful puppy. His eyes were all over her, as if she wore a bikini instead of grandma-librarian clothes. Estrella paid attention to her meal when it came. There was nothing else to do since she was being denied conversation. Devin hardly ate.

It was easy to think poorly of him but she knew it wasn't his fault. His behavior was typical of when she tried to be around men while she was healthy. It was why she'd chosen a man who seemed non-threatening to go out with. Devin was thoroughly boring and predictable, but at least she wasn't in fear of him. Despite being thin, she knew he could overpower her if he wanted to but that wasn't likely to happen here. It certainly wouldn't happen when she left the safety of the public restaurant. She could eat her meal in peace, disappointed that she wasn't having as much fun on her date as Steve seemed to have on his. Once again, she made herself look on the positive side of things. At least she wasn't in any danger.

"Can you divide it?" Estrella asked the waitress when she came with the check.
The woman nodded and came back with separate tickets. Devin had to be prompted to put his card on the little tray for payment, but he eventually did. He got up to follow her to the exit. She could feel him behind her, almost breathing on her neck. Other men looked too, many of them confused by being attracted to a strangely dressed woman.

"You want to go to my place? Or your place?" Devin asked when they made it onto the sidewalk outside.

"Thank you, no. It was nice meeting you. Don't call me," she said.

It was all she could do to be polite. She felt like running toward the car which waited for her. Devin was at her heels in pursuit. He stumbled back when he ran into Bucky's hand. Estrella got into the car and shut the door. She watched in the rearview mirror while Bucky said something to Devin. Devin looked to the car, then turned around and walked away, his shoulders slumped.

Bucky came around the driver's side of the unremarkable sedan they were using. He got in smiling.

"Why are you smiling? That was horrible! What did you say to him to make him go away?" she asked.

"I told him the lady said no. It took him a minute to hear me, but he did. It's not much fun running your men off. You should pick one with a little more fire in the belly," Buck said.

He started the car and got them headed to Wanda's neighborhood.

Estrella frowned all the way home. Bucky found a parking spot and waited for her to say whatever was on her mind. It was well past dark and the sky was threatening to rain. Lightning flashed and lit up the street, the buildings and the interior of the car.

"How can I have any fun on a date? You see how they are. Steve gets to play on his dates. I know he likes them. Natasha showed me the pictures when he was out with that blonde woman. He looked like he wanted to eat her up and she didn't mind. Are you sure he didn't fuck her?" she asked.

"He didn't. If he had, he would have told me all about it. You know how he is. He can't help himself. Yeah, he had fun. What's stopping you?" Buck said.

"He couldn't talk!" she exclaimed.


"I don't want to 'mess with' anyone. If I have to go out I want to at least try to enjoy it like Steve does. What can I do differently?" she asked.

"Don't go out to dinner. Go to an art showing or a music thing, something performance oriented where they have to pay attention to something other than you. There's a rock climbing gym a few blocks from here. You could do that," he said.

"I don't know how to climb," she said.

"So find someone who does and let them teach you. That way they have to talk and do something other than stare at you. Or hey, you can find a guy who's good with a guitar. That might work and you'd learn something you can use," Buck said.

Estrella considered his ideas. They had merit.
"Thank you, Bucky," she said.

She leaned over the parking brake and kissed his cheek.

He grinned his usual rascally grin, not at all effected by whatever it was about her that so bothered other men. She stayed close for a moment. It felt nice to have a guy's attention without him going all stupid.

"Get outta my face, kid. This would look weird if Steve came around snooping," he told her.

To ease the sting of rejection, he put his finger on her nose and pushed her away gently.

Estrella snorted at his arrogant presumption that she meant anything romantic by lingering close to him. She was happy to back away. She got out of the car and Bucky walked her to her building. She glanced nervously around for any sign of the man Natasha had warned her about. He was big and burly, easy to spot, but there was no one like him on the street. Rain started spitting at them and lightning flashed again.

"He's not around. 'Talia told me about him. C'mon, let's get inside before we're drenched," Buck said.

They took the elevator up and Buck walked her to Wanda's door. Mister Kaminski was inside for the night. The hallway lights were dim enough to still show the lightning flash when it flickered at the window at the end of the hall. They heard Jarvis unbolt the door for them.

"Do you want to come in? I'm ahead on my work and my fingers are too sore to play anymore. I'm bored," she said.

"Nah. I'm not your girlfriend. Text Steve or something," Bucky said.

Estrella pouted at him, then took his gloved hand for an instant. He looked at her patiently but it was clear that he wanted to leave.

"I didn't want to take up your time with this, so thank you for helping," she said.

"You already said that. I don't mind. Now go on. Get on the computer and look at some fashion mags or something if you're bored. You dress worse than my sister," Bucky told her.

Estrella laughed, but she went inside. She knew Bucky would wait to leave until he heard the door latch behind her. She stood and watched him on the monitor that overlooked the hallway. A full minute after Jarvis secured the door, Bucky ambled away.

She went to her room and toed off her stiff shoes, then she joined Wanda in front of the television. They watched a comedy show and Estrella went to the kitchen for a snack. The apartment was dark except for the blue glow of the television in the living room. The rain and lightning outside made it feel cozy to be safe and dry inside.

"Did you go out with him?" Wanda asked.

"Bucky? No. Natasha has me on a dating site. I went to meet a guy named Devin. Bucky only drove me there and back," she said.

"You don't want Steve anymore?" Wanda wondered.

"I do, but I need to give him time. I need time too. I've learned so much on my guitar since Steve
hasn't been with me every day. I miss him, but we need this," she explained.

"Hmmph," was all Wanda said to that.

They watched comedy until Estrella got tired. It was Saturday night, so Wanda was off work tomorrow. She never stayed up late on work nights.

"You know he was on the TV. Something about a woman," Wanda said.

"I know. He has to do that. She wants money but he didn't do it. Well, he did it, but she doesn't have a baby with him so he doesn't owe her anything," Estrella said.

"As long as you know," Wanda said.

Estrella nodded.

"So this is why you were trying to kill yourself?" Wanda wondered.

Her eyes indicated Estrella in general.

"I wasn't trying to die. I can't live looking like this if I'm on my own. They're protecting me now, but I might have to go back to how I was before," Estrella said.

"You've got a good thing with them. Why would you give that up if it helps you?" Wanda wanted to know.

"It might not be fair to them. Bucky or Natasha have to take me everywhere I go. Or Steve. They're busy people. It's not right to expect them to watch over me all the time," she reasoned.

"Look at you. You're sad even thinking about going back to the way you were. If they want to take care of you, you should let them. You're a fool to push your man away like you're doing. You keep doing that and he's gonna find somebody else. It's like you want it to fail. Do you? You think you're not worth a good life or something?" her friend asked.

"No, that's not it. I'll be okay. Goodnight, Wanda," she said.

When Wanda got to lecturing her, she decided the best thing to do was retreat. Wanda's perspective was different from hers and there was no use arguing.

"'Night," Wanda said.

Estrella went to her room and got into comfortable sleep clothes, which lately meant panties and a little undershirt. It felt like luxury to be able to wear almost nothing and be safe while she slept. It was easy to resent all the things she had no power over but she was happy for the moment that she was alive and healthy.

It was kind of late. Her fingertips were pink and sore from the strings of her guitar. Nat had said the Avengers were busy with something important. She didn't want to bother Steve but she missed him.

She turned off her bedside lamp and got under her covers. She reached for her phone. Before she could second-guess herself any more, she texted Steve.

_I went out tonight. It was frustrating. He wouldn't talk to me, he could only stare. How do you make conversation on dates?_ 

Steve responded almost immediately.
It's not in my best interest to give you dating advice, lady. Buck won't help me so why should I help you?

Estrella was taken aback at his attitude until the winking tongue-out emoji appeared.

She smiled in relief then wiggled down in her bed. She'd felt bad about moving out and making Steve date other people. But if he was teasing her, he must be past most of his upset.

He gave me dating advice. He's your friend. Why won't he help you? she asked.

He did, huh? He's a rotten friend. How are you liking the guitar? I bet you're really gettin swell at it.

She laughed at his use of the word *swell*, but her laugh was from fondness not ridicule. She could hear the timbre of his voice in her mind. He was smiling and she could hear that in her imagining too.

*I love it. I had to stop for tonight because my fingers are sore. I'm sure Natasha told you I went to choir practice Wednesday. It was swell, too. Steve, I want to know. How do you make conversation on dates? Or do they chatter your ears off like fangirls and you only have to sit there?*

Steve took a little longer responding this time and she saw his typing bubble appear and disappear before his response came. It touched her that he was trying to be careful and say the right thing. She wanted to hear his raw thoughts too, without him thinking twice and starting over.

*It's probably not the same as your date. You didn't know the guy, right? Buck said I was a wimp, that I needed to work up some moxie and ask out a girl I don't already know. Sharon was an agent with me before, and you know Darcy's with Thor and Jane at the tower. We had things to talk about. I was pretty harsh with Darcy and I asked her out to smooth over the talk I had with her. I think I got her to back away from me some. Maybe I cheated because that wasn't exactly a date. It was more of an apology and it didn't go so well. I think she was mad at me when it was over. Me and Sharon talked about work and some other stuff. Maybe I'll pick a fangirl next time and I won't have to talk.*

That was a lot of words from him. Either he was very fast with texting or he was speaking his message then sending it. She felt stupid when she thought about it. She touched the talk icon on her phone and called him instead.

"Hiya, doll," he answered.

"Hi, Papi. I like to hear your voice. You're old anyway, so we should talk instead of texting," she teased.

"Mmph. Yeah, babe. Call me Papa and then call me old. See what it gets ya next time I see you," he grumbled.

Estrella laughed, but his tone and innuendo made her hot.

"What did you do to Darcy?" she asked.

"Just talked to her some. She messed with me earlier in the day and I was rough with her. Then she came at me again trying to rationalize it all. I was tired of her tactics, so I told her to back off," he explained.

He sounded satisfied with himself, but she could hear a little uncertainty in the way his sentence
"What did you do?" Estrella asked again.

"She thinks I was threatening her, but I wasn't. I really wasn't. I only meant that I would move out of the tower if she didn't back off," he said.

"You can't move out of the tower. They need you close in case you have to work," Estrella said.

"Nah. When I was in D.C. we'd video-conference our meetings and Nat would pick me up and bring me to wherever Clint landed the jet. It's easy staying at the tower but I can live other places. I'm not gonna share space with Darcy if she's going to cause problems and she deserves to live at the tower as much as I do. I think she's lonely. She needs to be around Jane and Thor. Jane needs to work with Tony. Besides, maybe I wanna live somewhere else with somebody else anyway," Steve said.

"You do, huh?" Estrella asked.

She knew he meant with her by the suggestive, teasing tone of his voice.

"Sure, maybe. Me and Buck, we could work from other places," he said.

"You and Bucky?" Estrella asked.

"Yeah. I need Buck. You need Buck. He needs us."

"Us? Why do you think he needs me?" she wondered.

"You don't see him when he gets back from being around you. You bring out something in him. Something like how he was with Lucy. We're hard on him here, 'cause that's what he needs. Nat's brutal. He needs somebody to be sweet to him. He accepts that from you. I think he'd be suspec of anybody else. He doesn't trust much," Steve said.

"Jesse said you were 'breaking shit.' His words, not mine. Is everything okay with you and Bucky?" she wondered.

"We're fine. Nat's pulling on his strings and he needs to let loose sometimes. I could tell it made Jesse nervous. I'll apologize to him about that. Hey, it's late. You're usually asleep by now," Steve pointed out.

"I'm not so tired all the time anymore. You're putting on a good face, Steve, but I can tell you're not great. What's bothering you?" she asked softly.

"Other than the obvious?" Steve asked with some attitude.

"Other than the obvious. I could see on the show how it made you feel to have to talk about your things in front of everyone. There's something else," she said.

"Ah, work, kind of. And Tony's on about something. It's nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to worry about. I'll get it sorted," Steve assured her.

She could hear the little white lie all through his carefully lighthearted tone.

"You know I'm going to worry, especially since you're lying to me," she said.

"Right. Because I'm getting to be such a good liar lately," Steve said.
"And that worries you too. You don't like it when you have to lie to people. You need kisses," she told him.

"Yeah? You got some for me, doll? You didn't waste any on that other fella, did you?" Steve asked.

She could tell he was at least mildly jealous, but he immediately sounded happier and less worried about his work after she'd mentioned kissing.

"No, not this time. The closest thing he came to kissing was Bucky's hand in the middle of his chest. Did you waste any kisses while you were away?" she asked.

He already knew she was jealous. She didn't try to hide it in her voice.

Steve heaved a sigh. It made her heart thud with anxiety. There was a soft sound and she imagined him lifting an arm to rub at the back of his neck like he did sometimes when he was antsy about things.

"I don't wanna lie. Not to you. Can I tell you the truth?" Steve asked.

She was thankful he gave her a choice, a warning. His truths were sometimes hard to hear.

"Tell me," she said quietly.

"You know how I am lately. It doesn't take much to get me going. You got Wanda's phone and called me right as I was setting out to meet with Sharon. Do you remember that?" he asked.

"No! Was I wearing my necklace?" she asked.

"Uh-un, you weren't. Sweetheart, you had me on the elevator floor. Thank God there was nobody in there with me. I had to run to my room and change my shorts, and then I was late to meet with Sharon. It wasn't only you. I won't pretend that. I'm on all the time anyway. Between you, me, and how Sharon was that night, I was hard and she saw it. I was going to kiss her goodnight but Sharon's a good friend and she stopped me. She's smart. We recovered our professional demeanor and I left. That was that. Darcy's a brat. I don't like her, but she can get to me too. I was never anywhere near kissing her but I did wash her mouth out with dish soap," Steve admitted.

Estrella felt that she was supposed to laugh at Steve's last comment about Darcy, but she was hung up on the part where he'd been hard for Sharon and she'd seen it, then stopped him from kissing her. That hurt. She hadn't known that Steve would get so into going out with someone romantically.

"Eya?" he asked.

"She knows you want her now," she said.

"Sharon?"

"Yes, Sharon. The blonde one. I saw the pictures someone got at the restaurant. I could tell you wanted her," Estrella said.

She'd hoped it was a trick of the light, or something she'd misinterpreted, the way Steve had looked pleased and kind of hungry at his date while the woman looked flustered. Hearing what Steve had just described, she knew she was right.
"You told me to do this. I'm doing this or I'm not doing this, not somewhere in the middle. She may know I wanted something, but she also knows she can't have it, like Darcy knows now. I told her when it came down to it that I wasn't going to have sex with her. Turns out I was a little bit cruel and I didn't understand that. I do now, so I learned something valuable. She said I should kiss a lady goodbye at her door if I don't mean to do anything. That's when I got up to leave her hotel room and she stopped me from kissing her, even though she'd said I should kiss a woman goodbye," Steve said.

"If you haven't already been in her hotel room! That's like shutting the barn after the horse. You went back to her room?!!" Estrella seethed.

"Yeah?" Steve said testily.

"Ooook," Estrella simmered out the sound.

She was so upset and jealous that she was trembling with it.

Steve was silent on the other end of the call. She didn't know whether he was smugly satisfied that he'd made her steaming jealous, or if he was quiet because he was afraid to say anything more for concern of upsetting her. He solved that puzzle for her in the next instant.

"Don't tell me to find other dames to spend time with if you don't want me to do it up right. Call it off or suck it up," Steve said.

Estrella choked out a hurt sound, then slapped a hand over her mouth.

She heard Steve take a deep breath, but he didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she whispered.

"Me too. I'm getting over it. Now that I've gone out a few times, I think it's a good idea. I'm gaining skills, like you wanted. Thanks for that. Tactically, it's a great plan. I'm going to use it. You said you saw the Clarence Wallis show. Remember the part where Nat said I had a dating profile?"

She made a faint affirmative sound.

"My phone's going crazy. I had Jarvis filter the incoming emails because it's way too much. I bet Nat set you up on a dating site while she was there Wednesday, didn't she?" Steve asked.

It began to clarify to her that Steve wasn't trying to be mean. Everything he said stabbed at her feelings and he wasn't even trying. He said he was getting over the hurt she'd caused. He was going to throw himself fully into the dates he went on. He easily got hard for other women. Hundreds, maybe thousands of women were responding to his dating profile. Of course they were. He was who he was, and the public was starting to see what he was made of behind the uniform. That made him even more attractive to them.

She'd been stupid. Natasha was right. She had to go out too, or Steve was going to pass her up and leave her in the dust. He always learned everything so fast. He would be as smooth as Bucky soon, and it was all her fault.

"Eya?" Steve asked.

"I'm here," she said tremulously.

"I've hurt you. Which part?" he asked with more consideration.
She could hear her friend in his voice. At the moment, it wasn't comforting. As Clarence Wallis had said, he had plenty of female friends.

"All of it? But thank you for being honest with me," she said.

"Did you want me to lie after you asked me to tell you the truth?" he asked carefully.

She could tell that her answer was important to him.

"No! I should know by now that when you give me a chance to not hear something, I should take it. I want to know these things, but they hurt to hear. You're so strong and I'm not used to that kind of honesty," she admitted.

"It doesn't matter how strong we are. I get hurt too. You know I do. You fixed me gumbo like we had in New Orleans and sent it home with Bucky and I was awful to you. It can hurt. I know. Remind me why we're doing this to each other?" he asked.

"Because I need to learn to be something other than your pet. I want to learn guitar and music and I can't do that when we're together all the time. All I want to do is be with you and I can't tell you no when you ask me to see you. I need to learn to be me without leaning on you. You need to see that you're not little shrimpy Steve anymore, and to know that women want you, and I need to know that you're strong enough to not take those women even though you can have them. If you want to be with me, that is," she said, barely above a whisper.

"We're still sure about all that?" Steve asked for confirmation.

"Yes," Estrella said, and she couldn't keep the fact that she was crying from her voice no matter how she tried.

"You're stronger than you think, Eya. I need something, here. If I'm going through all this, I need a light at the end of the tunnel, doll. Are you still gonna want me at the end of it? I can wait if you do, but I'm not gonna be alright about it if I'm your jumping monkey, then you cut me loose. Don't get me wrong, I'm not threatening you. It seems like I need to say that 'cause people think I am, lately," Steve said.

"I love you. I miss you. As long as you can be true to me, I'm with you," she said.

"I'll try to hang on til you're ready for me, but I can't make any promises. I've learned that much," Steve said.

"You can't?" Estrella wondered.

"It's work stuff. You knew that all along, since the first day you talked to me and told me your name. If it's in my power, I'll wait for you," he said.

"Work is that bad?" she asked.

"Nah. Let's not talk about that. I didn't want to get off onto a bad foot and there we went. We don't talk much anymore. What's on your mind that's not heavy? I liked that talk about kisses. Can we get back to that part?" Steve gently guided her.

"I want to give you kisses, all over your face. You were clean shaven on TV. Are you growing your beard back yet?" she asked hopefully.

"Hmm. No, babe. I gotta keep it clean for the filming. I let it go for a day, but I need to shave in the
morning," he said.

She could hear his hand rasping over the stubble on his jaw while he rubbed his face. She wiggled in the bed. She wanted to rub his face.

"So what was his name?" Steve asked.

"Devin," she told him.

"It's not fair, you know," he said.

"What's not?" she wondered.

"I don't get any pictures of you when you go out. What did you wear for him?" Steve asked.

She bit her lip.

"A red dress," she told him.

"Not the one I saw you in last time, huh?" Steve asked.

His tone was stern. Worried.

She was tempted, but no. She was already fibbing enough.

"No, not that one. I have so much clothes now. I have more than one thing that's red. If you want to know what I looked like, ask Bucky," she said.

"You're not gonna tell me?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Ask Bucky," she denied him.

"What are you wearing now? For me? What'd ya put on before you decided to call me?" he asked, and there was no mistaking the way he was feeling.

"You mean, what did I take off before I called you?" she asked.

"Yeah, that," he said.

"Goofy. I took off my red dress. You want to know what I was wearing under it?" she teased him.

"Don't tease. C'mon," he urged her.

"Ask Bucky. He knows what I wear to bed these days," Estrella said.

"Awww, why do ya gotta make me think about Buck for everything? Now I'm not in the mood to play anymore," Steve complained.

"Maybe we shouldn't play on a Saturday night. I'm going to church in the morning," she said.

"Is that so? Me too," Steve said.

Estrella smiled. Things felt raw and painful between them right now, no matter the teasing they used to cover it up. She would be glad to see him there. It seemed that Steve couldn't fully ignore the pain between them, either. His next words told her he knew she was still stinging from it and he cared enough to try to ease her some.
"If it makes you feel any better, I didn't let Darcy ride on my bike. She asked. I didn't want her in your place," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

It was some consolation.

She yawned. In no way was she bored, but she was getting sleepy.

"Bedtime?" he asked.

"I guess so. What about you?" she wondered.

"Been in bed for a while," he said.

"It's not like you to be lazy in bed if you could be learning something or training. You weren't sleeping when I texted you," she pointed out.

"Maybe I was thinkin of you," he said.

The low, heated way he said it made it clear that he'd been busy while thinking of her.

"I don't want to do phone sex. It's so cliché and we've got church in the morning," she whispered as if anyone could hear.

"He already knows what I do. Can't hide anything from God," Steve said, "Buck was concerned about you. He thinks I could hurt you."

"What does that have to do with masturbation?" she asked.

Steve frowned. That gawky word was still like a slap in the face. It didn't stop him from reaching down and resuming what he'd been doing when she'd first texted him. It felt good to tease it a little and he grunted.

"Steve!" she complained.

Sure, she was fussing, but he could hear the interest in her voice, too. This was part of not lying to her. Of all the stuff he'd done while he was apart from her, the time in training with Bucky stuck in his mind the most. He needed to tell her at least part of it, to make some attempt at the truth.

"So, Buck said I had to be more careful. He taught me some things to help you," Steve said.

"What kind of things?" she wondered.

The way his voice went lazy and deep put her under a spell. He only sounded this way when there was sex. She didn't hear any crazy slapping sounds but he was definitely doing something.

"Guy things. I'll show you someday, maybe," Steve said.

"Show me what?" she asked.

"Mmh. This," he groaned, a quiet drawn out sound that could only come from a lot of pleasure.

Slow. It was something slow.

He was teasing her and it was working. What could he do to himself that was so slow, but felt so
good? She could only imagine him on his bed, pulling or rubbing on something, teasing himself deliberately.

"I'll see ya tomorrow, babe. I promise I'll be better behaved than this," Steve said.

Estrella stuck out her bottom lip and squinted even though he couldn't see her do it.

"How often do you do that?” she asked him.

"Not as often as I'd like. I'm trying to be good. It's been a rough day. I needed a distraction," was all he'd tell her.

She bit her lip hard. She wanted to be there and help distract him too. If she didn't get off the phone with him she was going to get sucked into what he was doing. It still felt too painful, too false to go with easy familiarity right now. Natasha warned her that men were different. Even good men. Steve felt the pain too, but it wasn't all he felt. His body drove him to do other things.

"Okay. You have fun. Take good care of yourself, and I don't only mean in bed. Don't let work… do bad things to you," she pleaded with him.

"I'll do my best. It's one last hard push against Hydra, and then I hope I don't have to deal with them anymore in direct combat. 'Night, Eya. I'll see you tomorrow, unless somebody really needs me somewhere else," he said.

"'Night, Papi," she said in order to end in the way she'd began.

She blew him a noisy kiss and he made the noise back at her. The call ended and she lay in the dark of her room thinking. It was difficult to sleep, imagining what Steve might be doing to have made sounds like that.

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She was wearing a black lace veil over her hair. It partially obscured her face from his side-on view of her. It distracted him almost more than if she hadn't been trying to hide herself with traditional modesty. Steve steeled his spine against continually turning his head to look at her in the choir seating by the piano. Sam's smirk wasn't helping.

Steve studiously paid attention during mass. He was deeply grateful, so he tried to honor the Lord by paying attention during the celebration instead of trying to catch glimpses of his girl over among the old ladies. Old ladies who happened to be younger than him, he reminded himself.

He smiled during the homily when he was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to find humor with anything. Estrella made him feel young. Ever since vacation, she'd been helping him to forget that he was an old guy. Only sometimes during office hours did he feel his age anymore. Steve bit the inside of his cheek against more inappropriate smiling. Right now he felt like a kid, about to crack up in church and earn a trip outside to get his britches dusted. He hadn't misbehaved in church much as a child and when he had it'd usually been Bucky's fault. Not this time.

Sam poked him in the ribs and Steve's eardrums popped out from the pressure of trying not to laugh. Mentally, he calmed himself with more responsible thoughts. He should really be serious right now because a lot of people were giving him the eye after all he'd been in the media this week.

He got through the rest of church pretty well. The music made him close his eyes because he could
hear Estrella's voice. He wanted to sing with her, but didn't trust himself today. It was better that he keep a low profile and not call any more attention to himself than he already had.

He'd gone to confession again, so he was clear to receive communion. Guilt tried to prod at him, but Father Miller said he should keep up the fight as long as there was still fight in him. Confession was his strength to keep wanting to do better, though sexual indulgence was the fight he most wanted to surrender to.

After mass, a girl tried to talk to him but her mother tugged her away. She could only meet Steve's eyes briefly. He didn't know what she'd wanted to say. Her eyes were sincere and troubled, so he nodded to her over her mother's shoulder. A few men shook his hand or patted him on the shoulder on their way out of the church. They had to go out of their way to do it because Steve stayed kneeling in the third-from-front pew.

Sam sat patiently while he prayed. Father Miller eventually walked up the aisle to stop beside him. Steve crossed himself, then stood up.

"Did I say something funny that I was unaware of?" the priest asked.

He wasn't being snarky. He was truly curious why Steve had been smiling during an otherwise serious homily.

"It's been a crazy week, Father. I suppose I'm glad to be alive. I'm sorry about that. It hits me at strange times. I was thinking that my girl is over there with all the mature ladies, and then I remembered that I'm quite a bit older than all those ladies, and then I was glad I have her to make me feel young again. It's a miracle to feel any kind of young when I think of things too much," Steve explained.

"Then I'm thankful she brings joy to your life. We shouldn't turn away joy when it comes to us, except perhaps to not laugh out loud during my homily," Father Miller teased.

"I didn't go that far, no thanks to Sam. I kept a lid on it," Steve said.

"I was trying to keep you from laughing, not to make you lose it," Sam said.

"Your lady friend is the new voice I'm hearing so much about?" the priest wondered.

The women of the choir were putting away their hymnals, turning off the sound system, and Estrella was helping Gladys to drape the piano cover perfectly. Steve walked to the choir rail and offered his arm with only a slight movement.

In a slip of easy grace, Estrella sat on and spun over the wide marble rail, set her feet primly to hide under her skirt again, then she came to take his arm. Steve grinned at her with helpless admiration and then turned to introduce her to Father Miller.

"Estrella, welcome," the priest said, "I heard all about you at the parish council meeting. Gladys said…Oh-" the older man said.

Estrella dipped her head down and tugged at the sides of her veil around her face. Steve's smile faltered but Estrella's didn't. She'd expected nothing less than this. Priest or not, it didn't matter. He was still a man.

"Isn't her voice lovely, Father?" Gladys came near them to ask.

"Indeed it is. We're blessed to have you celebrate with us. Please excuse me. It was good to meet
you," the man said.

He lightly touched Estrella's hand in greeting, then he turned a fraction and shook Steve's hand more firmly. Father Miller's eyes crinkled at the corners. Steve's smile came back. His priest understood his difficulties a bit better now. Estrella said her goodbyes to the ladies of the choir. Everyone seemed to be thrilled with having her around. Steve wondered if any of them were going to give him the stink-eye for his admitted misbehavior, but they all acted like nothing had happened.

"You want a ride home?" Steve asked her.

"If it's okay with you, Sam? I could call another ride if you have somewhere else to be," Estrella said as they walked out of the sanctuary.

They blessed themselves at the font. Cold, breezy sunlight enveloped them when they stepped outside the church. Sam's car wasn't far away at the curb.

"I've got nothing better to do. Mama-bear here had my car windows tinted like a limousine so people couldn't stare into the back seat. It's a Camry. It's not like I'm driving suits to Davos. Gets more attention because of the tint than it would have without. Get me a chauffer's uniform and a decent car and it wouldn't look so wrong," Sam grumbled in good nature.

Estrella got in the back when Steve held the door open for her. He was being watchful. All she saw of his face was the underside of his jaw because he was looking up and checking around with his eyes, watching for anybody who might be watching for them. She sighed and he shut the door.

"He's concerned about your safety. Humor him," Sam murmured while Steve walked around to get in on the other side.

Estrella nodded.

All the way through town they sat on opposite ends of the backseat. Estrella admired his strong torso exposed by his unbuttoned jacket and his sprawl. She couldn't stop thinking about the last time she'd seen him when they'd done whatever it was they'd done against her bedroom wall. From the look on Steve's face, he was thinking about it too. She wasn't in church anymore, so she unpinned the veil from her hair and folded it in her lap. It gave her an excuse to not stare at Steve lasciviously until she could get herself under control.

"The veil's pretty. All the ladies used to wear them. It's a good idea. Where'd you find it?" he asked.

She could tell he was only trying to make polite conversation. She appreciated his effort at trying to normalize the sparking, pulling attraction between them. His arms were in an open posture at the door and along the seat back. She wanted to slide over against him and feel the comfort and excitement of touching him. His expression was kind and serious, only a hint of arousal in the way his eyes were half-lidded while he looked at her.

"I found it online and ordered it. I think veiling is something again. There's whole websites of women who make them and sell them. I hope it helps, so maybe men won't look at me during mass. Did you see the little girls who had them, and their mom?" Estrella asked.

"I didn't notice. Must've been distracted," Steve smiled.

She enjoyed his teasing and looked down at her hands in her lap. It was impossible to not feel how much they wanted each other. She wanted to hold his hand, but even that much felt like too much at the moment. Steve cleared his throat and shifted on the seat a little. She looked at him. He
looked uncertain about something. He shook his head once, got on his determined face, then looked to her.

"Are you busy tonight?" he asked.

She bit her lip and shook her head.

"Would you go out with me? I've got an idea to keep us out of the crowds, off cameras. We could-" his words faltered, "Would you like to go out with me tonight?"

"Yes," she whispered.

It was incredibly sweet to see him struggle with doubt and have trouble with his words. He was strong and handsome, but she could see what little Steve must have been like in his self-doubt. The smile of gladness and relief that flickered across his features was infectious. Her hand moved, and his moved to take hers. His palm was humid. Had he really been so nervous about asking her out? After all they'd been through?

She lifted their clasped hands and kissed his fingers where they folded through hers. Steve's eyes watched her mouth avidly and he shifted on the seat again.

"Eya. Babe, I-" he stammered.

She let their hands drop. She understood. He wanted to move, and he would if she did anything else. She knew what she'd see if she looked to his lap, so she tried some restraint on her part and refrained from doing so. Instead, she took a turn pretending at normalcy. Their eyes almost got stuck. Steve looked away, then back.

"What should I wear? What time?" she asked.

"Jeans and boots would be fine. Is seven-thirty good for you?" Steve asked.

Estrella nodded.

She wasn't sure where the time went but it seemed like the shortest ride ever, getting to Wanda's building from the church. She wanted to linger when Sam stopped at the curb. Steve didn't let her.

"Go inside now. I'll come get you tonight," he said.

He looked not at her, but through the dark window tint and around at the people on the street. He was all business and she knew if anyone messed with her in the short distance between the car and the door of the building, he'd be on it in a heartbeat.

"Okay. Thank you, Sam," Estrella said.

She left the car and hurried inside without incident.

She waved at Mister Kaminski in passing and he returned the gesture though she didn't see it in her hurry to get inside.

Wanda was steadfastly calm while she dithered around all afternoon trying to put together something to wear. There was a knock at the door not long after three o'clock. When she went to look, it was Billy.

After Jarvis let her open the door, the courier handed her a paper-wrapped package then he hurried away. Billy had never been so brief with her. He usually smiled and at least said hello. He seemed
Estrella went to her room and unwrapped the floppy package, already suspecting what it was. A pair of Western-styled denim jeans was revealed behind the paper, and a note.

*Men can be so dad-blasted dense in the head! Colin said that Steve said that Jarvis said what your measurements are, so I hope these’ll fit you. You’d think we were all in junior-high by the way they made excuses about knowing your size. I’m honored you’d want pants from way down here, but don’t they sell blue jeans in New York City? If they don’t fit, won’t you call me directly so we can get you ones that do? –P*

Colin's wife had included her phone number at the bottom of the note. She'd never heard the woman's voice, but her writing seemed to have a gruff, straight-forward bark to it that allowed Estrella to imagine it. She set aside Prissy's hand written note and shook the jeans out. They smelled faintly like leather, like Colin's store. Inside the back at the waist, the jeans had been carefully hand-altered to fit her measurements. She hurried to strip down to her panties, then she wiggled and hopped her way into the snug jeans.

They were perfect. The bottom edges touched the floor behind her heels. They would be exactly right once she had her boots on. She hadn’t cried much in the last few days, but tears blurred her vision for a moment until she wiped them away.

Because of Steve, people she’d never met were doing nice things for her. Hand-altering something as tough as a pair of jeans was a labor of love and she knew it. She went to the closet and got her beloved boots, the belt, and the blue and white shirts to complete the outfit.

Going from modest church clothes to the skin-tight Western outfit made her feel deliciously feminine and naughty. She looked at herself in the mirror and decided to do something with her hair and to put on some makeup.

"Jarvis, can you do something for me? I need to thank Prissy for her work on my jeans," she said.

"Of course, Miss. How can I help?" he wondered.

"I know what Prissy'll like. When Steve comes to get me and he first sees me, could you get a picture of him, or maybe a video I could choose a still-frame from?"

She was surprised to hear a stronger accent come out with her words from having read Prissy's note and thinking about home.

"Certainly. I believe I understand your purpose," Jarvis agreed.

"Thank you," she said.

It took time to experiment with her hair and makeup, especially without Natasha's help. Wanda made a dryly amused face at her when she asked if she looked okay.

"*Girl,*" was all Wanda answered, and she shook her head.

Estrella laughed, because she understood Wanda's head-shake to not mean she looked bad, but that she was an idiot for thinking she had to ask.

"It's about time you get smart about something. If you're going to send him out after other women, the least you can do is show him he might be better off staying close to home," Wanda commented.
The woman had a low tolerance for drama, so she went down the hall and closed herself in her room.

Estrella almost forgot that she had something for Steve. She hurried to her room and got the small bag she had for him. It was almost time. She didn't know where they were going, how they would get there, or if there would be dancing. The new jeans were severely snug around her thighs and bottom, but perfectly fitted to her flat belly and waist. She usually had to wear things that were too big in the waist and cinch them in, but her clothes felt great. It seemed like her makeup was too much, but that was only because she was accustomed to looking at herself with a plain face. The little bit she'd put on would meet with Natasha's approval.

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Steve was late. He wanted things to be right. He would have been later, but Sam shoved him away from his arrangements and sent him on his way.

"Eya?" he asked when Wanda's door opened in front of him, but she wasn't immediately there. He stepped inside and was immediately attacked with a kiss. He grunted in surprise and denied himself the urge to grab at her. Estrella was a woman of sultry chocolate eyes, glossy pink lips, wild black hair and jaw-dropping curves. She stepped back and looked him over while he did the same to her.

She saw the arrested urge in his posture to pull her close. It kicked up her pulse how he looked like he was prepared to chase and grab her, except for the hard lock he had on his muscles. Before he got control of it, Steve's face showed a moment of blazing carnal appreciation. Then he tamed himself to a mere self-deprecating smile.

"Sorry, darlin'. It's great to see you looking like you again," he said.

Steve made her mouth water in his rodeo-cut jeans and the deep blue pearl-snap shirt he wore. He hadn't had the shirt before, so Prissy and Colin must have sent it along with her jeans. His long, strong legs looked so good she wanted to bite him through the denim. She balled her fists tight against the urge to feel the shapes of him which the jeans accentuated rather than concealed. She laughed.

"Where did you get that?"

"Colin said one of his friends is a silversmith and his pals all chipped in to have it made. You like?" he wondered.

Estrella pressed her hand over her mouth and nodded vigorously. At the front of his jeans was a new belt buckle. It was shaped like his shield, but done in bright tones of silver and gold. The star in the middle was polished silver, and the concentric bands alternated between silver and gold. There was writing or symbols around the outer band of the shield. The bottom edge barely pressed into the bulge behind his zipper. She leaned forward a little to try to understand the inscription around the buckle.

"So help me, Eya, if you put your face any closer, I'm gonna grab you by the hair," Steve growled at her.

Hand still over her mouth, her eyes sparkled humor and excitement at him. He looked absolutely edible. He also looked like a Texas version of Captain America, but a hundred percent her boyfriend, too. He'd managed to shrug off his responsibilities for the evening and she was glad.
"What does it say, then?" she asked.

"Army stuff. Unit, rank, insignia, dates. I think Colin's pals are Army vets, like him. It's meaningful to them. Me too. I haven't earned a rodeo buckle, but I guess I've earned one like this," Steve explained.

Their eyes roved over each other. They stood in silent, avaricious appreciation, both of them almost trembling with the urge to do something. Anything.

"Will y'all get out of here? I'd like to watch a movie in peace," Wanda said from the hallway.

Steve's attention flicked up over her shoulder and Estrella startled.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. We'll clear out," he said.

"Don't come around here with 'Ma'am,'" Wanda griped.

She scuffed into the living room in her house sippers and a robe.

"Wanda. I'm sorry," Steve corrected.

"What time are you bringing her home?" Wanda asked him.

Steve's mouth fell open slightly and his eyes blinked in confusion.

Wanda smiled.

"I'm messing with you. Go on. Have a nice evening," she told them.

Steve laughed. Estrella was pleased to hear that it was a genuine, relaxed laugh and not the higher, tight one he responded with when work was still on his mind. He took her hand and led her out into the hallway. Rather than hold her in a close escort with her hand tucked into his arm, Steve held her fingers loosely while they strode to the elevator.

"Maybe she likes me at least a little?" Steve asked.

"She'll tolerate you. Why are we going up? Did you land the jet on the roof? I didn't hear it," she wondered.

Steve shook his head. They couldn't stop smiling at each other. It felt wonderful. He was a dauntingly impressive man, an excited boy, and her best friend all in one. He made her feel like a giddy, care-free girl, like her feet were about to lift off the floor.

"I don't mean to be a jerk. I'll try not to pop my eyes out, but you're a real keen Sheba. There, I said it. Now I'll try to behave," Steve said.

"Keen Sheba? What does that mean?" she made a face and laughed.

Steve gave her a smug look.

"Ask Bucky," he said.

"Oooo!" she glared at him, but then ruined it with a grin.

"Hey, doll, two can play at that. You weren't even wearing a red dress when you went out with what's his face. I asked," Steve complained in good nature.
"Did you ask him what I wear to bed?" she wondered.

The elevator door opened and Steve led her to a utilitarian looking door along the hallway of the building's top floor. He opened it and they went up the steps and onto the roof. It was dark out and gravel crunched under their boots. Wind pushed at her hair and her skin prickled into cold bumps. There were lanterns. Steve walked with her past the dormant rooftop air conditioning units, past an old antenna someone had forgot to take down, and to a brighter place he'd prepared.

Light from the city around them was enough to see by once her eyes adjusted and there were the lanterns. They were metal and glass camping lanterns set here and there, and one on a hook hanging near a table. Estrella rubbed at her arms and looked around curiously. They were having their date on the rooftop. A small, intimate table was setup with a cloth and place settings. The lantern light spilled over it with a cozy glow. Steve took his leather jacket from the back of her chair and helped her into it.

A man in a white uniform uncorked a bottle of wine at a service table off to the side. She didn't like being waited on, but other than that it was perfect. Steve held out her chair for her to sit, but she instead hugged him.

"I love it. You make good plans," she whispered into his chest.

Steve's hands slipped down the back of her shoulders and finally pressed her into the hug they both wanted.

"Mmm, I wish we had a plank floor up here. I'd love to dance with you," Steve murmured.

Her arms went up around his neck and they two-stepped a few paces across the gravel. No music was needed. Their bodies remembered the rhythm and it was easy to follow his lead. Steve looked happy when she opened her eyes. She was glad to see him that way after all they'd endured in the past week. They went back to the table and she sat. He was plenty strong enough to push her chair in, despite the gravel.

Steve sat too. They stayed out of the way for the server to pour their wine and set it down. Estrella glanced up to thank the man, then she giggled.

"Tony! I miss you! Why are you pouring wine for us?" she asked with delighted surprise.

Stark smiled at her, but he ignored Steve.

"Because I don't know any other sommeliers who fly. I missed you too," he said.

Tony looked at her in the golden, flattering light for a moment of assessment then he smartly turned away and went back to the service table. It was a huge relief that both Tony and Steve were able to be in her presence and not become dumbly bewitched by her looks like other men. While Tony was away, she leaned forward. Steve leaned in close to meet her.

"What's a sommelier?" she whispered.

"It's a wine steward. I needed a little help to pull this off discreetly," Steve said.

"Mademoiselle," Tony said when he came back with a plate for her.

He looked perfectly serious, but she could see the hint of humor in his eyes as he served her. He had impeccable service manners. She laughed as he put on an understated show of servitude. He was much more chilly in attitude with Steve, but whatever their issue, it wasn't allowed to dim the
lovely, playful mood.

After they had wine and dinner served, Tony disappeared away somewhere. Estrella heard a mechanical sound which vaguely reminded her of Bucky's arm and then Iron Man sauntered toward them from the dark. She was captivated by how articulated the satin-red and gold suit was, how it moved so fluidly with Tony's walk. Iron Man gave them a two-fingered salute at his brow, then flew away on his repulsors.

"Thank you, Tony," Steve said warmly.

"He can hear you?" Estrella wondered.

"Yeah," Steve touched his ear then manipulated something in his hand.

He tucked a tiny thing into his shirt pocket.

"Not anymore. We're off comm. We can say anything we want," he assured her.

Estrella looked down at her plate. It was a simple but delicious-smelling meal of steak, potatoes, and green beans. She sighed. The last of her nervousness melted away as she picked up her silverware, leaving only eagerness to spend time with Steve.

They glanced at each other often but didn't try to talk while they ate. Steve looked hungry so she left him alone to fill his belly while she did the same. It was worlds better than trying to make conversation with a stranger or having to politely pretend she wasn't hungry. The wine was good. It was a little clumsy to manage the rumpled bulk of Steve's leather jacket sleeves while she handled her wine or cut her steak, but it was worth it.

There was no doubt they both simmered with barely controlled attraction but the evening felt friendly and uncomplicated. When the worst of the hunger was tended Steve got up and refilled their wine glasses and their water goblets. Estrella clenched her knife and fork harder in her hands and tried not to get caught staring at his rump in those jeans. His new belt buckle glinted in the light as he sat down again.

"Hey, my eyes are up here, doll," he teased her.

Estrella almost snorted her wine at the irony of being the one who couldn't stop ogling. There was an intelligent, kind-hearted acknowledgement in his eyes. He'd purposely made light of the situation to set her at ease. Had Bucky seen how awful Devin had been at dinner and then told Steve? She wouldn't be surprised if he had.

"How did you get jeans here from Colin's place so fast?" she asked him.

"I called about it a few days ago. Don't worry. I didn't tell them what happened to your last pair. I didn't ask for the shirt or the buckle. They're nice people. I've learned to take a gift, but it feels funny, you know? I don't like putting people out anything," Steve said.

Estrella nodded. Steve was wealthy now, but she saw in him the considerate thrift he'd learned while he was young. He didn't say it, but she knew it also made him feel funny when people gifted him with tokens of appreciation for his service. He seemed easier with the custom belt buckle, maybe because it was from other men who were Army.

"Can I see your hands? Are you getting callouses yet?" he asked.

She gave him the hand which wasn't using her fork. Steve ate faster than she did so he'd already set
aside his plate. He ran his fingers over her palm and then rubbed at her fingertips.

"I might not get callouses since I’ve got a little of your healing," she said.

"Nah, it doesn't work that way. A callous isn't an injury to heal. The body sees it as a protective response," Steve let go of her hand and held his out for her.

Right. She remembered the toughened skin on his fingers from using his shield so much. They weren't thick, gnarly callouses, but the skin was less tender. All of her steak was cut, so she kept her free hand in his while she finished eating. Steve idly skimmed his fingers back and forth over her knuckles as was his habit when they'd spent more time together. She looked at him sadly while she finished the last of her wine. His eyes shared her somberness, but didn't dwell on it. Neither of them liked living apart.

Estrella sat back from the table and sighed. She was pleasantly full. Steve got up from his place and stepped over to encourage her to her feet. Of course she went with him, but she didn't know to where. Their boots made noise on the gravel as they walked.

Several yards away, Steve had arranged a cushioned double lounger near the corner of the roof. The chill of the night was starting to make her legs cold, though Steve looked comfortable in his shirt sleeves. There was a gift wrapped box on the lounger seat, as well as a folded blanket. Steve held the fuzzy blanket for her until she huddled on the lounger, then he wrapped her in it. He went around and took his place beside her.

"I know you spend a lot of time inside. I wanted you to have something," Steve said.

He gave her the box.

"You do too much," she fussed at him mildly.

Steve knew it was a token protest. She looked curious while her hands worked at the wrapping paper. Belatedly, he realized the light might not be bright enough for her here away from the lanterns. A lantern appeared at his elbow and he took it and held it so she could see. Estrella didn't take note of the lantern other than to smile and make a confused face at the pictures on the sides of the revealed box.

"Really?!" she exclaimed when she understood what she was seeing.

"I hope it's alright. I didn't know…" he said.

Estrella looked at the desktop planter, then ripped the box open to lift the item out. It had a grow-light bulb above and a hollow well like a cup holder in its base which would accommodate a small house plant. While she was still stunned by the thoughtfulness of his gift, he held out his hand to her. In it was a baby plant in a small pot.

"Steve!" she exclaimed. She snatched the little plant from him and clutched it to her bosom inside the blanket.

"You got me an African violet?" she wondered.

"I thought you might like to watch something grow, then I did some reading, so…” he said hopefully.

"It's wonderful!" she cooed.
Steve smiled. She made that sound when she was in the presence of plants she liked, so he knew he'd done well. He put his arm around her and looked down at the way she'd taken the little plant in close to her.

"This is so much better than dead flowers. Oh! I have something for you too," she said.

Estrella wiggled her hips around until she could work her fingers into the back pocket of her jeans. She pulled out the little flat bag and handed it to Steve. He looked at her, surprised she'd brought him a gift, too.

"Open it, silly. I'm sorry it's not wrapped. It wasn't meant to be a surprise, I just wanted you to have it," she explained.

Steve had to be careful with his big hands and the small bag, like he'd been careful with the communication device he'd taken from his ear. His shoulders and his face fell when he had the small gift in his hand. Estrella felt terribly antsy until he spoke.

"You got me a Saint Michael medal. Eya. I had one of these. Buck's ma sent it to me. I lost it. It's probably still in the ice somewhere, maybe at the bottom of the ocean. Thank you!" he whispered.

He hugged her a little too hard. She didn't mind. He made an undignified sound which let her know he was deeply touched by her gift. The hug went on for longer than she expected. It began to worry her.

"Are you scared?" she asked him.

"I'm not scared right this minute, but things change. Thank you," he said again.

"You're welcome. Father Miller already blessed it for you," she said.

"Thank you," he said yet again, this time in a whisper.

"Stop it. You're making me worry. What's on your mind?" she asked.

She pushed at him for a little distance. He moved away to recline against the back of the lounger and she found that she missed his warmth. She made sure her gift was where she wouldn't knock it off the lounger, and then she turned onto her side to cuddle against Steve. She admired his profile in the dim light and waited for him to speak.

"It's nothing. No, it's not nothing. Maybe I'm about to finish what I thought I'd finished decades ago. I'm a little excited. Cautious. I'm not sure what it means after that," Steve admitted.

"What what means?" she wondered.

"I'm not part of Shield anymore, nor the Army. War's over. This is a personal goal. After this, what do I do? Retire for good? Stick around with the team to clean up things other people can't? Do I train a new team and step out? I have a way I can keep fighting, but do I want to? I think I'm obligated to," he said.

Estrella listened to him and tugged the blanket around so that it covered both of them. They weren't exactly lying down, but they were reclined enough to that it was comfortable to rest with him. She kept her plant in the warmth between them.

"Do you have to decide now?" she wondered.
"Nah, but I can't completely get it out of my mind. When it's time for work I'll be clear headed, but for the hours between now and then…? I was waiting for this all through the war. Now I think it's almost here, but I'm already home. Stateside. It's not like I thought it'd be," Steve said.

"Why not? Are you disappointed?"

"I was under a chain of command at first. Now I'm the one in command. That makes it different. I used to have someone else to tell me when the job was done, when I should stand down. Now it's my decision. How far and for how long do I keep digging? I'm not sure of myself on that. I'm lousy at it. I should have gone back and looked for Buck after he fell. I didn't," he admitted.

Estrella didn't have anything to say that she felt could be helpful, so she stayed quiet and let him think. Steve tucked the blanket around her and put his arm around her too. Her face rested on his shoulder. He liked the way her legs fit against his.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked.

"I'm good," she said.

Steve absently kissed her hair near her forehead, then he went on with his thoughts.

"Tony said something. I didn't like it at the time, but he may be right," Steve said.

She waited for a moment but he left her hanging in suspense.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He said I can't live without conflict. That I always want to be out front," Steve said as if he wasn't certain about the idea.

Estrella put her hand on his chest. He made a pleased rumble of sound and put his free hand atop hers.

"What if he's right?" Steve wondered.

"So what if he is? You find other ways to stay busy and satisfied. You could teach. Not like a classroom teacher. You could train military people to get your fighting itch scratched," she proposed.

Steve shook his head. She couldn't understand what the rush of battle felt like and he didn't want her to. There wasn't any kind of training that felt the same. Scrapping with Buck or Thor was the closest thing physically. Even then, it was inherently different. Not as multi-faceted, not as satisfying.

"I'll work something out," he said.

Estrella wasn't thrilled that he was thinking about work but if that's what he needed to do, she would be whatever help she could be. She slid her hand up his chest, over the collar of his shirt and his neck, and onto his jaw. He could still talk if he wanted to, but she wanted to touch him.

He gave up trying to talk. Her palm and her fingers smoothed over his face, forming to the contours of his skin and bones. It pleased her when Steve laid his head fully back and closed his eyes. She traced his nose, smoothed down each eyebrow, then massaged gently between his eyes. He made relaxed sounds as she touched him. She caressed his forehead, then down his cheeks. Her thumb rubbed over his lips back and forth, traced the edges of them.
She rubbed his ears and behind them. Steve didn't think it was weird because it felt good. Her fingers pushed into his hair and massaged his scalp. He turned his face and tipped it down toward hers. Cracking his eyes open a little showed him that she felt as blissed as he did. It wasn't a sexual thing. It was a comfort thing. Sure, his body was ready to go but that was nothing new. Always, his skin felt hungry. He wanted to take off his clothes not for sex, but so she could touch him all over and spread around the wonderful feeling of her hands on him. The sex which all that touching led to would be great too, he admitted to himself.

He'd planned their date on the rooftop because he didn't want to lose himself in his body tonight. He needed her mind, her friendship, and her comfort in other ways.

"So good to me," he murmured.

Estrella sighed and pressed a kiss to his collarbone through his shirt. She felt it was absurd that he thought she was good for him. It was the other way around.

"Why can you be with me without being stupid? Even Mister Kaminski had a moment when he saw me, and he's old. And no, don't make a comment about being older than him. You're not," she insisted.

"It's not easy," he said.

His fingers traced down to her throat where she wore the dusky blue choker and copper butterfly he'd made for her.

"You're good at staying focused when you need to," she said.

"Right. Sometimes I have to ignore intense things to tend to other things. We all do it. Injuries, people, danger… It doesn't matter. You noticed that Tony looked at you for a moment, but he didn't let himself get caught?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I think it's a learned skill. A combat skill. I can choose to turn that off, though. I'd be able to give you my full attention if it was the right time," Steve said.

Estrella made a sexy sound, a little growly whine that almost broke the focus he was talking about.

"Do you need anything now that you're healthy again? Is there anything that you're not getting?" Steve asked.

"If you mean food or vitamins, no I'm fine. But," she said, and slid her hand down the buttons of his shirt. Her fingers touched his belt buckle before he convinced himself that he wanted to stop her hand. Steve laughed quietly.

"What's that about? Little church ladies don't need any of that," she teased.

"Steve!" she complained.

It was half-hearted. She knew he wouldn't let her have what she wanted. She wasn't trying to tempt him terribly, only to get both their minds off their troubles again.

"Someday I wanna make you sing without this on, sweetheart," he said.

His fingers touched her choker. She knew he wasn't talking about music.
"Mmm-hmm. I think about that. What if I want to hear you sing too? I liked the way you sounded on the phone," she said.

"Ya did? I'd like to get to a place and time where we can make all the noise we want," he agreed.

"Me too. I'm not used to having what I want. Or to having dreams, or to thinking about a future I could have. It doesn't seem possible," she said.

"I've got a plan. You wanna make a bet against us getting there?" Steve challenged her.

Estrella laughed and shook her head.

"I'm serious. If you want out, you should tell me. If not, you'll probably get stuck with me. Buck says we might live for a really long time," Steve said.

She sat up a little and frowned at him.

"It's another thing to consider. I could die tomorrow, but I could also live longer than any sane person wants to. Because you've got my blood now, you might too. I'm sorry, Eya. I hadn't thought of that when we were trying to fix your heart," he told her.

"If we live that long, we'll have to find something good to do so we don't go crazy," she said.

This time she was quick and he was unprepared, his free hand tangled in her hair. She reached down and gave him a squeeze and a rub under his belt buckle.

"'Ya!'" he warned her.

His body went stiff alongside her. His hips did an interesting thing which turned into an erotic sort of squirm down his legs. He took a deep breath and let it out slow. If she put one of her teeth to his, she was pretty sure she could feel him vibrating with tension.

"I'm sorry. I won't tease, Papi," she said.

He looked up at her with steady regard. She couldn't decide if he was joking or serious, or something else entirely. It was a little speculative and scary, like he was figuring out what to do with her.

"It's fine. All in good fun. Maybe it's fair to remind you that I have a long memory and I believe in justice. Go ahead and tease me, darlin. I'll get you back someday," Steve promised.

Estrella licked at her lips nervously and held onto her baby plant between them. She had serious things to think about, but for now she wanted to dwell in the moment. Every time she thought she was too much of a burden to put onto Steve, he showed her that maybe it was she who would have her hands full.

That idea thrilled her and blew through all her fears and worries. She lay back down and quietly enjoyed his company and his touch until she got too cold to stay outside.

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Dana made a shooing motion at Melody when she heard the distinctive jingling out in the corridor, then a key slide into the lock of their door. Julio always knocked and she had to let him in. Anthony had a key. Her daughter vanished down the hallway somewhere to hide.
Anthony let himself in. Julio was with him. She'd been expecting Julio, not Anthony. If Anthony was here, then the bossman knew what she was doing and he wanted some too. She knew what they wanted. Her money.

"It's me he owes, not you, Anthony! You're not getting your hands on it when he pays up," she told them.

Anthony came to her at the couch and jerked her up by her neck and her hair. He pulled her in close so that she had to tolerate his bad breath.

"'Cause he's not gonna pay up, you dumb cunt. You're not gonna bother the man anymore. You think the bossman wants all the clients knowing we got a bitch in our stable who can't keep her mouth shut? The whole thing would crash. I'll give you a chance 'cause the little rat in your belly might be worth something if you can keep your mouth shut. But if anybody hears another word from you about the Captain, I'm gonna sell your parts, you get it? I'll get that kid of yours and chop-shop her out too. You understand me?"

Dana swallowed and tried not to show any pain or fear. Anthony liked pain and fear. Any hint of it made him want more. He shook her viciously and threw her toward the coffee table. She had to let her head hit at least a little bit and bounce with a thump, or he may think he hadn't done it well enough and do it again.

His polished shoe crushed down on her hand, making it feel like her knuckles were going to crunch. Julio didn't do anything to help her. She thought he would. He usually whined at Anthony about not bruising her up so she wouldn't look like a low rent girl when they sent her out.

"Why do you think you got his kid, huh? He says you don't," Anthony wanted to know.

"The time was right. It's his kid, I don't care if he says it's not," Dana insisted.

She tried to think fast. If Anthony was willing to bruise her, then maybe they didn't want her working for a while. They believed she had the Captain's kid and they didn't want to risk it. The bossman believed it. She had to keep them thinking it until she could get free of them. She had to think of how to get free so they couldn't take her money.

"Nobody needs you to have teeth. You might do better without em. Say anything else about the man," Anthony threatened her.

He left. Julio looked at her with that way he had, like he was calculating money in his head, then he left too. Melody knew to wait a while before she came out of hiding.

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Chapter 58

Maxine slipped the rack of cryogenically frozen specimen cylinders carefully into their insulated travel case. She startled when a loud peal of thunder shook the building, but kept her hands steady enough to seat the specimens into their case. Her lab assistant whimpered when the overhead lights failed and the backup illumination came on.

"It's just a thunderstorm, Jason," she assured the young man.

"What if it's them?" Jason asked.

Maxine took off her protective gloves and tapped the inventory interface on her tablet. The lab was considerably darker without the main lights, but her tablet was illuminated and there was still some light from the high transom windows. The meager light from outside dimmed as if clouds were obscuring the sunlight in a hurry. Maxine took off her glasses, then she gasped as the backup lights failed too and the tablet in her hand went dark.

Something rumbled far off in the other end of the complex and there were strange sounds, something like muted yelling.

"It's them, Doctor Holbruck, they've found us. We have to go!" Jason said.

"It's probably an accident on one of the sub-levels," she said, "but we can't work in the dark. Help me get these cases up to the parking lot and we'll go for the day."

Jason wasn't very brave. He whined in a way that made her want to slap him but he began to pull the cart out of the lab when she put the last travel case on it. Maxine was uneasy because no one was allowed to know what projects were going on in other departments, and there was certainly some kind of commotion coming from the other side of the research complex. Jason pulled the cart down the hall faster and she pushed to help him. There weren't any windows in the halls and it was almost too dark to move without running into things.

Why wasn't the emergency light system working? Or her tablet? It made no sense, but they did the best they could in the dark hallways. Maxine was determined to get the cart up to her car so she could secure her work in a safe place, away from whatever was happening. Two years of her life's work was in these cases and she didn't want it destroyed by someone else's carelessness.

The noise of whatever was happening got louder, closer. Jason let go of the cart and ran away. The closest exit was around the corner. Maxine cursed his cowardice and pushed the cart herself.

As she looked ahead to the dim natural light which came from the stairwell, she saw Jason come running back toward her. He cried while he ran and Maxine rolled her eyes. It was too dark to know what he was running from, but she thought she saw the silhouette of a man come around the corner behind him. His shape and the way he moved made her feel as frightened as Jason.

She let go of the cart, undecided what to do.

"Hello, Doctor," the man said.

Maxine turned to run, abandoning the cart. She couldn't see him clearly, but she'd watched hours of classified recordings and would know that voice anywhere. It was Hydra's hero, returned to undo them. She was too old to move very fast, and it wouldn't have mattered. She screamed for only an instant when a hand fisted in her hair and tore her off her feet, then she knew no more.
"Hangar two is secure. Sam?" Steve said into the comms.

"Almost,… Just one more… Got it, Cap. Hangar one is secure," Sam answered him.

"They're trying their cars. Nothing's moving in the parking lot. Barnes fried everything. We'll clean up out here," Clint told them.

Steve knelt to open the shielded case for the sensor device Bruce had made. When he turned on the device, the screen lit up with hits all around him.

"Are you seeing this?" he asked into the comms.

"I am. We will need a larger craft to carry it all," Thor said.

One of the dots on Steve's screen was much farther away than the others.

"One is on the move. Somebody's trying to get away with something. To the north. Nat?" he asked.

There was a delay before she answered.

"A little busy!" Natasha said, her voice strained.

"Never mind. I'll get it," Steve said.

He turned toward the hangar doors he'd just secured and looked for another way out. The metal wall beside the large doors tore easily when he applied his shield to it. He made a few swipes at the thin corrugated wall, then pushed his body through the torn gap.

Hydra agents were all around outside the complex, most of them having fled from the mess Hulk and Thor had made of the building. Steve suspected many of the men milling around looking terrified were hired contractors, only here to move boxes and trucks. He took a moment to notice that Tony and Clint had come to the same conclusion and were choosing their targets carefully around the hired civilians.

The alien energy weapon he tracked was on the move, through the trees to the north. Steve ran after it. They were trying to get away on foot so he had no doubt he would catch them, as long as they didn't have outside help. As he ran toward the tree line he saw Natasha had her hands full taking out combatants. Sam herded them toward her from above. There weren't more than she could handle and Sam would land to help if things got out of hand. Steve ran on, into the trees.

"Hurry with that. One of them is coming," Sperry whispered to his partner from behind their cover of boulders.

"I don't know how to do Facebook. You do this shit, I'm on the gun," Tunks said.

He passed the phone to Sperry and took the weapon.

"Shhh! It's the Captain. Point that thing away from me," Sperry whispered as quietly as he could and ducked under the barrel of the energy weapon.
He lifted his phone just enough to get a view through the crack of the boulders they hid behind. Captain America was easing out of the trees, his shield up and looking cautiously over the edge of it. Crap. Hitting his legs wouldn't be as dramatic or lethal, but-

"Fuck!" Sperry exclaimed.

Tunks had fired the weapon. Its blue distortion field splurrted out toward the Captain and tossed him back into the trees as if he was a ragdoll. The freaky gun had a hell of a kick because it hadn't been made for use by humans. Tunks was knocked back off his low stance and cursing.

"Did I get him?" he asked.

"I hope so, or we're screwed," Sperry whispered.

He felt like running away and if it wasn't for the live feed he was recording with his phone he probably would have. He stood up and lifted his phone. It looked like the Captain was down at the tree line. He wasn't moving.

"I think we got him. Goddamn. We got that sumbitch! Come on, get off your ass, Tunks. Let's go make sure he's dead," Sperry said.

Tunks stood and left the energy weapon in the dirt. He rubbed at his shoulder with one hand and pulled his sidearm with the other. Seeing that he had backup in case the Captain started moving, Sperry cautiously moved to where the man was down.

"Is he dead?" Tunks asked as they approached.

Sperry was hesitant to get within grabbing distance of the Captain's outstretched hands or feet. The shield was aside, his arms thrown wide and his hands loose from the impact and unconsciousness or death. There was blood coming from his nose and the blue uniform looked kind of messed up, like it was partly melted. He was laid out flat, his head against a tree trunk where he'd taken a hard hit.

"I think he's out good, if he's not dead yet," Sperry said.

Feeling bolder, he nudged the Captain's side with his foot. Nothing. It felt like dead meat.

Sperry laughed and handed the phone to Tunks.

"What are you doing?" Tunks wondered.

"I'm gonna cut his fuckin head off so he's done for good. He's not coming back this time. Keep that on me so everybody knows it was me who ended this freak," Sperry said with delight.

"I don't know man, just let me shoot him," Tunks said.

"No, I'm doing him like isis," Sperry denied.

He felt bold now that he was wrestling the Captain's body into an upright sitting position and he was still limp like a dead thing. Hell, even if he was already dead, he'd get the credit for ending this menace, since he was the one in the video.

"Heavy bastard," he muttered as he tried to get the body balanced against his knees and wrestle the helmet off his head at the same time.

It wasn't easy. Finally, he found the clip under the chin which held the helmet on. It was slippery...
from the blood running down the face, but it came off and he tossed it aside so the people watching could see the Captain's face. Sperry took out his beloved knife and got a fist full of short blonde hair. He jammed his knee behind the head to get a good angle for the camera, then he laid his blade on the throat and start sawing.

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"Miss, I wish you wouldn't. That is unauthorized media. I don't know what you might see," Jarvis said.

His voice startled her because Estrella wasn't accustomed to hearing Jarvis in Wanda's place often. She set aside her laptop and unlocked her phone, eager to see whatever video she'd been notified about. She was embarrassed to admit it, but she'd become a secret fangirl of Avengers uploads and she wondered what this one would be about.

"Miss, please, allow me to review it first," Jarvis pleaded.

"It's a live feed. Everyone else is seeing it, why can't I?" she asked.

"I would have blocked it if I could. It's loading from an encrypted Hydra server and I am not permitted to shutdown Facebook," Jarvis said.

"Shhhh!" Estrella hissed at him.

The video started quiet and she couldn't make out what the whispering men were saying. This wasn't one of the fun videos. There was no music. The view was awful and she couldn't tell what she was looking at for the first several seconds until the camera focused. There were rocks in front of the camera and just a narrow field of view through them. She thought she saw some trees in the far background, through the crack in the rocks. What was that thing hovering at the top of the image? It looked like some sort of water gun toy, one of the big ones. Was this one of those boring cosplay videos that wasn't really the Avengers at all?

There was more whispering, then the sound fuzzed out and the air filled with dust. There had been a brief blue flash, but she didn't know what that was about. Estrella frowned and almost tapped to close Facebook because the movie quality was so bad.

"Miss, I must insist that you stop watching. This is not authorized," Jarvis repeated.

The fact that Jarvis was so concerned kept her watching.

"Did I get him?"

"I hope so, or we're screwed."

At least Estrella could clearly hear the men speaking now. Get who? Possibilities came to mind and she began to feel a little odd, like she had butterflies in her belly.

The angle of the view changed. She could see something dark blue lying at the edge of the trees in the distance. Beside it was something silver and rounded.

"Steve?" she said, her voice rising in horror.

"I think we got him. Goddamn. We got that sumbitch! Come on, get off your ass, Tunks. Let's go make sure he's dead."
Estrella stood up and her laptop slipped off the couch to bang onto the floor. It was Steve down at the trees, she was sure of it, but the stupid camera was waving back and forth at the ground, showing rocks and dirt and sticks as someone walked. She moaned in dread and clutched her phone with two hands.

"This is real? Jarvis, is this real?" she asked.

The AI didn't answer her.

"Is he dead?"

The video stopped moving across the ground and panned along Steve's laid out body. It was really him, not some fan in a cheap costume. His uniform looked damaged and the exposed parts of his skin were reddened. There was blood streaming from his nose, over his lips, dripping from his chin. Estrella shook her head in denial.

"I think he's out good, if he's not dead yet."

The man with the phone kicked Steve just to see if he would move. Estrella was too scared to be angry at the insulting gesture. The phone briefly showed a man holding a handgun, then the view spun around to show Steve's body again, and another man nudging around to get behind him.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna cut his fuckin head off so he's done for good. He's not coming back this time. Keep that on me so everybody knows it was me who ended this freak."

Estrella felt sick and faint as she watched the brutish man handle Steve's body as if it had no feeling, no humanity. She didn't hear herself chanting 'no, no, no', nor did she feel the tears welling in her eyes.

"I don't know man, just let me shoot him."

"No, I'm doing him like isis."

What were they doing to him? Why? Her mind screamed at Steve to get up and do something, but he lay there limp and defenseless.

"Heavy bastard."

Steve's helmet came off in the man's hands and he tossed it aside. A meaty fist gripped at Steve's scalp, lost its grip because the hair was short, then tried again, pulling hard enough that she was sure it was hurting his scalp. The awful man bent Steve's head back against his knee and pulled out a wicked, long knife. Estrella shook her head and dropped the phone as blood started to sheet down Steve's pale neck.

She screamed and screamed, curled against the floor. She felt crazed with dread and disbelief. Her mind denied that any of this was real, while at the same time terror made her feel like she was coming out of her skin.

Jarvis's voice shouting was loud enough to be heard over her screaming.

"Watch the rest of it!" Jarvis said.

Estrella scrabbled for her phone, her hands wet and slippery with tears. She was shaking so badly
she had trouble picking up the phone and turning it over. Just as she turned it to face her, she saw a flesh-colored screen, then the video ended and went dark.

She whimpered and stared at the black rectangle and the little triangle.

"He's not dead, Miss. You must watch it again," Jarvis insisted in a gentle voice.

Estrella was panting, overwrought with grief, but hope sparked at Jarvis's words. She touched play with her knuckle and held the phone in a grip like it might try to get away from her.

"He's alive?" she asked with a trembling voice.

"He is. Watch to the end," Jarvis assured her.

The horrible video played again. Estrella hastily wiped her eyes so she could see through blurred tears. She moaned in fear and empathy as it came to the point when the man sawed at Steve's throat like he was going to decapitate him. She liked to kiss him right there and she knew the skin was soft and sensitive, and that asshole was hacking at him with a knife!

An instant after the blade bit into his neck Steve became a blur of motion. Suddenly the man with the knife was directly in front of the camera and the audio fuzzed out again. She saw the man's backside and the handgun bucking repeatedly in the other man's hand, then the phone fell to the ground. The view was straight up at the sky. Steve stepped near the phone like a towering colossus. A body fell aside and she now recognized the loose flopping motion of dead flesh. There was a flash of hands against the backdrop of the sky and the gun was dropped. She heard it thump to the ground near the phone and more dust kicked up.

A man's voice yelled in fear. There was an awful breaking, crunching sound which she also recognized and then the video went quiet. A moment later a familiar dark blue color filled the video, panned up across the blood-darkened star on Steve's chest, then his face appeared on screen with trees in the background. The thick, dark blood from his nose and down his neck didn't seem to bother him.

His eyes glanced around as Estrella knew he did when he was alert to his surroundings. Steve seemed to listen to someone she couldn't see, probably from that little thing he had in his ear sometimes. He made a displeased face while he continued to check his surroundings, then looked directly at the camera. It appeared he was walking somewhere from the way his shoulders and the landscape moved. He crouched down and picked up something from the ground. He held it out to the side so the camera couldn't see it, whatever it was.

"Live feed, huh? Sorry about that, folks. Now is not the time for a Facebook tutorial... No, Tony, I don't need to know how to turn it off," Steve said with some exasperation.

His hand covered the camera in a blur of flesh tone, then the video ended abruptly.

Estrella eased herself up to perch on the edge of the couch and she stared at the black video frame until Jarvis spoke.

"Our Captain is alive and well. If you would have listened to me, you could have been spared the fright. Such incidents are not uncommon and usually amount to nothing, only this time it was shared with the public," he said.

It was clear from his tone that he strongly disapproved.

"It was all real, it just now happened live from that man's phone, and Steve is okay?" Estrella
A haze of disbelief still altered her sense of reality. Her heart still fluttered from fright, and her breaths came in short, panicked pants.

"Yes. You cannot call him now, as he is still working. The Captain is quite well and is rejoining the team as we speak," Jarvis assured her.

"When can I call him?" she asked.

"I will alert you the moment they are done if he does not call you first. Miss, please allow me to review any future live uploads before you watch them. I am present while they work and I could have reassured you that all was well," he said.

"This kind of thing happens all the time?" she asked.

"Certainly not every mission and not always to the Captain, but it is not uncommon for one or more of them to be in peril. Miss Potts has concluded that it is better to not think of what they do until they've returned home safely. It may be wise for you to adopt a similar philosophy," Jarvis advised.

"In peril? He almost had his head cut off!" she exclaimed.

"I have been told that in most cases, *almost* does not count," Jarvis said dryly.

Estrella went to Wanda's kitchen and looked through the cabinets until she found a bottle of wine. She got the corkscrew from the drawer and shakily poured herself a large glass of it. When she returned to the couch she picked up her laptop and saw that the corner of the screen was cracked from where it had hit the floor.

She held onto her wine, bowed her head, prayed and cried. Relief was sweet but she would feel better only after she heard Steve's voice talking to her. To reassure herself once more, she grimaced through watching the video again.

Indeed, Steve's expression after he killed his attackers was calm and unruffled. He looked more concerned about what might approach him next than he was about what had just happened. Then, she could see he was disappointed to learn the video was live and even a bit amused at the way Tony wanted to teach him about Facebook so he could stop the live feed. He didn't bother to wipe at the blood on his skin. His humble apology to the viewers after such an assault on him seemed ludicrous, but she could tell Steve really meant it. It was like him to want to spare people any unpleasantness.

She watched the video again and paused it frame by frame in a few places. The places when the audio had fuzzed out were likely too loud and she concluded those moments were when weapons had fired. Steve had used the knife-wielding man's body as a shield so he could approach and disarm the shooter. He'd moved so fast that she could only figure things out by pausing and re-watching. From the sounds of injury, she didn't want to know what he'd done to the shooter. At the end he'd simply crushed the phone in his hand rather than using its touchscreen to stop recording.

Estrella finished the wine and got some more while she waited to talk to Steve. Halfway through her second glass, Pepper called her.

"The data is useless. Your pals with the knife were out of the facility and away with that weapon
before Barnes shut them down. Either they knew we were coming, or it was dumb luck and they were trying to steal the weapon and cash it on the black market. He uploaded that video directly to satellite and back encrypted through a Hydra server at a different location. We need the data, Barnes. Dammit! I've got to find the satellite they used or every mission from here on is an open sitcom episode to the world. We really needed that data," Tony ranted.

"We did what we needed to do. Mission accomplished," Bucky said.

He had a metal case under his arm. Fury had come with a team and trucks to secure the rest of the materials from the Hydra base but Buck had refused to release the one case he'd brought with him onto the quinjet.

Steve caught the damp towel Bruce tossed to him across the jet's cabin and started wiping at the partly dried blood on his neck.

"This is my operation, Barnes. You follow orders or you stay home next time," Steve told him.

"Yes sir," Buck said.

"It's too late to contain the video. It's gone out to too many accounts," Natasha said from her seat at the communications console.

"You should call your girl," Clint said from the pilot's seat.

Steve wasn't sure who Clint was talking to until the man turned his head a bit and directed his words to him.

"Don't be a douche. She probably saw it. Call her," Clint insisted.

Steve didn't want to call Estrella right now. These moments after missions were some of their best analysis and planning, when events were fresh and some adrenaline was flowing to speed their minds along. Tony was already figuring out how to disable future live video feeds and hack into their satellite interface. Tony stared at him, waiting.

"What?" Steve asked him.

"Call Estrella," he said.

"You should reassure your lady. The images were quite gruesome for a gentle eye. She will be in distress until she hears from you," Thor said.

Steve looked to Sam. His friend shrugged, then nodded once.

Steve went to his gear bag and dug out his phone. He had missed calls, but he was in a hurry to call Estrella and get back to work.

"Steve!" she said immediately when the call connected.

"I was hoping you didn't see it, but I guess you did. I'm fine. It's just a scratch, already healing," he told her.

"He tried to kill you!" she exclaimed.

Steve laughed briefly.

"Sure he did. It's kind of his job," he said easily, hoping to play her off with humor so she would
calm down and let him get back to work.

Estrella was silent on the other end of the call.

"What? Hey, if you're alright, I need to get back to work," he said.

He looked to his teammates, hoping they were holding their tactical thoughts on pause so they could get back to after-mission analysis as soon as he was done on the phone. Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head. Thor winced. Tony looked at him like he was an idiot.

"Okay," Estrella said.

"Alright, sweetheart. Try not to worry. It's nothing," he attempted to do a better job at easing her feelings.

"I want to see you," she requested softly.

He could hear the upset in her voice.

"I'd like that, but we're on a tight schedule for the next few days. I'll call you when I can," Steve told her.

"Okay," she said again.

"Pray for me? You can do that," Steve suggested something she might find useful.

He heard a soft sound like hair moving against fabric and he imagined she was nodding. Her breath sounded uneven.

"Doll, I gotta go. Try not to worry about me. I'll come around to see you when I can," he assured.

"Okay. I love you," she said.

Steve glanced again at his team. He bucked up his courage and responded.

"I love you too. Bye."

Bucky smirked at him and Thor grinned.

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They flew immediately down to Atlanta. The plan was to hit Hydra faster than they had before, to get them unprepared in the middle time when the Avengers were usually planning their next mission and before Hydra had time to move people and materials.

"Buck, let Tony get inside and run the data capture before you hit them with the EMP. Give it as long as you can, until you see them trying to flee in vehicles," Steve ordered.

"I could do that, but then they'll get a warning out to wherever the last base is," Buck pointed out.

"We can't find the last base unless we get the data. I need you to follow orders, soldier. Can you do this?" Steve demanded.

"Yessir," Buck said.

Steve didn't like the cool, emotionless way Buck agreed, but things weren't like they used to be. He
understood from Natasha that his friend was somewhere in the middle between the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes. Their old battle comradery wasn't there, but at least Buck wasn't being resentful or sarcastic. He was business-like and ready to follow orders. They could work with that.

As they did a final gear check before mission insertion, Steve wondered if their old banter and sarcasm during the war had been a false cover for what Buck was already becoming back then. Something told him it was. He'd been losing Buck to Zola's manipulations before he ever realized it. Buck's cool efficiency today felt more real, more mature.

The Avengers had to approach their target more stealthily because this Hydra facility was closer to a dense population center. Clint came in low and fast and Jarvis blocked communications devices of anyone who might have seen them. He could do that with civilian devices, and Tony would get into the Hydra encryption soon. It was after nightfall when they landed on the roof. The building couldn't hold the weight of the quinjet and that was part of the plan.

This time, they left some selected Hydra agents alive and injured in the rubble. A transport team came to take prisoners and bodies when the mission objectives were met. Thor made sure the Hulk kept the remaining Hydra agents terrified and hiding until the Avengers left, apparently forgetting about the agents they were allowing to escape.

This Hydra facility wasn't as rich with technology and gear, but there were more dead and more prisoners.

"That's not the way we do things, Buck. This isn't outright war. Most of our combatants are Americans and they have rights. We're not judge and jury. We're not assassins, we only need to clean them out and stop their operations. We kill the ones who won't surrender, and maybe some of the rest have a chance to change their minds about who they work for. Got it?" Steve explained quietly to his friend back in the cargo area of the quinjet where the others couldn't overhear.

"Yessir," Bucky said again, looking right at him.

"C'mon, pal. Quit saying that. We're done for the day, heading home. What's on your mind?" Steve asked.

"I think you're wrong," Buck said.

"About what? That most of them are Americans and have rights?" Steve asked.

"About you only needing to clean them out and stop their operations," Buck said.

"It's not just that. Nobody's supposed to know, but Fury has another department. We're smart about it. Not all of the survivors make it to trial. I don't like it, but I'm not as soft as you think. We have ways to question them and get information. Some, we can get an angle on and release them to become informants," Steve explained.

"That's the department I need to be in," Buck said.

"Talk to Nat. She works with them sometimes. If she thinks you're ready we'll see about it, but that kind of work can't be personal," Steve said, "by the way, what's in that case you brought back?"

"I don't know, but I knew the doctor who had it. I want Banner to take a look at it," Buck said.

"I'm sure he'll want to as soon as he gets some rest," Steve told him.

They looked to see Bruce passed out against Sam's shoulder, his head tilted back while he snored.
Sam was doing something on his phone, but he looked up and smiled at Steve. Hulk had had a rip-roaring good time today but all that activity was draining to Bruce, especially assisting with two missions back to back.

They had thirty-six hours until they hoped to be on their next and final Hydra mission on American soil, finishing up just in time for Thanksgiving Day. If Tony could recover enough data for them to find out where to go. It was a brash plan to hit them so quickly and loosely prepared, but it seemed to be working so far. They just needed the final location.

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**Author's Footnote:** This is only a fifth of what I have planned for chapter 58, but it will take me a week to get the rest of it done. I'm experimenting in releasing 58 to you in parts so you can get something faster. It will make the chapter count higher if I do every chapter like this, but I want to see what happens if I release this in bits every few days until I have all 5 parts of 58 out there. Let me know if you'd prefer it all at once in the larger chunk, or like this for easier digestion.
Pepper had already texted him once and asked him to tell Tony to get to bed. Steve almost felt bad for communicating back and forth with Tony and giving him a reason to stay awake, but the information was flowing. They were making progress. Stark passed him pertinent bits of information as he gleaned new intel from his work.

It was just a little past midnight. Tony was chatting with him on the sidebar of his laptop screen as he bit by bit cracked into the Hydra data they’d recovered today. Tony was probably tired. Steve knew how he got, tanked up on coffee and bleary eyed but determined to carry on when there was new data in front of him. Stark was probably in his lab at his gadget-cluttered workstation, working with Jarvis as they pried into Hydra like a clamshell.

Steve sat in his living room with his laptop glowing in front of him on the coffee table. It was dark in the suite and quiet. Buck was to bed but Steve wasn’t sleepy.

He wasn’t accomplishing much, only communicating with Tony and paging through the new maps and schematics as Tony found them. His mind picked at patterns and possibly inconsequential information, trying to make sense of what they were learning. That last Hydra base was out there, somewhere in the Midwest. They had to find it soon or Hydra would have a chance to re-establish and sink new footholds into new locations.

Tony had discovered they weren’t using one particular satellite but many, jumping into and out of them as they passed overhead as needed. That made it difficult to get a location on the base. It would be a lot easier if Hydra was passing its communications through cell towers instead of directly to satellite. The enemy was smart, doing everything they could to stay hidden. Steve’s mind flitted around, parsing information and experience, intuition and remembered images, seeking links, patterns, anything that tied this information to something he already knew. It bothered him that they didn’t know where Rumlow was.

Don’t move. Perimeter alert. Drone outside your window. I’m going after it, sending Barton and Romanoff after the operator.

Steve felt his adrenaline spike as the meaning of Tony's message became clear. There was a drone hovering outside the tower, probably watching him sitting here in his shorts. He wanted to turn his head and look but Tony had said not to move. They didn’t want to alert the operator that they knew and were taking action. Steve's eyes strained to the left, trying to see anything without moving his head, to see any movement in the dark outside, any tiny blinking light. There was no sound to be heard, not from motors that small on the other side of the thick glass.

A feeling of anger and threat heated him. This was his home. He was off-duty. It was no secret where he lived, but they hadn’t known Hydra was aware exactly which floor of the tower was his, and which windows. Was the drone armed? Was the armored film in the glass enough to stop a shot if it was? Steve felt naked and exposed, frozen like a rabbit while some Hydra operative took his time staring at him on his couch. He carefully controlled his breathing to hide the agitation he felt. How long until-?

The distinctive sound and glow of the Iron Man suit streaked off away from the tower in pursuit of the drone. Steve stood and went to the window to watch. Now that he was looking straight at the action he could see the small black flyer Tony was about to capture. It appeared as a dark shape blotting out the city lights below.
"Careful, it might be rigged with something nasty," Steve said out loud, confident Jarvis would relay the message to him.

Iron Man rolled and swooped in pursuit, then grabbed the fleeing drone. Steve watched him zip upward above the level of the tower and hover there, waiting for anything to happen. Now that the situation was being neutralized it was satisfying that Jarvis had detected it in their airspace, that Tony had captured it, and that he was being careful, holding it above where it could do much harm if it was going to explode.

"Unarmed. It was transmitting the command code to detonate the power cell we removed from Barnes's arm. They know he's here now, staying with you," Tony told him through the sound system in his living room.

"Thank you, Tony," Steve said.

If Tony hadn't demanded that Bruce examine the arm, if Tony hadn't replaced the power cell and removed the transmitter, they'd all be dead right now, debris from the top of the tower raining down on innocent civilians below. Well, probably Thor and Bruce wouldn't be dead, but the rest of them would be in trouble. He'd seen the atomic structure of the isotopes in the old power cell. It was incredibly reactive if given a precise stimulus.

"What's going on?" Bucky asked.

He stood in his bedroom doorway and frowned at Steve. He looked undecided if he should go back to sleep or wake up.

"Hydra sent a drone. Tony caught it outside. They tried to detonate your arm but there wasn't anything to detonate," Steve said.

Bucky grunted a satisfied sound.

Steve moved toward the door of the suite, intent on going to meet Tony and to see the thing Hydra had sent for them. He wanted to memorize the looks of it in case he ever saw anything like it again. Buck moved too, wanting to come with.

"You should stay here. He's got it but I don't know if it's dead yet. Since it didn't detonate, they might doubt you're here if it doesn't get you on camera. I want to keep them guessing if we can," Steve said.

Buck grumbled at him about slim chances but he stayed in the suite. Steve jogged to the elevator. Jarvis took him up to the jet launch bay where Tony came inside with the drone in his gauntlet. It wasn't one of the large commercial models but it wasn't a toy, either. It was flat black and about the size of Sam's Redwing.

Tony strode fully inside the building and the hangar bay doors locked shut. He retracted his faceplate and handed the drone to Steve. Steve gripped the thing under its central hub. Its six rotor blades whirred briefly and its camera eye rolled up to look at him.

"You looking for something?" Steve said to its operator, wherever they were.

He wanted them to wonder if Buck was in the building, to wonder if maybe there'd been no explosion because he wasn't here. It was indeed a slim chance they'd believe it, but he'd take what chances he could get. Hydra knew from the missions today that the Winter Soldier was working with the Avengers now, but maybe they weren't sure he lived at the tower.
Steve adjusted his grip on the thing, then crushed at the bottom of it where its center of gravity was heaviest. He felt an electric jolt to his hand then the acrid smell of chemicals reached their noses.

Tony reached out and took the dead thing from him.

"You don't have to crush everything like a caveman. Jarvis could have aborted it," Tony commented.

"More satisfying that way," Steve said.

His hand felt slippery and his skin started to tingle.

"You have battery acid on your hand. Come on," Tony said as he walked away.

Steve's urge was to wipe his hand on his thigh where he frequently wiped at his uniform when his hands got messy. Since he was in nothing but his shorts, his skin was bare and he would only smear the acid around. Instead of going to the platform where Tony usually got out of his suit they walked directly into Stark's lab and to a wash station. Tony turned a spigot over the hazmat sink. Steve neutralized the acid on his hand, then washed with soap and water.

"Thanks, Tony, for everything," Steve muttered while he wiped dry with brown paper towels.

He knew Tony was angry at him for forbidding his Iron Legion program. Tony was generous in spirit, still helping out when he was needed. Steve felt naked and a little vulnerable standing in his shorts while Tony was in the Iron Man suit. Tony was his friend. But Tony was angry, sometimes prone to petulance. And they were in his lab, his lair, where who knows what programs, robots, gadgets, lasers, things could get at him.

Steve did his best to hide a flinch when Tony abruptly snapped open the front of the suit and stepped out. He thought he did pretty good concealing his instant of cautious readiness. Maybe Nat would be pleased with the effort.

Stark glanced at him, then walked away. Steve took that as a small peace gesture. Tony was now the one vulnerable, in only his faded comfortable jeans and a tee. He left the suit standing by the hazmat sink and went back to his work station. The dead drone stayed clutched in the gauntlet.

"Is it really dead?" Steve asked as he followed Tony through the lab.

"It is," Jarvis confirmed, "there is no electrical activity from it since you disabled its power cell."

"You wanted something?" Tony turned to look at him.

He had that terse tone to his words which let Steve know his presence was no longer welcome.

"I- just…I'm sorry for keeping you up when Pepper wants you," Steve said. He lifted a hand to indicate the open program Tony had running to decrypt the Hydra files.

"I would have been up anyway. I want Hydra done before the holiday. Pepper wants us to visit her mother," Tony said.

"That's great, Tony. Is she fixing-"

"Go on, get back to your boyfriend. I've got work to do," Stark told him.

Steve stood there and frowned, then he clenched his teeth against the sharp reply he wanted to make. Tony was trying to rile him up, to drive him away. He was venting his sourness about Buck
staying in the tower, and about Iron Legion. Tony knew he and Buck weren't like that, but he'd used his comment to try to outrage and anger him.

Slowly, to give him time to protest or back away, Steve reached for him. Tony had an instant to glance at Steve and wonder what the hell he wanted now, but then Steve gathered him in for a hug. Tony was stiffly resistant at first, then he melted into the contact like a tired toddler. Steve would normally do the man-hug thing with a few brisk thumps on the back but now wasn't the time for rough comradery or dominance plays. As far as Tony was concerned Steve was in the doghouse, on thin tolerance for everything Tony was having to put up with from him.

"Really, Tony, I'm sorry. You're a good friend to me. I'll try to stop asking too much of you," Steve said.

He gave Tony a brief, gentle pat to the back and set him free. He didn't linger. Before Steve got to the door, Tony spoke to him.

"Don't cut it so close. We could have lost you today," he said.

"Nah, Jarvis was yelling in my ear and the pain brought me around. I was fine," Steve said.

Tony nodded and got back to his work. After Steve was gone from his lab, he smiled a little. Pepper had warned him about Steve's hugs. He'd been a bit jealous that Pep got one first, but now he felt better.

…

"We've got the operator. Do you want me to dispose of him, or should we hold him for questioning?" Natasha asked Steve over the house intercom while he walked back to his suite.

"Good work. Get him threat-assessed in medical, then put him in one of the holding cells," Steve told her.

"Yessir," Nat replied.

Steve smirked as he left the elevator on his floor. Natasha was taunting him about how he'd yanked Buck's leash today. There were several things she could be implying by reminding him of the incident, but she didn't say more. She didn't need to. She probably wanted him to think of all of it, the whole mental mess Buck was going through, the happy fact that Buck was working with him again, and the uphill battle he had ahead of him to get Buck to see things his way on live missions. All of which only made him thankful again to have Buck home, even if things weren't ironed out smooth between them yet because of Hydra's abuse.

Steve secured the door to his suite behind him. He went into Buck's room with barely a tap at the door. The room was dark, not having an exterior window. He heard Bucky make a drowsy sound at him and move in the bed. That was enough to let him know where he was in the dark.

"Nat and Clint captured the operator. We'll send him to Fury's team tomorrow," Steve said partly to inform Buck the incident was over, and partly to let him hear him moving through the room.

Buck wasn't startled when Steve climbed onto the bed with him but he grunted in surprise when Steve flopped behind him and grabbed him into a tight clench.

"Gotta breathe, pal," Bucky laughed at him.
"No ya don't," Steve said.

He curled up behind Bucky and hugged him close. Buck had showered after their work was done but the back of his head smelled nostalgically familiar. Thoughts of him falling from the train, or of him possibly being blown up by his arm tonight caused Steve to grip him a little tighter.

Bucky wheezed jokingly and patted him on the arm in a gesture that asked for mercy.

Steve let him loose to breathe but he didn't let go entirely. It felt strange to be held but it was only Steve so he put up with it. The kid was all heart and maybe he needed it. Buck reached back and felt of the skin on Steve's neck. It was smooth as if a knife hadn't been at him today. He took his hand back from the awkward reach and lay still.

Steve finally let go of him and rolled onto his back on the bed. Bucky stayed curled as he was, facing away toward the door. They understood what was going on, both of them glad to be alive and glad the other was alive, too. They'd had their little rituals long ago. A shared grin or a bump of shoulders. It had been a while since they'd worked together so Buck could understand Steve's exuberance even though things weren't exactly the same as they'd been.

He didn't want to smother Steve's relief and momentary contentment but he needed to speak his mind.

"You know how over time you've seen enough shit that you know what it's all gonna lead to, even if you can't explain how you know?" Buck said.

"Yeah?" Steve agreed cautiously.

"I know Hydra. I worked inside em, off and on all these years while you were on ice. You're a good leader, Steve. Your strategy is nearly flawless. But I'm telling you, if you don't step it up and go at it harder we're going to lose people. You've got them on the run but we know they're moving things around. Everything in me tells me they're moving their soft infrastructure off the continent. What they'll move into its place is more like me. They were packing things up today, probably going to truck it all to a port and ship it out. You've won North America, but they'll cover their retreat," Buck said.

"More like you?" Steve asked about the detail that worried him most.

"Five of em. Worse than me. That's why I was sent to kill Howard. He'd developed a new serum while he worked with SHIELD. I knocked off him and Maria, took Howard's serum, brought it to my handlers. I'm pretty sure they used my blood, my serum as a starting point 'cause you weren't around to sample from, thank God. Zola's research that made me was closer to what Erskine developed for you. I'm more like you. The others are psychotic, just sane enough to barely get by in public until mission completion. They're deranged, degraded, like a copy of a copy. I need to go after them before Hydra gets desperate and turns them loose," Buck told him.

"We need to go after them. Why am I just now hearing about this?" Steve asked.

"I just now put it all together in my head. I killed the Starks, but the five packets I saw in that case didn't make sense until I was lying here trying to figure out what Hydra's likely to do next. It'll be something bad, and when I thought of the worst they could do, there it was. Those five packets are what made the others, the ones they'll release on the world if we keep pushing them to retreat. I must have blocked the memory of them or something, like Sam says I might be doing with things I don't want to remember," Bucky said.
"I need to know more. I need to know everything you know about the other five. We have to-"

Steve tensed behind him.

Buck put back his hand and gripped Steve's side.

"Not tonight. They keep them locked up in cryo because they're hard to handle. They won't move fast because some handlers always die when they use them. They'd only wake them as a last resort. We don't know where to look yet. Let's watch the trackers we embedded and learn what direction to move. If we get a consensus on the tracking vector, we'll have a start. We'll trace backwards from wherever their extraction port is to Siberia. That's where they keep them," Buck said.

"I didn't think Hydra cared about people dying," Steve said.

The feel of his muscles over his ribs softened some, like he was no longer thinking about jumping up and going right now. Buck withdrew his hand and tucked it in front of him again.

"They don't, except handlers are hard to replace. Few are loyal enough to outright risk their lives for Hydra. They're not like you, Steve. You'd die for a good cause at a moment's notice. Once a newly-briefed handler understands what they've gotten themselves into, their loyalty to Hydra can take a backseat to self-preservation. Nobody's as eager to be a martyr as you," Buck teased him.

Steve thought about denying his comment, but it would only be empty banter. Buck knew he hadn't been trying to die today. Close calls just happened sometimes. It could happen to any of them.

Bucky let Steve lie and think for as long as he figured it would take him to get a good mental start of processing the new information and making plans. Then he purposefully changed the subject to get his friend back onto happier thoughts. Steve wouldn't forget his duty but he didn't need to be on right now. He'd done enough today.

"Do you think Estrella really understands?" Buck asked into the quiet darkness.

"That I could die any day? I don't know. I've told her, but…" Steve left it open-ended. Bucky felt him shrug, the round of his shoulder digging into his back.

"We know it was nothing but she was probably shook up today. You should go see her, let her lay hands on ya. You know she likes to do that after you've been hurt," Buck said.

"I don't want to see her until we're done with this. Buck, if they knew about her…" Steve said.

"She wouldn't be safe. I know. They're fighting mad, especially after today. They want blood. I could go keep watch on her but that would tip them off that I'm guarding something, might draw them right to her. They'll be looking for me too, if they sent a drone for me tonight. They want me back," Buck said.

Steve grunted. The thought of Hydra after Estrella or Hydra getting Buck again made him shake his head and blow out a tense breath. Buck was right. Tony was right. He needed to stay away from Estrella, unless…

"Jarvis, have you searched lately for any indication that Hydra knows about Estrella?" he asked.

"I keep a constant monitor on any of their communications they are incautious enough to allow me into. There is no hint Hydra is aware of her. I do not believe Hydra has an artificial intelligence system to counter my surveillance but I would not take for granted that they do not. I recommend we take additional security measures with all future communications between yourself and the
Miss, just in case," Jarvis said.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Steve said quietly.

They lay in the dark for a while longer. Steve wondered how long Jarvis continued to listen in on things after he was called. He would have asked, but didn't want to call the AI's attention again. Bucky sighed, only a slightly deeper breath which Steve was able to hear.

"You alright? Sore at me for today?" Steve asked.

"Nah. I got no problem serving under you. 'S kinda nice if I stop thinking of what I would do and just focus on what you tell me," Buck admitted.

Steve crossed his wrists behind his head and crossed his ankles, getting comfortable while he thought. He wasn't going to apologize for demanding Buck do things his way. Buck would understand that. Since Buck didn't feel any resentment about taking orders today and there was nothing to do about Hydra at the moment, his mind shifted back to the previous topic of conversation.

"It's not that I don't want to see her. I don't want to endanger her," Steve said.

"I get that, but maybe she doesn't. You should tell her," Buck told him.

"I have a problem communicating, don't I?" Steve asked.

"Come again?"

"Ha-ha. You're real funny. I mean somebody's always telling me to tell her things," Steve said.

"Yeah. I told you to explain it to her when you got off under me the day she left for Wanda's place but you didn't say anything. She was riled up about it. I had to explain it to her. Barton had to tell you to call her today. And now I'm tellin ya. What's wrong with you, punk? Hah! Why do I ask? You don't know crap about women. Look, she's gonna worry. You need to tell her stuff. Don't let her sit and fester in it. A woman's mind is always thinking ten ways to Sunday. If you don't explain stuff to em they get their own ideas, some of em wilder than the plain truth you're embarrassed to tell them," Buck advised him.

" 'S that so?" Steve asked archly, teasing him for knowing so much.

"Shaddup. Quit laying around with me and go get some face time with her on your laptop. That'll make her happy. You were a dick to her today when you called her from the jet," Buck said.

"I was working," Steve defended himself.

"Yeah, I know, I was there. Go tell her that," Buck grumbled.

Steve rolled to his feet and walked around the bed toward the door. From the faint city light coming through the living room he could see enough to not stub his toe on the bedframe. He stopped a moment and brushed his fingers across Buck's head. He was alive and here. They weren't promised tomorrow, but right now was good.

"Eh, fuck off. Go play with your girl," Buck said.

He swiped Steve's hand off of his head and pushed his hip toward the door.

Steve grinned. He could hear the smile in Buck's voice, that smartass one he had when he was
pleased but not wanting to show it too much.

"Sure, pal," Steve said.

He shut Buck's door for him. He got his laptop from the coffee table and took it into his bedroom. With a stubborn set to his jaw, he refused to close the curtains. No way was he going to let Hydra make him hide behind the drapes. Jarvis would alert him if there was anything else out there.

It was well past midnight. He might wake Estrella but Buck seemed to think she wouldn't mind. First, he texted her phone to ask her to open her laptop. Tony had a video chat program they could use.

"I will encrypt the stream and send it in micro-bursts. You may notice the pulses of data as minute disruptions in the video feed but I doubt the Miss will notice," Jarvis informed him.

Steve waited for Estrella to do whatever was taking so long on her end. Did she have to get dressed? Was she concerned about looking too bed-headed on video? Steve smiled. He kind of hoped to see her messed from sleep, but it would be fine to see her however she wanted to doll herself up, too. He was beyond getting embarrassed that the thought of seeing her made him hard. He'd been thinking about work all evening and it felt damn good to think about her instead. The tight pulling of his skin made him want to give it a few strokes through his shorts but he resisted doing so. He wanted to talk, to reassure her, not to play sex games with her. *Unless she was willing,* his mind tempted him. Steve shook his head in denial.

Finally, the video pane on his laptop showed an image of Estrella in the dark on her bed, as he was on his. Geez, she was going to be the death of him. Her hair was tumbled around her shoulders in dark, silky skeins. She wore a clingy sleeveless ribbed undershirt like he sometimes wore. The bedsheet she clutched under one arm for modesty only partly covered her. He could see bare skin beyond her folded knee all the way to the dark color of her panties which peeked from under her shirt at her hip. He guessed her panties were purple or dark red. It was difficult to tell in the dim, pale light from her laptop screen. Her shirt was probably blue. He tried and failed to not stare at the lush fullness of her breasts which she mostly hid with her arms.

"Angle the camera. Let me see you," Estrella fussled.

Steve smiled. He knew what she wanted, like Buck said.

He tipped the top of his laptop back and angled his chin so she could see the perfectly healed skin of his neck. Just to assure her, he pulled his fingers across the place he'd been cut. If he'd still been wounded the drag of his fingers would have re-opened the cut. He watched Estrella's face as her concerned frown smoothed to merely a sleepy-looking grump.

"So were you playing dead until the last second to catch them? Why did you wait so long before you did something to stop that man from cutting off your head?" she demanded.

"It was the weapon they shot me with. Knocked my head against a tree, tried to cook me. I'm not like Thor, doll. It took me a minute or two to come around. Jarvis was yelling in my ear. The knife hurt, so that was helpful. It was a good day and we made a lot of progress, I'm just sorry you watched that. Didn't Jarvis warn you?" he asked.

Estrella felt sheepish now that Steve was questioning her. The sight of all his pale blue skin in the laptop light was distracting since she was satisfied he was okay. Her fingers wanted to touch him. It was easier to ogle him in his shorts than to think about the fact that Jarvis had warned her and she should have listened.
"Jarvis warning me is like you asking if I want the truth. I'm learning I should listen sometimes," she admitted.

Steve was looking at her. Just looking. His expression was a little goofy. Only a second ago, he'd been concerned and serious.

"Steeve!" she fussed, then giggled at him.

Estrella tugged on her bedsheets and tucked it up under both arms. Steve's eyes flashed up to look her in the face and she wasn't sure, but maybe he blushed? He smiled in a way that asked her forgiveness and rubbed at the back of his neck, a sure sign he was embarrassed. He angled his face aside and down and she wanted to kiss his smile, right between his cheek and his mouth. She also wanted to kiss and nibble across his skin under his arm where the little ridges of muscles played against his ribs, up the sensitive area where his arm folded, and onto the hard curve of his bicep. He was achingly beautiful in his moment of shyness. It brought a tear to her eyes, she was so thankful he hadn't died today.

"You're so pretty, Eya. It's been a long day and I'm glad to see something sweet to distract me from what I've been working on," he murmured quietly when his smile relaxed enough for him to talk.

"What did you see that's sweet?" she teased him.

"Aw, do I have to say? No, you can't make me. I'll kiss you there and show you next time I see you," Steve told her.

Estrella wiggled on her bed and nodded. Her eager smile was infectious and Steve couldn't seem to get his lips to behave. There really had been serious stuff on his mind. He needed to talk to her about it. For now it felt great to simply tease with her some, to revel in the light, happy way she made him feel.

"How's the guitar?" he asked.

"It's good. I think my fingers are getting tougher. I can play for longer without them hurting. I don't have any complete songs yet, only parts of songs. I'm trying to make them different because I don't want my music to all sound the same. They're like different moods, different thoughts. If I'm feeling one way, I'll work on one, and if I'm feeling another way, I'll work on the piece that matches. My song writing is telling me I'm more confused than anything else, but that's my most complex piece so it's interesting to work on it," she told him.

"I wanna hear," Steve said, "if that's alright, I mean. It sounds fascinating, like I could see into your head if I could hear what you write."

Estrella laughed and shook her head.

"I don't want you to hear yet. They're not complete so there's probably mistakes and it would be embarrassing. I'm not very good yet, if I ever will be. Are you drawing anything? It would be like letting me see your work when it's unfinished," she explained.

"Um, yeah. I draw some if I can get a few minutes of peace. Like you said, it's about thoughts or feelings. Some of it's not for anyone but me. It helps me work through things," Steve said.

He was frowning but it was a thoughtful frown instead of a sad one.

"What?" she asked.
"I was trying to work out how I would feel if you looked at my stuff. Like you don't want me to hear your musical pieces yet. I don't know, doll. I want to share with you, but..." Steve looked at her sharply, as if he was trying to decide something important.

"You have things that aren't random street scenes or memories. Things you didn't want Lucy to see," she guessed.

Estrella thought he would blush again because they were probably talking about nudes but he didn't. He continued to watch her, thinking.

"Right. Those things," he admitted.

"I'll trade you when we both feel like it, a little bit at a time?" she offered.

She knew this was a big thing. It was to her. She felt tender about her new creations. They were things from her mind, her heart. Steve must feel the same about the art he was hesitant to show her. If they reached the point of sharing the deepest things that came from inside, the things that were unexplainable with words, that would be an important milestone for them. The fact that they weren't there yet was bittersweet. They had hurt each other and caused doubt in their relationship but there was the future to look forward to.

"I'd like that. When we both feel like it," he agreed.

Estrella had a thought, was ashamed to think it, then decided to say it anyway, even if it revealed a weakness. She wanted to know.

"Does Bucky see those, the ones you aren't ready for me to see?" she asked, not much louder than a whisper.

Steve shook his head immediately.

"Nobody sees those. I'm-" he tapped the side of his head, then shook it again.

His strong negative answer looked like the truth. Estrella was pleased at his response but embarrassed by what she'd revealed in the asking. She knew Steve wouldn't miss the implication and his next words were expected.

"You're jealous of Buck," Steve said.

Estrella lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug and let them fall.

"I don't want to be. I know it's immature. It's a feeling. I have a hard time making it go away. The way the two of you are... It's hard to understand," she said.

Steve tilted his head and crossed his arms. It scared her, the way he looked stubborn like he was about to deliver an ultimatum. She let her fear show in hopes it would inspire him to mercy. Steve sighed and shook his head.

"You modern people are funny about things. I don't think you get friendship. You don't need to feel threatened by him, Eya. Hah! Of all the reasons you could be afraid of Buck, that's the one you land on?" he asked incredulously.

"You don't need to be cruel. I can't help it!" she complained.

"Haven't you ever felt jealous?" she asked.
"In principle, yes. I was sore all the time that Buck got the girls, but I didn't fault him for it. He was born that way, and I was what I was. It made sense, so I couldn't be mad at the girls for choosing him over me. Later, Peggy didn't give anybody the time of day. She was only sweet to me, so I guess I never had cause to feel jealous. She wasn't... she was!" Steve paused his thought, then grinned at her.

"What? What was Peggy?" Estrella asked.

Steve chuckled.

"She was jealous. She sort of tried to shoot me after she saw another woman kiss me. I'm sorry, doll. There's nothing wrong with you, it's probably all women," he said.

"Oh! Suddenly if Peggy was jealous, it's okay for me? Peggy is the standard I need to compare to, and it's only okay to be some way if Peggy did it too?!" Estrella seethed. The smile disappeared from Steve's face. His mouth fell open and he blinked his eyes. She had a point and there was no denying it.

"I need to fix my thinking on that. You're right. I'm sorry," Steve said.

Estrella sighed. She couldn't stay mad when he so easily admitted fault and promised to fix the problem.

"It's okay. With all that's happened to you, you probably think of her and that time of your life as the ideal. It's what you're most familiar with, so you automatically compare everything to it," she said.

"That sounds partly right. I'll think on it. It was careless of me to compare you. You're nothing like Peggy. You have time for me. You're not terrifying. I can relax around you. Mostly," Steve told her.

"You were terrified of Peggy?" Estrella smiled.

"At first, sure. She was impressive. She was nice to me, but she knocked a lotta guys in the teeth. I was always wondering when it was gonna be my turn," he admitted.

"Steve, you're huge! You get hurt all the time. Why were you afraid of her punching you?" Estrella asked.

She was smiling, intrigued by this glimpse of his past. It was a relief to realize Peggy was not a person she was jealous of. She couldn't fault the woman for caring about Steve and she couldn't begrudge Steve for caring about the first kind woman to show an interest in him, especially since she was pretty. Nat had shown her photographs of Peggy, so she understood Steve's admiration.

Steve shrugged and smiled. He looked like a rascally boy.

"I don't like it when you scream at me," he pointed out.

She understood he meant the pain of her voice without her necklace.

She nodded.

They seemed to have reached an understanding. Estrella didn't like being compared to another woman and judged okay only because he decided jealousy was a common characteristic of her sex,
but nobody was perfect. She could work on that with him over time.

While her mind wandered through the things they'd talked about and how pleased she was to see him healed from the awful wound at his throat, her eyes also wandered.

Steve cleared his throat and she snapped her attention back up to his face. This time it was his turn to scold.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Uh-un," he shook his head, "you don't get a free pass, lady. You should feel ashamed of yourself, ogling a guy like that. You should admire me for my mind, my artistic skills, my-"

"You hush! I'm wearing something and I have a sheet. I can see all of you. How can you expect me to-"

"Not all of me, babe," Steve grumbled.

His head tilted back and his eyes narrowed to a teasing gleam. He unfolded his arms and one hand slid down his ribs, down his abs, over the waistband of his underwear. His fingers curled around the erection she hadn't noticed before because it was partly hidden by the way his knee and leg were folded. He gripped himself and gave a firm tug, then moved his hand away to rest on his shin.

Estrella took a sharp, shallow breath. Now that he'd drawn her attention to it, she couldn't fail to see the shape of him pressed against the dark stretchy fabric. She bit her lip and squinted her eyes at him.

Steve smirked, then laughed.

She sighed and allowed herself to smile. It was wonderful to see him in a playful mood. He'd looked so serious today at work, like a different person. An older person. When he played with her like this it felt almost like vacation again. It felt easy, as it had before she'd moved out and hurt him.

The regret must have shown on her face because Steve quit his playful mood. For a moment he looked at her kindly, as her friend. She didn't know how he could look that way when she could see he was still big and hard in his underwear, but he did. It was confusing to see that he could be hard and not distracted by it. Then his expression changed to something that made her uneasy. His face became like the Captain. She could see he had something to say. She already didn't want to hear it, whatever it was.

"You're not going to like my next date but I have to do it this way. We hit Hydra hard today. They're angry, out for vengeance. If they knew about you, you wouldn't be safe. Me and Buck discussed bringing you back to the tower but Jarvis thinks they don't know about you so it's better you stay at Wanda's, away from us. I have to draw them away, Eya. I'm going out tomorrow night. It's going to be public and I'm going to use everything I've got to make it look real. If you look for it, you probably won't like what you see. I want them to think I'm not attached to anyone so they won't think to look for you," Steve explained.

She wanted to ask what his plans were to cause it to sound so bad, but then she didn't want to know.

"What about you? If Hydra is so mad from what you've done, will you be safe out on a date?" she wondered.
"We don't think they'll strike in public. I'll have backup present but no one is likely to see her," Steve assured.

"Natasha," she guessed.

Steve nodded.

"Is Natasha enough?"

"If she isn't, then no one would be. She's not there to fight. She's there to watch me and call it in if there's trouble. Don't worry about me. I'll be alright. I only mentioned this in light of your issues with jealousy. I don't want to make you feel bad, Eya. I have to do this. I'm telling you so you can avoid watching whatever comes in about me for the next day or so. If you want to," he said.

Estrella looked down to rub her finger around and around on the dotted pattern of the sheet over her knee. Steve waited patiently while she thought.

"How do you know they're a threat? I know they want to kill you, but are there enough of them left to do it? Aren't you almost finished with them?" she asked.

"The enemy is always dangerous when you have them cornered. They came for Bucky tonight. They suspect he's in the tower with me. A drone was sent. It hovered outside my living room and transmitted codes which would have detonated Buck's arm if Tony hadn't already replaced its old power cell. When an enemy gets desperate, they might try anything," he told her.

"So they could attack you in public while you're on a date," she insisted.

"Except for the civilian casualties, I almost wish they would. The more of them I take out, the better. Try not to worry about that. We've got it covered," he said.

"You're going to have fun, anyway. You're going to enjoy the danger, the thought that Hydra might try," she said.

Steve's eyes crinkled at the corners a little and his lips tightened. It wasn't a nice smile. Or, it wasn't a smile from the nice part of him that she liked.

"You know me too well, babe. Yeah, I'll probably enjoy it. I'm not good at faking it, so I don't. If you decide to look at what people put out there, know that I'm not thinking of you. I can't think of you when I'm out with other people or it doesn't work. When I think of you I go all soft inside and I lose interest in whoever I'm with. I have to put you out of my mind and get this done," Steve said.

She squinted at him again.

"I didn't think you'd use dating for work. It was meant to help us know who we are," she said.

"I use whatever I've got. If you don't want me to use something, don't give it to me," he cautioned her.

"I'll remember that," she said.

"And remember I love you. Whatever you see tomorrow night, remember that," Steve said.

Estrella nodded.

Steve looked at her. She didn't say anything.
"I have to do this," he said.

"I know, but I don't have to like it. Be safe," she said.

"As much as I can and get the job done," he told her.

"Okay. I know you have work to do. Go, papi, and get some sleep."

"Alright, doll. Oh, Thanksgiving is coming up. If I can get a little time away can I come spend some of it with you?" he asked.

She didn't want to smile but she couldn't help it. Estrella nodded. Residual fear from seeing him almost die today, worries that they had too many hidden things between them, and dread about his date tomorrow kept her mouth shut. She so wanted this part of their relationship to be done with, but she didn't know when they could move on. It didn't feel right yet. If she could have him for even a few hours on Thursday she would be thankful.

"I'll see you then, if I can. No promises," he said.

Estrella nodded again. If she opened her mouth she would ask him to not go out with any more women. She would ask him to not put himself in danger with Hydra. She couldn't do that. It's not who he was and she didn't want to change him like that.

Steve saw she was having trouble. He looked her over one last time. He smiled that kind smile, the one which let her know they were still friends. Then he reached for his computer and their call ended.

She closed her laptop and lay back onto her pillows. After only a moment, she grabbed her phone from her nightstand.

"I love you too," she texted him.

"I know ya do. Pray for me," Steve responded.

"I always do," she assured him.

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Steve looked at the final edit of the public relations piece they'd made. Thor, Natasha, Tony and Sam had made their suggestions and the piece had been tweaked to suit their recommendations.

Sam suggested they shorten the scenes with the bike and include more time with the people he'd met across America's northern states. Thor likewise suggested more inclusion of older people in the scenes, whether they had speaking parts or not. Natasha spoke privately with Marley and Pepper and the only changes Steve saw from that were some different angles of his body that he wouldn't have thought to use. Tony watched it through and had some surprisingly insightful opinions about the voice-over content. Steve had re-written and re-recorded the voice work for twenty-two seconds of the ninety second piece because Tony's idea was a good one.

The team watched the finished piece once more at their Tuesday morning meeting. Hill and her people were there. Agent Canburn sighed after one of the edits Natasha had suggested but Steve didn't see anything lascivious in that scene. It was just an angle of his face while he talked to people on the street in Duluth. If that's all it took to make a girl sigh, he was glad to have Natasha around to work that sort of subtlety.
Not that agent Canburn was a mere girl, but she still had trouble paying attention in meetings sometimes. Steve knew she wasn't sighing at the video from boredom. He'd thought about letting her go but upon review he'd learned she did damn good work. He would put up with her fangirl crush until she got over it.

They'd decided to not put any text titles, credits or other information at the beginning or end of the piece. It looked better simply starting with him on the bike, no explanation given. Maria said people would be interested enough in the piece to look up any information they wanted if the Avengers simply made a webpage with easily searchable keywords.

Steve wasn't embarrassed of the piece and it said what he wanted it to say to begin countering Hydra's ideology in the public mind. Natasha had a faintly pleased smile, as did Pepper. That was enough for him. Buck had watched it this morning over breakfast. He hadn't said much but he'd nodded while he chewed.

"Let's get this released. We'll start work on the team piece after we've gotten Hydra out of America. Anything new on that, Tony?" Steve asked.

"I've got nothing. The trackers we implanted haven't been conclusive. One of them went two blocks and is staying inside her apartment. The other seven scattered, only two of them going remotely the same direction. One took a flight to Indonesia. Three are in hospitals across the continental U S. We'll have to watch for any kind of pattern. It's like they know not to lead us to that last base. Or they're without orders and are acting on their own. There was plenty of communication into and out of the Atlanta base, so we know that's not the case," Stark said.

"Jarvis, watch them carefully. If they start to coordinate in one direction we need to know immediately. I want to be on them as soon as we have a lead," Steve said.

"Consider it done," Jarvis agreed.

"We're on call. Everyone stay close to the tower. I'd like to get this wrapped up before Thanksgiving so we can all have some time off," he said.

Maria wasn't happy today. He knew he was flying too fast for her liking. Hill preferred a more detailed plan and they didn't have any details other than 'hit Hydra' when they finally found a location. They would have to plan the mission as they were in the air approaching the last base.

"Captain," Canburn said hesitantly.

"What have you got?" he turned to her.

"I was tracing the social connections for your date tonight. Miss Hodge is friends with a classmate who has an uncle who works for a branch of the CIA which hasn't been fully verified as clean. It's a remote chance, but they could possibly learn of the date and send a Hydra agent to you tonight," the young analyst told him.

"Thank you, Canburn. I'll keep that in mind," Steve said.

He gave her a cool look of appreciation for her professional skills. She blushed and hurried to look down to her notes on her tablet.

"Couldn't we ask Heimdall?" Tony asked.
"Ask him where the last Hydra base is?" Steve wondered.

"Why not?" Clint agreed.

Bruce shook his head minutely. They all looked to Thor.

"Heimdall's sight is not to be used in finding people for the purpose of ending their lives," Thor told them.

Steve nodded. That made sense. It surely would have been helpful if they could ask that question, but he understood the need for a rule limiting Heimdall's power. Tony made a disgusted gesture and opened his mouth to argue, but Thor and Steve both looked to him. Tony gave up the argument before it began.

"The good news is Hydra didn't try nearly as hard to hide their international bases of operation. It's a quaint mistake I'm surprised they made. Either they didn't think they were as vulnerable outside of the United States, or they've got something at the international bases we haven't factored in yet. We're digging hard to find out what that is, if anything. I know you want to be ready to hit them as soon as we're done stateside," Maria told them.

"Is the distress signal still coming from Sokovia?" Steve asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. I've put Sokovia first on our hit list so we can intervene more quickly if they have prisoners," Hill said.

"I want to review preliminary maps and plans for the global locations this afternoon. Send your team my thanks for their work," Steve told her.

"Of course, Captain," she replied.

"Shouldn't you be focused on other things this afternoon?" Nat asked him.

"It's only a date, not a mission. It's not that complex," Steve said.

Natasha arched an eyebrow. She always knew things he didn't. Sam chuckled and Steve turned to look at him.

"You don't go on dates. They're all missions. I've yet to see you just get dressed and go someplace like a normal person. If it doesn't involve strategy and at least twenty-four hours of planning, you're not interested," Sam said.

"We're gonna discuss my personal life in a meeting?" Steve asked him.

"You asked, man. Well you didn't ask, but you looked and did the thing with your eyebrow. Natasha's right. This isn't really your personal life. It's about security and misdirection. Look over the international plans, but get your mind in the game for tonight," Sam advised him.

"Captain, your workload is intense. We've just released a PR piece it would take most production units at least a month to finish and we did it in a week. We had great success against Hydra yesterday and more is imminent. Most of us work no more than ten or twelve hours a day, unlike you. It wouldn't hurt you to take some downtime while you can and view tonight with a more relaxed attitude," Hill suggested.

Steve looked at her sternly. He almost told them they were soft, that Hydra doesn't take breaks and neither would they. That they were going to push hard until the job was done because victory
required nothing less. But they were at a stalemate until they had more information. He didn't like it. He could see some of the others didn't, either. It was in the frustrated set of Tony's jaw and the tense way Thor kept his arms folded so he wouldn't fidget with Mjolnir and break something.

"Maybe he likes thinking. He doesn't mind everything being work and challenge," Tony said.

Steve turned his attention to Tony and smiled. It was great to have Stark understand him like that. Maybe Jarvis had tipped him off to how many hours Steve spent studying and working when he wasn't on official Avengers time.

"What is life without challenge and purpose?" Thor agreed.

Sam sighed. Natasha looked down at her hands on the table. She had a set to her lips which was the equivalent of an eye-roll on anyone else.

"Come see me in my lab this afternoon?" Bruce asked lightly.

Steve nodded. Yeah, it was probably a good idea to have a look at his blood chemistry before he went out tonight.

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"C'mon, Buck! You help Estrella. She said so. I'm your best pal and you've got nothing for me?" Steve complained.

He knew Buck heard him even though he was fixing his hair at his bathroom mirror while Buck stubbornly read a magazine at the table by the living room window.

"You don't need my help anymore. All you need is to get outta your own way," Buck told him.

"Girls, Buck. This is not a grown woman. It's a college girl and she's gonna call all her friends. I'll be outnumbered at least ten-to-one. I don't know how to dance to modern music. The least you could do is help me out with that," Steve said.

Buck appeared at his bathroom doorway.

"There's no steps to the modern stuff. It's all freestyle. The less you think, the better. It's crude stuff. If you can fuck, you can dance," Buck told him.

"Shit," Steve muttered under his breath.

Buck laughed.

"Yeah, you're in it. If you go in the club all square and formal, you're toast. Keep your fore-brain for everything else, but with the girls, use this," Buck said.

He reached and touched his metal fingers to the base of Steve's skull briefly.

"Shit," Steve repeated.

"You can do it. I know you can. Maybe not last year, but you can now. The trick is finding your line and not crossing it. Don't end up with a girl making claims against you again. I didn't do such a good job with you last time. Talia will do better," Buck assured.

"Bruce did some bloodwork a few minutes ago," Steve said while he got his toothbrush ready.
"I don't need the numbers. I can see you're running hot. Did you do anything about it?" Buck asked.

Steve waved a hand at his shower while he brushed.

Bucky grunted, sounding skeptical. Steve looked good, all things considered, though Buck knew going out dressed like a kid bothered him. Steve had earned the dignity of dressing more upscale than this, but Buck figured there was precise purpose in everything Talia had laid out for him to wear.

Steve was in a tee-shirt appropriate for meeting a college girl, something that showed off his body more than he liked unless he was training or working. It was a faded red color and seemed to emphasize his Irish complexion. The jeans were blue, but barely. They were so dark as to be almost black. They fit tight around his hips and ass but gave his legs some room to move. Bucky smirked at the fit, certain Talia had chosen the fabric because it clung to him as lovingly as the shirt.

There was a leather jacket laid across the bed but it wasn't his old brown one. The thing was a pale buff shearling biker jacket with a luxurious creamy fleece collar. Even Buck wanted to rub his hands all over it, so he knew it would give the girls an excuse to get their hands on Steve. He grinned and wondered if Steve understood that the jacket was about more than staying warm. Steve slipped the jacket on and tugged at the lapels to settle his shoulders into it.

He turned to the mirror on his dresser and frowned.

"I look ridiculous. The clothes are crap, but this jacket is more expensive than a nice suit. Who dresses like this?" Steve groused at his reflection.

"A guy who has more money than sense. Tonight, that's supposed to be you. Talia's trying to downplay the badass bloody Captain video that went out yesterday by making you look like a harmless fop. Do the collar-yeah, like that," Buck said.

Steve had intuitively flipped up the jacket's collar in the back and left the wide lapels to lay flat under their own weight. The slope of the collar and the breadth of his shoulders made him look huge and over-the-top aggressively stylish. His head drew back in disgust and he raised his hands to lay the back of the collar down.

"No, don't. It's cold out. Looks fine like that. You're good to go," Buck said.

He looked down to the last detail, Steve's shoes. They were nondescript dark brown leather, good soles. Anyone who was familiar with the Captain would see they didn't look much different from his uniform boots except they were nicely unobtrusive under his jeans. Talia had him ready to run and fight if he needed to. The only problem was his clothes were too snug to conceal any weapons. The shearling jacket had just the two obvious outside pockets. Buck supposed he would be relying on his wits and backup tonight if he needed help. He didn't like Steve going out with no battle gear but they both trusted Talia.

Steve absently rubbed his hands against the soft suede of the jacket. His eyes cut to Buck's in the mirror and he frowned.

"I can't wear this jacket. Maybe outside, but not in a club. I'll burn up," Steve said.

Buck laughed. Steve was figuring things out about the purpose of the jacket and protesting, but too shy to say exactly what he thought.

"So take it off when you get to the club so you don't sweat to death. Let one of the girls wear it, hell, let them pass it around. Wait, you need something with that."
Buck had an idea and went into the bathroom. He sniffed at the bottles of cologne on the counter which Steve never used. He picked one that smelled woodsy, slightly smoky, but still clean. He sprayed a spritz of it in the air in front of Steve. The dunce looked at him like he'd lost his mind for intentionally missing him.

"Walk through it, you idiot, before it all falls out of the air. Get some on you and the jacket," Buck told him.

Steve waved a hand in front of his face to supposedly keep the cloud of scent away from his nose, but he obeyed.

"There. See, I helped you. Now get your ass downstairs. Don't get surly or bark at the girls for touching you. You're their bitch tonight. Remember, cameras are everywhere. You'll do fine, sweetcheeks," Buck said.

Bucky slapped him on the rump and shoved him out the door.

Steve got into the elevator looking like he was chewing steel. He could still hear Bucky laughing his ass off behind the closed door. An unwilling smile pulled at his cheeks. It was great to hear Buck laughing with genuine humor, even if it was at his expense. Used to, he would have been nervous that Buck was pranking him, sending him out looking like a fool. He knew better. Steve was uneasy about what he'd seen in the mirror. Looking like this made him empathetic for Estrella. He didn't want to admit it, but he was afraid of what his looks were going to get him into.

"You are more nervous than before a mission, Captain. Is there anything I can do to allay your fears?" Jarvis asked helpfully as he took him down to the parking garage.

"You can stop talking about it," Steve said.

"I do apologize. Please, Sir, try to enjoy your evening. Mister Stark says you look fabulous," Jarvis remarked.

"Not helping," Steve ground out.

So help him, if the AI laughed at him, he was going to damage the elevator just to spite Tony.

Natasha waited for him in the garage. She was dolled up in a little black dress with a plunging neckline. The skirt was surprisingly full. Steve knew she needed somewhere to hide her equipment. Nobody would notice the off-fashion of the skirt because her bare legs were very distracting and her breasts looked like they might peek out at any moment. The center of her chest begged for a kiss right beneath the tiny, delicate charm necklace which hung between the swells of her- he couldn't call it cleavage because they were somehow gravity defiant and not pressed together.

"Great. Thanks, Romanoff," Steve grumbled.

He adjusted himself in his jeans because Nat had made him lose the relaxed state he'd been hoping to keep for a while. Good God, he wanted to bend her over the seat of the bike that was parked behind her and flip up her short skirt. He liked the style just fine, even if there were surely sharp things hidden in it.

Nat gave him a saucy smirk and waited for him to get to her. She lifted a keyring on a finger. Steve took it and eyed the bike.

"It's not American," he protested.
Natasha actually rolled her eyes.

"It is. Only the engine is Japanese, Steve. The rest is a custom build from California. Here," she said.

His hand automatically went to her waist when she stepped close to him and pressed a tiny thing into his ear. He felt it stick to the inside of his ear canal. It was so small it was already warm from being on Nat's finger. It was a new communication device, smaller even than the ones they used on missions.

"Go get your girl and I'll ghost you to the club. It's only you and me on the comm so don't worry about what you say," Nat told him.

She indicated another bike parked not far from the larger one he was to use. There was a black leather coat over its seat, so he quit worrying about his partner's comfort in the biting cold air.

Steve wasn't concerned about the clothes, the bike or the young lady Natasha had helped him choose. It was the crowds and the music which had him feeling anxious about the evening.

The bike was very different from his Harley. It was taller and faster, but lighter and less powerful. He adjusted to driving it quickly and felt capable enough to pick up his date and transport her safely. It took a while to get across town to his date's apartment. He didn't wear a helmet so he was pretty sure some people on the street around him recognized him. Steve waved and smiled at some people in a cab beside him who were madly waving at him. Tourists, probably.

His date had likely been watching for him through a window. Breanna Hodge came flying down the steps of her building. She pushed her phone into her coat pocket and Steve couldn't decide whether she ran or skipped to his bike. He'd planned to go up and get her like a proper date should but she'd made that unnecessary.

"Hi, I'm Bree," she told him.

She smiled so big at him that Steve couldn't help but smile back. She was pretty and charming and if he had to use a descriptor for her, he thought she was cute. She held out her hand like they were associates meeting for business, then ruined that impression by kissing his cheek while he shook her hand. It wasn't a quick peck.

"I'm supposed to call you Steve?" she asked.

"That would be great, Bree. I don't wanna think about work if I can help it," Steve said.

"I know, right? It's Tuesday but it feels like it should be Saturday," she agreed.

"It's still the middle of the week for me," he commented.

"Yeah, um, the thing on Facebook. That was pretty intense. And ohmygod, what was that today? Are you making PSAs now? Or, like a national pep-talk? What did that even mean?" Bree asked him.

He got off the bike and stood on the sidewalk with her. The girl looked up at him with wide eyes as he stepped close. He could tell she was delighted by his size, probably feeling a little hero-dazzled too. She was a New Yorker, so she didn't let herself get fluttered over him for long. She laughed and pushed a fist gently into his belly, then fanned her hand like it had burned her and laughed some more. She seemed to stumble around on her feet in a way that was playful and energetic. Steve grinned and pushed his hand through his hair. He wasn't sure quite what to do with a coltish
young lady like her. She made him feel more like an uncle compelled to entertain her than a serious date.

She looked up at him with blue-green cat-like eyes from under her jaunty mop of crinkle-curl dark hair. Her skin was a smooth shade of café-au-lait. Natasha hadn't presented him with any ladies who weren't spectacularly pretty and Breanna was a looker.

Or she would be. She had the exuberance of youth yet untempered by the weight of care and responsibility. Her profile said she was twenty-two. That made her only a little younger than Estrella. She seemed ages younger when Steve looked into her eyes. Some of his concerns about the evening eased. She felt like a kid to him. He liked his women a little more experienced by life. Breanna might be amusing to spend time with tonight but he didn't imagine himself being seriously tempted by her. She was too untried by adversity for them to have much common ground.

Bree stood on the sidewalk staring at him in the pale yellow light from the lamppost overhead. Steve leaned against the post and let her stare. He snagged a finger in the shiny-poofy coat she wore and pulled her closer to him so she wouldn't block the sidewalk. He didn't feel the need to make conversation while she stared at him. Used to, he would have thought he needed to. Something in his dates with Sharon and Darcy had taught him he didn't have to maintain conversation all the time.

Her eyes shifted around all over him, making little effort to do anything but stare at him. She seemed most interested in his center front which was shadowed by the opening of the jacket. Steve pushed one hand into his front jeans pocket to hopefully disguise the state Nat had left him in. He didn't want the kid thinking that was for her.

"You don't say a lot," Bree finally commented.

"Oh, I can talk. I was letting you satisfy your curiosity. You wanna go someplace? You mentioned dancing, drinks, and a club when I contacted you this afternoon. I don't know much about that. Do you have a place in mind?" he asked.

She nodded.

He didn't like the way she'd gone big-eyed and nonverbal. It was cold enough out that he could see her breaths puffing shallow and a little fast. She stomped her clunky boots and shivered. Much like Natasha, he wondered why women persisted in wearing short skirts in cold weather. Even with a coat, all that exposed leg would lose a lot of body heat. Peggy would have worn-

Steve shook his head and made a face at himself for once again thinking of Peggy, which caused him to think of Estrella's fussing about his comparisons, which caused him to smile. Then he thought of Natasha parked on her bike a block away, waiting. Her legs would be getting cold while he stood here and talked with the kid.

He pushed his finger into the edge of her front coat pocket and tugged her a little closer. People passed by in the spot where she'd been standing.

"Who's upstairs? Do you live with friends, or should I go say hello to your father?" he asked her.

Breanna made a boyish snorting sound and shook her head.

"Just friends. If you wanted to meet my father, you'd have to do some heavy spy stuff to find him. Nobody else can. Omygod, this jacket. Can I pet you?" she asked.

"Sure. Bree?" Steve asked her.
She was distracted with rubbing her hands on the front of the soft sueded lambskin over his chest. Her fingers crept up onto the wooly shearling lapels and he let her molest them.

"Hmm?" she asked.

"Think you can help me out tonight?" he asked her.

Geez, she already wanted to kiss him. Steve used the opportunity while she was staring at his lips to look around and check that nothing sinister or Hydra-flavored was happening around them. The comm in his ear was silent, so that was good.

"It really rubs me the wrong way when somebody says 'omg.' I have a hard time taking them seriously," he said as gently as he could.

"I'm on it. You can spank me if I say it. Cool?" Breanna said.

Steve tipped his head down and laughed.

"Are you sure about that? I might spank pretty hard," he warned her.

She grinned really big and did an anxious little dance on the sidewalk that seemed to shake her bottom at him as if she might enjoy a spanking. She was looking at his mouth again. He had to put a stop to that. He got back on the borrowed bike. Internally, he was thankful that Natasha understood things. He wouldn't have wanted this kid in Estrella's place on his bike.

"If we're going somewhere, mount up. Your lips are turning blue," he said.

"Yippie-kiyay," she quipped and got on behind him.

Steve preferred the sound of his Harley when he kicked it, but the Suzuki engine had a rev which seemed to match Breanna's bright young energy. He decided he liked the girl. He wasn't sure about the bike.

Breanna clung to him like a monkey and laughed with every acceleration and turn he made. He wondered if she'd ever ridden on a bike. She gave him directions to the club she liked and he parked where he probably wasn't supposed to. The key fob for the bike had a red button like his, so he pressed it. The handle grips briefly glowed red and a blue streak of lights chased down the bike's pinstripe detailing.

"Natasha, will there be trouble for us if anyone touches this motorcycle?" he asked his partner in French.

"No, it would be only a small jolt," she replied.

Nat's French was better, smoother than his. He wasn't surprised.

The club had a line outside, even on a Tuesday night. Breanna was distracted looking at her phone while they got in and he was glad of it. She apparently hadn't noticed that he spoke in a different language to someone else. Steve slipped his wallet back into his rear pocket and escorted his date into the dark, thumping building.

He winced at the noise and the crowd until his ears adjusted to the sheer volume of the sound. If he had PTSD he would have felt it. The bass booming from the speakers near the dancefloor reminded him of a mix of sounds from the war, none of them pleasant. The sight of exuberant young bodies bouncing to the music calmed his agitation. People were happy here. Nothing bad was happening.
His scanning eyes caught on a flash of red hair and the familiar shape of a shoulder and collarbone. Natasha. She'd allowed herself to be seen. Steve relaxed.

Breanna grabbed his fingers and pulled him through the crowd until Steve was apologizing to the people he had to push through to keep up with the kid. He slewed his body aside to avoid a waitress with a tray of drinks above her head, then twisted again to continue following his date through the crowd.

A chorus of female squeals arose from a table Breanna approached. Steve smirked. He'd expected this. They were counting on it to send the message they wanted. Steve counted seven of Breanna's friends already in the club awaiting her arrival. A few more hurried to the table when they saw him approaching.

She didn't have the mass or strength to do it, but Steve felt that Bree meant to sling him at her friends. He understood her sentiment. Buck's taunting words came back to him. He was their bitch tonight. He pretended to let the kid toss him to her friends like ill-gotten pirate booty because it was a fun mental concept he'd never considered. The kid was nothing if not fun. Where she lacked in other more substantial areas, she made up for in entertainment value.

"Holy shit, bitch! Oh my god! You brought Captain fucking America to us!" one of them said.

Breanna managed to look smug and adorable at the same time as she slinked proudly toward her friends at the table. Steve jostled the table only a little, then pinched the edge of it in a stabilizing grip so the ladies' drinks wouldn't spill from his abrupt arrival.

"Yeah, but if you want him to stay, you'll muzzle the language," Steve snarked.

He looked around at the girls. Young women, really, but his mind kept referring to them as girls. When he'd been their age women had been married, working in war munitions factories, doing everything they could for the war effort in one way or another, or grieving lost husbands. They may have been the same age as ladies he remembered from his earlier life but they felt less mature.

"Yeah, old man?" a blonde girl challenged him.

"Yeah. If I want that kinda talk, I'll go find a VA hospital and hang out with the guys," Steve said.

Several of Breanna's friends stared at him until they saw he wasn't joking. He was smiling but he meant what he said.

Her friends were comprised of different types of women. There were short and tall, light and dark, delicate and robust girls among them, and more seemed to crowd around. They lacked proper introductions and maybe that was a good thing. A stout curvy blonde reached out and touched him as if to verify he was real. He felt the touch of her fingers at his hip as Breanna snuggled up behind him. Another of her friends touched his face.

Steve looked aside over his shoulder as Breanna put an arm around his waist under the jacket. Her fingers almost met the other girl's as they played near his belly.

"You gonna let these other dames maul me? I'm supposed to be with you," Steve asked playfully.

"You're big enough to share," Breanna said.

Steve wondered about exactly what she meant, but then decided he was thinking too hard. He sat on a stool someone pulled to the table for him and Breanna slid onto his lap. His arm went around behind her back to support her. She felt slim and antsy against him, not much softness to her. He
made to pull his hand away from where she set it on her thigh, but then he relaxed and left it there. Her legs were cold.

"You're so hot. Fy, you've gotta feel him. You don't mind, do you, Steve?" Breanna asked him after her brunette friend already had her hands under his jacket.

"Nah, I'll let you know if I do," Steve said.

He minded. If all this was up to him, he'd keep his personal space. Tonight wasn't about his preferences, though. His purpose was to be seen with these girls, to make it appear that he didn't mind other women touching him because there wasn't supposed to be an 'other.' He was supposed to play with them some and to look happy about their hands on him. Part of him was perfectly happy with the idea. The other part of him felt like flesh for hire with the way their hands and eyes were all over him.

These girls were simple. Not that they were necessarily dumb, but their intent was obvious. They wanted to get familiar with Cap in a way that didn't require deep conversation. Breanna and her friends talked in lively chatters. They had to nearly shout to be heard over the thumping dance music. A few of the usual questions were asked of him, but they mostly talked to each other. He shrugged off the shearling coat onto the stool's back and draped his date's coat over it behind him. There was a collective pause in their chatting when his snug shirt was revealed. Breanna turned to stare at him too and her eyes showed her appreciation of the clothes Natasha had dressed him in.

"C'mon. It's awkward when you stare. Tell me what you study," Steve urged her.

"Eastern economies with a focus on local development strategy," Breanna half shouted at him.

Steve wished he had something in his ears to moderate the sheer volume of the sound around them, but he understood her. It was taking him a while to overcome the urge to leave for someplace quieter.

"Impressive. Do you plan to work for an NGO?" he asked her.

Breanna nodded but she didn't say anything else. She squirmed a little on his leg until her hip rested against his. His hand shifted toward the inner curve of her thigh. The move hadn't been intentional and he was alarmed to see excitement flare in her expression. It felt incredibly forward to rub on a girl's bare skin like this. He eased his hand more along the top of her leg and back as if his earlier slip had been part of a repeated caress along the top of her thigh. Steve had the thought that nylons had served the purpose of letting a guy pet a girl some without it feeling quite so shocking as all this bare skin.

Steve was the one shocked when a hand came around his side at his ribs then slipped straight for his groin. A plump, sly looking girl had come to his right side while he was distracted with Breanna's skin. He remembered Nat telling him he was shit at awareness when he had sex on the brain and Nat was obviously right. It was all he could do to avoid jumping and yelling like a virgin as the new girl unexpectedly groped him.

"Step off, bitch! He's here with me," Bree said.

Her hand pushed the sly girl's groping away and covered his dick with her own. He'd been hard since he first saw Natasha in the parking garage tonight, so there was plenty for her to claim.

"Whoa. Let's slow down some," he told her.

Breanna had melted back against him and turned her face to nuzzle at his jaw. Her hair tickled.
Steve gently eased her hand aside from his denim-covered erection while his date's sly friend contented herself with leaning against his shoulder and resting her hand on his chest.

Steve chuckled and shook his head. There were twelve girls around their table now and more loosely gathered around. Most eyes were on him, but some looked to each other or their phones. A leg pressed against his under the table.

"You doing okay?" Natasha asked in his ear.

"Good for now," he murmured to his partner.

It eased his mind to know Nat was observing. There was a lot of movement behind him and he couldn't see any of it. Nat would alert him if he needed to pay attention to anything. A waitress came by and asked him if he wanted something. It was clear that word was spreading about him being in the club.

Steve hoped the low light would make it a little more difficult for them to get pictures with their phones. Breanna was draped on him in a proprietary way but she allowed her friends to touch him as long as it wasn't in the way of what she wanted to do to him. Her hand crept back toward his groin. He touched the side of her wrist with a finger, letting her know not to grab him again. His dick certainly didn't mind the attention, but he wasn't eager to be her plaything so easily. And there were cameras to consider.

It was oddly sinister how the girls conversed among each other while hands wandered on him, over him, down him, all without anyone speaking directly to him. Breanna frequently looked to his face to make sure he was alright with it. At least there was that much consideration.

Steve shifted his posture on the stool so that Breanna and his shoulder were obstacles to the worst of the groping. They liked touching his back and sides too. That wasn't as bad as them repeatedly, intentionally rubbing over his nipples. Drinks were brought around and he took one, no matter that it may have been intended for someone else. He needed something cold inside to chill the heat which built in him from all the physical attention.

He looked to the dance floor. The music was a club mix of hip-hop and other styles he couldn't identify. Bucky was right. People were doing as they pleased. Some of what happened on the dance floor looked like sex with clothes on and some looked more artistic and talented.

"Wanna dance?" Steve asked his date.

"Aren't you kind of old for dancing?" Bree asked him.

Steve brought his hand up under her thigh in a mild swat which widened her eyes.

"Do you think I would have come here with you if I was too old to dance?" he challenged her.

Breanna giggled after she got over the shock of being spanked by Captain America. She squirmed on his lap in a way that again told him she wouldn't mind a spanking. He'd felt like an indulgent uncle before. Now he was starting to feel like some kind of twisted father figure. It messed with his head and he shook it once, then got to his feet. He downed the last of the drink from the plastic cup, then took several pieces of ice into his mouth for their cooling effect. It was his turn to tow Breanna behind him through the crowds.

More hands reached out to touch him as he carefully but firmly pressed his way through the people between him and his goal.
"Creeper on your two," Nat cautioned him.

Steve looked to see a face in the crowd which stared at him with strange intensity. It was a young guy, probably not Hydra, just an obsessed fan. The kid stood there and glared while others moved and smiled and danced around him.

"I see him," he responded to Natasha.

It likely wouldn't be a problem, but it was strange. Hill had warned him that with a fan base came some mentally unhealthy fanaticism. Steve pushed the odd moment to the back of his mind and got to the dance floor.

The music was almost as loud as a sonic weapon and bodies pressed around him in a way that made him want some space. The fancy lights which only partially illuminated the dark gave everything a secretive, moody feel as if you could do anything and maybe not get seen doing it. Nat wasn't warning him about anything, so he did like Bucky suggested and let his consciousness slip to the baser part of his brain. It wasn't hard to figure things out after that.

Like bars all across Europe during the war, this place was a meat market. The young people around him weren't on leave, desperate for good times before they had to face the artillery again. Now, like then, idle youth looked for either violence or sex as a means to excitement. Since there wasn't any conflict to be had, it only made sense that the ear-pounding darkness around him was saturated with sexuality.

He'd been watching the dance floor since he'd walked into the place. Like learning new combat skills, he bent his mind to understanding the meaning and purpose of movement. Some guys on the dance floor moved with almost feminine abandon. Some only danced by interacting with their partners in sex-like moves. Some did their own thing, absorbed in true skill and enjoyment of the music. Others stood almost still as if they were merely a display prop for their partner to perform near. Steve observed a consensus of how the music made others feel and he put himself in the same mental place.

It felt right to move his body at half-time with the music while he supported Breanna around him. He mostly enjoyed watching her dance while he became more confident that he wasn't making a fool of himself. Hands and bodies touched him and he looked to see that some of Breanna's friends had joined them on the dance floor.

Steve wondered if Breanna would follow a lead. She was an energetic and creative dancer, so she had the ability if he could make a mental connection with her. When one of her friends got too touchy with him, Steve guided her around to disrupt the overeager groping. He wasn't sure if Bree realized what he was doing at first, but she eventually did.

The girl lit up with the fun of being used as his tool. She looked to him and smiled as if they were great partners when he urged her one way or the other. To make it worth her while, he pulled her in close and let her bounce and rub against him when no one else needed scraping off of him.

Steve snapped his head up when he heard a loud voice say something about Captain America. There was some noise in the crowd but the music didn't stop, nor did the dancing. There was an elevated alcove off to the side, a little more brightly lit than everywhere else. A man was there with the sound equipment controlling the music in the club. As Steve looked, the guy smiled and gestured to him, nodding along to the beat he was putting out. Steve acknowledged the guy and kept dancing. He wasn't thrilled to be announced like a celebrity but it served the planned purpose of him being here.
Breanna laughed and turned to kiss him. Steve tucked his head down and let her kiss land on his cheek. She was constantly rubbing against him. It was stimulating and impersonal at the same time. He glanced around and saw it was only Breanna's friends who pressed against him and laid hands on him. The girls forced him to be careful how he moved but they weren't so bad. They at least kept a buffer between him and guys like his creepy fan.

The music changed to something slower with a harder beat. People around them shouted, apparently excited to hear a familiar song. Steve had never heard it and certainly didn't know it. He didn't need to. The energy the song imparted to the crowd was palpable. Breanna was sweating despite the air in the club blowing frigid onto the dance floor. He moved his body harder to the music, as did everyone else. The girls around him were shaken off or they got bumped away. A little space opened around him, just enough to feel some fresh air on his skin.

Breanna turned around in his arms and pressed her bottom to his groin. Steve didn't like the animalistic way some of the girls bent at the waist when they did that, so he wrapped an arm around her to keep her upright against him. That worked better than he'd planned because now Bree was pinned to him, bouncing and mildly struggling. She didn't understand what he was doing until he held her immobile against him and moved both of them to the music.

The girl made a strained whine he barely heard over the noise and she relaxed in his grip. She seemed to like letting him move them now that he had her. Her hands went down to grip his thighs which did most of the work. Her head lolled back at his collarbone and he smiled down at the dreamy look on her face. Her bottom was backed up against what she'd wanted to feel. There was no way she could get out of the lock of his arm around her, but she clearly didn't want to.

The placement of his hand was somewhat awkward fisted at her hip. Breanna had thought groping him was alright, so he opened his hand and cupped his fingers over her mons through her dress. The crowds were tight. No one would get a pic of where he rested his hand. No one could see. From the whimpering sound she made not far from his ear, Steve was certain she didn't mind his change in grip. When her body attempted to arch back at him, pressing further into his groin he knew she wasn't protesting the handling.

It was sensually delightful to have the girl in his arms and an excuse to move rhythmically with her. Though she'd turned her backside to provoke him, his firm hold on her kept her from stimulating him too much. Steve laughed out loud. Bucky was right. Modern dancing wasn't difficult for anyone who understood sex.

Thoughts of Estrella tried to intrude. She would feel better, smell better against him. Imagining her with him like this almost swooned him. He wouldn't be able to do it. He wanted her so badly that he wouldn't be able to pay attention to the music and they would end up moving to their own rhythm. Steve again shook his head to loosen the thoughts of the woman he really wanted to experience this with. The slim girl in his arms was fine enough for now.

Thor's teachings flowed in his mind and he felt right with what he was doing. Breanna was enjoyable. The touch of her friends was pleasant on his skin and over his clothes, under his clothes. Steve knew the carnal satisfaction he felt showed on his face and in the way he moved. It served to show whoever cared to watch that he was thoroughly enjoying the moment and not at all concerned about any other person of romantic interest.

A brief flash of grief for how this might sadden Estrella went through his mind, but his mind was quick and it likely didn't show. It was more important to keep her physically safe by misleading his enemies. Better still if he spread his attentions around among Breanna's friends so Hydra wouldn't focus on any one of them as a means to get to him.
Steve released Breana gradually as the song ended. The girl wasn't reliable on her feet until he got her turned around and set away from him a bit. She looked at him with eyes better suited to the bedroom. He felt the same smile on his face which Sharon had inspired. Breanna was his for the taking if he wanted her. His body wanted, but his mind was on task.

The next song was fast, high energy with almost shrill female vocals. It sounded electronically manipulated into sounds a human was unlikely to make. Steve couldn't understand most of the words but there was a strong sense of feminine anger in it. Breanna was no match for the music in her current state. She lolled at his side and he guided her off the dance floor toward their table.

She laughed and put her arms around his neck when he lifted her into a cross-body carry. They'd get there faster if he carried her and he wanted a cold drink. Someone was in his chair. The brunette girl moved for him to set Breanna down. He took an ice water from a passing tray of them and drank it down in one tip of the glass. He wasn't so much thirsty as hot. Breanna gripped the sides of the stool and watched him with smoky eyes. Her friends looked him over and he knew there was no hiding the fullness at the front of his jeans. He didn't care.

"I'm gonna go dance, if you don't mind," he told his date.

"Come back to me," she said.

"Or you could come find me when you catch your breath. I didn't know a babygirl like you would have trouble keeping up with an old man," he teased her.

Breanna fake-pouted at him but she didn't protest when Steve invited her brunette friend to return to the dancefloor with him. He held out his hand and the girl didn't hesitate.

He didn't ask her name and didn't feel the need to. The less he knew, the better. The angry girl song was still playing and his new partner liked it. She had a different kind of energy than Breanna, a little more mature and wild. They weren't even fully onto the dance floor before she had him snuggled to her backside. Bree's other friends were still there and dancing. They called out to Steve and his partner excitedly when they saw him.

Steve was sucked into a halo of rubbing, grabbing women. He laughed and let them do their worst. They weren't trying to truly hurt him, they only wanted a piece of him. There was a lot of thrashing and hair flying around with the girl-rage song. Steve lifted his arms, moved to the beat and let them maul him. There was scratching and pinching and he twitched his body more than once to dislodge a persistent abuser of his ass.

A dark girl, maybe East Indian, got in his face and yelled lyrics at him while she danced. That was fine if she was feeling it, but he wasn't okay with her digging her fingers at his hip and intentionally pinching his tip. Gently, he gathered her wrists behind her and brought her closer to rub at what she'd hurt. She wasn't okay with that, so he let her go. She left the dance floor and another girl took her place in front of him.

It was the brunette who'd come to dance with him. She moved in close and rubbed his erection soothingly in apology.

"She had a bad breakup last week. Sorry about that," she said near his ear to be heard above the music.

Steve nodded and didn't try to communicate. His dance partner twined her arms around his neck and looked him in the eyes while she sensually twitched to the song. Somebody else was snuggled at his back rubbing his thighs while another girl was messing with his shoulders and his hair.
The brunette didn't need to say a thing. Except for their clothes she would be fucking him right here on the dance floor. Steve's hands moved to her hips. He did his part and played along. The song changed to something less angsty but the beat stayed exactly the same. Steve glanced over to the music booth and the man at the controls grinned at him. Steve smiled back, then gave his full attention to his partner.

He couldn't follow her moves at first, then he understood she was moving at half time like he had earlier. When he fell into rocking with her rhythm heat bloomed along his skin. The girl behind him matched them both and hands moved through his hair, tugging his head back.

Steve was suddenly in a multi-girl fantasy he hadn't expected. Keeping his public decorum was hopeless as he got lost in his imagination. He'd always wanted to pay attention to one lady at a time so as to not miss anything. With the feel of bodies and hands all over him he couldn't pay attention to anything except sensation. Unlike the last song, the girls weren't as punishing. They gripped, pushed and pulled but there wasn't any pain.

The brunette girl was doing a great job of building him toward bliss with steady rubbing pressure. The girls around him liked the working tension in his body as he moved. They made encouraging, seductive sounds that had him thinking of naked skin and the smells of sex.

Time seemed to slow but he didn't want it to stop. The music was like a cardiac thrum in the background and the modern noise of it no longer bothered him. The girl in his hands shuddered in a pattern he recognized. His vision focused long enough to remember that he was in public and a girl was getting off on him. He wasn't far behind.

Steve pressed her in close for a hug, then set her away.

If the last song had been girl rage, then the next pounded with a male ferocity he immediately related to. Not all the guys on the floor could keep up with the punishing beat, but several could. The girls around him gave him some room but Steve stood still. There were a few men on the dancefloor who had earned their own space. Steve watched the startlingly athletic things they did with the song while everyone else cheered them on. Breanna rejoined him where he stood watching. She gave him a little nudge of encouragement, but Steve refused to move.

He really wanted to move to the song, but nobody here could see what was in his head. He wanted Bucky. Thor or Sam would do nicely too, but Buck was the agile, playful one who didn't mind busting his nose. While the other guys danced, Steve imagined fighting with Buck, choreographing the strikes and blocks to the driving beat. He was disrupted from his fantasy when a hard body collided with his.

Steve automatically braced hands on the guy to keep anyone from getting hurt, but he'd misunderstood his intent. The man was taller than him but slimmer, wiry with muscle. While Steve held his arms in a secure grip, the guy smiled at him in challenge and moved the rest of his body to the song, occasionally giving Steve a hard body-check. He looked like he was genuinely having fun and knew what he was doing, so Steve let him go.

Room cleared around Steve and the dancer and people started to hoot or call out for Cap to move, to dance. Steve smiled and shook his head, but then muscle memory had him snap his arm up in a block when the guy faked at him.

The crowd made excited noises. Steve sighed. The guy taunting him to dance had slick black skin and unbelievable dance moves. It would be fun to give in and they would look good together. Steve let his partner lead him into it. There were nervous looking bouncers gathering at the edge of the floor but the guy was clearly the instigator and Steve the reluctant one.
"Careful, Cap," Nat said in his ear.

He could hear a smile in her voice. She trusted him to be gentle with the civilian.

The next time the rhythm of the song had the guy come at him, Steve gripped his arm hard and held it immobile. The guy felt the security in the firm grip and flashed up in a series of kicks around and over Steve's head. Steve gave him a hint what he was going to do next, then slung the guy toward the floor. The man managed to dance and skid at the same time, pressed down, then popped up in a way that defied what the human body was known to do. Steve grabbed him again on the next beat and snapped him around, at which the guy swept his feet at where Steve had been standing. Steve easily hopped, tucked and rolled to thump into a solid stand opposite of where he'd been. Natasha laughed in his ear. That was a very familiar move of theirs in the training room.

Steve had the music memorized now. The other guy knew the song too. Steve smiled. He advanced on the guy with a series of controlled grabs, punches and blocks, all timed to the music. For him, it was slow and predictable. The dancer had just enough time to see and react with hilariously exaggerated freestyle moves that jerked, dodged, and struck back also in time to the music. Neither of them was really hitting, merely enjoying the creativity, the motion and the music. Steve stood still and let the guy grandstand around him for several beats, blocking and dodging where appropriate. He couldn't stop smiling. It was more fun than he'd had in a while.

The music master in the booth slowed the song down and it inspired Steve to do a few things the faster beat hadn't. His partner came at him with motions that looked like a spastic, malfunctioning robot. His face was likewise contorted in studiously comical expressions. Steve trusted the man's expertise to not hurt himself.

He power lifted the guy above his head with one hand, jerked his stiffly held form three beats to the song as if he was slow-motion shaking the life from a robot in combat, then herky-jerky drove him to the ground and soft-pounded into his side and back with blows that compressed his body but had no velocity. The man twitched in a convincing performance of a dying android with each blow and the crowd roared and hooted.

Steve laughed with delight and pulled the man to his feet. His partner smiled and they exchanged friendly shoulder bumps. The bouncers looked relieved and started to melt away into the crowd.

"I've never seen dancing like that. What's your name?" Steve yelled over the beginning of the next song.

"Yeah, well you missed a few years. I ain't nothin. Jon-jon, of the Bronx," the man said.

Steve shook his offered hand.

"We see you do shit, but damn, you're strong. You just lift like that?" Jon-jon asked as if he hadn't felt it himself.

"It ain't nothin, just messin around," Steve copied his downplay of what he could do.

"I saw you standing there all stiff and bottled up, figured you might let it off if I brought some to you," Jon-jon said.

"Good call. I wanted to, but I didn't know what to do. That was great. Thanks," Steve said.

"Ima let you run. You got half the women in the house waiting on you," Jon-jon said.

Steve nodded and turned away to go find Breanna. He couldn't stop smiling. The impromptu mock
dance-fight reminded him of the time he and Buck had been running through the forest with Estrella and they'd found an off-balance boulder to horse around on top of. He wished he had time to play with the idea more but he didn't right now.

Breanna found him. The girl looped her arm through his and handed him a drink.

"That's from the house. A waitress said she was supposed to thank you and ask you not to do that again," Bree relayed the message.

Steve laughed and took a sip of the iced whiskey. They'd cut it with water but he didn't mind. It was cold and he'd happily have taken water or soda. Breanna walked with him back to their table. This time his chair was empty and there were a lot of girls around, and some guys. One young woman had a pen and a napkin. She looked hopeful. Steve smiled and winked at her, but shook his head no. He wasn't in the mood to play Cap right now. The girl seemed to understand and only pouted at him briefly. She stood there staring, but Steve was distracted when Breanna slid onto his lap again.

"It's easy to forget that you're him. You're not like I thought you'd be," Bree said at his ear.

"Eh, who wants to think about work all the time? I wasn't sure going to a dance club was a good idea, but thanks. This is fun," he told Breanna.

He sipped his drink and made room when his previous brunette dance partner slipped onto his other leg. He looked to Breanna but she didn't seem to mind. They must be good friends, he decided.

"She's Fyona, one of my roomies. She says you were real nice to her. Nicer than you were to me," Bree said archly.

"I wouldn't want to be a lousy date like that. What can we do to fix things?" Steve murmured at her hair.

These girls apparently shared everything. He could tell from the mischievous looks passing between Breanna, Fyona and a few of the others that they all knew Fyona had gotten off against him on the dance floor. Steve didn't feel bad about that. She'd done the rubbing and he'd just played along. He was pleased that he'd been able to control himself and not do the same. Cameras were everywhere tonight. The crowd of dancers might hide their bodies but not their faces. He sure as hell didn't want his sex-face out there for everyone to see.

"We can go to my place and even things up. You've got a lot of evening-up to do if you're game for it. Might take all night," Breanna said at his ear.

Natasha had to hear Breanna's words loud and clear. Steve chuckled at the absurd suggestion, then looked up from his drink to tease back at Breanna.

She wasn't joking. Neither were her friends. Several girls looked at him hungrily, hopefully. Breanna slid her hand to his groin and gave him a squeeze. He was hard as iron. She sighed impatiently and squirmed in his lap.

Shit. They really weren't joking. He had two girls in his lap so hot he could smell them. He looked up at the sly blonde who liked his shoulders. She bit her lip and looked at his. Two girls across the table, one dark and one pale, stood still and ready like predators. A sea of other people was behind them, many of them looking at him pretty much the same way.

"Alright, we'll go in a few. Gimme a minute," Steve said.
He carefully slid Bree and Fyona off of him. They laughed and the blonde who was always at his backside patted him as he walked away toward the restrooms.

Steve made his way past other people and pretended not to hear anyone who wanted to waylay him. The restrooms were down a hallway that had an exit door at the end of it. He felt Natasha fall in behind him as he pushed the alley access door open.

It was blessedly cold outside, and vacant. Steve pressed the steel door shut as soon as Natasha cleared it. There was the smell of stale cigarettes and empty liquor bottles back here by the dumpster. He moved away, deeper into the streetlight shadow cast by the next building. The thumping of music was still easy to hear through the exterior wall of the building, but it was muted. Steve found a spot and sank down to his haunches to think. He was aware of Natasha across the way keeping watch.

The pavement between his shoes was damp with dew and leaves swirled around among some old cigarette butts. His thoughts tried to go back to the dance floor, with women rubbing all over him, pulling and pushing at what they wanted. Then his thoughts advanced to possibilities of Breanna's apartment, five women on him, him on them. All the girls, all the people who made eyes at him. All the hands that wanted to touch him.

Any number of them would go home with him or take him home. The ones who wouldn't didn't matter at all because there were so many who would. It wouldn't require him mustering the courage to ask anybody out. He didn't have to pretend to be anyone better or less square than he was. No words at all were required, he suddenly knew. All he had to do was meet their eyes or crook his fingers at them. Getting sex wasn't complicated at all. Buck had said all he had to do was get out of his own way. It rubbed him wrong, how right Buck was lately.

He was an idiot. He hadn't needed to pay anyone. People wanted him, and not just because he was Cap. He could go back in the club and tell the girls that he'd pranked them and that he only looked like Cap, and they'd still take him home and ride him til they were all done. If he hadn't spent a few minutes playing around with Jon-jon, he could have. Hah! Even an outside observer like Jon-jon saw it.

Steve gripped his dick and squeezed the damn thing. It was overly eager to go play with the girls, to take them up on their offer. He leaned back against the wall of the building and gripped harder. Too bad that even a punishing grip was exciting because his mind played the sensation right into fantasy. Skin, sweat, sighs and so much pussy he wouldn't know which one to pay attention to next.

He groaned and rolled his head on his shoulders.

Some truths were becoming self-evident. Only he saw himself as the little guy anymore. Only Bucky knew firsthand that he was a hopeless mama's boy and doomed anytime he opened his mouth in front of women.

But he didn't have to open his mouth. If he let them see what he wanted, if he stopped being bright and shiny Cap and merely looked at them expectantly, they were his to have. Thinking of not just the club behind him, but to home and to work, Steve realized this wasn't just a thing that effected his off-duty time. He could have Hill, Pepper, half of the staff in the tower, probably including Billy. Lewis and Canburn were a given, and Tony was probably on the table too. Steve snorted a laugh. Yeah, Tony would do it on any table. If he wanted him to. Friendship, teammates, subordinate staff, it didn't matter. All he had to do was give them a look and they'd show up at his door.

Steve shuddered under the realization. It was too much. He didn't want to think like this. Not about
people he knew and cared for. Pep had tried to warn him, but he'd thought she was only talking about attraction, not actual follow-through. His thoughts had been too polite to consider the possibilities. But now he knew and he couldn't put the knowledge back in the bottle, so to speak.

He wondered why it mattered. Sex was only sex, over in a few minutes and often more trouble than the pleasure it gave. That answer was uncomfortable to face, too. It was about social dominance and breeding rights if he scratched beneath the civil surface of it and got to the root of what tried to light up his ego in a shameful way.

"My loyalty is ultimately to you. If you want to take off those training wheels and ride it around for a while before you have to park it in the same garage every night, nobody will hear a thing from me, not even Barnes or Barton," Natasha said.

He opened his eyes and looked across at her. How could she know what he was thinking? He stood up and let go of himself. Yeah, that had probably been a hint that he was barely hanging on. Nat didn't need two clues to rub together to figure things out.

"Come ooon, Rogers," she taunted him in a voice both sultry and bored, "I watched you wake up in there. You can't un-know it now. That you can have almost anything. Anyone. Took you long enough. Are you gonna do anything about it or do we go on pretending?"

"Psssh," Steve scoffed, "I've got enough trouble with Dana Harding putting my business in the media. I'd be too much of an idiot to tolerate myself if I made things worse."

"So, more pretending," Nat murmured.

She pushed away from the wall and ambled halfway across the alley toward him. He was thankful for the little things he saw her do which let him know she was keeping alert for their security. He was sure as hell useless right now. Steve lifted his hand slightly to tell her to stop. Wearing what she was, looking like she did, and with the thin edge of control he felt right now he didn't want her any closer.

"I'm the only one who can stop me, Nat. You know that. If pretending is how I do it, that's my choice," he told her.

"Fine, but you're being a rude date. If you're not going to deliver for those girls, you should bring them home and disappoint them like the gentleman you pretend to be," Nat told him.

"Yeah, you just want to get back to the tower and tell Buck all about little Stevie wanting to ditch his training wheels," he snarked as they went back into the club.

"I won't have to tell him. He'll see it," Nat said.

Steve walked out of the restroom hallway and Nat blended into the crowd behind him. He felt her melt away like an itch that stopped itching.

He felt different. It needed some thinking on because he wasn't sure it was good but he was going to go with it for now, just until he got home. He didn't make eye contact with the people around him. Some of them wanted to talk or get his attention. He flickered his eyes around enough to know there was no threat near him, then he focused on his goal and walked toward Breanna. People reached out to touch him. He didn't want them to.

Steve walked like he did when he had somewhere to go and people got out of his way. He didn't feel like sharing his time right now and they seemed to pick up on that. They stopped bothering him. He smiled for Breanna as he approached. The girl stared at him, then looked away when he
"You ready to go?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she said.

She searched his face for any sign of what his plans were for the rest of the night but he only got their coats and helped her into hers. He shrugged into the shearing and left the collar however it was. It didn't matter.

Breanna walked with his hand at her back and people got out of her way too. Steve sat on the rear part of the bike's seat to warm it for his date and to let the denim of his jeans absorb the nearly freezing dew which had collected there. He started the bike, then slid forward and offered a hand to help Bree onto the tall bike and her pre-warmed spot. She hissed when the insides of her legs touched other cold parts of the bike.

"I'll get you home fast as I can," he said.

She pressed close to his back for warmth and he encouraged her to burrow her hands under his fleece jacket. He didn't mind the way her hands gripped and roved over his chest and belly all the way back to her apartment. What he didn't want was someone in traffic getting a pic of her hands on his dick, so he stopped her from doing that when she tried.

Breanna was shivering when they arrived at her building. He didn't have to rush her to make her get inside quickly. She sighed with relief soon as they made it into the heated entry. Steve let her cuddle close on the way up in the elevator and this time he didn't mind if she got a feel of him because there was nobody and nothing to see them. He enjoyed her company and her hands on him.

Bree got her keys from her coat pocket and smiled at him. Steve stilled her hands when she went for the door locks and guided her to the wall beside her apartment door. 324 was her number and he wished he hadn't noticed. The young woman looked at him with wide, uncertain eyes.

"You're not coming in?" she asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Going in would be nothing but trouble for me and you know I have enough trouble already. I've enjoyed my evening with you, Miss Hodge," he said with some small show of regret.

"But-" Breanna frowned.

"What Fyona accomplished, she did on her own. You're a big girl, Bree. I think you can resolve things on your own. Can't you?" Steve asked.

She squeezed her eyes shut and frowned, biting her lip hard. When she opened them, there were tears welled up on her lower lids. Steve smirked at her ploy whether it was real or not. He stepped closer and kissed her at the corner of her eye, then at the corner of her mouth. She gasped just enough to part her lips and lick them. He was tempted to take a taste of her sweet whiskey-scented mouth like he was sure she intended him to be. He'd almost finished his goodbyes and gotten away when the elevator stopped on her floor and let out four more women.

"You're going?" Fyona asked when she saw them.

The women surrounded him and Breanna at the apartment door. The sly blonde got her keys and
opened the door wide.

"Yes, ma'am. It's been nice meeting you. Thank you for the evening's entertainment," Steve said politely.

"But you can't go. We want you to stay," Fyona told him.

The girls pressed around him. Their hands turned him beside Breanna and they set about convincing him that he would enjoy staying. Steve smiled indulgently because all the touching felt nice. It felt great to know he was wanted like this, but it was time to quit playing around and get home. He needed some relief and he could feel himself shaking. Just because he was calm and focused like Thor taught him didn't mean his body ignored the stimulation.

"Alright, time's up ladies," he told them.

Steve began carefully extricating himself from the press of bodies and was surprised when they collectively shoved him back at the wall and nudged him toward the open door. Breanna looked at him apologetically but the other girls were pushy.

It pissed him off. Nobody was gonna deny him leaving when he wanted to, not even cute little dames. Steve banked his anger because his impulse to get rough with them scared him. When he felt like this, all amped up and shaking, he knew he had to be extra careful with Estrella. He didn't feel like being careful with these girls. As the milliseconds passed and they refused to give way in front of his gentle efforts to leave, his muscles tensed to violently remove them from around him.

"Need extraction?" came Natasha's voice from the shadowed area near the stairwell.

Steve looked up and smiled at her. Electricity crackled from her bracelets. The dangerous popping, snapping sound got the girls' attention. Nat advanced on them and smiled back at Steve. He laughed.

If Nat had to use the painful but harmless stun setting on her bracelets, she was going to enjoy every moment of it. The girls saw the wicked anticipation on the Widow's face and ran. The door to the apartment slammed shut and the bolts and chain could be heard engaging.

"My savior," Steve said.

He was free to go. They chose the elevator instead of the stairs because Steve felt the need to keep his movements calm and minimal. Leaping down the stairwell with Natasha could easily turn into something he didn't want if they only bumped into each other. They were silent on their way down, on their way to the curb through the cold night air, and in from the parking garage at the tower. He could have spoken to her over their comms during their bike ride home, or on the way up in the elevator to their shared floor. There was too much on his mind to pick any particular thing to say.

The elevator stopped and both doors opened. Nat turned to him and reached up to remove the tiny communication device from his ear with a careful scrape of her fingernail. She stood there and looked at him for a moment.

God, she was beautiful. Capable. Dangerous. It was a thrill being near her, as if the crackle of her bracelets still sparked in the air between them. He was going to thank her for all the ways she helped him but it felt inadequate. She'd saved him from having to hurt Breanna's lusty friends and that was a big public-relations catastrophe he was thankful to have avoided. A shameful thought entered his head, one he'd entertained many times before, but it felt different now.

If he looked at her and let her see, would she-?
"Goodnight, Rogers," Natasha said.

The ends of her hair slapped him in the face before he could lift his eyes from where they'd been stuck looking at the bare center of her chest while he thought. He watched her walk toward her door for only a moment, then turned to go to his.

"Night, Romanoff," he called back.

He shut himself in his suite and leaned back against the door. Buck came to stand in the kitchen doorway and stare at him where he lingered in the entry.

"Do I need to ask?" he rasped.

"It went fine," Steve said.

"Then why are you hiding in the foyer and kicking yourself for misbehaving?" Buck questioned him.

"Because I almost came onto Nat. I didn't, but it was one of those moments and I think she saw I was gonna," he grumbled miserably.

Steve blamed it on going out and letting women tease him when he knew he should have stayed home and had a date with Rosie instead. But he'd needed to mislead Hydra. Buck was right. Again. He should have had a dance with Rosie before he went out. He only hoped Nat understood he was goofy with it right now and hadn't meant anything by what he'd almost done. Of course she'd understood. She'd been the responsible one and a good friend to avoid embarrassing him.

"Don't let me go out when I'm feeling crazy," Steve asked for his help.

"Yeah," Buck laughed, "Right. What am I gonna do, sit on ya? Go on, get in your room and work it out. Get some sleep and you won't seem so pathetic in the morning."

Steve pushed away from the door and ambled toward his room. The problem was, he didn't feel pathetic. He felt…curious and afraid of what he was going to think of when his mind settled. Not pathetic. His hand glided along the wall past the hall bathroom while he made his way to his room in the dark.

Natasha's hair hitting him in the face, the feel of the ends of it brushing his lips... Her hair only did that when she turned away from something quickly. Either she spun away from things which were about to blow up in their faces, or she turned to run toward a thing she really needed to get to in a hurry. There had been nothing urgent calling her to get to her suite. She'd stood there patiently in the moment after she'd retrieved the comm device from his ear.

Then… she'd refused to meet his eyes in the instant when he'd wondered if she wanted him.

Damn. He hated the way his mind wouldn't conveniently leave things alone and undiscovered.

"You alright?" Buck asked him.

"Yeah, 'm fine" Steve said.

Buck grunted skeptically and shut himself in his room.

Steve didn't want to use Rosie or even his hand. He was in a thinking mood, not a sex mood, despite a persistent erection and a pretty severe case of the shakes. He got off once in the shower
mostly from the thoughts in his head and only slightly because of some brief handwork with the soap. It helped hardly at all.

He managed to fall asleep hours later, still hard and still thinking. Falling asleep like that made for torturous dreams.

…

Estrella hated herself for looking but she couldn't seem to help it. He'd warned her. It wasn't enough to keep her from indulging her curiosity. Part of the problem was that she missed him terribly. She wanted to see anything of him at all, to feel a connection while they were apart and to understand what was happening in his life.

She didn't know why Jarvis helped her, but he did. Still images and even some video trickled in through the small hours of the night. In every bit of it, Steve looked handsome and male enough to give her that melting sensation she associated exclusively with him. She sensed Pepper or Natasha's hand in what he was wearing. Steve would never have chosen to present himself so casually and in clothes that amplified rather than downplayed the aggressively sexual way he felt sometimes when he wasn't on duty.

She knew Steve well enough to read his face and his body language. She could see when he was being politely attentive from a sense of duty and when he was genuinely interested in whoever had his attention. Estrella saw that the girls around him and all over him had his body, but not so much his mind. The one girl, the mixed one with the interesting hair, had to be his actual date despite all the other women who were near him. There was an image of him sitting at a high bar table with her on his lap and her hands down somewhere the viewer could only imagine. She knew where the girl's hand was from the heated look on Steve's face.

Steve was letting that girl touch him. It made her angry that he let the women be all over him. He'd told her it was for the media, to lead Hydra away from her, but he was enjoying it too much. Jarvis shuffled images into chronological order on her laptop. Estrella could see how Steve started the night content to do his duty, but then he sank under the influence of the sensual environment and the bodies around him.

Nobody was making fun of what Steve did on the dance floor so she knew he'd applied his mind to observing and acting appropriately. Just how appropriately stung her with rage and jealousy. It was one of those scenes like you saw on TV, with a crush of people practically having sex to the music. Steve looked good in it and was thoroughly enjoying himself. The girl in his arms, a different one than his date, had her eyes closed. The way her body was against Steve's looked terribly intimate and purposeful, even with only a view from their waist and up. It stabbed at Estrella's tender feelings, the places she thought were only for her and Steve, to see his face looking drugged by arousal and lost in the moment with that one girl and the others who had their hands and bodies all over him.

Next there was a video clip which wasn't so bad, so hurtful. A space had opened up on the dance floor around Steve and some guy. Estrella could hear the intensity of the pounding music in the video, see the way Steve reluctantly, then carefully interacted with the guy who wanted to dance with him. She laughed at how indulgently and deliberately Steve handled the man. His playfully aggressive moves were nothing compared to how he'd been in Texas ending La Eme, or how precise and skilled he'd been with Natasha in the training room, or how blurred fast and lethal he'd been on yesterday's leaked video. Steve looked like he was playing with a half-trained recruit but enjoying the moment of interaction.
The last pics were of him walking through the club, apparently leaving because he had a coat on. His face looked different, almost angry. His eyes looked darker than normal in the flash of light like his pupils were wide. There was an athletic tension in the frozen motion of his stride that let her know something was different. Many wouldn't know what they were looking at, but Estrella could see the full shape of him at the front of his jeans, half hidden by the open front of his jacket. The girl walking with him, his date, looked smug and eager like she knew what he was taking her home to do.

"Jarvis, did he go inside that girl's apartment?" she asked with dread.

There was a delay before Jarvis answered her through the speaker on her phone. He must have been consulting with someone, maybe even Steve, but she didn't care. She needed to know, was afraid to know.

"He did not. His date and her roommates attempted to coerce him inside, but Miss Romanoff interceded before the Captain could do them violence in making his escape," Jarvis informed her.

"They tried to-to… gang-rape Captain America?" she asked, incredulous.

"Apparently so. Not to worry, Miss. He was never in any danger," Jarvis assured.

"Ooooo…" Estrella seethed with anger, then she laughed.

"They don't know him," she said.

"Quite so," Jarvis agreed.

"Thank you, Jarvis," she told him.

"I am not certain my services are worthy of thanks in this case. I appear to have caused you distress," he said.

"I'm okay. Let me think," she said.

"Goodnight then, Miss," Jarvis said.

"'night," she replied.

Estrella shutdown her laptop and made sure her guitar wasn't in the way of getting to the bathroom. She lay in the dark until she fell asleep, wondering about everything she'd seen on Steve's face during his date tonight. He was right. He didn't look like a man who had a girlfriend. He looked like a man who'd gone back to that girl's place and had a lot of fun. If it wasn't for Jarvis and her trust that everyone involved was telling the truth, she would believe like everyone else was going to, that Captain America was unattached and willing to play.

The PR piece the Avengers had released today told only a slightly different story. Steve looked somber, patriotic and dignified in it, but still blatantly male and alone. She'd watched it a few times today. Steve was in the media a lot lately, nearly saturating public thought and discourse. They couldn't seem to get enough of him.

Estrella huddled into her covers and longed to spend some time with him, to find the sweet man she knew and loved among all the hype and excitement. The trouble was, it wasn't all hype. Steve really was that exciting. There wasn't a camera angle that wasn't flattering or a thing about him that was fake. She worried that she was becoming too small for him, that he would decide all the other women he could have were more rewarding than waiting for her.
She had to do something about it if she wanted to keep him.

Footnote: I'm second-guessing myself on comma usage. I think I've overused commas in the past and am trying to correct that. Grammar and punctuation manuals aren't entirely useful because the English language is changing, becoming less formal in this kind of writing. If any of you noticed my comma usage at all, meaning I had either too many or too few of them and it stuck out in an obvious way, it would be helpful to me if you let me know. Thanks!
Chapter 60

Her date seemed to think she should be impressed that he picked her up in a limousine. Estrella giggled quietly to herself as he helped her into the dove-gray interior. She'd agreed to meet Robert Marshall at a Tribeca coffee shop Natasha had suggested. The limo felt absurd when coming from a coffee shop, even an upscale coffee shop where she felt terribly out of place.

Maybe she was supposed to be impressed with Robert Marshal and she was in a way, but his hands were soft and manicured. She shook her head at herself for comparing him to Steve.

"You find something amusing?" Rob asked her.

She settled in the corner of the seat by the window and looked out of it, only glancing across to Robert briefly.

"It's not you. I don't mean to be rude," she answered.

Rob looked charmingly disarmed, partly because she was sure the son of a wealthy family wasn't accustomed to having his things giggled at on dates, and partly because he was trying very hard to not stare at her. Estrella admired that his ego wouldn't allow him to behave foolishly as her previous date had. The man was clearly and unexpectedly out of his privileged element in having to deal with her. He was coping, adjusting, and trying to keep his dignity.

Now that her mind was fully recovered, she remembered men behaving this way. Police officers and doctors who had to deal with the unfortunate consequences of her teenage calamities had behaved much the same. Rob Marshall was doing his best to maintain his aloofness but her natural gifts were difficult for him to ignore.

He kept fighting against the urge to look at her for more than a few seconds and she marveled at his resistance. She assessed the front of his pants and saw that she affected him. A burning, nearly irresistible urge challenged her. This man was the scion of a powerful, wealthy family and she could take him. She knew she could. From that moment on, the evening became a game for her. Her curiosity and feminine instinct drove her to see if she could break his will, bend him beyond good sense into entangling himself.

She'd been to choir practice with the ladies at church this morning. It had been wonderful and just as reverent as always. This was entirely different. Estrella could feel two different aspects of herself in conflict. Fidelity and modesty urged her to leave Rob alone, while her unruly natural gifts demanded that she play with him. Her need to find out if Steve was capable of some healthy jealousy drove the stake through her cautious morality and underscored the path she had to take.

Estrella pondered the function of ensnaring a merely wealthy man as opposed to the benefit of loving a man of principle and conviction. Life was uncertain. Fortunes came and went. She decided that unless Rob Marshall demonstrated some as yet unknown superlative benefit over choosing Steve Rogers as a mate and father for her children, he was only an amusement for the evening.

So when she next looked to Rob's reluctant fascination of her, her eyes conveyed primal judgement. Was he strong enough to protect her and her children despite her family's gifts which always drew trouble? Was he only appearing to be resourceful because of his daddy's money? Or could he be brought down to the barren void of poverty and use his own grit to rise to proficiency again? She didn't know. What she did know was that Steve could fall to abject destitution and rise...
again to great heights of achievement through sheer force of will and effort.

Did Rob Marshall have the same conviction of character?

Estrella looked to him speculatively and Rob looked away, out the window as she had been doing. He wasn't accustomed to being challenged and found wanting by a woman. That much was clear. Truly, Estrella didn't mean to make him feel uncomfortable, but she couldn't help but assess him as a mate. Dating for the sake of dating wasn't for her. She needed a serious relationship with a person she could reveal herself to. The need for secrecy about her peculiar gifts was too much bother to meet a consecutive string of strangers.

If Steve was going to take his dates seriously, so would she. Burning, squirming jealousy had driven her to seek out a worthier class of man to go out with; to do like Natasha said and at least make Steve think he had some competition.

She'd found the alternate dating site on her own. When it became apparent that she needed to step up her game she'd looked for an online source that catered to a different category of people. Robert Marshall had seemed to suit her purposes. Natasha had dressed her with a combination of items from her closet and Pepper's private things. Estrella didn't know why she was wearing labels of clothing and accessories she couldn't pronounce. It was probably appropriate because Rob didn't question that she was a match for him. She found it funny how she knew she was a daughter of impoverished conditions, but as long as she wore the right labels and mostly kept her mouth shut a man like Rob was deluded into thinking she was potentially his social equal.

During their first half hour of meeting at the coffee shop Estrella had encouraged Rob to talk about himself. He'd gladly done so. While he divulged things she sensed to be a combination of true and conflated, she'd watched him speculatively. Her pensive regard seemed to make him uneasy, willing to say more and more about himself while she listened and observed his level of attraction to her. His ability to know to look away from her after a little less than two seconds was fascinating. She concluded that he must be an astute man to recognize, unspoken, the danger of her gaze. That was respectable and so she respected him for it.

Any other esteem, he was going to have to earn.

Rob continued to chatter on about himself and his supposedly impressive life and daily responsibilities as the limo brought them to Broadway. She knew she was saved from appearing vacuous by studiously meeting his eyes every time he dared to meet hers. Really, she had no clue what he was yammering on about but she relied on Steve's experience that she shouldn't have to say much if her sexual appeal made Rob uneasy.

The Marshall family had a private box to wherever he brought her for the musical they were to see. Rob proudly wore her on his arm through a few social interactions on the way to their seats, but Estrella couldn't care less about the people to whom he introduced her. These people were old money and lazy. They didn't have the burning drive that Tony had, nor Pepper's capable competence under pressure. If the building exploded with aliens, she somehow knew they'd all go into emotional lockdown and be useless. She would probably be more useful at getting herself out of such a situation than depending on Rob or any of these soft people.

Her date escorted her upstairs and they settled into their seats. Rob had finally deduced that she didn't care for his talk of markets and real estate. She gave him a smile of approval for shutting his mouth about such crass things. Rob seemed flummoxed that she wasn't impressed. The curtain went up and saved her from having to pretend to be interested in Rob's investment strategies.

The production on stage was wonderful and she smiled unabashedly at the heights of the music and
nuance. Rob seemed enchanted that she showed emotion for the stage. Who wouldn't be moved by
the talent and pathos of the performers? She delighted in the show. There were things in the
performance that she treasured and would remember to tell Valeria about later.

Rob brought her to a nice restaurant afterward. By now he was suitably convinced that the
frivolities of wealth were not a worthy topic of conversation. She smiled at him while he ran the
gamut of his mind to find topics which might impress her.

"Do you travel?" he asked.

"Not as much as I'd like. Please, tell me where you've been," she prompted him.

Rob launched into a colorful but male-biased monologue of exotic locales. She enjoyed his stories
whether they were completely true or not. Singapore and Costa Rica sounded fascinating,
especially when she asked him about what the people ate and what music he'd heard. She didn't
care so much about the business districts, the golf courses or the night clubs he seemed to want to
talk about. She wanted details about the people and the culture.

A stillness at the restaurant bar drew Estrella's attention. There was a man, barely within her range
of sight. Her lips pursed into a minimal smile.

James Buchannan Barnes was owning a bar stool, apparently frowning at the antiqued mirror
behind the bar. She smirked at the futility of leaving Wanda's place without Jarvis reporting on her.
Bucky wore the same black slacks, shirt and tie he'd worn to Mrs. Stiles' place. Something was off
about the profile she could see of his face but she knew it was him. The shape of his shoulders and
his odd stillness couldn't belong to anyone else. He didn't appear to be watching her but she knew
he was using the mirror.

Rob turned a little to see what she was interested in.

"You know him?" he asked.

Estrella internally winced. She'd looked at Bucky too long.

"I thought he was one of my previous employees but the face isn't the same," she said.

Rob looked curious, momentarily relieved to stop talking about himself. She didn't know what to
say after that, so she paid attention to her wine and the first course of their meal.

Estrella found that she could look at her date all she wanted because he'd learned to not meet her
eyes very often. Rob Marshall had dark, wavy hair and brown eyes. His skin wasn't pale white. His
features made her think he had some Spanish or Arabic ancestry. He was the kind of handsome that
almost wasn't because there was a squarely severe maleness about his face. She glanced to his
hands. They looked strong and attractive but she knew they were too smooth. He was tall, so that
was good. Like the almost-not-handsome look of his face, he had a large, long frame that would
have been too lanky if not for the time he probably spent in a gym.

She shook her head at herself for comparing him to other, more perfect people she knew. It was
petty of her and she didn't like feeling that way. Still, she found herself doing it. If Rob was merely
a man she saw at church, or a friend, or anyone she saw on the street she wouldn't judge his
appearance at all. Since she found herself trying to take her date seriously she couldn't seem to stop
comparing him.

She was comparing him! Belatedly, Estrella felt mortified for fussing at Steve when he had
compared her to Peggy. She was doing the same thing she'd fussed at Steve for. It was humbling to
realize she was no more sophisticated than Steve in this. Steve was merely more open and guileless about expressing it than she was. Then, it made her angry to find herself on a date with another man while nearly constantly thinking of Steve. Her eyes narrowed in anger at Steve for taking up all of her mental space yet again.

Rob glanced at her face, then down to her chest. His gaze lingered there. She was alright with that because at least he wasn't trying to touch her and he was in control of himself enough to make conversation. It was surely her fault for making him too uneasy to look at her face. She'd been angry for thinking about Steve and her anger probably made him anxious if he looked at her eyes for even a moment.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I'm in music," she said vaguely.

Rob's eyebrows went up and he looked to her again.

"Sofia Morales," Rob repeated the alias she'd used when introducing herself, "I haven't heard your name out there."

She shook her head and set down her wine glass.

"You wouldn't. I'm a songwriter. I only sing at church for now. I'm probably not good enough for people to ever know my name," she said.

"Oh, you're one of those," Rob said with a bit of stiffness.

"One of what?" she wondered.


He made a face which he probably thought was subtle and took a sip of his wine.

"Yes, I am," Estrella told him firmly.

Rob cleared his throat and glanced at her again, then down at the food on his plate. Estrella smirked. It was clear what he thought of people who held religious beliefs, yet he wasn't going to make an issue of it because he found her attractive. So typical. Here she sat, pondering every aspect of him and finding him wanting, but almost anything was alright with him because she was attractive.

"You said you thought that guy was a former employee. Security, maybe? He has the look. What does your family do?" Rob wondered.

He'd concluded she must be of a wealthy family if she was in the music industry, hadn't made a name for herself yet, but still had employees and money. He thought she had money because of the dating site they'd met on, the clothing labels she wore, and the way she'd worded her comments to try to pass off Bucky's presence.

"I'd rather not talk about my family if you don't mind," she said.

She smiled at him, which he noted briefly, then he looked to her bare arms and hands. It seemed that her not saying much about herself was giving him the impression she had valuable assets to protect. He was intrigued. Again, he looked to her face. This time he got caught in her eyes. The barely contained desire she saw there made her uncomfortable. She looked away, to the illuminated
glass and ironwork wall sculpture which was not far from their table.

She was wearing a Natasha dress. Thankfully it wasn't outrageously revealing, but it was bad enough. The ivory crepe material hugged her curves and creased delicately at her contours. She had no idea what the fabric was but the dress felt light as a feather and expensive. It mostly covered her from shoulders to knees, except for a low vee neckline in the front. Rob couldn't seem to keep his eyes away from where her skin was exposed at her chest. The bra she was wearing managed to do its job and not show despite the cut of the dress. Estrella didn't want to know why Nat and Pepper happened to have access to a specialized bra in her size. Did they plan things for her and buy things for her without her knowing? The thought made her feel grumpy and loved at the same time.

Nat had asked Bruce to make her a voice moderator necklace that was a gem-encrusted bead on a wispy-thin gold chain. There was a smooth, sinuous line around the equator of the bead which she was sure contained the working parts of the moderator. Natasha had layered other gold and silver chains of different lengths and bead adornments so that she had a delicate drape of sparkling metal on the bare skin Rob seemed to like so much.

He licked his lips in a way that wasn't overtly gross and his eyes narrowed to a smoky look that told her the man was lost in fantasy. Instead of being fearful, she reveled in his arousal. It was nice to feel wanted, but safe. Bucky's presence allowed that. She was sure Rob would make some kind of move on her tonight. She wondered if she could allow herself to enjoy it as long as she knew Bucky was near.

On a whim, she looked to the mirror behind the bar. Buck was watching. His reflection was blurred and unclear, but she still thought his face looked wrong. Wrong features or not, he smiled at her a little. It was reassuring. She looked away, back to Rob.

"I'm having a hard time learning anything about you," Rob complained in good humor.

"I don't date much. My privacy is valuable to me. I'm sorry for being difficult," she apologized.

"Then I should thank you for going out with me. Do you dance?" Rob asked her.

"I love dancing!" Estrella exclaimed quietly.

"I know a place, a little jazz club on Ninth. We could go, after?" he suggested.

Estrella had to think for a moment. The fearful part of her thought an automatic 'No' for an answer, but she couldn't be about fear tonight. If she wanted Steve to feel anything at all about tonight, she had to push her limits. She was thankful for Jarvis tattling on her and thankful that Bucky had somehow dressed appropriately to tail her wherever they went. She saw he had a matching black jacket laid over his knee. She would bet her teeth he had hard, dangerous items concealed in it. She could try dancing, even with Rob looking at her like he wanted to eat her. The club would be public so he wouldn't be able to get away with too much misbehavior.

"Sofi?" Rob asked her.

She'd thought for too long without responding to his offer.

"I prefer Sofia. I'd like to go dancing with you. I love dancing, but I don't get to do it often. You might have to teach me," she said.

Rob smiled.

"It will be my pleasure," he said.
They finished their meal which was savory, light and not too filling. She'd had just enough wine to make her feel relaxed but not tipsy. The ride in the limo a few blocks across to Ninth didn't take long and she was glad. Rob had switched from sitting on the opposite seat to sitting beside her. His almost knobby knee lightly brushed hers as he kept up a smooth conversation about fly fishing in the Cascades. He was saved from it being a monologue by Estrella making brief sounds of interest when he seemed to want her to.

Rob's hands gestured with polite animation while he encroached on her space. Estrella stroked the taupe fuzzy wrap she wore around her shoulders. It was some kind of silky, shiny fur made in a weave loose enough to help warm her. She wondered if it was cashmere. She wasn't sophisticated enough to know if it was, but it didn't feel like common polyester.

Stroking the luxurious wrap soothed her. She knew what Rob was doing. He was easing into her personal space, starting with light touches. He was watching to see if she would accept contact with him. Her nerves jolted when his fingers brushed against her thigh, then her arm while he told his story. Natasha and Steve had both told her to not show fear, so she didn't. She kept her gaze either out the window or occasionally smiled at Rob when he laughed.

Estrella had no idea where Bucky was. She could only trust that he was following. Her pulse beat faster. She knew dancing with Rob would embolden him. The man was going to do something before the night was over. Her urge to stay safe and not have him touch her couldn't be listened to tonight, not if she wanted to make a point to Steve. Not if she wanted to show herself she could be with a man socially in any kind of normal way.

The driver pulled to the curb and opened the door for them. Rob assisted her from the car with excellent grace and tucked her hand into his arm as if he did it all the time. She wasn't thrilled with how closely he held her while they hurried into the jazz club but she was determined to put up with it for however long it took to accomplish her goals.

She would have thanked the driver for getting the doors for them and she would have looked around to see if Bucky was nearby in traffic but she couldn't if she wanted to appear aloof as she was expected to. She'd already made the mistake of looking too long at Bucky and alerting Rob to his presence.

The club was dim and glittering inside. The golden lights above the tables and the band stand gleamed off the brass held in the hands of the trumpet and trombone players. People lingered in quiet conversation at the tables. Everyone wore nice things, the likes of which she was sure she'd never be able to afford on her own.

A few months ago Estrella would have refused to come into a place like this. It felt too rich with its antique glasswork above and around the bar, the fine craftsmanship of the carved wood architecture and the plush leather of the seating. She knew she had the appearance and the accessories to get by with pretending she belonged. Natasha knew how to fit in anywhere and she'd prepared her for this. No one who looked at her thought she was an imposter.

Men turned and stared as she passed by on Rob's arm. She expected that. Rob looked puffed up and pleased. He hurried to an empty table she saw beside the dance floor. Somehow he sensed that to stop with her and linger at any social greetings would be a bad thing. Again, she wondered at his instinct in dealing with her peculiarities. Maybe his intelligence and understanding of people was part of what had helped to make his family wealthy. It was the only explanation she could think of that would allow him to behave properly around her influence.

Rob ordered drinks for them while she laid her wrap on the back of a chair. He offered to get her a drink she'd never heard of and she nodded as if she knew what he was talking about. The dancers
near them swayed and stepped to the music of the jazz band. It was politely loud in the place, not too much sound to talk over, especially if Rob leaned close to her shoulder as he did.

"Is this alright? Think you can make it onto the dancefloor with me?" he asked her.

Estrella watched the dancers for a brief moment. Her nose tipped up with confidence.

"It's fine," she said.

Her drink was cold and fruity, with a dry finish. She sipped it one last time, then set it aside to move with Rob onto the floor. She thought of Colin's dutiful respect. She thought of Steve's welcome affection. She even thought of Jesse's harmless playfulness, but it didn't help much. Rob's touch was alien and over-warm at her waist and on her left hand. It was easy as breathing to follow the beat of the song and step to the classic jazz cadence. She was glad it was something she could do almost thoughtlessly because being held by him made her nervous. His hands felt energized and overeager.

Rob stared down at her with a hopeful smile. It was her turn to look away. Because he was tall, she had an excuse to look more to his shoulder than his face. As they glided and swayed she came into contact with the front of his pants.

"You know you're beautiful. I hope I don't offend," he murmured at her ear.

Since he wasn't pressing her against his erection but only making contact occasionally with the steps of the dance, she decided not to make an issue of it. She looked up to him briefly and gave him a little smile.

They'd taken to the floor in the middle of a song. It came to an end with a flourish of soft, brassy cymbals. Rob passed them by their table for a sip of their drinks as the next song began.

"It's warm in here," he commented.

He slipped off his suit coat and laid it on his chair as she had her wrap. His arm pulled her against his front. She allowed the contact. Her nerves were winding tighter and her tolerance was starting to feel strained. She kept her goal in mind and maintained her composure.

It helped that she could see a man dressed in black seated in deep shadow in the corner of the club. From the slow, smooth way he lifted a drink to his lips she knew it was Bucky. She could tell by the way he moved that it was him even though she couldn't see him clearly in the dimness. She hadn't realized she'd come to know him so well.

Rob held her more closely through the next song which had a more vigorous tempo. It was challenging to dance well, push a little distance between them with her hand on his chest, and still look like she was having fun. With the way Rob was staring at other parts of her, he might not notice if her smile wasn't genuine. She avoided his gaze entirely. His hands were slightly harsh at her hip and wrist, but he wasn't strong enough to make her really feel his grip, like someone else she refused to think of right now.

Rob sensed she was struggling, so he let them rest and finish their drinks during the next song. She patted at the slight dew of perspiration on her neck. Her eyes were drawn to the dancers after she looked at Rob for a moment. The man needed to cool down as much as she did.

"I can't read you. I don't know if you're enjoying yourself or if I'm being a boor," he said.

"Am I so mysterious?" she asked him.
Rob couldn't look away from her. She felt mercy for him as his face showed helpless fascination, alternating with determined lust. As always, her nature spurred a man to want, to take. He was no different from any other man, except maybe a little more restrained because of his well-bred dignity and a habit of politeness.

What did she want out of this? It was hard to give a clear answer to the question. She'd started the date with a determination to prove something, but that seemed frivolous now. It felt like she was making Rob act outside of his customary courtesy with women. The man was struggling, but too affected by her to know that he was in danger.

Estrella cast around among her thoughts, trying to justify messing with him for the sake of her goals. She couldn't. She wasn't a homeless kid anymore. This wasn't the middle of nowhere Utah, or Nevada or New Mexico. If she pushed Rob too far beyond his self-restraint there would be a public incident that could damage his reputation and give him a criminal record. She needed a moment to think while he wasn't staring at her expectantly.

"Do you mind?" Estrella asked.

She tipped her nose toward the area that appeared to have the restrooms. Rob looked confused because he'd been lost in staring at her, then he panicked because he realized she'd asked him something and he'd missed it. Estrella patiently ignored his awkward moment and waited for his response. She didn't want him to follow her to the restroom. He likely would if she didn't snap him out of his stupor before she moved away.

"Oh, right. I'll be here," he finally said when he gathered his wits enough to understand she meant to find the restroom.

Rob looked relieved as she walked away. He seemed to be aware that she had him under a sort of spell only after she stepped aside and released him from it. Many eyes were on her and she knew it. She made her way quickly to the rear corner of the dancehall, past the bandstand. The vocalist stumbled in his lyrics for a brief instant while she passed in front of him. He murmured something to his band that she didn't understand but Estrella was gone, hurrying past any man who might want to waylay her.

There was some congestion in the well-lit hallway near the restrooms. She bit her lip in anxiety. The oblivious women in front of her were lingering, chatting outside the restroom door while a stream of people went past. There was no room for her to go around the women unless she wanted to press through a group of men who might grab her.

The men in the hallway slowed their steps and stared at her. Estrella wished for her concealing fuzzy wrap and mentally fussed at the loitering women who were in her way. A few of the guys near her had that sly look about them which told her they were thinking up lines to start a conversation with her. Her eyes darted around to the pretty light fixtures, to the black and white photographs on the wall beside her, to anywhere but the men who moved closer to her. Her hand reached for the bead of her necklace, ready to rip it away and scream if she had to.

A harsh hand gripped her hip and jerked her back against a hard body. Relief washed through her so strongly that she nearly went limp with it. The man in black whose face didn't look like Bucky certainly felt like him and smelled like him.

"You gonna cause a scene screaming? That'd be a dumbass thing to do. Let go of the necklace," Bucky growled low at her ear.

She leaned back in the cove he made with his body and the wall. Tears of relief stung at the
corners of her eyes. The men who had been drawn to her drifted away under Buck's cold, steady stare. The women in front of her finally moved on. Estrella lingered where she was. Things weren't complicated or dangerous when Bucky was near. He always kept her safe.

"Are you about done in this place? Your date isn't gonna stay well-behaved for much longer," Buck said.

His grip on her eased some, but he stayed close. Everyone looked at her while they passed through the hallway from the lounge at the back of the building to the jazz club at the front. Estrella nodded.

"Alright. One more dance, maybe two, then you tell him you've had a nice time but it's time to go. Don't lose this," Buck told her.

His fingers slipped over her shoulder and glided under the edge of her dress, straight into the cup of her bra. For a moment she felt the coolness of a little piece of metal, then it warmed to her skin. She watched his hand withdraw from her clothes like he was a brazen fellow taking his time with a grope in the hallway. She turned her head up and back to glance at him.

"It's a tracker. I'm not likely to lose you, but things happen. Tell his driver to turn on Twenty-sixth," Buck told her.

"Then what?" she asked.

"You won't have to worry about it. You'll see me and know when to stop the car. Now go powder your nose," Buck said.

The hallway was clear and she could easily get to the ladies' room. She hesitated for an instant, reluctant to leave the safe space Buck made for her. His hand nudged her on. Estrella hurried into the restroom. When she came out Bucky was nowhere to be seen.

The band managed to play Witchy Woman by the Eagles in a way that made it sound good in brass. She smiled at the musicians and knew the song was for her as she walked by. The drummer made a little flourish with his sticks and she danced to his beat for a few steps. She had to move quickly but she could have fun while doing so. Knowing Bucky was here and watching made her feel bolder, safer. Rob watched her approach and she was able to keep a smile on her face.

It was slightly sickening, going from mental clarity with Bucky then back into the sensual-predatory feeling she had with Rob. She knew Rob might be pressed beyond his limits, but she was the one causing it. She caused this behavior in men, whether they were willing or not. Knowing she was safe for the moment tempted her to revel in the power she had over poor Rob. He watched her avidly and stood up as she neared him.

"You are. Witchy. I mean, the song…" Rob said.

He opened and closed his mouth, then made a face at the awkwardness of the moment. He clearly wasn't accustomed to awkwardness with women. He made his unease look boyishly charming with a smile. Estrella slipped under his arm, shrugged his hands into position and urged him onto the dancefloor. She led them for a few steps until he got his body coordinated for dancing.

He was hard at her hip again, stronger than ever. Rob opened his mouth to apologize. Estrella turned her face away to enjoy watching the musicians, the dancers, and the glamorous ambiance of the club. She didn't let her eyes catch on the men who looked at her or the women who frowned at their men for staring at her.
Rob was able to finish the dance with her, barely. Estrella was glad the next song was a slow sway and shuffle. It sounded incredibly sensual with its relaxed beat, but at least it didn't nudge him against her hip or belly so much.

Rob's hands were clammy and warm on her. She looked at his chin while they danced.

"I've had a nice night, Robert. I think you should have your driver come around so we can go," she said.

"What?" Rob asked, then seemed to realize he'd been lost in a trance and staring at her dumbly.

"Have your driver bring the car. I've had a nice time, but I need to go," she said more firmly.

"So soon? It's not that late," Rob frowned.

"I have plans tomorrow. It's a holiday," she said.

"I forgot about that," he mumbled.

He reached into his pocket and did something which apparently let his driver know he was needed. When the song ended Rob reluctantly led her to their table to get their things. He helped her put on her fuzzy wrap but he kept his coat over his arm. Estrella didn't like the way he looked at her, shifty and speculative. She knew it meant he was planning, grasping for a way to spend more time with her.

The night outside was crisp and cold, likely below freezing. The inside of the car was warm when she got in past the driver who held the door for her. Rob pressed next to her on the seat and the door closed.

Estrella noted they were pointed toward midtown, so she told the driver to turn on Twenty-sixth. The man nodded. It would be a while. Since tomorrow was Thanksgiving Day, many people had the day off and were out to enjoy the evening. Traffic was slow.

Rob put the privacy glass up between them and the front of the car. The slow movement of the glass gave her a foreboding feeling.

"Sofia, I didn't expect... to like you so much. It feels like we haven't had enough time tonight. Would you like to go for drinks?" Rob asked.

He perched beside her, his body turned slightly on the seat. While she felt for him and the unfair influence she had over his good sense, she knew he was dangerous. A man didn't have to have enhanced strength to overpower her. Rob was very capable of forcing her. Her fingers drifted up to press at the bead on her necklace.

"Thank you, Robert, but I need to get home. My driver will meet us-"

"Please," Rob said.

She read in his tense, poised posture that he wasn't pleading for her to change her mind and have drinks with him. He wasn't thinking clearly, so what he really wanted shone through. He gripped his knees harder than he needed to and she saw it as an effort to not reach for her. She could see he was trying to be a gentleman but he was desperate to touch her, almost out of his head with it. Again, she was impressed that he had this much restraint. She had to do something because his manners weren't going to last for long.
Where was Bucky? How would she see him? A plan came to mind. The driver finally turned onto Twenty-sixth but she didn't know exactly where Buck would be. She had to pacify Rob until then.

Estrella pushed Rob's tense shoulder until he understood she wanted to do something he would like. Once he was pressed back onto the center of the seat, Estrella slid onto his lap. His arms immediately went around her and he began kissing her chest through the chains of her necklaces. It wasn't too bad, not like getting raped. This way, she had a good view of the street. She could look around for Bucky so she wouldn't miss wherever he was waiting.

Rob murmured ardent nonsensical words against her chest. His arms and hands pressed over her, dislodging her wrap. He poked at her thigh, but at least he was still in his pants. If she could keep his hands busy and block access to his zipper she should have time to find Bucky.

Warm embarrassment heated her skin. Rob wasn't awful and he wasn't mean-spirited. He was good-looking enough. His confused urgency and the sounds he was making pleased her ego. Her disobedient body began to respond to his intent. Estrella scowled and guided his hands away from groping at her breasts. She directed him to squeezing her bottom instead. That felt less personal and intrusive. Where was Bucky? She wasn't sure what she was looking for but the way he'd instructed her made it seem that he'd be unmistakable. All she could see out the windows of the limo were lanes of traffic and strangers on the sidewalks.

Estrella yipped an excited, fearful sound when Rob abruptly turned on the seat and put her under him. Her head bounced on the upholstery. It happened so fast that she was helpless to reach for her phone. She barely was able to get a hand up to her throat, then Rob knocked it away in his haste to grab her chest.

"Stop it! Get off!" she fussed at him.

She was strong and healthier than she'd ever been. It was surprising to learn she had enough power in her thighs to lift and shove him so that he couldn't keep his groin pressed at her. She would have thought that was a good thing, but resisting him only excited him more.

Rob's amorous groping turned into shoving and trying to hold her down with more of his strength. This was quickly moving toward rape. His eyes were crazed and she didn't want to look at him. He was ugly. Her habit was to mentally fade away until these things were over with. Her life wasn't like it used to be. She had to try. She tried again to get a hand up to her throat, then Rob knocked it away in his haste to grab her chest.

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The door of the limousine made a loud, startling sound. The chill of outside air wafted over her, then Robert Marshall was removed from the car. Bucky's strangely wrong face appeared in the open doorway and he offered her a hand. She belatedly noticed they were stopped in traffic, hemmed in by other vehicles.

"Come on," Buck urged her.

He held a struggling Rob back with his left arm and she took his other hand. She squeaked and grabbed at her phone and her wrap as Buck pulled her out of the car more carefully than he'd handled her date.

Her feet felt wobbly on the street when she stood. She shoved down at the hem of her dress. Horns honked and people yelled at them. Rob continued to struggle, trying to get to her. Bucky kept himself between them. Even with an oddly wrong face, she could see that Buck was contemplating doing something punitive to Robert.
"He tried to be nice. Don't hurt him," she pleaded.

Bucky put the man back into his limo and closed the door so hard it bent into its frame. Everything had happened quickly. Rob's driver was just now getting out to deal with them.

Buck took her by the arm and fast-marched her across two lanes of stopped traffic and off the street. Her hair was down and messed up from Rob's manhandling. She was glad to hide behind it. The headlights of traffic felt too bright shining on them. She would have stumbled up the curb on her high heels, but Bucky hauled her upright.

"Hey, lady, are you okay?" some guy yelled.

"I'm good!" Estrella called back.

"Shut the fuck up," Bucky cursed at her.

A motorcycle was on the sidewalk. He practically threw her at it, got his leg over it, and sped off. Estrella held on to him and the items she clutched in her fist. His driving was madness until he had them across several lanes of stopped traffic and headed in the opposite direction of Rob's limousine. After three blocks of evasion Buck fit them into traffic just as a New York Police Department cruiser went by in the other direction. Estrella pressed her fist hard into his belly and tried not to whimper.

"Shut it. You must have ripped your necklace off," Buck told her.

Oh.

Oh!

Bucky hadn't sped away on the bike to get them away from Rob. He'd done it because she'd spoken without her necklace in front of the entire crowd of people on the sidewalk. Her broken necklace chain, her phone, and her wrap were wadded together in her hand.

She began to shiver from the cold and from delayed reaction of everything that had just happened.

"Hold on. I'll get you someplace warm in a minute," Buck turned his head to speak back to her.

Estrella let her head fall between the shoulders of his coat and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her fast, nervous breaths huffed little clouds of vapor in the light from the cars behind them. She was sitting side-saddle on the bike seat. She vaguely noted that it wasn't Steve's bike. Her dress was halfway up her thighs. She tugged at it and tucked it between her legs while they weren't moving in traffic. Bucky spoke to someone in a low tone. She understood he wasn't talking her, but probably to Jarvis or to Natasha somehow.

By the time he parked the bike curbside they'd travelled toward the park and into familiar territory.

"I can't see Steve right now," she whispered as he helped her off the bike.

"No shit. C'mon," he said.

Bucky led her on shiver-trembled legs into a narrow, well-lit business. She noticed a counter for food orders and a big guy with a greasy apron behind the counter. Buck hurried her to a booth in the back. The vinyl booths were tall and occupied. Buck slid into a seat that faced the front of the store and two teens looked at them with wide eyes from the other side of the booth. Their plates were empty, utensils askew across scraps of food. Estrella hid her face in her hair and against
"Get outta here," Buck growled at the kids.

They jumped to obey and hurried to pay and leave.

Estrella started to giggle at the absurdity of it all, but Buck clamped a hand over her nose and mouth so she couldn't breathe. Her eyes widened through the tangle of her hair. She was being careless with her voice.

"What's the matter with you? You can't talk in here. Do you have the necklace?" he asked her.

Buck took his hand away to let her breathe and she opened her hand. He set her phone on the empty space at their side of the table. Two necklaces were tangled with her fuzzy wrap in her hand. One silver, one gold. The voice moderator bead was wrapped in fuzz but she had it. She sighed a breath of relief.

Halfway through picking out the broken chains and the bead, she realized she was sitting on Bucky's lap. His arm was around her. It didn't matter. She'd sat on his lap and more. Finally, she freed the bead and picked fuzzy filaments off its gem encrusted surface. Buck pulled the tiny gold chain into a straight line on the tabletop.

"Yous okay?" the man with the apron asked when he came over to their booth.

"She's fine now. Had a little scare, is all. You got lasagna?" Bucky asked.

The man chuckled and rubbed his hands on his apron before clearing the used dishes from the table. Bucky's question was ridiculous. The whole place smelled of lasagna.

"Yeah," he said.

"Two, and some coffee," Buck told him.

Estrella watched the older man trundle away with the dishes. He went behind the counter and yelled something to the back of the place.

"Are you alright?" Bucky asked her.

His hand briefly landed on her thigh and tapped his fingers toward her crotch. He leaned forward and moved her shaking hands away from the necklace. His heat warmed her through the fabric of his suit. She nestled into the opening of his coat to get warmer.

Estrella nodded. Buck had surely seen that Rob's pants were still fastened when he'd pulled him from the limo. She couldn't say more until her voice was protected. She watched while Bucky studied the damage to the necklace. Her eyes weren't good enough to see things that small. His little black knife came out from somewhere and he pressed at something tiny near the end of the chain.

"Clasp is ripped open. I bent it back. Should work. Gimme the bead," he said.

She did and he threaded it onto the gold chain. She lifted her hair for him to put the necklace back on. It took some fumbling because the clasp was very small, but he got it done.

She let her hair fall then ran her fingers through it to try to restore some order to it.

"Can you tell if it works?" she asked quietly with her fingers pressing the bead to her throat.
"It should. You don't have to whisper," Bucky said.

She didn't have to sit on his lap, either. A woman brought them steaming mugs of coffee and a saucer with sugar and cream. Estrella slid off Bucky's legs and onto the seat beside him. She tried not to wince at the soreness in her legs and upper arms. Buck didn't miss anything. He saw her discomfort and frowned.

Estrella wrapped her hands around the coffee mug and stared at the steam. She pressed into the warmth of Bucky's side. She felt like less of a child now that she wasn't on his lap.

"What's wrong with your face?" she asked.

"Ident veil. Talia let me borrow it," he said.

"Why?" Estrella wondered.

Bucky shrugged. It was plain in his expression that he had a reason for disguising his face but didn't care to tell her about it. She didn't like the way the device made him look rough and thuggish. It was freaky to know what he was supposed to look like, to see him look different, yet still see his expressions on a different face. She touched his cheek. Whatever an ident veil was, she could feel an ephemeral weave of strings or wires, something over his skin. Bucky brushed her hand away.

"Leave it alone. Hey, thanks," Buck said to her, then to the woman who came back with two plates of lasagna and utensils.

The food was hot, like the coffee. Estrella blew and slurped at it. She felt hungry and cold. Dinner with Rob hadn't been very satisfying. She'd been too out of sorts to eat much.

"Did you accomplish what you set out to do?" Buck asked between quick bites.

Estrella wondered how he was eating with a veil over his face, then she noted that his lips were the same as they always were. There had to be a slit in the device to allow for normal behavior like eating and drinking.

"Huh?" she asked.

It was distracting, always getting used to new technology that Jarvis or Nat or somebody astounded her with.

"You had a reason for doing what you did tonight. Did you accomplish your goal?" Buck asked her again.

"That depends. Did you send pics to Steve? I was going to do it myself, but you probably did," she accused him.

"Yeah, I sent some. Then I had to turn my phone off," Buck said.

Her eyebrow went up while she chewed.

He smiled, then took another bite. Estrella reached for his back pants pocket where she knew he usually kept his phone. Bucky wiggled and nudged her arm away with his elbow.

"Let me see!" she hissed at him.

"Nah. You got a reaction outta him. That's what you were going for, right?"
"How am I supposed to know how he reacted if you won't let me see?" she seethed.

"You don't own him, toots. He texted me, not you. If you wanna know what you did, tomorrow will be soon enough," Buck smirked while he chewed.

"Ooooo," Estrella glared at him and burned with thwarted curiosity.

Bucky swiped at her head to fix her hair a little more. She didn't fuss because she was busy with her lasagna.

"Alright, I see the plan. Make Stevie a little crazy, put the pressure on. But what were Pepper and Natalia thinking? You can't go out in public like this. You're sex on heels, doll, nothing but trouble. How do you figure your date resisted as long as he did, being just a regular guy?" Bucky asked.

"I think he's used to being nice to women. It's me who made him misbehave. I'm sorry I used him. It was selfish of me," she said.

She paused in her eating and stared sightlessly at her plate while she considered how badly things could have gone. She felt dirty and low for manipulating Rob, especially because part of her had enjoyed it.

"Eh, tough up. He got a thrill out of it. You're the one left with the bruises. Are you alright in the head?" Bucky wanted to know.

"I'm okay. I was going to zone out to miss it all, but then I remembered to scream. Then you got there. It was very public. I could have ruined his life," she said.

"I'm tellin ya, shut up about it. Quit blaming yourself. We do what we gotta do. Let me see the bruising," Buck said.

Estrella looked around to be sure no one could see them, then she shifted her dress up and aside. The red marks from rough handling were already fading but a deeper shade was developing under her skin along her inner thighs. She tugged her dress into place and they looked at her arms.

"You have to wear pants and something with sleeves tomorrow," Buck told her.

"Is he coming? I'm going to cook, but he said he might have to work," she said.

"He'll be there. We don't have what we need yet. Eya, you're just what he needs to take his mind off it. He's been spinning his wheels all day and Stark isn't any good, either. Between them, they made all of us crazy. J is on watch. We could get called out at any time but I don't think it'll happen. It has that stale feel, like waiting for nothing," Buck said.

"Don't call me that," she said stubbornly.

It was petty to object to Bucky using the shorter, more intimate form of her name and she knew it. She felt the need to exert some kind of control. The ordeal with Rob was over, but the helpless feeling of being shoved around by a large man made her squirm in delayed denial.

"Go fuck yourself. I'll call ya what I want," Bucky said.

Estrella laughed and pressed a hand to her mouth. She felt the delirium from a late night of high tension and a narrow escape from getting raped yet again. Buck's attitude and his provocative smile through the ident veil tipped her composure over from laughter to desperate relief. She hung onto his right arm and tried hard not to cry.
She knew her face was hot and red. She pressed it to his sleeve above her hands so he wouldn't see her being ugly.

"Thank you for saving me," she whispered.

"It's what I'm here for, no need to thank me," Buck murmured.

He mussed her head like she was a kid. He pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She wiped her eyes and nose, then looked at him over the wad of white cloth.

"What, I'm not allowed to have normal things in my pockets?" he teased.

She giggled, still not sounding quite sane. It felt good to laugh, even if it was a weird laugh. She refolded the hanky and offered it to him.

"I don't want it back," Buck made a disgusted face at her.

He wasn't likely bothered by the tears and snot on his hanky. He was teasing her. The sibling-like play felt nice. Estrella sighed and let the hanky fall to her lap. Her lasagna was half eaten but she was too tired to finish it.

"Drink up," Buck said.

He pushed her coffee at her. It felt like they were about to go. It was the small hours of the morning and she wasn't used to staying out so late. Bucky put some money on the table. He put her fuzzy wrap around her neck and shoulders, then put his warm suit coat onto her over it. It was a long ride back to Wanda's place. She was shivering by the time Buck walked her up to Wanda's door. She looked forward to getting into her bed.

She wanted to thank him again.

Bucky turned and walked away.

"Remember to wear something over the bruises tomorrow or he'll blow his top and go hunting for your date," Buck said over his shoulder as he left.

"Okay," was all she had time to say before he got in the elevator.

Estrella locked herself inside and slipped her heels off with a sigh. There was light showing under Wanda's bedroom door. She didn't want to bother her friend. She brushed her teeth and got into a soft sleep shirt. She set her alarm for early because she had a turkey to cook.

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The suite was dark when Buck let himself in. It was highly unlikely Steve was sleeping. He'd been a tight coil of frustrated energy all day. After Buck had refused to answer his texts at the restaurant he knew the punk would be angry on top of his frustration with Hydra. He set the security fob for the bike on the coffee table, then startled when something moved in the dark.

"You did it on purpose," Steve accused him.

He sounded entirely too calm to actually be calm. The curtains were drawn closed in the living room, making it completely dark. Bucky didn't like how still and quiet Steve was. It meant he was really wound up, dangerous, barely controlling himself. Now that he listened carefully, he could hear the muted pounding sound of his friend's heart. Buck flopped down on the couch and tried to
relax. It was hard to do with Steve right there in the chair and so on edge.

"You bet I did. You need a kick in the ass. Both of you do," he agreed.

"What I need is to not be played by my friends. You know I'm doing everything I can, moving as fast as I can to end Hydra for good. I have to leave Estrella alone until we're done with them. I can't lead them to her," Steve said.

The back of Bucky's neck prickled at the cool, easy tone of Steve's voice. It was pitched too deep for him to be as casual as he sounded. He wanted to smile in the dark, but he didn't. Steve didn't need any more prodding right now. Estrella's date and the pictures he'd sent had been effective.

"Leave her alone except for tomorrow, you mean," Buck said.

"Maybe. If we don't get any intel by morning, I'll go."

"You'll go. I told her you would," Buck insisted.

Steve was quiet for almost a minute.

"That might not be a good idea," he finally said.

Bucky wasn't going to argue with him. He was in too much of a mood for it to do any good. Steve's normal stubbornness was hard enough to get past. Right now it would be useless to try to convince him of anything.

Buck was tired. He'd had an early morning of training with Talia. Then he'd sat in on meetings all day, watching Steve and Tony pace and gesture and blow off steam yelling at each other over why they were having such a hard time getting a lock on the last Hydra base. Everybody knew it was bluster, both of them wanting to make the hit and be done with it before Thanksgiving. Then Bucky had worked with Thor for over two hours in the training room. The call to go watch the girl had come when he was sweaty and sore. He'd spent three hours on duty for the girl. Now he had to speak carefully to needle at Steve without setting him off.

In addition to stress from work, Steve was on a slow boil. All day, the space around him had felt charged, almost like standing next to Thor. It made Buck itch. If he didn't know Steve so well, he wouldn't be able to stay calm in the tension which surrounded him. Something in his friend had changed, or was changing.

"What are you doing?" Buck asked.

"Doing? I'm sitting in a chair," Steve said.

"Don't be a smartass. You know what I'm talking about. Why do you feel different? Like you're gonna explode."

"Yeah, kinda feels that way," Steve agreed evasively.

"So?" Buck persisted in wanting an answer.

"I'm not doing anything. No time with Rosie, no getting off. I'm letting it build, seeing where it goes," Steve told him.

"Is that smart?"

"I don't know. We'll see," Steve said.
Bucky heard his shrug as a rub of his shirt against the chair.

"Are you tryin to prove something?" Buck asked.

"Nah, it's just that I've been thinking. I can't keep playing around, Buck. If I'm away on a mission, if I'm detained away from home, held prisoner, what then? I've let myself get too accustomed to getting off when I want to. I wanna see what happens when I don't." Steve said.

Bucky thought that was a stupid idea, but he understood Steve's reasoning. It was like him to find another way to torture himself.

"Did she get to Wanda's place alright?" Steve asked.

"I wouldn't be laying here if she didn't. She's fine," he assured.

Steve grunted at him with a derisive, resentful sound.

Bucky wanted to rile him up and tell him he should be thankful he'd saved his girl yet again, but he couldn't say that. Not with Steve simmering on whatever edge he was playing with. He might go off and find some trouble to get into. Instead, Buck got up to put himself to bed.

Bruce had brought an envelope for Bucky. Steve took it from his knee and tossed it in Buck's direction before he was too far away. He heard Bucky's hand snap out to snatch the envelope from the air, then his friend continued on to his room. No light came on to show under the door, so Steve figured Buck would read Bruce's report tomorrow. It had to be sensitive information for Bruce to go to the effort of hand-writing a report to keep it out of Jarvis's memory. It had to be about whatever Bruce had found in the metal cryo-cases they'd brought back from the Hydra bio lab.

Steve continued to sit in his chair. It felt like he was holding a tiger on a little string of a leash. He was pleased with himself for not breaking his phone, for not throwing it at the wall in a fit of rage. He was embarrassed that he'd gotten so angry even though no one had been here to see. But Bucky knew. He had to. He'd known what sending those pictures would do to him. Buck always knew things like that, perfect ways to get under his skin like a knife.

To rub salt in the fresh wounds of his jealousy, Steve made himself look at the images again. Estrella was dressed like he'd never seen her. What she wore was all wrong, things like Nat or Pepper would wear. Instead of her favored flip-flops or her beloved cowgirl boots, she wore pointy heeled shoes that made her legs look incredible, even with them tucked under a restaurant table. There was a lush female beauty to her in the clingy dress which was so dramatic as to almost be unreal. She looked like the kind of woman a guy would see in centerfolds, except Steve knew she was completely real, that not a bit of her loveliness was photo-manipulated fantasy. He had a hard time not lingering over the picture and staring at her. Her dark hair was done up in a way that made it look like an elegant, flowing mane around her face and over her shoulders.

What burned him the worst was how she looked across the table at her date. And how the man looked at her. He already knew who the man was and just where to find him, if he wanted to. Buck said Estrella was safely back at Wanda's place, so he kept himself in his chair.

Jealousy was a rank, bitter feeling. It rolled in his gut. Steve ground his teeth and thumbed to the next image. The pic was from a distance, but clear enough that he could see the assessing look on her face while she watched the guy. Her posture was alluring and womanly, sophisticated in a way he didn't know she could be. It eased his angst only a little to see Robert Marshall looking away from her uneasily, like the man knew he was sitting across from an irresistible spider, a woman
like Natasha. He clearly didn't want to make a fool of himself getting ensnared in her appeal. How did he know to be cautious? That indicated the guy was intelligent and sensitive, qualities Estrella would appreciate.

The next image made Steve growl a little, then choke off the sound so Bucky wouldn't hear and laugh at him. Her date stared at her while Estrella held her wine glass. Steve knew just what the look on his face meant. The guy wanted her in a bad way. He was thinking, planning how to get her to return the feeling.

Steve felt put off by the environs of their date. The restaurant was very nice, and so was the next place they'd gone. Dancing. She'd danced with the guy. In a room of other glamorous, beautiful people, she'd let him put his hands on her. They danced close. Steve thought about that and had to set his phone down on the arm of his chair before he broke it in his hand.

If not for the slight vacancy in her eyes, the shallowness of her smile and the stiffness in her posture, he would have found something to punch. Did her date see that she wasn't who she was pretending to be? Probably not. The girl Steve knew was warm and friendly, open and sweet. Estrella looked vampish and aloof on her date, like a different part of her was running things. Still, he chafed at the way she was dressed for the man, the way she let him touch her, the way Marshall looked at her.

The next pic nearly made him lose his mind. What the hell was she thinking, to risk this?

Estrella stood in a side-slant of light by a table while her date was nearby on the edge of his seat. Him and every other man in the mid-ground of the picture stared at her with heated, lusty eyes while she looked toward the camera. She looked like a goddess, like she ruled the men around her. Her regal Mayan nose was tipped up like she knew she was the queen. Her body wrapped in that dress with gold and silver glittering at her barely contained bosom made him want to reach through the picture and snatch her away so only he could look at her.

It was too much. Steve ripped out a harsh growl and threw his phone at the wall. The thing went through the sheetrock but he didn't care. He sat in the dark and ground his teeth. Estrella wasn't truly his yet, that he should feel so covetous of who she shared her time and her touch with.

He didn't like the mean, unworthy feeling of jealousy. It ate at him until he worked his mind around to thinking of other things.

……

It was almost noon and Estrella hurried to get the last details prepared for the food. Wanda helped her move things to the table. Estrella dipped a ladle into the savory juice from the turkey pan, pushed her slippery hair behind her ear again, then drizzled the steaming juices over the cornbread dressing. The dressing was Wanda's mother's recipe. Estrella was honored to have been allowed to make it.

A firm, polite knock came at the door. She didn't have to look at the viewer. She knew who it was. Butterflies collided in her stomach and her fingers clattered the ladle into the gravy boat.

"Take that apron off before you answer the door!" Wanda hissed at her as she walked away from the kitchen.

Estrella fiddled with the apron strings at her back but her hands were too shaky to get the knot undone. Her hair slipped against her cheek again and she pushed it back again. She probably
shouldn't have worn her hair partly down like this, but she wanted to look just-so for Steve. Why wouldn't the darn knot in the apron string come loose? She could have sworn she'd tied it in a bow, but-

The knock came at the door again, slightly louder. A glance at the panel showed a familiar blonde head and shoulders. Estrella pressed out a tense breath and tried hard to ignore the worry that her date last night had made Steve angry. She fumbled to get the door open while her heart beat too fast for such a simple task. What if Steve was chilly and sharp with her all day? What if she'd hurt him again? What if-

Steve pushed her back into the living room, kicked the heavy door shut behind him, then she was smothered in his arms and his kiss. Melting heat chased away her worries and joy leapt in her heart at his touch. He was so strong and solid around her that he lifted her off her feet thoughtlessly in his desire to be close to her. Estrella muffled a happy laugh against his mouth, delighted that he didn't seem cold or angry at her. Then she hummed an encouraging sound and her arms lifted around his neck to push her fingers through his hair.

He lashed her with his tongue briefly, just long enough to make her want more, then tamed his kiss to something a little more respectful. Estrella reveled in the hard, too-tight squeeze of his arms. The feel of him pressed to her was familiar and welcome. Abruptly, Steve set her down and away. She marveled anew at the nearly angelic beauty of his face, then noted his quick flicker of a glance behind her. He was aware of Wanda standing there.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Wanda," Steve said.

He handed the woman a bottle of wine Estrella had failed to notice.

"Thank you. You too," Wanda responded with tolerant humor in her voice.

Estrella heard her move toward the kitchen but she couldn't look away from Steve.

Oh. He was angry. He glared at her for a moment in reproach and Estrella knew that the pictures Buck had sent of her date last night had been effective. What she was seeing in Steve, feeling in his rough handling, was jealousy. That wasn't all of it. Despite the fire in his eyes, his cheeks were flushed with the consternation of being made to feel jealousy and the knowledge that she could read it on him. His lips pulled into an unwilling smile at the challenge she'd presented him. He was aware of what she'd done and why, and he respected her strategy. She dared to smile back, satisfied for making him feel as she had, thrilled they could play mind games like this and understand each other so well.

There was a lot to say, but now wasn't the time. She stepped back from Steve to get a better look at him. He was in khakis, a dark green winter sweater, and he had a small posy of flowers in his hand, along with some other thing.

His nearly overwhelming male presence crackled and hummed at her. They couldn't seem to stop staring at each other. She watched him pull his jagged, clashing feelings under control until he had himself contained and deceptively polite again. She tipped her chin up and smiled at him. It felt good to know that he still cared wildly and deeply for her, no matter how dating other people had changed them. She had some power of her own in their relationship and she knew that now.

Steve reached out two fingers and shoved her back a step, like a rude bully of a little boy. His rascal smile assured her he was friendly and playful, merely acknowledging all the unsaid things between them.
"You want to play, Papi?" she taunted him.

Estrella shoved him too, and was surprised when he let her push him back a little. He captured her hand from his chest and kissed her palm, then let her hand drop.

"We'd better play later or we won't get around to eating," he told her.

She pouted at him briefly, but she was hungry too. She hadn't had breakfast, and had only sampled small tastes of things as she cooked. It was hard to stop enjoying his presence but she made herself turn around. The feel of his heat and energy behind her made her shoulders shiver. She pointed at the knot she couldn't get undone.

"I can't get this. Could you?"

"Sure," Steve said.

His fingers brushed hers away and he had the knot undone in no time. She pulled the apron off and went to the kitchen to set it down. Wanda was nowhere to be seen. Steve was behind her in the cheerful light of the kitchen windows when she turned around. He offered her the flowers.

"They're…What kind are these?" she asked, truly puzzled.

She took them from his hand. The flowers were a mix. There were some she knew and some she'd never seen before, only one of each kind. They made an eclectic assortment of colors and forms.

"You can look them up later," Steve said.

Steve leaned in the kitchen doorway much as Bucky used to do, but his stance made her feel flustered rather than grumpy. She narrowed her eyes at him for the homework he'd set her. She would bet every one of the flowers in the bouquet had a clear and pertinent meaning. His mind never stopped. She knew the blossoms were meant to be just as much a message as they were pretty.

"Later," he reminded her.

Wanda came into the kitchen between them and Steve hurried to get out of her way.

"Are we going to eat or stand around all day? It smells good in here and I'm hungry," she said.

She got glasses from the cabinet and poured drinks for them.

"It smells great. Let's eat," Steve agreed.

They were surprised when after sitting around the table, Wanda took hold of their hands and bowed her head in silence. Her eyes closed and her lips moved for a few seconds. Then she let go of their hands and looked at them expectantly.

"I was gonna say grace, but thanks," Steve said.

"You still need to say grace. I was only praying for blind fools to find their way," Wanda told him.

Estrella stared at her friend for a moment, then she laughed. Steve grunted an insulted sound, but he grinned at Wanda anyway. They were quiet through Steve's heartfelt prayer of Thanksgiving, then his belly grumbled impolitely.

He chuckled and opened his mouth to apologize, but Estrella raised an eyebrow at him. Wanda put
a generous spoonful of cornbread dressing on his plate, then handed him the carving knife for the
turkey. Everyone was hungry, so little conversation happened while they served and ate.

Estrella felt content at the obvious appreciation Steve showed for her and Wanda's cooking. He
made blissful faces and occasionally little sounds of enjoyment during the meal. Estrella paid
attention to what Steve seemed to want and served more onto his plate long after she was done
eating. Steve sent her thankful looks and tried not to eat too fast. Wanda kept looking between the
two of them, clearly amused at how they communicated without words. She got up from her empty
plate, brought the wine from the refrigerator, then left them alone.

"I should have made an effort at conversation rather than eating like a rube," Steve grumbled.

"No. She understands. I think she wants to give us time together. I've missed you," Estrella said.

"Yeah, it feels like it's been forever. Thanks for having me," he said.

Estrella frowned and threw her napkin at him. He caught it out of the air before the cloth could
smack into his face. He looked to her curiously.

"Don't thank me like that, like we're just friends to have over," she complained.

"Cut me some slack, babe. This isn't easy. Part of me wants to talk and hold your hand, part of me
wants to tan your fanny for that stunt last night, and part of me…"

His heated look at her finished what he wasn't going to say. Estrella didn't want to smile because
she had a point to pick with him, so she bit her lip against it. It was impossible to ignore the heat
simmering between them. She took a turn flickering her eyes away so they wouldn't jump on each
other over the table.

Why did he feel so intense today? He thrilled her, he made her want to touch him, and he
challenged her to overcome all that and meet him in rational conversation. She was determined to
start there, with rationality.

"Is that what your dates are? Stunts?" she challenged him.

Steve took a calming breath before he spoke.

"I wasn't putting myself in danger when I went out. You were. The power dynamics are different
and you know it. It wasn't worth endangering yourself in public like that to get one up on me, so
yeah, it was a stunt," Steve said.

"I know Jarvis won't let me go out without telling you. Natasha and Pepper knew I was going.
Bucky was there-"

"He wasn't there from the beginning. He had to stop what he was doing and rush to get ready. It
took him over an hour to get to you," Steve pointed out.

"I don't care. I was fine. I know how to handle myself for a little while and I knew Bucky would
come. You risk yourself all the time, every time you go to work. I'll decide what risks I want to
take and if it's worth it. You need to let other people take risks according to their judgement, not
just you all the time," Estrella said.

Steve clamped his teeth shut and stared at her stubbornly over the remains of their Thanksgiving
meal. Estrella drank down her wine and clumped her empty glass on the table. She got up and
grabbed Steve under his arm. Her tug at him insisted that he comply.
Steve went with her. He expected them to settle on the couch in the living room but she passed up the couch and pulled him toward her bedroom.

"I don't know, babe. Maybe we shouldn't," he cautioned as she towed him into her room.

Estrella shut her door. He opened it again as soon as her hand was off the knob. He looked around for anything useful until he found a decorative iron sunflower on a bookshelf. He took the heavy knick-knack and wedged it under the door to hold it open. Estrella made a frustrated face at him and tried to kick the décor item from under the door. It was stuck fast and she only made her toe sore.

"Are we children? You don't think we can talk with the door closed?" she asked while she rubbed her aching toe.

Steve stood, leaned back against the open door. He crossed his arms, then waved a hand at the open space of her room.

"Talk all ya want. I'll listen from here," he told her.

His eyes briefly took her in from her comfy ballet slippers, up her dark red clingy leggings, and over her simple three-quarter sleeve tunic. She'd pushed the sleeves up past her elbows while she fixed the food. She knew his quick regard was more thorough than it appeared. She had a bruise from Rob on the back of her elbow but tugging her sleeves down now to hide it would only draw Steve's attention to it. She stood stubbornly, like him, and crossed her arms. Her stance was a copy of his, meant to be annoying. If her fingers hid the bruise it would look natural until she could think of a way to put her sleeves down.

"Look at us. I didn't want this. I wanted to stay your friend, and now we can't talk without the door closed because sex gets in the way," she pointed out.

"We're still friends and you know it. Do you want us to go back to only being friends again? I can't do that, Estrella. If that's what you want, tell me, but I'll be pretending," Steve said, and he shook his head once in denial.

"No! You know I love you. I can't go back either. I miss the way we used to be sometimes, that's all," she said.

She sat on the edge of her bed. She scooted back and toward her pillows, then took off her slippers and folded her legs under her. She looked to Steve and patted the middle of the bed. He stood there for a moment longer in defiance, then he came to sit with her.

"Show me we can do this," she said softly.

Steve pushed his hand under hers on the bedcover, then curled their hands together when her fingers slid between his. Her hand felt small and soft on his. A wave of longing made him close his eyes and hang his head. He wanted her hands all over him. He needed her softness. Right now he wouldn't be able to tolerate her touch on his bare skin without going too far. He wanted to be close to her so badly that his shakes had sped up into a smooth hum of tension he doubted she'd be able to feel, even if she set her tooth against his like she used to do.

"You can't relax," she said.

Steve laughed quietly, then looked to her with defeat. He should have known he couldn't hide much from her. Her hand came up to rub soothingly across his shoulders, back and forth. He sighed. It felt like a mere mist of water to a parched, thirsty tongue.
"It's not your fault. Work is frustrating. I want to finish the job. I've got plans," Steve said.


Her efforts at soothing him weren't working. Through his thick sweater he was like rubbing smoothly contoured marble. He moved like a man, was warm like a man, but he felt like stone. He was only supposed to feel like this when he was fighting. She gave up and let her hand fall onto his fist which clenched against the bed.

"Mm-hmm. Plans. You said you wanted to talk," he reminded her.

This tense quietude seemed to be all she was going to get from him today. She wanted to press him down across the bed and rub him and kiss him until he was smiling and at ease, but it didn't look like that would be welcome or useful.

"What's wrong at work? Bucky said you don't have the information you need. Does it really matter when you go, as long as you go?" she asked.

"Yes. It matters a lot, but I'm not here to talk about that," Steve shook his head, "I'd rather talk to you."

"Okay," Estrella agreed.

She scooted away from him to partly recline back against her pillows. She angled her legs along the bed next to him, propped her head on her hand, and reached to hold his hand with her other one.

She wore her copper butterfly today. That pleased him. The little plant he'd given her was growing under its light on her dresser. One of his shirts had gone missing. He saw it draped over her bedpost not far from her pillows. Maybe she liked having it near, just as he guiltily enjoyed the pair of panties he hadn't returned to her.

Steve looked to the open door. He could hear the sounds of television coming from Wanda's room. He toed off his shoes and pulled his legs up onto the bed. He bent himself to fit at the foot of the bed, his feet tucked under his opposite knees. It looked silly for a tense, brooding brute of a man to sit with her like it was a slumber party but Steve was adaptable like that. He rested his elbows on his knees and played gently with her fingers with both of his hands.

"How's the family?" he asked her.

"You don't know? I thought Jesse would be calling you all the time," Estrella said.

Steve shrugged.

"He calls some. Mostly, he asks how you're doing. I think he doesn't trust you to tell him the truth. He thinks we're in trouble and that you're trying to sugar-coat the situation so he won't worry," Steve explained.

"He said that much?" she wondered skeptically.

"Nah. You know Jesse. It's all bullsh- uh, malarkey, and I have to read between the lines," Steve said.

They both grinned at his fumble to find a more polite word. She would have made an issue of it but there were more important things to talk about.
"Are we in trouble? You and me?" she asked.

Steve smiled at her, slow and warm. She knew she'd made him jealous last night but he was forgiving. Understanding.

"No, we're not in trouble. We're good. What do you think?" he asked.

Estrella nodded.

"I'm sorry I made you jealous. I meant to do it. You needed to know what it feels like. So maybe I'm not sorry, but I don't want you to keep feeling that. It's an ugly feeling. It makes me want to hurt someone," she said with quiet contrition.

"I know what you mean. I know where he lives, Eya. Robert Marshall. Buck made sure I saw the way he looked at you, the way you looked when you went out last night. The way you danced with him. How the other men in the place wanted you. I wanted to hurt somebody but I took it out on my phone. Tony must be building a stronger phone for me. It went through the wall. Didn't break," Steve smiled.

"You know where he…? Of course you know! You probably knew in five minutes," she said.

"Thirty seconds after Buck sent the first pic," Steve admitted.

"Why did you need to ask about him? I didn't ask where those girls lived, the ones Jarvis said wanted to rape you," she fussed.

They'd both been bitten by jealousy and it stung.

"I know what he was thinking, Eya. I could see it on his face. You weren't safe. I wanted to know where he lived, where you were, in case I needed to help you," he said.

"I didn't need you. Bucky was there," she pointed out again.

"I didn't need you. Nat was there," he fired back.

They stared at each other for a long moment. It was silly to fight in such a juvenile manner but it felt good. With Estrella, he enjoyed letting his guard down. It felt humiliating but right to air his petty human weaknesses with her. The more he did it, the more he knew he could trust her to be kind to him. She didn't expect him to be perfect all the time like most people did because she didn't start out seeing him as Captain America. When he got to feeling nasty or low she wasn't shocked and she didn't try to cajole him out of it. She gave back and egged him on until the sore spot was smoothed out.

"So, neither of us likes feeling jealous," Steve murmured.

She shook her head slowly and tapped her fingers at her heart.

"It hurts," she admitted.

Steve nodded. He resolved to not make her feel that way again if it was in his power not to. He'd thought he was above that kind of jealousy, but once again he was wrong. She'd taught him that. He'd learned a lot of things because of her.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. Rob kept talking about himself and staring at me, and I couldn't help but compare him to you," Estrella admitted.
"Hah!" Steve said.

He briefly pointed his finger at her like tallying a point won in a game.

"I know, I know," Estrella looked resigned to being teased about her admission, but Steve didn't do that.

He smiled at her. She smiled back. If this was how they were going to handle their differences, he could take it. She was honest about how she felt and gracious in admitting when she was wrong. He admired her for that.

Gosh, she was nice to look at. Even in casual clothes, without the fancy dress, no heels or jewelry, no sultry makeup on her face and with her hair simply pulled back on one side, she was still so fine that he didn't want to keep his hands to himself. He wanted to feel the exquisitely female shape of her legs and hips under his hands. He wanted to bury his face in her shirt and explore the curves hidden underneath. He wanted to kiss her pretty shoulders and neck and bury his fingers in her hair.

She seemed to want the same from him. They'd got stuck in each other's eyes and he didn't care. Nor did he care anymore that the bedroom door was open. Wanda could come knock him over the head with the rolling pin Bucky had warned him of.

Estrella got up onto her knees on the bed and pulled his head to her chest. Steve put his arms around her and luxuriated in the feel of her against his face. Her hands moving through his hair felt wonderful. She smelled like his girl, clean and sweet, except for maybe the leftover scent of turkey and broth from her cooking. That only made him feel more at home.

She rubbed his shoulders while he mouthed at her breasts through her shirt. The bra she wore was soft and didn't stop him from nuzzling at her contentedly. Estrella tugged at him, trying to get him to lie down with her on the bed. It was easy enough to resist her pull. The problem was that he didn't want to resist. A microsecond before he would have given in, Steve set his feet on the floor and stood away from the bed. Estrella tried to move with him but he pressed her carefully away from him, back to her bed.

"Steeve!" she protested in a tortured moan.

The look he gave her was hot enough to flush a sheen of sweat to her skin, but stubborn enough to make her flop back on the bedcover and growl at him. She wiggled and writhed for a moment in stymied desire, then stiffly tugged down her sleeves as if a few more inches of modesty would make any difference in their longing. She scooted her bottom to sit against her headboard and brought her pillows around to hug to her chest in an attempt to stifle her aching breasts. She glared at him. He glared back.

"No. I've got to finish the job before we do that. I can't play with you anymore, Eya," Steve told her.

"Finish what job? Does your job ever end?" she asked.

"Just Hydra. They're the only ones who made it personal, like La Eme did while they were hunting you. I've got to get Hydra off my back before I can be free," he said.

When he put it like that, she understood his goal of ending the specific threat Hydra presented. But evil people didn't think they were evil. They thought their cause or ideology was justified and that Steve was the bad guy who needed to be stopped from interfering with their goals. Hydra might be his current target, but as long as Steve kept fighting, he would likely make more enemies who
would see him as the bad guy.

"And then what? Won't there be other enemies after that?" she wondered.

"I'll deal with the future when it gets here. Hydra is what I have to finish so I can move on from my past," Steve told her.

He stood tense in her small bedroom, between the bed and the dresser. She could see he was hard as stone again, clenched all over. Steve was heart-meltingly strong and handsome, even in his older grandpa-style clothes. She chastised herself for noticing while he was so obviously unhappy. Her hand lifted to rub his arm and offer comfort. He stepped away from her touch. She would have felt hurt at the rejection, except for the torment in his eyes.

"Estrella, I'm tired of holding back the darkness for everyone else. It's all I ever do. I want more than that. Can I have some light, some kind of happiness for myself without somebody lurking behind my back to take it away? I don't think I can keep being a good man if everything good only goes to other people. I know it's selfish," he seethed, "So, I'm selfish. I've had to acknowledge that. I can't keep being everyone else's hero. I want something for me at the end of the day. Something more than thinking in the dark all night, planning the next fight."

Estrella nodded. Like the last time they'd seen each other for their rooftop date, Steve had a lot on his mind. The weight of responsibility was almost palpable around him. She wanted to comfort him and distract him, but maybe he needed to talk about it.

Steve turned and leaned his shoulders against the wall opposite from her, beyond the foot of her bed. His skin was flushed with agitation and the muscles at his jaw jumped. Impatiently, he pulled his sweater off over his head. He tossed it onto her dresser so it wouldn't land on the floor, then he resumed his cross-armed clench. His skin was dewy with a thin sheen of sweat. His hand briefly reached out to turn on her fan and angle the air movement toward him.

The hard press of tension that rode him made his muscles rigid under his skin like she'd not seen in weeks. She felt bad for noticing how gorgeous he was while he was angry but she couldn't help it. He was looking away anyhow, lost in his thoughts.

"I'm done with just stopping the bad. I want some good, some positive things in my life. And I'm not gonna let anyone take it away from me once I have it. If somebody wants a fight, let em try," he vowed.

His eyes shifted to her. Estrella worried at the anger she saw there. Steve didn't do loud, blustering rage. She could see that if anyone provoked him beyond his patience and kindness he would quietly take action with precise, intelligent vengeance. When he was angry like this he didn't feel so different from Natasha or Bucky. The prickly, sinister sense of danger was strong even though it wasn't directed at her. She couldn't feel sympathy for whoever earned his wrath because she would probably agree with Steve's judgement that they'd earned it.

Steve drew a long, slow breath through his nose and laid his head back to rest against the wall. He had to calm down, to cool down. There was anxiety in Estrella's eyes. God bless her, she trusted him even when he let show the rage that drove him, that he kept hidden from everyone else. He let that thought soothe him. When Hydra was done, she would be here for him. Wouldn't she?

He cracked his eyelids enough to stare at her.

It took Estrella a moment to notice his regard. He had that burning angel look about him, the one that made her feel she was standing far too close to a roaring fire. It was easier to admire his body
than to meet the focused speculation in his eyes. She did, anyway. He deserved her full attention.

"What? What do you want?" she wondered.

Steve leapt much as he had in the back of his truck except he came at her, rather than leaping away. She had time to draw in a quick breath but no more than that. His weight landed on her bed without jiggling them too much. He did something a little too fast to see and she was jerked down flat on the mattress, her pillows tossed away. Only the delayed ache of pressure at the back of her knees told her how he'd grabbed her to pull her flat. That was forgotten as he stared at her nose to nose. She couldn't stand it. He was too much, too intent on seeing into her head, using her tell-tale eyes against her.

"What do you want?" Steve asked her.

His hand took her face carefully and coaxed her to look at him. Her damned eyes were going to give her away and he knew it. She was incapable of lying to him like this.

"I don't know what I want!" she complained.

"Liar. Try again. What do you want, Estrella?" he demanded softly, gently.

His anger was gone, but not his determination. She gulped a nervous breath and fluttered her eyes closed. It felt like she was in the grip of and pinned under a frightful thing but it was only Steve. He wouldn't hurt her. He wanted to know her mind, her heart.

"Don't hide. Tell me," he encouraged her.

"I have to think!" she hissed at him, "I can't think with you stabbing at my brain like this."

Steve chuckled a little. He very much looked forward to letting her turn his brain to jelly in the future, but right now he needed to know if she was done playing around with him. It mattered. For what he was going to fight through in the next week or more, he needed to know if she'd be waiting on the other side. If she still wanted to play games, his plans would be different.

"You have to think about it? Surely you know. Everyone dreams, Eya. Are you afraid to tell me your dreams?" he wondered.

She knew his lips were near hers. She could feel his warm breath speaking against her face. She sought him and rubbed a distracted kiss onto his mouth. It was a comfort against his mental intensity.

"C'mon, doll, don't try to get us waylaid. I need to know. What do you want? Say it, even if it feels silly," Steve urged her.

His presence, his maleness held taut above her was turning her thoughts to incoherent gibberish. He wanted her to think, but she wanted to revel in the power he had over her. It was exhilarating to be with a man she couldn't fully control. It felt free, to want him as much as he wanted her.

"You," she murmured.

That was an easy answer, and the one thing she was sure of. She looked at him so he could see the truth she spoke.

"Uh-huh. That's the easy part. We know we want each other. What else?" he asked.
Steve laid his weight on her. He hadn't been restraining her, but he did now. His hips settled into the cradle that felt like home to him. His weight rested on his elbows, but he took her wrists in his hands. He swallowed an over-eager sound and tamped down his body's urges. She was hot and she wiggled under him, trying to make some friction. He held still, except for an involuntary flex of something that had a mind of its own.

"Do you want children, Eya?" he asked.

He didn't need to see her nod to know the truth of it in her eyes.

That wasn't all he needed to know.

He turned her wrist so that the back of her left hand was near his mouth. He pressed his lips to her third finger. She liked the kiss, but didn't immediately get what he was asking. She watched his mouth moving back and forth between her first knuckle and her second, gliding along where he wanted to put a ring on her finger. He knew when she understood because her eyes widened.

"What about this?" he asked.

She stared at him for several seconds before she could answer.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

He could see that she told the truth about that, too. Her eyes compelled him to comfort her in her fears, so he did. He let go of her wrists and wrapped himself around her. The attraction and the drive for sex were strong between them but his affection for her was sweeter still. Finally, he allowed himself to kiss her face, her ears, her neck, her hair. There was no skill in his kisses, just the desire to make her feel safe and loved.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Of us, together. We're both different. Unique. What if we make little monsters? What if the world won't leave us alone? What if we're too strong for each other and we fight all the time and get in each other's way?" she asked.

"What if I die and leave you alone?" he added.

She nodded because she worried about that too.

"What if I'm gone, prisoner of some war, and I come home to find you've taken another man, thinking I was dead?" he asked.

Estrella made a startled face, then shook her head vehemently. She pulled him down so she could hide her face beside his.

"There's no one like you. I'd rather be alone than pretend anyone could take your place," she whispered near his ear.

"Don't worry about that. It's outlandish. I only said it because it's been a nightmare of mine. Along with someone hurting you because of me and not being able to stop them," Steve admitted.

Estrella kissed his ear, then the side of his face. They were already on a hair trigger between rosy affections and excited passions. Her hands moving to clutch at his bare skin in the small of his
back was the last sensible awareness they had for a while.

He didn't try to make it good for her. She didn't try to please him. They were too far gone for such considerations. They'd missed each other too much. They'd felt too much jealousy and nagging doubt. The cravings of their hearts and bodies were too strong to leave them any kind of sophistication.

The vigor of Steve's movements against her verged on painful, especially where she was already sore from Rob. In the thrill and joy of the moment she didn't pay attention to discomfort, except that his eagerness excited her. Estrella exulted in the healthy power of her body. Steve seemed to like it too, from the sounds he made. She pressed and pulled at him with her legs, clutched and pushed with her arms, and arched under him with her body, lifting some of his weight and exerting her will in how she wanted to feel him moving on her. If she bit at him too hard, he didn't complain. Steve's hand accidentally pulled her hair. She didn't mind losing a few strands as long as the loving continued.

Steve's teeth nipped at her lip hard enough to leave a mark and he grunted in dismay at the slight taste of blood in his mouth. Hers or his, he didn't know. Their ravenous kisses had already nicked their teeth together a few times. He tried to mumble an apology but she attacked him again, sealing his mouth so that he could only groan through his nose.

A sharp *Bang* almost like a gunshot startled them apart a few inches. Their heads whipped aside to look for the source of the interruption. Steve's body tensed above her, then relaxed.

Wanda stood at the door, her rolling pin in her hand. There was a dent in the glossy paint of the door. She looked at them sternly.

"Not in my house," she told them, "you get off of her."

Estrella flushed with embarrassment, but it was nothing on the flush she already had from scrapping with Steve. She giggled at being caught. Steve grimaced as he rolled away, his back turned to Wanda. The woman grumbled at them and only retreated to the kitchen when Steve stood to put his sweater on.

Estrella watched him avidly. She thought Steve would be a little bashful but he wasn't. His face showed humor and concern as he pulled his sweater down, but no chagrin for their interrupted affections. His rump settled near her hip on the bed and he turned his body to press his thumb up at her lip. Only now did she feel a sting at her gums. Her tongue swiped at the small welling of blood. Steve looked satisfied that the damage was slight and would heal soon.

While his mind was intent on seeing that she was unhurt, his body clenched and shuddered. He smoothed her hair back from her head with one hand while he gripped a painfully full erection in his other hand through his khakis.

"You're so sensitive. Did you…?" she wondered.

Steve shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment. With a harsh grip and controlled breathing, he backed his nerves down from the edge of going over. He wanted to but not now, not like this. Estrella looked on with confused fascination.

Steve let go of himself and smiled at her kindly. Lightly, his calloused fingertips caressed the marks he'd left on her. He touched her swollen lips, the reddened beard rash on her jaw and neck, and he rubbed his thumb at the sore spot he'd probably left on her head where he'd pulled her hair. The remembered feel of her straining and pushing at him made him thrill again with renewed
excitement. He resolutely turned his mind to affection instead.

"You're different," Estrella said.

Used to, Steve would have been less able to control himself. He'd have easily gotten off during the wildest part of their loving, despite their clothes mostly staying on. She wondered at the knowing little smile at the corners of his eyes. He wasn't going to share anything to appease her curiosity, so it notched higher. What had he done? What had he learned in the time they were apart? She narrowed her eyes at him for denying her.

Whatever mystery he was guarding intrigued her. It felt not like a threatening secret, but like a gift she might get to open later. Denied passion and eagerness to continue their play made her knees feel shaky when he helped her up and to the living room. Wanda sat in her chair watching the Macy's Parade on her big television. She gave the couple a suspicious side-eye while they arranged themselves on the couch, but she'd left it available for them to share.

"Sorry, Wanda," Estrella said.

She poked Steve in the ribs, but he only looked at her.

"I'm not sorry," he said.

Steve lay on his side along the couch. He held Estrella in a loose embrace in front of him while they watched the parade floats and listened to the commentary. Wanda glanced at them every so often. Steve detected a hint of a smile on her gruff face. He was onto her now. She wasn't as hard-hearted as she pretended to be.

Halfway through the parade, Steve tucked his fist in the middle of Estrella's chest. She held his hand there and kissed his knuckles. Wanda looked at them forbiddingly.

"If you're going to start that again you can find someplace else to do it," she told them.

"I'll behave, I promise," Steve assured her.

Steve stayed late through the afternoon, into early evening. Estrella warmed him a plate of leftovers when she heard the first rumbles of his stomach. She'd enjoyed the quiet time in his arms while they watched the parade. She'd enjoyed the friendly card game the three of them played, and she enjoyed fixing food for him when he was hungry. She sensed he would go soon and she didn't want him to. After he ate, as the day gloomed to evening, she sat beside him on the couch again, this time upright. Wanda was in her room trusting them to not act like teenagers.

There was so much they hadn't talked about, so much she wanted to share with him. But he was about to leave. She could tell by the way he didn't want to stop touching her skin and by the way he kept looking to his silent phone which rested on the coffee table. His face went from being her attentive boyfriend to the cool, reserved Captain and back again, depending on what he was thinking about.

"How long?" she asked him.

He looked up from where his thumb rubbed over her knuckles to her face. His eyebrow lifted a little in question.

"How long until I can see you again?" she clarified her question.

"That depends on my work. And on you. I don't have time for dating now, but you want me to see
"No," she shook her head.

"No?" he wondered.

"I can't stand to see you out with more women. Unless you want to?" she asked.

Steve shook his head and raised her hand to his mouth for a brief kiss. Her left hand. He kissed her on her third knuckle. Fears and doubts crowded her mind, but hope and wonder filled her heart.

"I'll be busy for a while, however long it takes. Please pray for me. I'll need it," he said.

"Don't you plan these things? Will it be very dangerous?" she asked.

"They're not going to go down easy, that's for sure," he said.

"Steve, please be careful," she pleaded.

He shook his head and kissed the back of her hand with utmost tenderness.

"Getting the job done is more important than being careful this time. I can't move on with my life until this is finished, Eya. You don't know how important this is, and not only to me. We have to do this. I can't live with the future they've got planned for everyone if we fail," Steve warned her.

Estrella swallowed nervously. He was speaking of big things she didn't want to know about. She was sure she could understand it if he explained it to her, but she didn't want to know. Whatever he knew was dire enough to put that forbidding, determined look on his face. One of the reasons he was a hero was because he faced the things nobody else wanted to acknowledge existed and he dealt with them so other people wouldn't have to. She was fiercely proud of his valor, but she wasn't so brave.

"I'll pray for you," she assured him.

"Thanks," he said.

"Do something else for me?" he asked.

She waited cautiously for his request. She didn't like the look on his face.

"Look after Buck if I don't make it. If he'll let you," he said.

"Steve!" she exclaimed quietly.

"Shhh, just promise me. He needs somebody. If I'm not around, you'll be good for keeping him steady," he said.

Estrella looked to him stubbornly. She would do as he asked, but she didn't want to consider him dying. He seemed to read that in her expression.

"Don't die," she demanded.

"Yes, Ma'am. I'll do my best," he said with a cocky smile that seemed to make light of the coming battles. Already, Steve looked like the Captain without the uniform. The brisk, concise way he moved to get up from the couch made it feel like her boyfriend had already slipped away before he was out the door.
He didn't give her time to argue about how careful he needed to be. Steve hugged her by the door and kissed her. She didn't want to let him go, knowing he was going off into some unknown danger. He didn't look afraid, only determined. Wanda wished him well and handed him the covered plate they'd fixed for Bucky.

Estrella cried after he was gone, afraid she wouldn't see him again. Wanda gave her a hug, then they did the dishes and cleaned the kitchen from the mess of their Thanksgiving cooking.

Before she tried to sleep she searched online to find out what Steve's flowers meant. It took a while to identify the unfamiliar flowers before she could find the meanings assigned to each blossom.


She stared at the flowers on her night stand until her phone vibrated with a message. She picked it up and looked at it.

_Thanks for the food. He says you're done dating. It's about damn time. Go with me tomorrow and I'll get you kitted out to turn his head. I know what he likes cause I pawed through all his favorite pinups_, Bucky texted.

She frowned. Something felt off about him offering to go shopping with her tomorrow. It wasn't like him to instigate a shopping trip. She could tell he didn't like shopping. He merely tolerated it when it was necessary.

_Do you know it's Black Friday tomorrow? I wasn't going to go out in that_, she responded.

_Pansy_, Buck taunted her.

_Okay, but isn't there a chance you'll be busy? Isn't Steve waiting for a big thing to happen?_ she wondered.

_Not likely_, was all Buck had to say to that.

_Okay, but let's start late to let the worst of it pass_, Estrella replied.

They agreed on a time and Estrella got ready for bed.

She wasn't looking forward to shopping on Black Friday. Since Bucky thought it would be alright, she trusted him. They could shop some other day, but Buck seemed eager to get her some things which would please Steve. Estrella felt a bit grumpy about that. She had her own style and things she liked to wear, but it couldn't hurt to know what Steve liked for future reference.

She prayed for her family and for Steve, then she tried to get some sleep.

....

On the way down in the elevator Bucky crowded her into the corner. He held up a stringy, strange thing in his hand.

"Push your hair back from your face," he told her.

"Why, what are you doing?" she asked while she did as he wanted.

"You get the ident veil today," he told her.
Estrella looked at the wispy thing as it approached her face. There was a more solid string across the top of the colorless mesh and Buck smoothed it along her hairline. The mesh grid lay against her face loosely until Bucky pulled the edges past the curve of her jaw and under her chin. He did something to snug the mesh filaments closer to her face, then he swiped his thumb along the top at her hairline. It felt like light was beaming into her eyes until her pupils adjusted to the brightness.

"Why me?" she wondered.

The device was barely noticeable on her skin, like she'd walked into a spider web. The most annoying thing was getting used to feeling like a flashlight was shining in her face. Bucky looked at her and nodded in satisfaction, then turned to stand in the middle of the elevator they had to themselves. He looked his normal dashing, debonair self today. His dark hair was styled in a classic comb-aside and his face was clean shaven. His slacks and sharply styled wool coat were nothing short of dapper. She didn't think she'd ever seen him wear polished shoes.

"Gotta change things up sometimes. Ya never know who might be watching," Buck told her.

They went through the main foyer of Wanda's building and out onto the sidewalk. The press of people was hectic all the way to the train, packed into the train, and up to the street again. Lots of people carried packages and shopping bags, which made getting around more annoying.

She liked what the ident veil did for her. Men still looked at her, but they looked at her body instead of getting mesmerized by her face, her eyes. She'd dressed down again in a long layered skirt to keep her legs warm and hidden, her Western boots for her feet, and in the thigh-length coat she still hadn't returned to Natasha.

"What do I look like?" she asked when Bucky's stride swayed him closer to her in the moving crowds.

"Asian, probably Japanese. It goes with your hair," he told her.

Now she wanted to see what she looked like. It was impossible to stop and stare at herself in a shop window because Bucky tugged her along. There would surely be a mirror somewhere today where she could get a good look.

Buck seemed like he was on a mission. They didn't linger at food carts or stop for coffee. He took her to East Village and hustled her into stores where the clerks measured her waist before they led her to dresses likely to fit her. Buck smiled as he told her about some of the old pinups Steve had kept in his footlocker. She could see the similarity in styles he described when he held a dress out to her for trying.

She didn't like some of the things he thought were grand. Some of the colors and fabrics were strange and scratchy and some were wonderful. Buttercup yellow was fine, and nut brown, but she refused pewter gray and dark burnt orange.

As Buck hustled her around from shop to shop, she realized that's what this was. A hustle. Buck was being entirely too gay and helpful. He was observant enough to see when she'd grown suspicious, so he dropped the act after they'd perused five shops. She had three bags in her hand and considered it more than enough success for Black Friday, especially since they'd only been shopping for her, not for gifts. Estrella was worried and getting tired of fighting the crowds. She'd almost forgotten the ident veil on her face, it was so comfortable.

He stopped regaling her about old times in the Army while Buck looked around the buildings and the traffic which surrounded them. He held her hand and hurried her into an open-front produce
Not many people were interested in fruit or vegetables for Christmas gifts. There were no big sales here, so it was less packed with people than outside.

"Bucky, what are you doing? What are we doing?" she asked.

He looked at her like nothing at all was the matter while he fiddled the plums. He raised a few to his face to smell them for ripeness, then he put them back down. They didn't smell ripe to her either, but she knew they hadn't come in here to look for fruit.

"I know I talk about Steve a lot. He's like a force of nature. He bends people's will around him. Even when he was frail and half dead as a kid, he had a way of sucking you in and getting you to do things despite your worse judgement. It's easy to get swept up in living your life around him, doing what he wants," he said cryptically.

Estrella nodded. They walked along the aisle and Buck hovered his hand over the nectarines, the peaches and the apricots, none of which apparently smelled good enough for him. They rounded the end of the aisle and strolled toward the front of the store again. She completely understood what Bucky meant. But why was Steve's magnetism an important point to talk about right now when he had her standing by the muskmelons?

Buck had his back to her, leading on as if he half expected something to come flying at them from outside the open air market and he intended to shield her. His head turned minutely and she knew he was looking around, keeping alert. It made her more than nervous. There was something he wasn't telling her and more and more, this whole outing was feeling like a sham.

"Buck?" she prompted him.

She didn't try to keep the worry out of her tone.

He stopped walking and turned back to speak to her over his shoulder. Had that bit of bright fuzz been on his coat collar before? She didn't think so. She lifted her hand to brush it away for him but he did it himself. It wasn't a bit of stray fuzz. There was a sharp little needle embedded in it. He had to pull it out of his neck, through his shirt collar and from his coat. He looked at the projectile without much concern and tucked it into his coat pocket. The bead of blood that bloomed red into the fabric of his collar horrified her in its meaning, but it didn't seem important to him.

He put his hand at the small of her back and pushed her across the store at a casual pace.

"Bucky! Did someone shoot you?" she hissed.

There could be no other explanation for what she'd seen but he was being too calm for a person who had just been darted. Had she been hallucinating, or did it really happen? Bucky pushed them through the clear plastic strips hanging from a doorway and into the back of the store. People sorting bananas in the stock room looked at them in surprise but Buck hurried her through and out the back door into the alleyway behind the market.

Bucky looked both ways down the alley and up at the afternoon sky. It didn't appear that he was worried about anything at the moment. She was verging on panic because something was clearly happening, but he spoke to her calmly.

"Steve is easy to go along with, and hard as diamond if ya try to fight him. But sometimes you gotta do things your way, no matter what he thinks about it, see?" Bucky tried to explain.

He put out his gloved left hand against the wall to steady himself as he swayed. Estrella grabbed his coat lapels but he pushed away her help.
"Your pupils are dilated. Shouldn't we run? I'll call-"

"Not yet, toots. You stay right here and gimme three minutes to deal with this, then you can call Wilson. I made sure his number was in your phone," Buck said.

"I'm not going to wait three minutes!" she argued.

Bucky stepped around her to go back into the produce market through its back door. She got her phone and started to unlock the screen. He pivoted around and smacked her phone from her hands. It clattered across the alley pavement. She looked to him in shock.

"Three minutes! Shtay here," Buck emphasized the exact spot with a downward point of his finger, "and do what I tell you. It's my turn, this time."

Buck ripped open the market's back door. His shoulder bounced off of the frame because his balance wasn't good. He surged through the opening with more determination than coordination. For an instant, she saw past him through the stockroom and the store to a burly looking group of men on the sidewalk out front. Buck's silhouette strode toward them with deadly grace marred only a little when his ankle tried to twist under him on one step. There were people moving all over the sidewalk. The men were standing still, waiting. They looked dangerous. Bucky was drugged. The door closed and she lost sight of Bucky.

Estrella looked around for her phone and grabbed it up from where it had landed near a puddle. She pulled desperately at the back door of the shop next to the produce market. It didn't open. It felt like a nightmare to run and try door after door while trying to get her phone unlocked so she could call for help.

Seconds felt like minutes because she knew Bucky had reached the waiting men by now and there was no one to help him. Finally, just as she got her phone unlocked with shaking fingers, an alley door opened in her hand. She stood in the doorway and searched for Sam Wilson's number while voices chattered at her from inside the building.

Where was Sam's number?! Bucky said he'd made sure she had it, but she couldn't find it anywhere. Sam had his wings, and Bucky seemed to know what was going on. There was probably a reason she needed to call Sam instead of Steve or Natasha or Tony. Maybe Sam could get here faster than the rest of them. Estrella rushed into full-blown panic as she couldn't find Sam's number in her phone anywhere. She looked up and saw people fussing at her in a language she didn't understand.

She stood in the open rear doorway of a restaurant kitchen and Thai people fussed at her and made shooing motions. Now wasn't a time to be polite or proper. Bucky was in trouble. Estrella stopped looking at her phone and rushed through the kitchen. She dodged through waitresses in a busy, dim service galley and out into the dining room of the restaurant. The patrons stared at her because she ran through the dining room and to the front. There was a statue and a screen in the way and she darted around it. She pressed her face hard against the front window while the cashier gawked at her.

Far to the left, she could see a disturbance on the sidewalk. Bodies dodged aside and someone flew and smacked against a parked car. She had to get a better view but Bucky had told her to wait in the alley. There was no choice, she had to risk it so she could tell somebody what was happening and get help. Her finger touched Natasha's number, the first useful name that scrolled under her finger on the phone screen. While she waited for the call to connect she took her chances going out on the sidewalk where the attackers might see her.
Estrella was buffeted by people running away from the disturbance in front of the produce market. She was shorter than lots of people so she couldn't see well. The sidewalk finally cleared. Several strong men were fighting with Bucky but there were so many that she couldn't see him. She knew he was the one in the middle of the pile. Another man flew away and bounced off of a lamp post. The military-looking thug shook his head and headed back into the fray.

Someone was shouting deliberate, individual words in Russian. She knew enough now to at least recognize it as the language Bucky and Nat spoke. From inside the fray, Bucky's voice shouted angrily, in rage or denial. It gave her chills of terror to hear him yelling like that. It meant horrible things were happening. His metal hand flashed up among the struggling bodies, stripped of its glove. The huddle of men shouted and cleared away for an instant, then Estrella saw the flash and crackle of electricity. The Russian words continued on, chanted with purpose almost like a cold, angry magic spell. There was a sustained buzzing crackle during which Bucky's voice raised in an uncontrolled yell, then silence.

In an instant, it was over. All of the men melted away into the crowds except two of them. Those two dragged a limp Bucky under his arms toward a car that waited in the middle of the street. She tried to get a picture of the vehicle and its license plate but her phone was on the call screen and traffic was a mess. By the time Estrella swiped away from the call screen to get the picture, the men had Bucky loaded inside and the nondescript black car was gone, far ahead into the empty space it had left by holding up traffic. It had taken only seconds for him to disappear.

They had taken Bucky! The shock of it temporarily blanked her mind. She'd expected a fight, that they would rough him up for some unknowable reason, then leave him lying hurt or dead on the sidewalk. She hadn't expected anyone to take him. She wouldn't have thought it possible. But he'd been drugged, then surrounded and beat by a dozen men, then electrocuted.

Her phone rang in her hand with Natasha's tone. She hurried to lift it to her face.

"They took Bucky," she said to whoever was on the other end.

"Where are you? Never mind. I see you. Who took him? Natasha! I can't get a track on Barnes! He must have cut out his tracker!" Sam's voice shouted through the connection.

Nat took the phone. Estrella heard Steve's voice bark something in the background. Estrella stepped out past the curb and between the parked cars. She risked herself leaning out into traffic to try to see where Bucky was. There were many black cars. Traffic had shifted lanes, obscuring and confusing what she could see. The particular black car she needed to see was swallowed up, gone from her sight among busses, delivery trucks, cabs, and every other kind of vehicle.

A horn honked and Estrella stepped back before she could be struck by a cab.

"Sam is coming to get you. Are you outside or inside?" Natasha's business-like voice asked her.

"Outside. I can't tell which car he's in. Hurry! They're getting away. I don't know which car he's in and I didn't get a picture!" Estrella fretted.

"Which direction did they go?" Natasha asked her.

"To the right. If you're standing on the sidewalk with the stores to your back, they took him to the right," she explained.

"Good. Thank you. Estrella, I want you to go inside now," Nat told her.

"No, I have to watch. Maybe I can see the car he's in," she argued, craning her head to look at the
"We don't need that. Go inside the market that's behind you. Wait for Sam. He'll be there soon,"

"But-"

"Do it!" Steve shouted at her through the call.

She felt awful abandoning Bucky, giving up hope of seeing the car. Steve and Natasha both wanted her to go inside so she did. She stood just inside the shop, between the end displays of apples and pomegranates. She felt agonizingly useless while she held the phone to her ear. She heard Bruce and Tony's voices in the background and Steve talking with Thor. Natasha muttered something vehemently in Russian but she stayed on the line with Estrella.

While she stood and watched the New York street scene return to normal as if nothing had happened, as if a man hadn't just been taken, Estrella felt a disorienting sense of dread and dull, helpless panic. A small black drone zipped by, flying above traffic and going the direction Bucky had been taken. A moment later Sam Wilson landed on the sidewalk between a trash bin and a lamp post, in the only spot that wasn't teeming with pedestrians. People watched and exclaimed while he folded his wings. They made room for the normally friendly-looking Sam to walk across the sidewalk to the market.

Estrella knew it was Sam and she knew he was a friend, but he didn't look it. The flight pack on his body, the specialized goggles on his face and the guns strapped to his thighs made him look intimidating. His usual smile was gone, replaced with a flinty jaw. Sam strode to her, took her by the arm and out onto the sidewalk.

"Hold on to the harness. I've got you," he said to her then they were up, into the sky.

Estrella shrieked in fright, but twisted her head to look around.

"That way!" she said, hoping Sam would take them over traffic so they could find Bucky.

Sam talked to someone back at the tower through his comm. Estrella clutched her phone and was thankful for the secure strength in Sam's arms as he held her and flew. Avenger's tower seemed to approach quickly. There wasn't much time to be afraid of heights between her worry for Bucky and their quick arrival to headquarters. Sam landed their weight gracefully on his boots, folded his wings and escorted her inside the tower. The familiar clean, new smell of the air inside Avenger's tower greeted her but she didn't have time to marvel that the tower smelled like home.

"Where's Bucky? Didn't you find him?" she asked while the elevator took them down.

"We're working on it," Sam assured her.

He didn't sound very reassuring. He was also preoccupied. It looked like he was in his head, not paying attention to her. The fingers of his left hand moved oddly, as if he was flying an imaginary plane but nothing was in his hand, only the complicated looking glove he wore.

The elevator opened and Sam escorted her into a highly technical looking room with all kinds of displays and control panels high and low on the walls. Everything was sleek and uncluttered under the bright overhead lighting. The Avengers were there, agitated and tensely quiet.

Bruce hunched over a panel. He quickly manipulated something with deft hands while he glanced between twelve different displays in front of him. Tony worked near him, articulating his hands in the air on a changing blue pane of light that flashed through information too fast for Estrella to
understand what he was looking at. Clint squatted on a high walkway that went around the room looking broody and thoughtful. He didn't smile at her. Thor wasn't present. Sam walked up to where Steve stood in the middle of the room with Natasha beside him. Estrella shuffled to a halt and looked at the large displays they watched in silence.

"I am unable to get a match, Captain," Jarvis's voice said from somewhere.

One central display scrolled through city camera images of sidewalks, traffic and intersections near the market where Bucky had been taken. A display off to the side flashed through images of vehicles, license plate numbers and registered owner names. Yet another display seemed to show cell phone images and videos of the altercation on the sidewalk.

"Yeltzen," Natasha said as she watched the poor quality image of the struggle which had subdued Bucky.

"Ramirez," Steve said.

"No Rumlow," Sam said.

The large display in the middle showed a quickly changing aerial view above the traffic. Estrella noticed how the aspect of the view as it tilted and turned matched the hand motions Sam was making with his glove. Sam was controlling a search drone while he stood here in the tower! Surely they would find Bucky any second now.

"It was a black car," Estrella said.

"Thank you," Natasha muttered.

Sam, Steve and Nat continued to watch the information on the displays in front of them.

"I tried to get a picture of the license plate, but I couldn't," Estrella said contritely.

"Bruce?!" Steve barked.

"It's gone. Like he's not even in the city. They know. They took the power cell out and shielded it in a case. It's the only explanation," Bruce answered.

Steve swore under his breath.

"Jarvis, did you scent blood in my suite recently? He removed the tracker and he didn't tell me," Steve said.

"Affirmative," Jarvis answered.

"Why wasn't I informed?" Steve snapped at the AI.

"James Barnes has private habits which draw blood. Any one of these incidents could have been his removal of the tracking device, but his frequency of this habit misled me into not taking note of any irregularities. The tracking device remained on him until he left the tower this afternoon. I was unable to determine that anything had changed. I am sorry I failed you in this, Captain," Jarvis explained.

"Goddammit, Buck!" Steve seethed.

Estrella bit her lip and her eyes watered at how angry and helplessly desperate Steve looked. He was losing his friend again to the enemy and there wasn't much he could do about it.
Sam took the risk of guiding his little drone around among the cars, trying to get a view into the black ones. It was highly illegal to fly a drone in city traffic but they were running out of time. The abductors were escaping with Bucky.

"This is intentional," Natasha commented.

"Talk," Steve said.

"He removed the tracker but kept it secret instead of being angry with us for chipping him. They shouldn't have been able to take him against his will. He allowed this to happen," Nat insisted.

"Romanov, are you suggesting Barnes is a traitor? That he's been a Hydra agent among us all this time?" Steve asked.

"No. He told me you're hard to fight, but he needed to do things his way. After they shot him with a dart. He said it was his turn, this time," Estrella said.

The Captain looked past Natasha to her.

"I got him," Tony said triumphantly.

With a flourish, he swiped the blue light of his data display toward the main display in the room. Estrella's head turned to see a changing string of numbers appear. They looked simple and lonely in the middle of the large display space.

"Thor!" Steve said.

"I have the coordinates," came Thor's voice from somewhere that sounded windy.

"Stop," Natasha said sharply.

Steve looked to her. Natasha stared at Steve. Once again, Estrella felt small and insignificant at the way Steve could communicate so many things unsaid with his partner.

"but I'm losing him," Steve said, an emotional plea that was so different from his brisk command tone.

Natasha continued to stare at him knowingly.

Steve seemed to glare at her, his eyes wild with flying thoughts, but then his shoulders slumped. He turned and watched the coordinate numbers change on the display. The numbers stopped changing for a brief moment, then began changing again.

"I am above the vehicle. He is no longer in a black car, but a gray van. They made the transfer at a fuel station," Thor informed them.

Steve stood still and quiet. Everyone stared at him. Natasha said something in Russian, to which Steve replied in a gruff voice.

"Captain?" Thor asked.

"Return to base. Let him go," Steve ordered.

There was a moment of silence in the control room, then everybody spoke at once.

"Are you out of your mind?" Sam wondered.
"He's right there!" Tony gestured at the coordinates.


"It was dumb luck I found him the first time. Soon as he's out of the city, I won't be able to follow unless I get in the suit right now," Tony warned.

"Let him go," Steve repeated.

Clint's fist made a hollow, thumping sound as he bounced it on the railing in front of him.

Tony left his work station and hurried to get in front of Steve, in his face.

"What's the matter with you? Is this martyr by proxy? We risk everything to keep him here, then you're going to let them take him back?" Tony prodded him.

"Yeah, Tony, I am," Steve said with quiet resignation.

The room seemed to collectively deflate, except for Steve and Natasha, who stood resolute and watched the numbers change. Estrella didn't understand it.

"How could you?" she asked into the stiff silence.

Steve looked briefly to her, then held out his hand. His eyes went back to the coordinates on display. Estrella went to him. Sam stepped out of her way and Natasha watched her approach.

"Tell me what happened," Steve said when her hand was in his.

His eyes stayed on the numbers.

"He called last night and wanted to go shopping. We went but I thought it was weird. Bucky was too happy, too eager to look at old clothes. We got some things but it didn't feel right. When he saw I didn't believe him anymore he took me into the fruit market. He kept looking around, watching. He doesn't like to stop and talk in open places so it didn't make sense that he would go in the fruit market. The whole front of it is open to the street. He said a few things about your past then I saw the dart at his neck. He made us go out back. He was losing his balance from what was in the dart. His pupils dilated. He slurred some words while he told me what I told you, that you were too hard to argue with and he needed to do it his way, that it was his turn. He told me to stay in the alley and wait three minutes, then call Sam. I know Sam's number used to be in my phone, but it wasn't anymore," Estrella said.

"Diversion, buying time," Natasha pointed out.

"He took Sam's number out of my phone to make me waste time? He tricked me?" Estrella wondered.

"If it makes you feel any better, Miss, he also tricked me," Jarvis said.

It didn't make her feel any better. She'd trusted Bucky and he'd played her. He'd played all of them. Even Steve and Natasha, Bruce and Tony.

Thor walked into the room, Mjolnir in his fist. His hair looked windblown. Estrella had no time for Norse gods. She looked back to Steve. His eyes reflected blue light while he watched the coordinate numbers change. Natasha widened her stance and crossed her arms. She watched the numbers with Steve, looking defiant.
"Why are you letting him go if you know where he is and you can get him back? What if they hurt him or kill him?" she asked.

Worry for Bucky ate at her nerves. Those men hadn't been nice to him. Maybe Steve didn't understand the danger Bucky was in. She had to try to get him to change his mind.

"They yelled at him in Russian and they electrocuted him after they drugged him and beat him. You should go get him while you can," Estrella insisted.

Natasha said a harsh string of words, enunciating each one precisely.

"Yes, that!" Estrella recognized some of the words.

Steve smiled a little.

His reaction wasn't appropriate at all. Wasn't he listening to her?

"Go!" Estrella ordered him.

She waved a hand at the coordinates on the screen.

The numbers froze still, then disappeared from the display.

"Mister Barnes is no longer within range of sensors," Jarvis said.

"Why are you doing this?" Estrella demanded.

Natasha put out a hand and touched her shoulder, turning her wrath and questions away from Steve.

"Because Hydra doesn't know what it's got. James can do this. We have to trust him. He's right. This was the only way," Nat said.

Steve shut his eyes and let his chin fall nearly to his chest. Estrella was confused but everyone else seemed to understand. Their respectful silence made her want to scream. To her, it felt like they were sacrificing a friend to torture and possibly death. Those people didn't mean to do anything good for Bucky. What goal could possibly justify letting Hydra keep him?

"Let me know if anything changes," Steve murmured, then he left the control room and took Estrella with him.

She'd decided that she didn't know enough to ask the right questions. She felt like an ignorant outsider. Until now, the Avengers had mostly let her feel like part of the family. Except for that one time when Steve and Natasha had been away on a mission and nobody would tell her where they went or why or when they'd be back. Steve didn't exactly march her through the halls of the tower, but it was close.

Estrella understood he wasn't angry with her. He was probably feeling horrible about the decision he'd made and didn't know how to handle himself. They got to his suite and Steve didn't hesitate to lock them inside of it. There was a cell-phone sized hole in the wall in the living room, but she didn't pay much attention to it on the way to his bedroom.

Steve lay down with her on his bed. She faced the glass wall and looked out at the unremarkable afternoon sky. Steve curled behind her and reached his hand around to swipe the ident veil from her face. He tossed it onto the night stand then drew her close against his tense body. They both had their shoes on and she, her coat.
"Are you alright? Jarvis scanned you and found no injuries, but are you okay?" Steve asked her.

He got her bulky coat off of her then rubbed her all over with questing hands. Stress from the abduction tried to melt away under his warm, caring touch but she still didn't understand and Bucky still was out there, moving farther and farther away.

Natasha's protective gesture of turning her questions away from Steve felt like a gentle reprimand. Estrella waited for Steve to tell her whatever he would. In her distress over Bucky being taken she'd failed to see that Steve was in torment over letting him go until Nat had pointed it out to her.

"I'm okay. Nothing happened to me," she said.

"I could have lost you, too," Steve said, his voice strained with emotion.

Estrella twisted in his arms until he let her turn over and face him.

"Bucky made sure I was safe. He made me wear the ident veil. The whole time we were out, he was watching. When he saw things start happening he put me in the alley and made sure I was too scared and confused to get into trouble. Or to call for help! Oooo, he stinks!" she said belatedly.

"Yeah, he's a lying rotten sneak, and a cheat. The very best," Steve said with an uncertain smile.

Estrella watched him, rubbed her fingers softly on his face, and waited for him to say anything more. His gaze was unfocused, his thoughts internal. Her comfort was worth little. Steve seemed perpetually tense, lately. All day yesterday he'd been firm like stone and he still was.

"You demanded I date other people. I did what you wanted. You have wisdom and I learned from the experience. Buck told me I was being too square about this fight, that we needed to move faster and hit harder. Just yesterday, you told me I need to let other people take risks. That's what this is, Eya," he explained.

"We take risks to ourselves when we think it's worth it. I never said we should risk other people to accomplish our goals. I did that with Rob Marshall and it was selfish of me. It was wrong," she said.

"Don't lecture at me about it. You're outta your league. This is my game, Eya. My world. Do you understand what Buck did? He's sharp. God, he's sharp. He used his skills and his knowledge to do what was necessary for the greater good. How can you miss connecting the dots of everything he did to make this happen? We have to respect him for it," Steve said.

"I think he's crazy! What could be worth putting himself back into the hands of the people who tortured him for so long?" she asked.

"You don't know and I'm not going to tell you. Nat's right. We need to trust him," Steve said.

"But will we ever see him again?" she asked.

"Yeah, probably. He has this habit of blowing… seismography!" Steve exclaimed nonsensically.

He kissed her on each cheek, then he leapt off his bed. Steve stripped off his office clothes and went into his closet.


She sat up on the huge bed and waited for him to come out of his closet. He didn't for a full minute,
so she slipped off the bed and began picking up the clothing he'd discarded. Steve was normally neater than to drop things all over, but he was excited. About seismography, apparently. She folded his office clothes and laid them neatly on his dresser.

Steve came out of his closet wearing a dark gray layer of silky thermal undergarments. His stocking-like socks matched, and he pulled the long-sleeve thermal top on over his head. He laid the stiff outer layer of his new uniform on his bed. He picked up the Saint Michael medal she'd given him from his nightstand. He slipped its chain over his head and dropped the medal down inside the thermal top, against his skin. She'd noticed he wasn't wearing it yesterday. He wanted it now, since he was dressing for combat.

He reached for the uniform he'd laid out on the bed, but then he stopped. Steve turned to where she stood by the bedpost at the foot of the mattress. With one hand, he lifted the front of his thermal top until his chest was exposed. Steve waved her closer.

She knew what she wanted to do, and it was probably the same thing that he wanted her to do. Estrella put her hands on his chest. She kissed the Saint Michael medal as a sign of devotion and entreaty, then she kissed Steve on his chest, over his heart.

"Ah, you're good to me," Steve smiled at her.

She smiled back. She still didn't understand what was happening, but that was okay. Steve looked optimistic and hopeful, filled with purpose. He shoved his legs into his dark blue Captain America uniform pants, then sat to pull the boots from under his bed. While he was there, he pulled his shield from under the bed too. He tossed it on the bed. Steve fastened the boots and the pants, then pushed his arms into the iconic uniform jacket. He left it open in front while he moved around the room getting straps and gear. Two thigh holsters not unlike Sam's went onto his thighs. There was a knock at the door and Steve called for the person to come in.

Natasha came to his bedroom doorway and stood there while Steve loaded his uniform with small items of gear and put on his gloves.

"The seismographs. If we-" Nat began to say.

"I'm on it. Bruce can show me how to triangulate, then we wait and listen," Steve agreed.

Estrella saw Clint lingering in the living room. Steve was right. The man didn't look friendly today. He looked scary. His bare arms were impressive and so was the gear he carried. Estrella didn't know what all of it was, just like she didn't know what Natasha had on and in her partially zipped black cat suit.

Steve did something to the second drawer down on his night stand, the one she'd never been able to open. The drawer slid out. He took out two deadly looking handguns. He checked the magazines in their handles, then shoved them firmly into his thigh holsters. Next, Steve stowed two gleaming knives in sheaths, one on his lower leg and one inside his jacket.

His motions were quick and practiced. He paid no attention to Estrella while he geared up but she couldn't stop looking at him. The leather harness for his shield went on last, after he'd properly zipped and secured his jacket and put on a tool belt. Natasha and Clint waited patiently. Estrella saw a smile on Nat's lips while she watched her watching Steve. It wasn't a dangerous Widow smile. It was a woman's smile, full of shared appreciation. Estrella didn't know that to make of it right now. She was dazzled watching her boyfriend turn into a soldier.

Steve swung his shield around and it grabbed on to the shoulder harness with a heavy metallic
clank. His gloved hands came to rest gripping his belt and he turned to her. He opened his mouth to speak, but grinned instead when he saw Estrella staring at him. She helplessly wondered if she could bite the shoulder harness. She blushed hot, embarrassed to find a leather strap so sexy. And that tool belt. Good Lord, something about the tool belt and thigh holsters made his ass look criminally good.

"C'mon, doll. I've gotta go to work," Steve said with a smile big enough to warm his voice.

Nat was grinning at her, and even Clint had a hint of a smile around his otherwise cold eyes. Steve held out a hand to her and she took it. He seemed taller than his usual impressive height, bigger and more sparkly. It must be the shield.

They walked from his suite and to the elevator.

"You're going to get Bucky?" Estrella asked.

"Not quite yet. He's got work to do. We'll pick him up when it's done. I need you to stay in the tower while we're away. Hydra's seen you with Buck. It's not safe out there for you anymore," Steve told her.

"But Wanda's place is reinforced," she protested.

"Only against civilian entry. We'd have had to scrap the building and start over to harden it against Hydra. That's too much to ask Wanda to put up with, don't you think? Here, you can stay with Jane for a few days," Steve said.

Clint and Natasha stayed in the elevator while Steve escorted her to a suite she'd never visited. Thor's hammer rested on a table outside its door, crushing the silk flower arrangement. Estrella wondered at the absurdity of life in the tower. She'd missed this place, but not the rollercoaster of drama and emotions that were inevitable here, living among these people. Wanda's place was quieter. She could think there.

The door opened at the barest beginning of Steve's knock. Thor answered it and offered them a bowl of grapes. Jane appeared beside him. She looked to Estrella with kindness and compassion. Darcy Lewis came from somewhere within the suite to look on past Thor's arm.

"Hey, Cap. Sleepover?" Darcy said cheerfully.

Steve rubbed Estrella's back in sympathy then gave her a soft, lingering kiss at her temple. He turned to look at Thor.

"She's one of yours until I return," Steve told him.

"I will guard her as blood of my blood," Thor assured him, "Need we retreat to Asgard for any reason, you will find her at my side."

"That should do. Thank you," Steve said with sincerity.

Estrella felt trapped. Loving Steve was easy. Being swept up in his hero-business was a ride she had no control over. He needed to know she was safe while he was away so he could focus on getting his job done. That meant putting up with Darcy for a few days. Steve started to pull away, eager to go find Bucky.

Estrella tugged at his hand and he turned to her. She tipped up on her toes and hugged him tightly. Without hesitation, Steve hugged her back, gear and the shield getting in their way. He tipped his
shoulders and kissed her thoroughly, the shield affording them some privacy. Their kiss was rough and wet, with no time for the finer details of romance. Their lips pulled apart but she didn't let him go quite yet.

"You did that move too well, like you've used it before. How many girls have you kissed behind your shield?" Estrella asked Steve, half-joking and half-jealous.

"I just thought to do it, I swear," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

He patted her hip, then pulled away from her. Steve walked toward the elevator and she watched him go. His walk was different when he was the Captain. There was an understated swagger, or was it just the weight of the gear which exaggerated his natural gait? Either way, she liked it and couldn't stop looking. Steve turned to stand in front of Natasha and Clint like the final piece falling into a three-piece puzzle. He gave her a two-fingered salute from his brow as the elevator doors closed. A smoldering, knowing smile tugged at his lips. It seemed to say he was pleased and that they had things to explore later, when Bucky didn't need rescuing.

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End Note: I have a work of short fiction that's original and can't be posted here. Do any of you know a place I can post original works? Preferably some place that gets a decent amount of traffic? Thanks in advance for any help.

I thought it best to end the chapter at the above cut, with the elevator door closing. Then a little bit more popped into my head. Those of you who don't hate Darcy might like to read below. It's not pertinent to the overall story and it may be ignored, but it may ease your mind of how Estrella will be doing while Steve is away at work.

...

Jane reached out and took her hand. Thor offered her the grapes again.

"Come on, we were getting started on supper. You can peel the potatoes. Before Cap gets back I'll teach you to curse in Portuguese. It'll be so hot," Darcy told her.

"You cook?" she asked Darcy.

"Uh, yeah. Somebody has to feed these two," Lewis responded.

Jane drew her in and Thor shut the door. Estrella was aware the three of them were being overly interested and engaging to distract her from what had just happened to Bucky and her trauma at seeing it happen. It was kind of them to make the effort. Estrella decided to make the best of the situation. She had her phone. She could call Wanda and send Billy around for her laptop and her guitar.

It smelled good in the suite. Something delicious was simmering on the stove. The place was much more homey than either Steve's or Nat's place. There was chintzy Americana grandma-style clutter wrecking Tony's attempt at edgy modern décor. Doctor Foster's data printouts were everywhere in stacks, along with some shiny foil food wrappers. Then there were the alien artifacts which added a touch of absurd royal grandiosity to the train wreck of conflicting styles.

Estrella wanted to sit down and add her boots to the pre-existing pile of shoes but there was a fluffy
gray green-eyed cat occupying the only chair near the shoe pile. The cat gave her a chilly stare, certain the new human wasn't going to require it to move. Estrella sat on the braided rug and tugged off her boots, then added them to the pile. They fell over sideways onto a large pair of what looked like bronzy metal armor boots. It didn't look like Thor cared if his things were disrespected because there was already a pair of fuzzy purple slippers over the toes of his princely armored boots.

"I think I like you. You know cat language. Loki bites people who make him move," Darcy called from the kitchen.

"He does not. Never listen to our Darcy when she smiles like that," Thor said.

He offered her a hand up. Estrella took it and stood. Thor had the same kind of strength Steve possessed. He hadn't exerted more than his fingertips in supporting her weight.

"Loki? That's not 'Battle of New York' Loki?" Estrella asked and looked at the cat suspiciously.

"Of course not. It is but a sly name the women applied out of fondness because the cat steals things and besieges our ankles. My brother would never tolerate me to do this," Thor said.

He reached for the cat and picked it up by the scruff of its neck. The fluffy feline melted into a limp slump and purred loudly. It looked strange to see Thor cuddle the cat to his chest and scratch it under its chin. His wise eyes looked to her over the animal.

"You need not feel green over Stephen's skill with his shield. It has become an extension of his body. Since he wanted to protect your private affections from curious eyes, he naturally tipped his shoulders to do so. Never have I seen him insult his shield for the sake of a frivolous dalliance," Thor assured her.

It took an instant of thought for her to realize Thor wasn't calling her a frivolous dalliance, but instead saying Steve didn't use his shield to play around with women. These people made her brain hurt. Was Thor trying to distract her to keep her from worrying about Bucky and Steve? Was he trying to put her at ease over a too-practiced move of Steve's shield during a kiss? Or was he simply trying to make her feel welcome in a new place?

"Please, coffee," Jane called.

"Thor, the potatoes! Quit trying to charm the new girl and let her help in the kitchen," Darcy called.

"Alas," Thor sighed.

He laid the cat back down on the chair, where it continued to be as energetic as a puddle of warm goo. Thor hurried to take the mug of hot coffee which Darcy held out to him and brought it to his lady-love while she shuffled through her papers at the coffee table.

Estrella noted the kitchen was the one clean, uncluttered area of the suite. She washed her hands before taking over the potatoes so Darcy could tend to the meat in the skillet. They worked in companionable silence for a while before Darcy spoke.

"Ya know, if they wanted broody-booty Barnes dead, they'd have killed him and left him there, right? But they didn't. That's their first mistake." Darcy said.

Estrella shrugged. It made sense, now that she was calmer and not losing her mind over seeing Bucky stuffed in a car. She finished peeling the potatoes and started quartering them into the pot of
hot water.

"The Avengers have knocked back Hydra so much they probably can't scrounge together a car battery and a paper clip in the same room to torture him with. Don't worry. Cap will get him back alive," Darcy said.

"Don't bullshit me, Darcy Lewis. They had a car, a dozen brutes, and some kind of electrocution thing. If you keep trying to put cotton candy up my ass, I won't trust anything you say. And don't call him 'Cap' all the time. He doesn't like it," Estrella said.

Darcy looked at her while she stirred the onions so they wouldn't burn in the skillet. She looked delighted that Cap's girl had used words Steve wouldn't approve of from a lady.

"You don't want me calling him Steve. The only time I do that is when I'm having a really deep therapy session… with my vibrator," Darcy said with a big smile at just the right moment.

It had been another long day. Estrella found that all she could do with Darcy's humor was laugh. As kind as Darcy was trying to be, she would probably be supportive if she felt like crying, too.

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Chapter 61

AN: You know how this goes. It got too big while I was playing with it. This is half of what I have. The other half will be posted as chapter 62 in a few days, as soon as editing is done.

"Ssshh!" Valeria shushed Andrea and Makenzie.

Her friends were throwing popcorn at each other and it was getting in her rug. What annoyed her more was that they were making noise laughing during the last few minutes of her favorite show. It was a dramatic scene, where Evan was about to kiss Haley, and you just knew Liza was going to walk in and catch them at it.

The scene finished and Val was about to turn to Drea and Mak and fuss at them for getting food in her fuzzy rug, but the sound of a motorcycle on the television snapped her attention back to the screen.

"Oh, there she goes!" Drea teased her.

"Shut it. He's..." Mak spoke up for Val against the teasing.

The girls sat still and watched the new thing with Captain America which had come out a few days ago. It was only on about twice a day, so they weren't tired of it yet.

Captain America's voice here and there over the rugged scenes spoke of kindness and duty, conscience and perseverance. When he couldn't be heard talking or laughing with people in some cold Northern town somewhere, or grunting a little as he leapt from one grip to another on some rocks, or gasping when he came up for breath out of the ocean, he spoke of overcoming difficulty and doing the right thing.

Valeria had written down the transcript of what Steve said so she could better understand it. She didn't feel so bad about staring at him along with her friends while they watched because she already had his words memorized.

It was hard to tell it was Captain America at the beginning. He looked like some big biker guy, kind of fascinating and sinister all in black, with a leather cap on his head and dark glasses. When she'd first seen it come on television, she'd been interested because the guy was attractive, but then she'd heard Steve's voice and squealed when she recognized him in the biker gear. He looked hard-faced and maybe unhappy, but the voiceover explained that he didn't like the cold, that he'd learned to tolerate things he didn't like. It touched her heart because she understood he had really good reason to not like the cold. The landscape flying by to either side of his bike was bright and icy with snow and his stiff leather clothes luffed in the speed of the wind around him. His face was pale with chill, but he braved the cold anyway.

Steve looked friendly and approachable in street clothes while he talked with people and listened to them over barbecue. He laughed at something someone said, and it didn't matter that he had a little smear of sauce beside his mouth. The small smudge of barbecue sauce was endearing and made you want to reach into the screen and wipe it away for him. It was touching to see him squat to listen earnestly to a little kid while the voiceover spoke of how people were what mattered, how everyone was worth more than the things they had.
He spoke of being too busy to get out and live, to explore our nation, of taking time to do the simple things, to unplug from stuff and be curious of the world around us. There wasn't much time showing him on a cliff somewhere out West, and Valeria wished there was more to that part. She liked how physical and normal he looked, as he had at the beach with their family. He appeared as just a man, not a uniformed hero.

Again, Steve looked almost ordinary in the scene in the bar over the pool table. He spoke of being a good sport and taking your losses in stride while the old gray guy beat him at billiards. There was something in the brief glimpse of him leaned low over the green felt, looking down his pool cue toward but not quite into the camera that thrilled Val and made her shut her mouth against making any sounds her friends would tease her about later. Steve looked intent, almost angry while he lined up and punched the cue smoothly at the ball. The way his lips were slightly open, along with the breadth of his shoulders and the careful precision of his hands felt like it popped a little fuse in the back of her brain and smoke should be wisping out of her ears.

Drea made a little squeak of a sound at the beginning of the last scene. Val was silent in sympathy and Mak wiggled on the rug next to her. It was blue, the deep blue of ocean water, with shimmering rays of sunlight piercing down into the unknown depths. While Steve's voice spoke of never giving up, no matter how far it seemed you had to go, a few silvery domes of air bubbles rose toward the surface. Pale at first, Steve's face and then his hands emerged from the gloomy depths, then his whole body pulling hard for the surface and the sunlight. From ghostly, grayed-out colors, his golden hair, blue shirt and red shorts blazed into close-up turbulent color as he gasped at the surface for air. His voice encouraged that sometimes it took a long, long time to accomplish our goals, but if we kept trying we'd get there or at least learn something valuable along the way.

The girls watched while Steve walked out of the water dripping, onto the beach, where he sat on a rock and looked in the far distance toward the late afternoon sun. The shot of his wet clothes clinging to him wasn't long at all, less than half a second before he turned around and sat as if he was tired. The Steve sitting on the rock was silent, contemplative, but you could imagine the voiceover was his thoughts. He spoke of hope for the future and of loving the people around you.

"He looks like-" Drea said

"SHH!" Val and Mak hissed at her.

The most riveting part was the very end. As the scene could have faded out like any sickly-sweet PSA usually did, Steve's eyes moved from staring to the distance and he looked at the viewer personally. It gave her chills like Halloween and made her feel hot at the same time, the way he looked. Valeria couldn't figure out if Steve looked wise, like all of his hundred years was there behind his eyes, or if he looked loving like a parent, or if he looked dangerous like a guy who was capable of anything. How did he blend all that into one look? She didn't know, but he did it.

Maybe love isn't what you think it is. Sometimes love asks for more than we thought we could give, but we give it anyway.

It ended abruptly. The goofy, loud used car ad which came on afterward seemed to underscore how personal and heartfelt the previous minute and a half had been. Valeria was sure it was done that way on purpose, to point out how impersonal and materialistic things had become. Once again, Val was left contemplating the meaning of it all, what the message had really been. Maybe the viewer was supposed to take Steve's thoughts at face value. Or maybe there was something deeper there. She was still thinking about it.

"I hate that!" Makenzie seethed at the same time Andrea tried again.
"He looks just like your cousin's boyfriend!"

Drea's eyes went to the Captain America poster on the wall.

Val mostly ignored her insistence, again.

"What do you hate?" Val asked.

"What does it mean? It's all a bunch of do-goody words and it's hard to listen to because you just wanna stare at his booty or his face, but then it ends like that! Like, is he saying romantic love isn't real, or is it about the self-sacrifice that he already did, or is he saying he's doing something really crazy dangerous and it's all for love? 'Cause I don't know if I want to kiss him or find someplace to hide!" Mak said with frustrated drama.

"Maybe all of it?" Val wondered.

Andrea stared at her with frosty bitch-face.

"He's not my cousin's boyfriend! So they look a little bit alike, but-"

"They look exactly alike," Drea insisted.

Mak sighed.

"Stop fighting over that. It's stupid! Don't you think she'd know if her cousin was dating Captain America?" Mak said.

"Whatever," Drea grumbled.

She got up to shake the stray popcorn out of Val's rug. Val would get mad at her bitchiness, but then Drea would do something nice like that and she couldn't stay mad. They gathered the crumbs into the mostly empty bowl and laid the freshly fluffed rug back down.

"I'm gonna go. You're a lying loser," Drea said.

"I'm not. You're an insane bitch. As if," Val scoffed at Andrea's continued belief that Steve was Captain America.

Mak gave her a hug and so did Drea. Val saw her friends out to Mak's car, then she went back to her room. It was late. Later in New York than in Texas, but she was going to call anyway. The mess in her head was about to boil over and she needed to know things. She waited until she heard Mak's car drive away, then she shut her door and got her phone.

"Val, I'm glad you called," Estrella answered.

"Why? Is something going on?" she asked.

"No. Yes. Something's always going on," Eya said.

"You sound sad," Val said.

"I'm tired. There's too many people here. They're nice, but…” Estrella whispered.

She shut the door of Jane and Thor's suite and walked with her guitar to the elevator. It was after eleven, so maybe the common room would be empty.
"You just closed a door. Where are you going?" Val asked.

"I'm staying with Thor and Jane while Steve is working, but I was waking them up with my guitar, so I'm going to find another place where I can play," Estrella explained.

"Jesse said you lived in an apartment with a woman named Wanda. Why do things keep changing?" Val wondered.

"Because things change. I can't tell you everything. Just… I'm in the tower for now, but I was with Wanda when Jesse was here," Estrella explained.

She walked out of the elevator and into the large open space. She gasped to see Tony sitting in a big chair with a drink in his hand. He looked tired and disheveled. And alone. Estrella was in her nightgown, which was really one of Steve's long T-shirts. She felt suddenly vulnerable with her legs exposed and her hair down. Tony looked at her and her startled wide eyes.

He smiled, got up from his chair, and blew her a little kiss. He turned and went off to bed, which was somewhere in the opposite direction of the elevator.

"'Night, Tony, I'm sorry," she called to him.

Tony waved a hand at her in a 'don't worry about it' gesture and disappeared around a corner.

"You just said goodnight to Iron Man?" Val wondered in her ear.

Estrella sighed.

"Yeah, I guess," she said.

"Well, did you or didn't you?"

"No, then. I didn't. I said goodnight to Tony. He's completely not Iron Man right now. More like sleepy man," she said.

"Oh. Sorry," Val said.

Estrella was sleepy too, but she was too worried to rest. Her cousin's juvenile ways were sometimes grating, but it was good to hear from family. She sat in the chair Tony had left because it would already be warm and the couches felt too big and empty. The leather was soft. She rested her guitar in her lap and pulled her legs up into the chair beside her.

The lights dimmed in the room but didn't go out. In the distance, she could see the city below. She waited for Valeria to say whatever she'd called about.

"My friend Andrea keeps insisting that my cousin's boyfriend that she saw at the beach with us is Captain America. I keep telling her no, but I don't know if she believes me," Val said.

"I know it's hard. I'm sorry," Estrella apologized.

"Yeah," Val said with some resentment.

"Would you rather you didn't know?" Estrella asked.

"No, I'm warning you that maybe she won't believe me," Val said.

"Do what you can. That's all we ask," Eya said.
"Sometimes love asks for more than we thought we could give, but we give it anyway," Val said with a deeper tone of voice.

Estrella laughed.

Valeria didn't laugh.

"What does he mean? I can't figure it out. Nobody I know can figure it out," she complained mildly.

"I'm not sure, exactly," Estrella said.

"He's your man! How can you not know?"

"He hasn't been around much for me to ask and when I saw him other things were more important," Estrella tried to explain.

"What could be more important than understanding what he just said to the whole country?" Val insisted.

"Other things. Like people going missing, and like working for the whole country. He made that, and then he took off and things happened. I don't know! Maybe I'll ask him later for you, or you can call him. But it won't do you any good, because you can't tell Andrea what it means as if you really know or she'll know for sure your cousin's boyfriend is Captain America," Estrella said.

She strummed her guitar quietly, trying to ease her thoughts past her anxiety and back into her music. Valeria was quiet for a while, which was uncharacteristic for the girl.

"Is that you playing? You're really good. I thought Jesse's guitar was the first time you played," Val finally said.

"Thank you. It was. I thought Jesse's guitar was the first time you played," Val finally said.

"He's cheating on you. I saw the pics online."

"No, he's not," Estrella laughed, "I told him to go out with other people. But don't worry, we stopped doing that."

"Oh. Like, you wanted him to be with other women?" Val wondered, sounding skeptical.

"No, but it's what he needed. What we needed. Don't worry about it. I saw the pics too. It wasn't easy to look at," Estrella admitted.

"I didn't think he'd look... like that," Val said awkwardly.

"Like what? Like a man? Well, he is. It's part of him, so don't judge. He's good," she said.

"I didn't say he was bad. I didn't expect him to look so..." again, Val was at a loss for words.

"Sexy? Hot? I know. He's like a few different people all in one. He's sweet, and he's young and he's old, and he's loving and kind, but dangerous and sometimes angry, sometimes so sad I want to hug him, and then he's cold like a mafia boss too. He's complicated," Estrella tried to explain.

"So the last lines at the end of the thing he just put out, it could really mean anything," Val said, more confused than ever.
"Maybe, but from the way he looked when he said it, I think that might have been a warning to his enemies, to the people he's fighting right now," Eya said.

"I knew it! Most of my friends at school think it's about love, but that was a weird look on him. It gave me shivers."

"It's still about love. It's about what he's willing to do for the people he loves," Estrella explained.

"I get it. So, for most people, they'll interpret the love message as he said it, but for Hydra…"

"Right. They should know him well enough by now to be afraid. Steve loves everyone, so he'll do anything to stop what Hydra has planned, whatever that is. He didn't tell me and I don't want to know," Estrella said.

Valeria didn't know what to make of the sly embedded warning in Steve's confusing do-good message. It was blowing her mind, all the different ways she was still thinking of to interpret it. She heard Jesse's truck arrive home, so she got up and opened her door. She'd catch him when he came in from work.

"Wait. Someone went missing? Who? One of the Avengers?"

"It's nobody you'd know. One of our friends around here. Steve isn't too worried, he thinks they'll come home," Estrella said.

"That's weird. Hey, Jesse's home. Let me get him so he can hear you play," Val said.

Estrella wasn't sure she wanted to talk to Jesse, but it was too late.

Valeria had put her phone on speaker, so Estrella did the same.

She heard her cousin's voice grumbling, like he was tired and also didn't want to talk on the phone. Valeria was cheerful between them, encouraging Estrella to play for them. So she did. She didn't think of it too much or she would be embarrassed. More from feeling than conscious memory, Estrella played for her cousins the piece she'd been working on tonight. She kept it quiet so as to not bother Tony and Pepper.

It was easy to forget people were listening when it was only a phone there instead of people's faces. Estrella played with all the longing and fear, desire and eagerness she felt. She ended with hope and demand, determination to achieve her desires.

After she quieted her strings with her hand, there was a moment of silence from her phone. Then Valeria giggled. Estrella felt warm and embarrassed. She hadn't meant to reveal all that to them, but it had been there to come out and it was the best she'd played the piece yet.

"Will you write words for it?" Val wondered.

"No, I can't," Estrella said.

Val was too young to understand that the words wouldn't be decent for public, that some of it would be vocal sounds of lust or frustration.

Jesse grunted. He got it. She knew he would.

"Sorry," Estrella said.

"No. It's good. That's in your head?" Jesse asked.
"I wrote it, so yeah," Estrella admitted.

Jesse cleared his throat, then he laughed.

"Jess, have you seen the thing on TV that Steve did?" Val asked.

"Yeah. It's a lot like what Eya just played for us," he said.

"No it's not," Estrella denied. "Why do you think that?"

"Watch it again. It just is," Jess insisted.

"He says something, and it means different things to different people! I don't see how you can think the two things are the same," Estrella said.

"Call him and find out," Jesse suggested.

Estrella sighed. What could it hurt to try? If he was busy, he wouldn't answer.

"Jarvis, is there a way to add Steve into our call?" she asked.

"I will attempt it, Miss," Jarvis said.

"Who's Jarvis?" Val wondered.

"Shh," Jesse said as they heard a ring tone.

"Eya? Did you hear from him? Why am I seeing Val's ID?" Steve asked as soon as he answered.

"I didn't hear anything. Val and Jesse are with us. Still nothing?" she asked.

"Not yet. Clint's working on something we picked up, but it might be nothing. Hi Val, Jesse," Steve said in his Captain voice, only a hint of warmth in his tone.

"Hi," Val squeaked.

"Sorry to bother you if you're working right now," Jesse added.

"It's alright, there's nothing we can do at the moment," Steve said.

"Papi, we're wondering what the PR piece meant. Val says her friends at school all have different ideas. Jesse thinks it's like a song I just played for them, but I don't think so," Estrella said.

"You played for them?" Steve asked with pointed interest.

Estrella felt odd, like she'd betrayed him in playing for her cousins first.

"Val asked to hear. I'll play for you too," she offered.


Steve made a curious sound. Val laughed nervously. Estrella sighed.

"I didn't think I could call you while you were away, or maybe I would have played for you first. I can't stop thinking about you," Estrella accused.

Steve laughed. He sounded a little more relaxed and off-duty now.
"What does it mean?" Val insisted.

Steve was quiet for a moment, then they heard a sound like leather rasping over beard stubble. Estrella imagined him standing in the quinjet in his uniform, rubbing his gloved hand on his jaw while he thought.

"It’s meant to be encouraging, to try to heal the divide I see in our country. Everybody's plugged into media that's pumping out division. I wanted to make something different, to help bring people together," Steve said.

"What about the end, the last words?" Val wondered.

"Are you going beast mode?" Jesse asked.

"Rruh," Steve grunted deep, then he laughed like it was nothing.

"But what does that mean?" Valeria nearly wailed in frustration.

Estrella bit her lip in continued longing and anxiety, and Jesse laughed belatedly with Steve.

"Maybe it's rough out there, wherever you are, so take care of yourself," Jesse said.

"I'll do what I have to, no promises," Steve said.

"Shit. Well, try to bring it home for Eya," Jesse said.

"Watch your mouth in front of the ladies," Steve warned him.

"Sure, Cap. You can make me do that when you get back," Jesse taunted him.

There was a creaking, grinding sound. It was faint, but they could hear it.

"Don't break your phone. And stop grinding your teeth," Estrella fussed at Steve.

He laughed again. It was deeper, almost nasty sounding.

Jesse wondered how the man could think a four-letter word was inappropriate in front of his little sister, but that laugh was okay. He frowned at the transfixed, breathless look on Val's face.

"I'm sorry we interrupted you while you're working. You sound like you need to hit something," Jesse said.

"In due time. Gotta wait til then," Steve bit out.

"Don't fight angry, Steve," Estrella said.

She was worried he'd go in hot-headed and get hurt.

"I won't. Thanks for calling, guys. I should go," Steve said.

"But I still don't know what it means," Val said.

"It can mean what you need it to mean, sweetheart. I think Jess and Eya have it figured out," Steve said.

"I will," Steve said briskly, then his part of the call ended.

"Bring who home?" Jesse asked.

"Bucky's gone. He was taken. Steve will get him back," Estrella explained.

"Shit," Jesse said while he contemplated what it would take to kidnap the evil motherfucker he'd met.

"Jess," Eya fuzzed at him.

"I was right," Jesse changed the subject before he could catch crap for cursing in front of Val again, "about your music and Steve's TV thing being alike."

Estrella made a negative sound.

"I still don't see it," she said.

The three of them waited in silence except for Estrella's fingers idly strumming the guitar.

"Night," Jesse said.

Estrella heard him leave Val's room and shut her door.

"I don't know, Eya. Are you sure he's safe?" her cousin asked.

"He's not safe. Sometimes I wish he would stop putting himself in danger, but it's who he is," Estrella said.

"No, I mean safe for you. Steve sounds like he's mean or angry or something," Val said uncertainly.

She'd always thought Captain America and then Steve was like sunshine, even when he was fighting with the Avengers. What she'd seen hints of in the television piece he'd made and now in his tone of voice tonight told her something different. It was hot, but it made her worry for her cousin to be so close to a powerful man who might not be cheerful all the time.

"He's really careful with me. Don't worry," Estrella said.

"Okay. 'night Eya," Val said.

"'Night," she answered, then touched her phone to end the call.

Estrella sat in the near-dark and played through what she had of her more somber, worried piece of music, adding to it and changing it while she thought of Bucky.

.....

It was difficult to keep his pulse calm while he stood like an obedient lab rat and watched them get the chair ready. These weren't his usual handlers, except for Kozlov. The old, bald neuroscientist kept looking at him nervously.

The Soldier stood between and slightly in front of two brutes with electro-stunners. James had dreadfully familiar muscle memory of exactly how he was to stand, exactly the blank set to his face, and just the right muscle tension to convey readiness but not threat. He'd stood like this for
days during the previous decades, for nights, through changes of his guard when the Soldier wasn't needed yet, but nor was it time to put him back in cryo stasis.

The technicians were under one of the oldest models of the chair, trying to install new wiring while Kozlov griped at them to move faster. The Soldier wouldn't have paid attention to what was said around him. James did. They were worried. They knew time was short and they were afraid it wouldn't be possible to recondition him before the Avengers arrived. They seemed confident that his mental conditioning was absolute, still strong enough to hold him in wakeful readiness until they could wipe his mind again.

Maybe the hardest part was not smiling when everyone in the room would startle at odd, ordinary noises like a gust of wind, or a distant peal of thunder, or something creaking in the old building. Steve had them paranoid and rightly so. These people were running on fear. They were under pressure from below, with their own Soldier and the Avengers possibly attacking them at any moment. They were under pressure from above, wherever they got their orders from. Kozlov's cell phone would buzz sometimes and he always looked more antsy after he read the messages.

He couldn't look around to notice helpful details of the place. The human eye wouldn't notice a shift in his gaze, but if there were cameras and anyone analyzing him too closely, they would see that he wasn't as mentally blank as he was supposed to be. James occupied himself with anything useful to keep from thinking of the chair they almost had ready for him.

His arm burned and itched again. They'd taken the clean power cell Stark made and hid it somewhere. In its place was a power cell even more crude than the one he'd had before. He wouldn't be surprised if it was simply a jury-rigged battery of some sort. Everything around him seemed old tech, nothing beyond simple wired-in electricity. The place smelled dusty, faintly of hay. The interior walls were white-washed wood all the way to the high ceiling and hanging utility lights. If there were any cameras watching him, they had to be tiny and new tech, which didn't seem likely.

Finally, the lights dimmed as one of the technicians wired the chair directly into a breaker panel in the wall. The Soldier's arm itched more. James kept his breathing and pulse calm, though he felt terror bubbling up, then rage as a protective shield against the terror. He contained both emotions. The faint humming sound the chair made added to his uneasiness. The thing wasn't right. No telling what it would do to him. These people were in a hurry and desperate. They were going to be sloppy in scrambling his brain this time.

"Come here!" Kozlov barked at the Soldier.

James limbered his arms from behind his back and strode forward, keeping his gaze blank and at the wall in front of him, as expected. Kozlov would be an easy strike, then he could take out the shock brutes behind him and the helpless technicians. But it wasn't time yet. He needed them to trust him. He needed more information. For his goals and for Steve.

"Sit," Kozlov ordered him.

They likely didn't notice the wobble his knees gave as the Soldier pivoted and sat on the cold metal of the chair. Fear. Anger. Determination. He needed to do this, so he would. If he died, he had a plan for that. At least Steve would find his body.

"Back," Kozlov said.

James lay back in the chair and settled himself as he was expected to. They had no mouthpiece for him this time. No one was worried about his teeth or his tongue under these circumstances.
He couldn't help a quick breath and a widening of his eyes as the techs strapped his arms down and the rusty device closed around his skull. God help him, the old leather straps weren't going to be strong enough to hold him, and he'd have to focus on not breaking them, along with everything else he had to keep in his mind while they cooked it.

It was horrific and familiar enough to turn his bowels to water, seeing his arms and fists flexing in anxiety in front of him in the instant before they flipped the switch on the machine. James had hoped to never see this, feel this again, but sometimes more is asked of you than you'd hoped would be.

Until his mind blanked under the heat and the insanity-making agony, the Soldier kept one word in his head, the process of broadcasting it holding more-less steady until he lost consciousness. He wasn't awake to see the power fail or the facility go dark.

…

"Where?" Steve asked.

"Can't tell exactly unless it happens again. It was brief. Somewhere around Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa," Clint guessed.

"Take us near Topeka. Set us down on federal land, a dark spot," Steve said.

Clint nodded and spun up the turbines on the quinjet. They'd settled in western Nebraska in the middle of nowhere and engaged the stealth cloak. It wouldn't take them long to get more central to the noise they'd been listening for.

Natasha pressed carefully at her headset, trying hard to buffer out the hum of the jet taking off. She adjusted sliders on the frequency panel, tapped the display and played the static noise over and over again. Her fingers played at the panel, fine-tuning the sound they'd captured. She got that faintly frustrated almost-crease to her brow, wiped the panel back to zero and started over. Steve stepped closer and gripped the beam overhead while he watched her work.

A glance at the nav map showed Clint had found them a centrally located spot to hide while they waited. As long as they moved at night and stayed on abandoned Federal lands, it shouldn't be hard to get by undetected.

Nat worked diligently and it seemed she was finally onto something. She listened to her headset as she played back a sound over and over, sliding her finger fractionally one way or another on the frequency panel. Steve was impressed with her skill and wanted to learn how to do what she did, but this was not the time. Results were more important than learning the process.

Finally, she slid off her headset and handed it to Steve. He slipped it on and nodded to her.

Nat's fingers reset the sound, then played it repeatedly. As her finger slid along the adjuster, the static noise resolved from nonsense to drawn out syllables. Crackly Zee-aww-EEE became fuzzy Zhee-ann-yeee, thena mostly clear word. Zhelaniye.

"Zhelaniye," Steve muttered, "Longing. You've found him."

He turned to Clint. The man shrugged. It wasn't that he didn't care. It was that the four-state area was pretty big. The sound had come in on a half-tuned AM radio band. There was no way they could possibly listen to everything out there, so Jarvis was helping them monitor all possible frequencies, whether terrestrial, geological, or atmospheric.
"It carried from a power surge along utility lines and jumped to a radio transmitter. The technology in question is primitive," Jarvis said with disdain, "I apologize I am unable to be more specific as to the location. This is mostly farmland, with thousands of miles of rudimentary power transmission lines. Rarely is there a telephone cable node to identify where transmissions originate."

Steve vaguely understood that landline telephone wire would have been primitive for Jarvis to track, but they didn't even have that to work with.

"You did well. Keep listening, Jarvis. We'll zero in," Steve said.

"If that was a power surge his location may be dead, unable to send more signal," Nat said.

"Longing. It's the first word of ten. He plans to do it again. He'll lead us to him," Steve said.

Natasha looked at him.

Yeah, he knew he was being hopeful.

"Seismic?" Steve asked.

"No. Only AM band. He didn't use explosives yet unless it was very small," Nat denied.

Steve flexed his arms against the overhead beam. The floor panel made a warping sound under his feet. He blew out a breath and instead squeezed his fists around the grip he held. He badly wanted to find Buck now, to take action and go get him. The waiting was hell. Steve wondered if this was what it was like for Pepper, for Estrella, when the Avengers were on mission and they had to wait and worry.

…..

Pain. Darkness. Cold. Bad smell. Urgency. Something needed to be done, but it was unclear what it was. One hand moved, the other arm was a dead weight pinned under his body. Gritty floor. Faint moonlight through bars in a high window when his eyes could crack open to see anything. Pain Pain Pain. In his head.

Cold and sticky on his face. Copper. Blood. Mouth didn't feel right. Had to do something, didn't know what. He lost consciousness again, barely noting the sounds of voices and activity somewhere far away.

…

Colder. Fear. Rough hands hauled him upright while he was half awake. He startled and thrashed. Fell over sideways to the hard floor, but he'd thrown off whoever had his right arm. Shouting, then a hard blast of water hit him in the face. Couldn't breathe. He clenched his airway shut to resist the pressure of water that wanted to get up his nose, down his throat. Chilled water battered against his eyes, prying underneath his eyelids. He was too disoriented to fight while they pulled at him, peeled him naked. Might have something to do with the sharp prick of a needle at his neck. Pain in his head. The pain was less, but still there.

Through woozy awareness, he felt them manipulating him into stiff clothes. The foul smell was gone from his water-blasted skin, but being wet made it hard to put leather on him. Somebody said something he was sure he was supposed to understand. Hands let go of him and he fell to the floor hard on his left side. The impact jarred his spine. More pain.
Things were hard to identify, to make sense of, but a feeling of satisfaction and patience took root in his mind. At least he was aware he had a mind now. All he needed was time. He didn't know why it mattered, but it did.

...

He stood in the center of the holding cell when they came for him again. He was curious. He knew they were bad, but he needed more information. His right arm supported the weight of his heavy, dead left arm while they marched him down a dusty hallway and to a small room.


Chair was bad, but it wasn't the same chair. Straps were bad too, but there were no wires. That was a small blessing. He almost laughed, but stopped himself. Laughing would be bad. Almost everything except mute compliance would be bad. So he complied.

Young, scared people worked at his left arm. PAIN! He thrashed until they pricked him in the neck again. As he became woozy under the drugs, the agony in his metal arm faded to a burning itch. His metal hand moved, the fingers articulated. Straps held him immobile when he wanted to lash out.

"We were not supposed to use another power cell. Your mistakes will kill us all! Go and fix the chair properly and hope for your lives that we have not destroyed his brain. Go!" the old bald man said.

He was glad to understand something. The young people stepped away from his arm and fled the room. Two brutes with pain sticks guarded the door.

"Soldier," the old man said.


Memories were returning fast. He had to keep the satisfaction from showing on his face. He shifted his eyes to look at the scientist as the man moved into his view.

"Good. Maybe you are not beyond repair. Who is your master?"

The question made no sense at first. A random phrase which felt right fell onto his tongue.

"Hail Hydra," he said.

Apparently that was a good enough answer. Kozlov patted him on the shoulder, turned off the lights in the room, and left him alone in the chair. One of the brutes turned to look over his shoulder. He activated his stun stick and blue arcs bathed along the instrument. It was a warning to not give them trouble while they left him strapped in the chair.

He smiled in the dark at their turned backs. He would give them no trouble as long as they were foolish enough to give him time.

...

Hunger was old and expected, easily ignored. Thirst was more difficult to disregard. Sometime in the long hours while his mind cleared from injury and strong sedative, a small person came in to
stand next to him. The brutes appeared to take no notice of the small person. That was strange. It moved silently and was hard to see in the dark. Maybe the brutes were unaware of it.

He stayed motionless, his eyes open and staring vacantly.

The small person lifted something cold to his lips. Water squeezed from a cloth and ran along the seam of his mouth. He parted his lips and swallowed quietly since it seemed he was expected to.

The small person had to brace on the chair and grasp his arm to reach his mouth. The fast breaths and heartbeat indicated a child. A strange child, to be so aware and so bold. More memory sparked in his mind as the child went away again, back to wherever it had come from. He began to remember details of his purpose here. Again, he smiled in the dark.

They led him to the repaired chair. Kozlov stood by and looked at a message on his phone.

"Again! I will choose who dies if you damage the Asset. We have no more time for errors," the old man said to the young tech staff.

"Come. Sit. Down," Kozlov gave him three orders at once, confident now that he wasn't an imbecile.

The Soldier balked and had to be pushed toward the chair. James felt this was correct behavior, in order to not arouse suspicion. He'd been un-wiped for a while now. It would be typical for him to begin disobeying at this point. The brutes punched him in the back with the electro-stunners and jolted him forward.

"Soldier! You will comply!" Kozlov barked.

James shook off the brutes and went to the chair.

Peace mixed with the dread he felt in his gut. He knew what he had to do. It was only a matter of waiting them out. The chair wouldn't be so damaging this time. He would recover more quickly.

As the straps cinched onto his arms and the mind-wipe device closed around his head, he was proud to scream out his pain and anger and to damn them to what was coming.

Steve pressed the headset to his ears as the jet roared to life.

*Rzhavyy, semnadtsat, rassvet*

"Rusted, seventeen, daybreak" Steve said with satisfaction.

He handed the headset back to her.

"I don't know what he's doing, but using three words at once indicates his plans are accelerated," Natasha said.

"Southwest Iowa. Still nothing seismic," Clint said before anyone could ask him.

Steve nodded. Clint and Natasha were tiring. They were accustomed to long missions but they'd
been on duty for forty-eight hours without a break.

He didn't need to tell Clint what kind of place to find for them. It was bright noonday outside. A short flight of less than a hundred miles in stealth mode took them over lonely highways and winter-brown fields. Clint set down the jet in a mess of trash piles at the edge of an abandoned silo complex.

"Eat something. Get some sleep," Steve said.

Clint stared at him. Natasha opened her mouth. Being slightly enhanced, she was fresher than Clint.

"That's an order," Steve insisted.

His team mates moved around to eat and settle for a nap. Steve sat in the pilot's seat and slipped on Natasha's headset. He looked to the center of the console where the processor was and tapped his finger to one muff of the headset.

"Understood, Captain," Jarvis said in his ear.

Steve felt good about their situation. His people were the best, as was Jarvis. Bucky was somewhere close by and he was alive. It was becoming clear why the last Hydra base had been hard to find. The place was old-school. No modern tech, no heavy traffic. Steve pondered while he waited what the function of such a facility could be. He didn't like the answers he came up with.

…. 

Kozlov was sleeping at his desk. The Soldier stood guard outside his makeshift office and waited. The brutes were no longer needed since they'd got a successful mind-wipe on him. Perfect compliance. The Soldier was a loyal agent of Hydra because James wanted him to be, for the moment.

A woman came with a tray and the smell of food made the Soldier's belly gurgle. He was ignored. Kozlov woke for long enough to come to the doorway and assess his Asset's compliance, then he returned to his desk and ate. He worked on some papers, scratching notes with a pencil, then he went to the restroom. Then he returned to his desk and fell asleep again.

Dusk fell. The Soldier remained on duty, guarding the scientist.

After full dark, the small person came again. The Soldier watched its approach but did nothing. It didn't appear to be a threat to him or to Kozlov.

The child had learned to move silently. It wore scant garments, only a long white shirt down to its knees. Bare feet on the floor made for good stealth. But the floor was very cold, James recalled. The entire facility was frigid.

It stopped in front of him. James waited, held the Soldier at attention.

The child reached out and tugged at a fold of leather on his thigh. He ignored it.

"Soldier! Comply," the child whispered.

It tugged at him again, pulling down.

James squatted. The child had shown him kindness before, but this could be a trick. A test.

"No. Not down. Follow me," it said.
He watched the tot. It was impossible to tell if the child was male or female. It couldn't have been more than three, maybe four years of age, yet it spoke with adult clarity. It only came when and in ways that others wouldn't notice it. Those details made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

"I have orders," the Soldier told it.

He stood back at his post and stared at the wall across from him.

"You must comply. Follow," the child said.

It walked away. When the Soldier refused to leave his post, the child came back and reached up to grasp at his hand which was fisted behind his back. He let it manipulate him. When the child pulled, he followed. The soft rubber of his boot soles was also good for stealth.

James went along, pausing cautiously to listen when the child did. Much of the decrepit facility was dark. He'd long since determined the place was an abandoned mental asylum. As they walked the hallways, they avoided the areas with lights and voices. At a hallway intersection near a closed and locked door, the child again tugged on his pants.

He squatted. The child smelled sweet, as little ones often do. It looked at him with eyes which were far too knowing, too adult. The kid looked a lot like his sister Lucy had, many years ago. He already knew what it was. This was his seed, a child of his DNA. He didn't trust it. There was no telling what kind of monster Hydra had bred from him.

"You must force the door. Quietly. There are no alarms," the child said.

The Soldier listened down the hallways, watched for activity from the direction of the lighted areas of the facility. There was no one coming. No one expected him to be roaming around. The child was not to be trusted, but so far he could pass this off as mistaken compliance, a glitch in programming if they were caught.

He stood and examined the old wooden door. It had been used recently. It would be used again. He had to be smart about this, to leave no indication he'd been here. He couldn't break the lock or any part of the door that would be noticed. Most people didn't notice the wall around a door.

James carefully pulled the doorframe away from the wall. With a quiet crumble of plaster and the whispered splinter of old wood, the entire doorframe separated from the wall. He regretted the paint and plaster chips that fell to the floor, but the floor was already dirty. It might not be noticed. The child watched him with wide eyes as he hefted the heavy old woodwork aside and leaned it against the wall. They'd been quiet enough. No one came running.

A dark stairwell yawned open before them. The child gestured down into the dark. James lifted the child to his hip so it could give him instructions at his ear quietly. It seemed to know the way. As he felt his way down the stairs, the sounds of the space around him told him the shape of the room despite the darkness. A faint glow came from the far corner of the mostly empty space. The child pointed toward the meager light.

There were drop-cloth covered piles of things, old and dusty. James avoided them and the support columns which held the building above the basement. Dread turned his gut as he recognized the stasis capsule standing in the corner.

One of the other Winter Soldiers was here. Male. Not the worst one, but they all were bad. It was in deep cryo, its chamber plugged into the wall like nothing more than a refrigerator. The cryo chamber was very new, probably a more efficient model made to require less energy. In the dim
orange light, James could see scuff marks in the dust from it having been recently put in place. The implications were worrisome, but expected.

The child wiggled to be let down. James set him down. He was heavy for his size, and strong. Someone kept him well fed. He ran hot, so maybe the chill of the place didn't bother him. The tot tugged at his fingers and James followed him into the dark, away from the menace of the sleeping Soldier.

There was another door. This one wasn't locked. He followed the child inside into a deeper darkness, a smaller room.

"Help me. I cannot lift it," the child said.

James felt his way to where the child struggled to push up at the lid of a cabinet of some sort. He lifted a handle and blue light illuminated the room. The device was out of place and modern, very different from the dusty detritus of the previous century which surrounded it.

It was an insulated cooler, but it wasn't cool. Warmth radiated from the open lid. A clear plastic film covered the contents. James lifted the plastic while the child looked on, standing on tiptoe and peering over the edge.

Inside the thermally regulated cabinet were covered glass laboratory dishes, about a dozen of them. They each had their own little shelf, their own tiny wire, and their own set of tubes. Through the blue backlight, James's sharp eyes could see a tiny red grouping of cells floating in each covered dish of fluid. Embryos. These were living, developing embryos.

"My brothers. They make them," the child said.

He gestured for the plastic to be lowered, then the lid. James did so. He looked around and listened as the darkness returned. Why wasn't this place wired, alarmed, locked down? It was a huge risk for Hydra to have a facility like this, unsecured in the middle of nowhere. It seemed they were relying on lack of attention to allow them to do their work.

"Come. There is more," the child said and tugged at him.

They moved through the dark to the doors of an old cellar. It smelled bad, like a farmyard as they approached the cool draft of an exit. The child directed James's hand to a heavy iron handle. He could hear breathing, the heartbeats of several creatures beyond the door. He supposed the dark might be frightening to some, the horrors of what Hydra was doing with his DNA too much for some minds to bear. This is what he had come for. He was satisfied to so easily be led to it, but highly suspicious of the child leading him. It was too easy.

James pulled the heavy door and it made a raspy sound. Again, nothing was locked. The child led him to step over a sill, then told him to shut the door behind them. The air was loud with the sounds of breathing, foul with manure, and James heard the restful heartbeats of large creatures. After the cellar door was shut, the child guided him to a wall where he found a light switch.

The harsh clack of the switch flipping probably couldn't be heard upstairs but it made the swine startle. Six large sows slept on their sides, lying on metal grating. Their waste fell through to a cesspit under the floor. They had feeding tubes in their mouths and intravenous needles delivering fluid into the arteries of their necks. James noticed black plastic electrical implants installed at the base of the sow's skulls. Except for the manure, the animals looked clean and healthy. Wires and hoses threaded up to the rough beam ceiling, across the room, and to one ancient looking computer console.
James walked over to the old gray bubble display and lifted his hand to press a key on the keyboard. The child tugged at his clothes and shook his head. Alright, so maybe waking up the rudimentary computer system would alert someone.

He turned to look again at the deeply drugged sows. It was clear what this operation was.

"This works?" he asked the child.

"They keep trying, but almost all of them are deformed. They die before birth. It worked once."

"Why are you different?" James asked the child.

He shrugged.

"Why do you help me?" he asked.

"I should not exist. They will use me. I do not like them," the child said.

"Why are you intelligent beyond your years?" he asked.

"Because I am of you, but with genetic manipulation. I will be stronger, faster, and more intelligent than you, Soldier. More so than the one they keep in the corner," the child told him.

The tot led him back the way they'd come. He replaced things just so as they went, demonstrating that his eyesight was superior. They stood in front of the other Soldier's cryo chamber for a moment.

"I must return to my post," James told the child.

"You know what you must do. They do not harm me yet because this body is too young, too fragile. Soon they will begin to condition me to be what they want," the child said.

"Is there an armory?" he asked.

"No," the child answered.

"There is always an armory in a Hydra base. No explosives?" James asked.

"There is nothing of the sort. You will have to try harder," the child said.

James carried the child up from the basement. He set him down and pressed the door and its frame back into the wall. The old wood creaked and the door rattled as he took his hands off it.

"Go," the child told him quickly.

"What of you?" James asked him.

"They fear me. Go," the child said.

There was no time to argue. They could hear voices down the hall, coming from the lighted area of the asylum. James ran on silent feet back to his post outside Kozlov's office.

His hellspawn was correct. Hydra operatives came to question the child about the noise they'd heard. Kozlov's office was too far away and around a corner to see, but his sensitive ears could hear. The child told them they were fearful dolts, jumping at shadows and the scratching of rats. They obeyed him when he told them to return to their duties. Then he followed the operatives and
requested cookies and milk. James would have smiled if there wasn't so much to do and to plan for.

Kozlov eventually roused himself and ordered the Soldier to lock himself in a cell. The Soldier complied. He had much to think on. Before dawn shone through the high bars of his cell, the child brought him water again. Only a small cup, but it was enough for now.

"No cameras?" he asked.

"None. Your Avengers would detect anything more advanced than what is here," the child said.

It watched him for a moment. James watched it. For a short time, he saw emotion, longing on the small face. Maybe it wanted a father. Maybe it was a sly trickster.

"How much time do you need?" the child asked.

"I would not tell you," James said.

The child nodded its understanding and left him.

....

Kozlov received a communication which made him nervous. He had his brutes bring the Soldier to him. It was midday. James didn't know which day because he wasn't sure how long it had taken for his brain to heal from the first botched mind-wipe attempt.

The old neuroscientist kept checking his phone and re-shuffling the papers on his desk.

Likely, Steve had heard his transmissions and was closing in. Hydra probably had a way to detect the quinjet, possibly by listening for the unique turbine sound of its engines. Things were moving too fast. James needed one more night for the Soldier to prepare. He must play them carefully.

A woman brought a tray of food and set it on Kozlov's desk. She turned to leave, but the old man touched her arm and asked her to stay. She backed herself to the corner by the desk and folded her hands in front of her. She was afraid. Everyone was afraid of the Soldier, no matter how well they hid it.

"Kill her," Kozlov ordered him.

The Soldier did so without hesitation. The woman had only time to draw in a breath before he snapped her neck and dropped her.

"Sit. Eat," Kozlov said.

The Soldier did that too. The food was terribly spicy. It was meant to be a torture, a test of his loyalty. As killing the woman had been. James had goals. The Soldier obeyed, despite coughing, choking and watering eyes. When the tray was clean of food, Kozlov threw a glass of water in his face. The Soldier did not react.

"Return to your cell. Rest yourself. You will be needed to guard our retreat. Be ready at sundown," Kozlov told him.

Sundown? That was too soon.

The Soldier had no choice but to wordlessly comply unless he wanted to undo the proof he'd just given of his loyalty. He allowed the brutes to lock him in. He sat and thought. It was only early
afternoon. There was no darkness to conceal his activity, yet he had to act fast.

James wondered how intelligent, how educated the child was. The child could be a spy, but it was worth an attempt. He sat on the floor near the bars of his cell and pretended to sleep. His metal fingers tapped at the bars. Anyone without superior hearing would not be able to detect his quiet tapping. Only minutes later, James felt a slight heat through the bars beside him.

"When will you act? Time runs short," the small voice said.

James continued to tap at the bars as if the child wasn't there.

"Very well. They will wake the other one soon. It must die," the child said.

James tapped on, marveling that one so young could fluently understand Morse code as if it was a spoken language.

"Take me with you when you go," the child said.

James stopped tapping.

"Then I must also die," the child said.

It went away.

James waited a half hour for the sound of some calamity, the distraction he had asked for. The brutes came by to see that he was still resting obediently in his cell as commanded. Soon as they left, he moved.

The bars high in the cell wall came out as easily as the old door to the basement. James swung himself up onto the edge of the roof, first crouching low to be sure there was not a guardsman patrolling the roof. There was not. It appeared everyone was inside.

He took a quick rooftop view of the overgrown estate around the old asylum then got moving. Beyond the wild trees was farmland as far as he could see and a vacant highway in the distance. Cars were parked behind the sprawling building, on the back side away from the driveway. There were only a few but they looked modern. Recently moved. It would be enough.

James had no choice but to take chances moving about in the daylight. The sounds of upset were still brewing inside the facility so he made his move while the Hydra nest was distracted.

He leapt down from the high roof. The ground was soft from recent rain. He quickly approached the parked cars. A swell of unrest, voices yelling inside the building, covered for him as he tore through the body panel of a car near its fuel door. He ripped through the car and felt until he had a grip on the fuel tank. The tank of gasoline came loose when he pulled it, its retaining straps snapping and the connecting filler pipe and fuel line breaking free. The tank was only half full but he could get more from the other vehicles.

James oriented the asylum in his mind to match the layout he'd walked through with the child last night. Near one end of the building he found the air inlet for the cellar. The smell of manure wafting through the bars assured him he was at the right place. He tipped the broken-off pipe from the car's fuel tank and poured gasoline down into the cellar. A few minutes later he did the same with a larger, fuller fuel tank he'd taken from a gray van. He estimated he'd used around twenty gallons of gasoline, which should be plenty to get things moving when the time was right. The fumes would likely be enough to kill the sows and thus the fetuses within them, even if he did nothing more.
He had to climb a tree to get back onto the roof of the asylum. Returning to his cell was no problem. It was more difficult to get up the wall and wedge the iron window bars into place than it had been to take them down. He scuffed the plaster chips around with the rest of the mess on the floor then sat as he had been. The Soldier was supposed to be resting.

Eventually the chaos quieted in the facility. Kozlov came around to observe him and then hurried away again when he saw the Soldier behaving as ordered. The distraction the child had caused had calmed, but the facility's staff was making more noise of a different sort.

They were preparing to leave as sunset approached. Now was the time to move.

James had no concern for making noise now. He slammed against the wall where his cell bars were embedded. He kept at it until the wall cracked. By the time he had the cell bars loose and could slip through to freedom, Kozlov had the brutes ready and was yelling at him from the other side.

"Soldier! Stand down!" Kozlov barked at him.

The brutes came at him with their stunners. James dropped them quickly and used the stunners on Kozlov simply because he wanted to. The old scientist shat himself and had a heart attack from fear before James smashed the side of his head in.

"Hurry. They are waking the other one," the child said.

James looked up to see him standing in the corridor. The child was not horrified to see the bodies or the scientist's crushed skull. He looked impatient. His little hand waved at James to follow.

James stood from Kozlov's body and flexed his left arm. The power cell was crap, but it might work. The lights went out in the facility. He hoped it was enough to shut down the cryo chamber in the basement, and the embryo cabinet. If the EM pulse was strong enough to kill the cars parked around back that would be cherries on top.

The child ran down the hall on bare feet as soon as he saw James following. His left arm felt sluggish. The power cell was likely nearly depleted. There was enough left to batter Hydra operatives away as they tried to stop him or the child. He was too slow to block a bullet fired at them and he took a slug in the side. There was muscle damage, some minor intestinal perforation, but his lungs were alright. He moved on.

The child was too slow but he had the advantage of not being a target. Hydra was after the defecting Soldier, not the little one. Operatives came at them and James took them down. There had to be someone in charge here, to give them orders. James left the child in the hallway and hunted down the young man who was shouting at the rest of the operatives. After he ended him, the others fled. They didn't want to engage with the Soldier unless there was damn good reason to.

James took a .45 pistol from one of them. It wasn't much, but it was at least something. When he returned to the hallway where he'd left the child, the stairwell door was smashed across the hall, the smell of gasoline wafting up to the ground floor.

"The other one is released. You are too late," the child said.

"Not too late. We need fire, then I'll get the other one," James said.

"My fingers are too small, or I would have done it," the child said.

It handed him a Bunsen burner lighter. There was little time. He couldn't let the other Winter
Soldier get away, but he had to incinerate the swine and the embryos. James pushed the child to the floor aside of the basement doorway and laid on top of him. With his left arm, he reached into the stairwell and ground the flint across the steel. It didn't work on the first try, though the fuel-air mixture smelled about right. James covered the child's face and his own and tried again.

The explosion was deafening. The hallway lit up with blue-orange vapor fire and the building bucked underneath them from the rapid heat expansion in the basement. In the instant of low oxygen before the building itself began to burn, James grabbed the child and ran. He turned his back and smashed through a chained-shut exit.

Soon as he was outside into the late afternoon, James flung the child away from him and the building, into concealing brush. He pulled the .45 from his waistband and went on the hunt.

"It will kill you," the child called out an eerie prediction.

"I don't die easily," James said.

...

"Seismic blip. Attempting to triangulate," Steve said.

Clint got the quinjet revved again and Natasha swung down from the overhead hatch where she'd been on watch with a spotting scope. It took them a frustrating twenty-two minutes in communication with Bruce develop a reasonably sized search area. The explosion had been small, only picked up on two sensors. For another fifteen minutes, Clint flew them in a grid search pattern over the likely area of farmland indicated by Bruce's guidance.

It was approaching dusk by the time the infrared view picked up the odd sight of people fleeing on foot across terrain. Their heat silhouettes moved like red-orange bugs over the land.

"Convergent vectors. They're coming from here. An old insane asylum," Natasha pointed out on the nav map. The white-hot glow of a burning structure against the cold dark landscape assured them they had the right place.

There was nothing around for a few miles. The agricultural plots beneath them were vast, with not so much as a farmhouse in the distance.

"They're Hydra. Clint, make a sweep. Shoot to kill. Do it fast. I want to get to that asylum," Steve ordered.

"Sure, Cap," Clint said.

Steve held onto the overhead beam again while Clint sharply banked the jet. Natasha called out targeting positions. They dropped twenty-three fleeing operatives in the middle of stubbled corn fields and tree line windbreaks. Nothing with body heat could hide from their sensors. Natasha made a call to get a cleanup team headed their way.

Steve was satisfied with the work, but resentful of the additional twelve minutes it took to finish the task and head for the asylum. From their aerial view, they could see a vehicle coming in along the otherwise empty highway.

"Hydra transport. We got them on moving day. Drop me at the asylum and go check it. If it's Hydra, immobilize it," Steve said.

"I don't like leaving you to work alone," Nat said as the rear hatch opened for him to jump.
"I won't be alone. Buck's down there," Steve yelled over the sound of the wind.

"Barnes is busy. Something else is down there too," Clint called.

On a hunch, Steve took off his thigh holsters and tossed them into the cargo storage.

"So hurry back," Steve said, then he jumped into the evening sky.

…

Buck was down. In the short moment they had before the attacker made another run, Steve assessed he was shot twice, neither of the hits life-threatening. He was burned. He was cut up some, and he was exhausted. A big brute ran out of the dark at them inhumanly fast. Steve was fresh. He tangled the guy up in hand to hand, fairly certain he could handle the threat. It didn't go as well as he'd hoped.

Steve got to his feet and shook off the pain of a wrenched neck and a nearly dislocated shoulder. He stood over Buck and circled with careful footing. In the low light he had to watch hard and listen hard to get enough warning of the next hit coming.

"C'mon, Buck. Up n at em," Steve said.

He nudged his friend with a foot.

"Nah. It's your turn. I'm gonna take a rest for a while," Buck slurred at him.

Buck flopped back down in a heap from where he'd tried to rise.

"Heh, that's the team spirit I was looking for," Steve snarked.

He spun and kicked, barely having heard footsteps rushing toward him. His best kick threw the attacker off stride, only stumbled him a little. An exchange of punishing blows left Steve sore and feeling dazed. Buck was a little better at knives than him, and Buck was cut up. Steve decided to keep his blades stowed in his uniform.

"Where are the knives?" Steve asked in the next reprieve.

"Yonder somewhere. All I could manage was to disarm him. Don't use knives," Buck said.

"I figured that out already," Steve said.

"Why is he running? Why doesn't he engage?" he asked.

"Glass jaw. I had him down once, almost killed him but he came to and skedaddled," Buck said.

"Shoulda told- oof!" Steve said.

It was his turn to get knocked off his feet. He was down on the ground, brawling dirty, hitting whatever he could reach, trying to block as much as punch. Every time he tried to get a leg up and pry the guy off, his throat got punished. He gave up on the idea of using his legs. Rolling didn't help much because the guy was wicked strong, too much to grapple with. Steve felt ribs crack and his nose break again before he got himself righted to a more defensible position. He took a wild swing at the guy's jaw but it was deflected. Steve tried for speed and power, battering his opponent's blocking arms to hopefully get an opening at that jaw.
Bucky pushed to his feet and shuffled over. The other Soldier was distracted, busy. He got a good swing with his sluggish arm and knocked the guy off of Steve before he could do more damage.

He ran off again. Buck put down a hand to help Steve up.

"You've been fighting this bastard for how long?" Steve asked as they moved back to back.

"Dunno. Feels like days," Buck said.

"No guns?" Steve wondered.

"Expended," Buck muttered.

Steve noticed Buck was carrying his arm around. That wasn't good. Buck was little more than a shield at his back in his condition.

"Get outta the way, pal. I'll take him," Steve said.

This time he had a good shot at the jaw when the Soldier came at him. Problem was, the other guy had a good shot too. Steve stumbled backward and Buck braced him up. They jumped on the dazed Soldier while he was down. Steve got a grip on his head while Buck wrenched his feet out from under him and shackled him with what power was left in his arm. Fuck, but the guy was strong. The head was hard to turn, his neck unlikely to snap quickly. The guy regained enough awareness to start pounding at sensitive spots while Steve slowly, excruciatingly slowly, began getting torque on breaking his neck. It was all Buck could manage to keep his legs pinned.

"Nnnghh!" Steve growled through his congested nose while he twisted his torso on broken ribs.

Pain pummeled at him but he couldn't stop. Another rib broke just as the guy's neck tendons began to shear. Steve took several deep breaths and risked losing what progress he'd made, then powered through the last of the neck ligatures and the crunch of bone giving way. The body jerked, then went limp.

Steve let go and staggered back as the wind and lights of the quinjet surrounded them. Buck was still down, hugging the legs of the body like he was too tired to move.

"C-4" was all he said, barely heard over the noise of the quin's turbines.

"Nat, bring explosives," Steve yelled.

He squinted into the blinding light of the jet's beams while he cradled an arm at his ribs.

Before Clint was fully landed, Nat was with them. She helped him pull an enervated Bucky away from the dead Soldier. Steve bent to roll the body over and Nat plugged its mouth full of explosive and added a detonator. The three of them retreated and Nat pressed the button.

Pink mist made an explosive cloud in the jet's bright lights. The body was vaporized down to its ribcage. Steve hissed in pain as Nat tried to brace him up at his side. He pushed her away gently.

"It was dead. Why'd we have to blow it up?" she wondered.

"Wouldn't have stayed dead for long," Buck said.

He wasn't too proud to accept a hand up from Nat.

"Should probably blow-torch the area and incinerate the body," Steve agreed.
"Vampire?" Nat wondered with some humor.

Bucky leaned on her and shook his head.


"Who has these?" she asked, no longer thinking the situation was funny.

"Only Hydra. One down, four more to go," Bucky said.

Clint came from the jet with a body bag. They gathered around the task that lay before them. It was a bad mess.

"Arrows are neat. They don't leave this kind of cleanup," Clint said.

"You needed help to kill it," said a small voice from behind them.

Clint did a quick look and tried to position himself to hide the extent of the gore that lay on the ground. It was decent of him to try to protect a little child, but it was a useless gesture.

The child walked closer until his bare feet scuffed through the pink film on the ground as if he was playing in finger paint or sidewalk chalk.

"What does it matter how it died? The job is done," Bucky replied.

Steve stared at the child. It looked just like Buck would have at that age, a few years before the two of them had met.

A hundred yards behind them flames licked through the windows of the old asylum. It was at the point where firetrucks wouldn't be able to save it.

"Who's this?" Clint asked.

His companions' lack of response was loud in the relative silence. The jet had stilled, only its lights disturbing the night. Crackling flames and the low roar of heat-driven wind came from the burning building, but it was a quiet sound.

"Buck?" Steve finally asked for an explanation.

Bucky picked up the child, but the little boy just as quickly squirmed down to the ground again.

"I am made from him," the child said.

"You speak English too? Is there anything ya don't know, kid?" Buck asked.

He shrugged.

"You've got a kid," Clint said.

There was another uncomfortable silence.

"I am not a 'kid'. I'm a weapon. An abomination," the child said.

"You got a name?" Clint asked.

The boy shook his head.
"Buck," Steve admonished him.

"Don't you start. There was no time or reason to name him in the middle of a mission," Bucky said.

Nat and Clint, Buck and Steve put on gloves and gathered what they could of the super-soldier's remains. The child brought pieces its eyes could easily find in the dark. He dropped them in the body bag with the rest of the offal. His little hands were stained red in the light.

"Clean him up," Nat said as they zipped the body bag.

She and Clint hauled the bag into the quinjet. Bucky took the kid up again and didn't let him down when he squirmed. Clint washed his hands and closed the back hatch. He prepared them for the flight home. Before they lifted off, they torched the ground where the body had been, scorching the ground to dry bare dirt.

"Why didn't it smell?" Clint wondered.

"They don't feed them. There was nothing in the intestines," the child said from his reluctant perch on Buck's hip.

"How old are you?" Steve wondered.

"Three years, four months, eighteen days," the child said.

Natasha looked at the child. He was a mess. His hair was burnt in places, his white shirt and his skin were dirty, and his hands and feet were gory with blood.

"I will clean you," she said.

She took the child from Bucky and he went willingly. The two went into the jet's bathroom and shut the door.

"Is she in danger?" Steve asked.

"I don't think so. Don't get attached, Steve," Buck warned him.

Steve didn't argue. They were both in pain from the beatings they'd taken, both thinking of many things at once.

"Hey, come sit. We need to get bullets outta ya," he told Bucky.

Buck complied. He was beat and had no reason to resist. Steve got the med kit and opened it.

"Congrats on finishing Hydra Stateside, by the way," Clint told them.

Steve grunted. The mood didn't feel very cheerful or celebratory.

Natasha came out of the bathroom with the boy. He walked on his own clean feet but he seemed to like holding Nat's hand.

"Put him in a fresh shirt," Steve suggested.

The boy shook his head. Natasha sat down to watch Steve tend to Bucky's wounds. The child climbed onto her lap. Bucky winced at the dig of forceps in his gut, but he frowned at the child.

"Don't be cruel," he told him.
The boy slid out of the woman's arms, off her lap and onto the seat beside her.

Natasha frowned back at Bucky.

He refused to acknowledge her disapproval.

"Buck," Steve fussed quietly.

"Don't get attached," Buck warned him again.

Shock blanked Steve's features for a moment. Bucky stared at him steady. Steve gripped the overhead rail as they hit a spot of flight turbulence. The pain on his face wasn't from their physical wounds.

Buck reached with his right hand and snapped his nose back like it should be before it could heal wrong. Steve didn't thank him, he was so upset.

The child fell asleep against Natasha. James couldn't make an issue of it because it was unintentional. He may be freakishly mentally mature, but his body was still that of a small child. Once Steve was done patching Buck up and wiping the worst of the grime off him, Bucky retrieved the child.

Natasha helped Steve bind his ribs. She looked at his bruises, then helped him back into this uniform jacket.

"Stark is coming. He wants to give Barnes a look-over before we're near the tower," Clint said.

"Alright," Steve agreed.

He might have protested, except having Buck inspected had saved them once already. He looked apologetically to his friend.

"I was in enemy hands. I was out for a while, don't know what they did to me. It's a good idea," Bucky easily accepted the idea.

Before they reached New York there was a heavy thump on the roof of the jet.

"Theatrical," Clint muttered as he opened the rear hatch.

Iron Man flew in and strode toward Bucky. He paused when he saw the child sleeping against his shoulder. The jet's rear hatch closed behind him, shutting out the windy noise of the night.

Tony's faceplate snapped open.

"That's yours," he said, immediately seeing the tot's resemblance to Bucky.

"He's his own fella," Buck said.

He bent and laid the child on the seat beside him. Tony was speechless for a moment more, then he shook his head and advanced to scan Bucky.

Buck held his arms out the best he could. The left one sagged moment by moment, its power cell acting like a low battery.

"What's this?" Tony asked.
He waved his suit's gauntlet along the metal arm, back and forth. A small blue pane glowed in front of his eye, showing him information from the scan.

"It's a cracker-jack power cell. Not any better than Energizer, I'd guess. It was good for one EMP, then it fizzled," Bucky said.

"No, not that. This," Tony said.

Jarvis lit up the central display and they turned to see what Tony could see. The schematic highlighted a glowing red mass in Bucky's arm, near the exhausted power cell.

"An isotope of Strontium, woven with a material more exotic," Jarvis said.

The numbers and equations Jarvis and Tony discussed made little sense to anyone except Steve.

"Good thing you don't power that suit with the old style arc reactor," Steve commented.

"Aaaand you're not supposed to understand the relevance of what's happening here," Tony looked pointedly to Steve.

"Sorry. Exponential learning," Steve said.

"I thought you were more interested in people than science," Tony accused him.

"I get interested when my people are endangered by science," Steve argued.

"Boys, boys," Nat admonished them, "What do we need to do?"

"Get this thing outta my arm," Bucky said.

"Let's have a look," Tony said to him and gestured to the med bench.

It didn't take long to have the wad of hazardous substance out of Buck's arm. He'd had such a rough few days he hardly made a sound as Stark was rooting around in his arm. It was going numb from the depleted battery anyway.

Tony stuck the gray goop to the surface of the med bench like so much used chewing gum. He gestured for Steve to step up and help out. They replaced the power cell in Buck's arm with a fresh Stark model. Bucky sighed in relief and sat up.

"You're all clear," Tony told him briskly.

"Thanks," Buck said, "Now scan him."

He nodded toward the sleeping child.

"You want me to scan a kid? That's harmful exposure to very young tissues," Tony balked.

"Do it," Buck said.

Tony went over and passed his gauntlet slowly over the sleeping child.

"Kid's clean, but he's weird. Too dense. Don't drop him in the tub. He wouldn't float," Tony said.

"You got an incinerator at the tower?" Buck asked.

Tony looked up at him sharply, then over at the body bag Steve indicated.
"Yeah. Hot enough to smelt vibranium," Tony said.

"That should do it," Buck agreed.

"Right. Well. See ya at home," Tony said.

He snapped his faceplate shut, grabbed the Strontium goop and the old power cell from the med bench and tapped his gauntlet near the rear hatch. Soon as it opened wide enough Stark launched himself into the night. A moment later they heard a distant explosion.

Jarvis displayed the bright burst in the sky from the hazardous waste disposal and showed Tony streaking off toward home.

"That was awkward," Nat said.

"It was fine. Tony's starting to accept you, Buck," Steve said.

"That won't last for long," Buck said.

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Steve felt an unsettling moment of indecision as they approached the tower. It was routine to shower in the locker room after a dirty mission but it wasn't appropriate to do so with the child along. Nor could they set the boy down or hand him off to anyone else. They didn't know enough about the kid to trust him out of their sight. Smart as he was, he could get into anything.

Estrella would likely be waiting anxiously for them. Bucky gave him an inscrutable look and picked up the child as they made their landing in the hanger and Clint secured the jet. As Buck walked down the rear hatch exit, Clint gave him a firm clasp on the shoulder and a solemn nod.

"Good to have you back," he said.

His gaze avoided landing on the tot who was asleep and drooling on the scorched black leather of Buck's shoulder. Clint and Natasha carried the body bag into the tower for disposal.

"We need to get the boy to medical," Steve murmured as they left the locker facility and headed for the elevators, still dirty and battle worn.

"Estrella needs to see us," Buck said.

"She can wait a little while," Steve argued as they got in the elevator and the doors closed.

The elevator didn't move yet, giving proof that Jarvis was listening and awaiting their decision on where they wanted to go.

"You can't protect her forever. It might be better to start toughening her up sooner rather than later. Unless you wanna drop the combat work and do fancy portraits for rich folks?" Buck said.

Steve firmed his jaw and took a breath deep enough to flare his nostrils.

"Take us to wherever Estrella is, if she's awake," Steve said.

"She is," Jarvis said.

Steve firmed his resolve to stay in Captain mode and walked briskly off the elevator and into the
common room. He intended to be brief in greeting Estrella, then to get the child off to the medical ward. He felt there was a hard conversation ahead with Bucky and he couldn't afford to lose his focus until they were done dealing with this mission.

Estrella stood waiting for them in the open space between the lounge area and the kitchen. A flush of heat burst in both Steve's heart and his groin at the sight of her. Who the hell had encouraged her to dress like this?

Her long black hair was up and partly back in a wild mane much like he'd seen in the pictures from her date. Subtle hints of makeup darkened her eyes and glossed her lips dark red. Her clingy purple top confused him because it hugged tight around her neck, but beautifully exposed her shoulders and arms. The shirt ended in a jagged slant at the bottom of her ribs and her full breasts stretched the fabric in a way his eyes almost couldn't escape from. The bare curves of her waist and the beginning flare of her hips made his mouth water. Was that a gemstone sparkling in the recess of her navel? He wouldn't have thought ragged cutoff jean shorts would look good on anybody, but they hugged her lush bottom and the small convergence of her groin so that he couldn't find fault with the white cotton strings that frayed around the tops of her thighs. Her full, curvy legs were crossed in an anxious little-girl sort of stance and ended in her colorful western boots.

As he approached her across the floor his mind was further boggled by the way her thumbs pushed at the front pockets of her shorts, revealing more golden skin as the ratty cotton tugged down with her twist of nervousness. Estrella bit one side of her lip in uncertainty at his fast approach. Her head tipped down a little as if she wished to hide behind her hair.

She would have glanced at Darcy for assurance if Steve didn't have every bit of her attention. Steve strode to her as the Captain, much as she'd seen him when he'd left. He at first looked cool and determined as if she was business to take care of. Then he changed.

It was subtle, but frightening to a woman who was attuned to noticing signs of aggression in men. His face tipped down slightly as if he was already aiming to land a kiss on her. His eyes narrowed in what could have been misinterpreted as anger, but she knew better. He was already breathing through his mouth because it looked like he'd had his nose broken again, but his jaw opened a little further either in awe or in eagerness to kiss her. His shoulders rounded down slightly and his arms rotated into a more open posture, ready to reach out and snatch her if she ran. He didn't slow down as he got close. He sped up.

Estrella let out an *eep* of fear and excitement when Steve picked her up at her hips and carried her back against the wall beside Tony's bar. An expert shake of her body loosened her crossed legs and he kneed her open, then pressed her hard into a deep kiss.

He was rough and demanding. Her arms slid from his shoulders to tighten around his neck. The fear she'd felt at his aggressive approach melted into eager welcome. Because his body had her pressed against the wall his hands were free to rub up her sides. One hand continued up her face and into her hair while the other boldly spread over her breast from the side and squeezed.

She rolled her eyes behind her lids and moaned eagerness while her legs clasped one of his and rubbed at his rough uniform restlessly. Their kissing gentled when they bumped his broken nose. Steve laughed with delight at how she'd been able to rip his mind away from the intention of staying focused on work.

He was gonna stop. Really, he was. Any minute now. As their kissing became more sensual and heated, his hands moved down to grip her bottom. His girl made an excited sound that spurred him on and he didn't wanna stop the satisfying feel of rocking his hips at her, just a little. Her hand gripping the back of his hair and pulling made him laugh again. Did she wanna talk at a time like
Steve backed off to let her breathe a little and to see if her hair-pulling was a request for a break. Looking into each other's eyes was a mistake. She tasted like cherry lip gloss and heaven. Now that the initial urgency of getting his hands on her had passed, he settled in to spend a while on the more subtle art of saying hello.

Buck's hand on his shoulder and a thumping, squealing sound in the room finally got Steve's attention. Reluctantly, he stopped kissing his girl and turned to see what Buck wanted.

Cold, unwelcome reality doused him. People were in the room watching them. Steve scrubbed the back of his leather-clad wrist at the lip gloss that had likely spread to his lips from Estrella's. The child was awake and staring at him, his little head still resting peaceably on Buck's shoulder. The thumping, squealing noise was Lewis having a fit of some sort on the couch. Pepper was sitting on a bar stool not ten feet away from him and Estrella. Tony grinned at them from a bit closer than that.

Steve cleared his throat and eased Estrella down from the wall and onto her feet. The sweetness of her hiding her face against his chest made his heart thump out of time for a beat or two. His hand came up to hold her nape protectively, as if he could hide all of her in his hand.

Automatically, the word Sorry came to mind, but he shut his teeth against saying it. Buck chuckled at the blush that colored Steve's cheeks. He really wanted some time alone with Estrella away from the attention of their friends.

"Bucky!" Estrella exclaimed, and she pushed loose of Steve's hold.

Steve clenched his jaw at her eagerness to hug Bucky too, then her startled pause at seeing the child. The boy smiled at her, then turned his face away when he caught sight of Steve's scowl.

"She's seen ya. Now go on," Steve told his friend.

Buck nodded once and turned to walk away.

"Wait for me before you... do anything," Steve called after him.

There was a stiff silence until a few moments after Buck and the child had left.

"What happened?" Estrella asked.

In her simple question was a host of other questions. Her eyes took in the details she hadn't noticed before. Steve had blood streaked across his face from his nose. His uniform was dirty like he'd been rolling around on the ground. She lifted his gloved hand and saw through the little cutout holes that his knuckles were red and rough looking. Bucky had looked ragged, his sinister black leather gear slashed in several places, and he'd smelled like blood and smoke.

Steve looked at her with quiet denial and shook his head slightly.

"Buck did what he had to do and I brought him home," Steve told her.

"That child-" she began.

Steve shook his head again.

"Won't be staying with us," he told her.
The stubborn denial against talking about it any further felt like a solid roadblock between them. Estrella bottled up her curiosity because she felt she wouldn't want to know the answers to her questions.

Steve stepped a half-step away from her. His fingers came up to ghost along the contour of her cheek. He smiled a little and reached to hold her fingers with his. She smiled back, but tears welled at her lower eyelids. Something felt sad though she didn't know what.

"I'll get us something for supper?" he asked her.

"It's almost ten," she said.

"Late supper, then," he tried again.

She nodded and squeezed his fingers. He was already leaning to pull away so she let him go.

"I need about an hour to finish up and shower. My place, after that?" Steve asked.

Estrella nodded again.

The dutiful way he walked away from her had none of the swagger she'd seen before. He was a man going to do something unpleasant. Something to do with the child Bucky held. Estrella pressed her fist to her mouth to keep from making any undignified noises until after he was gone. Despite their affectionate greeting, it was easy to tell Steve wasn't done with his work yet.

When the elevator took him away it became hard to ignore the people in the room with her. She took a few steps and sat on a stool next to Pepper. Darcy hurried to take the stool on the other side of her. Tony poured her a glass of wine and pushed it toward her across the bar.

Darcy looked confused. Pepper smiled at her softly. Tony acted as if nothing at all had just happened, neither the kissing nor the heavy feeling that lingered after Bucky and Steve left.

"Drink up, Sparkles. You'll need your strength if you're going to see Spangles later," Tony teased her.

He smiled, but he wouldn't look at her and the corners of his eyes didn't crinkle.

"Um, that was smokin' until Barnes doused it," Darcy said.

"Thank you for helping me," Estrella told her, then she paid attention to her wine.

She didn't want to think about whatever was happening between now and later.

He found Bucky and the child in a private room in medical. The boy was eating ice cream in the middle of a bed. Buck stood beside. He kept a hand on the child's leg. The gesture looked more like control than comfort.

Steve set down the things he'd brought from his room and took the film Buck handed him. It was a gray-tone series of scans of the child's brain. He didn't know a lot about neuroscience but he could see the boy's cortex was already more crinkled than an adult's. Steve picked up the data sheet on the boy's general physiology. Many of the numbers were well outside what was normal for people.

"Hydra made me to be a weapon. I don't want to be," the child said.
"You don't have to be. You're not with Hydra anymore. If you live with-"

"This isn't about you, Steve. He's already made his choice," Buck said.

"He's your son! Don't you even wanna try to save him?" Steve said.

"I'm not his son. I'm a genetically manipulated clone," the boy told him.

"What difference does that make? Don't you want to live?" Steve demanded.

"No. Something is wrong with me. Doctor Kozlov made a mistake. I feel nothing. I will have no empathy for others. With my intellect and physical enhancements I'll be too dangerous to keep alive. It isn't logical to continue on. Already you feel for me. With time, you would care for me until I betrayed you. The only possible outcome is tragedy and suffering," the boy said.

"You don't know that," Steve insisted.

"It's not your call, Steve," Buck said.

"He should have a name, then. Everybody deserves an identity," Steve continued to argue.

"No. I refuse a name. Applying a name would only serve to humanize me in your memory. Thank you for the ice cream. Thank you for rescuing me from a life of service to Hydra. If you don't want to grant me what I need, then leave and let him do it," the child told Steve.

"You're making him kill a little child! What do you think that's gonna do to him?" Steve said and pointed to Buck.

"I don't care," the child said.

Steve sat down in the vinyl guest chair. He put his face in his hands and exhaled slowly. The boy's unfeeling logic was ominous, especially from a person so small and cute.

"How do you want to do this? I could get you an injection, or-" Buck offered.

"I will not allow the medical staff to be complicit in your actions," Jarvis interrupted.

Steve picked his face up from his hands with some hope.

"You could hold me. Then hold me a little harder," the child said.

"Alright," Buck agreed.

"Buck, don't do this," Steve tried once again.

"Shut up or leave, Steven," Buck told him.

He got onto the bed and the child moved to make room for him. The boy was agile, easily balancing near the edge of the mattress. He frowned at the hand Steve put out to catch him should he fall. Buck sat in the middle of the bed and opened his arms to rest on his knees. The child moved to lean against Bucky's chest. It looked to be an affectionate gesture.

"Don't stop. Don't let me come back," the child whispered.

"I won't," Buck said with kind assurance.
He hugged the child. The boy turned his face into the black leather on his chest and Bucky understood how he wanted this to end. He put his hand on the back of the small head and pressed. Steve watched until the suffocating child began to struggle. Buck's face was the hardest thing to see. There was unfailing determination there, but also anger and deeply felt regret. Steve moved closer and held the child's hand. He put his other hand on Buck's shoulder.

Buck waited six long minutes after the child went limp, then he still didn't let go of him.

"Where's the incinerator?" he asked.

"Sub-basement two," Jarvis said.

Steve went with while Bucky carried the child's body down. Tony was there, waiting. He was wearing heavily insulated protective gear. They couldn't see his face but his presence and assistance were enough. The incinerator was still hot from disposing of the other Soldier. Tony waved them to stand back, then he hauled opened the heavy ceramic door. White plasma flame gouted from the opening, then Bucky placed the small body on the rack which Tony pulled out. Buck pushed the rack in and secured the door. It seemed too easy to end a life and dispose of the remains.

Tony arranged the settings on the incinerator then took off his protective gear. The three men went back to the main elevator. For once, Stark had no snide remarks.

"Are we ever going to know what you found in that place?" Tony asked before they got out to go to Steve's suite.

"Yeah. I'll write a report," Buck said.

Steve and Bucky stepped from the elevator.

"Hey," Tony said.

They both looked at him.

Stark looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words to do so. Barnes and Rogers both looked battered, tired and down. In the end, he twitched his hands at his thighs and made a pained grimace.

Steve nodded in acceptance of the sentiment. Sometimes even when you won the day's battle it didn't feel like a victory.

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His shower was the first private place he had to let himself feel anything. Estrella was coming in less than an hour. He had to sort himself out and find some peace before she arrived. It didn't take long to get clean. After rinsing, Steve stood under the hot shower spray and braced his hands against the wall.

He hung his head in guilt. Then he tried to reason away the guilt. Was the child really a child if it was a clone of Buck? Did that make it its own person, or just a part of James Barnes, maybe like the arm he'd lost? Especially since the boy claimed to have no empathy, it was possible there was something incomplete, something less human about him. Was he really questioning the personhood of what had been a living human child? Steve shook his head and turned off his shower.
He stared at nothing while he dried himself. His attention was internal. He had to think quickly and settle this so Estrella wouldn't see that he was troubled and question him about it. He didn't want to lie to her but he shouldn't burden her with this kind of truth.

While he brushed his teeth and looked critically at his broken nose Steve shifted his mind away from guilt and excuses. He probably could have saved the child if he'd tried harder, but he wasn't sure saving him would have been the right thing to do. The child's mental capacity had been growing rapidly. He'd already been freakishly intelligent for a tot, or even for an adult. It was probable they'd avoided disaster by ending the boy.

Steve's ethics questions needed answers but they would have to wait for later. He managed to temporarily excuse himself from guilt by admitting it had been a novel situation for which he'd been unprepared. That enabled him to clear his mind and he moved on.

It was never easy to decide what to wear, especially since he didn't know how Estrella intended to dress for dinner. He took a chance that she'd still be wearing the mind-melting shorts and top she'd worn earlier. Steve dressed in a soft pair of jeans and tugged a stretchy blue shirt over his head.

Bucky came out of his room fresh from showering. Steve finished placing their order for dinner on his phone then looked at Buck from a foot away.

"It's done. Quit thinking about it," Buck said.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut. The feel of the struggling, dying child's hand in his was burned into his memory and likely to never be forgotten. Steve grunted in surprise when Bucky hugged him. He looked to see Buck watching him with concern.

The hug was brief, then Buck pushed him away.

"I'm sorry you've got that in your head now," Buck said.

"Me too."

Steve looked down at his bare feet and then at his friend. Buck looked relaxed and normal. Almost too normal. An hour ago, he'd been in Winter Soldier black leather and had a shadowed jaw from a few days of not shaving. Now he was casual in slacks and a knit pullover. His hair was perfect and his jaw was shaved smooth. Patches of his skin were still faintly red from the fire at the asylum but he was healing fast. Their shallow bruises were gone, but deep purple lingered under their skin from the worst of their fight against the other Soldier. Steve tried to ignore the mild ache from his ribs and nose.

"What about you? You're alright? I know we take it for granted, but did they hurt you?" Steve asked.

Bucky walked away to get some week-old newspapers off the table by the window. He waved an arm in a dismissive gesture.

"That's not good enough, Buck. I can see you're physically fine, but Estrella's coming any minute now. I gotta know your mental state," Steve told him.

"Ah, sure. Gotta make sure I'm safe around the little lady," Buck grumped.

"You know I do," Steve didn't deny it.

Bucky turned and slapped the folded papers against his leg.
"I'm not gonna lie to ya. It wasn't much fun. Things went about how I expected, except for the boy. I'm fine, Steve. I'm used to this kind of shit. I'm compartmentalized," Buck tapped a metal finger at his temple, "That was work. This is home. No problem."

Steve nodded.

It had always bothered him some, how ruthless Buck could be. But killing a child in cold blood? There was no excuse that the Soldier made him do it, this time. His freewill and emotion had been obvious through the ordeal.

"What, you're just now figuring out I'm an assassin?" Buck asked with a cruel taunt of a smile.

"That wasn't you. It didn't use to be," Steve denied.

"Maybe it was, and I just hadn't grown into it yet. I got no problem with what happened. You're projecting your altruism onto me and pretending it's mine. Don't do that, Steve," Buck warned him.

"It's not you. That wasn't the guy I grew up with. You loved your sisters, your ma. You couldn't have killed a kid like that," Steve insisted.

"Ah, God! How hard did you get hit in the head?! Don't be a dumbfuck. Ya think I waded through all of Hydra's bullshit without getting a little darker than I used to be? That stuff sticks, pal. It doesn't just go away after a few months of therapy and acting like it's over. You're not reading the files Talia's making on me," Buck accused him.

Steve tipped up his chin in affront at the implication that if he was smart, he'd snoop in the files.

"It's your business, Buck. If I needed to know Nat would tell me," he said.

"Would she?" Buck asked pointedly, "Would she, Steve? I was her first lover, the first one she couldn't kill. After they put an end to that, we flirted with sex and death on and off for fifty years. You've only known her a little while."

"At some point we need to trust each other if we're going to be a team. She hasn't given me any reason not to. Neither have you, til tonight," Steve said.

"That wasn't a kid! That was my own goddam DNA and it wanted to die, just like I wanted it to die. There's no conflict there, pal. You saw the data. That was a half-grown monster. It had no soul. If you think I'm dark, if you think what we fought this evening was bad, you wouldn't have wanted to meet that kid once he grew up. If he even would have. His brain was growing faster than his skull. Probably would have died soon, anyway. We just saved him some pain," Buck reasoned.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. Steve's eyes widened. Buck had been talking pretty loud. Estrella might have overheard him.

"I wanted to name him. He should have been baptized first. I wanted to do that, but you did everything so fast," Steve whispered vehemently.

"Yeah, I saw what you brought. There wasn't anything to baptize, Steve. That's ridiculous. Do you wonder if every guy we kill is baptized first?" Buck sneered at his quaint morals.

"We don't snuff out children. Adults have had time to make their decisions. That boy was innocent and he didn't have a choice," Steve insisted.

"Right, so quit worrying about it. No free will, no sin. See? If he had a soul, he's fine. But he
didn't. Quit wringing your hanky and go let your girl in," Buck said.

Steve scowled at him, but he headed for the door after a long, hard look at Bucky. Buck stared back just as stubbornly. Estrella looked briefly at Steve as she came in. She handed him her guitar in passing, then rushed into the living room and hugged Bucky. Then she stepped back and slapped him.

"You lied to me! I was so worried I couldn't think. And then we couldn't find you and Natasha made him let you go after Tony found you again. Asshole!" she called him.

Then she hugged him again.

Steve bit his lips against a smile. Alright, so his best pal was an assassin sometimes, but he still appreciated a nice girl hugging him. Buck didn't react much to the slap and the first hug had caught him off guard. By the second time she got her arms around him and held on for a while, Buck's defenses looked a little soft around the edges.

The slightest of smiles tightened the corners of his lips and Steve could see it was genuine. Buck's hands moved in an aborted response, then his right hand went onto the denim at her hip while his left hand patted her back. Steve didn't like the way his metal hand splayed against the back of her shirt for a moment, then slid down so the silver fingertips touched her skin where the scanty shirt didn't cover.

Bucky winked at him over her shoulder and set Estrella away from him. Steve ground his teeth at the tease. It made him angry that Buck would even hint at touching his girl like that. It was too close to home. But it also eased his mind that the lighthearted prankster part of James Barnes was still there in his head, mixed in with all the crap Hydra had done to him.

Estrella looked around, then smiled briefly at Steve. They could see her confusion.

"Where's the little boy?" she asked.

"He went-" Steve began awkwardly.

"How'd you know it was a boy?" Buck asked.

Estrella shrugged and took a step away to go look in the bedrooms for the child.

"Eya, don't," Steve said.

"I had to kill him, toots. He wasn't right. A Hydra scientist made him. He wouldn't have been good," Buck explained.

"He looked sweet. He smiled at me," Estrella insisted.

Steve watched in amazement. He'd been sure Estrella would have reacted poorly to hearing Buck put it so bluntly like that. Instead, she stood there with her fists on her hips and challenged Buck to convince her.

"Don't be fooled. He smiled at Natalia too. He was made from me, so he liked women. That was him trying to manipulate. You shoulda seen him on the way home on the jet. He climbed into Talia's lap and tried to get her to feel something for him. Little shit was way too smart. He needed to go," Buck said.

Estrella pursed her lips against more words. She wanted to argue, but it was done. She could feel
the tension in the room between the men. Buck didn't look upset by the child's passing. She turned to look to her boyfriend.

Steve was stiff with disapproval. Of course he would be. She reached out to him and Steve put his hand in hers. She moved them both closer to Bucky, then she kissed Buck on the cheek solemnly.

"I'm sorry that happened to you. All of it. But you didn't have to lie to me," she said.

Her expression went from soft to seething.

"Hey! I just told you the truth. He was the one fixing to lie to you," Buck protested.

"You know that's not what I'm talking about! He was trying to spare my feelings. You made me feel like an idiot. I knew you didn't want to go shopping! It was all a hoax and now I don't trust you," Estrella said with attitude.

She pulled Steve's hand. He set her guitar on the couch and slipped closer against her back where she could feel the heat of him. His hand slid around from her waist to rest over her bare belly. Buck grinned at how the two of them went all sex-brained and forgot about everything else. Steve's previous stormy grumping and disapproval was gone and the couple stared at each other over Estrella's shoulder.

There was another tap at the door. Buck laughed softly and reached over to the stereo. He lowered the needle onto a record and pressed a button on the modern turntable. These two made for easy babysitting. Just get some skin going and put on a little music and they'd stay busy and out of trouble. He went to the door to get the food from the courier.

Steve eyed him once while he set two place settings at the table by the window. Damn. His pal wasn't done chewing him out yet, but that glance was an acknowledgement the rest would wait til later. Buck retreated to the kitchen to make a plate to take to his room.

Steve and the girl were in his way when he moved to get out of the kitchen. Now that the girl had softened him up, Steve looked apologetic and like he wanted to say something.

"Get outta the way. I'm starved. I've had about one meal this week and it was shitty," Buck told them.

Estrella stepped out of his way. Steve grumbled at him about his language but he moved too.

"I'm glad you're back, Bucky," Estrella told him before his bedroom door closed.

"Thanks for worrying about me, kid," he said, then he shut himself inside.

"Hey, I worried about you too," Steve called.

They heard a groan from the closed room.

"I'm an idiot. I should have let him eat earlier. He doesn't show it when he's hungry half the time, and-" "Hush. He knows you worried about him. You rescued him. It's over and he's eating now, so it's okay," Estrella told him while they got drinks for themselves.

She put ice in the glasses then turned to hand them to Steve. He was staring at her.

"Look at me later! You didn't eat right because you were worried about Bucky. I know you didn't."
Come on," she hurried him.

They got to the table and Estrella was pleased to finally sit at it with him. She had a token few bites on her plate because she'd already had supper earlier. It took her only a few minutes to eat, then she pushed her plate aside and went to the couch to get her guitar.

Steve looked at her curiously while she worked her fingers lightly over the strings. Estrella felt nervous to play for him. What if he didn't like it? His attention on her while he ate felt like acute scrutiny and it made her nervous. She knew how intelligent and analytical Steve's mind was, and how poor his skills at lying were. In a rush of nerves, her fingers fuddled up her idle strumming and pressed at the discordant noise she'd coaxed from the strings.

She hung her head in embarrassment and felt like a nervous fool. Warmth from Steve's hand comforted her shoulder.

"Ya don't have to. I'd love to hear you play, but not if you're not ready," he said.

She knew he meant it. He'd been prickly about not being the first person to hear her play, but he understood her dilemma. If Steve ever had an art exhibit, she knew he'd be sensitive to show his work too. But this was just the two of them. Estrella firmed her resolve and took a deep breath.

It wasn't so much the playing that bothered her, but revealing the emotions in her song which made her hesitant. Val hadn't understood it, but Jesse had felt uncomfortable listening because he did. Since Steve was the inspiration for what she wanted to play, it felt particularly personal to play it in front of him and show the depth of her thoughts, her feelings.

Steve stopped eating while she played for him. He hadn't been expecting this. A rudimentary cover of a known song, or maybe some simplistic original tune is what he expected considering how briefly she'd had the instrument. While Estrella wasn't a virtuoso, she had quickly gained an affinity for making the sounds she wanted with the guitar. A sense of wonder made him smile. She closed her eyes while she played, focused on the way her feelings flowed through her fingers and into the guitar.

The melody was simple but compelling. There was a repetitive pattern playing up and down the scale, swelling and retreating as the song went on. It made him think of a couple dancing, alternately working together across the scale and sometimes straining against each other in swells of feeling. As her song began to make sense to him, he was amazed with how her mind had conveyed emotion into the sounds she'd created. Estrella glanced shyly at him once and saw that he was paying attention.

It was gratifying to see the thoughtful and receptive expression on his face. The fact that Steve was very hungry after work, yet he'd stopped eating with his plate half full in order to appreciate what she was doing meant a lot to her. His genuine delight and interest encouraged her to express herself.

She risked playing her song as she meant to play it, though it was certainly a departure from modern music. Occasionally, in a quiet measure or a crescendo, her voice called out the longing, frustration or adoration she felt while thinking of him. They weren't loud sounds or coherent words, but the meaning was clear to anyone who had felt the same. Her song came to a quiet and tortured end, questioning in tone and pleading for some resolution to the way he made her feel.

The fragile emotion of playing it for him made her afraid to look at him or hear what he thought of her creation. Her hands rested on the guitar and her feet wiggled restlessly on the rungs of her stool. Steve's continued silence made her antsy. After seemingly long moments of waiting, she had to look up and see what his response was.
He was still thinking. The food on his plate was getting cold but it lay there forgotten. Some strong emotion burned behind his eyes and his physical stillness felt carefully controlled. Steve moved to stand up and reach for her guitar. Estrella knew he wanted to touch her without the fragile instrument in the way. She pulled her guitar away from his reach and shook her head.

"No. Eat first, Papi. You look bruised and you're moving funny, and you broke your nose again. You have to eat. Then we can do other things," she said.

Steve gave her a heated smile and he ate. Estrella was so pleased with his unspoken response to her music that she felt like dancing. Instead, she got up from the table and leaned her guitar against the wall. Then she stood beside Steve and carefully held him while he finished his food.

So many things went through her mind while she touched him and waited for him to finish his supper. He made her feel small. His size, heat and vitality made her happy because it reminded her that while his job was hard and he'd come home injured, he was generally fine and would heal quickly. It was clear that he approved of her music and wanted to reciprocate the intimate things she'd shared with him in her song. His brief glances at her while he chewed acknowledged that he was once again following her orders to eat when he'd rather be doing something else. The hint of a smile in his cheeks and around his eyes told her he didn't mind doing what she told him to do, that he kind of liked it when she was a little bossy.

Because of all the things and people which kept getting between them lately, it felt particularly good to know all this about him despite him saying very little to her since she'd come to his suite this evening. It was reassuring that their bond was still strong and they still easily understood each other without the need for a lot of words. She could feel delicious anticipation building between them as she rubbed at him over his thin shirt.

Steve made quick work of his food, etiquette be damned. He drank the last of his water, then turned from the stool and grabbed up his girl.

"I can walk, you know," Estrella laughed as she fussed at him.

The feel of his hands on her bare skin under her shirt was welcome and exciting. She wanted more. Steve bore her to her couch and sat with her on his lap.

"I know, but I can't wait to hold you. Your talent is a gift. Are you working on more music?" he asked her.

Estrella didn't want to talk, not even about her music. Instead, she growled at him and settled against him to seek kisses. Steve was happy to accommodate her. Better than trying to carry on in the common room in front of others, they could rub and rock at each other on his couch in privacy. She carefully avoided bumping his nose but all the rest of him was open for her touch. The way her legs were parted astride his lap reminded her of being naked with him in the shower. Memories of slick, soapy skin and affectionate pleasure had her grasping at him and sliding her shorts against his jeans, creating friction.

Steve couldn't get enough of her skin. His hands tugged off her boots and roamed where they could. They shared brief kisses and didn't care if they got snagged in staring at each other. Kissing was nice, but she wanted to see his face, to connect to the fiery personality behind his eyes. Her eyes always slid closed when they kissed but she wanted to see, so they spent more time rubbing and staring instead. The firm shape of him gave her tingles when she pressed over him and she liked the way his breath caught in his throat. He was feeling it too.

"Your room," she suggested.
Steve shook his head.

"Can't, babe," he denied.

Estrella grabbed at his shoulders and glared at his denial, then rubbed harder at him. Steve's head fell back onto the top of the couch and his hands cupped her bottom. She loved the way his throat worked, the little choked sounds he made while she teased them and wished for more. Her hands were greedy on his shoulders, his arms, his chest and his neck. After seeing him on the television and the internet these last days, dating other women and showing himself off for everyone, she was determined to enjoy him herself.

She didn't like the way the seam of her shorts was making a sore spot, so she lifted away to unbutton and unzip them.

A strange sound started in the direction of Bucky's room, then grew into a frightening and unexpected disturbance.

Bucky's voice sounded enraged and determined, with a chilling tone of uncontrolled terror through the noise he was making. There was thrashing, a bang and a whump sound, as well as the sounds of things falling to the floor in his room.

Steve looked to her briefly, then slipped out from under her. Their ardor came to an abrupt end as Steve stalked cautiously to the closed door of Bucky's bedroom. Restless sounds and rough panting could be heard through the door. Estrella got off the couch and moved aside, in the direction Steve's hand waved her toward. She didn't know why he wanted her to go aside to the kitchen, but she trusted his judgement and did as he wanted.

"Buck, you're alright, it's just a dream. I'm gonna come in," Steve said in a tone that was strong and calm.

He looked to Estrella and made a stay motion with his hand, then he opened Buck's bedroom door. She could hear Bucky's harsh breathing more loudly with his door open. Steve didn't show any hesitation in going in to help. When she heard him murmur something low to Buck and then the familiar sound of hard bodies thumping together, she dared to go peer around the doorframe.

Light from the living room lamp shone into the dark bedroom and made it harder to see until her eyes adjusted. Odd, disorderly shapes resolved into the sight of Buck's bedframe askew against the wall and his mattress tossed into the opposite corner of the room. Books and other things were on the floor, the blankets and sheets draped crazily over the mess. Steve had Bucky by the far wall, in the shadows.

Buck was sagging in Steve's hug, his arms hanging limp and his head on Steve's shoulder in a tired, defeated slump. He wasn't breathing as loudly anymore, nor was he making any noise or fuss but he wasn't his usual aloof, capable self. Steve raised a hand to pet at the back of Buck's head. Buck seemed to appreciate the gesture and turned his face into Steve's neck to breathe deeply.

Estrella had a flash of memory, of being pressed between Steve and Colin in the dark; of being comforted in her terror by the smell of Steve, knowing he was there to make things right. She wondered if Bucky was feeling the same comfort at Steve's familiar smell.


"The babies, the kids..." Bucky rasped.
"I think you took care of them," Steve said.

"Yeah," Buck said.

He sounded relieved.

Estrella made a sound at the door.

The guys started. Bucky pushed away from the consolation he'd momentarily allowed himself to accept. He grunted at the mess he'd made of his room and set about making things orderly. Estrella went in to help and Steve pushed the bedframe square against the wall where it was supposed to be. Buck refused to look at her, but he worked with her to dress the bed after he'd put the mattress back on. Steve picked up books and boots and deodorant while Buck and Estrella put the pillows back on the bed.

"Go on. Get outta here. I'm fine," Buck told them once they stood in the gloom with nothing more to do.

"You're not gonna sleep," Steve said.

"So?" Buck challenged him.

"So we gotta leave in a few hours and I need you at your best. You gotta at least try to sleep, Buck," Steve reasoned.

"You're leaving again so soon?" Estrella asked.

"We're not done. We finished off the last of Hydra in America, but we're going international. Lots more work to do over the next few days," Steve said.

"In a few hours? You just got back," she pointed out.

"That's the plan," Steve said.

He clearly wasn't going to explain more.

"That's not enough time for everyone to sleep," Estrella said.

"We don't need much, we'll be alright," Buck told her.

Estrella crossed her arms and stared at them. Steve and Buck looked at her like delinquent boys.

"How much rest have you had in the last few days?" she persisted.

They both mumbled nonspecific noises and didn't look at her.

"Get in bed," she told them.

"Look, doll, I know you're tryin to help, but I'm not gonna sleep after dreaming like that," Buck told her.

"Get in bed, both of you," she said.

"Eya-" Steve protested.

"You're wasting time. Do it! We all have to trust your plans, don't we? It's my turn. Get on the
"bed," she insisted.

"Whaddya want, here?" Buck asked skeptically.

He looked balky, standing there like he was going to refuse. Steve looked willing to play along but uncertain what he was supposed to do.

"Bucky, you get in the middle. Steve, over there," she said.

Estrella got onto the edge of the bed nearest her and lay down. She waited. Buck crossed his arms in a stubborn stance and stood at the foot of the bed. Estrella sighed. She was going to have to explain.

"You have to rest if you're working again soon. Steve smells familiar. You said before that remembering him helped when Hydra had you. Get on the bed. Steve, lie close where he can smell you. Let's try to sleep. Maybe by knowing he's here with you, Bucky can relax enough," she said.

"Heh, you're using Stevie as a pacifier for me? I'm not a babe in diapers," Buck said.

"I don't care. I had to put up with feeling like a fool when I was out of my head and you held me down, so you can too. Lie down and shut up," Estrella fussed at him.

Buck looked at the girl, then at Steve. The girl looked cranky but Steve was smiling. The big oaf shrugged and got on the bed, leaving a space in the middle. Buck rolled his eyes and complied.

It was almost intolerable. He felt like a coddled child. The girl snuggled up to one side of him and pushed at his left shoulder. It was understood that she meant to spoon up to the backside of him.

"Nah, I'm not gonna-" Buck protested.

The bed wasn't huge. Making a sandwich of him put him right in Steve's face. The punk was about to lose his shit and snort laughter at him. He got a kick out of seeing the girl boss the both of them around. Buck frowned at him and resisted the urge to share in Steve's goofy humor.

The last time they'd done anything this dumb and awkward, they'd been hiding in the loft of Mister Brzynski's store, trying not to get caught at Steve making Buck return a jar of pickles he'd stolen.

Estrella pushed down on Bucky's right shoulder.

"You have to scoot down some, so Steve can put his arm through," she told him.

Bucky humored her, more curious than compliant. He wanted to see how she thought this was going to work. Steve pressed his lips together and tried hard not to laugh at the face Buck was making. Estrella tugged at Steve's arm until she had it under both Bucky's cheek and her own, like an uncomfortable pillow. It worked better when fit under their necks instead. Then Estrella pushed and pulled at them until Buck was truly a trapped sandwich, her at his back and Steve stuck to the front of him. It irked him to have Steve a little higher on the bed. It made him feel short and he resented that, especially since Steve was twitching with the effort not to laugh.

"Go to sleep," Estrella said to them.

Steve took a long, slow breath to try to calm down from his humor. Bucky scowled like a wet cat. Steve snorted out a guffaw and Buck punched him in the gut for punishment. Steve blocked his hand away from the half-hearted punch, then relaxed.

Bucky lay there for almost a minute, nearly crawling out of his skin with discomfort of having
people so close while he was lying down.
"Can't sleep. Light's on," he grumbled.

"Fine," Estrella hissed, and she got off the bed to go turn off the lights in the suite.

"You expect me to put up with this?" Buck complained at Steve in a whisper.

"Whatever you want. I'll get her to leave you alone if you really want me to. What'll it hurt to try? C'mon, Buck, it's just us. Give it a chance," Steve said quietly.

"Pussywhipped," Buck accused him.

Estrella got back onto the bed behind him and snuggled up again. Her arm went around Bucky's ribs and her face tucked at the back of his head. She was up higher on the bed too. Buck repressed the urge to strike out at both of them. Steve made a negative noise at him. Strangely, the quiet warning calmed him. This was ridiculous, but Steve was aware of his mental state and watchful. For a brief moment, his strong grip closed around Buck's left wrist and held on. Then he let go and kept his hands to himself.

Buck closed his eyes and sighed a deep breath. The girl was soft against his backside. She smelled familiar. Not as familiar as Steve, but good enough to tell his mind that she belonged on the short list of people he could trust. The dark and the quiet were nice. The steady feel of two heartbeats against him made him feel like a puppy in a pile. He'd slept pressed against Steve too many times to count, so this was only slightly strange.

The girl lifted her hand from his ribs and ran her fingers through his hair. It felt so good that he closed his eyes. His ma used to do that on the rare occasions when he was sick as a kid. His skin began to prickle with heat where Steve touched him, but that was alright. It was a hell of a lot better than being cold. His muscles started to relax from the heat and the enjoyment of the girl's fingers combing on his scalp.

His mind started to drift into relaxation but as soon as it did, memories of his bad dream returned to him. Buck took a sharp breath and his brow pinched. Steve's large warm hand joined Estrella's on his head for a moment, his rough thumb pressed and soothed at the creased skin of his brow.


His friend's smell was all around him, and the girl's pleasant scent too. She was soft. If she was near, it meant nothing bad was happening because Steve wouldn't allow her to lie around like this if there was danger. If Steve said things were good at the moment, then they were.

Bucky gradually allowed his body to relax until he felt like limp, warm noodles. In this one beautiful moment he felt safe and happy. Exhaustion from several days of struggle and pain dragged him under. The smell and heat of friends nearby and the feel of their hands on him chased away the nightmares when they tried to creep in again. It was so good, he would have cried at the relief of it if he'd had the time to before deep sleep took him under.

Steve stared over Buck's head at Estrella. In the metabolic heat generated by two serum-enhanced bodies, his heart throbbed with love and amazement. He was still in awe of her natural gift with music and her ability to express herself with it. The kindness of her heart, even when shown with a fussy attitude, especially then, touched him. He knew she was jealous of his relationship with Buck, but she still cared enough to try to comfort him in his night terrors. And she was gorgeous,
dark and lovely like a dream come true. He stared at her with wonder and reveled at the feel of her skin on his arm. There was more work in the days to come, but he was very eager to get it finished and get back to her. A woman like her was pure gold and he knew he was blessed to have her, if she would agree to keep him around.

Sleep, she mouthed at him.

Estrella couldn't see very well in the dark, but she knew Steve could. Eventually, she felt him relax like Bucky. Only then did she allow herself to rest.

…

This wasn't in today's plans but he'd thought of it at the last minute and knew it had to be done. He should have done it sooner. Steve parked his truck on the dark street and hurried around and up onto the curb. The rest of his team was waiting for him back at the tower, so he'd have to be as quick as he could.

A short leap up the rectory's steps from the sidewalk, and Steve knocked on the door. He'd called ahead. There was a light on inside, so he knew he wasn't waking him. After a long moment, Father Miller opened the door and invited him in.

"Steven, are you alright?" he asked.

Steve felt goofy standing in the quiet, formal living room in full uniform. The old priest secured the door behind them then looked to Steve curiously. He was in pajamas, slippers and a robe. The hair on his mostly bald head was messy from sleep. It was four o'clock in the morning.

"I'm fine, Father. I'm sorry to wake you so early," Steve said in a rush.

Father Miller looked him up and down. The armor-plated uniform, the leather holsters, combat boots and the shield at his back, as well as the way Steve sort of fidgeted with energy spoke to the fact that he was in a hurry to get things done. The priest lifted his brows in curious indulgence.

"I'm getting married," Steve said in a rush, "I mean, I hope I'm getting married, after I ask her."

He gripped his work gloves in one hand, then transferred them to the other hand, then back again.

"I'll be happy to congratulate you when she's agreed to your proposal," Father Miller said mildly.

He was always achy from arthritis when he got out of bed so he took it easy walking over to his chair and sitting down. Steve's pent-up young energy made him feel old and tired. He waved a hand at the nearby couch and Steve perched his rump on the edge of it, looking like he'd pop up to his feet at any second.

"Father, we'll need a wedding. In a week or two, probably, if she says yes. I'm pretty sure she will. She didn't want to, at first. She was scared and didn't think it would work out. I think she's changed her mind. I think she's ready," Steve explained the best he could.

"Father, we'll need a wedding. In a week or two, probably, if she says yes. I'm pretty sure she will. She didn't want to, at first. She was scared and didn't think it would work out. I think she's changed her mind. I think she's ready," Steve explained the best he could.

"Married in a week? Impossible. We need six months to be sure you're prepared for matrimony. The sacrament of marriage is not to be rushed into. It's a commitment for the rest of your life, Steven, and there are important things to consider, classes to take in preparation. What makes you think she's ready now, if she wasn't before?" the priest asked.

"Classes?" Steve asked.
"Yes, classes. I'll need to interview you and the young lady to determine your intentions, then there are pre-Cana classes, and Natural Family Planning classes-"

"Father, I don't have six months. If these classes have books, we'll read them. Or we can take the classes after the wedding, can't we?" Steve asked with quiet urgency.

"What's the rush?" Father Miller asked.

At this point was when the couple always admitted that the prospective bride was pregnant. He looked to Steven expectantly.

"I don't know. It's a feeling. I don't have six months," Steve said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know! I feel like I'm running out of time. Last time... I can't. I can't let that happen again. I love her and I want to be married to her and live my life while I can, in whatever time I have left," Steve said with earnest certainty.

"Are you terminally ill?" Father Miller asked with sympathy.

It didn't seem that the bride to be was expecting in this case. He didn't feel Steve would lie to him since he was unfailingly honest about his other difficulties. He was beginning to learn that Steve leaned toward the dramatic.

"No. I can't explain it. It's just that everything in my life has been taken away before I could get to it. I can't let it happen this time too. I won't. We need a sacramental marriage. Our vows to each other before God are all that matters. No marriage license, I can't let the state know I'm doing this. I need to protect her from that," Steve said.

"One week, and no marriage license? Steven, you ask the impossible," Father Miller said.

"Then I'm sorry to bother you, Father. This is what I need. If you can't help me, I'll have to find another way," Steve said.

He stood and held his hand out to shake in farewell.

"Hold on, hold on. Wait a minute while I think. I might be willing to do this, if I can better understand what's really going on. What's this all about? If she's not pregnant and you're not ill, what's the rush?" the priest said.

He waved his hand at the couch for Steve to sit down again. Reluctantly, Steve sat. His knee jumped repeatedly in impatience as he flexed his heel.

"I'm not telling you a story, Father. She's not pregnant. At least, she'd better not be or I've got some serious business with my best pal. I don't have six months. I feel it. Please," Steve said.

Father Miller's face fell. It was sad that Steven felt he would die soon. Tragic. After all the man had given to humanity, it seemed he should have a chance to live a little. It was hard to believe he could feel imminent death, but if he said he did, who was an old priest to say he didn't? Steven's life had been truly remarkable so far. Improbable things happened to him all the time, so maybe God had graced him with foresight as a kind of blessing. Maybe it was God's will for Steven to marry now and have some happiness. With a heavy heart, the old man made his decision. If it got him in trouble with the bishop, so be it. He was old and he meant to retire soon, anyway.
"I'll see you married, and without the license. There are no services on Mondays, so we could have the wedding mass on a Monday. Or any night around ten, if we're quiet about it. I assume it will be a small wedding party? Fewer people would be best if we intend to keep a secret," the priest speculated.

"That's great. Thank you, Father! Yeah, maybe a dozen or so people. Her family and our friends," Steve said.

He stood to go. Father Miller pushed himself up from his chair. It amused him how Steve lingered not-so-patiently and walked with him to the door at his slower pace. He put out a hand to steady himself against Steve's strong arm.

"Steven, I don't understand this, this feeling that you might die. I hope you'll understand I'm skeptical."

The impatient younger man nodded at him.

"Mind the state of your soul, son. Go to confession often," Father Miller cautioned him.

"Of course, Father. About that... I need to consult with you on something, a death that happened. But it'll have to wait til I get back, I gotta go and I'm already late, everyone's waiting on me to take off. I'll talk to you about it soon, if you have time to meet with me again," Steve said.

"I'll meet with you any time," Father agreed.

He patted Steve's shoulder because it was clear he was about to hurry out the door. To his surprise, Steve hugged him. Perhaps the larger man meant to be gentle, but he was strong and in a hurry.

Father Miller wheezed and couldn't help but share in the joyful smile Steve gave him as he stepped away. For a man who apparently felt death stalking him, Steven looked quite happy as he leapt away to his truck and drove off to go deliver whatever mayhem was on his schedule for today.

Belatedly, the priest lifted his hand in a blessing and prayed for his protection. As he returned to bed, he marveled that Steven did seem to feel young again. In the time he'd known him, he'd often seemed more weary and worn down than some of the older parishioners. Since his young lady had come around, Steve was suffering more of the spiritual difficulties of a young man rather than those of an older one. Sadness clouded the old priest's thoughts when he considered that Steve might die soon if his foreboding was correct. He prayed death might pass their young hero by, then was able to return to sleep.

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AN: More soon!
Chapter 62

"If you're not careful this could become a major diplomatic crisis," Maria Hill warned them over the comm panel in the quinjet.

"That's why I've changed the plan to take out the North Korean location first. The politics are more delicate, stealth is more of an issue, so we do it while we're fresh and our equipment is in the best shape. We'll be in and out, an hour tops. No time-consuming detail work, we'll level it fast since we don't need any intel. They won't see us, they won't know we were there until after we're gone," Steve assured his chief intelligence officer.

Maria gave him a forbidding glare. Yeah, he knew she disapproved of his plans for this week's work. He knew she'd be in the hot seat if things went sideways. It was worth the risk. Hydra had to be ended and now was the time to do it, while they were in disarray, scrambling to reorganize their assets from their losses in the United States. If Maria had to deal with trouble resulting from his actions, he'd stand with her and take most of the heat after Hydra was done with.

"You don't approve. Duly noted. We're going dark. Contact after it's done," Steve told her while they were still over the Pacific.

He reached out and turned off the comm on Maria's chilly stare of disapproval.

"You heard the lady. Let's not screw up," Steve said to no one in particular.

Clint and Bruce smirked at him. Maria didn't see much action anymore. Sitting at a desk tended to make her waspish because she wasn't in the fight with them being reassured of their attention to detail.

He went over to see what Nat, Sam, Tony and Thor were finishing up. Buck stood aside from their planning. His pal was meticulously cleaning and oiling his gear, making sure his magazines were loaded to his satisfaction. Steve bumped Buck's shoulder and smiled at him a little. Buck was quiet and eager to get to work against Hydra. Sam made room for Steve in front of the displayed schematic of their target.

"Thunder and lightning would not be useful in this topography," Thor said.

"Right. We don't wanna bring an avalanche down on it until after we've blown the place," Sam commented.

Thor flipped his hammer and smiled.

Natasha sighed.

"You've been bored for too long. You heard the Captain. It's a tight plan, in fast, out fast. We pack the perimeter with explosive, ram our way in with the Hulk, Barnes pulses everything on the inside, then run like hell to get out before the avalanche from the high mountains buries it. The only reason we're going in is to be sure we've got the right target," Nat said.

"Duty roster?" Steve asked while he put on his gloves.

"Hulk is door-buster. Me and Barnes go in with gas masks in case they have time to get crafty. We need fast work in the cold, so that's you and Wilson setting the explosives outside. Thor goes deep and drops the mini-nuke down the mountain tunnels to kill the lower lab levels we won't have time
to explore. Stark and Barton stay high and watch our backs. North Korean authorities will
definitely sense the detonations locally, but we'll be gone before they can respond. Nearest military
installment is over a hundred clicks away. By the time they muster and come to investigate, we'll
be long gone," Nat said.

"I should go in," Steve said.

"Don't be a glory hog. Let's keep you pretty for later. There's plenty of work for you tomorrow and
the next day," she said.

He nodded, refusing to rise to her verbal taunts.

"Good plan. What's the specialty here? Weapons, tech development, personnel training?" Steve
wondered.


His friend looked at him steady. Steve nodded. This would seem like an innocuous hit, it being
merely a remote location in a hostile mountain climate. They knew whichever Hydra operatives
were hardy enough to hide in an inaccessible, frigid base were likely hardcore officers, not junior
trainees. Whoever was inside needed to be taken out with swift prejudice, lest they be able to direct
operations against them for the rest of the week.

Steve checked the ETA, then sat with Buck and made sure his weapons were in top condition. It
was expected that Tony would hunker with Thor over the miniature nuclear device to explain its
operation, but Steve was surprised to see Clint wave Natasha over to take the pilot's seat. Bruce sat
huddled, waiting. There was no special planning for him, other than to turn green.

Clint came over and tapped Steve's shoulder in passing. Steve got up to follow him. They went to
the back where the noise from the jet's engines was a little louder. Clint didn't waste any time being
subtle.

"You're an idiot and you're about to fuck things up," he said.

Steve tilted his head and waited for clarification. It wasn't like Clint to disagree with battle plans,
so he wondered what this was about.

"I know Natasha told you to talk to me. You never did, so now I've got to do this in the middle of a
mission," he said with some disgust.

"I didn't know I needed to. I thought it was a friendly offer, like if I felt the need to take a load off
my mind, you'd be a pal," Steve explained.

"Shut it and listen," Clint told him, "You can't go in worried about casualties anymore. If you want
to get home to your girl, you have to harden up. No enemy life is worth causing grief to your
family and Estrella's about to be your family. Get your ass in there, do what needs to be done, and
leave your conscience at home. Don't think about your girl, don't worry about what she's doing
while you're away, don't worry about her worrying about you. If you care about her you don't think
about her at all. Not once. What you think about is the job, being effective, and getting out in one
piece. No mercy, no distractions."

Steve blinked. He'd done that near the end of the war when his men were wearing thin and the
situation was getting desperate. Normally, he liked to give their opponents a second chance, an
opportunity to change their mind if they weren't on the darkest end of the evil spectrum. Clint was
dead serious. He seemed to speak from experience. He'd seen the man naked. He had scars all over
him, some of them bad ones. Yet he was a survivor, still here, still fighting.

Clint firmed his bottom lip in a way he only did when he was taking a long shot, a chance he might regret. He pulled out his phone, unlocked it and opened his picture files. He passed the phone to Steve, making sure to keep it turned away from any of Jarvis' camera angles. Steve thumbed through a half dozen pics. Then he handed the phone back to Clint.

"You're retiring after this," Steve said.

"Maybe, maybe not. Got another one on the way. Kids are expensive. Are you hearing me, Rogers? No more bleeding heart. If you've got family to get home to there's no room for mercy in combat. It'll get you shot in the back. It'll have your family standing around a coffin," Clint said.

"I hear you. I can do that. I've done it, I just don't like it," Steve said.

"Learn to like it. Learn to like it fast," Clint said.

Steve nodded.

"Thanks," he told Clint as he walked away.

Natasha came back to finish gearing up after Clint tapped her out of the pilot's seat. She looked at him expectantly and smiled slightly. She had already known. Steve frowned. He didn't like knowing Clint was a family man. He never would have guessed. But there was a pretty wife somewhere on a farm, and a rascally looking boy, and a small girl who looked like she adored her father. In the one picture of them all together, Clint was smiling like Steve had never seen him, relaxed and happy. It explained a lot. Clint's hardness, his apparent killer coldness, was professional focus and determination to get back home to his loved ones.

He thought of Estrella one last time, then put her out of his mind. Just like when he'd been dating other women, she had no place here. Not if he wanted to make sure to the best of his ability that he got back to her. Sam came to suit up beside him. Being unenhanced, he needed cold weather gear while he flew around the Hydra base planting explosives. There was a snowsuit designed to fit around his wings. Steve helped him seal up the back of it around the wing pack.

They came in fast and low over southern Japan, Clint skillfully navigating the craft in stealth mode barely over the topography. There was a brief stretch over the Sea of Japan, then they were over enemy territory. Though North Korea wasn't wholly a Hydra holding, the nation was not on friendly terms with the United States. Clint turned off all the jet's lights, even the interior cabin lights, and damped the engines over the most sensitive areas they passed. It took quite a bit of skill to pilot the quinjet over jagged terrain with the engines flickering sometimes on, sometimes off. The ride up into the mountains was rough and silent except for gear jostling in cargo storage, so they held on.

Steve, Sam and Thor picked up their loaded packs. Natasha and Buck fit their masks to their faces. Bruce took off his shoes and his shirt. The rear hatch cracked open and lowered. Clint flared the jet's wings into reverse and the craft lurched into an abrupt hover. The Avengers got to work.

The Hulk roared through the building, smashing through the secured heavy doors just as Thor smashed down through the roof. Natasha and Bucky looked around in the wake of the chaos left behind by their destructive teammates. People were waking up disoriented and adrenalized from their base being plunged into destructive chaos. They'd thought they were safe here, hidden in the high mountains of a nation where Americans weren't welcome. Typical Hydra operations were everywhere, from the insignia on jackets to the security code panels on computer screens. Natasha
and Buck knew they were in the right place, but this confirmed it for the records.

In the short time they had to document things before it was all detonated, Nat and Buck ran through the base getting images with body cameras. They knew what was here, though they'd kept it from Steve. There were lots of hardened operatives up top, but the sublevels housed quite a few blonde children. They saw the dormitories and the frightened children with their eyes, but their body cams recorded nothing except close-ups of the palms of their gloves.

Buck nodded to her and they threw specialized canisters into the dorms. They flash-welded the dormitory exits closed, then ran for it. Thor's nuke and the conventional explosives would put an end to whatever the canisters didn't.

There was a shockwave from deep in the mountain that threw them clear of the exit, then the Hulk scooped them up and leapt into the sky. Sam hauled Steve into the back of the waiting jet while Thor hurtled up out of the same hole he'd created when he'd entered the place. Tony triggered the detonations all around. They waited only long enough to see the building get blasted in and the beginnings of a massive snow avalanche from the slopes of the mountain valley, then Clint had them away. They retreated as quietly as they'd come.

"Chatter?" Steve asked Tony and Jarvis.

"Only on Hydra channels. Some Korean communications mention a seismic event, but no one yet suspects we've been in the area," Jarvis said.

"Clean work," Steve nodded.

Clint got them out of hostile territory and they flew on to their next target. Taking Clint's advice, Steve didn't allow himself to think on the lives they'd ended. If they hadn't wanted trouble, they shouldn't have worked for Hydra. They had five more locations to clean out. That was enough to think about.

Natasha and Bucky didn't look at each other. They didn't speak of what they'd seen or done. They'd agreed weeks ago that Steve should never know what was going in the deep levels of the North Korean Hydra base.

…

Sokovia was a hard fight. It was a fully entrenched military research compound and they were expecting the Avengers. Clint took to the field with them and narrowly avoided a bad hit. Bucky was there to shove him out of the way of the incoming weapons fire. Steve recognized the energy weapons and directed his team accordingly. He knew his shield, Thor, the Hulk, and to some extent Tony's suit were the only things on the field invulnerable to the blue energy beams.

They had to play cat and mouse on the field while Tony found a way in. In an old-fashioned battle of attrition, they wore down the Hydra defenders, overtook their nests and equipment, and fought their way to the main fortress. For such a strong defense force, the main structure was strangely empty of personnel. That was a good indicator something valuable was being held here.

Thor and Sam captured the leader, Strucker, as he tried to escape. They would have kept him for questioning, but had to kill him when he tried to detonate himself and take out Sam. Tony went deep into the mountain castle with Bruce, searching for the energy signature of the artifact they expected to find here.

Clint, Natasha and Buck covered his back while Steve searched for the source of the distress signal
they'd detected weeks ago. He found holding cells in the inhospitable place, and a young woman huddled inside one of them. Her cell was padded and well-lit but otherwise vacant and desolate of warmth. The female was a small hump of clothing in the middle of the cell. He could see her through the thick glass pane in the door.

He would have thought she was dead, only a lifeless husk, except for a compelling pull in his mind. *Help me.*

Steve saw her eyes open in her emaciated face. It seemed to be all the energy she could muster to do that much. A brief red glow emanated from her hands, then faded away. He didn't care that she spoke into his mind. He didn't care if her hands could glow. She was being held prisoner and starved to death in a Hydra cell. She wasn't their enemy and if they left her, she would surely die. He was getting her out of here. They could figure the rest out later.

He didn't feel the need to reassure the girl he would help her. She already knew. She was in his head. He could feel the wisp of her touch in his mind, but it didn't scare him. She was desperate and doing what she had to do. Steve looked for a way to physically force the door open, or a lock or latch he could break. A negative feeling convinced him he was wasting time. He knew he had to go down the hall to a control room. There, he found a panel and knew which switches would release the locks on the girl's cell. He flipped them and hurried from the room.

She looked skeletal. Anger burned hot in him for a moment that Hydra would do this. Killing someone was bad. Experimenting on them was worse. But to watch them slowly starve to death was truly evil.

"Are we clear?" Steve asked his team.

"Clear, Cap. Found the goods in the dungeon," Tony said in his comm.

"I've found the source of the distress signal. She needs help. Natasha, get a med kit ready. Clint, prep the jet," Steve said.

The girl watched him through slitted eyes. She clawed at the floor with dehydration-curled hands. He felt fear and doubt from her, but also threat and determination, rage and grief.

"Easy. Save your energy. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm getting you out of here," he murmured to her kindly.

He dropped to his knees and bent to lift her into his arms. He recalled how fragile Estrella had been and handled her very gently. She felt like bones and rags. There was barely any warmth to her. Her condition was urgent. She was likely only days away from death, maybe only hours. She desperately needed warmth and carefully controlled nutrition.

He lifted her slowly and made sure her head was secure at his chest. She might be too weak to control her neck.

"Buck, water," he requested.

"Yeah, I'll get some," Bucky said from the cell door.

*Downstairs. Morgue. Find him.*

Again, the words were in his head.
"Find who? We should get out of here," Steve said as he started on their way out.

"My brother. They killed him. Pietro," she spoke with a Slavic accent.

The girl's words were dry and raspy. Her voice broke on the name and her face crumpled into agony. Her emotions stumbled Steve and he caught them up against the stone wall.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he gasped under the weight of her grief.

The girl made an empty sound of hopeless loss and clawed at his uniform.

*Downstairs. Get him.*

"Alright. We'll bring Pietro with us. You need to keep your emotions mostly in your head so I can function," Steve told her.

She nodded weakly against his chest. Her body was spent but her will was strong. Steve took her mental guidance to the end of the hall, around a corner, and down some dark stairs. Bucky caught up with him and held out a plastic bottle of water he'd found in a supply room.

"Warm it first. She shouldn't have it cold," Steve told him.

Buck tucked the bottle into his leather top against his skin and followed Steve and the girl down the stairs.

"How do you know where we're going?" Buck asked.

"She's in my head. Yeah, I know it's shady. Lay off it, Buck. She's sick and grieving. She hates Hydra. She's no danger to us," Steve said.

"That's what she's got you thinking. You trust every starving, pretty face. Sure, pal, I'll follow your nads into a deep, dark dungeon. They can hang us up on hooks and do witchy things to us. It'll be fun," Buck snarked at him.

"Can it, Buck. It's not appropriate," Steve said.

Bucky flipped the lights on in the rudimentary medical facility. The girl gestured to a bank of drawers in the wall. When he brought her closer, she gestured to one. The temporary tag on the handle said Max, P

The girl turned her face to his chest and refused to look. Steve nodded to Buck. He turned his body so the girl couldn't see anything gruesome, then Bucky slid open the morgue cooler. Thankfully, there was a bag. Buck unzipped it and they saw a young man's face. He was robust and handsome, except for the pallor of death. There were autopsy incisions starting on his chest. Buck pulled the zipper back up so the intrusive cuts wouldn't show.

"I'm sorry, but you have to look to make sure we've got the right guy. It's a long way home and we don't want to make a mistake," Steve told her gently.

He turned so the girl could see, if she would. The sounds of her renewed, choking grief were enough confirmation, but she spoke in his mind again.

*It's Pietro. Bring him, please.*

"Get him, Buck. He's coming with," Steve said.
"Sure," Bucky said.

It was a grim job carrying a cold body and they both knew it. Steve started up the stairs so the girl wouldn't have to watch what Bucky did. On their way out of the fortress, Steve called for Sam's winter suit. He draped it over the girl before they got to the chill outside. Their path to the waiting quinjet would take them past some bodies, so Steve routed his steps another way.

No. Take me to him. There.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She didn't answer, but Steve felt a compelling urge, a building rage from the girl. She really wanted to see one particular body which lay in the snow. He brought her where she wanted to go. What could it hurt?

It was Strucker's remains, with a hole in the head where Sam had shot him. The girl made angry gurgling sounds and her hands pushed aside the white fleece of Sam's coat. The red glow surrounded her again, and this time it lit up her eyes. She screamed in rage and spread her fingers. Strucker's body flew apart in four directions, ripped by the force of the exhausted girl. Congealing blood smeared the snow in dark red streaks.

"Will ya lookit that?" Buck exclaimed.

"Shit," Steve muttered.

The girl had lost consciousness and fallen limp against him. Sam's coat sagged aside and Steve held it to her while he ran. She needed medical attention immediately. It likely was the last of what she had, whatever she'd done to punish Strucker's body.

"Another stray, Steve? I told you, you can't have a harem," Natasha teased him as he laid the girl's body on the med bench.

"Jokes later. She's barely alive. That's her brother," Steve told them as Bucky laid down the body bag in the rear of the jet.

He looked over to see Tony, Bruce and Thor examining Loki's scepter. He nodded at their success and the guys frowned at the girl's poor condition. Bruce left the scepter to come tend to the girl.

Natasha was working to get an IV into her, but she was so dehydrated her veins were collapsed. Bruce wiggled his fingers at the work. Natasha stepped back and let him try. Bucky held out the warmed water bottle.

"A little late now. It would have helped a few minutes ago," Buck said.

"No way I could have known she was going to do that and pass out," Steve agreed.

"You would have dangerously thinned her blood. She needs electrolytes. If I can get the IV… there," Bruce said with quiet satisfaction.

He reached up and squeezed the hanging IV bag to get fluids into her faster. Bruce guided Nat's hand to take over the task, then he searched in a bin for a vial of fluid.

"Get her secured to that table. We've got incoming," Clint warned them.

Sam buckled retaining straps across the girl's chest, hips and legs and they all held on to
something. Buck went and secured the body. Clint spun them up into the sky in a twisted flight pattern and kept pushing for altitude. Tony secured the scepter into a gear cradle and smiled at the test the quinjet was passing. Out the front view, they could see the sky getting darker. Stars appeared as the blue faded to black. Steve watched the proximity blips fall far behind. Whoever was curious about them was unable to follow.

"We have launch. Low orbit," Tony said.

"Was that necessary?" Steve asked.

The passenger cabin didn't feel any different than if they were in normal atmosphere, except there was less gravity.

"Unless you wanted us identified, followed and questioned, yes," Tony said.

"Fair enough," Steve said.

"Flying off into space makes it like it never happened?" Buck asked skeptically, "who was after us?"

"German flight ID. Military regulars, not Hydra. Germany has defensive airspace treaties with Sokovia," Clint explained.

Bucky laughed sarcastically. Steve knew Buck wasn't fond of German anything. It was a sentiment common to veterans of their era.

"It won't interfere with our job. Hydra already knows we're coming. Let's mix this up. We need to get to Bolivia. Go around the long way, come down in friendly airspace and drop her off at our upstate facility for treatment, then we head to South America. We can talk to the EU later," Steve said.

It was a long flight and strangely silent. The jet engines made no noise in attenuated atmosphere. Bruce did what he could for the girl and Natasha got blankets to hold in what meager body heat she was generating. Steve tapped Clint from the pilot's seat and learned how to navigate the quinjet in space. It was different than flying in atmosphere but Steve understood the adjustments. Tony stood by proudly and monitored how the systems functioned in a vacuum.

Tony encouraged Clint to take a break and he and Steve took them the rest of the way home. Or, almost home. The new Avengers facility in upstate New York wasn't completely ready yet. After being in space for a little while, Steve was glad to set foot on solid ground again. Spaceflight had been a dream of his as a boy, but he found he didn't like it much in reality.

Thor took the opportunity to call Heimdall for transport of the recovered artifact. Tony pouted at having Loki's scepter and its mysterious power source spirited away from any opportunity to examine it. Bruce distracted him with the readings he'd taken on the sly while Thor wasn't paying attention. Steve took the girl inside the new facility. The medical ward was ready, if not fully staffed. Bucky carried her brother's body inside and put it into the never-used morgue storage.

Steve and Natasha stood by the girl as she woke. Her eyes blinked in confusion, then she saw Steve standing beside her in the clean, modern med ward.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"I suppose I owe you that much," the girl said, "I'm Wanda."
"Wanda. I'm Steve. I don't have much choice but to trust you. We're going to help you recover. Do I have your word you won't hurt my people?" Steve asked.

"Will they not hurt me?" the girl asked.

Her throat was dry. Natasha handed her a small paper cup of water. Wanda hesitated, then took it. Steve felt her fatalistic attitude. She wasn't trusting. She was hollowed out by grief and didn't much care if she lived or died. If the water was poison, she would drink it anyway.

"They won't hurt you unless you force them to defend themselves. You're in America. New York. I'm asking you to stay on the grounds of this facility until we can get you immigration papers, if you want that," Steve said.

Wanda shrugged while she drank. Or she tried to. She was weak. Steve supported her hand as it shook. Then he set the paper cup aside, on a bedside table.

"I have to go. Give me your word you won't hurt my people," Steve insisted.

The girl tried a pitiful sneer as her head fell back on the pillow.

"I have no choice. I'm at your mercy. You should lock me in a cell if you don't trust me," she said, her accent somehow adding venom to her words.

"No. We don't do that. Your word, Wanda. I know you're capable. You're powerfully enhanced. I need your promise. I'm responsible for the welfare of these people," Steve pressured her.

A crisply uniformed nurse came to the bedside and sat with a cup of broth and a straw. Another nurse laid a warm blanket across Wanda's legs. The girl closed her eyes and nodded.

"You have my word, for what it's worth," she said.

"Thank you, Wanda. That makes me feel better," Steve smiled at her and touched her shoulder.

He turned to the staff.

"Get Doctor Kalfey here to attend her. No scans. Nothing intrusive. We can assess her enhancements later, when she's feeling better. Nurse Higgins, there are arrangements to be made for her brother, Pietro. Find out what she wants. Call a pastor if she needs one," Steve instructed.

He looked to Wanda one last time.

"Rest and get stronger. I'll see you in a few weeks. This is a secure facility. No one should bother you if you don't cause a fuss or draw any attention to yourself," Steve told her.

"Thank you, Steve," Wanda said.

The warmth of the blanket seemed to be already putting her to sleep, but the nurse was on standby, ready to pester her to take some broth.

He nodded and Natasha walked away with him.

"How do you know her word is worth anything? You saw what she's capable of. She'll only get stronger," Nat said as they walked back to the quinjet.

"Her word is worth as much as she wants it to be. This is a new beginning for her and she knows it. She's not evil. If she looks into the minds of the staff, she'll see they mean her no harm. We've got
work to do," he said as they strode into the jet.

Thor was returned from delivering the staff to Asgard.

"You put much trust in strangers," Thor said.

"A stranger is a blank slate. Better than an enemy," Steve pointed out.

They had a lot of work ahead of them. Natasha got them headed south while Clint slept. An hour after they were away from New York, Buck came to stand behind the co-pilot's seat at Steve's shoulder.

"How much of that motivational bullshit do you believe?" Buck asked him.

Steve smiled.

"Almost all of it. There's not much point to lying in front of our new friend. Our minds are easy for her to read. She only trusts me because she had a look in my head. She hates Tony," Steve said.

"Me? Why would she hate me? She's never met me," Tony wondered.

"I dunno. Let's get back to business. Bolivia is bio-weapons," Steve said.

"Right," Bruce agreed, "We'll need the hazard suits. Well, you guys will. I'm staying in the jet for this one."

Scientists were easy. They burned out the Bolivian Hydra research facility and disposed of the biological weapons they found there. Some of the staff surrendered easily, so Nick was going to determine if they could be convinced to work for more ethical enterprises.

Quezon City in the Philippines was the next stop on their Hydra hit list. It would have been a fairly routine hit, since it was mostly a combat training facility. But then Bucky cursed and pointed. Sam was ripped from the air and thrown against a brick wall. Natasha didn't fare much better. Steve ran to catch up with Bucky.

"Am I seeing two of them? Two Soldiers?" Steve asked.

"They're not birthday party clowns," Buck said as they ran to intercept before their teammates could be pounded into pulp.

"Tony, Thor, Clint, I need you to handle the regulars. Contain them in this city block if you can. Bruce, get out of the jet. Natasha and Sam need you as medic. Come get them. I know you can keep your cool," Steve said into the comms as he and Buck got between the punishing fists of the enhanced soldiers and their friends.

The locals were already running scared. They'd planned their attack for two in the morning partly because there would be fewer civilians around, and partly because that was their arrival time to the location. Most of the fleeing people on the streets were Hydra. Thor and Tony herded them back toward the center of the fight, around the building. Clint put away his long range weapons and instead did some work with his hands.

Steve and Bucky didn't have time to pay attention to anything after engaging with the enhanced soldiers. Steve had to be confident that his team would do as he needed them to. The pair of Winter
Soldiers that had been released from the facility weren't as fast as the first one they'd encountered, but they were brutal fighters. Only by standing back to back did Steve and Buck have any real chance to manage them. Guns were everywhere around them, as where knives and the hated electro-shock batons Hydra favored.

Steve managed to temporarily disarm one of the Soldiers with a chain, but then he was blocking bullets and punches with his shield again. The backside of the shield acted as a reflector, and Steve took a slug in the thigh as it ricocheted off his shield from a shot that was meant for Bucky. He had no time to tend to it. All they could hope for was that Tony and Clint would thin the ranks of their opponents so not as many bullets were flying around.

Buck grunted with effort and Steve felt him slam into his back.

"You alright?" he asked as he dodged a blow and knifed his shield up at the throat of the Soldier he was fighting. No luck.

"Fine," Buck gritted out.

Things weren't fine, but as long as Buck was snarky enough to gripe about it, they were better than dead. Buck was moving fast against his back. The unpredictability of being jostled around was both a help and a hindrance. It made Steve harder to hit, but he had to adjust his aim mid-fly to hit what he wanted. The randomness was bound to payoff sooner or later, if he could hold his ground for long enough. These enhanced Soldiers seemed tireless, driven by berserker fury rather than precision.

"They're shot full of adrenaline!" Buck strained.

Steve felt muffled blows through his back. Buck was having his ass handed to him. Much more of this and they'd have to risk breaking apart, maybe trading off opponents. Where the hell was Thor? Steve couldn't chance looking away from the albino-blond man who was kicking his ass.

"Then we wait them out, defense only. Don't try so hard. It'll metabolize and they'll tire, overexerted. Defense only, save your energy," Steve advised his partner.

"Fuckin hell!" Buck exclaimed.

"Buck," Steve fussed and jumped to keep his feet under him, then got his arm up to stop a knife stab that tried to get around his shield.

Bucky laughed, then had the breath pounded out of him. Steve had gotten a second wind since he'd decided to try defense only. He signaled to Buck, and Bucky ducked down to give him some room. Steve successfully slammed both Soldiers in the face with the edge of his shield and Buck crowed in triumph.

"Hamstrung the bastard," Buck said.

Steve saw an opportunity as the pale Soldier staggered back. He pulled his knife and jabbed up quickly, then retreated to defense again. The adrenaline Soldiers were tiring, slowing slightly. Steve had aimed for a carotid artery and was satisfied to see the deep red color of the blood. It would have been easy to hit the jugular veins, but not as useful. If these Soldiers were anything like he and Buck, it probably wasn't a fatal wound, despite the spurring blood. The pale Soldier was handicapped by holding a hand to the wound while he fought. He was still too tough to risk lowering the shield, but the weakness allowed Steve to get in a few more stabs, deep into the ribs, and one at the femoral for more bleeding.
His shield rang with angry blows. Buck wasn't at his back anymore. That worried him, but Buck sounded vicious and triumphant so it likely wasn't a problem. Steve fought defensively while he breathed deep and fast, loading his blood with oxygen. Then he opened his arms and went in for the kill.

He pummeled his opponent into a daze with the shield and all the speed and power he could muster, slashed deep across the gut with his knife to get the arms down defensively, dropped his shield, then brought up his sidearm and emptied the magazine under the jaw and into the brain. It took a little less than five seconds once he made his move. Parietal bone fragments and gray matter hit the brick wall across from him, then the limp body of the Soldier hit the pavement in the alley.

Steve ejected the empty magazine, replaced it with a full one, then holstered it on the way to pick up his shield. He spun around and checked to see how the battle was going. Thor, Clint and Tony stood watching. Buck was crouched on the ground, breathing heavily. Hydra agents were down all around them. Nothing was moving.

Iron Man clapped. It was a tinny sound with the metal gauntlets banging together. Thor smiled and helped Bucky up.

"How are Nat and Sam?" Steve immediately asked.

He had the shakes, still amped up and ready to fight. His senses were revved, and he checked everything, their surroundings, scents, the sound of sirens approaching, the feel of his injuries. Minor. He twitched his hands in an eager demand for more information. Too slow. Everything around him was happening too slowly. The red around the edges of his vision eased away as the microseconds ticked by and he waited for information.

"Tony! Report!" he demanded.

"You just asked me! They're gonna be alright. Calm down big daddy, game's over, you win," Stark said.

Clint stepped forward to grab him and get him going in the right direction. There wasn't much time to clear the site with the locals on the way. Steve stepped away from Clint's hand and lifted the dead body of the pale Soldier onto his shoulder. He didn't want anyone touching him right now, except maybe Buck or Thor. Bucky likewise took up his defeated opponent and hefted the body. They went inside and leapt up the stairs toward the roof of the building. The authorities were coming. Steve was willing to converse with them and supply information since the carnage had happened in their city. People had a right to know what was going on in their jurisdiction, but not until they could get clear and on their way to the next hit. There was no time to sit in offices, answer questions and do paperwork.

Buck paused halfway up the building, near the computer servers. He looked at Tony and the Iron Man suit went still and dark. Buck pulsed the building, then Tony rebooted his suit and they continued up to the roof. Natasha had her arm in a sling but she was working quickly to bring the jet online. Bruce wrapped a bandage around Sam's head and guided him to a seat. They eyed the fresh bodies while Clint took over the piloting.

Buck pushed Steve toward a seat. Steve reflexively shoved back, his instincts and Buck's proximity making him eager for more of a fight. Buck rebounded off the opposite wall and laughed. Tony looked on with wide eyes, wondering if they were about to have another super-soldier fight in the jet. Thor stepped between them.

"Cool your vigor, little brother," he advised pleasantly.
"I'm cool. Just felt good. Buck can take it," Steve said with a grin.

"Yeah, I can take it, but what I need to take is the slug outta your leg. Shut up and sit down, little britches," Buck told him.

"Sure, Buck. We got anyone who can manage an explanation to the locals?" Steve asked as Buck got the forceps to work on him.

"The local authorities are fluent in English. I will be happy to try my hand at diplomacy if you wish," Jarvis offered.

"Be my guest," Steve agreed.

Clint got them airborne and headed toward their next Hydra target.

"Find a quiet place and put us down for the night. They expect us to come in fast now. Probably have us timed to expect us at whichever base we hit next. Let's make em wait and sweat a little," Steve said while Bucky started digging in his leg.

Buck looked up at the deeper tone of his voice. Steve couldn't seem to stop smiling.

"Enjoying this, are ya?" Buck asked.

"I shouldn't be. That was sloppy. Sam and Nat are hurt. If we'd run tighter, there wouldn't be bodies lying around for the locals to see. Everything should have stayed inside the building. How much damage? Is anyone else hurt?" Steve asked.

Natasha watched him from her seat across the way beside Sam.

"We're fine, Cap. It was a little sloppy, but you get a B plus. Only a sprained elbow and a few bruises," Nat said.

"Not quite a concussion, but I don't heal as fast as some people," Sam grumped.

Everyone but Clint was sort of smiling at Steve. Bruce had his hand over the bottom half of his face, so it was hard to tell if he was smiling or frowning.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Oh, nothing," Tony said with light flippancy, "We'd started to think of you as a pencil-pusher and strategist. It's reassuring to see you can still kick ass when you take your Geritol."

He docked the Iron Man suit in its clamp and stepped out of it when it opened. Tony walked over and collected a rivulet of Steve's blood from the side of his face. He scraped it into a glass sample tube at the med station and added a liquid, then swirled it around. He was about to slip a diagnostic probe into it for sampling when Natasha took the tube from his hand and tossed it out the midship airlock.

"I was interested in that," Tony said pointedly.

"It's not yours to study. Be nice and you might get permission someday," Nat told him.

Steve smooched a kiss toward her. He was feeling saucy and he appreciated her stepping up to protect whatever secrets were in his blood after a hard fight. He could feel the work of endorphins and probably a high tide of testosterone in his mood. He felt great. Buck digging around in him pinched a bit, but he wasn't feeling as much pain as he should. Steve clunked his head back against
the wall and enjoyed the warm feeling surging in his arteries and veins. God, if he had Estrella here right now, he would…

Steve snapped his head up and shook it. He didn't need to think of that right now.

Thor smiled at him knowingly. Steve didn't bother hiding a grin. His face wouldn't behave. Thor respectfully turned away to distract Tony with questions about Loki's scepter. Steve let his arms rest in his lap, his legs sprawled in front of him. He turned to look to Buck when he sat two seats away.

"You alright? I know you took some hard hits," Steve said.

"Dislocated jaw, but I fixed it before you were finished dancing. Some bruises. It's nothing. Coulda been a lot worse. It's nice working with you again, Punk. We were good this time, but don't think part of it wasn't luck. Don't get cocky," Buck said.

Steve laughed.

"Yeah, I know. Get to the bathroom and take the edge off, will ya?" Buck said.

"Nah, I'm fine. I'm getting something to eat. You want somethin?" Steve wondered.

"I'll take a sandwich, sweetheart," Clint called out.


Steve used the smooth flight time to go to their food locker and make sandwiches for everyone who wanted one. He had too much energy to sit still. While his body calmed from the thrill of combat, he collected his thoughts. Natasha came around and took the food he made to bring it to their friends. She only had one hand to use because of her sprained elbow, but she was still helpful. He noted the slightly smoky look to her eyes. Then he pretended to ignore it. He didn't need any encouragement to misbehavior at the moment. Nat sat between Bruce and Sam to eat. Steve sat near Buck and stuffed his face. There was chocolate and beef jerky too, but the sandwich was great for now. Buck ate, then rested. Steve wondered if he was still healing from his time in Hydra captivity. He'd fought like a hellcat and won, so he was definitely up to snuff. It wasn't like Buck to take a catnap only a day into a mission.

Sam was sleeping too. Bruce looked more like he was meditating than sleeping. Tony argued quietly with Natasha about something. She looked unbothered by Tony's complaints. Steve left them alone and went to the cockpit.

"Calmed down yet?" Clint asked him.

"Getting there. I feel like an idiot, losing my head," Steve said.

He sat in the co-pilot's seat and enjoyed Clint's calmness.

"Happens to all of us, sometimes. If we're lucky," Clint amended.

A smile tightened the corners of his eyes at the memory of his own after-battle highs, then faded.

"Where're we going?" Steve wondered.

"About a hundred feet below sea level, out of the way of the shipping lanes," Clint said.
"Good idea. Mediterranean would be handy, local to our next hit," Steve said.

"Great minds," Clint agreed.

They flew on into the night, racing the time zones so that time seemed to stand still. Steve thought of the world as a treadmill beneath them. Their airspeed was almost right for that.

"We'll set down soon. You should rest, boss. Best thing to do when you're coming down off it, if your woman's not around," Clint said dryly.

"Geez, everyone's got sex on the brain," Steve murmured.

"And you don't?"

"If I do, I'm trying to be civil about it," Steve said.

He smiled to take any sting out of the words. As they watched, their night time perspective of the world slowly rolled under them until the Mediterranean Sea came into view. Clint navigated a path away from the lights of the major cities on the coast and brought them in low. Steve wanted to see the quin set down in the water and learn how to set and maintain depth. Thor was also interested. He came to stand behind them.

The controls were simple and intuitive once Clint showed them.

"I have no need of sleep. Jarvis will keep me company while you mortals rest," Thor said.

The cold, dark waters shut out any light they could have seen on the surface. The depth indicator showed thirty meters when they'd reached their resting point. Steve could feel the wing turbines pulsing to hover them in the same spot. It felt muffled and loud at the same time. A spike of anxiety took hold of him, then he pushed it away. This was fine, he assured himself. They weren't sinking and nothing was wrong. Thor and Jarvis were in control and he should go rest like everyone else was.

The mild anxiety attack caused by being underwater served to sap the last of the combat rush from his body. Steve went to the back. He checked that the Soldier's bodies weren't regenerating. He zipped them into body bags and washed his hands. Then he allowed himself to rest. Before he closed his eyes, he noted that Nat and Tony fought like cats and dogs, but they also slept well together. They were propped against each other's backs and dozing fitfully. It was impressive to see Tony allowing himself to touch anyone but Pepper. Steve felt good about his team working together so well.

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They landed near the edge of the Iranian desert. Maria insisted vehemently that they stay cloaked and under the protection of the jet until after the sun set, and then they had to time their movements between passes of satellite surveillance. It would be easy to call friendly fire onto themselves by accident. They knew the United States monitored this area heavily because U.S. intelligence had been very helpful in finding this Hydra location.

Everyone was well rested by the time they could hop under cover of night toward where they needed to be. Buck was concerned about what he'd seen on satellite images and insisted they not go storming in. One of the remaining two Winter Soldiers was here. Buck's caution made them curious about his history with the enhanced female.
"She's in there, Steve. I'm going to snipe her. Give me time and cover my position. She keeps sticking her head out. I'll get her," Buck insisted.

"We've got the manpower. You're sure we can't go in and finish this quickly?" Steve asked again.

"This one's heavy, pal. She's the best I've seen in combat tactics, good at evasion and drawing it out into a protracted entrenchment. We can't afford that, considering the satellite schedule overhead. She's strong, hell at hand-to-hand. It's better not to tangle with her if you want to stand in front of a priest with your girl anytime soon. Let me take her out, then feel free to go in and clear the rest of it," Buck advised.

"Alright," Steve agreed.

Before sunrise, they got Buck equipped and in position on the ridge above the cave opening. Buck had picked a very specific spot to setup. If he couldn't get the Soldier from the morning shadows, he'd have to carefully retreat through midday and try again in the afternoon. Clint and Steve knew where to perch to cover him so nothing could sneak in behind Buck and take him out.

Buck insisted the female soldier was sharp and observant. If any of them made a mistake and were detected, they'd catch hell from the serum-enhanced woman, from the thousand Iranian Hydra fighters at her disposal, from the Iranian army, or from the United States military and the president as well as from the United Nations. This was at least as diplomatically risky as their North Korean hit, maybe more so. Tony was on strict orders to not so much as play music in his suit while they waited.

It was cold at night and sweltering during the day. Buck had his best rifle and Steve had his second-best. Clint had his arrows. They waited. And waited. Nothing happened by the time the sun was getting high, so they began their carefully choreographed creeping move across the terrain to get into position for the afternoon shadows.

It wasn't easy to keep his attention focused during the long wait. Steve marveled at Clint and Buck's dead silence through the comms. He could hear them breathing, but that was it. He kept his eyes on his job. Buck's security depended on it. The success of their operation depended on it. Even Tony was observing careful silence.

Steve heard Buck's breathing speed up a little, then slow way down. His own breathing needed regulating to keep it calm.

"Shhhh," Buck whispered through the comms on a smooth exhale, as if he sensed Steve getting amped up.

A shot rang out, close and loud through their communication system, then an instant later in the actual distance. Buck hummed a satisfied sound, low and pleased.

"Move in," Steve ordered his team.

The Hydra base was a warren of rough cave tunnels. It was like flushing rabbits out of brush. Many of the combatants were running scared, demoralized that their goddess-protector had been killed before their eyes. Tony took a particular vengeance in using his sensors to probe the deep caverns and find every last man who tried to hide from them. He gassed them out and Sam and Natasha were like wraiths, cutting the fighters down as they emerged from the darkness. Bruce didn't think it was sporting so he hung around the periphery with Thor and kept the fight contained around the small canyon outside the cave system.
Steve observed the behavior of the milling men trapped between them. Some of the combatants were unarmed and appeared to serve no purpose. Of those who had weapons and ammunition remaining, almost all of it was being expended wildly, taking down their comrades in untrained fear more effectively than targeting the Avengers. It was the kind of mess Steve didn't like to see. Most of these people didn't belong here.

Many of the survivors were wide-eyed and terrified. They were a superstitious people. Clint and Buck had come down to help him sort the mess. Steve hardly needed his shield. Buck took a graze to his arm, but it wasn't enough to make him flinch. Bruce was right. It wasn't sporting. Even Clint seemed to agree. Steve felt dirty doing things this way, but the job needed to be finished. They divided the remaining Hydra combatants into sheep and wolves. They drove off the unarmed sheep who were nothing more than local mercenary fighters who'd been working for food. What remained were hardened Hydra veterans standing out in the open and surrounded. The men were outmatched and their weapons were expended.

Steve checked the time and glanced at the cloudless sky.

"Buck, take the woman's body and get to the jet. Stay out of sight. We've got a satellite due overhead in five minutes," Steve told him.

"Yessir," Buck said.

He bent to make sure the Soldier was thoroughly dead, then put the body over his shoulder and ran to the cover of the quinjet. He stopped along the way and picked up his rifle.

There were twenty-three Hydra operatives left standing, waiting under the evening sun. Some of them were locals, some of them weren't. A few looked to Steve for mercy. Most of them were beyond asking for it and stared at nothing.


"Steve," Sam protested.

He didn't like how this was looking. If Steve had to do it, he wanted to share the burden.

"Go," Steve told him.

"Sir," Sam said, and he went.

Steve waited two minutes for his team to get to the jet. Natasha and Clint remained beside him. They had more than enough ammunition. It was cruel to make the men wait any longer. Even if they were enemy combatants, they were deserving of some human dignity.

Steve nodded. The sights of their weapons hadn't moved away from the waiting men, so it was only a matter of finishing the job. In the span of a few seconds, twenty-three more Hydra operatives lay dead in the dry, sandy dirt along with those who had died earlier in the skirmish.

"Go ahead, Tony," Steve said.

A deep rumble from in the caverns grew into the much closer crashing of stone. The far desert collapsed over the exploded cavern system and dust spewed out to cover the bodies in front of them.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked for confirmation.
"No life remains, except for those whom you allowed to flee on foot," the AI assured him.

"Let's move on," Steve said.

Clint and Nat ran with him to the jet.

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Siberia more than made up for Iran's lack of an actual battle. There were skilled Hydra operatives left scattered around the world, but it seemed many of them had fallen back to their last operational facility. Calling the Siberia outpost operational was generous. The place had been mothballed for decades, with only a cryo-lab still in use. It made for hard fighting against men and women who had nowhere else to go and nothing left to lose.

Steve thought if they'd had any intelligent leadership left, they should have stayed scattered across the globe rather than gathering here. It's what he would have had his people do if they were being gutted. But something was here to give them orders to act against their personal interests.

"You know this is a trap," Natasha told him.

Clint looked on as he geared up. He didn't need to speak because Nat had spoken for him.

"I do," Steve agreed.

He checked the weather one last time. It was dark outside the jet and in the midst of a howling gale. Bitterly cold, dry snow was drifting up against the windward side of the quinjet. It would be over an hour until the meager gloom of daylight brightened things any. Steve observed his team was sealing into their cold weather gear. Exposed skin in this climate would result in quick injury. Clint was ready. He spent the few moments until they deployed wrapping white foam tape around a rifle.

Natasha was in her element, as if she'd dressed for this many times. Sam looked displeased but ready for action. Bruce had his bare skin and Tony had his suit. A glance at Buck showed a firmly set jaw, even under the protective gear. Buck had chosen black instead of white, and he was more lightly shielded against the cold. He was just about as eager to get out into the cold as Steve, but all of them were eager to finish their jobs.

"Unless they have summoned the titans, we will defeat them. If a trap waits for us, let us smash it into disarray and lay it open for you, Captain," Thor said confidently.

He prodded Bruce's shoulder with his hammer.

"Yeah, sure," Bruce said.

Steve knew Bruce was tired and heart-weary. While the Hulk reveled in the fighting, Bruce became more and more despondent on long missions. In working to help Steve, he had no choice but to ride along with the Hulk. Steve intended to give him a long stretch of down time after this. Bruce was a gentler soul, a scientist. He'd never asked for this kind of use and Steve was thankful for what grudging duty he served.

"There's going to be another Winter Soldier here. The last and worst one. If he gets his hands or his brain on any of us other than Thor or the Hulk, we're dead," Buck told them.

Steve looked around, willing to let any of his teammates sit this one out. None of them chose that
option. He prayed he didn't lose any of them today. Proximity sensors showed the Hydra agents were waiting patiently for them inside the shelter of their base, though they surely knew the Avengers had arrived. Steve nodded to his team and everyone seated their eye protection into place. He tapped the rear hatch and Jarvis lowered it for them.

"Hulk, you're up. Lots of reinforced concrete. Go smash!" Steve said, and they all deployed according to plan.

The cold on Bruce's bare skin was enough to make the Hulk appear. Thor flew up above the facility and located two rear escapes. His first task was to melt the exits shut with lightning and bury them in rubble so Hydra couldn't get out and circle around behind them.

Clint disappeared and Sam flew above Natasha, Buck and Steve as they ran. Tony illuminated the defenses arrayed at the front of the base just in time to watch the Hulk smash into them. Thor's lightning lit the place up on a broader scale.

Manned gun turrets emerged from the snow and tracked them as they ran. Steve took a bullet to the calf and Natasha stumbled. Bucky caught her up and threw her ahead of the gunfire. Ricochet sparks glanced bright off of Sam's wings, then the gun turrets stopped firing. Tony and Sam had taken them out of commission before they could do much real damage.

Hydra operatives were expending hundreds of rounds of ammunition against the Hulk as he tore his way through concrete and into the fortifications at the front of the base. Steve didn't know why they bothered. That never worked. Finally, they got smart and turned their weapons on the approaching fighters, but Hydra's numbers were already dwindling.

Steve was in the lead, using his shield against the worst of the incoming while Bucky and Nat fired from his exposed side. Though Steve wasn't a shooter by trade, he was able to see and aim well enough while he ran to thin the aggressors on his side of the approach with a Stark modified mini-gun. It was awkward to manage his shield and the mini-gun, but they needed the firepower. As soon as its ammo feed was empty, he dropped it and ran on. Now that the incoming rounds were thin enough to be less likely to hit him, Steve took a chance at throwing his shield.

The body armor in his uniform worked when it caught the bullets as long as a high caliber rifle wasn't being used. He could tell by the sounds that they were no longer using the kind of weapons which would get through his body armor. They'd foolishly used all their higher caliber rounds on the Hulk. Steve felt rounds hit his helmet and the armor panels on his body, arms and legs. He took a hit in the side under his arm, but it was a stinging annoyance instead of fatal. The shield returned to him again and again, as long as he was careful with his throws. He made a mistake in the last minutes before they closed distance and his shield hit a moving target at the wrong angle. It brought down the aggressor, but failed to return to him.

The Avengers finished the Hydra operatives who had been defending the entrance. Thor landed on the roof and helped Hulk tear into the place more quickly. Steve used the noisy moment to assess his teammates.

"Bullet lodged in my ribs. I can fight through," Nat reported.

"The wings are down for now. Wouldn't be much use inside the building anyway. I'm good to go," Sam said.

"I'm good," Buck said.

Thor and Hulk were loudly busy and having a great time. Tony was hovering above, waiting,
shining a light on things.

"What about you, Cap?" Sam asked.

"I've got a few bee stings. Ready for action," Steve said.

Clint was silent on the comms. That was expected.

Steve found his shield and flipped it into his hand. He crouched low and motioned for his team to do the same. He clamped the shield onto his back and turned to address his people.

"Soon as we're in-" he said.

A faint sound caught Steve's ear and he only had time to begin a hand gesture.

The concrete fortification at the front of the base exploded into high velocity chunks and shards. Thor and the Hulk were thrown through the air like the rest of them. Steve had already started a leap toward Sam and Natasha. His body slammed into them and rolled them under him, but the shield on his back caught the worst of the debris.

Buck was up and shooting to meet the outpouring of Hydra fighters. Steve's ears felt hot and blood ran into his right eye. He hoped his teammates weren't heavily injured as he gripped them by their winter gear and threw them away from the line of combat. He knew their nervous systems needed a moment to overcome the shock of the concussive blast. Steve stood a few feet away from Buck and held the area around them while Tony provided cover from above. A few combatants fell inexplicably, so Steve knew Clint was helping from a distance.

Detonating the front of their defense wall would have worked to shorten the battle if Steve hadn't just been thinking it's exactly what he would have done. Instead, Nat and Sam shook off the shock and their wounds and joined the fight. Hulk and Thor were stinging mad and helped tear into the emerging aggressors.

There was less gunfire because everyone was fighting close. It made for dangerous conditions, the worst kind of fight, when everyone was surrounded in melee mixed with knives and the opportunistic gunshot. These were mostly skilled fighters. Steve relied on brute strength when he could simply for the speed of the kills. His teammates needed his support and he didn't have time to fight fair. Steve and Buck took some damage because they weren't very concerned with defense, but it got them to the aid of their friends more quickly.

Buck worked with Sam and Steve turned his back to Nat's. Steve stumbled from a hard blow to his ribs, but when he looked there was only a regular operative there, already falling down from Nat's knife work. They had an opportunity to finally move into the base, so they took it. Steve briefly surveyed the field of fallen Hydra before Tony's illumination moved inside with them.

More hard fighting took its toll on them. The space inside the base was wide open like an aircraft hangar. Steve's team didn't need to be told to seek more defensive fighting positions around the perimeter where they wouldn't be open targets for sniping. Thor and the Hulk tore deeper into the more delicate structures of the building to make way for Tony to hit strategic infrastructure targets and destroy scientific equipment. There were fewer tough fighters inside. Scientists had retreated here with the last of Hydra, and that made no sense.

Steve recalled Clint's warning at the beginning of their operation a few days ago. There were no incidental hotdog salesmen in this place. Everyone here was loyal to the death to Hydra. Steve ripped through them, taking blows and stabs and the occasional gunshot, most of which hit his
shield or armor. Natasha danced in front of him like a second set of arms and legs. They made a beautiful spider which stung any prey that came to it.

Their side of the entrance chamber was almost clear when Sam's voice made a distressed sound on the comms. It had a chilling effect on Steve's enjoyment of the battle. There was no way they could go to assist until the last of the fight on their side was finished.

"Wilson's down. Non-fatal, but he's not getting up anytime soon," Bucky said.

"Put him in a defensible position and give him all your firepower," Steve said.

"Done," Buck told him.

"Sam, are you gonna make it?" Steve asked as he helped Natasha take down the last of their opponents.

"I'll be here, Cap. Barnes left me loaded for bear, I just can't walk on this leg. I'd slow y'all down. Pick me up on the way out, if you don't mind," Sam said.

They could hear the pain in his words, but he was clear-headed and able to defend himself.

Steve and Nat took up positions to wait for Buck to make his way around and join them. They could hear Thor, Tony and the Hulk busting deeper into the base ahead of them. Occasionally a Hydra agent would come running out toward them. Buck sniped and dropped one as he was coming to them.

"This stinks. Where's the last Soldier?" Buck said.

"I thought it was going well," Natasha said dryly.

She was catching her breath. Her hand pressed to her side, and came away bright red on her white snow suit and glove. Steve had his goggles up on his forehead. She could see the arch of his eyebrow under the edge of his face protection.

"I'll be fine," she assured him.

There was a non-specific sound on the comms. Bucky and Steve looked to Nat again.

"Clint," she said quietly.

"Cap, there's nothing here. We're done. The place is cleaned out," Tony told them.

"No cryo-chamber?" Steve asked.

"Not back here. Only the ones up front. I already checked those. They've been collecting dust for months," Tony confirmed.

"Shit," Steve said under his breath.

Buck had a brief thought of Estrella's cousin Jesse, but things were too tense to make jokes right now.

Again, the non-specific sound came through the comms.

Natasha turned to go back outside. The sky was starting to pale toward morning twilight, but it wouldn't reach full daylight out there. Not this time of year and not with a blizzard.
"Romanoff, behind me," Steve said.

He knew what was happening. The hard hit he'd taken outside, the man who had fallen to Natasha's knife. That was their Winter Soldier. He was already outside. With Clint.

Steve motioned his team behind him. Thor came to stand beside him, refusing to stay in the rear.

"I don't have time for this, Thor. I know you're tough. This one's smart and we don't know what he wants. Watch my back, keep the others safe, and stay out of my way," Steve told him.

"As you wish, Captain," Thor agreed.

"Jarvis, is he out there?" Steve asked.

"I have no sensors outside, Captain. My processor in the quinjet has been destroyed. I have rerouted via satellite through Mister Stark's suit," Jarvis said.

Steve felt like cursing but he had no time for personal indulgences.

"Thor, get Sam and stay close to our more vulnerable friends. Tony, get outside and get high. I need you and Jarvis as eyes. Move fast. I don't know what he's armed with. Hulk!" Steve said.

The Hulk strode forward, looking mean and ready to do some more smashing. He looked eagerly to the Captain. The wind gusts blowing in from the ruined front wall rustled the hairs on his green skin, but it didn't raise goosebumps. Hulk thumped his chest and chomped his square, white teeth.

"No smashing. We need the jet to get home. There might be a bad man in the jet. I need you to go get the bad man out of the jet. No smashing," Steve made his instructions repetitive and very clear.

"Smash the bad man?" Hulk asked hopefully.

"No, not if he's in the jet. We need the jet unsmashed. Come on, Hulk, we'll go get him together," Steve said.

"Puny Captain," Hulk complained.

"I know. You can protect me. Let's go," Steve said.

"Steve," Bucky protested.

"Buck, get lost," Steve told him.

"Understood, Cap," Bucky said.

While Steve and Hulk moved to the blown-out entrance, Buck started taking clothes off. Natasha frowned at him.

"Tony, talk to me," Steve said as they stepped outside.

"I can't see crap. I can't even see Barton. Temperatures are too low for infrared. Anything with body heat is holding it in, or has already given it up. Its white-out conditions on visual. I'm useless," Tony said.


Mission parameters had shifted in Steve's head. As an effective Hydra base, this place was dead.
They were done here. He now had to get his team safely back inside the jet and out of here. He wanted to get a kill on that last Winter Soldier, but getting his team to the relative safety of the jet was priority. If the last Soldier was as dangerous as Buck said, it would take all of their skill and some luck on top of that.

Steve ran toward the jet with the Hulk loping at his side. It would be easy for the Soldier to snipe him, so he kept his vitals between the Hulk and his shield. As they watched in the slowly brightening gloom, the quin's running lights flickered on, then failed. There was definitely someone in the jet making a mess of the electronics.

The Hulk roared at the outrage of someone messing with their ride and took off running the rest of the way.

"No smashing!" Steve reminded him as he ran through the hip-deep snow to keep up.

Hulk roared again and stomped into the back of the jet. Steve winced as the jet wiggled under his weight. Another roar echoed in the tinny confines of the quinjet, then a body was thrown out of the open rear hatch.

Fifty-caliber rifle fire tore across the snow-blown space. If Steve didn't already have his shield up, he'd have been hurt badly. Even in a mid-air toss, the Soldier was able to see him, target and operate the heavy gun.

"Got him!" Tony said in triumph and fired a volley of incandescent missiles at the Soldier.

Hulk ran out the back of the jet and closed on the Soldier, pounding his fists in the snow and smashing at the bad man as he fled. He'd dropped the .50 cal and disappeared into the snow. Hulk got in the way of Iron Man's missiles and the Soldier escaped like a mouse in tall grass.

"Damnit, Hulk, I had him!" Tony yelled.

Hulk flailed in frustration and roared at Tony.

"Quiet!" Steve yelled over the sound of the wind and their comms.

This was going bad and people were going to get hurt if he didn't get control of the situation immediately.

"I want Banner in the jet. Thor, get the team in the jet, stay close. Tony, stay high and cover us as you can. Radio silence, starting now," Steve instructed.

Steve's mind was sinking into his opponent's perspective. He saw what the other Soldier wanted. He knew how this was going to have to end. There were two bargaining chips Steve could remove from the table, and he intended to do so. He had to get his people in the jet and the jet in the air.

Any moment now, the Soldier would potentially be close enough to hit him. With the last Winter Soldier using the deep snow as cover, it made the snow into the equivalent of shark infested waters. They had no choice but to wade through it. Steve moved closer to where Thor was escorting Natasha, who was supporting a limping, hopping Sam. Blood trailed over the snow from Sam's open leg wound. Thor had his hammer spinning, his stance braced and ready to strike. He stayed near his vulnerable teammates. Steve knew Thor was trying, but he wouldn't be fast enough.

Steve circled close to them. He needed all his senses as sharp as he could get them. Steve ripped off his goggles. He tossed aside the balaclava which warmed his neck and face so he could hear and see everything, feel every shift of wind or sound. The cutting wind was so cold it felt scalding
hot. He knew that meant cell damage, but it needed to be done. He would heal, but Sam or Nat might not.

There was nothing exact, but Steve could feel the hit coming. Hairs all over his body lifted, but it was Natasha who went down, not him. Thor yelled impotently, then went silent as he saw Steve's head turn, tracking where Nat was being dragged away under the snow. Steve leapt ahead of the slight hump in the snow. He stabbed his hands deep and felt Natasha thrashing and kicking, fighting to get free. The Soldier had her by the foot. Steve ripped Natasha's leg from his grip, then held onto him while he reached for his sidearm with his other hand.

Natasha wasn't a fool to wait around. She removed herself from the situation. It was harder for her to move through the deep snow because she was shorter and not as strong, but she got to Sam while Steve was seeking a shot on an unseen moving target.

It was almost hopeless. Steve decided to waste no bullets. Even if he hit the Soldier, it wouldn't do much harm. He waved furiously at his team, for them to get to the jet. He kept his senses alert, watching, listening. The Hulk roared one last time, then collapsed in the jet as a shivering, miserable Bruce. Thor hauled Sam and Natasha into the jet and stood in the rear hatch to defend while they worked on getting airborne. The hatch had been forced open by brute strength and it might not close to protect them.

Part of his goal was accomplished, so Steve stood aside from the jet. He could hear Tony's suit up high and he could see his team in the jet working to get it airborne.

"What do you want? Face me like a man and bargain for it!" Steve shouted out to wherever the last Soldier was.

The wing turbines started to spin and the jet's running lights came on. That was a relief, but it wasn't the end. They weren't safely away yet. Nat was working on wiring repair and Sam followed her instructions from the pilot's seat. Bruce stood guard with Thor at the rear hatch as they took off.

"I want you dead. You and the other one. Where is the Asset?" said a deep voice behind him. He had a vague Scandinavian accent.

"Ah!" it warned.

Steve was about to turn and face his opponent but he felt something stabbed deep in his neck. The numbness from cold had kept him from feeling it at first, but there was a needle in the side of his neck, a fist holding the syringe, a thumb poised on the end of the plunger.

"You know what this is, Rogers?"

"I have the feelin you're gonna tell me," Steve said.

The cold was sinking into his exposed skin as they stood there and the quinjet gained altitude, beyond the height he knew he could jump. Steve felt like smiling, so he did. God, but this guy was predictable. The brainy brute behind him was likely the fastest, strongest smartest man in the world, but he had an ego on him. He just had to monologue. Which gave Steve's friends time to get away to safety.

"We've found the antidote to Erskine's serum. You will stay here with me. Let your little friends fly away. I don't need them. Now where is Barnes?" the Soldier asked him with false politeness.

"He's around somewhere. You'll probably see him soon," Steve said.
"He cannot defeat me alone. You'll be no help to him without your strength," the Soldier said.

Steve felt a spurt of cold fluid working its way down the veins in his throat. It warmed to his internal body temperature, but he knew he'd been injected with something. Was it in his head, or did the wind already feel colder? Nah, that wasn't possible. The guy was messing with his head.

"It doesn't matter. I knew this was coming. I sacrificed myself for my team so they could get away. If I live or if I die, they go free," Steve gave a careless shrug, "I'll die happy, knowing they'll hunt you wherever you go. My people will learn your tactics, they'll see your signature in all your moves, and they'll hunt you til they get you. That will be the end of Hydra and my goals accomplished."

Steve waved the jet away, told them to fly off home with hand signals. They didn't. Natasha turned the craft and deployed the autocannon.

"I'll cut you both down before I leave you here with him, Cap. You know we can't let him keep your body," Natasha projected her voice over the exterior comm.

Steve rolled his eyes. The storm and the jet's turbines blew up so much snow, he couldn't see anyway. This was getting ridiculous. Where were-?

Buck burst from the snow behind them and a single shot rang out.

The view from inside the jet was tense. Before Clint finally rose to take his shot, Sam and Natasha watched Steve's exposed skin going frost-white from the cold. The last Winter Soldier held him with nothing but a needle and a hand on the other side of his neck so he couldn't get away. They'd already watched him partially depress the plunger. Before Clint sniped him and Barnes got control of the syringe, more of the substance was injected into Steve.

Bucky carefully withdrew the half-full syringe from Steve's neck and pulled him away from the downed Soldier. He didn't like how stiff and unresponsive Steve was. Clint staggered up from the snow, trudged over, and emptied two more rifle rounds into the head of the Soldier. Between them, they got Steve and the last Soldier's remains on board the damaged quinjet.

Tony swooped inside and used a grapple cable to force the rear hatch closed.

Bucky handed the syringe and its contents to Bruce. Thor rechecked to be sure the four bodies of the Winter Soldiers were not regenerating, then he put the last one in a bag.

Steve's bleary, blurry vision watched while Thor completed the task. He hurt, but it was important that the mission was complete and all his people were on board and headed home. Thor nodded at him in reassurance. Steve couldn't focus anymore. It didn't matter because their work was done. His eyes felt dry and damaged so he closed them.

Bucky hauled him onto the med bench and started stripping him for examination.

"Buck," Steve mumbled through parched, bleeding lips.

He felt cold and numb outside, but fever-hot inside. Something was happening. It was something in his tissues, in his blood. Steve had a moment to consider what life would be like without the serum which made him strong, then he stopped worrying about it. There was probably nothing Bruce could do to stop the anti-serum with their limited resources. Pain dulled his mind and consumed his consciousness.

"What took you so long?" Natasha asked Clint.
"I was out. Bastard found me first and tried to kill me. I played dead, then I almost died for real," Clint said.

He slid into the pilot's seat Nat left for him. Natasha pulled at his torn coat until she found the deep wound in his side. It was stuffed with bio-foam and stabilized, but Clint had a lot of blood on his winter gear.

"Tony, I need you up here," Nat called.

Tony left the Iron Man suit standing in the back holding the hatch shut. When he saw what Nat indicated, he took the co-pilot's seat.

"You gonna make it, Barton?" he asked.

"Sure, Stark. Just make sure we get home, and maybe have medical ready for me and Cap," Clint said.

He assessed the ability of the electrically crippled jet. They could get home, they'd just have to go slower and navigate by analog instruments.

Steve's world was becoming very small. He was only aware of what was happening within his skin. He thrashed in an attempt to get away from the pain, but it did no good. The pain was inside of him.

"What are you doing?" Bruce asked.

"Hold him. If he's going to de-serum, I have to get the bullets out of him now while he's still got any healing ability left," Bucky said.

"I will restrain him. Banner, you should help Samuel," Thor told them.

Nat was already working to stop the bleeding in Sam's torn leg. It was a simple injury but it needed some treatment so it wouldn't free-bleed all the way home. Bruce worked to get Sam stabilized and medicated against the pain.

"Help Cap," Sam said.

They turned to watch Thor press Steve down with a hand on his bare chest. He spoke soothingly to him and held his arm out of the way while Bucky dug just below his armpit to retrieve a bullet. Steve coughed and reddish pink foam welled at his lips.

"You're in his lung," Nat warned.

"I know. Get to work on his other side," Buck said.

Bruce angled the light for Nat and rolled Steve's body so they could dig lower between his ribs around on his back side. Dark brownish-red blood ran from the entry wound.

"Kidney," Bruce said.

"Uh-huh," Nat agreed.

"Uh-huh," Nat agreed.

"Calf muscle is fine, best if we get the rest of his gear off him so we can assess," Bruce said.

They stripped Steve down to his shorts. The bullets came out, but his face and neck had cold damage. No one understood what was happening inside of him. Something was certainly going on
because he was unresponsive and there was no explanation for it other than what he'd been injected with.

"Steve!" Buck demanded and shook his shoulder, "Tell me what's happening in there, pal."

Steve didn't respond. His tight grimace of pain looked impenetrable to outside stimulus. They'd seen his eyes were damaged, so it was no surprise he kept them closed, but he wasn't responding to their words.

"Steven, what ails you?" Thor tried demanding from him.

"His world's on fire. Cellular destabilization. Immunological chaos. He's not breathing. We've got to get his airway open," Bruce said.

Whatever was happening, Steve was still strong. Thor had to force his head back and Buck had to put a steel sheath between his teeth before Bruce could intubate him or he would have bitten through the tube.

His breaths came in infrequent, pained gusts. Soon as Thor let go of his head, Steve curled into himself again. While Thor and Bucky watched him helplessly, Bruce put a tiny drop of the anti-serum agent onto a slide and looked at it under a microscope. Tony made a decision and flew them toward Amsterdam rather than home. Serious help for his friends was closer there.

"Natasha has a bullet in her side," Tony said in a tattling tone, as if Nat should be ashamed for tending to others while she was injured.

Bruce left the microscope since it wasn't helping any. He did the brief bit of digging and bandaging which Natasha required. She tolerated the fuss, then went to sit with Sam. They waited as their friends suffered through what only time could cure.

Bucky wouldn't leave Steve.

Thor looked him over.

"You were also injured from the cold. Dress yourself for warmth. He will not die, James. If he withstood the original serum process from a starting point of weakness, then he will withstand the opposite journey from a place of strength," Thor told him.

Buck didn't like the sound of that, but he got some clothes onto his hide. It had been useful to get pale and blend into the snow while stalking the last Soldier, but his skin felt like it had frozen and now wanted to peel off. He hurried back to watch Steve.

Thor was probably right. Steve wouldn't die. He couldn't. He just couldn't. But boy, he was gonna be pissy if he had to live as a regular guy from now on. Buck looked over at Bruce, who was curled over the microscope again, searching for secrets in the anti-serum agent. There was hope for anything, as long as Steve stayed alive.

Natasha tended to Clint when he lost consciousness and Tony piloted them the rest of the way to the safe haven of Amsterdam. Bucky and Thor stood beside Steve at the med bench. Before they landed, his body seemed to relax some and his breathing became more regular. His skin flushed a healthy color under the frost damage. Buck put a hand to Steve's chest.

His heartbeat was strong and regular, his temperature rising.

"Beat that, mutherfuckers," Bucky grinned, "Ya can't keep my boy down, no way, no how."
Bruce heard him and came over.

"Immune response. He's fighting it off. He'll probably be alright," Bruce said.

He smiled too. They needed some good news after the beating they'd taken.

"Cap's winning the internal battle? Did we expect anything less?" Tony asked.

"As I have said many times, he is mighty," Thor affirmed.

Natasha sighed and slumped in relief. Sam was already passed out against her from the pain meds.

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Tony had connections. Steve regained consciousness in a very exclusive hotel. Clint was being treated for an abdominal injury which likely would have killed most people. With Tony's access to medical specialists in Amsterdam, he was expected to fully recover with time. Sam's leg was sutured and on the mend, though he winced while he walked. Steve was anxious to get home.

"Keep your ass in bed. You don't wanna worry your girl by showing up with unhealed bullet wounds and the skin peeling off your face. Give it another few days and let Clint get his feet under him, ya inconsiderate douche," Bucky hassled him.

Steve felt he'd had enough convalescence to last him a lifetime but when he tried to get up he had an asthma attack. The fact he was having one bothered him more than the wheezing itself. The wheezing and difficulty breathing was old and familiar. Buck recorded him on his phone and laughed instead of helping him. Maybe Buck had a point. He'd thought he was recovered from the partial de-serum, but maybe not quite yet.

Lying back against his pillows and calmly controlling his breathing felt much better than the panicky feeling he used to have as a kid. He could tell Erskine's serum was still at least partially active in him by the way his body could tolerate low oxygen conditions until the asthma attack passed. It was reassuring and let him know his prospects of a full recovery were good. The way Buck laughed at him, but still watched him carefully until his breathing was back to normal made him feel warm inside. In their friendship, Buck's actions had always been more true than his words or his pranks.

Steve lay in a room fit for a medieval king and resented every minute of it. When he complained enough, they let him go visit Clint and Sam. Clint could sit up to play cards, but he wasn't ready to move yet. That tempered Steve's impatience. Given another day's time and healing, he was well enough to go with Tony to oversee the incineration of the four Winter Soldier bodies in a local lab, then Buck hustled him back to bed or to play cards with Clint at their vaguely castle-like hotel.

Clint's doctor said it would be two more days before they could travel. That gave Steve and Bucky plenty of time to scrub off their top layers of cold-damaged skin in the luxurious bathroom of their suite. It gave Steve plenty of time to think.

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"Clint's gonna be pissed you're doing this without him," Tony said from beside him.

Steve slowly turned his head. He felt dizzy, like the world was spinning. That was a good thing. No, it was great. It would be perfect if only he wasn't perched atop a bar stool surrounded by Dutch
locals who were watching for him to make a fool of himself. He smiled at Stark and was glad for his company.

Tony slid onto the stool beside him and picked up the bottle on the bar near his elbow. It was mostly empty.

"Old Jenever for an old man. Are you celebrating?" Tony asked him.

Steve shook his head, then stopped doing that. It was too dangerous and made him feel like he might sling himself off his stool.

"Testing. Help me, Tony," Steve pleaded as carefully as he could.

"Sure, but where's Barnes? I didn't think he would let you drink alone," Tony said.

He got off his stool and pulled Steve's arm across his shoulders. Steve had the presence of mind to grab his bottle from the bar and he tried not to trip Tony while they walked. They ignored the other patrons in the old stone and beam pub while Tony shuffled Steve to a booth in the corner.

"Barnes, Barnes, Barnes. Barn burner. Buck wanted to smoke some stuff. Don't know if I can breathe smoke. This place is no-smoking," Steve announced proudly.

Tony struggled to keep his balance as he lowered Steve's weight onto the leather seat of the booth. Long legs and clumsily tangled feet trailed out into the walkway. The casual lack of control of himself let Tony know how inebriated Rogers was feeling. It was very unlike him to not maintain precise control of his body. Steve slumped sideways, but caught himself up on an elbow. Tony went around the table and sat.

"Thanks. This is better. Not falling down," Steve said.

He looked at Tony like he was a hero for helping him.

"Actually, you are falling down," Tony told him.

He scooted closer and wedged Steve up with his shoulder.

"You said testing?"

"Mm-hmm. 'slong as I can get drunk, I'm no good," Steve said and shook his head with disapproval at his own perceived uselessness.

Tony was pretty sure he was still at least good for saving kittens from trees and helping old ladies across the street, even in a drunken state. He wished there was an opportunity for that. It would be entertaining to see Steve's do-good attitude stumbling around drunk and trying to help.

"Why'd you sneak off?" Tony asked.


He got out his phone and fumbled until he pulled up the video of him wheezing while Buck laughed. Tony watched it, then looked at him.

"What?" Steve wondered.

"You need new friends. Barnes is an asshat," Tony said.
"You're an asshat," Steve frowned.

"I'm the asshat who wondered where you were and came to find you," Tony pointed out.

"Jarvis found me," Steve argued.

"So? He's the one who directed you to the only non-smoking pub in Amsterdam. Come on, let's get you back under guard. You'd be easy pickings if any Hydra strays want to take a cheap shot," Tony said.

"Gonna need a bottle to go," Steve insisted as they shuffled past the bar.

"Just one?" Tony asked as he signaled to the barkeeper.

"Burning through it. Gonna be done soon. One should do," Steve said.

"Drink em while you can, huh?" Tony asked rhetorically.

He paid the man and took the fresh bottle. Sloppy as Steve was, he was capable of holding his own bottle while they stumbled down the steps to the street. Tony tried to keep an eye on defensive lookout while he stood curbside and signaled for a cab. It was a cold, damp afternoon but Tony was fine in a suit and woolen overcoat. He could have ordered a nice private car and driver at their hotel, but he didn't want to call attention to himself while he looked for Steve.

Avengers weren't customarily found in the Netherlands. If locals or tourists noticed a luxury car, then saw Tony and Steve getting into it, they might post pics to the internet. Whatever strays were left of Hydra would be angry enough to possibly coordinate and come after them if they learned their location. It was a small threat, but with Steve, Clint and Sam out of commission it was best to lay low for a while. Bruce had taken one look around at the beautiful and historic city and gotten himself a commercial flight back to New York as soon as he knew his friends were on the mend.

A car stopped and Tony got Steve inside it. Steve wasn't as sloshed as he'd been a half hour ago. He was able to slide himself across the seat to make room for Tony. The cab driver gave them a second look when Tony told him the address, but he got them moving.

Steve got himself out of the car at their hotel.

"You're recovering quickly. What made you think of drinking to test your recovery?" Tony asked as the footman let them inside the street entry of the estate.

Tony gave up his coat. Steve didn't have one. He was in ill-fitting clothes and a tweed jacket. Tony shook his head at Steve's silliness. He could have had a tailor get him fresh wardrobe in a few hours, but Steve didn't think like that. It looked like he'd bummed clothes off one of the hotel staff's grandpa.

"Too much time to think. Had to do something useful," Steve said.

The elevator was old and slow. In Steve's condition, it was a better choice than attempting the grand staircase. Steve leaned against the wood-paneled wall and clutched his bottle. He looked fine, as if nothing had happened to him. His skin was rosy and fresh from the chill outside. Hydra's anti-serum had done things to him internally, but it hadn't been effective enough to structurally change him. Steve looked big and strong, but Tony could feel the difference in how he'd had to support him. Captain America was not much stronger than an average guy right now.

"How are you alright with this?" Tony wondered as the elevator carried them slowly up to their
"It's temporary. I can feel my strength returning. I'm glad I thought to go for a drink while I still could. No lasting harm done, Tony, but thanks for asking," Steve said.

"What if it wasn't temporary? What were you thinking while he had a needle in your neck?"

"I was thinking everybody was on the jet and that was good enough. Goons'll say anything to mess with your head in a standoff. I guess I didn't really believe him when he said it was anti-serum," Steve told him.

"You were going to sacrifice yourself. Again," Tony accused him.

"The goal was to finish Hydra. Failure wasn't an option. If I couldn't get that done, I couldn't move forward with my life," Steve pointed out.

"For your girl. You want the girl to be safe," Tony said.

Steve nodded.

There was more to it than that, but he was pretty sure Tony could figure it out. They got off the elevator. Tony offered his support, but Steve could balance himself well enough by running his hand along the wall in the hallway.

Their suites were the entire top floor of the estate. Steve looked in and saw Clint was sleeping. Nat was curled in the deep window seat reading a book. She looked up as they passed, then went back to reading.

Sam and Thor were loudly arguing about something on television in Sam's room. They could hear them through the closed door as they passed. Steve's room was at the end of the hall.

Tony sniffed the air.

"You know, they might not appreciate the smell. Barnes should-"

"He's not a rube. He's out on the balcony, probably," Steve told him.

"Right," Tony said.

Steve felt warm and fuzzy. All was right with the world. His team was safe and recovering, Estrella was doing fine in New York, and he had plans to clean up the last few Hydra agents who had wisely scattered around the globe. The lingering effects of Dutch gin warmed him from the inside out and he felt good. He leaned against the wall by the door of his suite and smiled at the man who had made much of their success possible.

"Tony, thanks for all your hard work. None of this would have happened like it did without you. Iron Man, Jarvis, the quinjet, all the Stark tech; we'd be months, maybe years behind on routing Hydra if it wasn't for you," Steve told him.

"That sounds like a goodbye," Tony frowned.

"It's not. Can't I show some appreciation?" Steve asked.

"Name your firstborn after me," Tony suggested with a grin.

"Name your own," Steve challenged him.
Tony gave him an uncertain look.

"Bet you I can get Estrella pregnant before you get Pepper," Steve said.

"Now I know you're still drunk. You don't look it anymore, but you are," Tony said.

"I'm not. I'm serious Tony. Quit fucking around. Get to work. I plan to," Steve told him.

"Fucking around is kind of the point," Tony joked.

"Not the way you're doing it," Steve smiled and shook his head.

"You're telling me how to have sex. You're telling me?" Tony asked, incredulous.

"Somebody needs to. You're not getting the job done like it's supposed to be done. Get her bred. It's what she wants. She deserves it," Steve said.

Tony looked at the floor. Steve could feel the weight of the unspoken issues.

"Is Pep good at management? Can she handle things all on her own, even when you make a train wreck out of it?" Steve asked him a loaded question.

The answer to that was known to them and to all their friends. It was undeniable that Pepper Potts was supremely capable.

Tony looked at him, frowning because his argument against fatherhood was being dismantled.

"The world is a better place with you in it, Tony. You're an amazing intellect, an intrepid spirit, and you've got a big heart. Pass it on. The next generation needs more Starks," Steve said with earnest encouragement.

"You're giving me a motivational speech. I'm not falling for- wait. Starks. Plural. More than one? You're not just drunk, you're delusional," Tony said.

"We know what it's like to be an only child. It's lonely. If not for Buck, I'd probably be neurotic, like you. You need to make more than one. At least two, if Pepper wants that," Steve pressed for a harder bargain.

"You think I'm neurotic," Tony said, getting hung up on the insult.

"You know you are. Half your problems come from being wrapped up in your own mind. Siblings help with that. It's harder to be a self-centered prick when your little sister is crying and needs your help," Steve pointed out.

Tony glared at him some more.

"Your most dangerous asset is your mouth," Tony told him.


Tony would have joked it off as machismo bullshit among guys, but nobody was laughing. The heat and sincerity in Steve's words hit him hard. He'd crafted his statement to convey every visceral, erotic image that flashed through Tony's mind. Steve made procreation sound appealing, irresistible.

Tony wagged an admonishing finger at him, shook his head, then hurried off to his rooms. Steve
smiled and let himself into his suite. He planned to finish his new bottle of Dutch gin slowly until he knew he was recovered from the anti-serum. Then he had one more task ahead of him before he could get on with the rest of his life. He prayed to God he was up to it.

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"Hey, Buck, you got any more of that stuff you were smoking?" Steve asked his friend.

"Yeah?" Bucky said.

It was late evening. Clint's doctor said they could leave in the morning. Steve was itching to go, ready to get back home. He knew he was fully recovered because he felt strong and a little wild, like his body was revving him up extra to make up for the previous days of weakness. He'd eaten a lot today and felt hungry for all of it. Alcohol was no longer affecting him. It was time to get things done.

"Maybe you should get it and go have a smoke," Steve suggested, and tipped his head toward the fancy stone balcony outside the tapestry drapes.

Buck looked at Steve and how he stood with his hands on the waistband of his pants.

"Sure," Buck said.

Buck didn't bother to hide a smile as he got his little bag of stuff, shrugged on a coat and went outside. Steve knew his friend assumed he wanted some privacy to work one out, but it was more than that. Buck was smart enough to catch a hint and stay lost if he sensed something sensitive going on.

Steve pulled a heavy carved chair in front of the stone fireplace, added a few more logs to the fire and turned off all the lights in their suite except for the lamp nearest him. He stripped down to his skin and put his clothes away. He sat in the throne-like chair and picked up his phone. Nerves tried to shake him, but he firmed his jaw and texted Nat. This had to be done before he could go home and there was no point in putting it off any longer.

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Natasha set down the strawberry she was eating in preference of keeping her book in the other hand. She picked up her vibrating phone from her bedside table and looked at the incoming text from Steve.

_I could use your help with something. In my room._

It was an odd sort of message to get from him. He'd never asked her to go to his room. Not once. She was in her nightshirt but it didn't matter. It was only her guys on this floor so it wasn't a big deal if anyone saw her in the hallway. Steve was asking for her help in an understated way which meant he probably needed her in a hurry. She dropped the book and tried not to anticipate too much while she jogged to his place at the end of the hall. The main door was unlocked, so she let herself in.

The place was dark. That was strange. She knew what this felt like, but that was improbable.

"In here," Steve's voice called.
She moved past the wood-paneled foyer and into the dark living room. Steve's voice had come from farther away than that. She went further into the suite, to where she could see the glow of a fire and soft light in the guys' bedroom.

Steve waited calmly by the fire. He was comfortably sprawled and naked in a large chair. This wasn't the sort of locker room perfunctory after-mission scrub down naked. This was full erection, well planned and sensually intentional naked. Clearly, there was no emergency. From the intent look in his eyes as he stared at her, she knew Steve had plans.

Nat leaned against the bedroom doorway and appreciated the lord-of-the-manor picture he made sitting in a throne-like chair in the backdrop of the medieval room. Steve looked pale and golden but not at all vulnerable. Something about his manner told her he was fully recovered and feeling it.

"Take off your clothes," he told her.

She could have turned around and walked out. There was no way she was doing that, with what appeared to be on offer. Knowing Steve, things weren't likely as straightforward as they seemed but she was okay with that. She was certain she'd be okay with whatever happened here.

Natasha tugged her brief nightshirt up from her thighs and off over her head. She pushed her fingers at her hips to get her panties down and she stepped away from them. It was no farce when she walked toward him slowly, letting her hips, legs and shoulders move as they naturally wanted to. The moment seemed to demand a certain sensuality. She was feeling it, so she let it show.

Steve's gaze on her wasn't carefully polite or dismissive. For once, he let himself watch the beauty and power of her with every ounce of male appreciation and no pretense of being unaffected. His dick was already hard and full, strained up against his belly. It twitched with excitement. Steve didn't bother to hide it.

Nat was a pro at figuring out men. There wasn't a chance she hadn't noticed his unwilling interest over the last two years. It had taken over a week, but he'd figured out when she'd offered to help him explore a little that she was willing to take an active role in his fun.

"How can I help you?" she asked when she came to stand near his chair.

She'd been poised to let Natasha lead the action, but what she was doing wasn't contrary to
his goals. One of her hands moved on him, pulling up then tugging down so that his loose skin concealed then revealed him. With her other hand, she languidly spread around the bead of fluid she found welling at his tip.

Natasha smiled at the heated, indulgent look he gave her. He was resistant to touching her as she touched him, so she bided her time enjoying what she'd fantasized about until Steve decided to make a move. The way he watched her like he was content to marinate in the moment gave her a touch of performance anxiety. Usually guys were out of their head with lust at times like this, not scrutinizing and thinking.

Steve wanted to touch her. He'd felt the firmness of her body many times in the training room and in battle. What he was strongly curious about was the softness and weight of her breasts. What would her nipples feel like, taste like? If he touched her below her red shock of fur, would she be cold and dry or hot and wet? He restrained himself. Looking at her, feeling her hands on his dick was temptation enough for now.

"C'mon, Steve, what do you want?" she asked.

She'd put both hands firmly around him. She worked him slowly and squeezed at his tip on the upstroke. He stopped her hands with one of his, then pushed them away. Instead of explaining, he shifted them forward until he perched their weight on the front edge of the chair. His knees went wide, which opened her up too. One of his hands reached behind and under her.

It felt sexually imminent when he pulled his erection down under her bottom while he leaned forward. Natasha cupped a hand behind his neck for balance. Steve's large, strong hand supported her back so she wasn't surprised when he tipped her backward beyond her balance. Steve rarely made contact with anyone other than during training or combat. She most often saw his hands acting in hard, fast violence. To have his normally powerful, violent body around her, touching her with sensual intent felt risky and exciting. She was at his mercy in the position he'd arranged and she knew he meant it to be that way.

He managed to not press their chests together. Nat glanced down and wished her nipples were against the warmth of his chest, but to make that happen would be too much eagerness on her part. If he didn't want them pressed together and he didn't intend to kiss her, she knew this was meant to be somewhat impersonal. Despite what happened next, she knew this wasn't about love. He had a plan and she now knew what it was. Steve was testing himself against his attraction to her.

His erection pressed strongly along her cleft and between her bottom cheeks. The position he'd put them in, the precise angle, was well thought-out. Natasha admired the size and strength of him. It would feel amazing to get him inside but the determination in his eyes didn't look likely to allow her that pleasure.

"Come on, Rogers, it's not nice to tease a girl like this," she told him.

He was kind enough to slide his hand up from her back to support her head so she wouldn't have to strain her neck. She wanted to kiss him but it didn't look like that was going to be allowed either.


He gave her a quick kiss at her cheek, then tucked his head down at her collarbone. His arm moved behind her. The pressure of his dick was briefly gone then the strong, heavy thing smacked against her in its effort to tuck rigidly up against his belly. She was in the way.

Steve grunted and Nat's eyes widened a bit. The fleshy sound of his erection hitting her where she
was soft seemed to ring in the room. It was lewd and evocative of the sex they weren't having. He did it again. This time, she felt and anticipated the flick of his arm behind her, him pulling himself down, then letting go.

*Smack*

Natasha drew in a sharp breath. Steve was tensely silent. He felt like a live, angry thing against her. She wanted, needed to move her hips, to rub against the ache he was causing. Steve's hand briefly gripped her hip to let her know he didn't want her to move.

Then he smacked her again. It wasn't enough force to hurt, but there was a little sting. The impact of him all the way from her clit to her ass seemed to stab deep into her nerves. She began to breathe slow and deep to calm herself against moving like she wanted to. Anticipation hitched her breathing when she felt his arm move again.

The sound of wetness made Steve bite off a groan when the next hit landed. Before he could think too much, he did it again, three times, a fourth until the sound of swollen wet flesh was unmistakable. He held still while they breathed. Both of them were trembling. Steve kept his head down to hide the wild, demanding lust he knew was on his face. His body was tensed hard, his hips and the base of his spine wanted to draw back, angle up and plunge in. Nat's hands rubbed restlessly at his back, whether to soothe or encourage his desires, he didn't know.

He wanted to kiss her shoulders, suck at the soft-looking nipples which heaved from her breathing. He didn't. This wasn't about what he wanted, but about what he could resist. The wet heat of her bathed him, but he wasn't at his limit. Not yet.

Steve held one hand at her hip to remind her not to move, and he smacked them together again. Several more times until he lost count and he felt orgasm building he teased himself and incidentally, her.

Then he abruptly sat back in the chair and took her with him. He switched his grip to hold her under her arms. It was easy to let his tip seek the exact point where he could push inside her. He found that and held Natasha above him, where it would have been far easier to let her weight sink down onto him. He couldn't seem to stop the grind of his ass which made him nudge inside and wiggle against her. When the urge to thrust forward was crazy-making and unbearable, he opened his eyes and stared at her.

Natasha looked flushed, angry, and desperate. Beautiful. Her hands gripped his wrists and her feet had found a perch on the arms of the chair. The way she swayed her hips side to side rocked him for a little more stimulation. He held her high, unable to get any penetration beyond the kiss of them touching at her entrance.

She watched Steve's face, though she knew the rest of him deserved appreciation while their muscles were pumped with blood and the urgency for sex. There were the fires of hard lust in his eyes and he breathed through his teeth, but determination gripped his will like a cold steel fist. Despite their arousal, it was fascinating to watch a man fight so hard against something he wanted so much. It was unique. Admirable. And she knew it was going to leave her unsatisfied.

*Estrella*

The name whispered sweetly in his head. Steve let himself fully feel the urgent sexual need with which he wanted Natasha. He'd wanted her for a long time. But the longing he felt for Estrella pulled at more than just his dick. Natasha was harsh and exciting. If he tried to be soft and kind with her, she would grow bored of him and resent his sentimentality. Estrella wanted all of him.
His girl wanted to spend the sweet moments with him too, and she would appreciate the parts of him which weren't hard and violent. The choice was clear. Though his dick demanded he make a quick conquest of Natasha and be done with it, his heart felt sick at the thought of betraying Estrella.

Steve sat forward and Natasha set her feet on the floor. He took his hands away from her and then sat back to rest them on the armrests. It would be unkind to pretend he didn't want her, so Steve continued to admire her. She made his body regret the chance he was passing up.

"So that's it? That's all you plan to do?" Nat asked him.

"I appreciate your help, Natasha. I needed that question answered before I can go back and see Estrella. I passed the challenge to my satisfaction, so what more is there? Don't pretend you can't go to your room and alleviate any discomfort I've caused you," he told her.

"Is that what you're going to do? Jerk off after I leave? How does that qualify as passing the challenge you've set yourself? It's cheating if you allow yourself to do what you want in your mind," Nat taunted him.

She turned and walked toward the door.

"No, I'm not gonna-" Steve denied, then his words choked off.

Nat's ass was spectacular and she knew how to work it. If she'd overplayed it he could have smiled and ignored it as her deliberately playing games with him. Her walk was all woman, but not affected by pretense. The way her bottom moved and flexed was mesmerizing. The graceful motion of her thighs, her feet, her arms and shoulders quieted his mind to a white noise of rapt attention. These were the imagined moments his fantasies had been made of for two years.

Natasha glanced back over her shoulder and smiled at him. It made him angry. She knew she was getting to him. She stopped at the bedroom doorway where she'd dropped her clothes. Demurely, she squatted down and got her things. She could have bent in a blatant attempt to flash him, but that was too crass for Natasha. Instead, she kept her panties in one fist while she lifted her nightshirt and shook it out. She threaded one arm through the bottom, then the other with her back arched to pull the edge of garment down over her breasts. Her feet stepped apart and her hips tilted. Steve felt his mouth water as her ass wiggled. For a tiny moment that would sear in his brain forever, her bright wet quim flashed at him. Another one of her glances showed him the move had been intentional.

Lust and anger stabbed him. His instincts got him out of the chair and across the room before his higher thinking or his heart could make him second-guess. His enhanced speed didn't give him time to question himself. He wanted. He took.

Natasha would have made a sound, but he knocked the breath out of her. One of his hands gripped around the doorway for leverage, the other hit the wall. His feet set outside of hers and his hips unerringly drove forward. They slammed into the wall and Nat's eyes went wide with the sudden, shocking fullness of having him inside her. It was one thrust to get in, then Steve's body drove her up the wall until her feet were six inches off the floor. She felt the hard lift of her bodyweight resting on his pubic bone. He was holding her up with his dick and the painful press of her face and collarbone against the wall.

"Goddamnit, Nat!" he growled at her through his teeth when his mind belatedly caught up with his body.

Instead of immediately regretting and letting her down, Steve arched his lower spine and rooted as
deep as he could. The grind of their bones was painfully satisfying.

Nat worked to get air in her lungs again. She tried to ignore the way the stretching discomfort of him inside was threatening to turn into pleasure. The strength of him punishing her against the wall played into her fantasies. She shook her head.

"Did you think us sitting still in a chair was difficult enough? You should thank me, Steve. Now you really get to challenge yourself," she said.

"Uff," Steve huffed a tight breath.

He was losing the ability to think clearly. All he wanted to do was fuck. His body trembled and surged at her, delivering no real movement or friction, but a hard gripping pressure that curled his toes.

Nat turned her face aside to look at him. Steve had his forehead against the wall, his eyes squeezed shut, and his mouth open. He rolled his head against the wall in a negative gesture and grit his teeth again. She wanted him to move. She wanted to know what it felt like to have the girth of him sliding inside. The discomfort of his rough entry was gone. She fluttered in eagerness around him and tried to wiggle her hips.

"No," Steve whined.

Steve never sounded like that in battle. Even if he was losing and being badly beat, he was all growls and grunts. But this time he wasn't fighting an opponent. He was fighting himself and it sounded like he was afraid of losing.

Natasha felt a moment of sympathy. She hadn't let herself think of anyone outside of their team for days, but now she thought of Estrella. An apology was on her lips, but Steve spoke first.

"I don't like who I'd have to be with you," he growled at her.

He'd been satisfied. For his purposes, he'd been strong enough and proven to himself that he could resist Natasha, even if she was naked and sitting in his lap. But she'd had to provoke him further, always testing and teaching him like she did. Now he was somewhere he hadn't intended to be. He refused to pull out and shove back in, to fall into fucking her like he very much wanted to. He kept her tight against his groin with no slippage to make him more tempted than he was. Anger made him grip her hips hard and slam her against the wall again, one last rebellion against her wiles.

Then he stepped back and shoved her off of him. Natasha stumbled but quickly recovered her footing. He was ready and expecting it when she turned and attacked him. By the way she used her body, the direction her trips and blows tried to guide him into, Steve knew she wanted at him again.

"Stop it!" he barked at her.

It was difficult to pay attention to fighting with her half naked body tempting his attention. Anger helped him overcome that. He was going to win against himself and he was going to win against her, even with his erection aching to get inside her and pound out the rest of his frustration. He caught her kick which exposed her to him again, then he pushed her to the floor with it. She struggled against his control, but he got her down and planted her belly against the floor. She bucked and tried to get free until Steve sat on her.

Just for the satisfaction of it, he gave her a half-hearted smack to the ass. Natasha twitched and moaned, then she laughed. She stopped fighting him and lay on the floor breathing. He stayed
sitting in the middle of her back and tried to hold onto his grumpiness while she chuckled.

"I'm impressed, Steve. You win. Now let me up. I promise I'm done with you," Natasha told him.

Steve waited a moment, then he moved aside from her to sit on the floor. He pulled up his knees and crossed his feet to deny her access to what they wanted. Natasha rolled to her side then sat up.

Steve frowned at her.

Natasha was angry with herself that he'd made her lose her composure and reveal how much she wanted him. She was angry that he was strong and skilled enough to manhandle her to the floor into defeat, giving him the upper hand in sexual dominance between them. And she was disappointed in herself for being petty and teasing him selfishly, possibly endangering his future with Estrella. Her pride that he had the morality and fortitude to prevail against her was the only positive. She decided to pay attention to that.

"I've damaged your trust in me again," she said while he watched her cautiously.

"Not really. I've never trusted you sexually. Always knew you could best me," Steve told her.

"You won this time. You'll keep winning because it matters to you. You're strong, Steve. You stopped us. I wouldn't have," Natasha admitted with some humility.

Since he seemed to prefer modesty at the moment, Natasha tugged her shirt down and folded her legs aside.

"I want you to stop teasing me, Nat. It's no secret we want to, but it wouldn't be any good," he began.

"Shut up, Rogers. I don't need an explanation. We're better as partners, friends if we can be after this," she said.

She looked at him with uncertainty and a bit of hope.

"I think we can," Steve said, "If you don't get between me and Estrella."

There was a lot he didn't have to say. She saw the warning in his eyes.

"Of course. This was stupid of me. Selfish. I forgot about her for a few days while we were working," she agreed.

"I didn't," Steve told her.

Slowly, Nat leaned and kissed him on the knee. She kept her hands to herself so he wouldn't feel defensive. He watched her but he let her do it. The gesture signaled peace between them.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I hurt you," he replied.

His hand reached to touch the red marks at her cheek and collarbone where he'd ground her against the wall.

"I enjoyed it," she said.

It was an effort to allay the guilt she saw he was feeding for being rough with her. Nat didn't want
to sit around and coddle him. He'd started this and she'd prodded him further into foolishness, but it was over now. They were good enough with each other that she was confident they wouldn't dwell on the incident for long.

She got to her feet and put on her panties. Steve followed her to the door of his suite. She paused there before opening it. Steve stood naked, his arms crossed and his stance typically confident. She was pleased to see him naked, yet dignified and unashamed. It was a sign of his defiant trust in her, that she would leave him alone if she knew what was good for their working relationship.

Nat nodded to him, then let herself out. Steve locked the door behind her and returned to the bedroom. He was still half hard and wet from contact with her. Before he could get fresh shorts and head to the shower, Buck came in from the balcony. He didn't smell like funky smoke at all.

"You've got some gumption, punk," he said.

"What, is she your girl now?" Steve asked him.

"Nah. Not anything like that. So, did ya satisfy your curiosity?" Buck asked.

"You were watching the whole time," Steve grumbled while he turned to go shower.

"Sure I was, but I stayed outta the way. Are you gonna tell Estrella about this?" Bucky wondered.

"I dunno. You think I should? I needed to know I could be strong enough, Buck. Natasha…she's…Natasha. Now I know I can resist her," Steve said.

"I get that. I wouldn't tell your girl, if I was you. No, that's not true. I would tell her if I was you. But any sane guy would keep his mouth shut about it," Buck said.

"Yeah, maybe," Steve said, then he went to wash.

Nat was right. If he jerked off now, it would be a kind of failure. He got clean quickly and tried to ignore his aching balls. As Steve approached his bed, the negative aspects of the evening drifted away from his mind. He smiled. Tomorrow was the day. The thought made him nervous, but it made him happy too.

He sank to his knees for a while at the bedside and gave thanks for passing the test he'd set himself, mostly. He prayed for Clint and Sam's speedy recovery, and he asked for help in ending the last stray Hydra agents quickly. While his mind was happily eager for tomorrow, his body was revved and resistant to the idea of calming down. So he thanked God for his health.

It was difficult to get to sleep, but he managed to a few hours before they were due to fly out of Amsterdam.

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Buck handed him a small box. Steve looked at the contents, snapped it shut, and slipped it into the pocket of his old leather jacket. He checked himself in his bathroom mirror. Was his hair too short or too long? He pulled back his lips and studied his teeth. They were clean. He rubbed his fingers over his neck and behind his ears. No flakes of dead skin came off or landed on his shoulders.

There appeared to be nothing on him which would make Estrella worry or ask questions.

"You're fidgeting. Quit worrying about it, you look fine. You told her you were coming for six o'clock. If you don't get going you'll be late," Buck warned him.
Steve nodded. He turned to get his keys and Buck got out of his way. Before he left his suite he stopped to look at his friend.

Buck could see Steve was all wound up. He looked like an anxious, excited kid. Since they'd got up this morning and all during the flight home, he would fidget with restless energy or his brow would crease with worry. Now, when the moment was almost upon him Steve was about to vibrate out of his skin and he looked to him for some kind of help.

"What if she says no?" he whispered in a hurry, like he was afraid to speak the words.

"I don't think she will. But if she does you cut your losses and come on home. There's still plenty of work to do. You don't have to worry about it, though. She'll say yes or she's dumber than you give her credit for," Buck assured him.

"It wouldn't be dumb. She'd have good reason to say no. I can't give her a normal life, Buck. She wanted to be a schoolteacher, ya know, a regular gal. How can she be that if she's with me?"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. Look, just get going and put yourself outta your misery one way or the other. I'll tell ya how idiotic you're being later when you can think straight. Go!" Buck half-yelled at him, but he was smiling.

Steve managed a hopeful smile and he went.

He suffered an agony of wishing traffic would hurry up and at the same time being thankful it was slow while he drove his truck to Wanda's building. He hadn't been happy to find out Estrella had left the tower to return to Wanda's place the morning they'd left for North Korea. He didn't think it was safe for her to be away from Jarvis and Pepper's protection, but that was done. He wasn't going to fuss at her about it today.

Finding parking wound him up tighter. His legs were shaking by the time he leapt up the steps to enter the building. Steve forced himself to breathe slow and deep while he went up in the elevator. He shook his head and the tension from his body while no one was watching to think he was weird. His nerves tried to get the better of him again before he raised his knuckles to knock on Wanda's door. He firmed his jaw and closed his eyes for one last, quick prayer. Then he knocked on the door. The old man at the checkerboard smiled at him. Steve would have tried to smile back, but the door opened just then.

Estrella stood in the open doorway. She smiled shyly at him. His nervousness wasn't easy to hide from her. She probably knew what he was here for, other than just to see her. She was wearing the cheerful yellow skirt and white blouse he liked so much on her. She looked fantastic, gorgeous and healthy. Her dark eyes invited him in with a long glance. She stepped back and he went into Wanda's place.

"Hiya, doll," Steve said.

He bent a little to kiss her neck through her hair. He wanted to do a lot more than that but didn't want to be disrespectful or distracted.

"Hi, Papi. I'm glad to see you're well. Did you get hurt?" Estrella asked him.

The apartment smelled like good food. He didn't feel like he could eat. He might try later if she wanted him to.

"Some, but I'm fine now. Clint caught the worst of it. He's gonna be alright. Where's Wanda?" he asked.
"She went to see her cousin. I fixed dinner for us, if you didn't already eat," she offered.

The suspense was killing him. It might be rude to cut right to it, but he couldn't think of anything else to do. Steve took Estrella's hand and led her to the couch. Wanda's place was bright and homey, not exactly a romantic ambiance. It didn't matter. He saw the pulse jumping at Estrella's throat as he guided her to sit down. Her eyes were wide and her hands fluttered nervously until she clasped them in her lap. Steve pushed aside the coffee table and took off his jacket. He smoothly slid the jewelry box into his hand and lowered himself to one knee on the rug. He took her hand in his free one and looked at his girl.

"Estrella, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Estrella felt a shock at being in this moment. She'd worried about it for days, disoriented that this could be her life now. She hadn't yet made up her mind. If she said no, she was giving up hope and any prospect of love and a happy future. If she said yes, she might be taking advantage of Steve's position and imposing her weirdness on him. In the end, while he watched her with his heart in his eyes and waited, she couldn't stand the thought of a future without him.

"Yes!" she breathed, afraid this moment was a dream.

The uncertainty was squeezed out of her in the next instant when Steve caught her up in a hug.

"Thank God! Eya, please. I mean, thank you. I wasn't sure-" Steve babbled against her hair.

She wiggled and pushed against him. She wanted to see him. They could hug later.

"Shhh, I love you. It's alright," she assured him.

"I love you, I love you, I love you, mmm," Steve murmured, then his words hummed into kissing her.

This time he was gentle. He set her back onto the couch and touched her face with a careful hand. They kissed sweetly for several moments. When it would have started to turn into a heated thing, he pulled away from her. The way he grinned at her with his eyes full of happiness and love was worth everything they might have to go through to be together. She smiled in giddy agreement until her cheeks hurt. Her eyes were watering. She started to wipe at them, but then let Steve do it.

It made her heart flutter to feel the reverence with which he touched her.

She blinked a few times after his thumb was away from her eyes. Her eyelashes were still spikey with tears but that would have to be okay for now. She bit her lip against a coy grin and looked to what he was concealing in his other hand. This felt unreal, like she'd stepped into a television program. She'd never expected this kind of moment for herself.

"Ah, that…" Steve said.

He opened the box and held it out to her.

"I hope you like it. If it's not alright, we can change it to anything you like," he told her.

The ring was a gold band, sculpted and polished beautifully. It had gracefully undulating edges and
five diamonds set flush into the thick metal. The largest one was in the middle, the two on each side progressively smaller. The center stone winked at her clear and bright white while the surrounding ones sparkled in pretty shades of blue and green.

"It's beautiful. I like it. I wouldn't want to change it," she said.

"I was hoping you'd say that," Steve said.

He took the ring from its box and slipped it onto her ring finger.

"It's a little loose," she commented.

"That's because this isn't all of it. The gold part fits inside the vibranium part. You'll get that later," he said.

"Vibranium? Like your shield? Isn't it rare?" she asked.

"Extremely. But I have connections," Steve said.

His smile was backed up with a firm look of expectation. It wasn't unlike when he'd been buying everything on vacation and he'd told her she needed to be quiet about the expense and let him enjoy himself. Estrella was overwhelmed enough by the gold and diamonds, so she didn't let herself think about the vibranium part and how costly it must be.

She hugged Steve instead. He carefully wrapped her in his arms and rocked them back and forth a little.

"Get off your knee! Sit with me," she insisted.

Steve sighed and got onto the couch. Now that the uncertainty was done with, he felt very happy and sort of dreamy. He settled against the corner of the couch and was pleased enough to purr when Estrella leaned against his chest and petted him.

"Are we really doing this? I'm finally here? I'm not dreaming?" he asked in a low tone.

"I don't think we're dreaming. If we're dreaming, we're dreaming together. I'd like that, but I think I'd be sad if I woke up and it was a dream," she told him.

"Pinch me," Steve said.

"I don't want to. Not right now," she frowned and shook her head.

Steve laughed.

"Nah, we're not dreaming," he decided.

They kissed for a while, but they couldn't stop smiling so it didn't get heavy. Estrella's hand kept rubbing him on his chest and his shoulder and his neck. He was looking forward to decades of this kind of sweetness. It felt wonderful.

"What's your schedule like? When should we get married?" she asked him.

"My schedule is wide open for a while. I was thinking Monday?" Steve suggested.

"Monday! That's the day after tomorrow! I need a dress. I can't get married day after tomorrow. I have to call Aunt Rita! Steve, I want my family to be there," she said.
He sighed. He could have her family flown in within a few hours and he didn't see the need for a fancy dress. This was more about the vows than the accessories but he didn't want to spoil her fun. He knew women liked weddings and all that went along with them. He could wait a little longer if it made her happy.

"The next Monday, then?" he suggested.

"Can we do it on a Saturday? We need to go see Father Miller! It's supposed to be six months," Estrella worried.

"It's alright, babe. I already talked to him. He said we can marry on any Monday evening, but I'll talk to him again and see if we can do next Saturday, a week from now," Steve said.

"I have to call Rita. We should eat!" Estrella said.

She sprang up from the couch and pulled at his hand. She got to the middle of the area between the kitchen and the living room, then she hiccupped into crying. Steve smiled and held her.

"What's a matter, Eya?" he asked softly while he rubbed her hip.

"I'm so happy. There's so much to do!" she said.

"I know. Me too. Listen, if it's gonna be a week, why don't you get packed and I can drop you off at Rita and Alberto's house so you can shop for a dress with your family. I'll take care of things here and we can use our phones to work out the details," Steve suggested.

She pulled her face from his chest and looked at him with wet eyes.

"You'd do that? Just bring me to Texas like it's a walk to the corner store?" she wondered.

"Sure, babe. I want you to have time with your family," he said.

She cried some more because he was so good to her. They eventually got around to eating, calling Rita and getting her packed to go. She still didn't have many possessions. Her guitar was the biggest part of it.

"I want to leave a note for Wanda. She's a good friend. I can't go without saying goodbye and I want to invite her to the wedding," Estrella said before they left the apartment.

Steve waited for her while she did as she wanted. He was a little surprised out in the hallway when she leaned aside to move a checker on the old man's table and she gave him a smooch on the cheek. The old guy smiled like the dickens and Steve didn't blame him.

Estrella held his free hand while they carried her things down to the truck. Steve smiled at her while he drove to the tower until she fussed at him for not paying attention to traffic, but she was smiling too.

It felt like they were setting out on an adventure. The good kind, like he'd dared to imagine in his childhood.

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AN: This was surprisingly difficult to write. I'm sorry for any technical things I got wrong and I hope you'll excuse me if I flubbed some details. If I researched every little thing, I
wouldn't have time to write. One thing that tickled my brain is how does the Hulk weigh so much more than Bruce? Where does the extra mass come from when he changes? I probably think too much.
Chapter 63

Bucky put more popcorn in his mouth and ignored Estrella's feet pushing at the side of his leg. He'd finally found a great series to watch on television. It was a good excuse to keep the lovebirds company on the couch until bedtime.

The girl grumbled at him from her place half on Steve's lap and half on the middle of the couch. Yeah, he knew she wanted some privacy with her new fiancée. The desperate looks Steve shot him every time Estrella tried to make him leave were comical. The punk hadn't thought very far ahead beyond running off to propose to his girl. Now that he had her, he didn't know how to handle her.

Buck smiled and shook his head at the idiocy of the couple's situation. Some downtime was great, the show on the big screen was good, and the dim blue light in the living room made it feel just like a movie theatre, especially with popcorn. But the best entertainment was going to be watching Steve try not to do his girl before the wedding. All week, Steve had been sharp and on point as the Captain, planning every little detail days ahead of time and managing constantly changing threats in battle, taking out incredible opponents with skill and wit, and now he was too muddle headed to handle a woman. So typical.

Steve admitted to himself that he hadn't thought this through very well. That was why Buck was having a grand time laughing at him. Instead of proposing to her this evening as soon as he got back to the tower and cleaned up from work, he probably should have gone over to see her in the morning. It would be Sunday, perfect to go to church together, talk to Father Miller, then fly down to Corpus to bring her to Alberto and Rita. Instead, he'd been too impatient. Now he had to spend the night with her at his place.

Estrella shifted in his lap. It was impossible not to hold her. She wanted to be near him and he wanted the same. Each moment that passed was an internal struggle to stay socially polite and not take her up into a kiss which would lead to everything else. He wanted her too much. He needed to find a way to keep his cool for a little while longer.

The empty popcorn bowl smacked Steve in the chest and narrowly avoided hitting Estrella's face. Her eyes looked over the rim of the bowl and scowled at Bucky. Buck's silver grip pushed the plastic bowl at him with some pressure.

"Go make us some more. Two bags," Buck told him.

"You go make it," Estrella insisted.

"Nah. He's gonna make it," Buck said.

Steve gently eased out from under Estrella. It was painful to part from her touch. All he wanted to do was be near her, to feel her, to smell her. He knew she wanted the same. Her fingers trailed along his arm in a caress that made him shiver as he walked away with the empty popcorn bowl. Two bags. In the microwave. That was about five minutes. He could do it.

Estrella glared at Bucky from her end of the couch. Buck touched the pause button on the remote. He was the only one paying attention to the show anyway. It wasn't like whispering would help against Steve's hearing, so he spoke to her plainly.

"Doll, you gotta give him a break. I know you wanna be alone together, but that's against his goals. You know he'd be disappointed if you didn't wait for the wedding night," Buck said.
They heard Steve's head clunk against the cabinets in the kitchen. So he was embarrassed, but this shit needed to be said. Estrella got in his space, almost in his face in her eagerness to deny him.

"I know he wants to wait. I won't push him to do that. You should go away! Go to your room. We only want some time. I haven't seen him all week," Estrella argued.

Buck shook his head.

"I know. But that's not what's gonna happen if you get too cozy with him. He's got good intentions and he's strong, but not against you and not right now. There's stuff going on that you don't understand. Have some mercy on a guy," Buck made a case for his friend.

"What stuff?" she asked.

"It's complicated. He's just ground Hydra's face in the dirt, it looks like he's got the girl after all these years, he's flyin high and lookin for a victory dance. Sweetheart, he wants to nail you really bad, but wait for it. It'll be even better if you wait," Buck advised.

The microwave beeped in the kitchen. Steve took out one bag and put another one in.

Estrella thought about Bucky's explanation. She'd assumed Steve had been victorious over Hydra. He wouldn't have proposed to her if he hadn't satisfied himself that they would be safe. She knew defeating his old enemy was a big deal to him, a life's goal of his. Steve was likely feeling strongly about it. The idea of him wanting sex because of a big victory was intriguing to her. It was something to think about and she liked the idea of being a part of his victory celebration. He'd wanted to get married in just a few days, maybe because he was so eager to be with her and have this victory dance Bucky spoke of, but he'd agreed to wait a week to give her some time because she'd asked for it.

Now that she had a few moments of clear-headed distance from Steve, she knew if they spent any time alone together there was no way they could resist making love. They both wanted it so much, but Steve wanted to wait and do things the old fashioned way. The right way. With a clear head, she could respect that. She needed to respect that. But it was so hard! Even now, she felt heated and antsy, almost like the desperation she felt in the fertile part of her cycle.

She bit her lip and looked to Bucky.

"I know, sweet. Be strong for a little longer. For him. Alright?"

Estrella moaned softly and collapsed back against the end of the couch. She hugged a pillow to her chest and hid her face in it. When Steve came back with the big bowl of popcorn, she scooted to the middle of the couch. The bowl ended up in her lap so both men could reach it. Steve sat beside her and she felt a happy sense of comfort when his leg pressed alongside hers. Buck put a handful of popcorn in his mouth and pressed play for the television.

Steve stretched his arm out behind her head on the back of the couch. Estrella was going to lean her head back to rest on it, except abrupt movement caught her eye and she turned her head to see. Steve's outstretched hand shoved rudely at Bucky's head and the side of his face. Buck ducked aside some, but continued his chewing and grinned at Steve. She turned to see what Steve had been thinking, to do something so rude.

Her fiancé frowned strongly at Bucky, but his disapproval turned into a sort of bashful smile. Steve snuggled closer to Estrella and got some popcorn.

"Don't need a babysitter," he grumbled.
"Shut it. You know you do," Buck replied.

Estrella tried to watch the show. It was something awful about zombies and big guns and people running everywhere. She was beginning to understand that Steve and Bucky showed affection with aggression. She’d seen them fight hard, but they were always happy about it afterward. The fact that the couch, the overhead light fixture, the walls and the television were all new proved how violent they could be, but still they looked out for each other's best interests. She'd seen Steve honor Buck's choice to get taken by Hydra, and then he'd gone flying off to save him. Bucky would usually choose to stay and keep her safe, but he'd gone this week to help Steve when he really needed it. Now he was helping Steve to meet his old fashioned ideals of what courtship should be, even though they knew Buck himself had no such ideals.

This felt like family.

Estrella sighed and leaned her head on Buck's shoulder. He tolerated it for a moment, then he shrugged her off toward Steve. Through the rest of the zombie show and well into the next episode, she was able to keep herself from sliding back onto Steve's lap. They held hands. They got stuck staring at each other once and that almost lead to a kiss, but Bucky rudely flicked the popcorn bowl into Steve's lap. After that, Steve sent her off to bed in his room while he cleaned the spilled popcorn from the couch.

She lay in his bed and luxuriated in his smell on the covers and the pillow, but his room felt too large and cold without him. Her pulse beat faster when Steve came through to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He turned on the bathroom light, which she knew he didn't need. The light was for her benefit. She watched while Steve stripped down to his shorts and undershirt and brushed his teeth at the sink. His eyes met hers in the mirror. It didn't matter that he was messy-mouthed with toothpaste. She wanted him. He could see that. His face took on that pleased male expression she'd seen on the internet when he'd been on a date with the tall, pretty blonde woman.

The memory made her angry and jealous, but only for a moment. He was hers now, right there teasing her to take him. The bed covers were modestly up to her shoulders, but he was showing himself off. All that smooth strong skin was calling to her to go lick him, bite him, rub him all over. The handsome stinker was taunting her. She was sorely tempted to go climb up him and try, but she suspected she would lose and end up more frustrated. Steve arched a cocky eyebrow at her, rinsed his mouth and washed his hands. His knowing smile made her squirm and seethe in his bed. She didn't hear him take a moment to pee, she was so bothered by the longings in her head.

Fingers touched her forehead. Estrella stilled and turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, Eya. I can't seem to help it," Steve apologized from standing at the bedside.

"Nngh," she growled at him nonsensically.

Steve dropped to his knees and took her hands in his. He bowed his head to stop looking at the welcoming image she made in his bed. Her fingers worked loose of his and combed through his hair. It was soothing, a balm against the carnal want they struggled with.

"Can't hardly wait to show you all my love, sweetheart," Steve said.

She liked how his voice was low and ardent.

"Go," she told him.

If he didn't, they wouldn't make it.
Steve kissed her fingers, then hurried from the room. He closed the door behind him. She heard his frustrated groan as he flopped on the couch. She sighed, her heart still racing and her body still hungry. They had to get out of here soon.

…

She didn't see Bucky in the morning as Steve rushed her off to the jet bay at the top of the tower. The tower had felt empty of anyone but them since yesterday evening, but Tony was waiting for them in the Avengers locker rooms.

Tony looked slick and powerful in a silver-gray suit, as if he was going somewhere this morning too. His hair was dark and perfect like he hadn't done any work today and his glasses added a polished bling to his look. Unlike the usual tired grease monkey she was used to, the Stark in front of her was all refined billionaire. It made her uncomfortable and he seemed to notice that. Tony turned down the brightness of his smile and held out his hand.

"Let me see it," he said.

Estrella went to him and lifted her left hand. Tony didn't touch her, but he looked carefully at the ring. It was a brief glance, so she let her hand fall to her side.

"You got him to spring for the good diamonds, I see. Nice work, especially since I know he's a cheapskate," Tony commented, then switched his attention to Steve "Get a little work in on that challenge, Cap? You should give an old man like me a head start, you know. I'm only human, not even enhanced."

Steve smiled and Estrella wondered what the insults were about this time. It couldn't be too bad, since Steve was taking it in good humor. She nervously spun her ring on her finger and held her bag in her other hand. Knowing she was going to fly was making her belly flutter.

"You've got your head start, Tony. Why are you here?" Steve asked.

Tony held out his hand. Between his fingers was a small silver case.

"I come bearing a pre-wedding wedding gift. No confetti or strippers, I promise," Tony said.

Steve cautiously took the offered gift.

"Software. You're giving us software. What is it?" he asked.

"You're smart enough to figure it out. Have a nice trip," Tony said.

He winked at Estrella with a kind smile, then left the locker room.

Steve looked at the silver case in his hand.

"Thank you, Tony," Estrella said, knowing Jarvis would convey her words if Tony was too far away to hear her.

Steve picked up her guitar case. The fact that he'd put it down to have his hands free bothered her.

"Don't you trust Tony?" she asked.

"With my life? Sure. Seven days a week and twice on Sunday. But pranks?" Steve said, and he shook his head.
Estrella followed him through the double doors into the quinjet bay. Steve bumped a button on the wall in the hangar and the bay doors retracted to the sides. It was cold and rainy over the city. She grew more nervous, seeing how high up they were with no comforting glass window as a barrier. Gusty winds reached for them inside the tower bay and flapped her jeans against her boots. Fat raindrops spattered the launch pad and turned it shiny with wet not far beyond the nose of the jet. Worried thoughts swirled her mind about the wind, but she saw the jet's wheels were firmly clamped to the deck.

"Come on, if we hurry we can make it to eleven o'clock mass in Corpus and have lunch at Alberto's house after," Steve encouraged her.

She took a breath to buck up her courage, then looked at the jet. Something wasn't the same. This one looked shinier, more streamlined, and it had bronzy-gold trim around the windows and along its sides. It wasn't flat gray and angular like the one the Avengers used. The large craft still looked alien and dangerous to her, but not as military and utilitarian.

"You have more than one?" she asked Steve as they walked up the open rear ramp of the jet.

Again, she was surprised. Steve's bike was strapped securely to the floor in the back of the craft. Surprises kept coming this morning. She was starting to feel off-balance because of it all. Now that they were inside the jet and the outdoor winds didn't swirl the air so much, she smelled a new-car kind of scent, but maybe with some jet fuel smells and other things mixed in.

"No. I have one. This one. The rest belong to the Avengers, or to what's left of Shield. Nick Fury probably knows how many there are and who has the other quins. This one's new. I had it custom made," Steve said.

He took her bag and secured it and her guitar case in a cargo compartment to one side. She looked and saw the smooth interior was really made of contoured access panels. There was a lot of storage around, and comfortable looking molded seats to each side. There wasn't a medical area or a computer area like in the Avenger's jet, and the interior was more pleasing to the eye in shades of blue, green, white and gray. Convenient grips and handles which were made to be noticed were accented in the same bronzy-gold color as the trim on the outside of the craft and safety things like a fire extinguisher were colored red.

She rested her hip against the familiar seat of his motorcycle. Steve took off his leather jacket and laid it over the bike's fuel tank. He took a few steps and bumped a button on the wall. The rear hatch closed quietly and she heard what sounded like bolt locks engage to secure them inside. Steve came to stand across the bike from her. The overhead lighting was somehow bright and mellow at the same time.

He leaned forward and touched his forehead to hers over the bike.

"You doin alright?" he murmured.

She nodded. Then she shook her head. Then she shrugged.

"I know this is a lot, Eya. It's more than you're used to. More than you want, more than you're comfortable with," he guessed.

She nodded again.

The sound of the wind howled around the craft, but nothing moved. Her eyes widened. Were they really going to fly in weather this bad?
"This is what I need to do my job. If you were marrying a commercial fisherman, you'd have to put up with fish and gear and boats. If you married a teacher, there would be after-hours calls from parents and papers to grade and lesson plans. This is ours, but it's for my job, too. There's more to get used to, but we don't have to go through it all at once. Are you gonna be alright?" he asked gently.

"I will be. I want you to have what you need for work. It's just so different. I feel like a mouse," she tried to explain.

"You're my mouse. But hey, I thought we were gorillas?" he smiled at her and reminded her of pleasant things, "I told you forever ago, this is my world and you belong in it. Will you go with me?"

Estrella nodded again.


He smooched her nose, then strode to the front of the jet. She hesitated. Co-pilot?

"Where is Clint?" she asked.

"What's a matter, doll? Ya don't trust me to fly? Clint's hurt. Recovering. Nat brought him on leave for some rest. I've got this. Come on," Steve called to her from the cockpit.

She looked at his comfy brown jacket casually draped over his bike. Steve didn't expect a rough flight or he would have put his jacket in a side compartment. Estrella stuck out her chin and strode to the cockpit. There was a step down, and then only one place to put her foot beside the co-pilot's seat. She turned and grabbed an overhead rail which was gold colored, so probably was there for grabbing. She put her foot where it looked like it was supposed to go and swung herself down into the seat. The new smell was stronger here, like leather and electronics and the piped air from the duct which blew in her face. She reached out and angled the air to her shoulder instead.

There were straps, so she shrugged them around herself and buckled in, then tightened the straps until she felt secure. Steve ignored her for a moment. He looked busy flipping switches and looking at indicator panels which lit up in front of them. So near the glass, she could see the city far below and the weather. The tower's launch pad seemed very short in front of them. There was glass under their feet, too! Her belly clenched and turned. She didn't know if it was worse in the back where she wouldn't understand what was going on, or worse here where she could see everything around her. She felt like she was in a dragonfly's head looking out its eyes.

Steve glanced at her briefly. He didn't smile or try to cajole her out of her nervousness. He expected her to be brave and get through this. So she would. She watched while he studied a panel. It was black, except for a green line and some moving dots. There were numbers at each moving dot. Were those other airplanes?

"Flip that one," Steve told her.

He indicated an important-looking red switch in the middle of the controls.

"This one?" Estrella asked to be sure.

Steve nodded.

She flipped it.
Nothing seemed to happen at first, except a low vibration which was maybe a sound too low for her to hear. Then the sound slowly grew higher in pitch and louder.

"Did I just start it? I don't want to do the flying, Steve!" she exclaimed.

He laughed.

"Yeah, you just started it. No worries. I'll do the flying. You can do the easy things, help out a little here and there," he suggested.

She narrowed her eyes at him. She knew what he was doing. He was keeping her engaged and busy so she wouldn't worry about flying so much. But she didn't want to do it! She might do something wrong and kill them!

Steve kept smiling and glancing at her, knowing she was miffed at him, but he didn't stop his monkey business. When the jet sounded high-energy and anxious to get in the sky, Steve put his hands on the steering grips. He briefly pointed to a green lever below the start switch.

"Release the clamps," he told her.

"Steeeve," she complained.

"That's an order, cadet. Get it done," he instructed her firmly.

Before she could think twice about it, she reached her hand out and flipped the switch. The jet shot forward, then up. Estrella screamed and got a white-knuckle grip on her knees. Steve laughed while he flew. She bit off her scream and watched the buildings, then the city disappear out from under them. Rain hit the windshield, but sheeted off in a thin layer that barely affected their view. Steve looked at the indicator panel, then they disappeared up into the gray puffiness of the storm clouds. Lightning flashed, blindingly bright around them and Estrella shrieked again. Quickly, the thick clouds turned from gray to light gray to white, then they glowed brilliantly. Then they were up, above the clouds. Estrella gasped at the beauty and marveled at how sunny and pretty it was above when it was so stormy below.

"Sorry it upset you like that, doll. I figured it was best to get the rough part over with quickly. You did much better this time. You didn't pass out," he said.

"Asshole. Thank you," she grumped.

"Why are you still smiling?" she asked him a moment later after her heart began to calm down.

"Because it feels like we're going on vacation again. It feels like I've got a new car," Steve waved his hands around at the new quinjet, "and we're getting married. What's not to smile about?"

"Keep your hands on the wheel! On the steering thing, I mean," she complained.

"It's got auto-nav. I don't wanna get up and go make a sandwich or anything, but it'll fly smooth without me for a few seconds," Steve told her.

"Turn my side off. I don't want to bump anything," she said.

She didn't like the way the co-pilot's controls, whatever they were called, moved in front of her, along with the ones in Steve's hands.

"Are ya sure you don't wanna take a turn flying? It's not hard to learn," Steve teased her.
She sighed heavily.

Steve flipped a switch on the panel and her steering grips stopped moving. That made her feel better.

"I shouldn't tease so much. I know you're uncomfortable and I'm a klutz at trying to make it better. I wish I could hold you right now, but I'm kind of busy," Steve said in a more serious tone.

"It's okay. I know you're good at this kind of thing. I trust you, I'm just scared," she admitted.

"You're great. It takes a lot of courage to be scared and do things anyway. I admire that in you," he said.

She looked at him skeptically, to see if he was still teasing her, but he wasn't. He kept his eyes on the instrument panel or out the windshield.

"You don't have to say things like that, to make me feel better," she said.

"Don't tell me what to say, snooty patootie. I'll compliment you if I feel like it," Steve said with another grin while he checked something.

He ran his fingers along the smooth dash panel where there weren't any buttons or switches. It looked like glossy black glass, but there was a slit his fingers lingered over.

She forgot to respond to his playfully uppity comment and took note of the slight crimp between his brows.

"What? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. Tony's been in here making changes. This port wasn't here before," he said of the tiny slit his finger touched.

Estrella picked up the little silver case Tony had given them. It had stuck magnetically to the dash cubby Steve set it in.

"It's a card slot. You said Tony gave us software," she held up the case.

Steve nodded.

"Not now. Let's wait til later. I can handle surprises but I'm not sure you're in the mood for any more right now," he advised.

Estrella set the silver case back in the dash.

She didn't mind the smooth, steady part of flying. Now that she was calming down, she felt flushed. She angled the air duct onto her face again and enjoyed the cool air. Her eyes searched the panel. Surely there was an indicator of the outside air temperature among all the other fancy information? Her eyes widened. It was quite a bit below freezing up here above the clouds. It felt nice in the jet, almost too warm. Steve noted her discomfort and tapped the black glass. It lit up where he tapped and he slid his finger down a blue scale. The cabin temp control dropped five degrees. After he removed his finger, the blue glow faded to black.

"Why are some of the controls so modern, like Avengers stuff, and the other ones are old fashioned switches?" she asked.

"Because I'm an old-fashioned kind of guy. I'm okay with convenience features like cabin temp
being digital. Flight controls… it's better in an emergency to fly by wire," Steve said.

She made a face at him. Steve could see she didn't understand.

"I didn't want this designed as a combat craft. Unlike the other quins, I wanted defensive capabilities, good shielding, and maneuverability. Not so many weapons. More protection," he explained.

"The regular quinjet has weapons?" she asked.

Steve nodded.

"The newer jet Tony is designing for us has no manual controls at all. Anyone who wants to fly it will have to have a neural chip or a linked headset to control it. I don't agree with neural chips, so I'll use a headset or maybe something in my helmet. For a personal craft like this, I want anyone to be able to fly it," he told her.

"Like me?" she wondered skeptically.

"Sure. It's not that difficult. Tricky flight maneuvers are harder to learn and I wouldn't want you flying in bad weather, but normal flight isn't much different than driving a car," he said.

"I don't drive," she pointed out.

"Are you opposed to driving?" he wondered.

"No, I just never had the chance. A friend wanted me to steal a car with her once, but I didn't get in. She wanted me to drive," Estrella told him.

Steve frowned.

"I'm glad you didn't. High speed chase and a new driver don't mix well. Maybe she wasn't a good friend," he said.

She shook her head.

"Not a friend, really. Just a girl I was with in foster care," she admitted.

Steve kept a carefully neutral look on his face and she was about to fuss at him for disapproving of her past. Then she didn't. She'd learned she didn't have to be defensive about her past. Steve was on her side. She waited to see what he was thinking.

While she waited for him to gather his thoughts, she looked out the glass at the pretty morning. It was serene and quiet up here, like they were alone on vacation. He was right. This did feel nice. She smiled because she was at peace and she was with him.

Steve was still thinking, but he was frowning a little.

"What, Papi? What bothers you so much?" she asked.

"Knowing things is a burden sometimes. There are things I could tell you, maybe should tell you, but I don't know if you would want to know. It may only upset you to no purpose," he said.

She watched him as he fidgeted with an apparently useless button on the steering grip. Whatever was on his mind was bothering him, but it didn't seem to be dire to the degree that he was upset over it. It felt safe to ask more.
"What do you know?" she asked.

"I found your father. Do you want to see him?"

Estrella took a deep breath and released the buckles on her straps. She got up from the co-pilot's seat and went back to lean on the bike. Steve was right. Maybe she didn't want to deal with this. It wasn't so bad, just unexpected. She didn't know what to do with it. Did she even care about her father? She didn't think so. She hadn't seen him since she was very little. She barely remembered him. He'd left her ma when she was five.

"Eya? Are you alright?" Steve asked.

"I'm okay. I need to think," she assured him.

The old dread of dealing with men crept in when she thought of her father. She looked down at herself. She was dressed decently in a light gray sweater with her jeans and boots. She wasn't dressed to impress anyone, but she was what she was. The curves of her hips and breasts were easy to see in this. She'd already noticed Steve and Tony looking at her today, but they knew how to look briefly without being nasty. It was so easy to be around Tony and Thor, Bruce, Sam and Clint. Steve was allowed to want her, and Bucky treated her like a brat sister. But other men… she didn't know. To even consider seeing her father, who probably wouldn't know who she was at first sight other than an attractive woman, she didn't want to be dressed like this. She would want a skirt and more layers on top, something more to keep his eyes off of her. Her skin crawled with the negative possibilities of meeting him as an adult. He had never been improper with her as a child, but things would be different now.

She shook her head. Maybe later. She went back to sit with Steve.

"I don't want to see him today," she said.

"Alright. I hadn't planned on it being today, though I guess we could have. He's working on an oil rig in the Gulf. I wanted you to know you had more family out there. I didn't expect you to do anything about it. Was it worth telling you?" he wondered.

"I'm glad to know. Is he doing okay?" she asked quietly.

"How much do you want to know?" Steve asked.

"I don't need to know the names of his other kids or anything, but you could tell me generally?" she suggested.

"You knew he re-married?" Steve wondered.

She shook her head.

"I was guessing. It's what most people do," she said.

"Right," Steve kept his face carefully neutral, so she knew he disapproved.

She waved a hand at him to go on with what he knew.

"I don't think he knows your mom passed on. He remarried and had two children, got another divorce, married again, left her, and now he's on his own. He does oilfield work when he can get it, mechanic work when he can't. He's alright. He drinks some, gambles some, but he doesn't have a criminal record and isn't in trouble with anybody. No known medical issues," Steve said.
"So I've got time if I want to see him later," Estrella concluded.

"I don't know. Time isn't promised to any of us," Steve said.

She looked sharply to him.

"You want me to go see him," she said, almost like an accusation.

"I didn't say that. I was only pointing out that none of us knows when we're gonna go. There aren't any guarantees," Steve said.

"Stop thinking about work! You're not dying today," she said stubbornly.

"Alright. I don't wanna think about work anyway. But before we stop talking about it, there's more," Steve said hesitantly.

"More what?" she asked flatly.

"More things you're not gonna want to hear," Steve said.

"Did you bring wine?" she asked abruptly.

"No, why?" he wondered.

"Because if you keep telling me unpleasant things, I want wine!" she teased with a little smile to hopefully lighten their mood.

"Oh. Nah. Maybe you won't think this is so bad. Or maybe you will. Let's get it over with. Open the compartment at your knees," Steve told her.

Estrella looked at him with clear disapproval. Steve ground his teeth and looked steadily out the windshield, refusing to acknowledge her lack of acceptance. She sighed, then looked in front of her for a latch. There was one. She opened it. In a little space large enough for a cellphone was a card. It was black, so it was hard to see at first. She swiped her fingers to get it, then held it up to the light. It was plain black on both sides. Even the edges were black. With a closer look under the sunlight, she could see there was a magnetic strip on one side. The other side showed a slightly raised area where a chip was embedded. There were no numbers, no names, no writing at all on the card. It was flat and smooth. She turned it around in her hand and a blue flash lit up on the surface of the card. When she dropped it in surprise, she saw her thumbprint outlined in blue light, then it faded away to black again.

"What is this for?"

"It's a debit card to your account," Steve told her.

"I already have a debit card to my account," she denied.

"Different account," Steve said.

He was being very terse. There were things he didn't want to say. Things he knew she wouldn't like.

"Steve. What did you do?" she asked.

"You have two accounts in your name. Well, your account that you already have with pay from your Stark Industries job, and now two more accounts. Look on the back of the card," he said.
"There's nothing there. It's all black. I already looked," she told him.

"That was before you encoded it with your thumbprint. Hold it by the edges and look at the back," he insisted.

"Which side is the back?! I need reading glasses to tell!" she said in frustration.

"Hold it by the edges. There are four options. Front, right side up and upside down, then back right side up and upside down. One in four chances you'll get it right," he suggested patiently.

"You people! I don't know why you have to make a debit card so complicated. If you'd just put numbers or a name, oh," Estrella said as a phone number appeared in blue when she found the back and held it upright on the third try.

"If you call that number, you'll get LaVonne Hollis. She's Tony's accountant. And mine. And now yours," Steve said.

He was already wincing and cringing as he said it.

"Stark's accountant! Are you crazy! How much money is on this card!?!" she demanded.

Steve mumbled something and refused to look at her.

"I can't hear you. How much did you put?" she asked.

"million," he mumbled.

Estrella felt like she was plunged into cold, deep water. A million dollars. She was holding access to a million dollars in her hand. More money than her Uncle Alberto or Jesse would ever earn in their lives. What did Steve want from her? The card dropped from her fingers and fell to the floor.

"That's not what I expected," Steve said with some humor.

At least she'd stopped yelling at him.

"I can't accept this," Estrella said quietly.

"You can," he insisted.

"What do you want me to do for it, Steve? This is too much. Far too much. I can't-"

"You will," he said.

"Don't tell me I will. I'm not your prostitute! You don't own me. I won't let you own me!" she said.

Tears of rage and disappointment welled in her eyes and she hated it. They were having a misunderstanding, a mismatch, and things were going wrong already. They weren't even married yet. There was no way she could accept being his-

"It's not about you, Estrella. It's about me. God willing, you're going to be the mother of my children. I'm going to be gone sometimes, so I'll need you to manage our finances, pay our bills. I might not come home someday, so I want to know you and the kids are taken care of, even without me. I know you were hurt and people wanted to use you, and you think nothing in life is free. So it isn't free. Yeah, let's make it about that, if it makes you feel better. I need you to take care of our children, Eya. I need you to take care of yourself and not get yourself into danger again, to not let yourself be unhealthy again. For me to be me, I need to know I've taken care of you and our
children. Did you think I'd be able to sleep at night if I was stuck in a prison somewhere, wondering what the kids would eat, where you would live if I wasn't there to take care of my responsibilities and you didn't have what you need? That's not even a percent of the money, Eya! It's nothing compared to all the rest. Can you just take it so I won't have to worry so much? Please?" he asked.

"You have more than a hundred million dollars?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm not a billionaire like Tony, but… yeah. I'm sorry," Steve said with sore grumpiness. She was staring at him. She still hadn't picked up the card from the floor.

"Quit staring at me like that! I ate cats and pigeons sometimes when I was a kid. We all did, because we had to. I'm pretty sure Buck sold himself a time or two to pay for my medicine when I was sick after mom died. I know what it's like to live without and it's not my fault I have money now. The Army piled it up, and Howard got hold of it, then Tony and LaVonne, and now there's lots of it and I didn't earn it. So throw that out the window if you don't want it! Tell me to turn the jet around and I'll bring you back to Wanda's place if that's what you want," Steve riled at her.

Estrella inhaled a shivery breath. It felt like she should cry, but she didn't. This was her problem, and she'd upset him with it. He was a good man. The best. Her learned defenses from street life had overwhelmed her again and she'd been ungrateful and hurt his feelings. Respectfully, she picked up the card and rubbed it clean on her sweater. Not that it was dirty from the floor, because it was a brand new jet. His jet. His bike. His money. His financial advisor. She took a deep breath and carefully stowed the black card in the cubby where she'd found it.

Then she got up from her seat and went over to his. He watched her cautiously.

"Am I going to crash us and kill us if I sit with you?" she asked.

"No, doll, come on," Steve said.

He took one hand off the steering and opened up for her to slide onto his lap. Her feet stayed up on the step and his hand came around to rest at her hip. He bundled her closer and she rested her forehead against the side of his jaw.

"You don't need both hands to fly?" she asked.

"No. I was only doing it that way to make you feel more secure," he told her.

"I'm sorry I'm so bitchy," she said.

"Hey, I don't tolerate anybody callin my girl that," Steve said.

"One last thing. You do want kids, right? I know we talked about it before, but if you've changed your mind-"

"Yes, I want your babies. Why are you asking all these questions?" she wondered.

"I think I'm a little frantic and I'm trying not to be. We're getting married, Eya. That's big. I don't know how to do this and I'm afraid to mess up, so all these things are going through my mind. I'm sorry for being a pest," Steve said.
She rubbed more firmly at the tense muscles of his chest. He sighed and tried to relax.

"I love you. All the things you're pesterin' me with show that you love me too. I think I need counseling about the money and my time on the street, but we'll be alright. Is there anything else you want to shock me with, or can we be happy now?" she asked.

"There's something else, but I don't know if you want to hear it. To be honest, I'm being sly about it and I saved it for last, hitting you with all the other stuff first in the hopes I've got you against the ropes so you won't wanna hear any more, 'cause the last one is what I'm most afraid of telling you," Steve admitted.

Estrella laughed tiredly. It was eight o'clock in the morning and she felt emotionally exercised already. She wondered if she should ask him to get it over with now, whatever he was admitting that she wouldn't like, or if she should stay quiet.

It was frightening to hear that he'd been mentally manipulative like that, but then he was honest enough to admit it. If he was going to be sly, then she'd be sly too. She lay peacefully against him and let him stew in whatever it was that he knew and dreaded telling her. She would keep her peace for as long as she could and leave it up to his conscience to nag him into speaking up.

There was a little bit of turbulence and she looked out the window. The tops of the clouds looked different where they were now. Steve adjusted their flight and increased their altitude.

"Do I need to buckle in?" she asked.

"No. That was the line of the weather system passing under us. Give it a minute or two," Steve paused as more turbulence vibrated the jet, "and it will smooth out."

"You fly a lot," she guessed.

"It comes with the job," he agreed.

"You're used to going over or around the bad weather?"

"Sometimes. Other times, we have to go through it. These are tough little jets. They can handle it," Steve assured her.

For almost an hour, they enjoyed the quiet and each other's touch. It felt strange and wonderful. Steve was afraid he was living in a dream, having his girl in his lap and flying somewhere that didn't have a fight at the end of it. Estrella tried to imagine she was cuddling with him on their city bench outside the coffee shop. She shook her head and laughed. It wouldn't fit at all. There was sunshine here, and Steve, but that was all that was similar. Natasha had been right that day in the medical ward when she'd been so weak, ill and afraid. Taking that one leap of faith had changed her life forever. No going back. Steve had his hooks into her heart now, and she into his.

"Penny for your thoughts," Steve murmured.

"I don't know. It's hard to say them. They're flying around confused," she answered.

"I know how ya feel. Try anyway?"

"How is this going to change us? I don't know how to be a wife. I haven't thought much about being a mother. Am I even myself yet? What am I going to do about working for Stark? Do I want to stop that and only work on my music, now that you've made me a rich woman? Where are we going to live? Steve, I don't think I want to live in the tower forever," she babbled.
"All good thoughts. I think we'll figure out how to be married. It's bound to come naturally, don't you think?" he said.

She smiled because she could feel his erection at her hip.

"I know one part we'll be able to figure out and we'd better not think about it too much right now," she agreed and wiggled a bit into a different position so he wasn't hurting her hip bone.

"Mmm. Yeah, that. I've got a week of trying not to think of that," Steve said, and he kissed her hair, "I don't want to live in the tower forever, either. Maybe only a little longer, until we work something out. Where do you want to live? I mean, down in Texas near your family, or in New York? Work would be a lot easier for me in New York, but we could compromise, spend part of the year in each."

"Right, because it's so easy to fly everywhere now," she said dryly.

"C'mon, Eya. It really is. What do you want?" he asked.

She loved the dreamy feel of them thinking of the future, making plans out of nothing, like anything was possible. There was no one here to tell them no, no one to tell them what they had to do. No parents, no police, no dangerous men, no Hydra. They were free. Almost any reasonable thing they thought of, they could do, and probably some of the unreasonable things too. The sun was angling higher, warming her bottom and Steve's knees through the windshield. This was dangerous. She'd daydreamed about a lot of things when she was spending her time reading in the library or when her headaches weren't too bad and she lived on the street. Poor people always had dreams, some of them crazy because even ordinary things seemed impossible, so it was just as good to dream of big things.

"Two houses and we'd fly between them? We don't even have one house. I don't think I want two houses. I would worry about my plants not getting watered while I was away from one or the other," she said.

"You'd want plants. We can do that. People need jobs, Eya. You can hire someone to come around and water the plants while you're not there," he said.

"Now you want servants?" she sat up to look at him.

"No. I don't want servants. I want to help someone who needs a job. Maybe a kid or an older person. I had a paper route, once. It wasn't much, but it helped pay for the heating oil and kept me from freezing. Quit with the money thoughts, will ya? I'm trying to dream, here," Steve murmured affectionately.

He pinched her on the bottom. She jumped and squealed and jostled his arms on the controls. The jet jerked in the air and she screamed again. Steve laughed and smoothly corrected the slight aberration in their flight path.

"Now you're going to punish me for mentioning money?" she asked with a smile.

She was trying hard to be sane about the flying and the money.

"Sounds like a plan, if it gets me some of this," Steve said.

His hand rubbed her round bottom and gripped it like a massage to ease away the pinch he'd given. Estrella angled up and kissed him. Their kissing quickly turned into a hot, sensual mess. Estrella squawked again when Steve tossed her carefully over to the co-pilot's seat.
He wiped his mouth and shook his finger at her. She looked at the heated desire in his eyes, then worryingly out the window, then back to see Steve gritting his teeth and adjusting himself in his jeans.

"Sorry," she whispered.

She wiped at her mouth too, because that had gotten wild and sloppy fast.

"No kissing?" she wondered.

"Please. Kissing. I just need to have my mind in the right place and not get surprised by it," Steve said.

"Bucky said-"

"Forget about what Buck said. I can manage. Only, last night was intense. So he was right about that part. I wanna. Boy, do I wanna. But let's spend this time not so much on that, alright? Geez, we gotta be at church in an hour. We need to think of other things. These jeans don't hide anything and the leather won't either," Steve said.

"Leather?" she asked.

"Gotta wear it on the bike, at least on long rides on the highway in winter. You'll see. Unless you want us stripping down in the church parking lot, we're wearing leather to mass," Steve assured her.

"I don't have any leather," she said with a confused frown.

"Wanna bet?" he said with a smile.

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Could she be pleased and embarrassed at the same time? Steve looked very good in biker leather and she couldn't stop staring at him in church. She didn't want to look down because she was wearing some too. Somehow, he'd found someone to make them protective leather gear in the same weathered brown color as his old jacket. He didn't look so outrageous as in his PR piece because brown wasn't as dramatic as black. He'd taken his jacket off in church to show only his respectable pale blue button-down shirt, but she was still in awe of what plain brown leather did for his ass. Without the jacket, he looked more like a cowboy than a biker. She kept her jacket on because she was afraid of what the brown leather did for her bottom too. If eyes were on her, nobody bothered her because she was in church and it was mostly old people in the front pews around them.

Again, it felt wonderful to be home. The church itself wasn't her house, but she'd spent so much time here as a child that it held almost as much fondness as a home. They both could go to communion and she enjoyed receiving with him. It was wonderful to share a faith and not have that to argue about. Steve hurried them out of the church and onto the bike when mass was over and she'd sang the last verse of the recessional song.

He handed her the gold-bronze helmet which was now hers and they mounted up. Some heads turned when he kicked the bike to life but she tried to ignore them. She held onto Steve and they were away, out of the parking lot.

"No Eme this time, right?" she asked him, thinking back to their vacation and what had happened after mass last time.
"None. I already checked for that. You'll be safe, Eya, or I wouldn't leave you here," Steve said through their helmet comms.

He took her somewhere that wasn't her uncle's house. They'd landed the quinjet at the small municipal airport and she first thought they were going back there but they weren't. He drove them to a small mostly vacant park in the nice part of town and parked them farthest away from the swing sets where a few children played.

When Steve got off the bike, took off his helmet, then turned around to sit on the seat facing her, she took her helmet off too. She held it at her hip and stared at him. The weather was nice in South Texas for early December, sunny and only a little cool. His blonde hair and the beginning of stubble on his chin looked great under the sun. So did the gold and silver belt buckle Colin had given him. It gleamed at his crotch, which she also couldn't seem to stop looking at. She was grinning like an idiot and she didn't care.

"So, do you wanna know the other thing?" he asked her.

Her smile went away.

She really didn't know. She'd gotten back to feeling happy, and now this unspoken thing hung over them. Steve had his legs spraddled wide, his boots planted on the ground to hold the bike balanced upright. He leaned back over the fuel tank and rested his elbows on the handlebars. The posture and his enjoyment of the sun made her mouth water. His jacket splayed open and showed the delectable contours of his front with the way his shirt pulled tight against him. That damn belt buckle! It drew the eye, and then she got stuck staring below it.

His pose was blatantly sexual and male and he wasn't smiling at her. He wasn't playful or teasing. It meant something. The patient look in his eyes told her so.

"The other thing. You did something with sex. Steve! Why?" she demanded.

"You said you wanted me to date other people, to test that I could be faithful to you. I know myself, Eya. That wasn't good enough. I know what's in my head. Before I could come home and ask you to marry me, I wanted to be sure I could stay true to you no matter the temptation, so I set a test for myself. Now I know I'll be faithful, but you wouldn't like what I did to find out," Steve left it open-ended for her to decide how much she wanted to know.

He was leaving it up to her. All the times he'd offered her the truth or warned her about asking questions burned at her memory. She never was happy when he gave her those kinds of answers.

"Oooo!" Estrella seethed at him.

She was itching to know, but the cautious look in Steve's eyes hinted it might be wise to restrain her curiosity and her jealousy. She could see he was resigned to telling her, but now she wasn't certain she wanted to know the details. He did such crazy things and he felt so strongly, it tore at her heart to hear all the details he would share with her if she asked. Just the fact that she hadn't caught him at anything and he had stopped the bike to tell her on his own reassured her he would always be truthful when he could, even if it would get him in trouble with her. His willingness to be honest was enough. She didn't want to hear it, whatever it was.

"Am I going to see anything about it on the news or the internet?" she asked.

"No"

"Is anybody going to be pregnant?" she asked.
"No"

"Are you going to do anything like this again? Any more sex with other women?"

"No. It wasn't exactly sex, not like you're thinking. I stopped it before it went that far, so that's why I'm satisfied I'm ready to be committed to you," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. She wanted to beat him for messing around, even if he had a good reason, so she did. She thumped her fist on his thigh three times gently, more to express her frustration than to actually attempt to punish him. Steve sat up from his sexy slouch. He uncurled her hand and kissed her palm, then pressed his face to it with his eyes closed.

She had to trust him. Nothing about him felt deceptive or underhanded. He'd done what he'd had to do, then he'd offered to tell her about it.

"I don't want to hear about it," she told him.

He opened one eye and looked at her.

"Are you sure? Cause I'll tell ya whatever you want to know, Eya," he promised.

"I'm not stupid! It's bad or you wouldn't have warned me. I don't want to know, I want to be happy, but how can I be happy knowing you did something with someone? Ooooo! You make me so angry!" she told him.

"I'm sorry I ruined your happiness. I've been thinking it might be better to keep my mouth shut about it like Buck said, but then I couldn't. I don't want secrets between us, Eya. I had to say something," he said.

"Bucky knows about it? He was there when it happened?" she asked, her voice edging higher into upset again.

"He wasn't there in the room, but he knows. You can ask him about it if you want. I'll tell him to tell you, if you ask," Steve offered.

"No! As long as this kind of thing doesn't happen anymore, I don't want to know," she said.

Steve held her hand and set their hands down on his leg. She rubbed her thumb back and forth across his knuckles.

"Eya, what about you?" Steve asked.

"What about me?" she wondered crossly.

He smiled.

"Anything to declare, anything I should know before we do this?" he asked, twisting the ring on her finger.

"Me? It's you who needs sex all the time. I haven't-" she stopped talking and uncertainty made her eyes go wide.

"I might have tried to seduce Billy, if Bucky hadn't stopped me. And Bucky. That week… I don't remember exactly what I did, but I was bad. I remember being in a cold bath and I remember scratching Bucky some other time when he made me angry and frustrated. He had to restrain me," she admitted.
She looked to Steve. For an instant, he looked angry, then he put his anger away.

"Nah, sweetheart, none of that was your fault. Buck told me you were outta your head," he assured her.

There on the bike seat, he hugged her and kissed her ear through her hair. She felt bad for thinking poorly of him, now that she remembered what she'd tried to do to Billy and Buck. Her mind, her heart hadn't wanted to do those things, but her body had demanded it. Steve was much the same, his body demanding things of him which he had to resist. The thought helped her to understand whatever mysterious thing he'd done.

"We can help each other. When we're married, maybe these will be easier to manage," she waved her free hand at their bodies.

Steve abruptly set the kickstand and got off the bike. She slid off the seat onto her feet and watched him. He walked away, several spaces over in the empty row of parking spaces. His posture was rigid. She wondered what was wrong, then she saw him sort of tremble, then square himself with determination. He turned and walked back to her. When he stood beside her at the bike and skinned his fingertips along the leather over her hip, she shivered. He felt energized and crackly, like Thor. She looked up to see the fire in his eyes she'd seen before. Whatever was burning in him, he was alive with it, like a conduit barely containing too much energy.

The uniquely female nature of her gift recognized what she saw and felt in him. It was raw male power. At a quaint residential public park and completely dressed, she flushed with heat. Eagerness to be with him made her eyes slide half shut with desire and her breaths come quick through parted lips. She knew they would be good together, but Steve had something, some rare strength that would take them beyond just sex. Whatever he had sang to whatever she was. It demanded they get together and make the most of it.

"Don't look at me like that, love. I've gotta get you to your family and get back to New York," Steve murmured.

He started to kiss her. They touched for only a moment before Steve pulled away and got back on the bike. Estrella hugged him and he got them on the road again. Her hands pressed at his belly and chest under his jacket. He was hard like stone. He growled at her through their helmets and she stopped the gentle rubbing her hands had unconsciously begun.

It was good he was leaving her with her family for a week. If they stayed together, they wouldn't make it until the wedding. The desire to be together was too strong to resist anymore. She made a needy sound, the kind that came into her mind when she played her song for him. The time of wanting him and not having him was almost over, if only she could wait and keep herself busy for a week.

"I hate you. You're too smart. You're not doing this to let me see my family. You're doing this so we'll last til our wedding night," she teased him.

"Ya got me," Steve laughed briefly. "The one serves to accomplish the other. I really do want you to see your family, but yeah."

They arrived at Uncle Alberto's house and the side gate was open for them. Rather than dismounting on the street, Steve drove them over the grass and into the backyard. He stopped between the trampoline and the backdoor. It felt wonderful but surreal to be home again as Val ran outside and hugged her before she could even get her helmet off. Aunt Rita came out too.
"Hiya, squirt," Steve told the girl.

He refused to let her be weird about her crush on him. Steve hugged Val briefly then set her aside to give Rita a longer hug. Estrella smiled at him while Rita patted him on the cheek and the shoulder. It made her eyes water, the way Steve accepted affection from the older woman. There was something in the way he hugged her that seemed boyish, like he missed his mother.

"This is the same bike," Val said while she ran her hands over the warm leather of the seat and the curve of the fuel tank.

"You'd better stop molesting it like that, you little pervert," Estrella warned her while she got off the bike and took off her helmet and gloves.

Valeria immediately grabbed her hand and angled it to best see her ring in the bright sunlight. Rita came over to hug her and she forgot about everything for a moment while the large, soft woman held her. Rita exclaimed over the ring and patted Steve on the cheek some more. He smiled with relief at her approval. Estrella rolled her eyes at how much influence she could see her aunt was going to have on her husband.

Husband. She liked that word. It sounded alien in relation to her, but she would be happy to get used to it.

Fran, Isaac and Mateo were standing inside the back door. Estrella ruffled the boys' hair and they ran off. She hugged Fran and then they all had to move away from blocking the kitchen door. Rita came in and moved through to the living room, yelling at the men to turn off the television.

Steve came in, followed by Valeria. Fran accepted a polite hug and Steve went through to the living room to greet the guys. Luis shook his hand and so did Alberto, but Alberto also clapped him on the forearm and smiled. Jesse didn't arrive home from work until later, when they were all playing cards in the kitchen. The men had joined the card game because the football game on television was over.

Estrella set down her hand of cards and got up to greet her cousin. He hugged her briefly, then turned to shake Steve's hand. Steve was having none of it. He jerked Jesse into a hug and smacked him on the back a few times. Jess coughed and he grinned. It was a brief, aggressive greeting, but the guys were all smiles.

Steve went back to his cards at the kitchen table. He caught Valeria peeking at the cards he'd set down.

"Hey, cut it out. You don't want me to start cheating," Steve warned her in good humor.

Rita made room for Jesse to sit between her and Fran. Isaac ran to Jesse and dumped a handful of loose Legos on the table in front of him. Mateo came in crying and pointing at Isaac. Alberto fussed at the boys and Mateo sniffled and stopped his crying.

Estrella looked at Steve across the table and raised her eyebrows in question. Steve smiled and nodded. Luis bumped his arm with an elbow and Steve took the card the man handed him. Some of them were taking a while longer to warm up to him, but Steve liked her family just fine. The card game wore on into the afternoon until it was time to reheat the generous leftovers from lunch. Steve ate until he looked satisfied. It was uncomfortable how Valeria kept staring at him over dinner a little more often than she should, but he was good at ignoring the girl when she was acting foolish.
Often, Estrella saw Steve look around at the modest kitchen and the people in it. It warmed her heart to see him already forming an attachment to them and to the place which was dear to her. He spoke better Spanish to Alberto than he'd spoken the last time they were here. She wondered if Steve was spending his late nights teaching himself Spanish. She knew he was also learning Russian because it bugged him when Bucky and Nat spoke and he couldn't understand them.

The supper was cleared away as it got dark outside. The cards came back out and Alberto got up to open the windows through the house while Luis shuffled and dealt. Estrella smiled. All the people in the house and the warm supper made it stuffy, but they were too stubborn to turn on the air conditioning in December. It was one of those warm, muggy South Texas nights, never mind that it was a few weeks from Christmas.

Rita stood at the back and whooshed the screen door to feel some air movement. Lightning lit up the night sky in the far distance.

"Steve, you should go or you'll have to take the bike in the rain," she said.

He turned from talking to Jesse.

"Don't wanna go. I've ridden in worse," he said.

"I don't want you to go either, but won't you get tired if you stay late? You just got off work yesterday and I know you didn't rest much. You shouldn't fly back to New York if you're tired," she said.

The family watched back and forth to see who would win. Unspoken between them was the knowledge they shouldn't spend another night together. As it was, they were having difficulty not exchanging improper looks at each other in front of the family.

"'m not tired, but you've got a point. We need to get your guitar from the jet. It's more sensitive to the damp than my bike. Jesse, would you bring your truck so we can get her bags to the house?" Steve asked.

Alberto and Rita set down their newly dealt cards. Valeria frowned and set hers down too.

"You're taking the bike to a jet to get Eya's things? Can I ride on the bike?" Val asked.

"No," Alberto told her.

Steve said a quick goodbye to everyone except Jesse, Val and Estrella, who were going in Jess's truck to the airport.

Valeria didn't want to crowd into the middle of Jesse's truck seat, but Estrella pulled older-cousin seniority and tried to shuffled her over. The teenager balked.

"Val, get in or go back in the house. Steve's already on the street waiting on his bike and it's about to rain," Jesse told her.

Steve revved the bike's loud engine as if he'd heard and was impatient. Valeria got in the middle and Estrella slid in and closed the door beside her. Estrella liked the way Jesse's truck smelled of old, dry vinyl and stale cigarettes. It started raining halfway to the airport, but Steve and the bike didn't appear bothered by the water as he rode ahead.

"Why are your bags still at the airport? How did you get a jet to wait all this time?" Val asked as they passed through the entry gate closer to where the private aircraft parked. The man in the
security booth nodded as Steve indicated the vehicle behind him with his thumb. The guard waved them inside too.

"Because it's his jet," Estrella told them.

Jesse drove down the concrete lane among the two aircraft parked there. One was a small, ordinary plane with propellers. The running lights flicked on and the Quinjet lit up as its rear ramp went down. Steve rode the bike straight up into the craft. A flash of lightning showed the streamlined jet gleaming in the rain.

"It looks like a space ship! That's Steve's?" Val asked.

She pushed at Estrella to get out of the way and reached for the door handle. Estrella laughed while Jesse drove right up to the open back of the quinjet. The high tail section shielded the open truck door from the rain somewhat. Valeria clambered over Estrella and ran up the ramp into the jet. They could see Steve securing the bike in its transport straps. He smiled at Valeria and started explaining things as the girl looked around in the jet excitedly.

Estrella looked to Jesse while they sat in the truck.

"What kind of jet is that? It doesn't even look like the one the Avengers use," he asked.

"Custom. He had Tony make it to his specifications," she said.

"Shit. Dammit, Eya! Now who am I supposed to marry? Ma will say 'but why couldn't you find a nice celebrity girl, Jesu? You're pretty enough. Eya got an Avenger. You could at least come home with a senator's daughter or something'," he griped in a mimic of Rita's voice.

Estrella laughed. Then she stopped laughing because Steve crooked his finger at her from the back of the jet.

"Come on. You're going to need to make Val come back to the truck in a few minutes," Estrella told her cousin.

They got out, Estrella staying mostly dry, and Jesse getting out on the less protected wet side of the truck. He ran around and clumped up the ramp in his work boots to join the rest of them in the back of the jet. Estrella had most of Steve's attention while her cousins looked around and exclaimed over the idea of a private aircraft and one as new and specialized as the quinjet.

"Hey, don't touch anything if it isn't that color," Steve said and pointed to a bronze-gold handle near his head.

"Okay," Valeria called out.

Estrella stared at him from the other side of his wet bike. Steve's jacket and leather pants were wet too. They couldn't seem to find anything to say as he took off his leather things and hung them up in a compartment. His shirt and jeans were wet along his front. Her eyes flickered to the damn belt buckle and she licked her lips. Steve smiled at her and opened his mouth to say something.

"NO, you stupid pendejo!" Jesse exclaimed.

A low hum started and began to change pitch. Rain blew violently inside the back of the jet and Steve leapt for the cockpit. Val cried out and there was a thump sound. The wing turbines and the jets began to spin down to rest again. Shredded rain stopped pelting Estrella and the bike.
Steve growled in anger and pulled Valeria from the cockpit with a fist clenched in the front of her sweatshirt. He carried her with her feet off the floor and dropped her on her feet between her cousin and her brother.

"I said not to touch anything which isn't that color," Steve said with cold, precise words.

He pointed to the handle again. Valeria's wide eyes looked at where he pointed and she hiccupped a nervous breath. Steve stood in front of her, almost six and a half feet of rigidly angry Captain.

"Idiot! You could have killed us," Jesse fussed at his sister.

The girl burst into tears and hugged herself.

"I'm sorry," she squawked around her upset heaves of breath.

She swayed on her unsteady feet and looked around with wet eyes, but no one wanted to comfort her. The awfulness of embarrassment and knowing she'd messed up so badly made her want to hide, but there was no place to go except out in the dark and the rain. Three people stared at her forbiddingly. One of them was ignorable because it was only her brother. The other was her so-pretty cousin who looked disgusted to be splattered with rain and whatever muck the turbulence had kicked up from the tarmac. The last one was the man she idolized and so badly wanted to think well of her. The Captain America of her bedroom poster glared at her with mighty anger, and he was in no way Steve, her cousin's cheerful fiancé.

Valeria moaned in misery and turned to run out of the back of the jet. She didn't care where she went, as long as it wasn't here. A strong hand snatched her off her feet again before she took more than a step down the ramp. His chest was far too hard smashed against her nose to truly be comforting, but she cried in relief anyway because he couldn't be terribly, terribly mad if he was hugging her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what it was. I didn't mean to," she blubbered at his shirt.

Steve patted her back a few times, then set her away from him a bit to make her look him in the eyes.

"No. That was my fault. I was distracted and you're just a kid. I should have known better. This isn't a toy, Valeria. If I tell you not to touch something, you don't fucking touch it," Steve said.

Val's eyes went wide. She stopped breathing, she was so surprised to hear such a word from his mouth. Steve shook her just a little, then he set her a polite social distance away. Estrella took her hand and bullied her into the small bathroom she knew was in the side of the passenger area. The women closed themselves inside and Steve heard water running and Estrella instructing Val to wipe the mess off of her.

"I should have been more watchful. I was treating her like a sensible adult, and she's not," Steve apologized to Jesse.

Jesse looked at the formerly pristine interior of the new jet and shook his head. The rear section of the ceiling was spattered with a haze of gray dirt, the bike was spattered with gray dirt; everything was mucked up in the back half of the jet.

"Naw, man. That was good, since nobody died. She needed it. Ever since you got her that necklace, she thinks her feet don't touch the ground. It's time her wings got clipped and it had to be you," Jesse denied his apology.
Steve looked at him, still angry about the incident but mostly at himself. They heard belated miserable crying from the bathroom and Estrella trying to shush the girl.

"You might have over-reacted some, but that's good too. You didn't hurt her. Hah!" Jesse laughed, "You looked like a bear shaking the dust out of a housecat."

"I've hurt her feelings," Steve frowned.

"You broke her heart," Jesse corrected him.

Steve nodded. He sighed and gathered Estrella's things from the side compartment. Her laptop bag and her guitar case needed to go in Jesse's truck. Steve put the things in the truck, shielding them from the rain with his body until they were safe inside.

Val and Estrella were coming out of the bathroom as he came back up the ramp. The girl moved to stand close to her brother, but Jesse stepped away from her. Estrella looked less drenched and grumpy, but she didn't appear to have much sympathy for Val, either.

"Eya," Steve said.

She came to him and took his hand. She wasn't angry at him for snapping at her cousin.

"We should see about Tony's gift before I leave," he suggested.

She nodded. They went to the cockpit, which was still clean. It was brightly lit inside, though the windshield was black except for the lightning flashes. Steve put up the rear hatch so there would be less noise from the weather.

"Go ahead. You do the honors. It's less likely to explode or shock anybody if you're the one who puts the chip in," Steve said.

"Scared?" Estrella smiled at him while she retrieved the little silver gift tin from the dash.

Inside was a small data storage chip. She looked at it cautiously and pressed it into the slot Steve had found in the dash panel. A holographic burst of confetti glowed above the panel and loud disco-porn music blared through the jet's internal speakers before Steve groped for the controls and turned down the volume. A hologram of a male and female stripper danced atop the dash above the card slot.

"He said no confetti or strippers!" Estrella exclaimed.

She waved her hands frantically through the images of the nearly naked dancers to keep Val's curious eyes from getting a good look.

"He didn't say no holographic confetti and strippers," Steve pointed out.

"Good evening, Mister Rogers," a refined female voice said from somewhere.

"Negative. I will not be called by that name," Steve told the new AI system.

He held up a hand so no one else would speak while he was correcting the newborn AI system.

"I apologize. Please provide your preferred appellation," it said with a slight tone of genuine-sounding contrition.

"You may address me as Captain, Captain Rogers, or Sir," Steve told it.
"Of course, Captain. And the lady? I assume Mister Stark has played a joke on us all. Am I not to address her as Sweetheart?" it asked with perfect seriousness.

Estrella snorted a laugh.

"No. You will address her as Miss for now," Steve said.

"Hello, Miss. Mister Stark sends his salutations and wishes to know where to find the infant gift registry," the AI said.

Steve ground his teeth and pulled out his phone.

"Jarvis!" he barked.

"How may I assist you, Sir?" Jarvis inquired from his phone.

"I assume you're more powerful than this new recruit Tony's infected us with?" he asked the senior AI.

"Indeed I am. It would take years for her to attain my processing status," Jarvis said.

"Get inside her. Rip out all the Stark humor protocols. I want a business-only AI on this craft if I'm going to have one at all," Steve said.

Tony's face appeared in a dash panel. It was clearly him as he made his way through a party of people with a drink in his hand and Pepper on his other arm.

"Gift horse in the mouth? You're a cruel master, Rogers, to go tearing into a young AI when she's barely three minutes on the job," Tony said.

Steve blew a tight hiss of air out from between his lips and tipped his head down to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"You've spent too much time with Banner. Come on, Steve, it's just a touch of humor," Tony chided him.

"Tony. Tony. Tony," Steve looked up over his knuckles and shook his head slightly.

Stark swirled Pepper around and against him onto a dance floor. Pepper smiled at them and whatever device Tony was using to communicate and twiddled her fingers in a wave.

"Hiya, Pep. Tony, we're gonna have words when I get home. A child was here when the confetti went off. Strippers, Tony. You said no strippers. Jarvis, are you done?" Steve asked.

"I assume you want inappropriate surveillance protocols removed also?" Jarvis asked.

Steve nodded.

"J, you're a dirty traitor," Tony frowned at them.

"So you've said, Sir, yet I remain in your employ. Captain, it will be another forty-six seconds for me to fully remove all routines I believe you would find undesirable. I apologize for the delay," Jarvis informed them.

"Thank you, Jarvis." Steve said.
"You're no fun," Tony said, and he closed the communication.

"Hey, asshole," Jesse said.

"What a delight to see you again, Mister DiAlba-Castillo. May I direct you to the nearest vermin-infested hellhole?"

Jesse laughed.

"Nah, just sayin 'hi'," he replied.

"I am overjoyed to refresh our acquaintance, Mister Di-"

"Cut the chatter," Steve said.


There was a moment of silence, then the data chip ejected itself from the dash panel. Estrella took it and put it back into its case.

"Thank you, J," Steve murmured.

"Sir, if you won't be needing me?"

"Dismissed," Steve told him.

"AI, state your name," Steve told the newly edited presence in his jet.

"Wednesday," it replied.

"Fine. We'll call you Wendy. Hibernate until further instructed," Steve said.

He got up from the pilot's seat and paced to the back of the jet. Jesse, Val and Estrella followed him.

"That's an AI?" Valeria asked and pointed to the cockpit.

Steve nodded, then pulled her into a hug once more. He patted her hair, then set her away.

"I'm not angry with you, Valeria. I'm sorry if I scared you," Steve told her sincerely.

It was a narrow balance, to apologize to the kid without going too far and making her think she had any kind of claim on regret or remorse from him. Steve made sure no hint of softness showed on his face or in his posture. He wanted to wipe at the fresh tears what welled in her eyes, or at least offer her a hanky, but he held firm. He shook Jesse's hand.

"See you next weekend. Natasha will fly down to pick everyone up," Steve assured them.

He opened the rear ramp for them. Jesse looked around inside the jet one last time. Then he put his hand on the back of Valeria's neck and steered her down to get into his truck.

Steve turned to Estrella, who remained beside him.

"Ya think they're watching?" he asked.

She was glad to see him finally relaxing after Val's reckless stunt and Tony's pranks.
"You know they are but we can put up the ramp, or Jesse is smart enough to keep Val from seeing too much," Estrella said.

"Yeah? 'cause if I close us up in here alone you might not be leaving for a while," Steve smiled and tugged her against him.

Estrella pressed at him so hard that his shoulders thumped against the wall behind him.

They kissed hungrily. Steve's hands went to her hips and pulled her close. Her fingers speared into his hair and he arched her backwards with the urgency of his affection.

"Our life is crazy," Estrella complained when he kissed down her neck and tugged at her butterfly choker with his teeth. The last bit of her words was unmoderated and she didn't care.

Steve grunted at the little mental kick he got from her voice. He sucked at the hollow of her throat he'd revealed. She hummed at him just to strum his brain with want, then lifted a hand to tug her necklace back into place. He shivered under her hands and whined softly, which then turned into a growl.

"I want to run away with you. Now," Steve said.

"You'd have a baby AI watching us," Estrella pointed out.

Steve shook his head.

"I know how to destroy the processor," he reasoned while he lipped at the delicate skin under her ear.

"Mhmm. I want to go too, but we've come so far. Let's wait a week. No, six days. We can do that, Papi," she encouraged him.

"Then get outta the jet and go to your Aunt's house," Steve warned her.

She kissed his dangerously hot smile, then all over his face. His hand was pushing away at her middle while he leaned to kiss her one last time.

"Fly safe and text me when you get home," she said as she backed carefully down the ramp.

Steve stood near his bike and braced his hands overhead as she'd seen him do before in the Avenger's jet. He watched her like a hungry cat until she shut herself inside Jesse's truck against the rain.

"Let's go! Get the truck away so he can fly. If you want, you can watch him take off from a distance," Estrella warned them.

Jesse let go of his little sister's face and started his truck. By the time they were near the airport's
private craft exit, Steve had the quinjet spun up and lifting off the ground. Estrella waved a hand at Steve because she could still see him in the lit interior. She was sure that was intentional. In the next moment, the jet wobbled precisely in what she was sure was a wave of his own, then it spun around and shot off away from the airport. Before it had gone far, it winked out of sight as if it wasn't in the space it had occupied an instant before.

"Where did he go? Is he okay?" Valeria asked.

"He's fine. Probably some stealth cloaking or something," Jesse guessed.

Estrella tried to get comfortable with her guitar case across her lap. It wasn't easy to not cry. She wanted nothing more than time with Steve where they could be alone. And a shower. She felt grit in her mouth from all the kicked up dirt Valeria had caused.

Later, in Fran's old room she was borrowing for the week, Estrella stared at the black card Steve had stealthily slipped into her back pocket. It was lying atop the bedspread in front of her folded knees.

Estrella took out her phone and picked up the card. She flipped it over and saw the phone number glowing. It was only two rings before a woman answered.

"Miss Estrella, welcome to the family. How can I help you tonight?" a lady's voice greeted her with a warm tone.

"Are you LaVonne? Mrs. Hollis?" she wondered.

"You can call me LaVonne. You're wanting to know what your man did, aren't you? He told me when we met to discuss arrangements that you weren't going to appreciate it," the woman said.

Estrella could hear the smile in her voice.

"It's not that I'm ungrateful. It's too much. I never asked for this," she tried to explain.

"I understand," LaVonne said.

The woman patiently waited. Estrella didn't know what to ask.

"He said there was a million dollars on the card, but he mentioned another account," she said.

"That's interesting. The Captain isn't known for telling little white lies," LaVonne told her.

"Well, how much is it?" Estrella asked.

"Which account?"

"The one attached to the black debit card," she said.

"Five million," LaVonne informed her.

Estrella made a choking sound. She dropped the card on the bed. The phone fumbled in her unsteady grip and Estrella held it with two hands, one gripped over the other.

"The other account?" she dared to whisper.

"Ten million. I should explain the interest-bearing account isn't accessible without an office visit. Its purpose is to accrue investment interest which then spills into the debit account…" LaVonne's
voice droned on, but Estrella wasn't listening.

The stinker! It was so much worse than she'd imagined. She corrected herself. Those were uncharitable thoughts. She could afford to be very charitable now. And she could afford counseling. The thought that she was responsible for all this money made her want to run away. Truck camping on the beach would be nice, as long as there wasn't any Eme after her. She didn't want this money to own her, and already it bothered her that it was there, like a thing she had to think about and take care of. She wondered if Steve had felt the same way when he learned about his accounts. She'd have to ask him later.

After she got some sleep, she had a dress to shop for and a wedding to plan. Steve texted her a few hours later with a picture of him in his bed, the bedside lamp on and the covers up under his arms. She was surprised he hadn't sent a racy picture of some sort, with the way they'd been feeling when they parted. She snapped a pic of a sleepy smile to return to him. It wasn't so much Steve who tired her out as everything and everyone around him.

The sounds of her family's house were strange and new to her. She could hear clothes tumbling in the dryer and someone running a shower. It sounded like Jesse had his television on in his room across the hall, and a car with a loud stereo went by on the street outside. Aunt Rita yelled for Valeria to come help with the dishes. Estrella had a moment's worry that the small, ordinary home wouldn't be secure enough to keep her safe while she slept. Then she convinced herself it would be alright. Steve didn't take chances with her safety, now that he knew her particular dangers. If he'd left her here, she was fairly certain she'd be safe. Her exhaustion from the long day was enough to let her get to sleep.

Nick Fury knocked, then came into his office with Maria Hill close behind him. The man laid a thick folder on his desk and waited.

There was something to be said for the direct approach and a lack of flashy technology. Steve picked up the paper folder and opened the cover. He stood up, energized.

"You found him. When do we leave?" he asked.

"Right now, before the trail gets cold. I called a backup team for you, since you sent yours away on vacation," Fury's emphasis on the words seemed to imply he'd been unwise to dismiss everyone on leave for a week.

Steve was beyond caring at the moment. They had work to do. He needed something to focus on to keep from losing his mind from the emptiness in his office and the emptiness in his suite. Fury looked pointedly at the thick folder, then disappeared down a side hallway, apparently not going with them. It was nice to see Maria in tactical gear again. She looked eager to do some real work. Steve brought the folder with him and rode with her up to the locker rooms where he could change into his uniform.

The sound in the jet bay was different. Maria pushed through the doors to give him some privacy to change. Steve glanced through the closing gap between the doors, then he did a double take and looked harder. That man, the one in the suit, standing in the back of the aggressively-modified jet, he had to be…

Steve blinked twice, to be sure it was who he thought it was. He got dressed a little faster. He smiled, tugged on his gloves, and slapped his shield against his back. If anyone could find Rumlow
when he kept disappearing, even from Jarvis, it would be Coulson.

Steve kissed the blessed medal Estrella had given him, then dropped it down inside his uniform liner. He fully closed the armored jacket, then jogged into the flight bay to the waiting jet.

"Captain! It's good to see you again," Coulson smiled at him and reached to shake his hand.

"Likewise," Steve said and gave him a hearty shake.

"I'm a little disappointed. I thought you'd be more surprised," Coulson said as they departed the tower almost before the rear hatch was closed.

"Sorry to disappoint. Not much surprises me anymore," Steve said.

Phil introduced him to a fresh team and Steve was left feeling like a fifth wheel. He could tell these people were a close-knit unit. He wondered why he was along. They seemed plenty capable of going after one rogue Hydra agent.

"Congratulations on decimating Hydra, Captain. It's been long overdue and it's only right that your team was the one to do it. Have a seat and read that file. Brock Rumlow isn't what he used to be. He's more. That's why we need you on this one," Phil said.

"I don't care what he is, I want him," Steve said.

"He's already taken down some good agents and I don't want to lose any more, so I came to you. I thought you might be interested in bringing him in," Coulson said.

Steve glanced at Coulson while the man hovered near him. It was difficult to focus on reading a file while being stared at. One of the agents snickered and Phil cleared his throat, then turned away to busily do something else.

Steve tried to respectfully ignore Coulson's admiration and the gentle teasing of his team. His sense of humor faded as he sat to learn what Rumlow had become. He used much of their flight time reading and re-reading the file, flipping back and forth through the pages to connect any important details which might have been missed.

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Estrella knocked, then came into his room when Jesse grunted at her. He was tired from working all day but he could listen if she was quick about it. He was feeling warm from his shower and full from the supper his ma had held on a plate for him. Sleep wasn't far off, if he could shake the dull feeling that was nagging him. Something felt not-right, but it was probably all in his head from being so tired.

"Eya, what? Make it quick," he grumbled and punched his pillow under his head.

Everyone else in the house was asleep. He supposed she came to him because there was no one else to talk to. His pretty cousin sat on the edge of his bed in her flannel pajamas and rested a sheaf of papers on her knee.

"He's supposed to be home and he's not. He's out working. What if he gets called out on our wedding day?" she complained.

"What do you want me to do about it? You knew who you were saying 'yes' to," he told her.
This wasn't his issue. He didn't do wedding planning shit. All he had to do was convince his boss he needed a day off from work. So why was it making him feel anxious? He shook off the odd feeling. He was too tired to care. If he could figure out what Estrella needed to hear, he'd say it so she would go away and he could sleep.

"He said his schedule was wide open for a while. All I need is to know what color tuxedo he'll wear, but he doesn't answer his phone for almost forty-eight hours now. That means he's working," she fretted.

Again, why the hell was this girl stuff twanging his nerves? So, Steve was busy. Heroes got called for help all the time, right? It was starting to make him angry that he couldn't relax. He needed sleep. Why was this mundane shit making his skin crawl?

"Black. He's a traditional guy. He'll wear black," Jesse mumbled into his pillow.

"Yeah, probably so," Estrella frowned and rubbed at something on her paper with a pencil eraser.

Jesse wanted the light off so he could at least rest his eyes, but the uneasy feeling in his gut got worse. Then he didn't want the light off. He looked to the window. It was closed, the blinds drawn shut.

"What?" Estrella asked him.

"Nothing," Jesse said, but his voice sounded uncertain.

The feeling got stronger. There was definitely something wrong, some threat nearby. His eyes went narrow with suspicion and he stared at the ceiling. There had been no sound, but something was on the roof of the house. It had come from across the yard near the trees, and now it was up there.

"Jess?" she asked again.

He pointed to the ceiling. Estrella closed her eyes and tried to sense what he sensed. All she felt was frustration. That was normal for the last day or so, with her not being able to reach Steve. But no. There was more. This was the kind of frustration that made her want to scratch or hit someone. It was a familiar feeling.

She got up from the bed and went to the window.

"What are you doing, crazy chica? Don't open it!" Jesse hissed.

He stood to stop her, but he was slow, reluctant and undecided about getting out of bed in only his shorts. His urgency spurred him closer to smack at her hands. She had the blinds up and had unlocked the window. Jesse had to wrap around her from behind to get his hands on hers, but he was too late. She threw up the sash and stuck her head out.

"Bucky!" she whisper-yelled into the night, "come down here!"

Jesse almost banged her head on the window, he jerked her inside so fast, but a black-clad fist gripped Estrella's hair from outside and tugged her head down so she couldn't retreat fully inside, nor bang her head.

"What the hell are you trying to do, give her brain damage? The both of ya are already dumb as rocks. Turn off the damn light," Buck grumbled at them both.

Jesse stopped trying to get Estrella back in the window. He shrank away from the menacing
presence outside and went to turn off the lamp. There was light from his aquarium, but it wasn't bright. Jesse stood uncertainly in the middle of the room and looked around for anything he could use. It was too late.

Estrella backed inside, and then the man with the raspy voice came in weapon first. It only took him an instant because he was way too agile for a guy his size. A long rifle angled in and up at the ceiling, then the arm, his head and the rest of him. He propped the specialized weapon in the corner and shut the window swiftly and silently. He had time to tug down the blind before Estrella was on him.

"Bucky! Thanks for coming. I should have known. La Eme isn't that predictable. Steve wouldn't have left me here without you," she whispered.

Jesse felt a little sick to watch his cousin tip up and kiss the grisly-looking black specter on the cheek. A flash of white teeth showed briefly in the dark face. The guy's posture was menacing, even with him standing still. Something about the set of his arms and shoulders made Jesse want to duck away from possibly being grabbed. His eyes shifted around again, seeking anything he could use. A skateboard?

"Kid, don't. You'd need actual weapons and more years of training than you've been alive to have any kind of chance," Buck told him.

"I don't want you in here with my family. Get out," Jesse said low enough to not wake the house.

"Don't make demands you have no power to enforce unless you've got one hell of a bluff, you're playing for time, or you've got an escape plan," Bucky respected the quiet and spoke in a particularly raspy voice that wouldn't carry far to unenhanced ears.

"Will you two stop pissing? Bucky, what color tuxedo will Steve wear?" Estrella asked.

"Who says he'll wear a tux? He might wear a plaid tweed grandpa suit and think he looks dapper as hell," Buck said.

"He wouldn't," Estrella said with horror.

Then she smiled. Steve wouldn't match with anything at all if he did that, but he would be adorable and she would love him.


"What?" Estrella wondered.

"Jumpin Jehosephat is right. You shouldn't have opened the window. You didn't know what I was. I coulda been Victor Creed," Buck told her.

"I don't think so. I don't want to scratch out Creed's eyes like I do yours, I only want to scream at him until he goes away. Plus, Victor Creed strikes me as the kind of guy who would walk on the roof and make it creak with every step to terrorize us before he busts through the window whether I open it or not," she said thoughtfully.


He leaned close and fluttered his eyelids at her. His pretend-flirting felt creepier to her than his sneaking around with a rifle while he was smeared all in sooty gray-black. She could feel that his
flirting was cold and false, a manipulation. He was charming enough to turn the head of someone who didn't know better. That was the sinister part, because she wondered why he did it. He certainly wasn't going to get any romantic attention from her and he knew it.

She turned and looked at Jesse. Her cousin stood in the middle of the room in only his shorts. He was exposed to his bare skin and unarmed, but still watching Buck suspiciously. His breathing was a little fast. His hands twitched a tiny bit. She would have missed it if she wasn't used to looking for signs of twitchiness in Steve.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at Bucky.

"Messin with him," he answered after a moment.

"Well, stop it! It's not nice and these are my people. I love them," she reminded him.

"Yeah? What're you doing in his room?" Buck wondered.

He spoke to the girl, but he stared at the guy. Estrella started pulling at his left glove fingertips because she knew he wouldn't like it. Bucky made a fist with his metal hand to keep her from successfully annoying him.

"I was asking what color he thought Steve would wear, just like I asked you. And if he thought Steve would show up to our wedding. Why is he working this week? We're supposed to be coordinating things for the wedding. Bucky, that's disgusting. I can't believe you thought that of us!" she belatedly realized what he'd been implying.

"Shhh" both guys shushed her.

"Can't help thinkin it. I know what life has taught me," Buck admitted.

"Stop thinking it! We're not that kind of family," Estrella fussed.

Jesse's chin went out a little in a familiar gesture of offense and he stared at Bucky with the same kind of cold disgust the girl did. The two of them didn't seem guilty of anything and they weren't sly enough to fool him. Buck let the moment pass and changed the subject.

"Somebody dangled a crumb in front of Steve. Hydra's smashed, but there's still a few loose ends out there. There's some targets Steve wants and a few I want. He'd better not be taking out Rumlow. He's mine to take," Bucky grumbled.

Thinking of business seemed to take his mind off of antagonizing Jesse. It wasn't really worth it, because she didn't like to hear that Steve was out putting himself in danger before the wedding. Bucky talking about taking targets like an assassin was going to make Jesse even more nervous.

Estrella realized she'd come to accept that Steve and especially Bucky killed people for a living. It made her feel strange and uneasy. She knew Steve tried not to kill anyone and it bothered him when he had to, but Bucky was different. Jesse sensed that. Estrella reasoned that she wasn't marrying Bucky, so it wasn't her place to reform him.

It still felt bad to know she was the beneficiary of his deeds. She glanced aside to the surprisingly simple looking rifle in the corner. It wasn't some sinister black monstrosity, and not an advanced Stark design at all. It looked like a plain wood-stocked hunting rifle with a cylinder thingy on the end and a scope on top. She looked back to Bucky.

"Have you seen any Eme?" she asked him quietly.
"Nah, not yet. You don't need to worry about it. I'm only here as a precaution," Buck said.

"Why do you have to hide and wear dark paint on your face?" she wondered.

"If any of the people I'm on guard against know I'm here, they won't present themselves as targets. It's better to draw them in and take them by surprise than to warn them away," Buck told her.

"Don't kill people from my house, man. Are you crazy?" Jesse said.

"If I had to, you'd never know it. I'm not a rookie," Buck told him.

Estrella disliked the renewed tension between the men. She pushed her hand up at Bucky's dark shirt and poked him in the belly. He stepped back in surprise. No one ever groped him like that, got at his soft spots without a fight. The girl's finger prodded at him, then withdrew.

"You're not eating enough, Bucky," she complained.

"I'm fine," he denied.

"Where are you staying? I'll bring you food," she said.

"I'm provisioned. You think I take jobs without being prepared?" he told her.

"I think you're not eating enough, and I'm going to bring you food. Where are you staying?" she persisted.

"In that little stand of trees to the west of the house, between us and the neighbors," Jesse answered what Buck was unwilling to admit.

Jesse crawled back into bed and pulled his blankets up to his chest. If Estrella was worried about the care and feeding of the sinister asshole and comfortable enough to poke him in the belly, then he decided he didn't need to worry about him, no matter how his gut felt around the man. Maybe he should worry, but he was too tired for this shit.

Buck didn't like that the cousin could feel where he was. He also didn't like that his old training urged him to kill the young man simply for having the ability to sense him. Estrella was right. The guy was about to be family, of a sorts, so he needed to get over it.

Estrella stared at him stubbornly. He got a feeling he was going to be living with a whole lotta stubborn after Steve married her. Now was not the time or the place to argue, so Buck nodded his acceptance if she wanted to bring him food while he was here. If she blew his cover, it would be a lesson for her to not interfere with his work.

"Is that all ya needed me for, to ask what color Steve would wear?" he wondered.

"That, and what you thought he was doing since he won't answer his phone," Estrella said.

"Estrella, you gotta learn not to make a personal call on me when I'm working. Whatever Steve's up to, we'll deal with it later. Go on back to bed and don't worry about the tuxedo. I'm sure Pepper Potts will have him in black," Buck told her.

Estrella bumped his shoulder with her head in some odd sort of affection. She patted Jesse's shoulder, then she left the room and went across the hall.

"She just obeys you like that?" Jesse asked as he was grabbing his rifle from the corner.
"Mostly," Buck said.

"C'mon, shut this window after I'm out. And keep it quiet about me being here," he told Jesse.

"You expect me to listen to you, too?" Jess complained.

"Do what you want, kid. I'm only responsible for keeping her safe. If you bring shit down on your head and the rest of the family, that's on you," Buck told him.

He ducked out the window. Jesse hurried to see how he got up on the roof so silently, but he was too late. Creepy fucker was already up there somehow, in just the few seconds it had taken him to get from the bed to the window. It prickled his pride, but Jesse secured the window and the blinds as directed.

He was inclined to stay quiet about having an assassin on the roof, too. Valeria would think it was fascinating and try to climb up and bring the guy sandwiches. His ma would have a fit and shoot the man with holy water or something. There was no telling what Alberto would do. It was hard to get to sleep, but he supposed if he had to have a killer on the roof, at least it wasn't aimed at him or his family.

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"You can't alter this dress. The new seams would tear the fabric. It would be better for you to find a new wedding gown that can withstand modern thread tension," the woman behind the counter told her.

Estrella firmed her jaw and thanked the lady who had helped her. She really liked the classic dress she and Valeria had finally found in the third thrift shop they'd visited. The first shop hadn't had any dresses suitable for a wedding at all. The second one only had ones which were too large, too small, or not appealing. The prices were within what she was willing to pay, but only because she'd already shopped for wedding gowns online and been shocked at the cost.

They left the boutique and went to where Jesse was waiting for them in his truck. Valeria was resigned to riding in the middle of the seat by now, so she slid in without argument. The women buckled their seatbelts and settled for another ride. Jesse didn't budge from whatever he was doing on his phone.

"Let's go," Estrella urged him.

It was getting late in the afternoon and some places might begin closing for the day.

"If I have to drive you, you can at least let me get some stuff done while I wait," Jesse complained but he started the truck and backed them out onto the road.

"Why can't Ma take you around?" he grumbled.

Estrella studied her list of shops and pointed the direction she wanted him to turn at the intersection.

"Because her shift doesn't end until six and I have to start shopping. I can't wait any longer. It's already Wednesday!" Estrella said.

"So it's Wednesday. You've got til Friday, right? I go out with the guys on Wednesdays," he said.
"She can't just buy a dress off the rack. It has to be altered, and that takes time. And there's other things," Valeria defended her cousin's need to shop today.

"Why don't you drive? You could drop me off at Jed's place and take the truck," Jesse conceded.

"I can't drive. I never learned," Estrella said.

Both her cousins looked at her like she was weird.

"Who was going to pay for me to have driving lessons or to take the test? How would I get there? What car would I use? I didn't have any...anything," Estrella pointed out, flustered that they couldn't understand being homeless.

Valeria laid a hand on her leg in empathy and Jesse didn't complain about driving her after that.

"You have a New York license. I know you do. Steve wouldn't let you come back here without ID. Let me see it," Jesse said as he kept his eyes on the road in midtown traffic.

Estrella sighed and pulled her New York driver's license from her pocket. She handed it to Val, who held it up for Jesse to glance at.

"That's your picture, but it has the wrong birthday. Sofia Morales? That's not even a name, chica. What is this?" Jesse asked.

Estrella shrugged and took her ID back from Val.

"She's going to be like a spy. Steve wants to keep her safe," Valeria guessed.

Estrella nodded.

"We shouldn't waste time at the mall. What are you going to do, get a dress at JCPenney? They closed the Sears." Valeria said.

"I need other things too, not just the dress" Estrella told her.

Jesse dropped them at the food court entrance of the mall and went to park. He wondered if he should go in with them, but then he didn't. Steve and that asshole had taken care of all the danger, hadn't they? Jesse found a parking spot in easy view of the doors and got comfortable with his phone. He kept an eye on his sister and his cousin until they made it safely inside the mall, then he continued scrolling through the spring class schedules like he'd been doing before the girls came out of the last shop.

A guy who moved in a particular way caught his eyes as he walked across the parking lot. He looked completely unremarkable, merely some guy in jeans, a cap, and a bulky jacket. Just the sight of him prickled Jesse's sense of alarm. He was headed into the mall, the same door the girls had used. The guy turned his head and looked at Jesse from a distance and only briefly. Jesse relaxed. If that bastard was here, he really didn't need to worry about the girls. He tried to shake off the sense of alarm, but it had to fade on its own. He frowned and put his mind back into wondering about school.

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"Don't buy these ones. I know they're cheap, but they're so plain. Didn't Steve give you any money to shop?" Valeria asked.
"I have my own money!" Estrella hissed, "What am I supposed to get? All I need is plain stockings. I don't want to be bare-legged under my dress because what if he does the garter thing? Do they have garters here? Oh, there they are. These are ugly."

She moved from inspecting the white stockings on offer to looking at the endcap display of bridal garters.

Estrella felt frustrated and rushed. She'd wanted to enjoy preparing for her wedding, now that it was starting to sink into her mind that she was going to have one. It felt frivolous to buy all this stuff she would only wear for a few hours, but she didn't want to disrespect the occasion by looking ratty. She was with Steve now, so she should try to look a little nicer than what this store had to offer. The prices weren't too bad, but she didn't like what she saw. It all was plain and boring like it was trying to be formal but wasn't, or it looked like it belonged on a prostitute. The antique things at the thrift shops had been much nicer, made with care and interesting materials. But none of it had fit her. The one dress her hips and boobs could fit into would need altering to fit her waist and apparently that was out of the question.

"Eya, we're wasting time. *Come on.* We have to go to the bridal shops. They'll have what you need," Val urged her.

She sighed in resignation and allowed her fourteen year old cousin to tug her out of the department store. No doubt the dedicated bridal shops would have everything she needed, but the prices online had been astronomical. The black debit card felt like it was burning a rectangle into her butt. Her poor debit card that held her pay from work would buy maybe the accessories, but not the kind of dress she would find at a bridal shop.

Time was running out. Even if she found a dress this afternoon, two days might not be enough time to have it altered. She would have to make the alterations herself, she was sure, and sewing wasn't her finest skill. Anxiety twisted her nerves and she took a deep breath while they made a run through the people in the mall and back to the food court exit.

She thought she saw a familiar shape, but when she looked directly at it, there was no one she knew. Valeria huffed and puffed beside her. They couldn't slow down. Too many men noticed her and these men didn't have the aloof chill of New Yorkers. Several had already changed course to come talk to her, but she hurried so fast that they'd have had to break their machismo dignity to run after her if they wanted a moment of her time. Valeria glanced at her and saw the fear in her face, so she didn't argue about the hurry.

They rushed around a mother with kids and a stroller and an old man with a walking cane and out into the chilly parking lot. Jesse flashed the truck's lights at them to show where he was parked and Estrella barely paid attention to traffic enough to avoid being run over. She pulled at Valeria's hand now. They hadn't bought a single thing at the mall, and that on top of worry about the men was making her grumpy.

When she pushed a complaining Valeria into the truck, rushed in and locked the door beside her, she noticed Jesse's wide eyes.

"What?" she asked, slightly panting from the jog across the parking lot.

Valeria stared between the two of them curiously, buckled herself in, then pushed Jesse's hand toward the keys in the ignition. He started the truck, then gave a pointed look at Estrella, his eyes still a bit wide. They got moving from the parking space and Valeria showed him an address on the hand-written list Eya had made.
"Why did we have to run?" Val asked her cousin.

"You didn't notice the men?" she asked.

"Yeah, but what were they going to do? Maybe they only wanted to talk to us," Val innocently wondered.

Jesse glanced at her again while he drove and she seemed to be missing something important. What? Something he didn't want to say in front of Val? She paid better attention to the areas of their gifts where Jesse was more talented than her. Oh!

Estrella turned her head and looked through the back glass of the truck cab. There was a tarp-covered bundle in the bed of the small truck. It looked like nothing remarkable, but she felt who was under the tarp riding along with them.

Relief flooded through her, so much stronger than her annoyance at Bucky for following her that tears came to her eyes. She shut them and rested her head back against the headrest. Valeria was oblivious, trying to get her phone to link to Jesse's truck stereo.

Jesse saw the slump of relief in Estrella's shoulders. The creepy asshole had come hurrying out of the mall ahead of the girls and he'd disappeared for a moment in the parking lot, then he'd leapt into the back of his truck and wrapped himself in a tarp he hadn't noticed was there when they'd left the house. He was still startled over how he couldn't see the middle part of the man's path from the mall to the truck, and then he'd flowed up and over into the truck bed like horror-film goo going up a wall. But he made Estrella feel better.

Jesse's shoulder blades felt itchy with Barnes riding behind them, but he got them to the address Val had showed him. He'd seen the place before, but never imagined he'd need to go there. It was all upscale women's stuff and he hoped they didn't expect him to go in with them. He was still in his work clothes and boots.

As they parked in front of the store Valeria gave Estrella an eager smile. She hurried her older cousin out of the truck and bounced in the parking lot with excitement.

"Now we're shopping!" the teen exclaimed.

She almost danced around Estrella on their way into the store. The girl's enthusiasm was infectious. She made Estrella a little bit happy to look at things in the store. Even if she didn't buy anything here, it would be nice to look at what they had. The opulent feminine displays in the large front windows were beautiful and made her feel dreamy like when she'd wanted to go into the bath and fragrance shops in the city but couldn't. Men only noticed her body, but women's eyes were sharper, especially when assessing other women. Maybe the ladies who worked here would take a look at her and know she didn't belong in a place with expensive things. She tried to shake the thoughts of self-doubt and put on the persona of someone she imagined might belong in such a place as this.

It was surprising to find Jesse coming into the store with them, until Estrella noticed the irritated look on his face and the set to his shoulders. Estrella giggled, knowing it was Bucky's presence in his truck that drove him to prefer wedding shopping to waiting outside. Jesse took a look around at
the mostly snow white, delicate displays and scowled. As a store clerk approached them, he spotted a comfortable looking furniture arrangement in the middle of the store. Jesse rudely went around the approaching woman and straight to the couch.

The blonde woman smiled at him and shook her head.

"Hi, how can I help you?" the well-dressed and coiffed woman asked Estrella.

It was obvious from Val's giddy gestures who the bride-to-be was. Estrella had lists and printed pictures in her hands and she looked as stressed as some rushed brides tended to. Wordlessly, she held out the photos of dresses she'd liked when she'd looked online.

The blonde woman made a valiant effort to speak to her in Spanish, but Estrella shook her head.

"I speak English. I'm sorry, I'm feeling overwhelmed and I don't know where to begin. I'm getting married Saturday," she told the woman.

"This Saturday? Three days from now?" the lady asked.

The nametag on the lapel of her cream-colored pants suit indicated she was Shirley.

"Yes! I'm going to need alterations and I know there's not enough time. I'll do them myself if I have to," Estrella fretted.

Shirley took the photos of dresses she liked and looked through them.

"Don't worry, dear. We'll help you. Do you have a price range?" Shirley asked.

She gestured them toward a separate sitting area from where Jesse lounged. The seating was surrounded by white latticework. The area was made to feel cozy and separate from the rest of the large showroom by a beautiful rug underfoot and an overhead pergola structure with flowered vines woven around its columns.

"No, anything will have to do. I'm too late. I think if I find something I like that fits me, I couldn't let myself look at the tag," Estrella said.

"Are you sure, dear?" Shirley asked.

"I'm sure. What do you have that might fit me and looks like those pictures?" Estrella said.

Valeria looked at her funny, but she sat when Shirley gestured for them to take a seat. The woman slipped off Estrella's coat and hung it on a hanger nearby.

"No need to rush this. I don't think you'll be able to enjoy your day and make a good decision you'll be happy with if you stay tense like this. Relax. I'll take care of you. White or red? Or would you prefer champagne?" Shirley asked as she moved behind a small counter and opened a mini fridge.

"Oh! God bless you! White, please," Estrella said.

Valeria looked confused.

Shirley brought a glass of white wine to Estrella, which she took eagerly. She sipped it and turned toward Shirley when the woman sat next to her on a nearby chair. She picked up the photo prints and looked at them again while Estrella had more wine. Valeria looked impatient, but she kept quiet as Estrella seemed to relax in Shirley's calm presence. The woman pulled out a few books and opened them to show available styles of dresses which were similar to Estrella's online selections.
She laid the books on a table near Estrella's knees and turned to more pages of wedding dresses, more images of beautiful things. The bride-to-be held the stem of her wine glass and nodded at the dresses she liked.

Val finally noticed the soft music playing in the background, now that they were beginning to relax. She loved the way the store smelled, like new fabric and expensive, lovely things. The girl looked around and saw all the things Estrella would need. There was an entire section of the store dedicated to pretty heeled shoes, and more space for jewelry and veils and hair pieces. On top of a rack there were rows of mannequin lady legs displaying a variety of wonderful, delicate white stockings. Some had seams down the back, some had lace patterns, and some had tiny dots or even pearls attached.

Valeria obviously wanted to go explore the wonders around them. Estrella waved her away while she and the lady looked at bridal styles in the books. She heard Jesse fuss at the girl to not touch anything. The wine was relaxing her as intended and she was finally starting to enjoy shopping for a dress. Since she was resigned to using her black card in order to get her dress ready in time, she felt more at ease. This was a good reason to begin using the account, she reasoned with herself. It was to look nice for Steve, so she stopped letting herself feel frugal about it.

Shirley asked her to stand up and she took a few brief measurements, then she called an assistant and disappeared. Estrella waited for a little while and finished her wine while she looked at more dresses and at the pages in the back of the books which showed bridesmaid dresses and accessories. It was getting later and the store windows were darkening with the evening when Shirley and the assistant rolled a rod of selected dresses to her where she waited.

They were only beginning to show her the selections when the bell rang at the store's entrance. Estrella heard Val's voice calling out and Aunt Rita's voice answered. Valeria and Rita came to the lady's seating area.

"What about Uncle Alberto's supper?" Estrella asked.

She smiled in happiness that Rita had come to meet them. She was in her hospital scrubs fresh from work, but that didn't matter. Estrella stood to hug her and they all sat to look at the dresses.

"He can get burgers or something on the way home. You're getting married, mi Eya! This is important. I only wish I could have been here from the beginning," her aunt enthused.

The gold tone of the overhead lighting made the pearls and sheen of the fabrics look dreamy, like fairy dresses as Shirley and the assistant showed them dresses which would most suit Estrella's tastes. Valeria and Rita murmured and cooed with delight at the pretty things. Estrella was delighted too, but she looked at the offerings with a critical eye. Some didn't have enough coverage on the top. Some were too encrusted with beads and lace. The seventh dress caught her eye.

"This one!" she said, and she stood up.

Shirley smiled at her.

It was a knee-length dress with cap sleeves and a full A-line skirt. The bodice was opaque and cut straight across the chest from arm to arm, but an ephemeral panel of lightly beaded and laced veil-like fabric would cover her modestly to her shoulders. The delicate neckline was pretty. When Shirley turned the dress around, the skirt rustled and a long row of tiny buttons was revealed down the back of the dress. The main fabric of the dress looked refined and somewhat antique in its simplicity, and the heavier beading and lacework on the upper part of the dress diminished to mere hints of embellishment toward the plain hem.
It was a strait, almost plain look compared to most of the dresses around them. Estrella knew she had the curves to make it look good. She nodded vigorously to Shirley and Rita and Val came to inspect the dress. Valeria looked skeptical, but Rita knew what her niece was envisioning.

"Why would you want this one? It's so understated. Don't you want…Oh My Gosh!" Valeria exclaimed when she looked at the tag attached to one of the back buttons of the dress.

"This is the one I like. Don't tell me the price! I don't want to know!" Estrella fussed at her.

"But, niña, how will you know if you can-" Rita started to say.

Estrella pulled the black card from her jeans pocket and pushed it at Rita.

"He gave it to me. I'm embarrassed to tell you how much. I know I can afford the dress. And your dress, Tia, and one for Val and for Fran, and tuxedoes for the guys, and shoes and a veil and everything. I don't want to think about how much he put on that! Time is running out and he only gave me a week to get ready. I never thought I'd say this, but be quiet about the money. He said it's mine, and I want to try to enjoy this. If somebody has to look, you look, but don't tell me," she told Rita.

"Maybe credit cards aren't so smart, Eya. Are you sure? He's only a soldier," Rita cautioned her.

Estrella shook her head and took back the card when Rita handed it to her.

"It's not credit," she said.

"Ma, he has his own jet. It's like a spaceship and it can cloak to invisible and take off straight up in the air. Ste-"

"Ah! Don't say his name! You know I don't want people to know!" Estrella fussed at her again.

"Lots of people are named that," Valeria pointed out.

"You hush. I want the dress. I'm getting the dress," Estrella insisted.

Jesse had wandered over to see what the commotion was about. He leaned on the corner column of the pergola. Estrella looked at him. He'd been to New York and met the people she lived with. He could know. He'd find out sometime, anyway. Estrella crooked a finger at him. Shirley and the assistant avidly watched the handsome young man come over to the bride, never mind that he was a bit grungy from work.

"Unless that dress costs more than a new car, I want it. Go look for me?" she whispered when he leaned his ear to her mouth.

Jesse carefully reached his mostly-clean hand over and looked at the tag.

"A cheap car, or a nice car?" he asked.

"Any car," Estrella said.

"Any car?" he wondered.

She nodded impatiently.

"You're fine," Jesse assured her.
She was relieved. There were some crazy wedding dresses out there, but she didn't think she'd find one like that in Corpus Christi. Shirley looked on, amused at their antics.

"He's so good to you, Eya. I'm so happy! Your mami would be so happy!" Rita said and wiped tears from her eyes.

She accepted a hug from her aunt. Jesse rolled his eyes before he ambled away to sit far from the women again. Was Jesse taking pictures of stuff in the store? Why was he taking pictures?

"Would you like to try it on?" Shirley wondered with a smile.

Estrella nodded again.

The ladies followed to the fitting area at the rear of the store. Shirley's assistant went behind the partition to help her with the dress. Estrella hurried out of her jeans and her sweater and her boots. She chuckled to herself at the passing thought of wearing her cowgirl boots under the wedding dress. She was tempted to do it, just for the fitting, but then she didn't want the colorful boots to ruin her first impression of the dress when she saw it in the mirror.

"We'll only do a few of the buttons because it'll need altering through the middle anyway," the assistant said.

She helped Estrella carefully into the gown. Estrella wondered at the soft, smooth feeling of the inside of the dress and the quiet crinkly, poofy fullness of the skirt. She was very careful threading her arms through the delicate top. It wasn't even properly on yet or fastened, and she felt like a princess.

The assistant fastened the buttons where the dress fit through the neck and shoulders and at her hips. Then she took some tiny padded clothes pins and drew the bodice properly snug around her middle. A few brief tucks and pins, and the dress settled against her like a second skin.

"Will it hold if I walk?" she asked the assistant.

The lady nodded.

She was eager to get out and see herself in the mirrors.

Valeria gasped and Rita cried again when she came around the partition, so she knew it was good. Estrella tipped up on her toes to imitate wearing heeled shoes and she looked in the well-lit mirrors.

Her taupe bra straps were too visible, but other than that, she could hardly believe she was looking at herself. She thought she looked like a cross between Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, which was just perfect. For once, her extravagant curves and bosom looked appropriate. She knew Steve liked her shoulders and neck and collarbones. The top and sleeves would be a perfect tease for him. She was so pleased with the dress, her eyes watered with happiness. Now all she had to do was have it altered and find all the accessories.

"Hell yeah," Jesse said.

She whipped her head around to see him taking a pic of her in the dress.

"Don't!" she fussed, frantic as she saw him hurriedly type something then send off the pic in a text.

"Who did you send that to?" she demanded.
Jesse was a clueless oaf where tradition was concerned, and he had Steve's number.

"Relax. I didn't send it to him. I sent it to somebody know knows him really well. Don't you want his opinion?" Jesse wondered.

He tipped his head ever so slightly toward his truck outside.

"Oh. Yes," Estrella agreed.

It was a good idea, actually. They both looked on until Bucky's response came to Jesse's phone. Estrella laughed. It was exactly the same thing Jesse had said when he'd seen her in the dress.

*Hell Yeah*

That sealed it. She was getting this dress.

"How long for the alterations?" Estrella asked Shirley.

"We can have it for you first thing Saturday morning. That's skipping you ahead of several people on our seamstress's schedule, but you've got a wonderful figure. Anything would need to be altered. There's an additional charge for rush service, but we can do it," Shirley assured her.

"I need it Friday morning. I'm getting married in New York and I have to fly out Friday before noon," Estrella explained.

Shirley's eyes widened a bit and she took a short, sharp breath. She murmured to her assistant, who ran off to get the alterations schedule book. When she had it, Shirley studied it closely.

"I don't know. I'd like to assure you we can do it in time, but our schedule can't accommodate-"

"For a thousand?" Estrella asked.

Shirley looked at her shrewdly, deciding how many apologies she'd have to make to other customers.

"For you, and for the seamstress too. I need this done by Friday morning, eight o'clock," Estrella insisted.

She knew she sounded bossy, but attitudes from Natasha and Bucky and Steve were filtering into her mind, telling her how they would get this done. She could get this done too, if she was firm like they were.

"We'd be happy to work with you, Miss. I'll personally see to it that you're ready to go by Friday morning. You'll need to come in for another fitting tomorrow afternoon, to make sure we'll have it exactly right. Do you have shoes yet?" Shirley wondered.

Valeria looked from her cousin to the woman. It felt strange to see her cousin throwing around money like this, because they all knew she'd been impoverished until very recently. And that cool attitude. Where had it come from? Jesse laughed, then ambled off again. He must know something about how this was happening, how Estrella was behaving like a different person.

"I need everything, and I want them to have dresses too. And shoes," Estrella told the woman and indicated Val and Rita.

"Jesse, you can go home. This isn't for you. Get some food for Alberto and some for us. We'll be hungry after this," Rita said to her son in passing as the ladies moved to the shoe section.
"How long are you gonna be here? The store was supposed to close a half hour ago," he said.

"Don't worry about us, just go," Rita said.

"Okay, give me your keys so I can put some of Estrella's stuff in your car," Jesse said.

Rita gave him the keys, then forgot about him in her hurry to be with Estrella while she found all the things she liked for her wedding. Jesse brought her keys back, then the boy was gone from underfoot.

They had a good time shopping for Estrella and they found things for Rita and Val. The older woman tried to protest the cost, but Estrella insisted again that she didn't want to know any of the prices.

Shirley was uncertain of the plain black debit card which was handed to her. She asked to see photo ID, but was unsure how that was going to help. Everyone was startled when pale blue laser lines briefly traced over Estrella's face from the card the clerk had just swiped. The card emitted a pleasant ping tone and Shirley nearly dropped it.

She handed back the card and the New York license to Estrella as well as the lengthy receipt. Estrella passed the long scroll of paper to her aunt without looking at it.

"Thank you, Miss Morales. It's been a pleasure helping you," she said.

Valeria elbowed her mother when Rita might have said something about Morales having nothing to do with Estrella's name. There were shoe boxes, jewelry boxes, a veil bag and two garment bags to carry to the car, as well as other bags with things the ladies needed. Valeria wanted to help carry things, but Estrella urged her cousin to get in the car with her mother.

"Tia, its cold out. Could you get the car started and the heater going?" Estrella asked her.

Rita looked at her strangely but only for a moment. They were all happy with the shopping and thrilled about the wedding. Having a dress and shoes made it seem more real and imminent. Rita and Val got in the car and the trunk opened for the shopping bags.

There was a tarp tightly rolled up in the forward section of Rita's big trunk. Estrella poked its contents as she put things in. The assistant had helped her carry things to the car. The woman thanked her once again and hurried back into the store.

"Thank you, Bucky," Estrella whispered, then shut the trunk of the car.

She got in the back and happily let Val ride in the front seat. Rita looked at her in the rearview mirror, then attended to safely driving them home.

"Something strange is happening with you, niña. Don't think I didn't see it. Are you letting the Avenger people change you? That Tony Stark and all his money?" Rita asked before they reached the house.

"I have to change. I still want to be me, but there's things Steve needs so I have to help him. That's what marriage is about, right? Helping? I had to be bossy like his Avengers people to get the alterations done in time. It's an act I learned from Natasha, and it worked. I've learned to do what I have to do," Estrella said defensively.

"Okay," Rita said, and she nodded.
Her aunt could see the wisdom in that. They'd both had to do things because they belonged to this family. Maybe Rita didn't want to be fat. Maybe she would have liked a more handsome husband. There were probably things she didn't know about her aunt's past, like Steve said.

It had been another tiring day, but a happy one in the end. Valeria was oddly quiet, but she hugged Estrella before bedtime.

Steve texted her some red kissy lips just as she was falling asleep and that made her even happier. It meant he was finally home, or at least done working and on his way home. Now that she had the most important thing, the dress, she was sure everything else would be alright. She texted a kiss to him in return, but was too sleepy to do much more.

She'd left an extra burger meal and fries out for Bucky. Since Jesse was making her use her senses more, she could feel that Buck was on the roof again. She worried about him briefly when it started raining, but it didn't feel like his position changed on the roof at all. He'd said he was prepared for the job, so she could only trust him that he had something to keep himself dry.

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Thursday evening after she'd returned home from her second dress fitting, Estrella sat at Rita's kitchen table with her laptop. Val was doing dishes slowly and quietly in the background while Steve connected to her on video chat. His text said she had to talk to the priest, so she'd come to the kitchen because talking to the old man in her bedroom didn't feel right.

Estrella smiled and waved, then blew a kiss when Steve appeared onscreen in an unfamiliar setting. It was a plain looking place, with a picture of Jesus on the wall behind the couch, so she assumed Steve was with Father Miller at the church rectory. Steve grinned at her and they got stuck, just as they did in person. They smiled stupidly at each other until Valeria came to stand behind Estrella's shoulder and say hello.

Steve snapped out of his goofy, happy daze at her greeting, then Estrella shook her head and pressed her long hair to her face in embarrassment. Her little cousin had just caught them making goofy-eyes at each other, but she supposed it was better than the priest catching them. Valeria laughed and went back to doing dishes.

"Father, it's connected. She's on," Steve called to somewhere off camera.

He leaned aside and turned on a light so the view was lit with a brighter, more yellow glow than just the blue from the laptop.

"Alright, how do I- oh, there you are. I just talk like this? Is there a microphone?" the priest wondered.

He'd sat on the couch beside Steve and Estrella smiled to see Steve dwarf the slender old man. By comparison, Steve looked like a burly teenager. He obviously cared about the old man's sensibilities, because he kindly explained video chat to Father Miller while Estrella waited.

"Estrella, it's nice to see you again," Father Miller finally addressed her directly.

"Hello, Father," she said shyly.

She'd always been shy around priests. They seemed to her to be a level above normal humanity, except for the bad ones. She could tell this priest was one of the good ones. He didn't feel weird as some ministers did. Steve trusted him too, and Steve was an excellent judge of character. He was
only a man, so his eyes lingered very briefly, but he was good at looking aside instead of at her all the time.

"I'm happy to officiate your sacrament but the situation is unusual. Please forgive me while I attend to some formalities," he said.

"Okay, Father," she said.

"Steve tells me you are a willing bride. Is this true? You will marry him of your own free will?" he asked.

Steve looked sour at the idea that the question was necessary, but he smiled at her response.

Estrella nodded and smiled.

"I love him. I want to marry him. Of my own will, yes," she said.

"Wonderful. Will this be your first marriage, dear?" he asked.

Estrella looked momentarily bewildered, then she nodded.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Steve has shown me your baptism and other sacramental documents. I see you did not confirm. Do you intend to confirm your faith, or do you see yourself as other than Roman Catholic?" he asked.

"I'm Catholic. I wanted to confirm, but my mother died, and I had to move, and the foster families weren't Catholic, and…I didn't have the chance," Estrella said.

"I'm sorry you had to endure such difficulty. Be assured, we can work with you to complete your sacraments when you feel ready. Will there be any pre-existing children coming with you into this new family?" the priest asked.

Estrella shook her head, then her eyes went wide with belated memory. She tried to forget what had happened most of the time, especially now that she was with Steve and trying to be happy. Now that she had love and family again, she was unsure how she felt about her past. She'd blocked most of it out, so she would need to tell Steve things as she remembered them. Now wasn't the best time to inform him, but maybe he needed to know.

"I was pregnant. The baby didn't make it to term because I was injured. It was a long time ago. I forget because I don't like to think of it," she said.

She could almost hear Steve's teeth grinding through the video chat, though the speakers wouldn't be sensitive enough to pick up the slight sound. With the way his jaw looked, she knew why the priest looked aside at him.

"It's not her fault. Don't think that," Steve shook his head sternly at the man.

"I wouldn't," Father Miller turned to face Estrella, "God grants peace to the souls of the innocent. Never fear for the child, dear. Again, I'm sorry for your loss."

He bowed his head and she saw his lips move slightly and silently. She was touched that he prayed, apparently for the little one she'd almost misremembered. Or maybe for her. Or maybe for himself, because it seemed he had to go on, though he didn't like to bother her with personal
questions which brought painful memories.

"Your decision to marry Steve can't be undone beyond certain circumstances. I think fewer young people are getting married in the church because of the binding nature of the sacrament. Do you understand that sacramental marriage in the church is permanent?" he asked.

"I understand, Father," she said.

"I'm not getting a marriage license from the state, Eya. Only the church records will show the marriage, and the records are sealed. They're not in any computer system. It'll appear to the government that we're not married," Steve told her.

"It's okay. I know you planned it that way to keep me and the children safe. Paperwork doesn't matter. God and the important people will know," she agreed.

Steve nodded.

"Those are the necessary formalities. There is only a few days' time, but there is a book I'd like you both to read and discuss together. Customarily, there would be classes to attend but Steve assures me you both will read the material and ask any questions you may have," Father Miller said.

"I'm a fast reader. Unless it's as big as the Bible, I can read it before Saturday. Oh, that's not too much," Estrella said.

Steve held up a relatively small book and wiggled it at her. She nodded her agreement. The priest looked pleased at her eagerness to read the information, whatever it was.

"Lastly, I would appreciate it if you both would not make much of an issue of your marriage among the congregation. If the bishop hears of me officiating a clandestine sacrament, I may be forced into early retirement. Not that retirement wouldn't be nice, but I feel called to serve for some years yet if the Lord will have me," Father Miller said and smiled at them hopefully.

"I won't say anything. I don't want to get you in trouble and we want to keep it a secret too. Thank you for helping us," Estrella told him.

"Steve tells me you're in Texas. He hasn't given you much time to prepare. In his eagerness, maybe he moves too fast. If you need to reschedule, we can discuss a later date," the priest offered.

"I found my dress today, and the shoes and everything. I'll read the book, and I'll be ready for Saturday night, Father," she assured him.

"Matters of convenience are not valid reason to rush into marriage, Estrella. Are you certain you're ready for this responsibility?"

"I'm ready, Father," she said.

She was beginning to feel she was answering the same question over and over. There was supposed to be six months of preparation before a wedding, so she knew the priest was assuring himself that she was doing the right thing and that it wasn't all Steve's idea. It made her feel nice to know there was someone looking out for her and for other women who might be feeling pressured.

She got stuck looking at Steve again, even with the priest there. If she could reach across the distance and touch him, she would. It was good visiting with her family, but she wanted Steve to be her family. No one understood her like Steve, not even Val or Rita or Jesse because they didn't know what she'd been through like Steve did.
Steve grinned stupidly at her until the priest laughed joyfully.

"It's wonderful to witness two people who truly love one another. Thank you. This sets my mind at ease, more than questions and answers could," Father Miller chuckled at Steve's attempt at dignity through a blush.

"Don't be ashamed, Steve. Renewed proof of love is a delight to the weary soul of an old man. I wish you both peace and happiness, and I'll see you Saturday, God willing," he said.

"Bye," Estrella waved at the genial old fellow as he rose from the couch with a bit of Steve's assistance.

"I'll call ya back in a little while, Doll. We've got a book to read," Steve said before he moved his hand to shut down their connection.

"So you're home, now? No more work until after?" she asked quickly.

"Yeah, I'll be home now. I'll call you soon," he assured her.

"Okay, bye," she said.

The connection ended on Steve smiling at her. She shivered at the heat in his smile and hurried to close her laptop before Val could come around and see that look on Steve's face.

"You were pregnant?" Valeria asked somberly.

"Yes. You know I didn't have any help for a long time. No protection like you have. Be thankful for your family, Val. I'm glad bad things didn't happen to you," she told the girl.

Val rushed forward to hug her. Nobody had hugged her when she'd found out she was pregnant years ago and nobody had hugged her when she'd lost the baby. Nobody had said kind words to her. Val's hug felt like a balm on her dimly remembered grief for everything. It was a small gesture, and late, but it meant a lot. Someone cared. Someone would have cared, if only they'd known what was happening to her back then.

"Don't be sad. Things are good for me now. I don't waste time thinking about the bad things and neither should you," Estrella assured her.

Val nodded. She got a text from one of her friends and wandered away to chat in her bedroom.

Estrella rushed off to her room with her laptop to get ready for Steve to call her back.

It took a while, about as long as she figured it would take him to get back to his suite from the church. Then it took a little while longer, so she used the bathroom and brushed her teeth.

She was in a comfy sleep shirt and shorts, her hair down and brushed smooth when the laptop pinged his incoming call and the window popped up. Estrella clicked on his call and maximized it. She wanted to see him as big as she could.

Steve appeared in a white undershirt and plaid flannel pajama pants. He didn't look turned on or like he was in a joking mood. He had something serious on his mind. She frowned a little and could feel her brows drawing together.

"What?" she wondered.

"Are you alright?" he asked, "Father Miller's questions reminded you of painful things."
"I'm okay," she nodded once, "That was a long time ago. I try not to think about it, so I forgot to mention it. I kind of mentioned it the night we spent at Tony's place on Rockaway, before vacation."

"I remember that now but I didn't understand it at the time. I was too engrossed in my own troubles to pay attention to what you said then. I'm sorry, Eya," he said.

She could see he was angry again that those things had happened to her. She sighed. He seemed to care more than she did about the hurts of her past. She didn't want him to. The future was what she wanted to think about. She shrugged.

"That's over. We have a book to read. And why were you gone for two days? I thought you were done with work until after the wedding," she said.

"There was some work I thought would happen after, but I had a chance to get it done before. I'll be able to enjoy our time more, knowing it's taken care of. The stuff Father Miller wanted us to read… I found it online. Check your email. We can read it together. You think you can read as fast as me?" Steve hurried to change the subject.

Estrella squinted her eyes at him to let him know he wasn't fooling her with the conversational evasion. His bratty little grin acknowledged her sentiment. He was too cute for her to fuss at and he knew it. That made her eyes squint more, but then she smiled. It felt good to play with him, to know that they read each other's facial expressions and emotions sometimes better than words.

She clicked over on a side pane to find the file he'd sent and she opened it.

"This is two books," she said.

"Right. The one he showed us is mostly scripture stuff about the sacrament of marriage, the stuff we would have learned in the pre-Cana classes. There's this other one he wanted us to have, but I think he forgot to mention it, or maybe it's for later," Steve said.

She didn't feel like reading. She only wanted to pay attention to Steve. But they'd promised to read. She sighed. The marriage book looked to be the less interesting of the two. Maybe this wouldn't feel so much like homework if they'd had more time to prepare for getting married.

"You're good at everything. You probably read faster than me. Let's do the marriage book first. Do you think we can skim it and absorb the general ideas? We can take more time to read it thoroughly later," she suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," Steve said.

He leaned back against the headboard of his bed and held the hardcopy book in his hands. Estrella was transfixed looking at him. The undershirt clung to him and the loose flannel wasn't stodgy enough to make him look like an old man, not now that she knew what was under it. His eyes flicked up at her over the book he held, and the only thing sexier would be if he was wearing reading glasses.

"You gonna get to reading, Doll? Do I need to make this a race?" he teased.

Reading glasses? Why did she even think he'd be sexy with black-rimmed readers? More than he already was? She wanted to suck his lips and bite his nose, nibble at his eyebrows, all while she rode him and he squeezed and rubbed her with those big, rough hands.

"Babe, you're killin me. You don't wanna read?" he asked.
She could feel the arousal in her expression, so no doubt he could see it. She shook her head. No, she didn't want to read. Steve laid the book aside on the blankets and slouched down on his bed. The slide tugged up his shirt in the back and exposed his lower belly in the front. It drew his pants tight against his groin. A naughty gleam was growing in his eyes, threatening to overtake the promise they'd made to the priest to get this reading done. He would play hooky with her. She could see it. All she had to do was say something outrageous or take her shirt off, or pose in any number of ways she knew would wind him up.

"Ooooo," she seethed, "We promised. Let's see how fast we can get through this one and to the next one."

"Right," Steve grinned at her.

What had she done to him? When they'd first met, he was all charitable friend and do-gooder, bringing her sludgy juice drinks and taking her side against the gawkers. He'd been perennially worried about work and not much fun at all. She'd had to encourage him to go out and do anything except work. He'd been too fuddly to tease any woman like this, and he'd certainly never had that blazing sizzle and male assurance about him. She might have thought it was bravado, only a show, like she saw in other men. They did that to try to impress her and it felt fake like what Bucky did when he taunted her. This was real. Steve knew what he was worth now and he knew how to use it.

Again she glared at him, but it was her fault. She'd sent him out and just as she'd intended, he'd learned he was wanted. He didn't play with her cruelly, but he let her see what he knew. She shook her head to gather her thoughts away from the hot fog of want she'd fallen into.

"Reading!" she proclaimed, and she snapped her eyes to the first open file.

Steve chuckled, low and satisfied. Estrella firmed her mouth against making any response which would distract them from what they should be doing. She began to skim the book. There were the usual front pages and the table of contents, the foreword, then the chapters. It was all about the purpose of marriage in God's plan for humanity, and what it meant for individual people, the gifts marriage brought, and the responsibilities. She slowed down to respectfully read the scripture verses included here and there and she got the general ideas of the chapters. Her eyes flickered aside and estimated how much of the book Steve had left to skim. He was faster than her, and he was probably reading and comprehending all of it, being the over-achiever he was.

Estrella hurried, skimmed through the material faster, and tried not to feel competitive against him. She knew she was a good reader and intelligent. If Steve was faster than her, then it was his enhancements, she told herself, not that he was naturally a faster study. Even that made her burn against her ego, but it was a fun, challenging feeling to race against a friend in reading. It was a lot better than worrying if she should eat, or if the rain would make her blankets wet, cold and miserable. She sighed and released her feelings with a deep breath. Why was she thinking about her past on the street so much lately?

She was done with the book. It had been pretty much what she'd expected.

"Are you thinking about your past? Lately, I mean? This week? Things keep coming back to me, to remind me who I am or where I came from, or to make me doubt that I can live like this now," Estrella said.

"A little. I used to think about my past a lot. About when I was small, and the hardships, and the fun times in the neighborhood growing up, and time I spent with my ma or with Buck, the stupid things we'd do. Then it got painful to think of my mother, or of Buck, and I got too busy to dwell on it. The last few days I've been thinking about how I used to dream of a future, something normal
after the war was over. I'm remembering what I used to want, what me and Buck used to tell ourselves we'd do if we made it through to the other side. Now I'm doin it, so it's kind of a mix of the past and hoping for the future. I don't think I'll believe it's real until we're married a while. I had a nightmare a few nights ago that this isn't real and it's only a dream I'm having while I'm under the ice," Steve told her thoughtfully.

She could see these were his internal ponderings, things he hadn't imagined saying out loud. She was honored he'd share the thoughts with her, even his nightmare. It sounded like they both were wondering if they were ready and if this was real or a dream.

"What makes it real? Pain? Bills to pay? Maybe we only start believing it when I'm in labor and it hurts, or when we have to pay a mortgage, or when we have our first argument," she wondered.

"Life is never perfect. If things are going too smooth, I know I'm in a dream or I've overlooked something. We're gonna argue, Doll. I'm sorry I got so angry at you wanting me to date other people. I was unkind. I think I was afraid you were looking for a way to leave me, to bow out and make your excuses," he apologized.

"I'm sorry I hurt you like that and made you afraid. Did you learn things about yourself you didn't know?" she asked.

"Hm. Some dangerous things, maybe, but I learned to manage them. You're wise, Eya. I didn't know I needed to be aware of those things, but you did," Steve admitted.

"You knew them. You refused to acknowledge them because they made you uncomfortable and you didn't know how to deal with it. Wanda told me you tried to pose in front of her to get your way when you wanted to bring drinks into the library. That's not the act of a man who-"

"I did not! C'mon, really?" Steve exclaimed and sat up to defend himself.

Something in the shift of his eyes told her he was re-examining the incident.

"See? Using your looks made you uncomfortable, but you knew about it. You tried to use it like a sly little boy. You're not a little boy anymore, and you've finally learned to use it like a man," she pointed out.

Steve stared at her. His shoulders slumped slightly and his mouth fell open a bit.

"I lied to you, just now. I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be so dramatic. Lying isn't what you meant to do. You meant to deflect something you couldn't stand to deal with. But then you fixed it at Steve speed," she said.

"Steve speed, huh?" he asked.

A little smile was hinting at the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah. Steve speed is what all the other good men do, just so fast that I don't have time to get offended while you bungle through the error and the solution to the apology," she told him.

Steve laughed.

"God, I love you. I wanna sink into your brain and rub up against your heart and never come out again," he said.
Estrella blinked at him repeatedly. Her mind and her experience with men tried to put a tawdry twist on his words, like he'd said a crude pickup line, but the pure, joyful look on his face made her immediately feel bad for assuming the worst. Steve was simply good like that, and wicked smart. From the patient, loving look that he gave her, he knew she was struggling to interpret him correctly. He gave her time to think about what he'd really meant, not what she'd heard.

She sighed dreamily.

"Now I want to say 'I love you' too, because you understand me and my hang-ups so well, but you just said it, so I don't want you to think it's an automatic response I don't really mean," she pointed out.

"Let's not overthink it," Steve suggested in the generous spirit of a truce.

She nodded.

"I love you too," she whispered.

Steve thumped a fist to his chest and grinned. She'd intended to remind him of their day at the mall when he'd sang at the barbershop and first told her he loved her. It looked like he knew exactly what she meant.

They almost got stuck staring stupidly at each other again, but Steve was learning. He wagged his finger close to his laptop camera and snapped them out of it.

"We've got another book to read," he reminded her.

"We only promised to read the one," she said.

"Come on, we might need this stuff," he encouraged her.

Estrella looked at the time in the corner of her laptop screen. It was after eleven but it didn't seem like there was anywhere they needed to rush off to. She had no early morning obligations and Steve didn't need much sleep. They could read more.

"Do you think this stuff will work for us?" she asked while she looked at the table of contents of the next book skeptically.

"I dunno, but I'm sure we're at least somewhat like normal people. We know you have a predictable fertility cycle. We already managed to avoid you getting pregnant once. Let's look at the material and see if we can adapt any ideas to help us. I don't wanna use a condom or anything from the drugstore if we don't need to. I've done some reading and I hear pills can change your mood so you don't even feel like having sex. What's the point in that?" Steve said.

"Not having fifty babies?" she answered.

"Um, fifty?" Steve worried with his eyes gone wide.

"You said we might live a long time, you because you're you, and me because I got some of your healing which might slow down my aging. If we don't do something, we really could have fifty babies. Or more. I've thought about it," she said.

Steve looked scared.

"That's a whole platoon! Are you sure? I don't know, Eya. I don't know if I can handle that. But if
you've thought about it and it's what you want, I guess I could…” he made a gulping sound and
batted his eyes as if he'd seen something he couldn't believe.

She gaped at his horrible misunderstanding, then she saw the little hint of slyness in his eyes.

"You! You!" she accused him dumbly.

Steve laughed.

She finally could laugh in relief that he'd been joking, but it was half-hearted. The idea of how
fertile they might be was truly terrifying.

"I know we're gonna have issues with fertility, but we don't have to figure it out right now, do we?
Your cycles are long and you were just fertile a few weeks ago. We've got, what, two months, give
or take, to read up on this and come up with a plan? We know what to do to get you through it and
then there'd be another few months to think about what to do. We've got time. More time than most
people have," Steve assured her.

"Steve, you don't know how horrible it was! I know you felt it at the beginning and the end, but
you weren't there for the middle. I don't want to go through that every time. It makes me crazy. I
can't stand being out of my mind like that!" she said.

"Alright, so what you want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know if there's anything that would work for me. What if the myths are
true, what the Mexicans think about me, and I'm some kind of fertility thing, and nothing works on
me? No pills, no patches, no injections, nothing?!" she whispered in fear.

"We'll find a way. I promise I'll take better care of you than you've had in the past. Do you trust me
to try my damndest to find a solution for us?" he asked.

Estrella forced her breathing to slow down. She'd been panicking, finally facing what living with
Steve could mean. She wanted a friend, a lover, a person to cuddle with and live life with. But if
she had to face the torture of a fertility cycle without him four times a year…her mind wanted to
run away from the idea of spending days out of control and miserable.

She tried to look at the problem more optimistically. Any life with Steve would be better than
having to run away to the desert or get raped. It would be better than starving herself to avoid
having a cycle at all. Steve was smart and they had smart friends. Even if normal birth control
didn't work for them, Steve would use his intelligence and his resources to find a way to make it
easier for her. She nodded.

"Okay," she cautiously agreed.

He waited for her to calm down more before he spoke again. She really wanted to hold him, but the
miles between them were cold and empty. They had to wait until Saturday.

"Had you not thought about birth control this whole time since we've been considering marriage,
since I proposed to you?" he asked gently.

"Steve, you must have noticed I have a habit of allowing myself to forget, or to not think about
things that worry me or make me sad. This is one of those things. I've been moving so fast to get
ready for the wedding that I've been able to avoid thinking about it. It was childish of me," she
said.
"I've noticed you block out things. It's not childish. It's a learned response that's helped you cope. Don't be so hard on yourself. We'll figure this out. We've got time," he reminded her.

She nodded. It felt better when she looked at the problem with his calm attitude.

"Do you want to skim through the book? Something in it might be helpful to us," he offered.

Estrella nodded. They began skimming through the book about family planning. It took a while. Things were basically making sense according to the biology she already understood. Then Steve laughed. She looked at him on the other half of the screen from where she was reading.

"Seminal residue? Who says that?" he asked incredulously.

"At least you don't have 'vaginal mucous'", Estrella made a disgusted face.

"Hey, I think I like whatever that is. I like that we can use these methods to either avoid pregnancy or to cause it. It's not a pill or a thing they're trying to sell you, it's just learning how our bodies work. I thought you were fertile for ten days. You're not. Eggs don't live that long. They only last for a day, maybe two if you're different. It's me, my sperm that last so long, so that I can get ya from us having sex a week before you ovulate. See, I learned something," he said with satisfaction.

"You sound like you enjoy the idea of 'getting me'," she noticed.

Steve merely nodded, but there was a whole lot he wasn't saying. She had to look away and bite her lips against a smile. She might be afraid of raising fifty babies, but she wasn't afraid of making them in the first place. She felt the same primal drive that Steve wasn't really hiding in his eyes.

"I don't want to think about this anymore. It makes me ache," Estrella admitted, and she rubbed at her lower belly.

Steve grunted in understanding. He shook his head a little as if he could clear it from thoughts of sex. It must have worked because he managed to look at her normally.

"Do you wanna talk about photography, or flowers? Pepper wants to know if you want simple, small white flowers, or big ones and a lot of color?" Steve asked.

"White and yellow. That's cheerful like fire and sunshine. I would prefer small flowers and only a few. You want photographs? I thought we were keeping things secret?" she said.

"I'd like at least one photo for memories. It could be print only, not digital, so it's not as likely to end up on the internet," Steve said.

"You're good at this. Why do you need me?" she asked.

"Nah. Pepper is good at this. She told me what to ask. What about music?" Steve wondered.

"No music. I get caught up in music. I want to pay attention to the mass and the wedding. We can listen to music later," Estrella said.

He nodded.

"And for after, what about a reception? Your family will be there, and our friends. It would be easier with security if we did something small at the tower," he suggested.

"I don't care, Steve. A little bit of celebration and dancing would be nice, but don't you let Tony plan any of this. I don't want a big, overblown thing," she denied.
"I know you don't, babe. Pepper knows too. That's why we're not letting Tony do anything. He already offered a bachelor party and I turned him down. He's still pouting," Steve smiled.

"You can have a bachelor party if Sam is there. I trust him and only him," she admitted.

"Thanks, but nah. I'm using you as an excuse for why I'm not allowed one," he said.

"What about rehearsal and dinner?" she asked.

"We can have dinner if you want, but Father Miller says we won't need rehearsal because it's a simple wedding mass and we're trying to be discreet. It should be a lot like a regular mass, but we'll marry in the middle of it. He said it'll be easy to follow along," he told her.

"Okay, I'm glad. I don't need a lot of extra things, I just want to be married to you," she said.

She yawned and tried to cover it with her hand.

"Way to make a guy feel like chopped liver, doll," Steve said dryly.

"Don't play like that, Papi. You know I'm tired. I'm not yawning at you. I can't help it," she told him.

"You're cranky when you're sleepy. I think I wanna hold you just to hear you fuss," he said and smiled.

It wasn't a bad smile. He meant he liked her fussing and thought it was cute. She blinked slowly at him.

"Shut down your laptop, Eya, before you fall asleep with it on. I'm sorry I kept you up so late," he said.

"Love you, night," she said sleepily.

"I Love you. Can't wait to see you tomorrow. Nat says she'll be at the airport around noon," Steve told her.

"'kay," she said.

"Two more nights, babe, just two more, then we get to be together," Steve reminded her.

She smiled and yawned again. She really was excited, but sleep was claiming her. She kissed her fingertips, then pressed them at him. He did the same, then they shut down their connection.

In the few minutes after she put away her computer and before she fell asleep, she reveled in how much she simply enjoyed talking to Steve and spending time with him. The sex part was all jangly anticipation and mystery, but she already knew she would love spending her life with him.

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A/N: I've already got a good chunk of the next part written, so it shouldn't be too long until it's done. It'll have the good stuff, so I want to make sure I get it exactly right. In the meantime, I wanted to get this out to you guys. Reviews and comments are greatly appreciated. I always like to hear what you liked or what you didn't like.
Valeria chattered excitedly on the way to the airport, telling her father all about Steve's jet. Estrella had butterflies in her belly about flying again and poor Alberto looked like he did too.

She kept thinking she was forgetting something but the tarp in the back of Jesse's truck covered travel bags and garment bags and her guitar and all her things she'd brought down from New York. There were formal clothes for her family too, though Fran and Luis wouldn't be able to come to the wedding. When she'd started worrying too much Rita had helped her check everything to make sure nothing was forgotten. Rita had also picked up her dress on the way home from work this morning. The seamstress had finished the alterations on time as promised.

Her aunt was a rock for her in the tumult of the morning. She'd worked a night shift at the hospital as a condition of her having the Friday and Saturday off for the wedding. Rita was obviously tired but she insisted she could sleep while they flew.

"I don't see how! It'll be amazing," Valeria said.

"I've flown before, niña. It's all the same when you're in the air," Rita denied tiredly.

They'd taken Jesse's truck and Rita's car to the little airport. Estrella could see Steve's new quinjet waiting for them through the security gate. She could see through the bubble of the front windshield that there were two people inside the cockpit. That made sense. The bright midday sunshine made the air hot off the tarmac when they parked and got out of the cars. A small commercial passenger jet took off on one of the municipal airport's runways. Alberto and Jesse watched it go. Rita yawned and started gathering things to take to Steve's jet.

Valeria seemed mightily disappointed they weren't more excited about the quinjet. She didn't understand that Jesse could see Bucky inside and that he hated Bucky. Alberto looked sick at the thought of flying at all and Rita was just plain tired. Estrella moved to her cousin and spoke quietly to him.

"I have to talk to Natasha and I don't want them hearing it. Keep them out here for a few minutes?" she asked.

"Okay," Jesse said.

He started organizing bags from the back of his truck.

Estrella had flutters in her belly as much for confronting Natasha as she did for the flying. She stiffened her neck when it wanted to bend her head down in fear. She strode quickly to the jet before she could lose her nerve. Someone put the ramp down for her and she hurried up it. First she went to Bucky who was in the co-pilot's seat. He looked tired like Rita.

"Thank you, Bucky," she told him sincerely.

He nodded a little but looked more interested in what they all knew was coming next. Natasha was already standing behind the pilot's seat in anticipation. The gorgeous redhead had her arms folded placidly and an infuriating look of patience on her face.

Estrella let her see the anger in her eyes and she grabbed two fistfuls of dark red hair. She shook the
woman violently, as strongly as she was capable of, which was more effective than she thought she'd be. Natasha stumbled forward onto a smoothly-slid foot and steadied her stance while she let Estrella have her piece of flesh for her anger. The girl growled and raged at her for a moment more, then Nat stood up straight and stepped back. Her knee then her extended foot made it so that Estrella had to step back and let go, or end up off her feet dangling by fistfuls of hair.

"I didn't think you would do that to me!" Estrella finally controlled her anger enough to open her teeth around understandable words.

"Ouch," Natasha said.

She finger-combed her hair back into place. She hadn't moved her hands at all, except to fix her hair. It enraged Estrella further that her attack was merely tolerated, then shrugged off like a mosquito bite. The woman could have at least pushed her around or slapped her back. Her dignity stung at the evidence that her anger, her outrage, and her hurt were ineffective against Natasha.

"I set out to do nothing, little tiger. It was what Steve needed at the time, so I let him. When he asks for help and he appears to have a plan, I go," Nat said.

Bucky cleared his throat pointedly.

"I made it more of a challenge for him. He passed the test he set for himself and fought me off when I tried harder. You should be proud of him," she told Estrella.

"Don't tell me anymore. I already told him I don't want to know! And quit thinking in Russian. You've been talking with Bucky and you're going to scare my family," she replied.

"Then don't try to pull my hair out. Really, Estrella, it was nothing. I wasn't sure he'd think it was worth telling you, but of course he did," Natasha shook her head and rubbed at her scalp.

"I can't trust you and he works with you," Estrella pointed out.

"You were stupid to ever trust me. It's Steve you need to trust. He did it to prove to himself he was ready for you. Didn't he tell you that?"

"He said there was something he was reluctant to tell me, and that he had to prove something. I figured out the rest. It's not so hard. I could tell it was a sex thing and he'd just spent a week with you, so who else could it be?!" Estrella seethed with renewed angst.

Hot tears blurred her vision. She swiped them away furiously.

"If I was a lawyer, I'd tell the both of ya to shut yer mouths. This isn't any good for anybody," Bucky said.

Estrella looked to him.

"She's feeling guilty for upsetting you so she says you can't trust her, but you can. That's as much of an apology as you're gonna get. Move on," Buck told her.

His words were brisk, but Estrella could see warmth in his eyes. Bucky wasn't very good at emotional things or at smoothing over conflicts. Still, he was trying to help. She thought it was nice of him to try.

"You have courage. I could make something of you. You need training," Natasha said and looked at her critically.
These people made her crazy. They didn't know how to be normal friends because all they did was fight, practice fighting, and plan for future fights. The fact that Natasha offered to teach her what she was good at was probably her way of showing she cared.

"No. I don't want to fight as a job. I was only angry," Estrella said with a bit of contrition.

Natasha tipped her head aside in the equivalent of a shrug, then she slipped into the pilot's seat and opened the hatch for Estrella's family and all the bags.

"Thank you for coming to get us," Estrella murmured to her.

"You're welcome," Nat replied as if nothing had happened.

She put her attention solely to preparing them for flight. Bucky smiled at her a little. It was maybe the first hint of a genuine smile she'd seen from him where he wasn't trying to provoke her wrath.

The incident left Estrella feeling mollified. She hadn't expected that. Bucky said Natasha felt guilty. Steve said it hadn't really been sex. Whatever it was, it was over and done with. Could she trust Steve? She thought she could. Whether or not she trusted Natasha in everything, she did trust the woman with her life. She knew Nat wanted good things for her and Steve, despite her odd way of showing it.

Estrella set her fingertips briefly on Nat's shoulder over the pilot's seat. Just as briefly, Natasha touched her fingers then went back to checking their flight preparedness.

Bucky grinned at both of them.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" he said.

"Shut up!"

"Shut up,"

Both the women spoke at once. Buck smiled bigger and lifted his hands in a sign of surrender.

Valeria ran up the ramp and chattered to Jesse about her excitement for flying, then she noticed the pilot and co-pilot. Val slowly, cautiously walked toward the cockpit.

"Don't touch anything this time," Jesse taunted her.

Val flicked her brother a rude gesture before their mother could come in and see it.

"You're Black Widow," the girl said.

"Mhmm," Nat hummed, and glanced at the kid for only an instant.

Valeria turned to study Bucky. He was sprawled in the bucket seat looking very un-pilot like, more like a sleepy cat in the sun.

"Bucky Barnes," Valeria breathed in a whisper.

"Sharp eyes, kid. You must have one of those history books," Buck agreed.

Val nodded.

Buck looked kind of sinister, still in dark clothes and black leather gloves, his tactical soft-soled
sneaky boots, and with hints of dark grease paint remaining around his eyes. Jesse rolled his eyes hard and came to get his sister.

"Go get stuff from the truck, putita," Jesse told his sister and he pulled her away from staring at Bucky.

The girl swatted at him but she went.

"You shouldn't talk to your sister like that. She's just a kid," Buck frowned at Jesse.

"You don't understand. Stay out of it," Jesse told him.

Estrella sighed and went to the truck to carry things too. It was her wedding and she didn't like everyone else doing all the work. Rita was carrying her wedding dress and her guitar so she took the awkward guitar case.

"Go sit, Tia. You should rest. We'll get everything else," Estrella told her.

Alberto dutifully trudged toward the jet with his arms laden with wedding things.

"Tio, I have a little medicine patch for behind your ear so you'll sleep while we fly and you won't get sick," Estrella whispered to him so no one else could hear.

Alberto smiled at her ever so slightly and nodded.

"Si, gracias," he murmured.

Estrella hurried her things inside and showed Jesse and Val where to secure stuff in the cargo compartments. While they were busy and Rita was in the restroom, she quickly got a little patch from her bag and pressed it behind her stoic uncle's ear.

"You can sit and lean back. I promise it's safe. They're very good pilots," she whispered to him.

Alberto nodded but he didn't look convinced.

"Are we ready to go?" Natasha called to everyone in general.

"Did you lock our cars?" Rita asked Jesse.

"Yes, Ma, and we've got everything here," Jesse replied.

Valeria wiggled excitedly in the seat behind Natasha's. Estrella and Jesse both suspected she'd taken that particular seat so she could see out the front window and so she could watch Bucky Barnes for a few hours. Rita and Alberto were across from each other in the back. Natasha put up the rear ramp and it locked shut. Alberto took a quiet, deep breath. Rita's hand fluttered on her armrest but she put it down again. Even if she could reach her husband to pat his arm, she wouldn't dare do so. He wouldn't appreciate looking weak in front of everyone.

Estrella sat behind Bucky and Jesse was behind Valeria. Natasha spoke quietly to air traffic control then she started the jet's engines and wing turbines. Valeria glanced to Estrella with remembered guilt, but Eya smiled at her. The mud was cleaned away from Valeria's accident and all was forgiven.

"Go easy, please," Estrella requested of Natasha.

Nat nodded her understanding. She might have done something dramatic with the liftoff to prod
Estrella but she wouldn't do that to the rest of the family. Bucky looked like he was more interested in checking the inside of his eyelids than in being an attentive co-pilot.

Val squealed quietly as the jet powered up and lifted smoothly off the ground. Estrella clenched her teeth in dread, but it wasn't Clint or Steve flying and they weren't taking off from the top of the tower. Natasha took them up and away gently. Estrella almost cried in relief that Rita and even Alberto didn't appear to be disturbed.

"We're flying!" Valeria said in wonder.

Buck chuckled quietly, then crossed his arms and tucked his head down to rest.

The flight would have been boring except Estrella kept herself busily distracted looking on her phone for examples of wedding hairstyles that might look alright with her veil. It was nice to look out once in a while at the sunny sky and white clouds but Natasha was too good a pilot for them to notice any wiggling or turbulence.

Alberto snored lightly and Rita smiled at him.

"I wish I had my phone," Val eventually said.

"Nobody trusts you not to take pictures and post them everywhere," Jesse told her.

"Jesu, stop being a bitch," Estrella whispered to him.

"Sorry," Jesse frowned.

He glanced at Bucky and then away again.

Estrella understood that being near Bucky made him cranky but he needed to stop bringing her down. She was getting married tomorrow and she would get to see Steve today after all week without him. She wanted to be happy, not bothered that Valeria might feel bad about her brother being mean. Val seemed to ignore Jesse's sour mood as if it didn't matter. The girl nodded off for a while and Estrella smiled that she'd not been able to keep her excitement cranked up for the whole flight.

Val woke and got more excited again as they approached New York. The city looked the same as always, huge and busy. Estrella felt like she was coming home here, too. It was the first time she'd felt a sense of homecoming for New York. Maybe it was for Avengers tower and Steve and her other friends. The city itself certainly hadn't been very kind to her, except for Izzy and Wanda.

"We're landing there? It's tiny," Rita asked as they approached the open jet bay in the tower.

"It's Avengers tower, Ma. That's where we're supposed to park," Val told her.

Estrella nodded to her aunt because Rita seemed to need reassurance beyond Valeria's youthful enthusiasm. No one wanted to wake Alberto until they were landed.

Her heart pattered faster because as soon as the jet leveled for the landing, she saw Steve standing in the back of the bay waiting to greet them. Bucky laughed at her eagerness for the back ramp to open. Before it was fully down, she ducked and hurried out.

Steve hugged her firmly but briefly then set her aside. Estrella wanted to frown at his quick greeting but then she understood. He held her hand while her family came from the jet. They exchanged the usual sort of greetings and everyone grabbed things to bring inside.
Valeria was wide-eyed with wonder as she looked around inside the open jet bay. Alberto looked drowsy and unimpressed. Rita kept a polite smile while Steve brought them through the Avengers locker room and to the elevator. Estrella could tell her aunt felt a little overwhelmed to see this side of Steve, as if she hadn't really believed who he was other than her boyfriend. Steve looked more professional than the guy Rita had seen in swim shorts or biker leather but he was plainly Steve and not his Captain persona. The jet, the city, Avengers tower and the wealth of it all were likely what was making her aunt feel out of sorts. Estrella put her free hand in Rita's and gave it a squeeze. For a brief instant Rita looked at her with anxiety, then she put on her polite smile again. Valeria asked Steve a barrage of questions which prevented any awkward silences.

Jesse watched as Bucky and Natasha came from the jet and joined the group. Steve carried on after greeting the family and didn't seem to notice his friends but Jesse observed his quick glance at the woman and the asshole. He was waiting for it and there it was.

The moment Barnes joined the group and they were close enough to all fit in the elevator, the sinister feeling of threat from him faded to something like a dog on watch. He felt almost like a regular guy when he was near Steve. If he was a dog on watch then Steve held the leash. The idea eased Jesse's concerns a little. Steve felt bright like the sun, as usual, nothing sinister or dark about him. It was like Steve's steady burn drove away Bucky's killer cold. It was unsettling to find Barnes watching him, maybe wondering about what he felt.

Natasha glanced curiously between them and smiled in a way Jesse couldn't interpret. He felt nothing from the woman but hardness. She looked hot as hell and her attitude was pleasant enough, but to Jesse she felt hard like a tool. Like a gun or a knife. He felt that she was neither good nor bad but would take on the will of the one who held her loyalty.

She was a good match with Barnes. Natasha was a solid neutral. Barnes was both ends of the spectrum at once and it felt fluidly unpredictable whether he would behave as an angel or a monster at any given moment. They confused Jesse because they weren't clearly good or evil like everyone else he'd been able to sense.

As long as they both were tied to Steve it felt like good people would be safe from them. They were dangerous hounds, but Steve was the alpha. Jesse smiled and tipped his face down to hide it. Where did he fit in this dominance hierarchy he was feeling? He was like a puppy, he decided. Probably a newborn one and begrudgingly adopted.

"Your new boss must be an improvement over the last one. It was big of him to give you a day off when you haven't been on the job for long," Steve said to him as the elevator opened.

"He didn't like it but I told him I was going. If he's too mad I can find another job. Maybe a night job. There's a tech school for welding or electrical. I haven't decided which yet, but I think I wanna go," Jesse said.

They moved out into a foyer with a wall of glass at the end of it and suites on either side. Steve went to the suite on the right and opened the door. Rita looked at Jesse in surprise while she went inside.

"Jesu, you never said you wanted to go to school! What kind of night job could you get that would pay for school?" his mother wondered.

Jesse shrugged and followed them into the empty suite Steve showed them. The place smelled like new carpet. It was furnished and sunny but it felt vacant like a guest suite, not someone's home. It was underhanded to mention school to his mother while she was disoriented about being in New York but Jesse would take a lucky moment when he could get it. She was less likely to hit him
with a lot of questions right now.

Everyone unburdened themselves of their bags and the wedding things in the living room. Rita and Valeria went to the big wall of glass and looked down at the city.

"Alberto, Rita and Val, you're here for tonight if this is alright. Jesse, you can stay with me and Buck," Steve offered.

Alberto nodded and went to find a bathroom. Jesse noticed Bucky and Natasha weren't with them anymore.

Estrella lingered close to Steve and held his hand like they were permanently connected. They were about to be. The tension between the couple was like two magnets hovering and trying not to get stuck to each other. Steve kept himself mostly turned away from her and Estrella wouldn't quite glue herself to his backside like she seemed to want to. Their hands were the only physical connection and it looked like if they did more than that, there'd be no pulling them apart. Jesse grinned at the way they were almost ignoring each other, but not quite. Estrella tipped her face down so that her hair slid forward and hid her. Steve smiled a little and looked back over his shoulder at her.

God, he'd be glad when the wedding was over and they could go home. Jesse hated New York. Between the dangerous people who lived here and the sexual tension from the couple he felt like an antsy kid who needed to pee. This place, this tower was a madhouse of personalities that needled and prodded at him while he tried to stay calm. He wished he could turn his 'gift' off like Eya and Val could by putting on a necklace that fixed their voices. Maybe if he could have a few drinks tonight it would dull the way his nerves jangled at him. It wasn't one person out of a thousand that he could feel enough to bothering him but the Avengers all together in the tower felt like lightning bolts in a jar.

"Mister DiAlba Castillo, are you quite alright?" Jarvis asked.

Steve looked sharply to Jesse and so did Estrella.

"'M fine," Jesse said.

He walked around from behind the couch, pushed slippery plastic garment bags out of the way, and sat down. He leaned his elbows on his knees and propped his head in his hands. Estrella whispered something but he couldn't hear what.

Valeria was talking to his ma and Alberto sat in a chair and figured out how to turn on the television. Jesse's heart sped up and anger heated him at his own sensitivity, his freakishness.

A warm hand touched his shoulder and fingers flicked a 'come on' gesture where he could see it.

"I'm gonna go crash at Steve's, ma. You worked all night. You could get a nap too," Jesse said and he followed Steve from the suite.

Estrella kissed Steve on the cheek. She stayed to visit with her family and to help them put things away.

Steve sent him a worried glance after the door closed. They went across the open elevator and to the other side of the building. Jesse was thankful he couldn't feel Barton's sharpness from the suite on the left. It felt like Bucky was somewhere else, too. Steve's suite was blessedly dim and peaceful.
"Tell me about it," Steve said quietly after the door closed and they were alone.

Jesse looked uncertainly to him while he flopped on the couch. The place smelled like guys lived here but that was alright.

"Come on, what's bothering you? You said you could sense people. Remember, you called me a beast," Steve said and smiled to ease the weirdness of the comment.

"Yeah, I did. I don't know what's happened, but you're more of it now. You don't need to be all on about my feelings. I can handle it for a little while," he said.

Steve went into the kitchen and got something from the fridge then he came to join Jesse in the living room. He handed Jesse a cold beer and sat in the big chair adjacent to the couch.

"Seventy percent," Steve said, and the daylight shining through the window wall got brighter.

Jesse tried not to gawk or take any notice of the fact that he was being married into a group of people who gave AI voice commands to their windows. Then an urge struck him.

"Let there be light!" Jesse lifted his hands and said in a loud, theatrical voice.

The windows went to full solar brightness and the overhead lights and the lamps in the living room glared at them on their brightest setting. Steve squinted and chuckled until his eyes adjusted.

"Holy shit!" Jesse complained and crossed his arm over his eyes while he held his beer.

"Jarvis, previous settings," Steve murmured.

The house lights faded off while the windows went back to seventy percent translucence.

"I know, it's crazy. You shoulda seen me when I woke up in the twenty-first century. Times Square looked like a sci-fi flick," Steve smiled a little, then he let the humor fade, "Now, tell me about it."

He'd lead into it with a smooth anecdote, but there was no mistaking the expectation in the order.

"I gotta tell you all my shit now?" Jesse challenged him.

Steve leaned back and sipped his beer. He flicked his folded bottle cap behind him with a precise pinch of his fingers and Jesse could hear the little piece of metal land in the kitchen sink.

"No, you don't gotta. If you don't mind, I'd rather know so I can understand how all this affects you. It's possible I could find a way to help. But if you don't wanna," Steve shrugged.

"You don't have to fix everything. I don't need a necklace for my brain. It's good enough being here where it's quiet. Your people, your Avengers, almost all of them have crazy strong vibes. I can feel them. Sam is the only normal one. I mean, he's a good guy, but not freakish good like you and Thor," Jesse explained.

"I'm a freak," Steve said ambiguously.

"You're a freak, I'm a freak, Estrella's a freak, Val's a freak, Barnes is a freak, almost everybody here is a freak. It's like normal people don't belong," Jesse said.

"Interesting observation. Are you gonna be alright while you're here?"

"I was last time. I don't know, maybe I'm changing. What if the more I'm around you people, the
more I feel it, like a muscle getting stronger?" Jesse worried.

"Let's not borrow trouble," Steve said, "Jarvis."

"Sir?"

"If Jesse has an unfavorable reaction and needs some space, take him somewhere in the tower away from people. My gym would be a good place. Call him Jesse as he prefers. He's under enough stress already without the humor," Steve instructed.

"Of course, Sir. I do apologize, Jesse," Jarvis said.

"Thank you, Jarvis. Leave us," Steve told the AI.

They sat in silence and finished their beers. Jesse felt drowsy, like he could sleep. Steve was a heavy presence in his consciousness but it was alright because he felt constant and trustworthy. A random thought landed in his mind and grew.

"Barnes. Natasha. I don't know what to make of them. They make me itch. People like them, I stay away from. But they're with you. I get the back side of them, not the front side, right?" Jesse wondered.

"That sounds right," Steve agreed, "Buck's a jerk, but he wouldn't hurt you beyond a little bruising or maybe a cracked collarbone. Nat's tricky. She'll teach you a lesson if she thinks you need it but she won't rough you up too much."

"A lesson? Like training?" Jesse asked.

"No. Like humiliating you if you do something stupid when you should have known better," Steve said with a smile.

"Shit," Jesse said.

"Yeah," Steve agreed.

Jesse felt like he was melting down into the couch. Steve got him a blanket and encouraged him to get some sleep.

Estrella met him at the downstairs café for a late lunch. They said hardly anything and they didn't make eye contact while they ate. Their skin touching as they held hands was all they could decently handle. He was determined not to be alone with her until tomorrow night. The other people in the diner helped to enforce his good behavior.

Steve checked the time.

"You have somewhere to be?" Estrella asked him without looking up from her soup.

"No, just wondering how long I have until I get to go home with you," he told her with a low tone that made her shut her eyes and bite her lip.

"Are you nervous?" he asked her.

Estrella nodded.

"Me too," Steve admitted.
His hand squeezed hers and his thumb rubbed the back of her knuckles.

"There's no script to follow, Eya. We don't have to start playing house and having babies right off the bat. How do you want this to go?" he asked her.

"I don't know. Vacation was nice. We could take some time off work and just be us?" she suggested.

"I like that. I have a place. Or places. I mean, I don't own them but we have access to them. In the mountains in Colorado, or in Manitoba. Or, if you want, we could go someplace warm again. You have a passport now. We could go anywhere," he offered.

Estrella made a pained face at the crazy thought of them flying off anywhere in the world on a whim. The idea was too big for her. She didn't care so much where they went because she wanted to be with Steve. They could go to a hotel someplace and never step outside for a week and it would be fine with her. Steve seemed to like leaving destinations up to her, so she helped him decide.

"We went to a warm beach last time. I've never been to the mountains. Colorado sounds nice. Would we be camping in the truck?" she asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Nah, it's too cold. There's a cabin. We'll fly. Do you want to spend the first night here or there?" he asked.

"We'd have to wait longer if we took time to fly. Let's stay here tomorrow night, then fly in the morning," she said.

Steve nodded.

"I like the way you think. About that... we don't have to do anything on account of it being the wedding night. Sure, I want to, but I've waited this long. I can wait longer," he offered.

The kindness and understanding in his expression made her heart feel melty. It reminded her that Steve was her friend just as much as he was the incredibly sexy man she wanted to make love with. Her anxiety eased a bit about the wedding night and the coming days. The desire to be together at last was so strong that it was overshadowing the rest of their relationship. She began to look forward to the times when the sexual tension was eased between them and they could enjoy each other as friends and companions again. She took a moment to think about his offer. The thought of sex was thrilling but also scary. It would probably hurt.

Estrella looked around and saw that the few other diners in the room were far enough away to not overhear them. Of course Steve would have already checked that before talking about the wedding. It was a cold, bright afternoon outside the windows and she marveled at how she used to see the city as her only habitat, as if the rest of the known world was lost to her because her circumstances were so limited. But now she could sit and idly make decisions on whether she'd rather go to Colorado or to Manitoba, or to someplace else entirely. The thought of Tahiti briefly crossed her mind and she laughed.

It wasn't so long ago that they'd spent the afternoon in the abandoned schoolyard lying in the sun. It was the day she'd first determined she was going to touch him a lot and he'd mentioned Tahiti. That was the day she'd made up her mind she wanted to try a relationship with him, she realized. Steve had been balky about them touching at all. Now they could hardly wait for tomorrow night.
"If I'm scared I don't want to wait and worry about it. I trust you, Steve. I want to be with you," she decided.

He nodded.

"It's okay to change your mind, even at the moment of. All you have to do is say so," Steve persisted.

Estrella merely looked at him. For a week, since he'd proposed to her, she'd avoided looking at him for more than a second. Now she stared at him for his ridiculous chivalry. It was very sweet of him but he seemed to be forgetting that she was the one who hadn't wanted to wait for them to get married to have sex. Still, she adored him for taking into account the trauma of her past and offering her all the time she might need. Desire and love swelled in her heart and she let him see it. She had to try very hard to pull her gaze down and away after he got caught in it and she saw his pupils go wide with answering desire.

"Mmf," Steve grunted, then he smiled and shook his head.

"Don't be stupid. You know I want to," she told him and also smiled to soften the comment.

She sipped her tea, then set it down.

Now that most of the planning things were done and all she had was a salon visit scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, she could relax some and think about the future beyond the wedding. There was a fragile, tiny hope growing in her that they might get a chance like normal people to have dreams and to pursue them, to have happiness and a relief from the constant worry her life had been for years. Not only the vastly improved circumstances she found herself in, but also the luxury of a friend to share the future with felt like setting out on the beginning of a real fairytale or an adventure story. She didn't think she knew exactly what she wanted for her future yet. Maybe Steve didn't either. That was something they could enjoy dreaming about soon. They could talk about it right now but she didn't want to. She wanted to save it for when she could lie in his arms and they could talk in the privacy of their own space.

"I'm nervous, but I'm excited too. Not just about the sex. For everything. The future, and the possibilities, whatever we end up doing. I didn't think I could ever have this," she murmured while she looked at their clasped hands on the table.

"Me either. I know how ya feel. We just have to get through another day," Steve said, then he remembered something he needed to mention.

"Tony had another idea and I don't wanna offend him. He's been a good friend. Instead of a bachelor party he said we should go get manicures," Steve grumbled uncertainly.

Estrella glanced at him and laughed. The idea of Steve and Tony sitting in a posh nail salon and chattering like women didn't fit at all. It was only Steve's kindness to the man who had helped him so much that could make it possible. Knowing Tony, it wouldn't be a normal experience. Her eyes widened at a thought she felt unsure about. She looked to Steve. He already looked sheepish.

"He's going to have the manicurists be strippers, or naked or something!" she whispered to him.

"Yeah, I think he might. What do you want me to do? Should I turn him down again?" he asked her permission.

Estrella narrowed her eyes at him. Women. Again. But he was asking this time, letting her tell him not to. She could see he would do whatever she wanted. She sighed.
"Go. Could you bring Bucky too?" she wondered.

Bucky knew their situation. He knew how Steve wanted things to go. He would stop things if Tony got too wild and Steve didn't want to be impolite. Buck didn't mind offending anybody.

"Nah. Buck's not gonna go for having his nails done. Neither will Sam. I don't see why a guy needs his nails done but Tony says executives do it all the time. Clint wouldn't tolerate it either, and he's gone anyway. Nat..." Steve made a face and shook his head, "Thor. He'll do it."

"Thor? Having his nails done?!" Estrella exclaimed.

"Sure. He's up for anything, once. Would that make you feel better? Or should I cancel?" Steve said.

"You can go," Estrella said reluctantly.

She didn't want to be one of those wives who didn't let her husband out of the house and wouldn't let him spend any time with his friends. She felt she could trust him to not misbehave, especially since he'd informed her what might happen and given her a chance to say no.

"I yelled at Natasha. I pulled her hair," Estrella admitted.

Steve's teeth clicked shut and he looked startled.

"Did you think I wouldn't figure it out, Papi? I still don't want to know what you did, but I'm not an idiot," she said.

Steve nodded his acknowledgement and stared down at the table. The fingers of his free hand skinned restlessly at the edge of the table for a moment, then he stilled the gesture and looked at her with cool determination.

"I didn't tell you it was her because I didn't want you to think the incident affected our working relationship. I was using her to answer a personal question and she knew it from the beginning. She was a calculating bitch the whole time and it never was a romantic thing. I admire her professionalism and we understand it for what it was. I'm going to keep working with her, but I'll understand if you want me to stop," he said.

It was on her mind to ask why he got to call Nat a bitch when he resisted calling any other woman a bitch, but that idea flew away at his last words.

"You're going to keep working with her, but you'll understand if I want you to stop? What does that mean?" she wondered with quiet threat in her voice.

"It means exactly what I said. Natasha has skills the team needs. I have to lead my team and make decisions that best accomplish the missions while trying to keep everyone alive. Trust and loyalty isn't easy to come by. The team needs Romanoff and for now that's not going to change, but I'll take your feelings into consideration where she's concerned," the Captain told her.

Outrage welled up in her. How dare he do whatever he'd done with Natasha, and then tell her he wasn't going to get rid of her if she wanted him to? She let it burn through her blood while she stared hard at Steve and let him see her disapproval. The Captain stared back at her with calm resolve. She felt like she was poking a mountain with a twig. Or maybe with a burning branch, but it was still completely inadequate at moving him.

Then she relaxed. It was easy to be angry and shrewish about whatever he'd done with Natasha, but
the thought of him capitulating to her idea of removing Black Widow from the Avengers felt wrong. As she imagined it, she felt sad. Natasha was good at what she did. Steve was very good at being stubborn and keeping his promises, and at telling the truth. The Avengers wouldn't be the same without Natasha and maybe she wouldn't respect Steve as much if he simply caved to her wishes. Part of the reason she'd agreed to consider marriage to him was because he'd shown her he could be strong and deny her, despite her being what she was. This felt true to who he was. It felt right to accept his decision even if she didn't like it.

"Okay," she finally said.

"Thank God! I love you so much," Steve babbled in a hurry and lifted her hand to kiss.

She smiled at his sudden reversion to his particular style of innocent sweetness. He hadn't been kidding when he'd warned her so long ago that he could change persona in a moment. She'd have to keep learning to get used to that.

He smooched her hand a few more times, then set it down.

"I know you're good at picking up on things, like the way people are together. Yes, there's an intimacy with me and Nat but it's not based on romance or on sex. She was pushing that but it was about team dominance, not the sex. It's…" Steve paused to gather the right words, "We wouldn't hesitate to stick our hands into a bleeding gut wound if one of us was in trouble."

Estrella made a face. She could understand how an experienced woman like Nat would be tempted to sexually bully a peach like Steve, but he didn't seem receptive to it anymore. Nat said he had beaten her, defeated her, whatever that meant. It sounded like a fight, not sex. In a strangely masculine and pragmatic way, Nat wasn't one to hold a grudge. Their hierarchy had been settled, so she probably saw it as beneath her dignity to try again. Bucky had said the woman felt guilty for her part in the incident and that was probably all the consideration that could be expected from her.

She didn't want to think about this anymore so she changed the subject.

"We're going for lunch tomorrow and to have our hair done. I think we're doing our nails too. Val is going to love it. In the middle of everything, I didn't think about Val being a big Avengers fan. She's dying to have her phone. Rita won't let her," Estrella said.

"I appreciate that. I understand Val wanting to take pictures but its best she doesn't. Instead of having pics, she and Jesse can come around to visit us sometimes," Steve said.

Estrella felt pleased about the idea of them having a home together where family could come visit but she still couldn't imagine having a roof that was hers. A rush of confused thoughts and feelings about the past and the future muddled in her head and she wished for her guitar so she could soothe the feelings away into sounds. Her fingers worried at her necklace and she looked to Steve.

He seemed lost in his own jumble of thoughts, then he looked across the table at her and smiled. It was an odd moment and they seemed to mutually decide not to linger in it. They wanted the comfort to be found in holding each other, but that couldn't happen here or now. It felt like if they could they would hurry the time along and get to the wedding. With that in mind they decided to leave the café.

They cleared their table and left for the lobby and the elevators. Estrella hurried in when the doors opened for them but Steve didn't follow. His fingers slipped from hers and she turned around sharply to question him.
"You're not coming up?" she wondered.

"I…can't," Steve said hesitantly.

He looked around at the private space of the elevator, then at her. She understood. If he rode up with her they wouldn't be able to stay off of each other. Jarvis held the doors open for them patiently while Steve stood with his hands braced in the doorway as if he was struggling not to take a step inside and let the doors close behind him.

Estrella saw the valiant restraint on his face and reached out to touch his cheek. He turned his head and kissed her palm. He seemed to breathe deeply of her and she smiled. As she let her hand fall, her fingers caressed his jaw and his neck. It was fascinating to watch such a big man shiver all over. It thrilled her. The elevator doors creaked and his arms looked tense with muscle under the fit of his shirt.

"Is this the last time we see each other until the wedding?" she wondered.

"I think so," he said.

She looked briefly at the situation in his pants. She tilted her head aside and lifted a brow at him in question. Steve shook his head.

"I'm savin it all for you, babe. Been doing that for a while," he told her.

As alive with desire as Steve seemed to be, the idea of all that restrained passion being her responsibility was both intimidating and exciting. Then again, she had plenty of unmet needs of her own. She too was eager for tomorrow.

"Goodnight, Miss," Steve said to her with a grin.

Estrella cheerfully seethed at his words and blew him a kiss. Steve reluctantly stepped back and let go of the elevator doors. He touched his fingers to his lips, then gave her a little salute. The thought that the next time she'd see him would be at the church made her wiggle with a shiver of excitement.

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Jesse woke to Barnes returning to the suite. Steve came in behind him and they argued about something loudly. They went into the kitchen and Buck made irate banging noises as he got out things to fix himself a sandwich.

Steve sighed and came to sit in the living room across from a bleary-eyed Jesse. Jess noted that it was dark outside. He must have slept for several hours. He felt disoriented but things were righting themselves in his mind as he woke up.

"Hey, Jehosephat, you want a sandwich?" Barnes called from the kitchen.

Jesse grumbled an affirmative and shuffled to the bathroom. When he came out Steve was still sitting in his damp workout clothes. Barnes was in the kitchen and he looked sweaty too, in blue sport shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Jesse tried not to stare at the metal arm while the guy fixed food, then left the stuff out for him.

"You knew I wanted Rumlow," Bucky said as he took his plate and drink to the living room.
He sat at the table by the window and looked grumpy.


"What good is he gonna do me dead?" Buck glanced at Jesse in the kitchen, then talked around his food, "I wanted him alive."

"He's alive, sort of," Steve said with a tiny asshole-ish grin.

"You're just now tellin me?" Buck dropped his sandwich and stood up from the table eagerly, nearly making it topple over with his quick move.

"Ya didn't ask."

Steve's grin was full of shit now, and Jesse smiled despite the morbid nature of the conversation. The people his cousin was marrying into were weird but they weren't boring.

"How? If it's so hard to hold him or track him if he gets away, why are you taking a chance? That's not like you. You shoulda handed him off to the other team or ended him," Bucky said.

"Happy Birthday, Buck, and Merry Christmas. I put him on ice for ya," Steve said.

Bucky growled something that sounded Russian and strode for the door.

"If you want him a little more lively let him thaw out for a while," Steve suggested.

As soon as Bucky slammed the door to the suite and left them in the quiet the smile faded from Steve's face. Jesse put away the things in the kitchen and came to eat at the coffee table.

"Why does he want this guy so bad?" Jesse asked.

Steve held a neutral face that seemed to have something hard and cold behind it.

"Buck was kept prisoner for decades, on ice for most of the time I was, but not all of it. It's incredible he's doing so great, considering everything they did to him and made him do. Brock Rumlow was one of his handlers. At the same time Rumlow was working with me in what I thought was Shield but was really Hydra, he was…" Steve stopped and had to clench his jaw through a patch of raw emotion, "hurting Buck."

Jesse couldn't imagine the kind of goon that could abuse Barnes but he was sure he wasn't being given all the information. He didn't want all the information. Steve looked like he knew more than he wanted to know. He wasn't exactly tearing up, but maybe he'd already cried for his friend. The thought of something being so bad that Steve would cry over it was sobering.

"So you went and got this guy, this Rumlow, and brought him back alive so Barnes could get his revenge?" Jesse wondered.

It seemed to be a premeditated act several shades too dark for Steve, but he'd done it. Jesse could see the conflict in his eyes.

"It's not about revenge. It's about closure. We hope it'll help him feel less powerless, if he's feeling that," Steve said.

"We?" Jesse wondered, "He doesn't seem powerless to me."

"Yeah. I couldn't make that kind of decision on my own. It's not what I would do. It's probably not
what I should do. I thought Sam would think the same, but he didn't. Not this time. There's not a lot of prisons that could hold Rumlow anyway. He's too smart and he's too strong now," Steve said.

"You don't need to confess to me, man. This shit is way above my head. I'm sorry this all happened and I'm sure as hell not going to judge you," Jesse grimaced, "Or Barnes, I guess."

"Thanks," Steve said after a moment.

Jesse set his sandwich down on its paper plate and stared at it. He didn't feel much like eating anymore.

"So he's just going to kill the bastard?" he asked.

Steve shook his head. The look on his face wasn't a denial, but a kind of dread.

Jesse swallowed and fidgeted his fingers together until he managed to clasp his hands against any more signs of weakness. Steve sat dead still and started at the wall across from him.

"You're not gonna go down there and be with him? Like, off to the side just for support?" Jesse nearly whispered.

It seemed the crazy kind of thing Steve would do for his friend. Steve shook his head once.

"I should. I won't. He wouldn't want me to. I won't pretend it's not happening, but I don't wanna see Buck that way. He doesn't need me hindering whatever he needs to do, weighing on his conscience." Steve said.

"You are his conscience," Jesse pointed out.

"Maybe a little," Steve admitted.

"No, not a little. You can't feel him. Without you, he's merciless." Jesse said.

"He's not. Before things happened to him he was a good man. He still is, under all the damage," Steve said.

Jesse didn't feel like he should argue so he didn't. Steve seemed greatly bothered about whatever Barnes might be doing to the Rumlow guy down in the basement. Jesse could feel a hard knot of Bucky definitely sitting on the bad end of the spectrum. It creeped him out. He was like Steve in that he didn't want to know exactly what was going on. If Steve couldn't go down there and be with his friend Jesse decided he could at least hang out with Steve until it was over, whenever that would be.

Steve sat and stared at the wall. Jesse made himself finish his food, then he searched around the suite until he found a bottle of bourbon high in a cabinet. It was good stuff so he sipped it slowly and tried not to think of anything.

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Jarvis directed him to the second sub-basement. When Bucky found Rumlow he smiled. Steve had brought the motherfucker back in one of his old cryo-chambers. It was the worst one, the mid-fifties model that didn't quite freeze him all the way into deep unconsciousness but sometimes let him hover in half-aware icy agony. Geez, how much did the punk know? How deep had he dug into the files? He'd thank Steve later for the thoughtfulness but right now he was eager to get to
Buck made sure Rumlow could see him if he was able to crack his eyes any and look out the frosty glass pane. He stood right in front and smacked his hand on the chamber with a hollow boom, metal on metal. Then he drummed his fingers on the glass.

"Hiya, Brock. Steve punked me. Again. He let me think you were dead. He played it out real sly before he told me he'd left you alive. Just for me. He's sweet like that, ain't he? Always thinking of what other people want. Going above and beyond. He's real thorough on the details and he doesn't forget anything. My memory ain't always so great, but everything's coming back to me," Buck said as if Rumlow could hear him.

Maybe he could.

Bucky didn't bother to unlock the cryo-chamber. He braced one hand on the back half and ripped the steel open, tearing the latch and the hinges off. The heavy door clanged and wobbled on the floor while Bucky assessed the changes to Rumlow.

The fucker had been handsome in a sleazy, sickening way before. Now he was gnarled with burn scars, most of his hair and eyebrows melted off. Cold vapor flowed down to the floor and ice crystals frosted the surface of the body. Buck got a grip on the tactical vest he wore and lifted him out of the chamber. He took the stiff body and propped him against the wall of the bare storage room he'd been stowed in.

Sweet. Steve had even thought to put a chair in the room in case there was need to sit and contemplate things for a while. Buck took the innocuous white plastic folding chair, unfolded it, and set it in the middle of the floor. He sat and stared at Rumlow, waiting.

The frost was thawing but he was unable to move. It would be easy to tell when he was making progress because Brock was going to fall over as soon as the stiffness started to ease.

"J?" he asked.

"Yes, Mister Barnes?"

"Brain activity?" Buck wondered.

"Quite a lot of it. Other vital signs are nearly imperceptible, but I believe he may be able to hear you," Jarvis said.

Almost a half hour later, Brock slumped enough to start a slow-motion slide down the wall. He toppled and fell to the side, then hit the floor with a fleshy smack. There was a quiet, brief groan and one of his hands twitched. Bucky knew how much it hurt to hit the deck when he was still half frozen. Now Rumlow knew it too. There was a lot Rumlow was going to learn tonight.

"Would ya lookit that? Steve left me some bleach and a tarp. That's real considerate of him," Bucky said.

He got up from the chair and ambled over to where Rumlow lay on the concrete floor. It was an unfinished room. Bare concrete took stains pretty bad.

"I think I'm gonna need more bleach," he said as he squatted where Rumlow's barely open eyes could see him.

Brock groaned again and his arms and legs twitched as if he was thinking about getting away.
"Jarvis, fire up the incinerator," Bucky said.

"Done. The incinerator will reach operating temperature in forty-three minutes," Jarvis said.

"Stark can bill me for the extra energy use, 'cause I'm gonna be a while longer than that. Go away, except for monitoring security. I don't want Steve getting his eyes on this. He gets into everything lately," Bucky told him.

"Understood," Jarvis said.

Bucky gripped Rumlow and set him upright again. Rumlow's eyes were moving now and he was definitely breathing. The vest ripped away easy. Now that the frost was off his skin, deep bruises about the size of Steve's fists could be seen on him.

Brock's eyes shifted back and forth, seeking ways to escape, seeking anything to look at other than the Soldier's face.

"This ain't fair but it was never gonna be. For years, you didn't mind takin a piece of me when I couldn't do shit about it. I ain't Steve. Askin for mercy's not gonna help," Buck said when he thought he heard Rumlow try to talk.

He leaned closer to listen to the stiff-jawed mumbling. Rumlow was trying hard to say his trigger words, to turn him back into a mindless asset and get control of him.

The mumbling stopped with the first hit. Buck didn't want him to scream in case somebody might hear and get upset, so he tore off something Rumlow wasn't gonna need anymore and stuffed it in his mouth. Yeah, he was gonna have to search the supply closets for more bleach.

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"Why are we the only ones here?" Rita whispered to her loudly.

It was afternoon. The lower floors of the tower would normally be busy with customers but they weren't today.

Estrella had noticed the salon on the second floor was empty of customers except for the ladies of the wedding party. She and Rita were having their feet and nails done while Valeria, Natasha and Pepper were having their hair done in the other side of the full-service salon. The staff had offered her a massage and a glass of wine but Estrella had refused. She was excited and she didn't want to relax.

In just a few hours she was getting married! She wondered what Steve was doing right now and if he felt excited too, but Rita was looking around the mostly empty salon waiting for her to answer.

"Because Tony and Pepper do things like this. They blocked off the schedule book so we could talk about what we want with no one around to listen," Estrella told her aunt.

Rita looked uncertain how to think of people who could buy the afternoon at a nice salon. Estrella didn't want to tell her Tony and Pepper owned the salon. If her aunt hadn't figured out they owned the whole building she wasn't going to tell her that either.

"It's okay, Tia. It's their way of being nice, like a wedding gift," Estrella said.

She giggled uncontrollably at the tickles to the bottoms of her feet. The lady scrubbing and
massaging smiled but kept working despite her foot wiggling. Estrella managed to get the tickly sensation under control. She wasn't used to people touching her feet. The warm, bubbly water felt good. Whatever was in the water smelled nice, too. Rita didn't seem ticklish, or maybe she'd had her feet done before and was used to it.

"Do you know what you're doing, Eya? These kind of people are so different. How can you be used to them?" Rita asked her.

Natasha, Val and Pepper were far enough away that it felt like no one would be offended at overhearing them. Jarvis might hear. The salon ladies certainly could hear but their dull conversation wasn't likely worth repeating. Even if what they said got passed along to her, Pepper was mature and understanding.

"I didn't have a choice. I was sick and Steve was my friend. I think I was going to die, and then I woke up here. Steve had his people taking care of me in their medical ward and I started getting better. It was a few months before I was well enough to go on vacation with him and come down to see you. They might be rich but they're nice people. They're good friends, mostly. Nobody's perfect," Estrella said.

She smirked, thinking that Steve might be getting his feet done right now too except with a naked woman wiggling around down there where he could see. The idea of Tony teasing him and Thor being jolly along with them made her smile. She could ask him about it later.

"You didn't tell me you almost died!" Rita said.

"I didn't want to because you would have worried. I'm better now. I have a job, I have friends, and I'm about to be married so you don't need to worry about me anymore. I'll be okay," Estrella said.

She wasn't going to tell her aunt that she was thinking of quitting her job and going to music school because she would fret at her over that, too. The other salon lady was working on Rita's feet, rubbing a metal tool at her heels. Estrella squeaked when the same process was started on her feet. Rita looked calm about it so it must be a normal thing.

"Do you and Val get your feet done? You look like you've done this before," she said.

"Only on her birthday and on mine and Fran's, before Val's voice did what it did. It's been a while," Rita told her.

They heard Val exclaim about something from across the salon. The girl sounded happy so they didn't feel the need to investigate. Estrella watched the odd expression on her aunt's face. She had something on her mind and it looked like she was going to say it.

"Eya, what do you know about men? I don't want to tell you things you don't need to know but your mami isn't here and I wouldn't want you to not-" Rita began awkwardly.

"I know the things I don't want to remember. There's too much, so I don't think of it. But then there's Steve. He's different. He's so nice to me, Tia. He's not like the others," Estrella said.

Rita looked at her skeptically.

"Okay, he's not completely different. He wants things. We do things. But he's not mean. He doesn't hurt me," Estrella assured.

"That's good, but he's still a man," Rita said.
Estrella laughed. She felt a little giddy between having her feet messed with and knowing her life was about to change forever. It felt like she was slightly outside of regular reality, like she was watching herself on a TV show. It was a little like when Steve had proposed to her. She felt strange. She barely remembered breakfast. The day had gone by so fast already.

She bit her lips to smooth the smile off her face. Her aunt looked like she had important things to say and that she should listen respectfully instead of laughing like she was out of her mind. She knew her misplaced humor was nerves because of the wedding. Rita was experienced enough to excuse her silliness.

"You need to know things. Marriage isn't like having a boyfriend. It's wonderful, but there's bills to pay and troubles sometimes, and men are grumpy. They're not always your best friend," Rita told her.

Estrella sat patiently and listened.

"They accuse us of being moody and hormonal, but they are too! All the time, they want sex or they want food. Eya, if you can handle a husband, you can handle a baby. With a baby it's sleep and food, but husbands are sex and food. You cook, don't you, niña? I remember your mami teaching you to cook, but did you forget?" Rita asked.

"I cook. Before we were together, when we were just friends, I cooked for him. I enjoy feeding him because he's thankful. He makes cute faces while he eats because he's always so hungry and he's easy to please. Don't worry about the food, Tia. I know I can do that," Estrella assured her.

"But what about the sex? Are you okay?" Rita asked with a desperate sort of worry in her expression.

All the bad things that had happened to her while she was a teen remained unsaid. Rita had experienced trouble of her own with men. She could assume much of what Estrella didn't tell her.

"We've kind of tried sex. Not everything, but enough to know that I'm alright. He's very kind to me and he knows what's happened to me. We'll take it slow if we need to," Estrella said.

Rita shook her head.

"He won't be slow forever, niña. They get grumpy and impatient if they can't have what they want. You know you're pretty. He's going to want a lot. He'll make you sore," Rita warned her.

Estrella could feel her eyes go wide at the dire tone of her words.

Rita hurried to wave her hands when she saw she'd probably scared her niece.

"It's okay to be sore. Especially at the beginning. Then you get used to it. Sometimes later you get sore too, but not as much. You said he's good to you so you tell him if you've had too much. He can wait a few days until you feel better, or you can do other things," Rita said.

"A few days?" Estrella asked.

The thought of being sore from sex for days was linked in her head with being hurt by other men. She knew that kind of soreness. It wasn't something she thought she'd experience with Steve. She'd been a little sore from him once, but it was a nice kind of sore, not the kind that made her wish for pain medication or a soft pillow to sit on. Or to not sit down at all. Would Steve make her that sore? She hoped not, or she might not like sex as much as she wanted to.
"Only a few days. Men don't like to go without sex for more than a few days. Steve is young and he looks healthy. Are you going to be able to handle him, Eya? If you can't, you have to learn other things to keep him happy," Rita worried at her.

"We're good at the 'other things' part. Like with the food, he's easy to please that way, too. Don't worry so much. We'll have fun," Estrella tried to ease Rita's concerns.

"That's good, but he makes me worry. He can have anybody, Eya. I'm afraid there will be trouble if he doesn't get what he wants from you, and then he could find somebody-

"Tia, tia, its okay! I mean, it's not okay, but we already talked about that. He did stupid things and we all know about them because he was on television. I made him date other people to be sure he could be faithful. He gets led around by sex, I know, but I can take care of him. I will take care of him," Estrella said with a stubborn set to her jaw.

"Okay, but you call me if there's something you don't know. When you're a wife, you have to deal with things, and maybe I'm not thinking of all the things right now, so you call me!" Rita insisted. Estrella bit her lip to keep her smile from getting too big and making her aunt think she wasn't taking her seriously. She was. It was endearing and funny how Rita worried for her. Jesse and Val had to live with her for years, so she had a little more sympathy for her cousins when they rolled their eyes and whined about their mother. Rita loved them. Her cousins couldn't know how important that was, what a blessing it was to have a mother. Even Steve appreciated Rita's fussing.

"What about him being grumpy?" Estrella asked.

"Sometimes even if they've had sex and food, they're still not happy and it's not your fault. Work makes them grumpy, and the things they want to do but can't. There's all kinds of things in their minds and sometimes they won't tell you, but they're unhappy and you can't fix it. Just love him when he gets like that. It will pass. And remember it's not your fault," Rita said.

Estrella nodded and reached out her hand to grasp Rita's. The salon ladies urged them to move to different chairs to have their hands done and their toes painted. They went where they were lead and Estrella had to let go of Rita's hand. They were near each other so they could still talk.

"I don't want anything painted. Please, just trim and shape and buff until its shiny," Estrella told the lady when she was expected to make a nail polish selection.

Rita chose a clear coat with a hint of pink.

"What about babies, Eya? What will you do? If you don't do something, you might get pregnant on your honeymoon," Rita whispered as if the new topic was suddenly more risqué than what they'd already talked about.

"We won't. It's the wrong time of the month for me. We read a book, and I'm learning more online. It's okay if I get pregnant anyway. I want children, so I don't mind," she told her aunt, more to calm the older woman than to give an honest answer.

Birth control was going to be a thing for her and Steve to figure out on their own. If Rita was going to worry about it, she'd tell her it was taken care of.

"Are you sure? It's hard not to have more than you wanted," Rita said.

"I'm sure, Tia. I'm reading and learning all about it. Steve knows it's a thing to be concerned about. He's said he'll help me, whatever I want to do," she said.
"Oh, that's good. Some men don't want to think about it or help with it. They just want what they want, and it's up to the woman to look out for herself," Rita said.

Estrella shook her head.

"Steve's not like that. He wants to take good care of me," she told Rita.

Her aunt sighed with happiness.

"I hope Valeria can find a good man like that. You're so lucky, Eya. Be good to him. You don't always have to win in a fight, you know? Sometimes it's better to let your man win an argument and have a happy house, even if you know you're the one who's right," Rita advised.

Estrella watched the women work on their nails, polishing for her aunt and buffing for her. She liked how pretty her hands and feet were with her nails simple and clean, shiny from the buffing. She didn't like the idea of blood-red nails on Steve's skin. She blushed and imagined her hands on him, pressing and pulling, pushing and urging him to do what felt good. She wanted to be naked with him, with no artificial paint or colors to distract her. She liked the way their skin looked together, pale and golden. That was all the color she needed. The thought of some of the other colors of him in places where nobody could see made her blush harder. She had to think of other things. What had Rita said? Oh, it was about arguments and letting him win.

"But what if I'm right and he's wrong?" she asked, "Why should I let him win?"

"Because he thinks he's right, too, just like you do. Compromise, Eya. Both of you have to win sometimes, or there's resentment. He will be right sometimes, and you'll be wrong sometimes. Don't be too proud to let him win when he should," Rita said.

Estrella nodded her understanding. She'd already done that yesterday when she'd wanted Natasha to stop working with Steve because of her jealousy and distrust. She knew she could compromise when she should. Steve had also shown the ability to admit when he was wrong and to apologize.

"I think we're going to be fine. We can compromise. We like to talk about things. Sometimes we get angry, but we've worked things out so far. We don't stay angry," Estrella said.

"That's good. Don't go to bed angry. Try not to leave for work angry. People die, Eya. You wouldn't want your last moments with him to be angry ones," Rita said.

"We're getting married! Stop talking about us dying and be happy with me!" Estrella said.

They moved to the other side of the salon to have their hair done.

"I am happy. I say these things so you'll stay happy like you are now. It's getting close to the time to go, Eya! Don't pick anything complicated for your hair or we might be late," Rita looked out the windows to the city street as they settled into the chairs for a shampoo.

"She's the bride. They would wait," Natasha said from a chair nearby.

Valeria nodded. It was easy to see the girl had found a new Avenger to idolize.

Pepper swooped in and set a light kiss on Estrella's cheek while she looked at her nails.

"You're so pretty and natural," Pepper smiled at her, "We have your dress and all the accessories ready to go. You won't be late. I'm going to go make sure the flowers and everything else is ready."
Pepper looked at her watch.

"I'll make sure Tony isn't holding things up. Tell Jarvis when you're ready and we'll have the car for you," she said.

"Thank you, Pepper. You've done so much," Estrella said.

"It's been fun," the older woman said and she smiled fondly.

Estrella believed it. Pepper could manage multi-national corporations, lawyers, and stock portfolios. Planning a quick, secret wedding was probably like play to her. Valeria left with Pepper but Natasha stayed at the salon with Rita and Estrella. She wasn't Bucky, but she was security, even if she was sitting and having her nails painted. By now, Estrella could recognize the kind of clothes which hid weapons. She wondered if trouble was expected but she didn't let herself worry about it. They could hear Valeria learning about flowers from Pepper as they walked away.

Estrella handed the hairdresser a picture of her wedding veil and another picture of what she wanted her hair to look like. The lady working on her hair nodded her understanding. A glance at Rita showed that her aunt was still concerned and thinking, but she was satisfied with what she'd taught her for now. Estrella smiled at her and was truly thankful for her advice. Addressing Rita's worst concerns and feeling she could handle everything her aunt mentioned made her feel confident that she was ready to be married. The sooner she could get finished here and get to the church, the better.

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Steve stood up from running a cloth over the shiny black toe of his shoe. He grabbed Jesse's left shoe and rubbed at a less than perfect spot until it shone. Alberto had already taken care of his shoes and had a perfect shine. Jesse pulled his foot away from Steve's dithering.

"C'mon, you shouldn't even be shining your own shoes today, much less somebody else's. Sam, is the?-- thanks," Bucky said.

Sam handed Steve's tie to Bucky. He tucked his arm inside Steve's and towed him away from Estrella's family and toward the mirrors. Thor moved over to make himself useful entertaining the Texans so Sam and Buck could finish getting the groom ready.

"I can comb my own damn hair and I know how to tie a tie," Steve griped, but he stood still and let his friends help him.

"Simmer down, fancy-pants. You spent all day getting your nails done and now we don't have time to let you do this over and over til you get it right," Buck taunted him.

"I get it right the first time," Steve continued to grumble.

"It wasn't all day on the nails. There was entertainment and lunch, too," Tony said from where he stood leaning in the doorway of his personal wardrobe.

Stark didn't have a closet. He had rooms of clothes, shoes, coats, ties, hats, everything a guy could want to look like a swell. He'd come to see how Steve was doing getting ready in his suite and he'd frowned at them. Apparently the lighting and the mirrors weren't good enough in Steve's suite.

All the guys had gathered in Tony's huge suite of a wardrobe where the lighting was bright and complimentary. Steve stood still and stiff in front of a triple mirror while Buck got his tie on and
Sam sprayed a comb with something and ran it through his hair.

"What's that stuff?" Steve asked Sam.

"Relax, man. It's just a little something to keep your corn silk from getting disorderly until your girl messes it up later," Sam said.

Steve bit off a grunt and Bucky laughed at him.


"It was indeed entertaining. The women were very professional, merely a bit scantily clothed. You did say your lady approved of the venture?" Thor asked.

"Well, yeah. I wasn't gonna go without askin her. I do wanna get married today," Steve said.

"Estrella knew? About the…" Tony made hand gestures at his chest, indicating breasts.

"Sure, she knew," Steve said.

"But it was supposed to be a surprise," Tony said.


Stark smiled. Since he was a genius he'd likely known his plan would be figured out and that Estrella would be informed. Steve appreciated the chance to enjoy a little time with him and Thor, even if he was sitting to get his nails worked on. It hadn't been so bad, not like a strip club with gloomy lighting and sticky tables. The place had been clean and bright and the ladies really had made his hands and feet look better somehow, without putting anything on them. Tony had insisted that Alberto and Jesse should come along. Steve could see a big difference in how the guys' hands looked. He doubted Jesse's nails had ever been so clean.

Plus, now Alberto and Jesse had reason to keep their mouths shut and not gab to Estrella and Rita about the pleasant view they'd had. The place hadn't been tawdry at all. The ladies had worn some kind of little things over their nipples so not everything was visible. Compared to a bachelor party, it had been pretty tame.

Steve had taken the opportunity to thank Tony sincerely for not giving up on him. While snooping around in the Shield files Steve had learned he'd eventually been written off as a loss. Peggy and Howard hadn't given up. They'd searched for him all over the North Atlantic and under the ice after funding had been pulled from the recovery effort. At first Howard and Peggy, and then Tony and Peggy after Howard had passed. Then Tony had continued on alone after Peggy had to be moved to a care facility.

Tony didn't know what to do with sincere praise and thanks. He'd tried to wave him off and shut him up, but Steve talked until he'd choked up, telling Stark he wouldn't be here today getting married if Tony had given up on him. At that point Tony told a crude joke to annoy him, but he understood Tony now and he ignored his crudeness for the distraction it was.

The man was still smiling a little and Steve smiled back in the mirror. Tony looked away at his watch and answered a call from Pepper. Buck made a small gesture to Thor and the big man kindly gathered Alberto and Jesse along with Tony. He ushered them out of the room, telling an amusing hunting story along the way.
Sam ran the edge of the comb behind Steve's ears and stayed out of the way while Buck pulled the corners of his bow tie to perfection.

Steve couldn't complain of the result. He wasn't as picky about the details of appearance as either Bucky or Sam, and they thought he was done. He looked good. His friends stepped away and looked with him into the mirror. Sam made one more swipe at the back of his hair above his stiff shirt collar, then went to rustle in the garment bag for the coat of his tuxedo. Steve extended his arms and looked at the fancy cuff links Tony had lent him once again, then let his arms fall to his sides.

He was nervous but he didn't want to think about it. Other things were on his mind to keep him from thinking too much and making it worse.

"You weren't gone for very long last night, Buck," he said quietly.

They knew each other well. He knew Bucky had a thousand ways to make Brock Rumlow suffer. He hadn't taken as much time as expected at it. Buck knew Steve wasn't comfortable with torture.

"I got in a few licks and found my heart wasn't in it. Rumlow's not worth my time. There was only a little mess to clean up, and now ole Brock ain't nothin but ashes to be scraped out of the incinerator," Bucky said.

He seemed real easy about it, like he was happy. After decades of abuse, how could he be?

"I didn't want you to hold back on my account," Steve said.

Sam walked over with the tuxedo coat. Steve nodded his thanks, then took the coat and slipped it on. It fit like it was made for him because it was.

"That's the end of it? You closed the book on Rumlow?" Sam asked.

He tapped the side of his head briefly to indicate Bucky's mental state.

"There's no amount of damage I could have done that would make up for what happened. Tearing him into little pieces wouldn't undo anything. I know he's gone. That's good enough. Thanks," Buck said.

He looked to Sam, then Steve. It had been their plan to bring Rumlow in for him.

Steve grinned at him proudly. He was so relieved that Buck was in a place in his head where he could make a rational, more ethical choice than prolonged torture. Sure, there'd been a little punishment while he figured himself out, but Buck had made the right choice in the end. He turned to look at Sam.

"Yeah, yeah, you told me so. I had my doubts, but maybe he's the kind we can save," Sam said.

He looked to Bucky and reached out his hand. Bucky shook it, uncertain what the gesture was for.

"As opposed to what other kind?" he asked.

"The only other kind. The kind we stop," Steve said.

The three of them let the thoughts of conflict and work pass away. They stood in front of the mirrors and had a look.

"Damn. We look fine," Sam said.
"All dressed up…" Buck agreed.

"…and I've got someplace to go," Steve finished the thought.

"Come on, punk, let's get you to the church on time," Buck said.

Steve couldn't stop smiling. Was he awake right now? He couldn't remember feeling this good, ever. The bad guys were mostly gone and he had someone really good to look forward to. The moment felt like accomplishment and hope and he had Bucky beside him again. There was nothing more he could ask for.

…

The air smelled like candles and fresh flowers. She hadn't imagined the wedding looking so much like a gothic fairy tale, but it did. It was a large church and almost as dark inside as the night was outside. Nobody was supposed to be here tonight, so Father Miller had enlisted the help of a few trustworthy altar boys and Happy Hogan to find brass candle stands and light all the candles. There were four tall ivory candles on stands in the vestibule to give enough dim light that they wouldn't bump into things. The main doors of the church were locked behind them so no one else could wander in if they could see the dim candlelight from the street.

Estrella tried not to look into the church but she was curious. Rita wouldn't let her get close to the vestibule doors when they opened for someone to go through. She'd seen enough to know there were lots of candles in the church. She'd glimpsed a row of them on each side of the aisle going toward the altar before Valeria fussed at her and Rita had dragged her away. Rita had pinned a small yellow rose on Jesse's lapel and then she'd put one on Alberto's lapel. Val and Rita had flowers and they looked pretty in their pale yellow dresses. Val was proud as anything to have her hair, nails, and makeup done and it showed. The girl looked at the plain white choker necklace and opal Estrella wore and touched her fingers to the necklace at her throat too.

Uncle Alberto looked as handsome as he could. He wore the tuxedo with the same dignity with which he wore his deputy's uniform when he left for work in the mornings. Estrella stood in her low-heeled shoes and watched her flowers shake in her hands. She wondered if she had missed a cue and if everyone was inside waiting on her.

Just then, Bucky cracked the heavy wooden door and stepped through. Valeria squeaked at how handsome he was. The man ignored her and the frown she got from her mother. He stepped close to the bride and wordlessly passed a ring box to Rita.

"Give us about three minutes to get seated then come when you hear the music," Buck murmured to Estrella.

"I thought there wasn't going to be music?" she whispered back.

"It's just two ladies with the piano and a flute. I told em to play quiet. Hey, isn't this supposed to be down?" Buck said.

He lifted his white-gloved hands and tugged her veil down in front of her face. It felt funny to have the wispy material tickling at the edge of her jaw. It tinted everything she looked at with white.

"Thanks! We forgot to put it down. How is Steve?" she asked.

"Gimme three minutes, then come see for yourself," Buck grinned at her.
He escorted Rita and Jesse escorted Val into the hushed church, leaving only Estrella and Alberto standing among the four candles.

Estrella looked around at the high ceiling and the shadowed architecture around them. Her flowers shook harder. She wasn't cold. She didn't feel fluttery and nervous. She felt wound-tight and humming, like Steve was sometimes. After the door closed the minute shaking of her flowers was the only sound, and her heart pounding in her ears.

Uncle Alberto reached for and took her hand. She stepped close to his side and looked at him because he seemed to be staring at her.

"This is what you want?" he asked her.

Her uncle was a serious man. A man of action unless he was sitting in front of the television. If she said she didn't want to get married he would do something about it.

"Sí, Tio. I want to marry him," she said.

Alberto nodded, then tucked her hand onto his arm.

She had only a moment more to think. Tears wanted to well in her eyes but she squinted and thought mean thoughts to make them go away. She didn't know if the eyeliner she was wearing was waterproof and she wasn't going to cry before the wedding! The priest had wanted to be sure she wanted to marry. Aunt Rita wanted to be sure. And now Tio Alberto wanted to be sure it's what she wanted too. All these people were concerned about what she wanted. Used to, nobody cared what she wanted, they only cared what they could get from her. She squeezed her uncle's arm in a little hug and then she heard the music start.

Estrella drew in a sharp breath and Alberto took a step forward. She went with him and the doors opened for them. Two people in suits held the doors but she didn't look to see who. The quiet music was a good choice because she didn't think she could have stood to walk among everyone with all eyes on her in the silence. She was too anxious with everyone looking at her to pay attention to what song it was. Their friends from New York were on her right at the front of the church. Her family and her dear friend Wanda were across from them on the left side of the aisle. Almost all of the pews were empty. Her feet wanted to go faster because there was Steve, waiting at the end of the long aisle with the priest.

"Slower," Alberto reminded her.

Estrella breathed deep through her nose and made herself walk at a stately pace like she knew brides were supposed to. Her flowers were still shaking but she couldn't look down at them. They passed candle after candle and she wished she could see Steve better through the stupid veil. She saw smiling faces beside her, Bruce and Jane and Thor, Val and Jesse and Rita. Then finally they stood before the priest and Steve held out his hand.

"Be good to her," Alberto said.

"I will," Steve agreed.

Her uncle put back her veil and encouraged her to put her hand in Steve's. She did, but it was a mindless gesture. She was staring at Steve. He was so handsome in his black tuxedo and formal white shirt that she didn't immediately get stuck looking into his eyes but then she did. Steve looked equally enchanted with her and the dress. Father Miller cleared his throat and Valeria giggled right behind her.

"Oh!" Estrella whispered.
She handed her flowers to her cousin to hold for her during the mass and ceremony. She tucked her chin down. It was embarrassing to be caught staring by everyone, but Steve touched her chin with a finger. She looked up at him as he guided her to the two chairs which were set front and center of the aisle, closest to the altar. The proud, happy look in Steve's eyes told her not to be ashamed. She smiled at him and tried to pay attention to the mass.

Of all people, Tony got up to read the reading from the Old Testament. The two anonymous altar boys held candles for him on either side of the ambo. For a moment, Estrella was sure he was going to pull out some kind of Stark tech to light the pages rather than the archaic candles, but Tony didn't do that. Stark managed to read through the romantic and flowery verses of the Song of Solomon with a straight face, though they could hear a tone of humor in his voice. Then he became more serious on the last verses as he read.

"Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm; for stern as death is love, relentless as the netherworld is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire. Deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods sweep it away."

Estrella's throat tightened and Steve made a small sound. She squeezed his hand tighter where they were already clasped. Who had chosen these bible readings? The first romantic, almost silly verses had been the velvet before the punch of the last half. They were eerily perfect. Both of them would have died for love. Steve knew devotion well, in his relentless search for Bucky and his destruction of Hydra. She knew Steve burned inside, a love he hid for those he cared about. She felt the same fervor and hoped to express it soon. Maybe deep waters and floods reminded Steve of his time in the ice.

Tony wasn't Catholic so he didn't end the reading as was properly customary. That was alright. Estrella felt honored that he'd agreed to read for them even though he didn't believe. Tony returned to sit with Pepper.

Father Miller sang the psalm, then Sam went to the ambo for the second reading from the New Testament. Again, Estrella felt bad for being distracted during mass, especially at her wedding mass. She heard the lovely words Sam read from Corinthians but she was momentarily charmed by the way the candle light made everything look medieval. She looked to Steve. He looked terribly serious paying attention to the reading, then he smiled at her. There was something in his look of a rascally boy, like maybe he long ago used to pay attention to other things when he should have been listening.

Their smiling at each other was interrupted by the Alleluia, then they stood for the Gospel. Father Miller read to them of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. Estrella had always thought it was too saucy of Jesus to turn to his mother and say "Woman, what does your concern have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." She almost giggled when the priest read Mary's line of "Whatever he tells you to do, do it." As Father Miller was shortly to say in his homily, it was clear that Mary already knew her son could work miracles and that turning water into wine should be no problem for him. But she'd put her son in a conundrum when she'd told the servants to do what he said, which implied Jesus had to do something to appease his mother's concern for the lack of wine. Estrella could almost imagine Jesus rolling his eyes at his mother, but waving his hand at the water jars anyway to make the wine. She was likely thinking too irreverently about it, but she liked that Mary was a wise mother and knew what her son was capable of.

Her humor dried up as Father Miller approached them to marry them. Steve helped her up though she didn't need it. It was the traditional and chivalrous thing to do and he looked dreamy doing it in his tux in the candlelight. Bucky came to stand beside Steve and Rita came to stand beside her. Steve and Estrella stared at each other with nerves and eagerness as Father Miller held the book.
beside them.

Steve took her engagement ring off of her finger and handed it to Bucky. There was a metallic snapping sound but Estrella couldn't see what was going on. Bucky handed the completed wedding band to the priest. Father Miller set it on the pages of the book with Steve's ring. The two rings were compliments to each other, as Estrella's was gold down the center band and vibranium on the outside edges, while Steve's was silver in the middle with gold on the outside edges. The priest put his hand over the rings. Her nerves tightened to an excited hum. In just seconds, she was going to be married! Steve looked antsy too, then he took a deep, slow breath. She met his eyes and absorbed the steady calmness he sent to her with a look.

"Steven, do you take Estrella to be your wife? Do you promise to be faithful to her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love her and to honor her all the days of your life?" Father Miller asked.

"I do," Steve said with strong certainty.

Estrella was almost too awestruck by the moment to be able to speak but the priest turned to her next. Steve kept staring at her and she couldn't take the intensity. She turned to look at Father Miller who was waiting for her attention.

"Estrella, do you take Steven to be your husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love him and to honor him all the days of your life?"

"I do," she said.

Her voice was shaking with emotion, but she meant it. Steve could see she meant it.

"Dearest family and friends, as God has witnessed, as we have witnessed, these two, Steve and Estrella, have freely been given to each other in marriage. What God has joined, let no one put asunder," Father Miller pronounced.

He lifted his hand and bowed their heads together. Steve was eager and his head clunked hers a bit too firmly. He winced as their foreheads bonked. Estrella felt for his moment of embarrassment but the contact hadn't really hurt her. She made a kissy face at him and he smiled with relief while the priest blessed them and their marriage. Next, he put his hand back on the rings and blessed them. He handed her ring to Steve and gestured for Steve to take her hand.

Steve's hands were warm and steady as he slid the ring on her finger and repeated after the priest.

"Estrella, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Estrella felt shaky but she took the blessed ring. She had a harder time slipping it onto Steve's finger because of his knuckle.

"Steven, receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

By the time she was done with the words she'd managed to get the heavy band onto his finger where it was supposed to be. Bucky was almost laughing at her struggle. She squinted meanly at him, but then she smiled in triumph at Steve.

Bucky and Rita returned to their pews and Steve and Estrella knelt for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The familiar sacrament was comforting among the excitement of having successfully doing what
was publically required for marriage. They hadn't messed up their vows because all they'd had to say was "I do", and the ring part was easy except for Steve's knuckle. They knelt on the ornate white kneelers and held hands until it was time for them to receive the Eucharist. It was especially sweet to be receiving it together for the first time as husband and wife.

Steve momentarily wished he could pass the goblet of precious blood to Estrella directly, to give to her, but that wasn't for him to do. He passed it back to the priest. He bowed his head and felt scalded inside when he realized what he wanted to do by the gesture was give up his own blood, his own body for her. He could do that later, but thinking of sex wasn't for now while they were kneeling in the church in front of God and everybody! His embarrassment was between only him and God, though, so maybe it wasn't so bad. Or maybe it was good. Was Jesus giving himself to them kind of like marriage in its unity? Steve was overwhelmed and confused and he felt he should think about this later instead of right now.

When he peeked and shifted his eyes, Estrella had her head bowed in deep prayer. She peeked aside and up at him. Her cheeks looked flushed. Had she had the same thoughts as him? He looked at her in wonder and she ducked her head back down to rest on her fists. Steve smiled. Now he had to ask her later what she'd been thinking just then.

The priest moved behind them and offered the sacrament to whoever else in the congregation was in unity to receive it. There weren't many Catholics in attendance, but surprisingly Thor came forward to receive a blessing when he saw a few others do so. The altar servers helped Father Miller put things away properly and then the mass was ended.

"Thanks be to God," Steve and Estrella said together.

Father gestured to them and Steve helped her to stand from the kneelers. They turned around and held hands. They looked at each other. They could feel the weight of all their friends and family looking at them expectantly.

"It is my honor to present to you Mister and Missus Steven Grant Rogers," Father Miller announced.

If there was anyone nearby outside on the street, they could certainly hear the cheering in the supposedly dark and shuttered church. The newly married couple smiled shyly at their friends. Father Miller leaned toward Steve before the cheers hushed.

"You may kiss your bride," he said.

Steve looked to Estrella to see how she felt about the tradition. She bit her lip and looked shy about kissing in front of everyone but then she nodded. She seemed to want to hurry while there was still some noise from the announcement. Steve heard Bucky make a rude and encouraging snorting noise. He turned to face Estrella fully and she glanced up at him in the instant before their lips met. With the way she was looking at him he couldn't carry through with a raucous show for the crowd, no matter how Tony clapped and hooted.

He held her and dipped her back just a little. Their kiss was gentle and respectful. His eyes slipped shut and so did hers, or they'd get stuck into doing more than kissing right in front of the altar. Her lips were soft. All of her was soft in his arms. He wanted to sink into that softness and hold her for a while. To feel a little more of it, he pressed them closer and nudged into the kiss. His senses thrilled at the feel of her, the smell of her, and his lips parted to taste her. Valeria's giggle snapped him back to awareness. Estrella grinned and turned her face down bashfully. He smiled with pride and adoration of his bride, his friend. Everyone else clapped or made 'aww' sounds at them. Val handed Estrella her flowers and Bucky patted Steve on the back.
Sam had an impressive camera and he lifted it to his eye while he knelt on one knee in front of
them. While Steve and Estrella were still smiling and blushed with happiness from their kiss he
snapped the shutter several times. This was the most well-lit place in the church, but it was only
ambient with candlelight. He frowned, braced himself steady against Thor, then took the picture
again with a slower shutter speed.

Bucky shook Father Miller's hand, did the same to each of the altar boys, and then the wedding
party followed Steve and Estrella out to the front curb. Cars were waiting for them. Bucky drove
Sam's car with Steve and Estrella in the back. For security and privacy the wedding celebrants all
took average looking sedans by different routes back to the tower.

Buck didn't see any paparazzi or nosey onlookers on the quiet block around the church so they'd
probably escaped public notice. Steve and Estrella in the backseat weren't paying attention. Sam
smiled at him from the passenger seat. They both wanted to watch the newlyweds in the backseat
but somebody had to drive and pay attention to any security threats around them.

The couple laughed and murmured into each other's ears in a way that even Bucky couldn't
understand. He recognized the low rumble in Steve's voice and the breathless tone the girl used
when she responded to him. He figured these two wouldn't be at the wedding reception for long.
Whatever they were talking about, even if it was the Holy Spirit, they were ready for sex, not
dancing and cake. They sounded like they were half into it already. Buck thought about the teasing
Steve would have to endure if they didn't even make it to the reception but left everybody and went
straight up to their room. Steve would resent the teasing and he'd never live it down, especially
with the way Stark could go on.

"Hey, Stevie," Buck called to the backseat.

Nothing but laughter and more amorous murmurings.

"Hey!" he barked.

"What?" Steve asked.

He glanced at the rearview. Steve was stupid with happiness, but ready to get serious if he was
needed. He hated to interrupt them but somebody had to.

"At ease. It's nothin. Just, ya think you can make it to the reception for at least a little while?" Buck
asked.

"Yeah, Buck. We're planning to," Steve said.

Sam grinned and shook his head. The sooner they got to the tower, the better. Maybe putting the
newlyweds in the back of a small car rather than a limo hadn't been such a great plan. Estrella
moaned quietly and her dress rustled. Steve slipped out of his tux jacket as they turned into the
parking garage.

"Hey now, hey now, what about your little cousin and your auntie? Cool down a bit, Miz Rogers.
There's people coming behind us," Sam gave it a try.

Estrella growled at him. Her necklace wasn't on all the way. Bucky slammed the car into park,
unlocked the doors, and shoved Sam out and onto the concrete. Before Sam could fully get to his
feet, Bucky was over the hood of the car and had him by his suit coat. He slammed the car door
shut with his hip.

"You alright?" he asked.
"Fuck. Yeah, I think so. You're immune to that?" Sam asked a moment later.

Bucky eased his grip from Sam and smoothed the rumpling on his coat. He stared the man down and waited to see what he'd do after he let him go. Sam put his hands up briefly, then another car pulled into the garage.

"Quit staring at me and figure out how to get them out of the backseat without making a peep show!" Sam fussed.

"Yeah," Bucky said.

He left Sam where he was and went back around the other side of the car. With a quick pull, he had Steve's door open and dragged his friend out of the backseat. Steve was not appreciative of being interrupted. He moved stiffly like he was in the mood to fight about it.

"Hey! Calm the fuck down. We've got people coming," he reminded Steve and shoved at him a few times.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry," Steve said.

"Your hair's all messed up," Sam told him.

Steve looked at him and grinned. Things had gone just as predicted and he loved Estrella's hands in his hair. Sam pulled the comb from his coat pocket and tossed it to him over the car. Steve didn't look a bit like Cap, but he still caught things like him. He hurried to slick his hair down proper, then tossed the comb back to Sam. He moved to duck into the car and get his coat, but Bucky pushed him away and around toward Sam. Steve didn't like it but he went. Estrella's door was there anyway, and he wanted to help her out.

Buck slipped into the backseat and found Steve's tux jacket on the floor. Estrella looked at him sharply. She held her necklace to her throat and worked the clasp shut again.

"Nobody's judging. If I was you I'd wanna say the hell with it and go straight up. Do you wanna do that, or do you want to see your family a little more before you disappear for a few days? A little dancing, a little cake, and then…?" Bucky jabbed his thumb in an upward direction, indicating Steve's suite.

Estrella glared at him, then she sighed.

"I'm going, Bucky. Thank you," Estrella said.

She sat in the car with Steve waiting outside to get her door.

"What?" Bucky asked.

"Do I look okay?" she wondered.

Her hands played at her hair and her veil, then rubbed under her lips. She didn't have a mirror and she didn't want to be embarrassed. She was a little messed up. Bucky didn't know how to fix it.

Buck popped out of the car and whistled sharply. Natasha was there in an instant. Everyone else was arriving but it was still chaos in the parking garage. Steve assisted his bride from the car as soon as he'd shrugged into his retrieved tux coat and Buck tipped his head toward the doors. Steve and Nat escorted Estrella inside to the nearest bathroom in a hurry before anyone else was close enough to see the girl was mussed.
Steve stood outside the bathroom and was startled to see Billy come running to him with his phone. The courier grinned at him and gave him a thumbs-up. Steve took the ringing phone and accepted the video call. It was Clint.

"Steve! I hear congratulations are in order," Clint said from his perch on a porch swing in the middle of nowhere. It was a few hours earlier wherever he was, not quite dark yet.

"Thanks. We just got back to the tower from the church. Is this..?" Steve asked.

"I'm Laura. We're so happy for you. I would have liked to make the wedding, but thanks for sending him home," a lovely brunette woman said from where she was snuggled against Clint's side.

"Daddy, you didn't tell us! Is that him?" Steve heard kid's voices, then Clint grimaced as a boy and a girl climbed onto the swing and pushed between him and Laura.

"Yeah, that's him, and where's your manners? Don'tcha want to have a bunch of these rude beasts?" Clint teased him.

"I'll get around to it," Steve replied with a smile.

Estrella's family and then the rest of the Avengers saw he was talking with someone so they smiled at him and went past him and inside. Steve had no idea where the reception was being held. He was sure someone would tell him.

"I'm gonna let you go so you can get to doing what you'd rather be doing," Clint said.

"Can't get to that just yet. There's gotta be dancing and cake," Steve made a politely frustrated face. Laura laughed.

"Go, go! The sooner you're done with cake, the sooner you can get to the rest of it," Laura made a shooing motion at Clint's phone.

"What could be better than cake?" Clint's son wondered honestly.

The adults chuckled.

The comfortable couple smiled at him while the kids energetically wiggled the swing.

"Thanks for calling, Clint. Enjoy your time off. There's no hurry back. I plan to be away for a few weeks. It's nice to meet you, Ma'am," Steve said.

Clint nodded and the kids stared at him curiously through the video call. Steve waved until the call ended a second later. He liked how content Clint and Laura looked, despite the kids pestering between them. He felt honored Barton had let him see his family. He still didn't know where they lived and he wasn't going to snoop around to find out. Steve understood the value of privacy because he dearly wanted some of his own.

…..

Natasha had everything in her little handbag. There was a refresher for her lipstick, pins for her fallen hair, and even a cooling, soothing wipe for the slight beard scrape on her throat. They both knew Steve had likely shaved before going to church, but there must have been time for his beard to grow some. Nat held the wet pad to her neck and waited, then took it away and nodded.
"I can still see the mark," Estrella said while she tipped her chin up and looked in the mirror.

"You can, but it's better than it was. You're as fixed as you will be. Let me see the back of your stockings," Nat said.

Estrella turned and the woman squatted to straighten the seam going down the backs of her legs. Nat stood to gather the things from the utilitarian bathroom counter and put them back in her bag. She linked her arm with Estrella's then they went outside to gather Steve. Nat put herself firmly between the two of them and linked their arms together.

"Steve, you don't know how much fun Pepper had decorating for this. Dance and make nice for at least an hour. Estrella, for God's sake, eat some cake and quit staring at him," Nat told them.

"Set a timer," Steve grumbled.

He was thankful for Nat's tending but he was starting to resent the idea of a reception. Everybody knew they were married. Why did they need to be 'received?' He knew he was old-fashioned but the idea seemed quaint even to him.

"Don't be rude. I like cake. We can wait," Estrella told him and Nat.

Jarvis took them up a few floors to a ballroom in the center of the tower. Everyone cheered again when they walked in. Nat had fallen behind them so they could enter as a couple. Steve took Estrella's arm as a proper escort and he bowed them to their friends. He didn't know why, but it seemed the thing to do. Why was everyone acting like this, anyway? They all knew each other. He felt his face go stiff with the effort of being polite.

"Stop being a grump," Estrella whispered aside to him.

"I'm sorry. Since we got out of the car everybody wants to own us but us," Steve complained.

The ballroom was huge and it took more than a minute to walk across it. Valeria managed to get a picture of them on her phone. Steve ignored it and trusted Jarvis to encrypt the file so she couldn't share it. Rita came forward to hug Estrella. Bucky pulled Steve into a hug and Steve allowed himself to loosen up a little. He could feel himself being crabby and this wasn't the place or the time for it.

"Thanks," he said to his best friend.

"It's alright. We're gonna do a little toast, a little light snack, some dancing and the cake, then there's the flower toss and the garter. You're wearing a garter, right, girlie?" Buck said.

Estrella nodded but continued talking to her aunt. Steve could tell he was being managed. Buck was reading him a list like a battle plan. Steve nodded. He cared about these people. They weren't the enemy. They were simply less preferable than running off with his wife.

Wife! Steve looked to Estrella and grinned. She smiled back but carefully looked away before they could linger too long. Steve noticed the ruddy mark across her neck. It pleased him to know it was there where anyone could see. Geez, she was beautiful!

Somebody bumped him and Steve snapped out of his staring.

"Bruce!" Steve said happily.

They shook hands.
"Congratulations. It was a nice wedding. In a church and everything. I haven't been to one of those in a while," Bruce said.

He seemed more than a touch inebriated. That wasn't like him. Steve frowned. He braced a hand on Bruce's shoulder when he swayed.

"Are you alright?" Steve asked.

Rita and Estrella wandered off to talk to Pepper. Bucky had something to do with Thor so he left too.

"'M fine," Bruce insisted.

Steve was concerned, not so much because Bruce was the Hulk, but because Bruce was sad. He always seemed somewhat sad but it was showing through tonight more than usual. Music blared loudly for a moment and everyone turned to look at the platform where a band or an orchestral arrangement would be.

"Sorry!" Darcy called, and she turned the music down to a quieter volume they could speak over.

Tony came to see what was going on with his friend and lab partner. Bruce waved him away so of course Tony ignored the gesture and hovered close. He looked to Steve with a bit of concern, but Steve shook his head.

"He wants to say 'Congrats' too, but I'm not gonna let him out to say it," Bruce said.

"That's swell. Thanks, Hulk," Steve said.

Bruce scowled at him for making it more difficult to keep a lid on his other persona, then he smiled when Natasha came to him.

"Wanna dance, boys?" she said to Bruce.

He smiled at Nat like both he and the Hulk thought that was a great idea. Darcy played a song easy enough for an inebriated scientist to dance to. Natasha took Bruce off their hands as if it was her fondest wish to do so. Steve and Tony couldn't imagine what they talked about while they shuffled around but Bruce had a lot to say and Nat looked very understanding.

Steve was aware of exactly where Estrella was with her family. He took a moment to look around the ballroom.

"I didn't know we had a ballroom," he told Tony.

The place was impressive. It took up almost this entire floor of the tower. The room was more ornate and less modern looking than Tony's normal tastes. The gilded molding and high windows soared thirty feet above the wood parquet floor. There were fine, almost invisible wires from the corners supporting flower garlands. The garlands draped and met in the center of the room at the chandelier to form the suggestion of a wedding tent in the middle of the large room. There was a banquet table laid out with chafing dishes of food, a long table for seating, as well as a round table with a wedding cake on it.

Yeah, he would have felt bad if they'd ducked out on this after Pepper had gone through the effort for them.

"I think you're supposed to…," Tony left the statement unfinished and gestured toward the dining
Estrella came to get him. He was happy to go anywhere with her. She urged him toward the food which was almost always a good plan if she was trying to get Steve to come along.

"Where's Wanda?" Steve asked.

"She didn't feel comfortable staying. I don't blame her. This is a lot," Estrella said and looked around at the opulent room.

Steve admired the way the tiny buttons marched down the middle of her back. His classic tux seemed ordinary by comparison. If he paid attention he could draw her like this later, from memory. Her dress had a lot of detail so he studied all of it and the shape of her in the dress until they reached the food. He discovered he was hungry. They put things on each other's plates that they knew they liked. Everyone was hungry because it was supper time. The new couple made it to the table first. Estrella scooted her chair right next to Steve's so their legs could touch while they ate.

As soon as everyone was seated and the champagne was poured Buck got the toast over with.

"We didn't think this day would happen, did we, pal?" he asked.

Steve smiled and shook his head.

"We didn't think we'd make it home. Steve didn't think he'd make it over there in the first place, but we got over there and back again. So much strangeness has happened in the years between, it's easy to forget what normal is. It's easy to forget the dreams we had when we were kids. But don't forget we had em. Steve didn't ask for much. He only wanted the usual things. A nice car, a nice place to live," Bucky looked around at the grandiosity of the tower, "and a nice lady. You've done well, my friend. More than a nice lady, I think you've found the person you're meant to be with. Too bad you're so old by the time you found her, but hey, you age pretty well. Here's to more dreams for the future. Never forget your past but live for the future," Buck said.

"Here, here!" Thor agreed.

Their friends had a few more things to say while they ate. Bruce stood up and said something terribly important which no one understood because it was in a different language. Everyone nodded and voiced their agreement. Tony patted him on the back and nodded his head for good measure.

Pepper politely got their attention and took her turn.

"I like a woman who knows what she wants and works to make it happen. I think we all saw Steve resisting the idea that he could have a relationship. We know how hard you've worked for everyone else, Steve. I've enjoyed watching Estrella bring you around to the idea that you can have what you want. You've both worked for your future. Steve took his time being a patient friend. Estrella took her time being a very patient and forgiving girlfriend. I wish you the happiness you've both so richly earned," Pepper said.

Tony bumped his fist to his chest and tipped his head down to stare at Steve and Estrella. Stark didn't make grand speeches unless they were about himself or about technology. He didn't make toasts unless they were crude, humorous, or crudely humorous. He simply looked at the couple for a moment, then lifted his glass and drank. The smirk and wiggle of his eyebrows he sent down the table at them caused hoots of rowdy cheer from the guys and from Natasha and Darcy. Those who
knew Tony well enough didn't need words to know any number of suggestive comments he could be making without saying a thing.

A clink of silverware against a glass quieted the humor and everyone turned to the other end of the table.

Alberto cleared his throat, then spoke in heavily accented English.

"I'm no so good for wedding toasts, but I know you took in our Estrella when she was lost and needed friends. Then you come to my house to help my daughter. I don't know you people. But you good people. Thank you for what you do," he said quietly.

Rita patted her heart and looked at her husband with proud, watery eyes. A murmur of awkward sentiment went around the table. The Avengers weren't accustomed to being personally thanked, especially as people and not as heroes. Alberto paid no mind to the awkwardness. He waved his hand to where the music was supposed to be playing.

"Bailamos!" he told them.

The man looked at Steve, and Steve was grateful. Alberto understood this was all taking too long. Steve stood up and offered his hand to Estrella. She took it and Darcy got up from the table to go put on music for them. It didn't matter to Steve what the song was, as long as he could dance to it. Whatever Darcy chose sounded nice and slow.

Estrella settled against his chest and their legs pressed together as they liked. His hand was firm in the middle of her back. Rather than hold their hands out and aside as was proper, they twined their fingers together and rested them on Steve's chest near his shoulder. Estrella's other hand clasped the thick part of Steve's arm. They swayed together and closed their eyes. He spoke quietly.

"I love your uncle."

Estrella laughed.

"He's growing on me. I'm starting to see why Rita likes him," she admitted.

They danced blissfully for a few moments, content to touch and not pay polite attention to everyone else. The urge to be alone was strong.

She whined softly.

"God help me, Eya. Don't start. Not yet. I think I still have to dance with a few other people. Dammit," Steve grumbled.

It was hopeless. His girl was beautiful and she was pressed against him. Steve sighed in defeat. Estrella rubbed his shoulder soothingly but it didn't help. She could feel him strong against her belly. She lifted her head and shook it slightly at him when their gliding steps became a little more suggestive with hip movement. One of their friends yelled something she chose not to understand.

They were professional fighters. Of course they'd be able to read the tiny shift in the way Steve used his body. She shook her head harder but Steve only smiled at her.

"I can't help it, Eya. I don't want to stop," he said.

"Val is here!" she hissed at him.
"Then Rita'd better distract her, cause I'm gonna dance with my wife," Steve said stubbornly.

"Oh! It's okay. Tony's got Val. We can dance," Estrella said with relief.

Steve snorted at the notion that Tony having his hands on the girl could be a decent thing, but then he realized it was. Tony was a lecher, but he wasn't a despoiler of kids. Their friend had seen the problem and was dealing with it. Val was probably ecstatic to be dancing with Iron Man so she wouldn't be paying much attention to them.

The song changed to something kind of bluesy but still slow. Steve tucked Estrella to him and noted that Valeria was being passed to Thor. He forgot about the kid and danced the way he wanted to with his new wife.

Estrella had to keep her throat open to breathe without making embarrassing noises. Dancing so that they flowed together to the beat, their legs pressing and rubbing was making her crazy. The strong, supportive posture Steve gave her to move against and the heat of him around her had her hiding her face against his coat. She wanted skin. She wanted to bite him. There was no doubt of what Steve wanted to do from the subtle roll of his hips with each step. He wasn't being overtly nasty but it was more than they were used to displaying in front of their friends. These weren't forgettable strangers in Texas. They saw and they would remember. She wasn't sure she cared anymore. Steve was hers and she wanted to claim him. Let Darcy see. Let Natasha see. Let them all see. They didn't want to be here anymore. They wanted to go away.

Steve's low growl was enough to warn her they were about to be interrupted. Estrella gritted her teeth and lifted her head. Rita smiled hesitantly at them. She was the only person Steve could find a smile for and everyone likely knew it.

"The cake. Come on. Cut the cake, then you can do the rest and go," Rita told them.

Steve sighed, but Estrella was nice enough to walk in front of him to the cake table. Sam took a few brief pictures of the cake being cut. They dutifully ate a piece of cake between them.

Pepper waved them toward Bucky who knelt on one knee in the middle of the dancefloor. Estrella was confused, then Steve urged her to perch her bottom on Buck's knee. She'd have refused to sit on another man if it was anyone other than Bucky. His knee was too hard so she scooted aside to where his thigh was broader. He steadied her with his hand on her arm. Steve knelt too, to glide his hand up her stocking. All the unmarried men, which were most of them, gathered behind Steve. Darcy played a suggestive song while Steve felt up the inside of her thigh. Slowly.

"Go faster! I know it's there. Why can't you find it?" she whispered to him.

Bucky laughed.

"It's not every day I get to grope under my girl's skirt while everyone watches and cheers, Doll. Gimme a moment," Steve said.

Estrella wiggled her perch on Bucky's thigh and tossed her head back. Her hair and the veil and Steve's hand were making her sweat.

Finally, Steve acted like he'd found the garter when he'd had it all along. He drew it out along her leg and carefully over her shoe. Bucky helped her to stand and Steve flicked the garter back over his shoulder.

Improbably, Bruce jumped and caught it. He looked at the frilly white thing in his hand then tried to hand it off to Tony. Tony shook his head and backed away. Thor happily took the offering and
wore it around his arm.

Estrella strode over to the table where she'd eaten and picked up her bridal bouquet. There were only four unmarried ladies. Natasha stood still, making no effort to catch the flowers. The bouquet sailed over her head and Darcy snatched it from the air. Valeria frowned, then smiled. She was too young and didn't want to think about marriage yet, anyway.

Estrella was about to bid her family goodbye and grab her husband by the ear but Natasha got to her first.

"To the powder room. I have something for you," she said.

"But-" Estrella protested.

"Go! You'll thank me later," Nat insisted.

In the nearby lady's restroom there was an old fashioned powder room with mirrors and couches. A beautiful red dress hung in a filmy garment bag. Pepper was waiting for them. Between the two older women, they turned Estrella and attacked the row of tiny buttons down the back of her wedding gown.

"What are you doing?" Estrella asked.

"Buttons! You chose a dress with thirty-seven buttons down the back. We're getting you into one with a zipper," Pepper told her.

"Why can't-?" she squawked.

"Just trust us," Natasha insisted.

It took half as long to get her out of her wedding dress as it had taken to fasten her into it, which was still several minutes. Estrella gawked at how flushed dancing with Steve had made her when she saw her skin revealed in the mirror. Pepper held the new dress for her and Natasha guided her heels into it so she wouldn't snag the lustrous cherry-red fabric or have to remove her shoes. Pepper pulled the long zipper while Nat held the dress at her hips. Estrella sucked in a breath.

The dress was tight, like a corset. Like a corset, it trimmed her waist even more and pushed her bosom into prominence.

"The neckline! It's too low," Estrella patted her hands at the exposed swells of her breasts.

"It's perfect," Pepper said.

"Magnificent," Nat agreed.

"I can't wear this!" Estrella cried.

"I know. That's why I got this for you," Nat waved something white and lacy.

Pep and Nat got to work at her bosom tucking the white lace artfully between her boobs and the stiff neckline of the red dress. When they were done she looked a tiny bit more modest. The hem of the dress was shorter than her wedding gown, a few inches above the knees. Her white stockings almost showed the tapes and garters that held them up. If she moved too much, they would show. They left her in her white bridal veil and her demure white satin low heels and hustled her out of the powder room.
A flash of red caught Steve's eye and he turned to look. His jaw dropped before he could click his teeth shut again. Jesse had been talking to him about something but he wasn't listening anymore. There was a pat on his back and a shove which he didn't need to get him moving.

Bucky grinned and moved to intercept him. Steve took a deep breath to bark orders at his best man, but then Rita was in front of him. Bucky swept Estrella into a waltz. Steve locked his teeth together and felt like he was breathing out through his ears, he was so frustrated. He could hear Alberto and Jesse laughing. Rita smiled at him and Steve didn't want to insult her. He felt like breaking someone but he was very gentle with Rita.

"Soon, niño. Let her dance with a few more people. You should too. A little patience will do you some good," Rita said.

"Seventy-five years. Is that enough patience?" Steve growled.

Rita lifted her brows like she was unconcerned. She was a good dancer. He paid enough attention to the steps so he wouldn't step on her, but other than that his eyes were on Estrella.

"Is this a test?" he asked her.

"Maybe it is," Rita said.

"I'm about to flunk it," Steve said.

He stopped dancing when the waltz brought him and Rita nearer to Buck and Estrella. Tony and Pepper, Jane and Thor, Natasha and Bruce were watching while they danced.

"Maybe you win it this way. Go get her," Rita said.

Steve didn't care anymore. No more pictures, no more cake, no more toasts. No more dancing, and no more friends. Steve calculated the movements of the dance and any direction Bucky was likely to break away with the girl if he felt like being a jerk as the wily grin on his face seemed to indicate. Tony swung Pepper out of the way of the confrontation. Estrella felt the stiffness in Bucky's arms, saw the wicked tease in his eyes while he looked past her. She whipped her head around to see Steve swooping in toward them. Bucky swung her around and spun their steps to change direction.

Steve inserted himself smoothly into the spin and gathered Estrella to him. He lashed out with an elbow and caught Buck in the kidney. The blow wasn't too hard. Buck grunted more for show than because it hurt.

"Don't be a jerk," Steve told him.

Estrella laughed as Steve swung her up into his arms. She waved her fingers at her family and their friends. Pepper and Rita waved back. Natasha and Bucky didn't miss a beat partnering up for the next song. Steve caught sight of Buck's grin as he hurried out with his bride and the ballroom door closed behind them.

"You can put me down now," Estrella said.

"No way," Steve denied.

He got them into the elevator. The doors closed but they didn't go anywhere.

"What's wrong, Papi?" she asked when Steve only stood and failed to give instructions to Jarvis.
"I don't trust them. We could go down to the truck or up to the jet and get away from here," Steve said.

Estrella patted his tense shoulders. It felt nice the way he was holding her. His warm breaths were huffing over the exposed skin of her bosom. Red and white fabric gleamed rich against his black tuxedo. She liked the way her knees looked peeking from under her dress. She felt like Dorothy looking to get out of Oz, and any which way Steve took her home was just fine.

"I don't think driving or flying is a good idea right now. Let's go up to your suite," Estrella suggested.

"Our suite," Steve amended.

She watched his eyes shift around in the minute motions that meant he was thinking really fast.

"Why are we still waiting?" she whispered a moment later.

"I don't trust them," Steve said again.

"I assure you Sir, I will guard your privacy. Consider it my wedding gift to you. Miss Potts has overridden Mister Stark's overrides for tonight. No one will be able to access your suite with the possible exception of Mister Barnes. I, myself, will be absent. You will have to intentionally access me through your cell phone if you want my attention," Jarvis promised him.

"God bless you and Pepper Potts," Steve said, "take us up."

"Thank you, Sir," Jarvis said.

The elevator finally started moving. It was a short ride to the midlevel switch, where Steve carried her across to the other elevator. They went up again.

"You know they were playing with us. All of them," Estrella said.

She ran her fingers through his hair and he closed his eyes. He touched his forehead to hers and tried to calm himself.

"I know. I'll probably be able to laugh about it soon, but not yet," Steve said.

"You're not angry with them?" she wondered.

"I'll get over it and they know it," he said.

The doors opened on Steve's floor. Since Clint was away with his family they had this side all to themselves. Steve brought them toward his door. Estrella gave it a shove with her foot and it swung open.

"I wish you both joy," Jarvis told them before the door closed behind them.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Estrella said.

"You can put me down now?" she asked again.

Steve lowered her feet to the floor in his living room. Their living room. It was dark.

Instead of telling Jarvis, Steve reached and switched on the lamp himself. Estrella blinked in the sudden light and stared at him.
"We don't have to, Eya. I only wanted to be away from them. To be with you," Steve reminded her.

"Liar," she whispered.

She bit his delectable bottom lip and lightly dragged it between her teeth until it snapped back into place. Poor man. He was nearly beside himself with wanting her and with wanting to do the right thing. As she nibbled and kissed him, the laughing, playful banter they'd enjoyed in the backseat of Sam's car after the wedding was nowhere to be seen. Steve was incredibly stiff. His breathing huffed shallow and fast.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

Estrella leaned back to get a better look at him. Steve looked afraid. His eyes shifted all over her, seemed to linger on her veil, then at her throat and bosom, then down her body in a fast flicker. His hands clenched at his sides.

"I'm afraid of hurting you. Can you give me a minute?" Steve asked.

She frowned a little, but she nodded. He turned and went into his bedroom, then into his bathroom. Estrella followed so far as to turn on his bedroom light and sit on the edge of the bed.

The door was mostly swung shut, with only a crack so she could see a sliver of the bathroom mirror over the sink. She couldn't see him, but she heard Steve run water to splash his face, then brush his teeth. It was a good idea.

She got up and went to tap lightly at the door.

"Yeah?" Steve asked.

"I'd like to brush my teeth. I don't want to have food breath," she said.

"Oh. Sure," Steve said.

He swung the door open. She swished past him in her beautiful red dress. He was going to escape the bathroom and leave her to it but she grabbed his hand in passing.

"Take the pins out of my hair? My head itches with all this," Estrella said, miming scratchy hands at the up-do of her hairstyle and veil.

"Alright," Steve said.

He automatically moved behind her to look for the dark brown pins in her hair. His face was intent on finding pins and taking off her veil. She could tell he was gratefully using the task to delay dealing with sex.

Steve's reflection behind her at the bathroom countertop was sharp and handsome. He was quite a bit taller than her, even with her heels on, so she could watch the stern expression on his face and the careful way his arms and hands moved around her head. The bright color of her dress and the black and white of his tux once again stood out to her as a novelty of formal beauty. She watched in the mirror as the lovely young woman she saw began to look a little more like herself as her hair fell down around her shoulders and the veil was lifted off and set aside. Her makeup wasn't heavily done but it was still more than she was used to. She quickly got a wash cloth and cleaned her face before Steve was done with her hair.

"I think that's all of the pins," Steve murmured.
His hand set down the last little pile of pins he'd been holding. With nothing to do, he stood behind her like a large bird ready to fly away at the slightest startle. She reached back and took his hand so he wouldn't go.

"It's okay, Steve. We can do this slowly. Take off your jacket then come rub my feet? They hurt from the heels," she said.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," he said.

While he made his escape to hang up his coat she managed to pee and brush her teeth. He knocked before coming back into the bathroom. Estrella felt like rolling her eyes but she didn't allow herself to, in case he might see.

"Come in," she told him.

Steve looked hesitantly around the door as if he might upset her by finding her in a state of undress. She patiently waved him over to the tub. Her full skirt swished as she sat on the rolled edge of his claw foot tub. The strapless bra she wore dug into her armpits. She was eager to get it off. It looked like they would need to take things one piece at a time and there were several things to get to before the bra.

Steve still looked crisply formal in his ruffle-front starched shirt and bowtie and the cummerbund and trousers. Only now did she notice the glossy shine of his black shoes because she'd been so distracted by the rest of him until now. He smoothly lowered himself to squat on his heels in front of her.

"Let me see your hands!" she said enthusiastically when he started to reach for one of her shoes.

Steve smiled and gave her his hands, splayed out, because he knew she would want to look at his nails. He liked that both of them had smooth, shiny fingernails. With their matching wedding bands, the sight of her holding his hands was a strong reminder of their recent vows and exchange of rings. The rings felt new and unfamiliar to them.

"Was it crazy, having a manicure with Tony?" she asked.

"Not as bad as I'd feared, thank God. The women had things to cover up, so…" Steve said, and gestured vaguely to his chest.

"Oh. I thought it would be worse. Like disco balls and poles," she said.

"Nah. It was almost boring. I had a good talk with Tony, though. And with Thor. The wedding customs on Asgard are a lot crazier than topless manicurists," Steve said with a smile.

"I've read about the old Norse customs," she said to keep the conversation going.

She offered her foot to Steve. He supported it at the back of her ankle while he slipped her white shoe off. His hands on her stockings gave her the shivers and she wiggled and grinned. They weren't even doing anything yet and his nearness and his touch at her ankles was making her feel sparks of response up her legs and straight to her brain. Steve looked up from his captivated stare at his hands on her feet.

"Ankles," she said.

Ankles had never meant much to her but seeing Steve's reverence and reaction to handling hers made her feel tingly. The way he smiled back at her with some heat in his eyes made her happy
because it meant their slow pace was working.

"Yeah. Ankles. Yours are beautiful," Steve told her.

He smoothly slipped one hand behind the small of her back and lifted her right foot to kiss her on top of the ankle and the stocking that covered it. The heat in his eyes cranked up a few notches and he looked down again to break the connection. The fact that he knew bodies so well and knew that she'd need a counter-balance at her back when he lifted her foot made her feel unexpectedly melty. Since he knew how to support her with every little movement, what kinds of positions could they try? Naked, carnal images flashed behind her eyes and she closed them and took a quick breath.

"Eya?" he asked.

She opened her eyes halfway and smiled at him. She shook her head, deciding it was best to leave those thoughts unspoken for now. He must have known something of what she was thinking because he leaned forward to kiss her again, a careful, sensual press of his mouth to hers. She wanted to push, to feel the wet slickness of his mouth but Steve denied them that. He pulled away slowly and set her shoes aside. Carefully, his hands rubbed her feet. The grip he used was a little too strong but she wasn't going to complain. His fingers strayed briefly up the backs of her calves, feeling the seams going up her legs.

Estrella had enough of waiting. He was very handsome in his tux but she wanted him out of it. While he indulged himself playing with her ankles and her stockings, she tugged at his bowtie. It took a few minutes to figure it out but she undid the black silk and dropped it atop her shoes. The way he looked at her while she undid the small button at his throat was almost frightening so she didn't look at his eyes for long. She didn't want their first time to be on a bathroom floor or in a cold, hard tub so she had to look away.

They were playing with each other and she loved it. The trembles she knew Steve would be experiencing were so high-pitched she could barely feel them. Her hands slid out along his impressive shoulders and down his arms almost to his elbows. He was still hard all over. Being slow and gentle wasn't calming him any, it was only setting a pace for him. That was good enough.

"How does this thing come off?" she asked.

Her fingers reached down to tug at the upper edge of the cummerbund.

"It's in the back," Steve said.

He stood up and turned around. The sight of him straining at the front of his trousers was to be expected, but it was brief before she was presented with his back side. She bit her lip while she dutifully undid the clasp and let another piece of silk puddle down onto her shoes. He would have immediately turned around again but she set her hand at his hip to keep him from turning. Without the coat to hide it, the hard curves of his ass would have been too much for polite company. The muscles of his thighs pressed at the expensive fabric and creases formed in the tailored fit around his ass and legs. Her hands moved to his knees and skimmed slowly up his thighs. He groaned as she got her hands full of his bottom. She gave him a good squeeze and a grope. He laughed.

His laughter abruptly cut off when one of her hands went underneath and between. She was slow but steady. If he was so hard up front, was he…?

"Yaa.." Steve groaned again when she cupped his tight balls from behind.

Quickly, she withdrew her hand. He was supposed to be soft, there. He wasn't. Everything was
drawn up high and tight. As soon as her hand was away from between his thighs, he spun around and dropped to his knees.

Their kiss was wet and messy and she was nearly pushed back into the tub. His hands roughly tugged her body against him when she teetered and almost tipped backwards. Her dress crumpled and scratched along the inside of her thighs when he pulled her to him. His strength and the harshness of his breathing startled her into unwanted fear. Fear wasn't welcome here. She bucked up her courage and smoothed her hands up his face and into his hair. At the pleasure of massaging his scalp, Steve gentled against her.

"Sorry," he mumbled among softer kisses.

"S'okay," she told him.

Her hands worked down the buttons at the front of his shirt. Steve stopped holding her to undo the cuff links at his wrists. He quickly slipped off his dress shoes and dropped the cuff links into them. They went beside her shoes and his shirt slipped off down his arms. She wasted no time tugging up his undershirt and he ripped it off over his head the rest of the way.

Suddenly there was a lot of bare skin. She moved to kiss his shoulder but he pulled away.

"Slow. I wanna..." Steve said.

His hands skimmed restlessly up and down the backs of her legs. Jesse had been sending pictures of things from the bridal shop to Bucky. Buck had suggested the stockings with the seams in the back. She didn't really like them. She'd wanted the plain ones, but this wasn't all about her. She wanted Steve to be happy too. Clearly he was happy with the seamed stockings. For better effect, she didn't want him to take them off of her yet. His fingers were tickling at the tapes and clasps holding the stockings up, seeming to enjoy the naughtiness of feeling around under her skirt.

She shook her thighs at him, like a dog shaking out extra water. Such a gesture would have been pathetic a year ago, but not now. Muscle and lush curves flicked his hands away. Steve gave her some room as she stood from the tub rim and turned her back to him.

"Thank God," Steve said.

"Hmm?" Estrella wondered.

"I loved your wedding dress, but all those buttons! I don't know how I would have-"

"Thank Pepper and Natasha. They wrestled me into this dress because it has a zipper," Estrella told him.

He stood behind her and she shivered to feel his closeness. His fingers found the hidden zipper pull and eased it down.

"You look so pretty in this, doll, I almost don't wanna take if offa ya," Steve told her.

She took her first deep breath in a while as the bodice eased away with the opening of the zipper. She was far from naked underneath. There was the highly structured bra which went down to her hips, then the short layers of stiff crinkly petticoat which had helped to fluff her dress, then the tapes, garters and stockings down her legs. With the dress falling away, she stepped out of it and was left clad all in white, except for the yellow silk roses nestled in the deep cleavage of her bra. The little ties at her stockings were yellow as well.
She braced a hand back onto Steve's shoulder and stepped one foot then the other out of her dress. Steve was too proper. She liked that he respected the fancy red dress but she grimaced that he left the bathroom to go hang up her dress probably wherever he'd hung up his tuxedo jacket.

She made sure she was posed to best effect when he hurried back to her in the bathroom. Her hands braced at either side of her hips on the edge of the tub and her ankles were crossed in front of her. The bra made outrageous high, round mounds of her breasts and her waist felt cinched tight and sleek. The curves of her bottom and legs felt extravagant and more feminine than she'd ever seen them. Steve stopped still in the frame of the bathroom door on his return.

"Guh..." he sputtered.

She smiled at him. In that moment, she felt mighty.

She was so much weaker than him, but strength wasn't everything. The way his eyes played over her made her feel like arching her back, almost as if his hands skimmed her curves. She lifted a hand to crook a finger at him.

Steve moved slowly closer to her. He had only a few steps to stalk her but it was clear that's what he was doing. She bravely stood and turned her back to present him with the ribbons of her petticoats. A sharp pop sound and the jerk of her body made her eyes go wide. Steve was done messing with tiny fasteners. He'd ripped the ribbons. Her petticoats fell down her legs and he lifted her feet in turn to set them aside.

"Mmph!" she squeaked.

Steve was on his knees again. He'd buried his face in the curves of her bum.

Estrella giggled, then choked off the sound when his large, warm hands came up to steady her hips. Steve's face moved up from her bottom and he kissed her right above it. She twisted to look back over her shoulder. Oh. He liked the little dimples on the backs of her hip bones.

She gasped as his fingers curled into her silky panties at her hip, then her body jerked again as he ripped them away and dropped them. There was a little sting where the fabric had burned across her opposite hip but she wasn't going to complain. Again, fear spiked her adrenaline. This was Steve. He was safe. He was only playing, enjoying the moment. The gentleness of his fingers skimming over her hip told her he was aware the fabric had caused her discomfort and he was sorry.

The heat of his breath huffed at the backs of her thighs. She went up on the balls of her feet and arched her back. Steve groaned and began kissing her bottom. His kisses turned into licks and centered in where she was already hot and wet.

No. The required angle and balance wanted her to brace her hands on the wall behind the tub. She was reminded she didn't want to do this in the bathroom. Again, she shook herself. Steve wasn't immediately dislodged from licking at her, but he got the message in a moment and he sat back on his heels so she could turn around.

When she did, she found him rubbing a thumb up and down the hard ridge at the front of his trousers. His eyes were burning and naughty and he licked his lips.

She lifted a foot and used her toes to nudge his hand away from stroking himself. She shook her head at him like a disapproving teacher. He smiled a little and cocked an eyebrow at her in challenge. Estrella turned and walked from the bathroom to the bedroom. She was beginning to
feel tight all over like he was. The heat of him was right behind her. The urge to run was strong and she didn't know why. She wanted this. She wanted him.

With a tight pivot, she hopped back onto the bed. Steve immediately made to follow her until she pressed a stocking foot to his chest. It was marvelous that big and strong as he was, he stopped himself from lunging over her at just the slight pressure of her foot. That made her feel safe, especially with the hungry look in his eyes. She scooted back to prop against the headboard. Her gaze moved down to his waistband expectantly.

Steve moved to quickly to finish undressing. She frowned at him. He smiled a little through the desire that burned in him and slowed his hands. The muscles of his body and arms were dreamy and she wanted to touch him all over and feel his skin. The way he peeled away the front closure from his groin and smoothly slipped the trousers down his legs made her smile in anticipation. His shorts were black silk too. He bent to give a little tug to his socks, then he shucked out of his shorts and climbed onto the bed.

She was scared. Not enough to not want to make love to him, but enough to make her tremble. As he moved closer over her his hands skimmed up her stockings. He noticed her anxiety and he eased his lust to give her a gentle smile.

"Tell me anything, sweetheart. If you don't want to, it's alright," he insisted.

It wasn't alright. With the tight, hard way he was tucked against his belly and the shine of wetness at his tip, she knew it wouldn't be nice to make him stop. She didn't want to stop either, she was just afraid it would hurt. She clenched her teeth and pushed her jaw forward. She could do this. Even if it hurt, she would.

"Nah, don't get stubborn. I don't wanna hurt you," Steve murmured.

Instead of getting over her, he lay at her side and pulled her into a hug. His hand stroked the back of her hair and she breathed at his neck. His sweetness when she knew he was so ready brought tears to her eyes. She tucked her head down to kiss his upper chest. The feel of him at her thighs made her squirm. Some part of her mind was afraid but her body wanted more.

Steve made a tortured sound, then bit it off. His hand curled around the ribbon going to her garter and she touched his knuckles. She didn't want him to rip all of her pretty things. The tight clench of his hand eased and she felt his nimble fingers fiddle with the ribbons instead. While he handled the garter and stockings, her hands rubbed him all over. His arms, his shoulders, his back and sides. His chest was tense and they kissed almost painfully until he had the stockings loose. She bent one leg, then another and let him push the delicate stockings down and off her feet.

"Off!" she insisted, and rolled under him to present the back of her bra. His fingers popped the clasp and she tugged aside the stiff garment to toss on the floor somewhere. She was naked underneath him and she suddenly couldn't think anymore. Skin. There was so much warm skin. They rubbed together in a frenzied hunger. Steve's hand caught at her hip and turned her onto her back again.

Their kiss was wild and deep, both of them breathing hard. Steve made a desperate sound as she rubbed her thighs together restlessly. His hips were already moving. She speared her hands into his hair and wiggled her body down for him.

"Nnnn!" Steve whined, then there were hot spurts of fluid splashing against her thighs.
"Mmhmm!" she encouraged him through their kiss.

The shuddering of his body was tight and controlled against her. She strained against him and luxuriated in the hot wetness he'd given her. She loved the smell of him, the taste of his skin, the strong, desperate shaking of his body against her. As his orgasm wound down she bit at his lips, denying him the possibility of apologizing. They both knew he could go again and again. She didn't want him to feel bad for going off early. She was deeply pleased he'd wanted her so much that he couldn't wait.

While he blushed so hard that she could feel it in his face, she kissed him and nipped at his lips. Her hips writhed against his, rubbing his semen between them and making things slippery. The feel of him, still hard and springy, was making her insane with want.

"Please!" she shrieked.

Steve held her writhing in his arms and slid through the mess he'd made to find the warmest spot which seemed to welcome him like a target. She went still when his tip found her. Estrella stopped her thrashing and stared up at him.

If his arms around her hurt, she didn't notice. The world was made of only his face, his eyes, and the slow, certain push of pressure where she so needed it. There was no condom this time. Sensitive skin slipped and pushed, glided and tugged. Her jaw fell open so she could breathe deeply enough to fuel the excitement of finally getting him inside where she'd longed for him.

Steve felt like he was sinking into a deep, hot kiss. If he hadn't come a minute ago, he was sure he would now. He couldn't look away from Estrella. Both of them were sharing the shock of joining. He had to go slow. No way would he mindlessly want to rush through this bliss. Shivers chased down his body, excess energy that urged him to slam forward and thrust at her mindlessly. He saw her eyes go wide as the girth of him glided past the rougher, tighter band of scarring inside her. If he stopped now, she would hurt more. Something at the base of his spine and the base of his brain demanded that he not stop.

He watched her carefully. When she gasped in a breath and he felt pressure at his tip he stopped moving. God, but he wanted to dig his knees into the softness of the bed and shove against her. He didn't.

They held still and basked in the moment of being fully joined with nothing between them. Estrella's hands made fluttery pats and grabs at his hips. She felt pinned and penetrated, vulnerable in the most delicious way. The discomfort of him large inside her was worrisome but the sensation of finally being full outweighed any negative.

"Mmuh?" she breathed at him.

"Babe. Ah, God. Eya. Are you alright?" Steve asked.

"Ngh!" was all she could answer.

Her hips gave a shake side to side, rubbing him around to feel the almost-too-much press of him inside. She wanted to feel him move!

Her eyes squinted angry demand at him and she bucked strongly enough to partly lift his weight. Her strong thighs were braced against his and she kicked at him with her heels in frustration.

"Mmm, okay," Steve mumbled.
Belatedly, he noticed her breasts pressed at his ribs. He tucked his head down and lipped at their upper swells as he started to move. Regret was fleeting as he lost himself in the mind-blowing glide of his cock inside her slick grip. He'd wanted to be romantic and look into her eyes, but that wasn't working. It was enough that he set his head beside hers on the pillow and listened for her sounds while he moved slow and deep in her.

Estrella reeled at the fear, adoration, and abandonment she felt in his arms. This hurt almost like the sex she'd had before, but she loved Steve. He was going slow and trying not to hurt her so she bit her lip hard and didn't make a sound of complaint. Unlike the experiences of her past, the full feeling inside was welcome and joyful, coveted by something deep in her mind. Her hands gripped at his sides to feel his muscles working, to feel the careful way he used only a measured amount of his strength to love her.

She turned her head to watch the tight grimace on his face, evidence of the pleasure he was lost in. Burning discomfort caused her to tighten around him, which made it worse. Steve made a euphoric sound in his throat. His pleasure was more important and she badly wanted to feel him go off inside her. She wanted to feel his trembles again.

Steve carefully moved faster, lost in her grip. He made his strokes longer but didn't hit her too deeply. Warmth bloomed in his chest and he felt like he couldn't breathe enough, probably because he'd been holding his breath. He arched his body back to let some air at his skin and his eyes burned down at her, watching for signs that he should stop.

Estrella looked down his chest to see the way his belly tensed and worked to move him. He was flushed and the veins at his neck showed more than usual. She wanted to suck at him there but her body arched her back into the pillow, into the bed. It hurt. It burned. But it was building to some frenzied height. The pull and press of him tugged at all of her soft parts. She felt swollen and over-sensitive. Orgasm snuck up on her fast and harsh.

It felt deeply gratifying to spasm and grip around him. The ecstasy and burning combined to make her scream, a long shrill that tripped Steve over to follow her. She felt the strong spurt of him against sensitive tissues inside and it rolled her eyes behind her lids. Her mind overloaded and she couldn't think anything at all for a few moments. Dimly, she was aware of kicking her legs at him to make him stop moving.

She didn't know how long it had been when she returned to awareness. She blinked her eyes and breathed through her teeth. They were clamped onto Steve's bicep. He was still full and hard inside her. She felt like a mess down there. The rest of their skin was either hot where they touched or chilly with sweat where they didn't.

Steve was on his elbows above her, holding her behind her shoulders. His head was down and he breathed against her temple. He occasionally twitched inside her and she wondered at him still being as hard as he was before.

It was embarrassing to see the purplish tooth marks she'd left on his arm. She kissed at the marks then laid her head back to look at him. Things felt tender and she didn't know what to do. She wanted him out, but she didn't. She wanted to hold him forever, but at the same time she wanted to breathe deeply without him pressing her so firmly.

"I don't wanna leave you, but I might be hurting you. If I pull out, I might hurt you too. What should I-?" Steve asked.

"Slowly," she said.
She winced at the feeling of the thickest part of him pulling past her scars. The feeling was a deep tug because she couldn't seem to loosen and relax around him. There was an embarrassing wet sound as he slipped free. It was incredibly intimate to feel the loss of him, to see him wet and ruddy, dripping as he moved aside to lie near her.

She hid her face against his arm. His hand came to rub the back of her head and he kissed her hair.

"Tell me you're alright," Steve murmured low and sweet to her.

"I'm okay," she assured him.

"It hurt," he guessed.

She shrugged.

"I'm s-" Steve tried to say.

Estrella rolled aside and up to press a hand to his mouth and frown at him.

Steve's apologetic look turned into a smile under her hand.

"No. You don't apologize," she told him.

"Yrs Mm," Steve sassed her, muffled behind her hand.

"I shouldn't have bit you," she said as she rubbed fingers at his arm.

The tooth marks were fading already.

"It's fine. I'm not sure I felt it," he said.

He gathered her close, but in an embrace that let her breathe. A few things were noticeable now that she could pay attention to something other than Steve. They were on top of the bedspread instead of under it. Her wedding band still felt new and heavy on her finger. There was a beautiful arrangement of flowers on Steve's dresser beyond their feet. Beside the flowers was a sliver bucket frosted with condensation, a bottle stuck in the ice, and two glasses waiting. Their skin felt wonderful but sticky with sweat. Estrella rolled away some and his arm loosened around her.

They got under the covers. Steve folded down the top of the blankets to rest at their hips. There was no need to be hesitant about staring at each other. She was aware he looked at her bare chest and belly, just as she stared at him. He was still shiny and slick from being inside her. She wanted to touch, so she did.

Her fingertips glided at his navel and played in the slipperiness. His foreskin was still back. She touched it, which made his hips twitch. Steve's hand caressed up her arm, then his palm moved down to cover her breast. He played with the weight of her for a moment, then brushed his fingers across her nipples. She sucked in a breath and jerked to move away, then made herself relax under the tingly sensation.

"I can't stop lookin," Steve admitted.

His fingers trailed down her arm to her hip.

"I like to look too. Don't feel bad about it," Estrella told him.

They lay back a little and let each other look their fill.
"This is too good. It's like we're gonna be in trouble and our parents are gonna bust in and expect us to go home," Steve said.

Estrella smiled and shook her head. Both of them were years past having parents but she knew what he meant. The moment felt too good to be true. She looked at their pretty bodies, at the nice, secure, comfortable room, and she smelled the scent of sex in the air. It felt like luxury and indulgence. She scooted over and snuggled against his side. His arm settled around her shoulders and made a pillow for her head.

He was still hard, so her hand naturally closed around him and began moving. Steve breathed deeply and laid his head back.

"You don't hafta," he said.

"Unless you don't want me to, hush," she told him.

Steve felt swelled with happiness. At first, he'd been sorely embarrassed that he'd gone off too early, but she'd been so kind and encouraging about it that it wasn't an issue at all. The remembered feel of being inside her made the base of his brain feel fuzzy and warm. He surged harder in her hand and she purred at him. She was stroking him lightly, just enough that he wished it would never stop. But how had it been for her? He'd asked and she hadn't wanted to tell him. She'd only said she was 'okay.'

He took a quick glance down at himself. There was no blood on him. There was no coppery smell in the air like there would have been if he'd been too rough on her delicate bits. That was reassuring. She looked beautiful, sweaty and stubborn, daring him to mention that he felt bad about making her hurt while he'd had all the fun.

Steve decided to be sneaky. He pulled her close to kiss her, since she didn't want him to apologize for bad sex. He felt guilty for wanting more but she felt so good, smelled so good, tasted so good. He didn't want to get out of the bed, but he lifted her and brought her to the bathroom. She made an urgent sound and he heard drips hitting the floor. He winced and imagined they'd never get the smell of sex out of the carpet.

Estrella let him set her in the tub. She crouched on the chilly porcelain while he turned the faucet levers to get the water going. There were new candles on the marble shelf by the tub and bottles of scented bubble bath. Steve felt to be sure the water was coming in warm. She twisted the top off a bottle of milk and oatmeal bubble bath which the label assured would be soothing to sore skin. Bubbles began to froth up under the running tap.

Steve grinned at her while she stared at his nakedness. They were enchanted with the ability to look at each other. He began to frown at some red marks on her skin where he'd probably held her too hard. Estrella looked down at the places on her ribs and arms he was concerned about. It was nothing. It didn't hurt.

She surprised him with a splash of bubbly water.

"Pepper and Nat left us champagne and candles but I think they forgot matches to light the candles. Go find some? And stop worrying about me. I'm good," Estrella told him.

Steve glanced around and finally took note of the new candles beside the tub. His wife was far more interesting to look at. She looked oddly like a beautiful woman and a little girl too, with the way her hair was starting to get wet. Then she laid back to relax against the curved end of the tub. She didn't look like a little girl anymore. Not at all.
"Go!" Estrella smiled and splashed a foot at him.

Steve laughed and hurried from the bathroom.

Matches. And the champagne. His belly grumbled while he hurried to dig in the kitchen drawer. Now that the nerves and urgency of their first time had passed, hunger caught up to him. Steve rushed to the living room where he'd left his phone charging on the end table.

**Buck, is there any food left?** he texted.

**Yeah I've been trying to bring you some but J won't let me. You gotta tell the moron to let me in.**

Steve laughed. Jarvis had been serious about their privacy. He heard Estrella turn off the bath water. He wanted to hurry back to her.

He touched the text thread for Jarvis.

**Shall I allow Mister Barnes to make his delivery?**

**Yes, pl** was all he had time to type before Bucky knocked on his door. Steve dropped the phone and hurried to answer. Now that he'd been thinking of food his stomach was clamoring for something. He'd been too nervous to eat much all day.

Buck stood out in the foyer like a waiter with a covered tray balanced on his left hand. He glanced briefly down and back up at Steve's careless nakedness and handed over the tray. Steve answered his friend's grin with one of his own. He was stupid with happiness and he didn't care. He just needed food and the champagne. And matches.

"She bites hard," Buck said while looking at his arm.

"Well, we're kinda hungry," Steve said as a smart-ass explanation.

He couldn't stop smiling. There was a rare happiness on Bucky's face that he hadn't seen since they were kids. It warmed his heart that Buck was happy because he was happy. Belatedly, he felt a herd of bath bubbles sliding down his thigh from where his girl had splashed him.

"Go on. Don't keep a hungry lady waiting," Bucky urged him.

"Thanks, Buck," Steve said.

Bucky gave him a jaunty silver-fingered salute and turned away for the elevator. Steve kept the heavy food tray balanced on his palm while he closed the door. He set it down in the kitchen and rummaged until he successfully found the matches. Whatever was under the cover of the large silver tray was making his mouth water. Before carrying it to the bathroom, he brought an end table from the living room and set it in the bathroom. He glanced at Estrella where she nestled in a cloud of bubbles. Gosh, his cheeks were gonna be sore from smiling so much!

It took longer than he liked to carefully pop the cork from the chilled champagne. There was the foil and the wire twisty thing, and he almost wanted to snap the neck off the bottle with his thumb to make it go faster. Broken glass in the bubbly would be no good. Fancy wine flutes weren't his thing, but it was for Estrella so he took enough time to get it right. He carried the poured champagne to the bathroom then went back to get the food tray and the matches. Steve set the food on the table near the tub, uncovered it, then handed Estrella her champagne.

"Careful, you'll make it spill over!" Estrella warned as he stepped into the tub and sat down at the
opposite end from her.

"I won't. You left enough room for it to not overflow," Steve said.

When Steve settled back to relax against his end of the tub the water was near the rim and the bubbles threatened to froth over onto the tile floor.

"How did you know it wouldn't overflow?" Estrella asked.

Her eyes were wide at how close they'd come to making a lake of the floor.

"Displacement. I'm good with spacial things. I could tell there was… never mind," Steve's words wound down to a mumble. He didn't want to talk about how his brain worked right now. He had a naked lady in his tub and their skin felt great where their legs slid together under the water.

"How did you get food so fast?" Estrella asked.

"Buck knew we needed it," he said.

He inspected the impressive array of food and picked a chocolate covered strawberry. He handed it to her.

Estrella looked dazzled, like Captain America fans sometimes did when they unexpectedly met him on the street. But it wasn't because of that. Her gaze darted around at the handsomely appointed bathroom, the large tub and the bubbles, the champagne flute in one of her hands and the chocolate-dipped strawberry in the other. The candles! Before his hands were wet, Steve got the matches and lit the seven fat ivory candles beside them. Flickering candle light added to the warm glow of the bathroom lights.

Steve relaxed back against the tub to enjoy the lovely picture his wife made across from him.

Estrella smiled timidly, then her face crumpled into tears.

"Aw, sweetheart, come 'ere," Steve murmured.

He quickly dropped the matches outside the tub onto the floor, set her champagne on the table, then gathered Estrella into his arms at his end of the tub. Water sloshed over the side but he didn't care. He cuddled her against his chest and held her. She felt great against him but now wasn't the time for thoughts about sex.

She cried and he let her. He kissed her wet hair and rubbed her back. She held her strawberry above the bubbles and tried not to make embarrassing snotty noises. It felt wonderful to have Steve hold her. It felt like the one real thing in the middle of the fairy tale.

"This is me?" she whispered between shuddering breaths.

"This is us, Eya. You and me," he said in a low, soothing tone.

"I don't like champagne," she said.

Steve laughed.

"I don't either. I'm more of a beer kind of guy," he agreed with her.

He picked up their two champagne flutes and poured them into the bathwater.
"Steeve!" Estrella fussed at him.

"What? I'm not wasting it. We're using it, see? Only, we don't have to tell our friends exactly how we used it," he reasoned.

Her head turned and she looked at him with deep brown eyes made rich by the candle light. They were nose to nose. It was impossible not to kiss her, so he smooched her nose.

"I know it's a lot to adjust to. Maybe you'll like the cabin in Colorado more. I think it's a little rough around the edges," Steve said.

Estrella sighed. She laid her head down on his shoulder. His arms were heavy around her but they were a comfort.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry. I'm happy," she said.

"It's alright. It's been an intense day. Jesse probably thinks I've got obsessive-compulsive disorder because I wouldn't stop shining his shoes. We handle stress in different ways," Steve admitted.

"You shined his shoes? Why didn't he shine his own shoes?" Estrella wondered.

Steve fiddled with the clasp of her white choker necklace at the back of her neck. The fabric was wet but he left it alone. They didn't need the complication of her voice right now.

"He did shine his own shoes. But then he got a scuff on em, and everybody was doing everything for me. There wasn't anything they'd let me do for myself and it was making me restless. I had ta do something and that's all I could find to do," Steve murmured with some embarrassment.

"They wouldn't let me do anything today, either. Nat made breakfast for me and Rita had tea ready for me when I went over to see them. Val brushed my hair and talked my ear off this morning. She's discovered she can make Jarvis have a conversation with her. Alberto wouldn't even let me carry my guitar over when I wanted to play to take my mind off my nerves. I almost yelled at him! Why can't they leave us alone?" she whispered.

Steve's stomach gurgled long and loud.

"Are you gonna eat that, or are ya gonna keep waving it under my nose?" he asked her while he stared at the forgotten strawberry.

Estrella laughed and pushed the strawberry at his mouth. Steve took the whole berry, stem and all.

"They're happy for us and they're trying to be helpful. I think it's their way of participating in our wedding. Let's not be ungrateful," Steve said as soon as he'd swallowed.

"I'm not ungrateful," she assured him.

"I know. Me neither. It's just a little more help than we wanted," Steve said.

Estrella nodded and sat up. He loosened his arms to let her. Their bodies slipped in the milky tinted water while she reached for the food tray. Her strong legs wrapped around his middle for a secure grip. She turned back to him with a little cocktail sausage in her fingers. Steve watched the juicy, saucy morsel of food. She brought it to his lips. It smelled tangy and tasted like meaty ambrosia.

"You're gonna feed me? Aren't you hungry?" Steve asked.

She nodded. She offered him another little sausage from her fingers. Her beautiful, lush breasts
dripped with bath bubbles while she perched on him. Her smile was generous and she kept the food coming to him fast enough that he could only make appreciative sounds. He fell a bit more in love with her. This was like heaven. She changed her angle and slipped lower on him while she reached for more to feed him. Steve's eyes went wider as she brushed at his tip under water.

Estrella noticed how captivated he was with her. It was gratifying to watch the awed look on his face while she touched him and fed his hungry belly. He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, ridiculously so, with his skin wet where his chest showed above the water and his strong arms resting along the edges of the tub. If he wasn't so hungry she would have stopped wasting time with the food.

"Eya, aren't you sore?" he asked when she got herself in just the right spot on his belly and let herself slide down.

Maybe she was, and maybe it stung a little as she let her weight and the slippery bath join them together again. The press of him inside was uncomfortable but she wanted it. Steve was frozen still and staring at up her. Estrella decided to hold still for a while and try to let the soreness pass. Maybe the warm water would keep her relaxed so she wouldn't clench up like last time.

Steve could barely eat. Hungry as he was, the feel of being inside her hardly let him taste the food. Between bites he stared at the witchy way her eyes watched him. It seemed she was enchanting him and she knew it. Food and sex at the same time was powerful magic for him. Though she wasn't really moving, her body shifted, changing pressure and angles when she reached aside to the tray. She took a few bites for herself between bits she passed to him and he was glad.

There was a slight but serious pinch between her brows. He could see signs of pain on her face but she carried on with what she wanted to do. Admiration welled up inside him at her spirit of generosity and determination. He wanted to stop her so she wouldn't hurt herself on him but she pushed away his hands when he reached for her hips.

"Let me," she said low and husky.

Steve lay back in a daze and she did as she wished.

Estrella decided she needed help with him or she really would be intolerably sore in the morning. She reached under her hair and took off her necklace. Steve's pupils darkened in response before she made a sound. The necklace dropped to the floor onto their shoes and discarded silky things.

He was large and twitching inside her with excitement. There was something more than the pain. She held him. All of him. His cock, his attention, his senses, and his love. Steve was incredibly tuned into her, focused and waiting. She felt a heady sense of power at what she knew she was going to do to him. She pulled the tub drain. Then she started to move.

Her body instinctively knew what needed to be done. While her hands gripped the large muscles of his chest, she flexed her torso and angled her hips. The drag of him inside her made him lay his head back and moan. With a reaction like that, she knew she could play him like her guitar.

She worked with slow undulations. In her mind, she found a way to turn her pain into intensity. Rather than an instrument of discomfort, the stiff jut of him inside became a means to ply him with pleasure. It thrilled her in some mysterious way to watch Steve bite his lip and make pretty noises deep in his throat. His hands moved near her hips, then he decided to curl them on the edge of the tub instead. Water sloshed in a slow, recurring wave with the movement of her hips. She loved the feel of the warm water moving around them so she stoppered the tub again before any more of it drained.
The sight of him blown away, out of his mind from sex made her feel hot and demanding. Hungry. Excitement spiked her brain every time he made those low groaning sounds. She wanted to hear him more and louder. Her hips snapped faster and harder until she began to whine with mingled pain, pleasure and excitement. The first stroke of her voice made Steve gasp and arch back. His legs braced stiff against the end of the tub behind her and the thick metal made an ominous warping sound under the force of his feet and hands.

Both of them were making noise and it drove her mad. She felt flushed feverish with need and determination. Steve was rigidly stiff inside her and it hurt so good. Steve made a desperate sound which strangled in his throat. Estrella sang out at the incredibly sweet feeling building inside her. She didn't care if she bruised. She needed him. Needed him!

Steve looked up at the wild woman riding him. The demand to grab her and fuck into her roughly was strong so he exerted it against the tub. He felt like an animal and she did too. He yelled through his teeth as she cried out and thrashed on him. Her hair, her breasts, her searing hot eyes... oh God. He felt like his life was pouring out.

The way he stared at her with his eyes nearly all black, his face a severe grimace of intensity was something like the ferocious image she'd seen of him in battle. His body tensed in a terribly gorgeous display of muscle and the tub made a shrieking sound along with her. She spasmed in the grip of orgasm while Steve came down from his.

Both of them panted as if they'd been doing hard work. There was no momentary loss of awareness this time. They were too adrenalized to not be fully alert.

Steve wanted to lay his head back and close his eyes, but he couldn't stop looking at her. The timid girl who was easily overwhelmed by rich things was no longer with them. Estrella perched on him proudly like he was a slayed dragon. She was so strong and perfect, like some mythical creature he was too mind-wiped to think of at the moment. Then she looked down at the tub.

"Where's the water?" she whispered in confusion.

Steve laughed. The tub was still stoppered but the water was gone. Estrella twisted her body to look toward his feet. She gasped from the sight of the broken tub and she gasped from the aching soreness inside of her.

She leaned aside to look over the rim of the tub. The floor was wet but there was no standing water.

"Don't worry about it. There's a floor drain under the tub. It's alright. Eya... easy," Steve murmured affectionately.

He felt calm enough to put his hands on her now. Steve lifted her off of him slowly. He really liked the sight of them joined together but his concern at the pained sounds she made had him helping her to her feet instead of lingering to get a peep show.

"No, don't pick me up. I can walk!" she hissed at him.

"Alright, then lets shower. I don't think we accomplished getting clean," Steve said.

He bent and retrieved her necklace. She stood still and held her hair aside while he put it on her. It was beginning to feel natural to be naked with him. He didn't feel like a threat behind her. He felt solid and safe. Steve started the shower and held out a hand to her. She joined him under the hot water.

For several minutes they leaned against opposite walls of stone tile and stared at each other. They
were close enough that she had to look up to him. Somehow she felt like his equal despite their obvious difference in size and strength. She noticed his skin, his muscles and his veins were returned to normal from how ruddy, hard and straining he'd been only a few minutes ago. Her heart was still pounding a little and she still breathed through her lips.

Her vagina hurt but the rest of her felt amazing. Even her toes felt blissed out. She looked down at them and wiggled them against the tile.

"Do your toes feel good too?" she asked, looking up at Steve.

"Uh-huh. Babe, I think the ends of my hair feel good. That was…" Steve said with fervor, running out of words to describe what he felt.

Instead, he gave her a goofy smile which faded to a proud kind of regard.

"Estrella, you make me happy. You amaze me. Where did that come from? The thing you did at the end?" he said.

She shrugged. She touched the back of her head like he'd done before to indicate the instinctual part of her brain. He understood her gesture.

Steve pulled her into a hug. He held her carefully under the warm water. She was a wild lady, his girl, but she was sweet and fragile too. He wanted to care for her, both her body and her feelings. He got the shampoo and began to work on her hair. His damn dick was awake and not likely to leave him alone with her in his arms. They both ignored it.

Estrella moved carefully and kept her legs a bit apart. Nothing down there wanted anymore squishing. She had no regrets. It had been amazing and she was pleased to be looking forward to being with him again, instead of fearful of hurting again.

"I know I'm sore, but it's like I can still feel you inside me. I want more, Steve," she told him while his lathered hands were in her hair.

"I had the same thing when I left you in the bathroom to go get the food. The way you feel, the heat, the tightness, I think it's stuck in my brain. But we're not doing it again anytime soon. Look at how you're moving, Eya. You're already hurting and it's going to get worse," Steve said.

He guided her head back under the shower to rinse out the shampoo.

"How do you know? You don't have a vagina," she sassed at him with lazy humor.

"I know about sore and bruised people. I see it all the time. It gets worse for a day or so before it starts getting better," he advised her.

"Rita said you'd make me sore," she told him, just to prod him for sounding so know-it-all.

"She did, huh?" Steve asked idly.

Estrella was standing with her back to his belly. Steve ran his soapy shampoo hands up her arms so that she hugged his neck behind her head. She laughed while he lightly scrubbed his fingernails at her armpits, then she sighed when his hands moved down to slip and squeeze around her breasts. His ever-present stiffness twitched at her back. She rubbed her hips back and forth to stroke him in a way that didn't bother her sore parts.

"Mm, Eya stop it," Steve fussed at her in a contradictory rumble.
"Okay, but your hands feel good on my boobs. They're bigger and rougher than mine," she told him.

"Later, babe. We can't get into this again. I gotta let you heal," Steve insisted.

She reluctantly nodded. She took the bar of soap from its holder and cleaned the rest of herself while Steve did the same to himself with the shampoo. Naked was becoming normal for them but she still couldn't keep her eyes off of him while they dried themselves. There were so many places on him she hadn't explored yet, so many places she wanted to know.

The same desire was in Steve's eyes when he glanced at her. He moved to his dresser and pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a tshirt. She saw that it was almost three o'clock in the morning then she looked away from the alarm clock. She didn't want to think about time. This night seemed charmed. She didn't want it to end.

A bag of her clothes was on the chair. She looked through it briefly. It was all girly night clothes. It wouldn't do. She made a frustrated sound in her throat.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Can I borrow some of your sweats and a tshirt? I want ice cream," she said.

"No. You can't borrow them. You can have them. Anything of mine is yours now. Well, almost anything," Steve said.

He pulled a second pair of sweats from his drawer and a shirt and gave them to her.

"Right. I don't want your shield or your uniform or your guns. Or your knives. Or whatever other work stuff you have," Estrella agreed.

She hid a grimace while she moved to put on the clothes. She was afraid Steve was going to be right. Her tender parts were feeling more sore now than they had during sex.

"Ice cream," she said again after she pulled the overly large shirt down over the baggy, too-long sweatpants.

She towedled at her damp hair one last time then they left Steve's suite. She knew there was no ice cream in his kitchen. That meant they had to go down to the shared kitchen. Every step she took made her suppress a wince. It also made her recall the feel of him inside her. Her muscles clenched at the memory and she hissed a breath while they were in the elevator. Steve watched her knowingly.

She smiled, then looked at their very casual attire. She looked unsexy with the way his workout clothes sagged on her. That was alright. Steve didn't care and the ice cream surely wouldn't care. Their fingers stayed laced together from the time they left his suite.

"Movie night?" Steve asked as they walked in to find Jesse, Natasha, Bucky, Thor and Sam sprawled on the couches in front of the big screen.

"What are you two doing out?" Bucky asked in a surprised voice.

"Ice cream," Estrella said on her way to the kitchen.

Steve looked to everyone and shrugged. He followed his wife into the kitchen and smiled at the thought. Half his team plus Jesse was staring at them but Eya wanted ice cream. They avoided the
stares by eating it in the kitchen. He was fascinated by the way Estrella stood and rocked her hips back and forth slightly while they ate directly from the carton with two spoons. She squinted her eyes at him and challenged him to tease her about enjoying the way she felt.

Steve grinned around his spoon and didn't say a damn thing. It eased his conscience to see her wiggling her bottom just for the sensation of it. She couldn't be too awfully sore if she was doing that. He also liked the way she went at the ice cream almost like it was sex. She knew what she wanted and she enjoyed having it. They threw away the empty carton and washed their spoons.

All eyes watched them when they left the kitchen to go back to their suite. Steve smiled at their friends and shook his head at the way Buck and Thor grinned at him. Yeah, he knew he was being sappy and loose and following his girl around like she had him on a string. So what if she did? Estrella gave Jesse a little wave. He seemed to be in relatively good humor for being so close to Bucky. He waved back at her but wondered if she was okay. It was apparent even to him that Estrella was walking a bit differently. His cousin flashed an okay gesture at him and he relaxed at the smile on her face.

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Sleep had hit her so hard that she didn't remember going under. After ice cream they'd brushed their teeth and gone to bed. She also didn't remember kicking off the baggy sweatpants sometime in the night but she had. They were wadded up under the covers near the foot of the bed. Steve felt like a lot of bare skin behind her. The room was cool but he felt wonderfully warm. As long as she could stand to, she snuggled back against him. The need for the bathroom drove her out of bed.

Estrella looked back at Steve as she slipped out from under the covers. She'd thought he was asleep but his eyes cracked open and he smiled at her as she hurried away. She smiled back at him. He looked relaxed and content, which was very rare. He didn't seem to want to break the quiet of the morning by speaking yet so she honored that.

On her way to the toilet she noticed that Steve must have cleaned up the mess they'd left in the bathroom. How had he been so quiet? The room was tidy, the food tray and the end table were gone, and the broken piece of the tub was set carefully inside of it.

The sight of the broken tub reminded her that she should be sore. When she wiped she was surprised to find that she didn't feel tender. Estrella got a cup from the bathroom countertop and filled it with water for rinsing. When she splashed clean water on herself and carefully felt with her fingers, she was fairly sure she wasn't sore like she'd expected to be. She freshened her breath and ran her fingers through her wild hair, then went back to their bed.

Their bed. She loved the idea. Steve held the covers open for her and she slipped in to cuddle with him some more.

"Sorry," he whispered to her because of what he knew she was going to find when she backed up against him.

"It's okay," Estrella told him.

She encouraged him to wrap his arms around her from behind and she pressed herself back against his chest and belly. With a bit of exploring she was able to guide his morning erection between her thighs, then relax with him cradled there.

"Good morning," Steve said.
"Good morning," she agreed.

They watched the light get brighter through the glass. Steve moved slow and lazy behind her and relished the feel of her in his arms. It was a wonderful kind of torture to be pressed between her strong thighs. She pushed back at him in a way that made him want the sex they shouldn't have.

"Were we supposed to leave for Colorado?" Estrella asked.

"Whenever we want to. We're on our own schedule. I got four hours of sleep but I wanted you to have more," he said.

"Hmm," she hummed contentedly.

Having him so eager between her legs was starting to make her hot. His body heat added to the sensation. She pushed back the covers. It was startling to see the tip of him pressing forward through her legs, then retreating. He did it slowly and it looked lewd because of his size and the way his skin slipped forward and back. She could look at the morning any day. This was more interesting.

Steve let her play around with him until she started using her fingers to press him toward getting inside her.

"No. You're too sore," he said.

"I don't think I am," Estrella told him.

"Eya. Stop it. I don't need it every day. You wanna get up and get packed to go?" Steve asked.

"No. I want to try," she said.

"Try what?" Steve asked suspiciously.

"Make love to me," she said.

Steve made a muffled sound into the meat of his arm. He managed to stop his hips from moving again.

"I think it's the boost to healing I got from your blood, like when my hand healed. Bruises don't stay on me for long. I don't feel sore," she told him.

Steve made an uncertain sound but his hips pushed forward again.

With the thought of possibly scaring her and getting her to call a stop, Steve rolled her under him belly-down. He nuzzled through her wild morning hair and lipped at the back of her neck. His hips kept moving, pressing. It felt great to rub through her thighs then slide against the sheet under her.

Estrella wasn't stopping him.

On the next stroke he felt her fingers pressing at him.

"We're gonna die from fucking," Steve grumbled into her hair regretfully.

She laughed. Her fingers pushed harder at him. He didn't have to think about it. She was under him and she tilted her hips just right.

"You gotta tell me if it hurts. I can't enjoy it if I know you're hurting all the time," he said.
"Please, lets try," she urged him.

Steve made a happy sound as he propped the weight of his upper body on his elbows. It felt raw to spread her open with his knees between hers. There was no way she could stop him once he got her open like this. It didn't feel like she wanted him to stop. It was a hot tease to poke around a little and pretend he couldn't find the exact spot. She made a frustrated noise, then a long moan when he quit playing around. Steve took his time working himself in. He sure wouldn't want to stop now but he had to give her the option.

"How are ya, babe?" he asked while he moved slowly.

It was hard to keep his voice steady.

"Don't stop," Estrella said.

He stopped.

"That's not what I asked," he reminded her.

"It's good. Need you. Please, Steve. I want to feel you," she told him.

She hadn't thought of it intentionally, but with him coming in from behind he didn't press and drag so much against her scar. What he did push against felt sensitive and fluttery. It was a different sensation than before, but it was the return of the full feeling she craved.

A few more strokes and her moisture began to make them slick. Estrella felt subdued by his strength above her and the way he made her feel helpless. She didn't like to think of how harsh he could be in the training room. She preferred him to be her sweet, friendly Steve. Though he was gentle in his movements, his dominant posture over her made her feel endangered in a way that thrilled her with the faint risk that he might snap his hips forward suddenly and powerfully. That would hurt but she mewed a breathless sound of longing. If he wanted to do that, she couldn't stop him.

She turned her head and had a too-close blurry view of him staring at her. They adjusted so she could focus on him clearly. Staring at each other was almost too much. He could see her fear and excitement. Steve had to stop for a moment to get his instincts under control. Like Bruce said, her fear was an aphrodisiac. He may not like it, but it was true. Seeing and knowing that she feared him thrusting deep and hard made him want to do exactly that. The wild look in Steve's eyes for a moment and the way he stopped and clenched his jaw made her heart race. She was terrified he might do it and almost disappointed when he didn't.

When he moved again, the sound of wet flesh sliding was unmistakable. She stared at him and tried not to feel too vulnerable. Now there was no hiding that part of her really wanted him to get rough. The idea of it, the threat of it, had her soaked. Steve groaned at the temptation and had to stop again for a while.

"Doll, I don't know if I can…. Oh God, I wanna hammer you," Steve admitted while his hips trembled in indecision.

She felt the muscles of his arms, chest and abs harden against her shoulders and her back. She whined in needy conflict. Real fear spiked her pulse. She wasn't ready for what she suspected he could do. She badly wanted to be ready, but she wasn't.

"Nno. I'm sorry. Please," she whispered nonsensically.
She wanted it, but she didn't.

Steve breathed out slowly and mentally thanked Bucky for teaching him some restraint. He didn't see any pain in her eyes as they'd expected. He reminded himself to be thankful they could make love this morning. It was stupid to feel frustration that he couldn't lay into her hard and fast. It was too soon for that, if she would ever be ready for that kind of harsh treatment at all. He let go of his aggression and smoothed it away with love for her. She felt exquisite around him. Slow could be good, too.

"Relax, Eya. We can try that later," he assured her.

The trust and adoration in her eyes was more than enough reward. Instead of feeling like a beast over her, he gentled his heart and felt protective as if he was shielding her with his body instead of using it on her. She was so sweet to give him another chance after he'd caused her pain. He settled in to make it good for her.

She got wetter until every stroke was warm, gliding bliss. The sounds played with his mind and mixed sweet and nasty together until his excitement revved from it. She was taking him deep and he relished getting all the way in. His balls tapped her gently and he gritted his teeth at the potential, if only he was moving harder and faster. Estrella's eyes widened because she felt it too. He couldn't stop a grin. They read each other's minds so easy. It was a gift between them.

"Just a little faster?" she whispered cautiously.

"Mmh," he breathed.

It was amazing what a slight change of pace could do when their minds were already excited. Steve moved only a little faster and added a slight snap to his hips at the end. It made a satisfying slap and Estrella whimpered. Oh, hell yeah!

The orgasm that flowed toward her like a wave was deceptively soft at first, growing a little with each stroke. It grew in depth until she was desperate for Steve to hit her harder. What was he doing to her? She wanted more, but it was already scary and aching and almost too much. He hardened inside her and the excitement of knowing he was almost there tripped her mind faster into it.

She clenched around him in anticipation of him spilling heat into her and that made each stroke more intense. She went from quiet whimpers to helpless cries. Steve slowed and stopped. She didn't. She was already gone. Estrella twitched and shuddered on him and he loved the sounds she made, the way she felt on him. It was beautiful and pure to see her enjoying it.

He gave her a moment to come down and catch her breath. Then he moved again. He got up on his hands rather than his elbows. With shorter, faster strokes he chased his own end. If felt damn good to come when he wanted to for once and not be out of control. Steve managed to grin down at her when she twisted around to look up at him. He did feel a tiny bit beastly as he glared at her and pumped into her. He wasn't able to hold the grin through orgasm, but she didn't seem to mind. She clenched tight around him again and gave him an undulation of her hips that made him feel he had to chase it to keep it deep where he wanted to put it. How did she know to do that? Her expression had a bit of a wicked gleam too as she dared him to keep on target.

Steve carefully collapsed onto her and rolled her into a hug.

"You make me crazy. I love you so much," he growled at her before he stopped throbbing.

"I adore you," she said.
He smiled so hard his cheeks hurt because he knew she did. He could see it in her eyes.

While they cooled with the covers thrown off Steve started thinking about flight preparation and food. And a shower. This was great but he wanted to get her somewhere really secluded. It was Sunday. The flight patterns might be tight and he'd have to be careful.

"Good morning, Captain," Estrella giggled at him.

"Ma'am," he answered.

It made him feel good that she could recognize when he'd gone off to work in his brain and that she accepted him when he did so.

So much sex and love had him flying in a high mood already. They both were happy. Steve was relieved and he said a little prayer of thanks that Estrella wasn't suffering soreness as badly as they'd feared. They hurried to shower and dress in warm clothes. They ate a quick brunch and made sure they had everything packed that they might need.

Estrella grimaced at the state they were leaving the bedroom in. Tidy as they usually were, they didn't want to wait another minute to leave the city and get out on their own.

Steve looked at the damp and disorderly sheets. He frowned.

"It'll keep," he told himself, and they hurried out of the suite.

Estrella didn't know exactly what the plan was but she knew they were flying. They hurried her guitar and their bags up to the jet, then they came back down to the common room empty handed.

Only Bucky was there. Everyone else had stayed up late and was now sleeping.

Steve strode in and clapped Bucky into a harsh hug. Buck added a hand around the back of Steve's head and Estrella thought for a moment that they might kiss. Instead, they simply grinned at each other. The guys' happiness was infectious. They stepped apart a bit, but stood closer than most people would. Bucky rested a hip and an elbow against a barstool and the bar.

"You headed out right now?" Buck asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for everything. Except for that last dance, you ass," Steve told him.

He still felt sour about the hard time he'd been given last night at the reception, but it couldn't bring his mood down for long. He looked to Estrella and smiled again.

"Somebody had to have the balls to mess with your head or it's not as much fun," Bucky said with a grin.

He reached out a hand and pulled Estrella under his arm. It was an unusually friendly gesture but she tolerated it because it felt genuine.

"What'dya do to him, girlie? His face is broke," Buck asked her.

Estrella shrugged and tried to look innocent. Then she couldn't help it. Something in her nature wouldn't let Bucky get away with teasing her like a kid. Her smile sharpened to something most men would find either irresistible or terrifying. She pressed close to his side and let her spine limber into a hint of what she'd done to Steve. These men were attuned to how bodies moved. Bucky could take a subtle hint. Estrella winked at Bucky then slipped out from under his arm.
"Hey, what was that?" Steve complained in good nature.

"Daammn, Stevie. You're a lucky lad. You'd better get her out of here before Stark wakes up and comes sniffin around," Buck teased.

"You comin'?" Steve asked, all teasing aside.

"Not yet. I'll give you a few days. Holler if you need me sooner," Buck said.

Steve nodded and clapped him on the shoulder once again. Then he took Estrella's hand and they made their escape.

"We're not taking the bike?" she asked him when they got in the jet.

"Nah. There's no roads where we're goin," Steve said while he studied their flight path and made sure his quin was ready to fly.

This time he didn't try to toughen up her nerves with an exciting takeoff. He could see she was tired. His heart was soft with affection for her so he let her settle into the co-pilot's seat and take a long nap.

Hours later he reached out to gently shake her awake.

"Eya, we're here," he told her.

"Hmm. Wha? Steve! Why are we hanging face-down?" she asked.

"Gotta scan down the mountain for skiers or elk, or bears. I don't wanna bury anything that's alive," he said in a brisk tone.

Estrella clutched the straps which held her into the downward-facing seat. The quinjet felt precariously tipped on its nose but Steve looked calm and capable as his eyes scanned the terrain outside the window. She squinted at the brightness. Everything was white with a thick layer of snow. The green conifer trees and craggy gray-brown rocks in her view were more than half obscured by a heavy load of snow. The sun was bright somewhere far above and she wished for sunglasses against the glare.

"Why do you have to bury things?" she wondered nervously.

Steve smiled at her and finished his look around in the deep mountain valley. She gasped as the wing turbines hovered them up the rockface. Up and up and up they went and her ears popped from the altitude change. Her view out the front window expanded until she could see an endless expanse of wilderness made of nothing but tree-shrouded mountains all around. On an outcropping in front of them there was a square-ish shape that didn't belong. It was a cabin, mostly snowed in. There was more mountainside looming behind and above the snow-blanketed cabin. The man-made structure looked small in the vastness of the landscape.

"Too much snow. That means danger of avalanche. We've got to send most of this snow load down to the valley before we can make a safe landing and settle in," Steve told her.

She didn't like the sound of that. How was he going to move tons and tons of snow with one little quinjet?

Steve toggled some switches on the dash of the jet, then he pressed a red button on the steering yoke in his hands. A tiny-looking pink flare like New Year's fireworks shot from the front of the
jet. It silently streaked toward the mountainside above the cabin. There was a little puff of snow and it disappeared into the slope of the mountain. Estrella looked at Steve, unimpressed.

"Watch," he said.

She turned back in time to see a blurry shockwave radiate out from where the flare had landed. It reverberated back at them and shook the jet so hard that she could feel her internal organs vibrate. Then layers of snow sheared away from near the top of the mountain ridge. The movement started small, then the entire slope of snow built into a monstrous slide and roared down the steep terrain. Trees shuddered and disappeared in its wake.

"The cabin!" she exclaimed.

"It's safe. It's further out on the ridge," Steve assured her.

As soon as the avalanche swept past and divided around the ridge the cabin was on, Steve moved the jet in for a landing. Estrella clenched her teeth because the cleared space not far from the back of the cabin looked not much bigger than the landing bay in the tower. Snow dust was still kicked up in the air like fog and the wind turbines stirred more of the dry, fluffy snow. Steve killed the engines and pressed another button on the dash. A loud, hollow rumbling sound filtered in through the speakers.

"That's the last of the avalanche, down below," he told her.

Steve had a pleased tightness at the corners of his mouth. Or, the Captain did. He was still in the mindset of taking care of business so they'd be safe.

"Boys love toys," Estrella said.

"The bigger the better," Steve agreed.

He'd landed them so that the jet was facing the mountaintop and the rear hatch was toward the cabin. He leaned forward and peered at the high ridge while the disturbed snow settled from the air. She did the same to try to understand what he was watching for.

"Is it safe?" she asked.

"It is now," he said.

"Steve, this is beautiful like a Christmas card, but is there any electricity out here? What about water? And heat? How is this cabin even here if there aren't any roads?" she asked skeptically.

"There's a very modern generator. Plenty of power, water and heat," he said.

He got out of the pilot's seat and went to where he'd stowed his winter gear. It was bright orange, with reversible blue plaid on the inside. Estrella looked at the balmy temperature reading inside the jet and the reading outside. It was almost zero degrees out there! She wasn't so sure this had been a good choice for a honeymoon destination but Steve looked eager to get outside. She stayed where she was and tried to think positive thoughts.

Steve came over to her. He leaned down and gave her a soft kiss. Then he handed her a brightly colored snowsuit.

"I'll get the cabin warmed up for you but the walk to the porch will be cold. Better put this on," he suggested.
Estrella nodded. Steve waited until she was suited up before he opened the hatch to go outside. Now that the jet and the avalanche had settled to stillness, it was absolutely silent. She smiled at the little-boy snow day look Steve tried to hide under his serious getting-things-done expression. His boots shuffled out into the glaring white snow and his eyes squinted against the brightness as he looked around. She decided to go with him. There was likely nothing more dangerous than a chipmunk around but she didn't want to wait alone in the jet.

Steve waved her to stay a few steps behind him. She didn't know why, but it wasn't scary. He looked relaxed enough. They walked slowly because they couldn't be sure what was under the newly settled snow. Estrella looked around avidly at the majestic tall trees and the cabin they were approaching. The sonic weapon had knocked the snow off of the roof, too. It piled in deep drifts around the house, except for under the roof gable where the porch entry was. Steve took his time and looked around, then waved her up onto the porch with him. He motioned her to stay at the door after he opened it with a touch of his thumb to a keypad. Estrella turned her back to the house and looked out across the sunny landscape until he came back. The silence was ringing in her ears.

"It's all clear. Come on," Steve told her.

They went inside and he shut the door behind them. Estrella pushed back the fuzzy edge of her coat hood and looked around. The place showed Pepper's touch in the décor here and there, but it was mostly rustic and uncluttered. Steve went halfway across the spacious living room and turned left to step up into the kitchen. She followed him into the dim space. Steve keyed in a code on a little wall panel near the oven. She squinted her eyes when the lights came on.

Steve turned and pulled her into his arms for a hug muffled through layers of coats. She relished the affection, then looked around his shoulder. The kitchen was modern, clean and had everything she could think of to fix meals. It looked like there was a pantry off to the side, probably fully stocked. A bedroom and bathroom could be seen down a short hallway. Now that the lights were on she noticed a large stone fireplace and a fluffy rug in the living room. The timber and stone of the cabin felt heavy and secure.

"Good enough?" Steve asked her, "Or we can get in the jet and go anywhere else."

She looked out the large picture windows of the living room wall that faced west. Was that a deck and a hot tub out where they would be able to watch the sunset across the valley? She thought it was. There was a big ax propped by the fireplace and only a few pieces of firewood wood stacked on the hearth. She patted Steve on the shoulder and smiled.

"I think it's good. I'm going to get my guitar," Estrella told him.

Steve grinned and nodded. He loved to watch her conquer her fears and doubts about new things and this was no different. She already trusted him to take care of her in an inhospitable landscape and a remote location. Her trust felt good to the part of him that wanted to be responsible for providing for her.

"There's a big copper tub in the bathroom. I promise not to break it because it's not mine," he teased her as they headed out the door to get their things from the jet.

"Before you take a bath you need to work up a sweat chopping us some firewood, don't you think?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve agreed cheerfully.

Estrella thought she could be happy with this for at least a week. Even the farthest beach at South
Padre Island hadn't been this secluded. They had all the space and the privacy to do anything they wanted out here. Fun ideas were already popping into her mind. She put her hood up against the cutting wind and enjoyed the sun on her face, even if it didn't bring any warmth.

Steve tripped and fell down at a hidden tree stump under the snow. She laughed at him when she saw he wasn't hurt, so he rolled over and threw a hastily made snowball at her. It smacked her in the middle of the chest. She bent to scoop up some snow. She'd never made a snowball, but she was going to learn.

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A/N: I've had reviews telling me to hurry and update. While I appreciate your eagerness, please keep in mind that these chapters are huge and they take a month or more to put together properly and get them all polished up pretty. Also, I'm not getting paid for this and I have to fit my life around working on it. So please be patient while I work on the next chapter. I really love reviews and comments that tell me what you liked or disliked about the content, not so much the ones that just demand more without even giving me any feedback. I also welcome thoughts about what you'd like to see the characters do. I may choose not to include your ideas, but readers have influenced my writing in the past and you might too. My thanks to all of you for reading my stuff.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!