The Test of Time: An Interlude

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Summary

A class five mutant resumes her journey back in time and lands in the middle of World War II. Her mission: to alter the destinies of early mutants with the help of Captain Rogers and the Howling Commandos. But Rogers has no memory of their shared past and is in love with Peggy Carter now. Zaara Xaviar must remain a stranger to the man she loves in order to complete her mission and ensure the events of World War II remain unchanged.

Notes

This story takes place immediately after the events of the video game movie "Captain America: Super Soldier." So if you watch the film, know that my opening scene happens right when Steve destroys the Sleeper (though Zaara has no clue what that is!)
And please forgive me if I butcher any German. I am not fluent.
Arrival

As a pebble cascades down the rivulets of a thundering waterfall so her body hurtled through time and space. She gasped for air but there was none to be found. Whirs of gray light spun and twisted all around her, propelling her through the void to a place that had no end and no beginning. The time traveling mutant who accompanied her provided no sense of stability even though he tightened his grip upon her arm. She could feel her lungs collapse beneath the weighty pressure of it all, making her wonder if her body might burst. Darkness came and she could see nothing. She wiggled her fingers and toes and knew her bones remained intact.

The tumult continued, unabated.

After what seemed an infinity of tumbling the sensation suddenly ceased and she could feel Bishop let her go. He released her entirely from his hold and vanished before she could utter goodbye. The time-traveling mutant had other business to attend to and would not appear again to help her—not until the job was done.

Explosions.

That was what she registered first.

Loud, ear-piercing explosions gripped her consciousness. The lack of oxygen in the centrifuge of time became a lack of oxygen on the battlefield, the very air a poisonous fume. Above her, she could see no sky. Only smoke. She had little doubt she had landed in a war zone. Bishop warned her about 1944 so she should have expected this, but then she had never seen war before.

Though she meant to cover her mouth so she would not inhale the toxins she found herself covering her ears instead, the crackling pain making her wonder if she would wind up deaf. The air thinned slightly before smoke enveloped her eyes, tearing them up. Before her senses failed her completely she caught the groans of some kind of massive machine. She managed to pry open an eye to take a peek. The monolith spun round and round until it exploded, spurting out fire in a massive display before she shut her eye tight once again.

Blind, dizzy, and disoriented, Zaara stumbled to the ground. She wanted to clear the air but she did not know what was happening or who might be present in this theatre of war. The class five mutant could have easily protected herself from the horror, but the vicissitudes of time travel demanded she not change outcomes or reveal herself to observers. World War II had to remain World War II and
the history books must not be altered. She had come to make only a small change and that would be all; she could not deviate from her mission. But she would not let herself die or allow the baby she carried, still so tiny in her womb, to be harmed. Even so, she was obligated to blend in and keep her own mutant powers secret—as far as that was humanly possible.

In the midst of the furor, Zaara scanned for active minds. She could find nothing in the din and worried that her very human senses had been dangerously dulled by smoke and fire and whatever else was floating around in the air. Something stirred in her heart and she picked up the trace of one human life somewhere in the midst of the machines. She might have to clear a space for herself in the battle zone and risk being seen in order to get a more accurate reading.

“Ma’am?” A masculine voice reverberated through fire and darkness. It pierced boldly through the blasts and into her consciousness. She struggled to open her eyes. Through the slits of her lids she could see a figure dart past her in the air. Dashes of blue and white flashed by, a blur moving almost too quickly to be seen.

The voice sounded again. “Get out of here! It’s gonna blow!”

Paralyzed, she pressed her hands to her ears even harder as the rumbling threatened in the haze.

The figure swirled around the machine one last time to deliver the final blow.

It was a man.

In the next heartbeat he landed right beside her and she could see him through the window of her mind. His face, concealed by an iconic mask, did not veil the intense expression in his eyes. She forced her own eyes open and stared back at two vivid blue pools locked upon her own. She hardly dared to breathe in the smoke and ash.

Steve?

“Raus hier! Raus hier! Es wird die Luft zu sprengen!”

Steve Rogers, the man behind the mask, gathered the strange woman into his powerful arms and lifted her as if she were light as a feather. Zaara gasped, unable to fathom it. This was no garden variety human, but a mutate—his mind a complete blank, his physical enhancements astonishing. No
longer the slender, wiry Steve she had fallen in love with and definitely not the image of the man she had married, this man’s body was a mountain of muscle that prickled with energy, every ligament and joint so finely attuned to its purpose she had no doubt he could dance on the head of a pin or navigate a minefield with ease, or possibly do both at the same time.

Steve glanced behind them and made some sort of instinctual calculation. He readied himself, then took a gigantic leap high into the air. For an instant, Zaara felt as if he would fly. The explosion trailed only inches behind them. Steve frowned with effort and landed in a run, his strides lengthening, making his quadriceps burn. He clutched the woman’s body so hard in his fervor he might have broken a bone had he not remembered to use a lighter touch. She did not resist him so he eased his hold on her slightly.

Where the hell did she come from? Civilians shouldn’t be anywhere near a Hydra base.

Another rumble sounded and he realized the next blast would follow in seconds. With the woman’s added bulk in his arms, Steve knew they would never make it in time. Zaara sensed it, too. Her weight slowed them down and fire nipped at their heels. Steve could have made it on his own but he would never abandon a civilian. He ran even harder and prepared for one last desperate leap.

Zaara injected his effort, already superpowered on its own, with a sprinkling of psionic force. In the next second, they cleared the field.

She exhaled, pleased with her efforts. She had used only a slight amount of telekinetic energy. No one should notice. And if they did, well, Captain America possessed so many physical enhancements no one would bat an eye.

Steve kept on running. Even while carrying the strange woman in his arms his speed surpassed human limits and they were soon a safe distance from the fire. He slowed his pace slightly but still made good enough time to meet up with his team at the rendezvous point.

But the air had not cleared and the trajectory of the fumes finally triggered her nausea. Zaara began to retch. Steve stopped and lay her down upon her side. He tilted her head carefully so she would not choke while she vomited upon the ground. The smoke and stench trailed behind them and it was too much. Unable to get a clean breath of oxygen, she lost consciousness.

Steve gazed down upon the woman in his arms. He wiped her mouth with the back of his glove and made sure she could still breathe. Her intake seemed irregular and labored but at least she was getting some air. He pressed his fingers to her throat and checked her pulse. It slowed and her body slumped so he knew she’d be out for a while. Something told him she wasn’t German. He decided to take a
closer look. Now that he finally had a moment to really see her, he gasped.

*Dressed like a Brooklyn girl,* he smiled to himself, eyes widening in surprise.

Even in her unconscious state, she was lovely. Her generous curves and rich auburn locks would give Peggy Carter a run for her money. Even through the smoke and stench and vomit, she smelled absolutely fantastic. Steve Rogers did not make a habit of deliberately smelling women though his highly attuned sensory processing system lent itself to the task quite avidly. But there was something about this particular woman. What could it be? He gathered her into his arms again, on the alert and ready to dodge any further explosions. Holding her close made his chest burn with satisfaction. It stunned him to realize it felt good.

Too good.

His heart flushed with warmth and he experienced a deep and unexpected sense of relief to have saved this beautiful stranger’s life. But it puzzled him. She should not matter so much, not any more than the other countless individuals he had saved over the last two years—even if she was beautiful. And although he had become quite attuned to his new body and its enhanced senses, by his calculation they should never have made it. He had had his share of close calls but somehow, he always knew. He pushed his body to its limit and would die to save others without hesitation. But this time, he really should not have made it.

He had no explanation.

He shrugged to himself. Curiosity got the better of him and he could not resist scenting her again as he clutched her close, though he would never confess it. He really couldn’t help himself. He meant no harm, though he also believed it a rude and intrusive thing to do and felt shame for it. His nose nestled beneath the softness of her ear, his lips grazed her throat unintentionally, and he continued to breathe in her fantastic scent while he ran.

In addition to her own unique and beguiling perfume, the woman harbored faint overtones of a more curious and distinctly feminine aroma. He’d encountered it before, though not very often. What could it be? It made her stand out from the girls back on base. He remembered smelling this accent for the first time a couple years back—soon after he had made the change. His old body did not possess such an acute sense of olfactory perception. It shocked him when he first detected how differently women smelled from men. The distinction was profound and unmistakable and so obvious he thought it strange never to have noticed it before. But this particular womanly scent was more subtle than that; it reminded him of some of the ladies who would greet him after his USO shows back when he traveled the country selling war bonds.
Most of the dames who carried this scent seemed to have children, but not all of them. The dancers sure didn’t have it. Could it be the scent of motherhood? But not all mothers had it. Or was it just some random feminine scent a few women shared? He did not know. Women’s scents were not exactly his specialty. None of the labs bothered to track his sense of smell or tabulate the many different aromas he could identify with his new body. He had become something of a bloodhound, he realized. It embarrassed him, actually, for his abilities often provided too much information. The SSR had been vastly more concerned about his other enhancements. Nevertheless, Steve knew not every woman smelled this way. Peggy Carter certainly didn’t, though he liked her scent just fine. He furrowed his brow and filed the question away for another time.

Still running, he began to notice other responses in his body, especially the deep, dark pull of attraction that would have made him blush had there been anyone else around. Steve had never experienced such an instantaneous and immediate sexual response to a woman though he loved girls as much as the next fellow. His feelings for Peggy Carter gave him a similar sensation though his adoration of her went far beyond the physical. He loved Peggy body and soul; her courage and tenacity invoked his passion every bit as much as her body. The way she always believed in him, even before he received the serum, told him she was the one he had been waiting for. His feelings for the dame who currently lay in his arms could only be physical, as far as he could tell. She was a stranger to him. He frowned at himself for it. He ought to be ashamed.

The explosions continued in the distance and he realized he needed to get her medical attention and soon. He quickened his pace and made it back in minutes, carrying the woman like a child in his arms. He brought her over to the boys where they waited at the rendezvous point by the transport plane. They gathered round him in effusive delight.

“Cap!” Bucky crowed, his ebullience knowing no bounds for he had feared deeply for his best friend’s life. “I knew you’d make it!”

Cheers erupted and Steve found himself pounded on the back with good natured slaps and punches. He shifted his weight to better balance himself in the face of all the physical affection.

“What’cha got there?” Bucky asked, zeroing in on the sleeping woman in his arms. “She alright?”

“Yeah. No wounds, but her eyes got stung by the fumes. She passed out from the smoke,” Steve explained.

Bucky got an eyeful of her generous curves and grinned wickedly. “Need a hand? You’re lookin’ a little tired there, Cap.”
“Yeah, let me relieve you of your burden,” Dum Dum offered helpfully.

“Or me!” Falsworth laughed.

“Nope. I’m fine,” Steve answered back neatly, clutching the woman just a little bit closer.

“You sure Agent Carter won’t mind?” Bucky cocked an eyebrow.

Steve frowned. Bucky had a point. Still, he would not let the woman go. His men were good men and they would take care of her, even if they enjoyed the job a little too much. But a fierce sense of possessiveness burned in his gut though he did not understand why. Steve always followed his gut. “She’s unconscious, Buck. Not breathing right. Someone has to look after her.”

“Well, I could be that someone,” Bucky winked mischievously before he shook his head in real admiration. “She’s a peach.”

“Nah, I’ll do it,” Steve insisted quietly. He held her snugly in his lap when the plane took off, his arms stronger than any seatbelt they could have fastened on her. Bucky settled in close beside them, never taking his eyes off her.

“I bet Sleeping Beauty hails from Brooklyn,” he murmured softly, eyeing her body up and down. *Boy, she smells great. Like my favorite ice cream or something.* “Ain’t seen a dress like that in a couple years.” He winked at Steve knowingly and reached for her, his fingers tugging gently at the collar of her dress.

Steve’s jaw dropped. His gut told him it would be alright but it shocked him that Bucky would feel entitled to touch her at all. A strange feeling of jealousy crept over him.

“Relax, pal,” Bucky grinned playfully. “Just checking.” He unfurled her collar where the tag lay exposed, the back of her head resting in the palm of Steve’s considerable hand.

*Woolworth’s*, said the ubiquitous label.

“I knew it,” Bucky cackled. “Ain’t no Woolworth’s across the pond.” He kept his hands to himself
after that and settled his head against the wall of the plane in a fitful attempt to sleep.

Steve kept careful watch over the unconscious woman in his arms. To his shame, he thoroughly enjoyed taking in her beauty. *What a sight for sore eyes.* But he also worried for her breathing seemed labored, sluggish, and entirely too irregular. He wished he could fix it but he was helpless. If he could have done the breathing for her, he would have and so found himself slowing his own inhales and exhales as if they could guide hers back to a healthy pace. Tiny pangs of guilt clawed at his gut but he chose to ignore them for he had done nothing wrong—except, perhaps, for scenting her on purpose a second time. This was not a betrayal of Peggy. Still, something tugged at his heart and told him otherwise.

Holding her felt so, so right.

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Zaara came to an hour into the flight.

The first thing she noticed were the powerful arms that clamped her into place. There would be no moving from this position unless the arms were willing. She coughed and gasped for air.

“It’s alright, ma’am. I’ve got you,” Steve spoke sincerely. Tenderly. “Don’t try to talk. You’ve inhaled a lot of smoke and fumes. We’re taking you back to base. They’ll put you in an iron lung.”

*Iron lung? What the hell is that?* she thought, wishing very much she knew more about medicine in the 1940s. *What about the baby?*

Zaara coughed a little more and tried to steady herself. She took her breaths slowly and cautiously knowing she had just been in a war zone, a real first for her, and her eyes burned. Knowing her powers would protect her baby from harm even if her body could not heal so efficiently, she had time and could relax, at least for now. The mission could wait. Her mind returned to the baby. Somehow she knew they were having a boy for his infantile brain waves had already formed a primitive masculine pattern.
Thank God Steve doesn’t know about him. What would he say, me bringing our son into World War II? I may be a class five mutant, but some lines shouldn’t be crossed—even if I am just doing my job.

She heard more voices and gradually took in the other minds on the plane since it was easier than opening her eyes. There were half a dozen, all of them soldiers: the Howling Commandos. The familiar blank space that composed Steve’s mind was even more so, if that were possible. Before the serum, Zaara could only read him through skin contact—unless he was having sexual feelings for her. Mother Nature had gifted him with something of a mental shield, a rare talent for a garden variety human. Who knew what had happened to it now that Steve had been given the serum? Technically, he was a garden variety human no longer, but a mutate. Some mutants and mutates harbored a resistance to her telepathic tendrils but she had almost never encountered resistance among average humans.

When they first met in 1942, Zaara could only read Steve when she touched his skin. But even with the prolonged skin contact, he was still strong enough to keep a thing or two hidden from her. She fervently hoped she’d be still be able to read him this way now for she missed him terribly. Saying good-bye to him, erasing his memories of her, had been one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. In the present moment, he was a closed book and did not remember her at all. How she longed to reconnect with him. For Zaara, reading Steve’s mind would be like coming home. He was the man she had married and the father of her child, but she could not speak of their past during this mission, nor could she bring back his memories. Captain America had to stay Captain America, he could not be the Steve Rogers she once knew. During the war, Captain Rogers was a single man with no relatives or dependents. He was completely dedicated to the war effort and a true American icon—not the fragile, sickly artist from Brooklyn who had fallen for her. Still, if she could read his mind, it would grant her some sense of peace and connect her to the man she loved. Tentatively, her eyes still closed, she raised her hand and reached for his cheek, envisioning it in her mind’s eye.

Steve caught his breath but did not resist her touch. Rather, he interpreted the gesture as a thanks, if not an unconscious movement stemming from the trauma of the battlefield, something he knew all too well. Most certainly this woman did not. At least, not according to the way she was dressed.

“Your clothes look American. I’m guessing you’re not from around here?” he asked tentatively, blushing at the feel of her fingertips where they grazed his cheek. So soft. “Don’t try to talk. Not yet.”

Zaara nodded. She smiled slightly, grateful for the care he was giving her, grateful for the opportunity to stay silent. Her hand relished the warm, smooth feel of his skin, but she could not read him. Indeed, she could get nothing at all. The serum; it must have boosted his mental shield. Disappointed, she woke a little bit more and sensed a familiar presence close by.
“Hey, doll,” the battle weary Sergeant murmured, waking up. She opened her eyes for an instant and caught his Cheshire cat grin, but they hurt so she quickly closed them again. She wondered dimly why she hadn’t recognized his presence earlier—could it have been the mental shield she had woven in his mind two years before?

“I ain’t seen a dress like that in a long time. You from Brooklyn?” the future Winter Soldier queried.

Zaara smiled in spite of herself, eyes still shut. She shook her head.

“But she’s American,” Steve confidently insisted.

Zaara smirked and shook her head again. Steve raised his eyebrows.

“French, then? British? Russian?” Bucky grasped at straws as Zaara shook her head no to each one.

“Canadian,” Steve said suddenly, not knowing why. A Canadian regiment had just moved onto base to assist the 107th. Steve had noticed their arrival just before his deployment. Canadians were as likely to shop at Woolworth’s as Americans.

Zaara nodded affirmatively. Canadians: always the last to get noticed. Her smile widened but her eyes were still sore so she kept them closed. She shifted wearily.

“That’s right. Sleep. We land in an hour. Try to rest,” Steve urged her tenderly.

She slept.
When they finally reached base he reluctantly surrendered her to the medics. Unable to tear his eyes away when they carted her off, he barked orders at them to treat her for smoke inhalation and eye trauma.

Although he felt excited to see Agent Carter again, his heart sank when they took the stranger away from him.

He still did not know her name.
Awake

Zaara woke, her body warm but confined. *This must be the iron lung.* All hard surfaces and her body didn’t like it one bit. She reached over and scratched the inside of her elbow where it prickled, grateful that they hadn’t strapped her down. A *bandage.* In a flash she knew they must have taken her blood. The bandage was right on the spot where they always stuck the needle. They probably gave her a pregnancy test as they would to all the women on base at one time or another. Standard procedure.

*Shit.*

Her thoughts returned to Steve. She wished herself back in his tender and powerful arms, preferring them to the cold embrace of the iron lung. Her heart longed for him and she marveled at how it felt on the transport plane when he held her with his new body, arms no longer slim and wiry but thick and muscular. His gentle strength made her feel so cared for, so safe, even though she could not read his mind. But she shook her head and forced her thoughts away from him. He could not help her here—not yet. She had to follow her instructions and talk to Peggy Carter first. As the only person permitted to remember this mission, Agent Carter would be her starting point. Zaara coughed and decided to test her voice.

“Nurse?” she called, but it came out garbled. It was then she noticed the mask covering her nose and mouth. She sighed. She would have to speak telepathically. It was the only way.

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Steve made his way over to HQ and found, to his delight, Colonel Phillips out on break. It meant he’d have Peggy all to himself. “Agent Carter,” he smiled, suddenly feeling shy. She always seemed to have that effect upon him as he battled the butterflies in his stomach. He had grown used to hearing her rich, sonorous voice over the coms throughout his recent mission, and so it was a true pleasure to finally behold the woman in person.

Peggy Carter smoothed her palms down the sides of her jacket, which, as always, looked meticulous;
never a hair out of place, not even an eyelash. She wore her uniform like a weapon. Stiff upper lip and all, of course, but none of that mattered. What did matter was the way in which her clothes could reinforce or, conversely, undermine her authority amongst a battalion of lonely, scruffy, war beaten men. Indeed, she cared dearly about this war having lost her brother to it. And she had waited a long time for Steve to return so it would not do to look anything less than perfect. War may be a dirty business but it would never ruffle Peggy Carter’s sense of authority—or her appearance.

“Captain,” she smiled back warmly. As usual, Steve managed to work miracles. The mission had been a resounding success for not only did they destroy the Hydra base, they acquired volumes of intelligence to ponder and sort. She certainly had her work cut out for her. Peggy longed to embrace him and indeed took a step closer before stopping short, her self-restraint a product of hard won discipline. There would be time for romance after the war. The Colonel had another mission up his sleeve and she needed to debrief Rogers that very day. “Congratulations on the successful completion of your mission.”

“Thank you,” he lowered his eyes to the ground and fervently hoped he wouldn’t blush. It meant the world whenever Peggy had something good to say about him.

“I hear you rescued a civilian,” she raised an eyebrow.

“They needed medical attention,” he explained, lifting his eyes to meet hers once again before he shrugged. “Looked American.”

“Agent Carter,” the corporal suddenly interrupted them. “You’re needed at medical.”

“Medical?” she canted her head. Why would they want me there?

“Yes, Ma’am,” the corporal nodded submissively.

“Alright,” she sighed, leaving Steve with more than a little regret.

Steve followed, suspicion weighing heavily upon him.
“She asked to see you alone, ma’am,” the corporal explained. “I don’t know how she can talk—they said it was a pretty bad case of smoke inhalation. She’s got a mask on.”

Peggy nodded and brushed him aside effortlessly. Why Steve had followed them was beyond her but it delighted her to have him nearby so she would not admonish him for it. He stood and waited outside the medical unit most politely and made no effort to follow her in, although she suspected he would demand to know why the patient had summoned her.

Agent Carter.

Peggy nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked around the room, determined to find the source of the sound. It was so . . . unusual. She knew she had not heard it with her ears.

Agent Carter?

The voice came through again. She had heard of this phenomenon before but had never believed it real. She clasped her hands over her ears as if it would block out the voice.

It’s me. The girl in the bed. I’m talking to you.

The woman had patches over her eyes and a mask over her mouth. Peggy immediately scanned her chart and noted the patient had stabilized though it would take a few days for her condition to clear up.

Answer me in your head, please. So no one can hear us.

Peggy’s shoulders tensed and she immediately surveyed her surroundings. The medical unit had only limited privacy. She drew the cotton curtains on the window.
Why should I talk to you? Who are you? How the hell are you speaking in my head? Peggy fought to regain her composure.

Thank you for staying and not running away, the woman answered patiently. I’m a telepath. I can read people’s minds.

Can you talk? Peggy tensed up and willed the air to continue flowing in and out of her lungs at a regular rate.

Yes, of course I can. It’s the damn smoke inhalation. I sent the nurse to get you.

Why? Peggy frowned.

I need your help.

Are there others with, with your abilities? Peggy willed her heartbeat to slow down.


Are you an American? Her interrogation instincts finally kicked in.

No. I’m Canadian. My name is Zaara, Zaara Xaviar. And I am here to help with the war--in a way. Zaara smiled, though no one could see it.

Who gave you your mission? Peggy resorted to her training in a desperate attempt to calm herself. The technique worked, but only slightly.

A man who trusts you.

What’s his name? Peggy furrowed her brow, preparing herself.

Charles Xaviar, but you haven’t met him yet.

Peggy started and turned away from her. Who the hell is that? I’ve never heard of him. She felt bombarded and just a little bit terrified. She was about to leave, then thought the better of it.
Look, I know this sounds crazy. But I will talk to you normally, out loud, when my voice returns. I should be better in a couple of days.

Peggy raised her eyebrows.

Please. He told me I could trust you.

Peggy sighed. A woman in the army had much to prove. Too many resented her position in the chain of command. Too many questioned her authority, refused her their trust and respect. But this girl sought her help, elected to trust her without having met her and it piqued her curiosity. It seemed both a compliment and an opportunity. This Zaara must have a lot at stake to put anything on her shoulders. But a telepath?

Alright, Peggy nodded reluctantly and not without suspicion.

You can come back later and we can discuss this telepathically, when you feel more comfortable. Or in a couple of days when my voice comes back. Take some time to get used to the idea of telepathy. And my other powers. Zaara knew it would be best to start slow. Peggy Carter was highly intelligent but even she had her emotional limits.

Other powers? Peggy felt a shiver run up and down her spine.

Yes. I have telekinesis as well.

Show me. Peggy issued the order as a challenge and tried to appear unruffled.

Zaara concentrated. Although she could not see with her eyes she could sense Peggy’s presence in the room. Agent Carter stood to the left of her cot. Slowly, gradually, and with the utmost care, Zaara raised her body up into the air.

Peggy gasped, her feet dangling above the ground. It scared her silly and she fought furiously to maintain her composure. She forced her breathing to slow but clenched her fists.
Zaara knew her fear and her struggle to conceal it. *Don’t worry, I’d never hurt you. I’ll release you now, as gently as I can.*

Peggy nodded, her hand clamped tightly over her mouth. When her feet touched the floor again, she relaxed slightly.

*I promise you: you’re not crazy. Want to see something else? Tell me and I’ll move it. Anything.*

Peggy swallowed, wondering what she ate last night. She knew she had not had a thing to drink.

*My shoe. Move my shoe.* She did not know why she chose that. She supposed it seemed harmless enough.

Zaara could see the shoe in her mind’s eye. It was a lovely high heel, rather impractical but feminine and smart—as alluring as the woman who wore it. She removed it from Peggy’s foot and sent it into the air to circle around her body in a spiral. Then, Peggy gasping once again, she brought it down and planted it carefully back upon her foot.

*There. Hope that’s enough, but I can show you more if you want. Why don’t you think about all this, try to get used to it a little. I know it’s weird. I’m not a soldier or anything. And I can’t change much about the war. But this mission matters. You’re the only person authorized to know the details, for now, and I will share it with you as soon as we’re both ready. Do you trust me? I trust you.*

Peggy nodded silently.

*Alright, Agent Carter. Thank you. I know you’ll understand why we have to keep this secret for the moment. Okay?*

Gathering her senses, Peggy looked about her sharply. *How do I know you’re not Hydra? That you’re not controlling my mind?*

Beneath her mask, Zaara smiled. *Do I look like Hydra? Hail Hydra, resistance is futile, you will be assimilated, blah blah blah . . .*
Peggy trembled in confusion but stood her ground bravely.

*Right. I’m so sorry, Agent Carter. Old Star Trek reference. I’m trying to think of a way to convince you . . . I’m sort of strung up here, you know.*

Yes, Peggy agreed. She couldn’t argue with that.

*Well, if anything should convince you I’m not Hydra, it’s my incompetence. I’d make the worst spy ever. A few days ago, I had trouble counting to four. Zaara almost laughed out loud but it hurt her throat. And one time, I phoned my best friend and told her about her surprise birthday party by mistake.*

Peggy pursed her lips.

*Yep. Pretty stupid, huh? And I don’t control minds. It goes against my beliefs.*

*And why should I believe you?* Peggy frowned.

*Telepaths see people’s pain—all of the time. We know too much about suffering. It’s the worst part of this gift. So we follow a strict moral code. Charles Xaviar taught me that. I guess you’ll just have to trust me on this, the way I need to trust you. I am the one stuck in an iron lung, after all.*

Peggy gave it some thought before she nodded. *Quid pro quo, then.*

*Yes, Zaara agreed. Trust makes us both vulnerable. But we need each other—more than you know. And Hydra would never hire an airhead like me. My powers may be a dream come true to that guy with the red brain . . . what’s his name again?*

*Johann Schmidt. Otherwise known as the Red Skull,* Peggy offered wearily, realizing Zaara Xaviar must be telling the truth if she could not even name their most dangerous enemy.

*I’m not a bad person. I’m doing my best to make things right. Believe me, I have no ambitions to control or dominate anybody. Before this mutation changed my life, I was a ballet dancer. I’m nothing like that Red Skull guy—though I know my powers must seem like his creepy dream come true. So, please--take some time, try to get used to it. Then we’ll talk. We have work to do.*
Mutation? Peggy felt a thrill shoot through her heart.

Yes. I’ll explain all of it. I promise.

Alright, then. Peggy nodded stiffly and made for the door.

She found herself outside, gripping the knob until her knuckles turned white. She did not realize she had stopped breathing for a few seconds.

“Peggy? Are you alright?” Steve’s eyebrows creased with worry. He was about to take her hand but she waved him off.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she said wearily. This turn of events would put a damper on their happy reunion, even if Phillips’ latest mission had not done so already.

“How is she?”

Peggy bit her lip. “She’s... alright. Eye patches. Bit of smoke inhalation. It wasn’t easy for her to talk.”

“Why did she want to see you?” Steve pressed. He knew it was none of his business but he did not care. “Who is she?”

Too spooked to brush him off, Peggy met his gaze steadily. “She has a mission.”

Steve’s face went pale. He had never seen Agent Carter this rattled before. And she was the toughest person on base. How could the woman in civilian garb be on a mission? “What is it? Is she a spy?”

“I can’t talk about it, Steve,” Peggy frowned. Once again, work had come in the way of their relationship. She had a lot of information to process so she gave him a curt nod and made her way back to her quarters. She needed some time alone, time to acclimate to the idea of such power existing in the world. Her knowledge of humanity had suddenly expanded into the realm of myth.
and legend for she knew what she saw could not have been some elaborate deception. What she needed most of all was time to decide whether trusting Zaara Xaviar was worth the risk to the base—not to mention her military career.

Steve watched her go, puzzled. He knew enough to let her be. She wanted him to wait, and wait he would.

In the meantime, he began to find excuses to hover near the medical unit, keeping to the east side of the building—the side with the stranger’s window. He never left it for long. Two more days would go by before he would see her again, this woman whom he had saved. The hours passed him by like a vigil.

~

Confined within the iron lung, Zaara’s heart flooded with compassion. She decided to send one last message and, now that she could identify Peggy’s energy signature, could do so remotely.

*Please don’t worry, Agent Carter. I’m not going to be in your head; I promise. When you’re ready, come back and we’ll have our talk. I know it’s a risk to trust me. Don’t be afraid. There are more things in this world than can be found in books. Not all of them are bad. I’m one of them. And so are my friends.*

*My friends,* Zaara thought to herself. As the hours in the iron lung passed she allowed her consciousness, bolstered by the power boost of pregnancy, to wander across the army base and search out personalities from amongst the throngs of men. She noticed the blank energy signature of Steve and how it always seemed to hover near her room, never venturing far. Now and then he would leave, occasionally meet up with Bucky, but he would always return. Even at night, he would interrupt his sleep and wander back to the medical unit, keeping watch under the stars. *Curious. Why is he hanging around here? Does he sense something about me?*

Steve didn’t know why himself. Bucky asked no questions, and so he was not forced to confront this odd behavior of his. Peggy had been too busy to notice. Indeed, no one questioned Captain America, the man who always went above and beyond the call of duty. If he appeared to have adopted the
strange habit of keeping an eye on the medical building, it would not have mattered. Nevertheless, no one noticed. He had to restrain himself from going inside, for he longed to enter her room and see her, the woman he had saved. If he could have, he would have snuck a peek at her chart, found out how she was doing, and learned her name.

Each time she woke from her uneasy slumber, chest hitching in frustration as the machine did half the breathing for her, Zaara sensed Steve’s presence. It made her smile, but she could not linger on him. It would have been frustrating if she had, for she still could not read his mind. She could only tell that he was always there, nearby. Instead, she forced her attention back to her tireless search. Finally, she wandered into the minds of a different group of men on the outer edges of the base, an elite unit that called itself the Black Watch. She quickly recognized them as Canadian—but they were most different from the Canadians she had known as a child. These men kept to themselves and seemed especially fierce and stoic. And she soon realized, to her horror, she was not the only mutant on base. As her telepathic tendrils stretched far and wide, they identified the putrid energy signature of one of the X-men’s worst enemies and a key part of her mission: Sabretooth.

Yet she also felt a thrill, for along with it came the warm, familiar trace of one of her dearest friends. A man who knew her deeply, who had sacrificed himself for her and her family, who had held her hand when her daughter was born: Logan.

The Wolverine.
Chapter Notes

Honk if you love Stalker Steve! LOL.

Thanks for all the kudos, hits, comments, and enthusiasm! I'm having so much fun with this. XD

This is one of my favourite chapters of the story since it's kind of raining men. We get some Wolverine, some Stalker Steve (my guilty pleasure), some Bucky, and we get to play with the dynamics between all the men.

Hope you enjoy and thanks for the love!

Trigger Warning: threats of violence, some a bit sexual, but no actual violence. Yet.

Zaara slept soundly another day and woke thinking not of her husband, but of the mutant who captured both her imagination and her heart. She concentrated harder for it would be useful to read Logan’s mind from a distance. Without Cerebro this could prove a challenge, but Zaara had some practice in it and the army base was about the same size as the grounds of the X-mansion. Her power boost from pregnancy ought to ensure it—indeed, it had enabled her to defeat Trion Juggernaut and a power that was totally out of this world. She had no explanation as to why being pregnant made her stronger. It did with Ellie and it was the same now with her little boy, so she would use it to her advantage.

Though she was able to recognize the unique energy signature of Victor Creed, to her chagrin, she could not read the beast’s mind at all. In fact, his blank spot bore a disturbing resemblance to Steve’s. She knew Creed was there but she could not tell what he was thinking, at least not remotely. Her power boost made no difference. His resistance would not be overcome even after she increased the intensity of her psionic force. She pushed hard to break through his walls but had to stop since her efforts were nearing a lethal level. If she tried any harder, she might well kill him. Though she sincerely doubted anyone would mourn his loss, she had never killed anyone before and was not anxious to change that fact. Reading the mind of Sabretooth required skill, not strength. She sighed, wishing she had completed her training under the Professor. He would have been able to figure it out.

Logan, however, was a bit of an open book. The man otherwise known as the Wolverine did not think of himself as Logan at all in 1944. Howlett—James Howlett—was his name now. If Zaara’s eyes had not been sealed shut beneath the gauze patches, she would have widened them in amazement. She was about to be privy to a significant part of her friend’s true history—a history that happened years before he had been brainwashed and abused by the Weapon X program. Now, in the middle of World War II, James Howlett was a soldier and a war hero who walked loudly and carried
a big stick. He fought for the Canadians and was one of them. But he was not above joining other armies to fight for what was right. His spirit felt the same to her and it gave her a sense of smug satisfaction. She always knew Logan’s essential goodness for it dwelt deep in his heart, no matter how confused or tormented his mind. He may hate himself at times, regret his very existence, but he was a good man. Zaara never let him forget it.

The same could not be said for his brother-in-arms, Victor Creed. Although Zaara could not read the mind of Sabretooth, she delved deeper into Logan’s mind and saw the many adventures they had shared over the years; a long history of fights, separations, and reconciliations. In their time together, Creed managed to sink his claws into Logan’s consciousness as much as his body. He fed him lies and exploited his insecurities all to convince him that James Howlett was a monster just like himself—an animal and aberration who could only exist on the fringes of society. Zaara never actually met Victor Creed, though she knew enough about him to hope she'd never meet him at all. Now she caught a glimpse of why the Professor assigned her to deal with him, somehow, during the war. But without reading his mind, she still couldn’t be certain about what needed to be done about him.

She coughed and called for the nurse.

Before she could say a word, Zaara delved into the young woman’s mind and confirmed they had indeed administered a pregnancy test. They had the results but so far only the nurse and the doctor knew the truth. Her status would be kept private unless they had a good reason to share it with the officers. Zaara frowned in frustration. She could not let her pregnancy interfere with this mission. She had enough secrets to keep.

“Please,” she urged the nurse with her broken voice. “Let me out.”

“I’ll call the doctor,” the nurse replied, surprised to hear her speak.

The doctor came minutes later and, with reluctance, opened the iron lung.

Zaara sighed in relief and pushed herself up into a seated position. “I think I’ve had enough of that,” she smiled.

“How do you feel?” the doctor asked.

“Not great,” she admitted. “But I think I’d feel better if you took these patches off my eyes.”
“Alright,” the doctor agreed. Zaara had to push him against his will but it did not take much effort. She had very little time to lose for she needed to get to Creed and soon. She winced when he ripped the gauze off her raw, red skin and, for a moment, the light blinded her painfully. Determined, she blinked several times and forced herself to adjust.

“It’s a little fast for my taste,” the doctor frowned.

“I know,” she agreed. “But I have work to do.”

“Stay still, please,” he insisted and began her eye exam.

Zaara tolerated it, biting her lip to stop herself from mocking 1940s medicine. This man was trying to help her. He should know enough to address any real problems with the irritation around her eyes. She told herself she ought to be grateful.

“Alright,” he nodded reluctantly. “You can go. But first, I need to tell you something.”

“I’m pregnant,” she said the words for him.

“You know?” he asked in shock.

“Yes, of course I know,” she smiled quietly.

“Where is your husband?” the doctor asked.

“Not here,” she answered truthfully, amused by his very old fashioned sense of entitlement. She could not imagine a doctor asking such a presumptuous question in the 21st century. “But don’t worry. I’ll find him. Some of the girls will help.”

“There may be a bunk for you in the nurse’s quarters,” he nodded. “But you won’t be able to stay on base for long. I can give you a week to complete your recovery. But we need your room.”
“Yes. You need my room,” she agreed, having put the idea in his head. It made him feel as if he made the decision for himself, after all. Zaara did not make a habit of brainwashing or influencing people but, in the interests of the mission, she needed to get out of medical fast.

She left the unit and wandered through the camp clad only in her hospital gown and robe.

Before long she spotted the Canadian regiment. The men were on break, killing time before the next mission put their lives in jeopardy once again. Most of them were thinking about going drinking that night for they would ship out in a day’s time. Their loneliness permeated the air and she was forced to deflect their interest telepathically for a single woman wandering around base tended to draw far too much attention, even though she appeared to be just a patient at medical. Briefly she considered donning a nurse’s uniform but decided against it. Perhaps she could settle for some battle fatigues so she might resemble one of the young female privates that worked in the office. That might make it easier to keep their minds out of the gutter. Most of these soldiers’ fantasies seemed to involve nurses.

On the outer edges of the scrum, she could sense two mutant wavelengths.

Logan.

And Victor.

She made her way over to their tent. The mutant healers would not share barracks with the company but chose to isolate themselves. Their lieutenant tolerated it, sensing it best not to object. The pair tended to operate apart from the rest—always on their own, a scruffy couple of loners that kept to themselves. They would fight side by side with the rest of the troops, save their lives in a skirmish or two, but that was all. They never quite fit in and even managed to intimidate the tough, grim Commander of the Black Watch, who would only talk to them through his lieutenant. They managed to survive every battle since the start of the war and everyone knew it. They had been in the Black Watch longer than anyone in their current company and it was enough to make them seen as lethal assets of the team--assets that were best left alone.

At first glance of the familiar brown mutton chops, Zaara launched herself into his arms.

“Logan!” she laughed. “It’s so good to see you!”

“What’s this?” he barked, wholly taken aback by the unwanted contact. A beautiful girl had just
thrown herself into his arms and, though he loved women, he had sworn off them. *Comes with the territory,* he told himself. *Me being a killer who can’t die and all. No woman should be with the likes of me.*

She felt his powerful arms pin her up against a tree and James Howlett frowned. He had eschewed the touch of a woman for so long he resented its imposition upon him. It reminded him too vividly of what he had lost. Before he could stop himself, he sniffed the air and recognized her scent.

*Pregnant.*

“I’m sorry,” she apologized quietly. But she could not block the adoration from her eyes.

Wolverine was one of her best friends. He had welcomed her to the school when she showed up unannounced, pregnant (for the first time), and alone. He assured her the Professor would welcome her there and so it was true. She knew well the love he bore Jean Gray. Terrible taste in women, she thought at the time, since Jean was married. But it did not take long before Jean also became one of her best friends. Both of them were with her when Ellie was born, but Logan had been the one to find her in the woods when her labor had begun. He stayed with her through it all and had been the only one to support her when she insisted she wanted to have her baby in the forest. *Like some kind of crazy fairy princess,* he had joked though she knew he understood why. It felt so peaceful there. Against her wishes, they brought her indoors though she continued to labor part of the time out in the garden, for it calmed her. She squeezed his hand when Ellie was born and he cried. She knew what it meant for him to help bring a life into the world when, through no fault of his own, he had taken so many.

Zaara would not let time or space or history change the way she felt about this man. Her love for him was not romantic but when he released her from his grip, she shook her head, grinned, and leaped back into his arms again.

“You big jerk,” she cried, wiping away a tear. It was an incredible gift to find him here. Only now did she appreciate that she felt truly alone.

He shook her off and that was when she sensed another presence.

Steve.
Half hidden behind a tree, Steve’s heart smoldered with resentment as he watched the woman he had saved embrace the burly, powerfully built Canadian. He didn’t like it.

Not at all.

His hand gripped a branch of the tree so hard he heard it crack. The sound roused him from his trance and flustered him. Was he actually spying on her? He felt too ashamed to admit the answer to that question. He did not wear his uniform but was only in fatigues and, though he did not quite realize it, had been hovering around medical for the past two days. When Zaara finally emerged he fought the urge to go to her and instead simply followed from a careful distance in hopes of solving the mystery. Who was she? How did she end up in the middle of a Hydra base?

It should not have been a surprise that she sought out the Canadians since she was one of them. It took everything he had to stand back and watch her put her arms around a strange man—a rough, feral looking man that was very much the embodiment of a man’s man.

Out of nowhere, Bucky Barnes suddenly appeared. He slapped his best friend on the shoulder. It had taken almost half an hour to locate him and the young Sergeant had been all over base, scoping out his usual haunts and a few other places besides before he finally found the Captain half-hidden behind a tree. It made him curious. “Steve? What gives?”

“Hmm?” he answered, not bothering with actual words.

“Where ya been? I’ve been lookin’ everywhere for you. You going to the dance tonight?” Bucky asked eagerly. He got very little time around dames and wasn’t going to let the moment pass him by. After all, not every fella was lucky enough to have a Peggy Carter on base.

Steve forced his eyes away from the wounded woman and regarded his friend.

“Agent Carter might be there,” Bucky grinned suggestively.
“Uh, yeah. Sure,” Steve nodded and turned his attention back to the Canadians.

“Hey, ain’t that the girl you saved?” Bucky drawled, following his gaze. “She sure seems fond of Canucks.”

Steve gritted his teeth.

~

Zaara smiled sheepishly at Logan, her cheeks reddening. “Sorry. Again. I just miss you.”

“Miss me? What the hell, honey?” James Howlett widened his eyes in dismay. “This how you greet strange men?”

Zaara cackled, knowing he was wondering if she might be a prostitute. “No. Not strangers. You just don’t remember me.”

“Well, I’d remember if I knocked you up. It wasn’t me,” he said gruffly. Defensively.

She laughed. “No. It wasn’t. But I always could trust your nose.”

“You’re a stranger to me, toots.”

“But you’re not a stranger to me,” she smiled.
“What about me? Am I a stranger?” Victor Creed abruptly closed in on them. He towered over her ominously as he stepped very close, invading her personal space.

“No, sir. I don’t know you. We’ve never met before.” Zaara looked Sabretooth up and down in trepidation and quickly decided to keep things as formal and polite as possible. Victor Creed liked it when women feared him. She did not need to read his mind to figure out that much.

Standing at about six feet, six inches tall Creed appeared to be a hairy monster even while in uniform. His predatory eyes fixed upon her own and his canine teeth resembled fangs a little too closely when he smiled. Zaara’s eyes were drawn to the sharp, dirty nails on his fingertips. Already, she knew the poison he had been feeding Logan, had read it on the outskirts of his mind when she embraced the Wolverine. Victor Creed wanted, indeed, needed James Howlett to believe himself a monster—just like himself.

In the distance, Steve shivered and felt a white heat sear the top of his spine. It spread up into his throat and he soon recognized it as fear—not so much for the shorter, hairy man the woman had embraced, but the taller one who gazed at her the way a panther considers its prey. Before he knew it Steve had closed the distance between them and found himself panting not from his quick steps but from the terror in his heart. The tall man was a threat. Steve’s gut was never wrong.

Only steps behind, Bucky followed.

“Ma’am?” Steve called loudly.

Zaara spotted him and gave him her warmest smile. It set his heart at ease—a little.

“Hello, Captain. It’s Captain, right?” she asked blinking, praying she wouldn’t give herself away. “You’re not wearing your mask.” She stood poised and strong, the small red veins in the whites of her eyes and the patchy skin around them the only evidence of her earlier trauma.

“Shouldn’t you be resting? You just left medical,” he admonished, anxious to get her away from the tall, dirty Canadian. At a closer vantage point, he noticed how much those teeth resembled fangs and the sharpened fingernails that seemed like claws.

“Mask? What mask?” Howlett muttered, looking at them as though they hailed from outer space.
“He’s, uh, Captain America,” Bucky confessed sheepishly. “Out of uniform at the moment.”


“Did you?” Steve flexed his biceps and clenched his fists, ready to clock him.

Bucky noticed it. Zaara did, too. Both of them shivered. A fight between Sabretooth and Captain America could only be a brutal bloodbath; Victor had a phenomenal healing factor and Steve would never stop. She had to do something and fast. Zaara dove into Bucky’s mind, navigating swiftly through the mental shield she had wrought for him not so very long ago. But Bucky had already come up with an idea of his own.

“Hey,” he chimed in, sensing the rising hostilities. Better to avoid a fight. We don’t want any trouble with our allies. “There’s a dance tonight, fellas. You coming?”

Howlett looked at Bucky like he had suggested they go to the moon. “Nope. Don’t dance.”

Zaara laughed. “Of course he will. This is Corporal James Howlett of the Black Watch Regiment, Canada.”

“Captain Steve Rogers, US Army,” Steve announced, offering his hand to Howlett. “Pleased to meet you.”

The Wolverine said nothing. He simply stared at him.

“Oh, James. Shake his hand already,” Zaara giggled and rolled her eyes. She knew she had to respect the timeline but her patience for Logan’s bad attitude and self-denial had worn thin. Besides, it could diffuse the rising tension. She could not read Steve or Sabretooth, but the sense of rivalry between them was undeniable. It permeated the air. “I’m Zaara Xaviar,” she added while Logan shook Steve’s hand. “I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce myself—to all of you. And thank you, Captain Rogers, for saving me on that Hydra base.”

He nodded, his cheeks turning a distinct shade of red when she touched his hand. Her hand, so small inside his own, felt light and feminine and hit him with a jolt of electricity. Zaara blushed in response. So bizarre to greet Steve like a stranger, shake the hand of the man she had wed and the father of the
baby she carried as if they were meeting for the first time. It made her smile sadly, confused and amused at the same time.

“Sergeant Bucky Barnes,” the future Winter Soldier grinned, delighted. He simply loved the way she smelled—it gave him the strangest sense of déjà vu. “At your service.”

Zaara shook his hand as well and felt a small spark light up between them, transporting her back to the dream she had had on her wedding night—the dream of being shared by both Bucky and Steve. Indeed, the way Steve gazed at her now made it seem as if he remembered it, too. It really looked as if the good Captain wanted to gobble her up. Her blush deepened and she forced her mind elsewhere. She really did care for the Winter Soldier long before she ever had that dream. What a relief to have him here now for she knew Bucky would have her back. In the 21st century, the Winter Soldier had been a favorite of hers, their friendship playful and flirtatious, but born of a deep sense of trust and mutual respect. I don’t know why I always had a soft spot for brainwashed supersoldiers, she mused. But they really are the sweetest.

“You know, there are others like you out there. And me. Bub. She winked at Logan.

Howlett gasped in shock. Victor was the only mutant he had ever known, besides himself.

“Creed. Victor Creed,” Sabretooth sneered, mocking their politeness. “Pleased to meet you.” He narrowed his eyes, issuing each of them a look that implied a challenge, but he took Zaara’s hand. “You especially.”

To Steve’s horror, Zaara allowed him to kiss her hand, hoping in vain that she’d get a reading from the skin contact. But it was to no avail—she could sense nothing. She would have to go in through his head and that meant close contact with his face. She suppressed a shudder.

Damn it all. I can defeat Trion Juggernaut but I can’t even read a class 3 mutant.

She frowned in frustration but had to accept it. Different mutants had different powers and a few could pose some resistance to her own. It was the only way Logan managed to survive the Phoenix onslaught. Now that the two of them were in such close proximity, Zaara could tell Sabretooth’s mental shield was nearly identical to Steve’s. Did it derive from his healing factor? She could not
“No. We haven’t. I know I’d remember you,” he purred menacingly. “Unlike this punk brother of mine.”

Steve simmered. Everything inside him told him Creed was dangerous. And he could not bear to have anyone threaten her, this Zaara whom he had saved. Once again, he poised himself for an attack and the countless hairs on Creed’s back and chest suddenly stood at attention.

“Fellas,” Bucky crooned, interrupting again before Zaara could intervene. *This could get real ugly real fast. Gotta keep Steve away from that big smelly knuckledragger or Phillips is gonna have our hides.* “You gotta go to the dance. All the girls’ll be there. I hear you ship out tomorrow—why not make a party of it? Have a drink or two. One of our guys brought stogies.”

“Stogies?” Howlett piped up. That got his attention. It had been quite a while since his last cigar. Stogies were hard to come by during wartime.

“And how,” Bucky grinned.

The Wolverine snorted his begrudging approval. “Maybe.” The hairs on the back of his neck had also begun to prickle but he would not let Victor harm the woman. Nor would he allow him to battle the tall American. *Victor would tear that tights-wearing sissy to shreds. Wouldn’t last a second. Gonna start another war between Canada and America.* Howlett could sense Cap’s possessiveness of this Zaara. *It’s like she’s his woman or something.* Steve’s scent responded to Creed’s threat and the combination was nothing less than volatile.

*Pheromones,* Zaara realized, though Logan did not yet know the term. She simply followed his nose. Reading Logan’s mind gave Zaara access to his incredible sensory processing center, but it also overwhelmed her at times. She shook it off and followed Bucky’s lead.

“Cigars. Yuck,” she frowned and pouted, giving them her girliest sense of disapproval.

The men chuckled knowingly.
What a relief it proved to be when Victor finally released her hand. Though she did not fear the nasty brute she could read where it was all headed. Steve obviously felt protective of her, Bucky felt protective of Steve, Logan could smell it, and they all noticed the way the Captain kept trying to insert himself between her and Victor. Zaara sensed something going on inside Steve, something that might have to do with his old feelings for her, even though he seemed to have no recollection of their life together. Steve’s scent suggested she was his, that she belonged to him, and it posed a threat to anyone who might challenge him. There could be no mistake—Logan’s nose was never wrong. And Creed responded like a feral feline ready to pounce. Thank goodness Bucky had been able to diffuse things quickly. No wonder she always had a soft spot for the Winter Soldier. He could really think on his feet.

“What about you, big boy?” Bucky cocked an eyebrow at Victor and grinned; anything to distract him from Steve. “Bet you cut quite a figure on the dance floor.”

Creed huffed, not realizing the statement had been laced with sarcasm. “Maybe. If I can get a pretty lady to dance with me.” He leered at Zaara.

“Sure. Why not,” she shrugged politely, hoping her vomit reflex would not get triggered by his hoary breath. She forced herself to think about rainbows, puppies, and unicorns--anything to keep her mind off the stinky, hairy beast before her.

Steve frowned, unhappy with her reply and infuriated by the way Creed practically drooled all over her. He decided to put an end to it. “Where are you headed, Miss Xaviar?”

“Oh,” she answered gingerly. “Just wanted to meet some fellow Canadians. The doctor said there’s room for me at the nurse’s barracks, if you would show me the way.”

“I sure can,” Steve smiled with relief, thrilled to escort her away from the monstrous man who stared at her so chillingly. He offered her his arm in the guise of assisting her, but he craved her touch.

“Bye, James. Private Creed,” Zaara said politely. She took Steve’s arm and had to admit it was a huge relief to walk away. Her fingers clutched his rock hard bicep for support while he all but towered over her. She was still tired from the iron lung and appreciated the help, but Zaara could hardly imagine this Steve to be the same man she had fallen for. He didn’t seem anything like the artist from Brooklyn she had loved. Although it felt good to touch him, she missed his wiry, slender body something awful. This soldier, this Captain, was easily strong enough to crush her whole. How she missed his lightness, his gentleness. When it came to Sabretooth, Captain America seemed anything but gentle.
“See ya, fellas,” Bucky winked, following them. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Logan watched the three of them disappear from sight. He grunted at Victor. “I’d stay away from her, if I were you,” he said bluntly.

Sabretooth grunted back. “What’s it to you, runt?”


“Argh,” the beast snorted, choosing to dismiss him. “Mind yer own business, runt. I’ll do whatever I want.” He marched off in a huff.

The Wolverine sighed.

_Looks like I’m going to that dance after all. Oh well. At least there’ll be stogies._
Chapter Notes

Wow, I’ve received so many beautiful compliments about this story—so I’ve decided to retire ‘cause it can’t get any better than this!

Just kidding ;-) 

Thank you all so much for your kind words and kudos. You are all just awesome. Seriously, I don’t want to let anyone down so I’m going to keep on trucking. I’ve even got someone offering to be my beta and I just might take them up on that, if I can figure out how it would work logistically speaking. I’m posting early this week because I’ve got a Halloween parade tomorrow and lord knows I get no time on weekends to do anything. Btw, this story is complete and I’m just editing before I post so you can expect updates on Fridays.

No warnings or triggers in this chapter. Just a little smut alert for Stalker Steve, wink wink! Enjoy!

“Captain Rogers?” Zaara panted, struggling to keep up with his brisk pace. She nearly stumbled and fell, but Steve caught her in the nick of time. He forced himself to slow down, but he really could not escort her away from Creed fast enough.

“Yes?” he replied, coming to a complete stop so she would not lose her grip upon his forearm. Butterflies fluttered deep in his chest and he blushed. Her touch intoxicated him.

“I’m actually feeling a little . . . hungry,” she admitted with some embarrassment. The nausea of pregnancy had finally worn off and Zaara figured she must be past the twelve-week mark. Now she should be able to eat without throwing up and soon her tummy would start to protrude.

“Oh course,” Steve murmured, feeling terrible he had not thought of it before. “The mess hall’s right over there. Let me take you.”

“Are, are you sure it’s alright?” she asked, worried. She knew they had all kinds of rules on army bases.

Bucky laughed. “Ain’t nobody gonna fight you for the grub they serve there, sweetheart.”
She sighed, trying not to laugh with him. In all seriousness, Zaara felt so hungry that just about any food would taste good right now, and the idea of eating almost distracted her from the touch of Steve’s powerful new body.

Funny, I spent time around Cap in 2016. But I never really touched him before; he'd never come close enough. Bucky sure wasn’t shy about getting his share of hugs after a mission. But Cap was always so quiet, so distant—except when he gave commands. He didn’t seem anything like my Steve, at least not then. He is now, even if he isn’t quite the same as he was back in Brooklyn. Isn’t he?

Steve and Bucky walked on either side of her, their bodies acting like shields that dwarfed her and protected her from stares, forbidding any questions that might arise given her appearance on an army base. Steve gave Bucky one of his looks but Bucky didn’t mind at all; Zaara smelled awfully good to him and it wasn’t every day he got to escort a beautiful dame across base. She clung to his arm and smiled at the future Winter Soldier. Steve felt a stab of jealousy. Nothing evaded his attention when it came to Zaara but he also felt grateful to have Bucky with them. Fortunately, it was late in the afternoon and most of the men were done eating. They entered the mess hall and Bucky left to fetch her a tray since Steve refused to release her arm. He led her to a seat and waited while Bucky put a little bit of everything on her plate.

When he returned, Zaara cringed.

“The Brussels sprouts,” she nodded at them. “Would you please?” She navigated through the familiar mental shield she had affixed to Bucky’s mind and he scraped them off her plate without hesitation. Thank goodness. Vomiting would only generate more questions. Normally she did not mind Brussels sprouts but obviously her baby boy loathed them. Thankfully, everything else smelled fine though she longed for red meat and noted regretfully that it must be in short supply on base. She had pretty much given up eating meat long ago, but someone else seemed to be in charge of her appetite these days.

Steve waited politely, his face not reacting as Zaara swiftly cleared her plate. She gazed upon it quite mournfully once the food disappeared and had to restrain herself from licking it clean. Bucky noticed and cocked an eyebrow at him, but Steve shot him a warning look so he kept his mouth shut.

“So,” he finally spoke while Zaara chewed her last mouthful. “I hear you have a mission.”

She swallowed. “I do.”
Steve and Bucky exchanged glances.

“But I can only talk to Agent Carter about it, for now. She’s the one I’ve been instructed to speak to.”

“Are you a spy?” Steve could not help himself. He needed to know.

“Do I look like a spy?” Zaara tried to suppress a giggle, but failed.

“Hardly, doll,” Bucky grinned wickedly. “You look like the cat’s meow in that hospital gown.”

Zaara laughed with him. How good it felt to have Bucky Barnes flirt with her again. When she knew him in the future, he had always been on the brink of asking her out on a date, though she always managed to evade him, claiming that class 5 mutants don’t date--anyone. But he never gave up hope. “Suits me, huh? I think I’m going to ask Agent Carter to get me some fatigues, though.”

“Nah. You need a dress. There’s a dance tonight.” Bucky winked at her.

“Buck!” Steve chastised him. “She just got out of medical.”

“It’s alright,” Zaara smiled. “I’m feeling better.” It occurred to her that the dance would be a good place to confront Sabretooth. If she danced with the monster, the extended contact could allow her to access his mind and figure out what the hell to do about him for this mission.

Steve frowned. He did not like the idea of Zaara at a dance with a bunch of lonely soldiers or anywhere near that sweaty toothed hyena. His protective feelings reared up again and he soured.

“You still hungry, doll?” Bucky asked discreetly, noticing her glancing mournfully down at the empty plate. Steve allowed it.

Zaara nodded shamefully, her eyes lowered.

Bucky left to get more food, winking at her again. “I like girls who don’t skip meals.”
She laughed, realizing men really did prefer curvy women in the 1940s.

Steve smiled in spite of himself. It felt good to hear her laugh. “You sure are hungry,” he noted, not unkindly. It piqued his curiosity since he had seen so many starving people during the war, but Zaara did not resemble any of them. Despite her injury, she exuded health and vitality.

She lowered her eyes, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s no problem. No problem at all,” he soothed. He hated for her to feel bad about it.

“I’m just—hungry a lot,” she admitted, still not looking at him.

“It’s fine. Sorry I brought it up,” he reddened, feeling more than a little embarrassed. “Bucky’ll be right back.”

“Great,” she smiled again, and finally met his eyes. She held his gaze a long moment, marveling at the changes in him now that she could finally get a look at him in the light of day. His robust body seemed so massive. So alive. The blood in his veins pumped vigorously even while at rest and his limbs rippled with so much muscle it was hard to imagine him ever displaying signs of weakness or fatigue, illness or asthma. His enhancements put him far beyond any garden variety human and oceans away from the slim, wiry slip of a man she had fallen for. That man had all but vanished and it saddened her to think she would never touch his body again. He would never need her to hold him and heal him, she would never be able to feel the light firmness of his slender weight upon her own. If this new Steve lay on top of her, he might well crush her with all those huge, heavy muscles. His very face appeared so different with its bold jawline and prominent chin, his bones dense and elongated, pale skin replaced by a rich, rosy tan. Her eyes searched longingly for traces of the man she loved and, to her sorrow, could hardly find any.

Steve returned her gaze, questions in his eyes. He assumed her stare had something to do with her hunger and shame at asking for more food but his quickening heartbeat sensed something else. More than anything he yearned for her to feel safe with him. He needed her to—to what? Something stirred in his heart and left him longing to reassure her, comfort her, as if there were something he should say or do. His eyes could not leave her, he longed for her touch, and some part of him felt most keenly that he knew her. But that was impossible.

Zaara sighed to herself and felt, for the first time, content. Steve had finally let down his guard and at last she could recognize a familiar expression in his soft blue eyes. He always used to look at her like
this, with such gentle sweetness. Almost from the first moment they met, at least when he was not staring at her in the heat of desire, he would gaze upon her in this way, an expression of affection, protectiveness, and love.

Just like the old Steve.

“Thanks, boys,” Zaara said, smiling at them. “I can take it from here.”

With great reluctance, Steve released her arm and watched her head into the nurses’ barracks. She gave him one last glance before closing the door behind her, but suddenly changed her mind.

“Captain?” she called.

“Yes?” he replied, eager to do anything for her.

“Would you please send for Agent Carter and ask her to come see me at her earliest convenience? I’ll be right here.” Zaara promised herself not to send anymore telepathic messages to Peggy and do things the old fashioned way. It should help put the woman at ease.

Steve nodded. “Sure thing.”

“Bye, doll,” Bucky grinned, wishing he could go in with her. He had his eye on one of those nurses. But he also took advantage of the opportunity to savor a good look at her behind. Zaara grinned to herself. Only Bucky Barnes knew how to ogle a woman respectfully. It was a unique skill, and he was a talented young man.

*I’m glad you have my back, Bucky, even with that hungry wolf eye.*
The door closed. Bucky turned to his friend and gripped him by his shoulders like he was delivering bad news. “You got it bad, pal.”

“What?” Steve blinked, his eyes still on her door.

“She’s givin’ you them doe eyes and you got a picture of Agent Carter in your compass,” Bucky’s voice sounded a warning. “You’d better be careful.”

“I, I don’t have feelings for Zaara” Steve murmured, clenching his fists. “Not like that.” If it had been anyone but Bucky, he would have clocked him.

“Yeah, and I’m the King of Spain,” Bucky snorted. “You gotta sort this out.”

“I don’t have feelings for her,” Steve insisted again, louder. His face went red. “I only just met her. Besides, I saw you look at her, too.”

“Yeah, well I ain’t got no Agent Carter,” he snorted.

“It’s nothing,” Steve averted his eyes. “She got hurt. I’m just trying to help.”

“Love at first sight,” Bucky shook his head sarcastically. “Watch your step. You don’t know that girl so well.”

Steve had had enough. “I’m just looking out for her, Buck. Would you mind fetching Agent Carter? I gotta go.”

“Swell,” Bucky shoved his hands in his pockets in defeat and took off. Maybe Steve would see some sense given time.

Steve returned to his tent alone. There was not a lot of privacy on base but at least he had a small space to himself, for the moment. Bucky shared his tent. Steve had made his best friend part of his team and the Howling Commandos occupied the barracks nearby. The Captain had saved all their
lives, many of them more than once, and they knew how protective he was of his friend.

He climbed onto the cot he kept next to Bucky’s. He knew his friend would fetch Agent Carter and report to Phillips afterwards. He himself had a meeting to keep in an hour’s time. He sighed with weariness and finally accepted the feelings pouring through his body, so tired of fighting them. Was Bucky right? He felt ashamed to admit it to himself. He wanted Zaara. Wanted her bad. There was no explanation and no use denying it. She was beautiful, sure, but not really more so than Peggy Carter.

Peggy Carter.

His mind returned to his first love and he felt surprised at himself. Why did he send Bucky off to fetch her? Why didn’t he do it himself? Steve concentrated on Peggy, imagined her in his mind’s eye as he had so many times before, his lips tracing the skin on her beautiful face from chin to cheekbone until they met hers—always the perfect shade of red, her lipstick flawlessly rendered. He saw himself run his fingers through her raven black hair, his other hand lingering on her slender waist to trace down the devastating curve of her hips. He could feel his mouth open and clamp onto hers in a long, wet kiss that had their tongues dancing and thrusting into each other.

Somehow their clothes faded away and now they lay skin to skin, bare body on top of bare body, while he pressed his hardness into her. Wet and glorious, his sweaty slickness pounded into her hot, silken flesh. But when he lifted his face to feast his eyes on the mouth that blew sweet hot breath upon him, he did not see Peggy Carter.

He saw Zaara.

She moaned and dug her nails into his scalp, pulling his mouth back onto hers and he pounded her even harder, his breaths coming quick and shallow.

No.

He forced his thoughts back to Peggy, made himself see her face instead, but the next moment he clutched her buttocks and pummeled even faster, like a piston, and he knew it was Zaara again, could hear her voice moan in joy and ecstasy and beg him for more, her desire every bit as wild as his own. He shuddered and found his release before collapsing onto the cot, a wet warmth soaking through his clothes.
He lay there a while in wonder.

What the hell was that?

His longing for Zaara felt like an intrusion. Why did he keep thinking of her? Why did he desire her so—aside from her exquisite beauty? He had never been one to desire only the body of a woman and nothing more; that would make him the worst sort of hypocrite. He was not himself. He was not being Steve Rogers. Bucky was right, though he hated to admit it. He frowned and pulled off his sticky clothes, washing his naked body with a sponge and a basin of water. Drying off with a small towel, he noticed his formal uniform hanging on the rack and checked the clock. He had half an hour before his meeting with Phillips. He sighed. He had relieved his tension, for the moment, though his heart still ached. Standing there in the nude, he felt free, sexy and vulnerable. He thought again of Zaara, how it would feel to be with her like this, and felt himself grow hard again.

Frowning, he ignored it. Perhaps he should go and see Peggy. It might make things feel better. Steve had never imagined he would desire a woman the way he desired Zaara. It wasn’t right. His heart longed for the right partner and that partner was Peggy—there could be no doubt about it. She was his girl. But his body told a different story. Zaara drew something dark and deep out of him, some primal lust he had never fathomed, never experienced before.

He had to find a way to stop it.

~

Agent Carter took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the nurses’ barracks.

“Come in,” Zaara called. “No one’s around. They work long hours here.”

“Right,” Peggy nodded, shutting the door behind her. There were about fifteen beds in the room and Zaara gestured for her to have a seat on the one bare of personal objects. Hers.
“Please,” Zaara nodded.

“Thank you,” Peggy replied. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you. So,” Zaara began. “I want to apologize if I frightened you earlier.”

“I suppose you would know if you had,” Peggy chortled. “Being a telepath and all.”

“Probably,” Zaara smiled. “But some people are more difficult to read than others.”

“Are they?”

“Yes,” Zaara admitted. “Your Captain, for example.”

“Steve Rogers, you mean,” Peggy nodded.

“Yes,” Zaara said. “He has a mental shield. Highly resistant to telepathy.”

“I’ll make a note of it,” Peggy replied neatly.

“Do,” Zaara nodded. “I’m not sure why, but it’s quite strong.”

“The serum,” Peggy said to herself.

“Probably,” Zaara agreed. “But we’re not here to discuss him.”

“No. We’re not,” she said simply. “Your mission.”

“Yes. My mission,” Zaara agreed. “I’ve come to rescue a boy, a very important boy. He is being
held in isolation in a Nazi concentration camp by a devious individual known as Sebastian Shaw.”

“Is Shaw part of Hydra?” Peggy queried.

“Possibly, but I don’t think so,” Zaara admitted. “But that’s no reason not to worry about him. Shaw’s a mutant. Like me.”

“A mutant?” she asked, shocked.

“Yes,” Zaara confirmed. “And you are the only person authorized to know about us—for the moment. We are mutants. We are still human beings, but we are also mutants.”

*Why on earth am I the only one authorized to know about this?* Peggy asked herself.

“Mutants are more than 99% human, with one tiny genetic difference,” Zaara continued. “The mutant X gene. It gives us these . . . these gifts that set us apart from the rest of the human race.”

“Like telepathy and telekinesis?” Peggy braced herself.

“That’s just me, and I’m sort of unusual,” Zaara lowered her eyes modestly. “Most of us have only one power, but there are many different kinds of mutants. And there are not a lot of us in the world—at least, not yet. But there are three of us here on this base.”

“Three?” Peggy repeated in alarm.

“Relax,” Zaara soothed. “We’re all on the side of the allies.”

“What can the other ones do?” she demanded.

“Well, they both have a healing factor, unlike me. They can recover from anything and fast—even a bullet to the head.”
Peggy’s jaw dropped.

“They’re also abnormally strong and one of them has a pair of really long claws.”

Peggy’s throat went dry.

“One’s an old friend of mine. His name is Corporal James Howlett. He’s with the Canadians, in the Black Watch. So is his associate, Private Victor Creed, but Creed is not a good man. He’s a bit of a monster, actually. And I need to do something about that.”

“Your mission?” Peggy forced her mind to stay on target, hoping she would not be driven mad by Zaara’s strange words.

“Has two parts,” Zaara continued. “The first is to take care of Creed. I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to do about him—I’m still figuring that out. I was told I’d know what to do when the time comes. The other part is the boy. His name is Erik Lehnsherr. He’s being held by Shaw, a most dangerous mutant.”

“Is the boy a mutant as well?” Peggy asked.

Zaara smiled and nodded, admiring Peggy’s ability to keep track of detail in the midst of so much information. The woman was one sharp cookie. “Yes. He will grow up to become one of the most powerful mutants on earth. He can already control metal but mutant powers mature with the body, so he’s not quite there yet.”

Peggy swallowed and blinked back her shock.

“No one else knows about us. Just you. We don’t even know about each other. I had to introduce myself to Howlett and Creed. They’d never met any others before.”

“I thought you said one of them’s an old friend,” Peggy cocked an eyebrow, her attention to detail unparalleled.

Once again, Zaara’s heart flooded with admiration for Agent Carter. “He is. He just doesn’t
remember me, for reasons I can’t get into. But our main problem is the boy.”

Peggy nodded again, but remained silent. *What would Schmidt do if he found that boy? Or Zaara? Or Howlett or Creed?*

“A mutant’s first defense is anonymity,” Zaara continued. “We are people. Having powers doesn’t make us a threat. As you know, the wrong person behind the wheel of a car is a threat. Most of us just want to live our lives in peace and have no desire to hurt anyone. I’m a good person, as I’ve told you already. I want to help with this war. And I want to complete my mission.”

“But Creed is a threat,” Peggy pointed out.

“Yes. He is. I’m working on it,” Zaara nodded.


“Charles Xaviar is a mutant and the most powerful telepath on earth. He’s also my adopted father. And he’s taken quite a shining to you,” Zaara’s eyes sparkled. “He admires your work. Your integrity. He told me I can trust you, that you would become a strong advocate for mutant children. You can imagine the people out there who would want to isolate us and exploit our powers.”

“And Shaw—the dangerous mutant you spoke of; tell me about him,” Peggy said quietly.

“He’s holding the boy captive, torturing him. Trying to make him into his minion, get him to hate all humans. Shaw absorbs and channels kinetic energy. Very dangerous in a fight, you can imagine,” Zaara warned.

“Yes, I can,” Peggy admitted, her heart sinking. Her world had never changed so quickly before, not since her brother Michael died.

“So,” Zaara continued. “You’re a brilliant woman, Agent Carter. I’ve given you a lot of information. And I’ve given you my trust. I need to rescue Erik Lehnsherr soon and I need your help. I was also told that Cap and the Howling Commandos might assist me. And I’ve heard about your boss.”
“Colonel Phillips,” Peggy said absently. *Mutants—I wonder how that will go over with him.*

“Yes,” Zaara agreed. “He’s a good man, isn’t he?”

Peggy nodded, her mind racing.

“We can bring him on board if you see fit. But please be aware that I’m going to have to wipe the minds of everyone we involve. All of them will be made to forget about me and this mission—each and every one of them. Except for you. You are the only person authorized to recall it after it’s done.”

“Why is that?” Peggy asked, suspicious.

“I don’t know,” Zaara admitted. “I’m only following orders. I trust Charles Xaviar with my life. And I know how much he admires you.”

“And if I won’t help you?” Peggy raised her eyebrows in a challenge.

“Well, I’m guessing that at least you won’t spill the beans,” Zaara shrugged. “And I’d have to do it all by myself. But I trust Professor Xaviar and I’m putting my trust in you.”

“You’re right, it is a lot of information,” Peggy demurred. “I shall have to think about it.”

“I hope you realize I would never try to sway you on this,” Zaara added softly. “That would go against everything I believe. You’re free to come to your own decision.”

Peggy swallowed again, disconcerted by Zaara’s ability to mentally manipulate her. The mutant had gone out of her way on more than one occasion now to reassure Peggy she’d never do that. *But how do I know for sure?*

*Trust,* Zaara told her. *Without trust, we have nothing.*

Peggy rose and nodded curtly at Zaara. Zaara rose and gave her a small smile in return. She sensed Peggy Carter would do the right thing. But she had to come to it on her own time. Helping Zaara
On her way back to Phillips’ office, Peggy ran into Steve.

“Agent Carter,” he called, smiling. His meeting had gone well and he felt thrilled to see her in the light of day. *That’s my girl.*

“Captain Rogers,” she smiled distractedly, her mind enmeshed with other matters. “I have to see Colonel Phillips.”

“I won’t keep you,” Steve darted in anxiously, matching her brisk pace and marveling at how quickly she could move in high heels. “I was just wondering . . .”

Peggy stopped. “What is it, Steve? Out with it.”

He tried not to stutter for her beauty always distracted him. “Wonder if . . .”

“If what?” she asked, losing patience. *Bloody hell, Steve. I’m a little preoccupied by telepathic, telekinetic mutants that can heal from bullet wounds to the head.*

“If you’re coming to the dance tonight,” he blurted like an awkward schoolboy.

“Oh, oh, right,” Steve fumbled, utterly failing to conceal his disappointment.

“I’ll see you later,” Peggy shrugged helplessly. She felt badly but he was asking too much of her. She could not have gone anyways. Large dances on base were not a thing for a woman in her position as she could not be seen fraternizing with enlisted men. Besides, she preferred the cool intimacy of a night club with a smooth band, elegant dancers, and good wine—the sort of place she could actually hold a conversation. A dance with this squad of allied men the night before they shipped out would undoubtedly be something of a riot. She had appearances to keep.

And mutants to think about.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Steve called after her as she trotted away.

He could hardly blame her. He felt very distracted himself.

Sighing, he returned to his tent. It vexed him to have to attend the dance later in the evening. If he had not met Zaara, he would never go at all; not without Peggy. Sure, he got plenty of attention in this new body of his, there would be dames willing to dance with him, though none of them could hold his interest. There was only one woman he wanted to dance with, and she would not be there. But he would not abandon Zaara to the mayhem of all those enlisted men, although he could hardly stand to admit his feelings to himself and what happened in his tent that afternoon. Still, some part of him knew the truth. She just got out of medical; they’ll outnumber her fifty to one. And if any of ‘em feel the same way I do, or look at her the way Creed did, she’s in for some trouble. I gotta go.

He sighed again, remembering all those dances Bucky had dragged him to back in Brooklyn, all the girls that ignored him, rejected him. Those memories still hurt. But he reassured himself. It’ll be different this time. I already got a girl. And I’m only going to look out for Zaara. He began getting ready, ignoring the thoughts that kept popping in his head, ignoring the way his body kept calling to him, the way his mind kept returning to the image of her face, the scent of her body.
Zaara smoothed the skirt of her humble second hand dress carefully below her palms, the tiny rose leaf pattern curling in faded rumples across the seams. It was her hope to appear modest and plain. She put her hair up in an old fashioned ballet bun but knew none of it would help. She would be among a small minority of women at a dance filled with lonely soldiers sporting the hungry wolf eye-not to mention the hungry wolflike claws of Victor Creed, otherwise known as Sabretooth.

She walked over to the mess hall in the company of two young nurses, both of whom felt distinctly uncomfortable. One had a beau back home and the other would have preferred a better balance between the genders, but both felt compassion for the men who might not be alive tomorrow. They soon entered the mess hall where the music sounded loud, the voices louder. The men wasted no time making the most of their last night on base. No woman was permitted to leave the dance floor. Whenever a song ended and a man released a girl from his hold, the next would immediately step up to take his place. They whirled around to lively songs of forced cheer, seeking to escape the grim reality of tomorrow and all those who would not live to see another night such as this.

Zaara deflected the attention she received from the many wandering eyes while she walked across the room in search of the two mutants from the Black Watch. With her psychic tendrils, she wove a general air of inattentiveness over and around her body so that the men came to ignore her, turning back to their liquor and cigars. Indeed, most knew better than to seek the comforts of a woman on their last night on base since there were too few to be had anyways, the ratio hovering around thirty to one. Most just wanted to forget the horrors of war, all that awaited them tomorrow, and so drowned themselves in the comforting brew of oblivion.

Across the room, a beer in hand, Steve spotted her right away. He figured Peggy would never show up at dance like this but he had an inkling Zaara would. Bucky sure put enough pressure on her to come, he noted ruefully. Swimming through the crowded dancefloor and its constantly shifting labyrinth of bodies, he made a beeline for her, but she had already reached Howlett.
“You ready for our dance, honey?” the monster growled menacingly. Even in his formal uniform, he still looked dirty and unkempt.

“You come second, Private Creed,” Zaara replied innocently. “Corporal Howlett owes me a dance.”

Creed backed off in dismay while Logan puffed on his stogie in silence. The Wolverine looked a sight cleaner than his companion, but his face was no less gruff. Zaara plucked the cigar from his fingers and unceremoniously stubbed it out under her borrowed high heels.

“Hey!” he snarled, not believing she would dare.

“You know better,” she whispered. I know you can smell it.

You talkin’ in my head again, sweetheart?

Yes. I am. Cigars are bad for me right now.

Ain’t never met no mind readers before. And I ain’t never smelled you before today.

“Why, I’d be pleased to,” she sang out loud to anyone who might be watching, placing herself firmly and deliberately in his arms. The band played a whimsical tune she did not recognize and they began an awkward dance, her hands on his shoulders, his hands on her hips, feet not really moving at all. But you know what I smell like, she insisted.

A baby. You’re havin’ a baby. It’s obvious, toots. I could smell it a mile away.

I could always count on your nose. Look, I’m here to do something about Victor. You know what’s wrong with him.

Logan stopped. You got a problem with my brother? That was Logan’s heart: loyal to a fault. He despised Victor but, having lived under the distorted belief the two were actually brothers, he was
also somewhat protective of the foul beast.

*He’s not your brother. He lied to you. You know that, deep down inside. And you’re not the monster. He is.*

*Hey, we’re not havin’ this conversation. Not out loud. And definitely not in my head.* The Wolverine gave a low pitched growl.

Suddenly, Bucky appeared out of the blue. Freshly attired in his starched uniform, hair combed and slicked back, cerulean eyes bright and cocky, he had already danced with most of the women in the hall that night. None of them could refuse him, but he was ready for more. Noting the surly look on Howlett’s face, he stepped up where Steve could not. “May I cut in?”

“Be my guest,” Logan snarled and released Zaara, making off for the next nearest stogie.

“What gives, Miss Xaviar?” Bucky hummed, swiftly showing himself to be a far more skillful dancer than his predecessor. “Can’t cut the floor with a fella like that. He’s a dead hoofer.” Zaara giggled and relaxed into his hold. It felt sweet and safe there. Like home. He smelled so good, all clean and masculine, bright blue eyes twinkling when they met her own. She pressed her cheek against his and let him spin her away and pull her close again, squeezing her to his chest. Boldly, he dipped her down to the floor and swooped her up as if she were lighter than air. She marveled at it.

*What a charmer you were in your day, James Buchanan Barnes,* she smiled to herself. “My mission, Sergeant Barnes,” she replied coyly. “You’ll know all about it soon.”

“That big guy got anything to do with it?” Bucky dared to ask. Victor Creed wouldn’t take his eyes off them and Bucky’s gut was working overtime.

“He’s a bad man,” she admitted. “Real bad. I gotta do something about him, but I’m not sure what. I have to figure it out.”

“What about the other fella?” he asked, suppressing a shiver. He never liked the look in Creed’s eyes, but he had no such feelings about his shorter companion.

“Howlett? He’s fine. He's a good man,” she smiled. “You can trust him. But Creed’s dug his claws into him. I think I need to separate the two of them.”
Bucky furrowed his brow in confusion.

*Don’t you worry, Bucky Barnes. I’ve got it all under control. Just take care of Steve. Look out for him the way you always do and keep him away from Creed. Don’t ever let them fight. He’d tear him apart with those claws.* She delivered the message to a part of Bucky’s unconscious mind where he did not even realize he received it. The music stopped and they both stared across the room at Steve, his jealousy palpable, his longing for her all too apparent. The modest, secondhand Sunday dress made no difference at all.

Steve also had eyes on Creed. The tall, feral-looking Sabretooth strode deliberately across the room to where Bucky and Zaara stood. Steve watched with shouldering eyes as Bucky released her and Creed took his place. Bucky’s eyes locked back on Steve, waiting. Steve took a deep breath and made ready to approach them. Bucky immediately intercepted him, pushing him back. “Simmer down, cowboy,” he murmured. “The lady gets to dance with whoever she pleases.”

“I don’t like it, Buck,” Steve replied, allowing his friend to stop him. Bucky always did have a better sense of how to handle awkward social situations. “Got a bad feeling about this.”

“It’s her choice. She’s got it under control,” Bucky insisted. “You got no right to interfere. No right.” Steve frowned but could see the compassion in his friend’s eyes. Bucky pulled him closer and lowered his voice. “You always did have a soft spot for a damsel in distress. Look, I know you rescued her. But if I were you, I’d stick with Agent Carter. She’s just as pretty and twice as smart.” Bucky wondered where his own words had come from. He had no reason to think Zaara a woman of lesser intelligence. Nevertheless, something compelled him to keep Steve away from Zaara at the moment and he had no ability to thwart it.

Steve accepted it. He could not argue. *Bucky’s right; I can’t stop her from dancing with whoever she wants. Can I?*

Still, he stood there and watched, seething with rage.

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Zaara allowed Victor Creed to take her into his arms. His foul breath coated her forehead and she steeled herself, hoping not to faint. Bucky had been none too happy about it, but she sent him away and he could not resist her will. *Time to work for a living,* she told herself. She tried to block out the unpleasant scent of Creed’s breath without success. Once or twice she raised her eyes to meet his and he chuckled evilly.

“Ain’t never been to a dance before, woman,” he said gruffly. “ Seems a bit of a waste. Would be able to touch you more in private.”

Zaara took a slow, calming breath and assessed the situation. She was on a dance floor in the arms of Sabretooth—Sabretooth: quite possibly the most psychotic killer in mutant history. Sometimes, she really hated her job. “Oh, Private Creed.” She gave a fake laugh. Pretending to enjoy the company of Sabretooth was like forcing herself to swallow some very nasty tasting medicine. “I can touch you right here if you like.” She raised her hands to his cheeks and concentrated.

Nothing.

Almost nothing.

But the longer she held him, the more she could sense something coming through. Channeling her psionic energy, she increased the output to the maximum level, as far as she dared. If she tried any harder, she could knock him unconscious, or possibly even kill him. Luckily, her efforts proved to be enough. Slowly, gradually, the mind of Sabretooth revealed itself: a disturbing mixture of bloodlust, violence, rage, and animal desire. And at this moment, he desired her. She tried not to feel sick to her stomach. “Oh,” she breathed heavily, as if his dancing swept her off her feet. “Do behave, Private Creed. I’m a good girl.”

“I hope not,” he chuckled evilly. He knew what he wanted and he intended on getting it. “But it don’t matter. You smell fine enough to me.”

“Oh, stop,” she protested demurely. *He can’t tell I’m pregnant. He can smell it, but can’t identify the scent because he never cared to learn what it means. His instincts aren’t pure, like Logan’s. They’re all about terror. Domination. What a monster.* “Oh, my. Your skin is so . . . so smooth.” She stroked his cheek but kept one hand upon his forehead until more information came. She strengthened her psionic hold and steadied herself. The mind of Sabretooth was not a place she liked to be—at all.

Brutality. Fights. Killings. War. Nasty, violent stuff. But she clung to him because he let her and,
soon, darker things emerged. Things he had done to women. And children. Things he had never accepted about himself and kept deeply buried, concealed from his own conscious mind. Victor Creed was indeed a monster. And he needed to be stopped. Zaara gasped. She finally understood her mission, but she could not complete it here in front of so many eyes. The music came to a stop and she released her hold on him. Creed snarled in protest, but Zaara giggled and pointed behind him. Logan was coming to her rescue for she had summoned him telepathically. He tapped Creed on the shoulder and smirked, presenting his old enemy with a stogie.

“You should try one, Private Creed,” Zaara suggested flirtatiously. “Only the toughest guys smoke those. I sure can’t. How about saving me another dance?” Flattery always worked on egotistical men.

“Alright,” he reluctantly agreed. “I’ll get back to the little tart later. He turned to face his rival.

“Looks like you’re havin’ too much fun there, bub,” Logan narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah, what’s it to you, runt?” Sabretooth growled.

“So you can handle a doll, bet you can’t handle one o’ these,” Logan taunted.

Zaara sighed in relief. It didn’t take much to get Logan to come over and tease Creed to relieve her from the worst dance of her life. She needed a few minutes to gather her courage so she could complete the first part of her mission, for by now it was eminently clear. She knew what she had to do. There must be no delay—she had to put an end to Sabretooth’s madness for good. But the music started up again and, before she could escape the dance floor, Steve swooped her up from behind, wrapping her boldly in his enormous arms. Before she could even attempt a protest she recognized his inexorable strength and knew she could never break his hold on her, not even if she wanted to—not without revealing her powers. She relaxed and gave in, at least for the moment.

The music slowed and a singer crooned the opening notes of a ballad.

*I’m in the mood for love,
Simply because you’re near me.
Funny, but when you’re near me,
I’m in the mood for love.*
“Golly,” Zaara raised her eyebrows in mock horror. “Do I to have to dance with every man in the room tonight?”

“Why?” he hissed, dismayed by her dance with Creed. It took all his courage to approach her, let alone dance with her. As soon as she stepped away from the hairy beast, he forced himself to do it.

“Why what? I can’t read your mind, you know,” she answered honestly.

“Why did you have to dance with him?” Steve canted his head in the direction of Victor Creed, unable to conceal his revulsion.

“Relax, Captain,” Zaara whispered. She would not toy with him. It was overwhelming to be back in his arms again. It conjured up far too many memories--that fateful night at the club back in Brooklyn, their first kiss, and everything that followed. This particular love song made it all worse. How it mocked her and all the feelings she had for this man in a time and place when they could not, must not, be together.

They moved across the floor in a tentative dance that wasn’t really a dance at all, his torso pressing against hers, their bodies reacquainting themselves in a duet that held them in a trance, oblivious to all the other bodies in the room. Steve had learned enough about dancing to hold her the proper way. She could feel his enormous hand press firmly upon her back, his other hand squeezing hers tight. She felt the impossible firmness of his rock hard physique, a tantalizing contrast to her own soft curves and tried in vain to suppress a gasp. Her hips and the small belly that had just started to protrude grazed against his flat, muscular abdomen while they glided across the floor. Somehow their feet formed steps, hers following his, though she could not tell what they were dancing. A waltz? A foxtrot? Overwhelmed by her feelings, she lacked the capacity to figure it out. Dancing was the last thing on her mind.

A lump formed in her throat. How she hated hiding her pregnancy from him, even more than their marriage. They should be together, they should be loving each other, sharing in the joy of the baby to come. Steve should be allowed to experience the early stages of fatherhood, have the chance to contemplate the wonder and awesome responsibility of becoming a parent.

He deserved that.

And God, how she missed him, body and soul. All she wanted was her Steve back--that small, humble man from Brooklyn who loved her like there was no tomorrow. The man with the clever, dexterous hands of an artist that could render the lines of her body so beautifully on paper it made her feel as if they were tracing over her skin in the early morning sunlight. But now was not their time.
Their future existed, well, in the future. She had to keep a lid on it and so she shook off those yearnings and forced her mind back to her mission. Her eyes traveled up his chest to his broad, powerful shoulders, his head so much taller than her own she had to strain her neck to meet those angry blue eyes. “It’s part of my mission.”

He scowled. He, too, had been deeply affected by the closeness between them and noticed the way his massive hands clutched her feminine flesh jealously, like a possession, all those curves so soft and round. To his chagrin, he realized he had started to harden as some primitive part of his mind registered the slope of her hips, the swell of her breasts, her sweet breath so close to his own. But his anger would not allow him to indulge in that desire. Every cell in his body and the arms that encircled her so intimately commanded him to hold her, keep her, protect her, claim her as if she belonged to him and him alone. “I don’t like Creed. There’s something bad about him.”

“You got that right,” she agreed. “And I’m going to fix it.”

He stopped dancing and stared at her in shock. Whatever it was she wanted to do, his gut told him it was dangerous. Far too dangerous.

“No.”

“I’m not asking your permission,” she said quietly. “I have a job to do. It’s my duty. You have yours, and I have mine.”

“NO,” he repeated louder, stubborn, though he did not know why. He just knew he had to keep Zaara away from Creed. Everything in his body screamed out against what she intended to do.

“Steve, I mean, Captain,” she shook her head at the mistake and lowered her voice. “I’m sorry. I can tell you’re worried about me.”

His heart softened slightly, but he furrowed his brow. He found her so confusing. Suddenly, to his surprise, he heard himself begging. “Please, Zaara. Miss Xaviar. Please. Whatever you’re planning to do, don’t do it. Don’t. Please.”

She would not answer, but only continued their dance. He held her tighter as if that, alone, would be enough to stop her. His blue eyes pleaded, his heart ached, and she could see it. All of it. Her own heart ached in return, though for different reasons. It’s like he still loves me, even if he doesn’t know me. God, why does this have to be so difficult? Why can’t I just wipe myself from his mind, get the
job done and get the hell out of here?

The resolute set of her lips made him want to weep and that puzzled him terribly. He could not explain it to himself and, knowing there was no way he could stop her, that she would eventually confront Creed no matter how he tried to stop it, he was of a mind to drop down on his knees and beg her all the harder not to. If there were any chance it could work, he would have. But Zaara stared back at him with such grim determination, he realized it would all be in vain. Steve Rogers knew a thing or two about stubbornness. But why did he care so much for her? Why did he have to keep sticking his nose into her business? He just couldn’t help himself. Steve always listened to his gut and right now, his gut told him Zaara needed to be protected.

At all costs.

~

When the song finally ended, she had to practically tear herself from his arms. Her body did not want to leave him and his arms did not want to let go. His eyes betrayed his reluctance, his heart sank and his body yearned for her so painfully that he froze himself to the spot. It was the only way to prevent himself from following her. Dancers glided by and narrowly avoided running into him, but he didn’t care. Zaara had a job to do and do it she would. He knew he could not stop her. Letting her go was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do. Fear overwhelmed him, pain throbbed in his chest and he could not look away from her. Bodies swirled all around him, but he saw no one but her.

She left him to seek out the man known as Sabretooth in the corner where he stood by Logan, puffing a stogie. Or, rather, choking on it. Sabretooth had never been one for cigars and, to his dismay, Logan got quite a chuckle out of his coughing and hacking. “Try again, bub,” Howlett cackled. “Third time’s the charm.”

“Private Creed,” Zaara interrupted them.

Sabretooth glanced down at her darkly.
From across the room, Steve felt a distinct chill run up and down his spine.

“I thought we should have another dance,” she spoke, her voice just above a whisper. “Or, would you rather go for a walk? There’s a beautiful moon tonight.”

Sabretooth grinned malevolently and offered her his arm.

Howlett puffed his cigar and narrowed his eyes. *I don’t like this.* But he said nothing as the pair walked out of the mess hall and disappeared into the night.

Steve’s heart leapt into his throat and he rushed for the exit, but not before a muscular arm barred his way. “Hold up, bub,” a deep voice sounded a warning.

“What the hell?” Steve would have levelled Howlett with his fist but Bucky had already grabbed his friend from behind and stopped him dead in his tracks.

“He’s right, Steve.” Bucky didn’t quite understand why he interfered, but he felt compelled to do so.

“What the hell--?” Steve repeated, turning to meet Bucky’s eyes.

“She’s on a mission, you jerk,” Bucky insisted stubbornly, though he had no idea why he felt so strongly about it. “She knows what she’s doing.”

“She does,” echoed Howlett, surprised to find himself in agreement with Sergeant Pretty Boy. “Even though I don’t like it.”

“Then why do you hang around with that creep?” Bucky retorted, unable to stop himself. He didn’t like Creed any more than Steve did. “She said you were alright, but that bruiser’s damaged goods.”

Howlett curled his lip. “Don’t see how that’s any o’ yer business, bub.”

Steve lost his patience. All he could hear was the pounding of his own heart. “Let me go! I gotta follow her. I can’t let this happen.” He struggled to shake them off while Howlett inserted his body
between him and the door. To his surprise, Bucky and Howlett succeeded in hindering him. No one had been able to pit their strength against Captain America before, except perhaps the Red Skull.

Bucky held him fast by the shoulders. “You can and you will, pal.”

Steve shivered. “No. I can’t.”

A piercing scream rang through the night.
Warning: Violence in this chapter, fighting or H2H combat, cutting, and bleeding. Lots of bleeding.
Sorry about that.
It all serves a narrative purpose, so nothing gratuitous, I hope.
Also, some may interpret sexual overtones to the violence, but no actual sexual violence occurs.

OK, so a double post this week XD
I didn't want to leave you with a terrible cliffhanger so I'm letting you know what happens after the scream.
This is pretty much the most violent chapter in the story and violence doesn't play a huge role for the rest of the tale.
I'm pretty insecure about writing action scenes, but that is mostly what we have in this chapter.
I sincerely hope it's alright and that you enjoy it.
Have a fantastic weekend!

Steve had never run so fast in his life--not even to save his own hide. At the sound of the scream, Howlett and Bucky released him and followed, only a heartbeat behind.

Another scream tore through the night.

Steve’s pulse throbbed so fast he wondered if his veins might burst. He could see nothing in the darkness but the breeze carried the unmistakable stench of Victor Creed right to his nostrils. A hint of Zaara’s sweet scent confirmed it. The sound came from a small cluster of trees so he made a beeline for it. Hot on his heels, Bucky and Howlett trailed close behind him. The soldiers entered the grove as a trio and came to an abrupt halt, their blood running cold.

Steve’s spine rippled with horror.
Their eyes beheld the body of Victor Creed pinned unnaturally up against a tree, feet dangling inches above the earth. Zaara stood before him, her dress torn to shreds, her hands clamped firmly upon his face. Blood streamed in rivulets down her arms while his wildly writhing claws rended her flesh asunder.

“Wait!” Bucky and Howlett shouted in unison. But it was really Zaara speaking, using their voices in a desperate attempt to hold Steve back in defiance of the white hot pain searing its way through her body. “Let me finish it!”

It took less than half a second for Steve to leap at Creed.

Sabretooth roared like a lion in a rage.

Blood spurted all around.

Zaara attempted to freeze Steve in mid-air, but failed. Creed had partly broken through her psionic hold; his hands freed enough to tear open her arms while she clung to his face. She dared not spread her energy any thinner or he’d be ripping open a lot more than her arms. Somehow, she ignored the white hot pain and launched a final psionic blast to complete her mission.

Then, releasing her hold on Sabretooth, she fainted dead away.

Steve’s eyes widened with horror and he abandoned his attack to catch her body just before she hit the ground. Zaara flopped like a ragdoll in his arms, her blood soaking his uniform.

The next moment, he felt the beginnings of a spine-shattering whack upon his back, courtesy of Victor Creed. In a flash, he whirled out of the way to deflect most of the blow and faced his enemy head on while Zaara bled upon the ground.

But he was not alone.

Unleashed from Zaara’s hold the moment she fell unconscious, Bucky and Logan joined in the fray. Both had a mind to protect her, both terrified they were too late. “You look after her, bub!” Howlett barked, directing his words at Bucky before landing a punch on Creed’s shoulder. Steve took the opportunity to grab hold of Creed’s wrists, narrowly avoiding cruel scratches from the sharp, dirty claws. “I’ll take the big guy!”
Bucky frowned in panic. He couldn’t stand to see Steve tussle with the sweaty-toothed beast and hesitated in his compulsion to protect him.

“DO IT!” Howlett screamed. “Listen to me or she’ll die!”

Bucky watched the streams of blood pouring down from Zaara’s body onto the cold ground and realized Howlett was right. In a panic, he rushed over to her and took off his jacket, pressing it against her wounds to staunch the bleeding. The lacerations were too many; he could not even count them or distinguish where one began and the next ended. His breaths heaved and he nearly hyperventilated, but he slowed himself down and, with great deliberation, did away with his own terror, his military training finally kicking in. He had to save Zaara. “Hold on, sweetheart!” he managed to say in a brave voice even though she probably couldn’t hear him. “I got you. You’re gonna be alright. You’re gonna be alright.” He looked up and his eyes widened even further.

Blood, punches, lashes, and roars permeated the night air and Bucky witnessed it all by the light of the moon. Steve had never known an opponent who could take the worst of his fists but Sabretooth did just that. Bucky had seen the Red Skull himself flinch when Steve knocked the mask right off of him, but Creed just didn’t seem human. He fought like an animal, taking hit after hit that would have KO’d any other man. Steve realized it and upped his game, putting all he had into every punch and kick, each one lethal now. Thankfully, the flailing claws and nasty fangs proved easy for Steve to dodge but he could not last forever and Sabretooth did not tire. Neither did Steve, but he just couldn’t seem to deliver the final blow. His heart ached thinking of Zaara. Tapping into some reservoir he didn’t know he had deep down inside, he increased the speed and intensity of his attack and beat Creed like a madman, desperate to return to her before she bled to death.

Howlett stepped up. Steve spared him a glance, assuming a second threat.

“Hold up, bub!” the Wolverine blurted, barely dodging the backward kick that came his way. “You don’t wanna fight me. Lemme take care of Creed. I know how to take him down.”

Steve glared at him in the midst of a particularly magnificent leap, incredulous. “NO!”

“How’s the only way to stop ‘im,” Howlett pleaded his case with more earnestness than Steve had yet seen from him. The Wolverine hated the thought of Zaara lying there dying and would do anything to save her.

Steve paused a moment. Sabretooth stopped as well and regarded his rival with loathing, panting like
a rabid dog. Captain America had already broken at least a dozen of his bones, and, though they were already healing, Creed had taken a great deal of punishment in only a few seconds’ time. “You gonna send for the coppers, runt?” the feral mutant snarled, addressing Howlett. He didn’t consider Steve worthy of his attention. As far as Sabretooth was concerned, the real fight was about to begin—the only fight he had ever really wanted. “Always knew you were a traitor.”

“Yeah,” Howlett growled back, his claws emerging dramatically from the backs of his hands. He crossed his arms over his chest in a deadly display, ready for the fight of his life. He roared out his challenge. “Gonna put you back in your cage! WHERE YOU BELONG.”

Steve’s jaw dropped in wonder but he could not bring his heart to care. All that mattered was Zaara. He saw the whites of Bucky’s eyes glisten in the moonlight when Howlett unleashed his long, bony claws. The Wolverine wielded them like weapons and, in a flash, took on his old enemy, circling him with all the hatred roused in his heart. “Never liked it when you hurt girls, bad breath,” he snarled, flashes of spit firing from his mouth.

“Never bothered you before,” Sabretooth barked back, sweaty toothed with blood lust.


They clashed.

Steve ignored them and dropped down to Zaara’s side. He swallowed the lump in his throat, tears filling his eyes and sticking to his lashes. He dared not allow them to spill. “Buck,” he breathed raggedly. “Go get medical. Call the MPs. If Howlett’s right, we can only restrain Creed. Can’t kill him, otherwise I woulda by now.”

Bucky nodded. For once, he had no words. Tears hovered just behind his own eyes, but he did not acknowledge them. He pressed Steve’s hands to the spots where he had been attempting to stop the bleeding. “Hold on doll. Steve’s got you. You’re gonna be alright, I promise. I’ll be right back.”

Steve pressed his hands firmly on the wounds and Bucky ran off as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Hold on, darling,” Steve murmured. He paused, taking a deep breath. Suddenly, he plunged his lips down to hers, planting desperate kisses all over her face, perhaps the only part of her body not covered in blood. He did not recognize the word when it fell from his lips, but heard its echo
moments later. *Darling.* Unable to stop himself, he brushed his lips over hers once again while the battle raged by their side, his heart bleeding right along with her wounds.

*She can't die. This can’t be happening.*

*It can’t end like this.*

~

*Zaara opened her eyes. Where am I? Oh. Medical. Again. But this time, thankfully, she lay in a bed and not an iron lung. She tried to move and realized they had strapped her down.*

*What now?* she thought to herself. *She concentrated, trying to remember.*

*Sabretooth.*

*Oh, shit. I made a real mess of it this time. I’m gonna have to wipe a whole lot of people to sweep this one under the rug.*

She had been lucky not to have died. Sabretooth did a number on her, for certain. But she had done a number on him in return, though it came at a very high price. At least she could feel some relief. *Sabretooth won’t be able to harm innocents ever again.* She knew she had done the job right—that was why it hurt so much.

To her surprise, the feral mutant proved to be a formidable opponent. It had always been tricky for Zaara to employ the powers of telepathy and telekinesis at the same time. Creed’s unusual level of resistance bore an unsettling resemblance to Steve’s, making a complicated task even more difficult. She barely managed to break through his mental barrier and access his consciousness, but once she got inside, she sought to permanently alter his sadistic tendencies. In her journey through the labyrinth of his mind, she saw all the innocents he had harmed, the victims of a sick, deranged
psychopath and a mutant body capable of the most horrendous acts of violence. But Sabretooth, of course, fought back just as stubbornly as Steve would have. Navigating through the mess of his mind, she brazenly brainwashed him to inflict lethal damage upon his own body whenever he felt the temptation to harm innocents or anyone weaker than himself.

But she could not perform such precision work and maintain her telekinetic hold at the same time, not even with her power boost from pregnancy. It had been a question of skill, not strength—that was why the monster managed to break through her hold. Though he could not extricate his whole body from her mind, he did manage to move his hands and fight back. Distracted as she was by her intricate telepathic task, Zaara could not regain her hold over his body and he managed to shred several sections of her arms down to the bone.

Zaara sighed, relieved she had been able to stop the worst of Sabretooth. She knew it had to be done, even if she had never been assigned to do it. As soon as she saw what he was capable of, she knew she could not live with herself if she left such a monster in the world. She would have done the same even if the Professor had not assigned her to the task. But here she was again, back in the hospital. And she could not move her arms. Her heart throbbed in sudden panic and she wondered for a moment whether she had lost the use of them until she recalled she had been strapped down to the hospital bed. She had feeling in them and knew them to be sore. And itchy. She wiggled her fingers and caught sight of the telltale blood stains on the many gauze bandages. Then she remembered.

_Victor cut me._

Her heart pounded harder.

_My baby._

She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated until she could sense him.

He was alive. He was safe.

Deep down, Zaara knew her powers would attend to her baby first. That was one advantage of her otherwise burdensome mutant abilities. The Professor never worried about it and neither did she; he sensed the inexorable protective instincts that went far beyond the regions of her conscious mind and had told her of them when she was pregnant with Ellie. Zaara had no doubt the same was true with this pregnancy. Nevertheless, she feared for her son. Their son, for he was Steve’s son, too. Tears filled her eyes.
“She’s awake,” she heard a feminine voice speak.

“I’m going in,” a masculine voice insisted. She extended her psychic tendrils and recognized the familiar blank space of another mind she could not read.

Steve.
Chapter Summary

So we are dealing here with all sorts of feelings and recovery after the events of the last chapter. There will be some limited descriptions of the violence and the surgical stuff afterwards, along with mentions of blood, so you have been warned. Also, a few more references to the nasty violent past of Sabretooth, but mostly in passing and not explicit.

Also, some depression and grieving, on the part of Steve. Poor Steve--what I've put him through.

But the Wolverine has a sense a humour, so that is seeing me through.

Plus, I decided to end this chapter with a little piece of joy, so please don't despair!

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. I'm very happy you feel this story's worth it. XD

Double post this week. I think these next two chapters really belong together and I didn't want to drag the hospital-related stuff out so let's get this done now!

btw, smut alert . . . for next week! lol

“How are you?” he murmured with a tired voice, unnumbered tears leaving him with dry, reddened eyes. Black rings circled on the skin below them, and the bruises on his cheek were topped by nasty looking cuts just beginning to heal. His fingers gripped the edge of her hospital gown where it draped down from her body onto the bed and played with it gingerly. He could not explain his feelings for her and when he discovered the truth, it tore at his heart.

So much had happened in the three days while she slept. He would be lucky not to be court martialed. Colonel Phillips had to pull a lot of strings to keep the peculiar circumstances of the attack under wraps and complained bitterly about it. The Black Watch had been aware Victor Creed posed a danger to civilians and his fellow soldiers, but since Creed had brought them victory in so many battles, they surrendered him with great reluctance. Phillips was ready to have their heads when he discovered they let a known murderer and sadist onto his base, but he seemed satisfied when they hauled Creed away in chains. The monster was no longer his problem.
Steve Rogers, unfortunately, still was.

From a distance, a handful of eye witnesses to the bloodbath had been shocked to see the Captain and another soldier pound mercilessly upon an unarmed Canadian. None of them were exactly certain what transpired that night, but it did appear to be disturbingly out of character for Captain America. All they knew for sure was that a woman had been attacked and seriously injured and that a wild and brutal fight followed. It was unlikely the Captain would be charged with anything, but a court martial was still a court martial. An investigation had been initiated and Phillips was doing his best to undo it and keep things quiet.

Steve had gone to bat for Howlett, as did Bucky. Both men saw enough of the fight to realize Howlett could be an invaluable member of their team. Bucky, adamant that they could trust him, got Steve to begrudgingly admit Howlett helped save Zaara’s life. They needed one man to fight Victor, another to staunch the bloodflow from her wounds, and a third to run for help. Without all three, Zaara might not be alive.

She smiled slightly, gazing at him between half-closed lids. “You must be so angry with me.”

“You got no idea,” Steve frowned, unable to conceal it. But he smiled a little in spite of himself, for it felt good to hear her voice again. He had wondered more than once whether he ever would. Still, his words betrayed his outrage. “Why didn’t you talk to Agent Carter first? She would have helped you. Or why didn’t you tell me what you were gonna do? We coulda taken care of Creed together, got the whole team to help.”

“So she told you about my mission?” Zaara asked primly. She knew how Steve would react if she told him the full truth—that she never wanted him to fight Sabretooth, that the beast posed a grave danger to him. “That means she’s going to help me.”

“Yes,” Steve admitted.

“And so I did,” another familiar voice entered the room. “Miss Xaviar. Sorry to see you back in the hospital.”

“Me, too, Agent Carter,” Zaara closed her eyes and grimaced. A sudden throb of pain ran up and down the length of her right arm, but it left as quickly as it had come. Steve noticed it, anyways.

“You’re showing, you know,” Peggy added coolly.
Zaara nearly fell out of her hospital bed. *Thank God I'm strapped down.* After a moment, she found her voice. “So they told you about that, did they?” She quickly realized that they would never give a pregnant patient any painkillers. *Shit. This is really gonna hurt. For a long time.*

“How could you?” Steve snapped, finally losing the tenuous hold he had over himself, his fury fully unleashed. “Where’s your husband? Does he know? How could he let you do this?”


Steve exchanged glances with her but his stubbornness took hold of him and he would not relent. Zaara caught his eyes and the look he gave her withered her heart from the inside out.

*It’s like he knows the baby is his. Somehow, he actually knows! How could it be? I wiped him, I took it all away. After the serum, all the changes he’s been through, after the war . . . My God, how could he know?*

“What’s your husband? Does he know?”

Zaara swallowed, tears brimming in her eyes. Her voice crackled from disuse. “I have a duty. A mission.”

“Not good enough,” he gritted his teeth, his fingers bunching up the edges of her hospital gown.

“Captain Rogers!” Peggy practically shouted. “I said ENOUGH. Leave us. NOW.”

It stopped Zaara’s breath to witness Steve warring with Peggy Carter. He clearly did not want to back down but Peggy was having none of it.

“You are not entitled to the answers to those questions!” Peggy articulated each consonant with surgical precision. She took a deep breath and reconsidered. Her words sounded slightly above a whisper, making them even more deadly. “Captain Rogers, kindly permit me do my job.”
Steve tore his eyes away from Peggy’s seething glare to look back at Zaara as she fought to keep the tears from falling. What trouble she had caused, not only for herself, but for everyone on base. She could sense the attachment forming in Peggy’s mind. Agent Carter adored Steve Rogers, was practically in love with him. If they spent a little more time together away from the war, their relationship would surely blossom into something quite serious. It had taken Zaara by surprise, but not entirely. She knew the Captain had someone during the war, a lady friend or lover; she never heard much about it and never thought to ask. It was simply a part of his history. And since he was such a quiet, private sort of man when she met him in the 21st century, she did not want to pry. Clearly, in 1944, Peggy was his girl.

And she had caused strife between them. “Captain Rogers,” Zaara said softly, trying to swallow the lump in her dry throat. “Please go.”

She prayed he’d forgive her. How she hated to see him suffer; he didn’t deserve it and she would do anything to take that pain away. Though he did not wear his stars and stripes, it struck her that he might as well have been. In this moment, he seemed so different from the Steve Rogers she loved and married. His justifiable outrage and his sense of entitlement reminded her more of the aloof man she had worked with in the 21st century. They had not been close then, not at all. He seemed so lonely as the Captain, reserved and remote, always with a relentless focus on the mission. A true hero, his life wholly dedicated to fighting the good fight.

Now she could finally see just what Captain America meant to the world: he truly was the hero who sacrificed all. She never wanted to change that and it was imperative she did not. Moreover, he was meant to fall in love with someone else, someone utterly unlike her: a servicewoman of sharp intellect and ravishing beauty, not to mention remarkable courage. Peggy Carter was practically perfect for him in every way. Zaara knew theirs was a relationship doomed to end tragically by the seventy odd years he was fated to sleep in the ice. If that never happened, if Cap never became the hero the world needed, not only would Zaara and Steve never meet, she would never have been born at all. His anger and disappointment was entirely understandable and wholly justified.

Steve stood still a moment, frozen to the spot in painful silence at her unceremonious dismissal. His chest contracted so tightly he could barely manage to draw breath. He gave her one last, painful glance before stomping off in a fit of violent rage. He had never known such anger in his life, not even after the assassination of Dr. Erskine. He couldn’t explain it to anyone, let alone himself.

Maybe it was the baby she carried—no one seemed to care about that. Sending a pregnant woman on some suicide mission was one of the cruelest, most immoral things he could imagine. To think how Victor Creed came so close to tearing her body apart—*he ripped open her skin, drained her blood*. . . . Steve saw it all over again in his mind, like a nightmare: Zaara’s blood streaming down her arms, pouring down upon his uniform to colour it red . . . . He had watched the medics struggle to staunch the flow, had followed them when they transported her to the OR and fought to stitch her lacerated arms back up again. Her unconscious body shook with untold pain and his own body flinched at every tremor, winced at every speck of it in horror. They force fed her penicillin through a tube for
there was little doubt she’d be fighting multiple infections from Victor’s cruel, dirty claws and they were compelled to give her transfusion after transfusion. Steve had watched it. All of it.

Throughout those two horrible days he found himself praying for her survival, unable to face the possibility of her dying, the catastrophic pain of losing her—as if he actually loved her. I called her darling, he remembered numbly. I kissed her. His own words kept returning to him, echoed in his mind, betraying the intensity of his feelings for her.

Darling? Why did I call her that? Does it mean I love her? How could I love her? Why did I kiss her? I hardly even know her.

And he reeled when he discovered her secret. Holy God, she’d been pregnant the whole time.

He barely left her side for two whole days, would not change out of his uniform even though it had been soaked with her blood. Bucky approached him cautiously after a stern warning by the medical staff about his volatile rage. No one could deny him access to Zaara, no one dared say no to him. The look in his eyes was enough to make them give the Captain a wide berth. Bucky brought his best friend clean clothes and took away the ones stained with her blood. Steve begrudgingly left her side for the few moments it took to change into them. Peggy tried to speak with him more than once, but even she had enough sense to give him space. She had heard enough about what happened that night to recognize his trauma, especially after learning of Zaara’s pregnancy. For a man who had seen so much violence in the war, this proved to be a cruel and unusual experience even for him, a grotesque and most ugly violation. She would never attempt to break down his walls after such an incident. The man needed time.

On the third day, when Zaara finally stabilized, it was as if he could actually breathe again. Finally, it seemed safe for him to leave her side for short intervals, so he set to work. Indeed, he managed to surpass himself and became a true busybody while she lay unconscious. He demanded to see her chart and even wrangled information out of Peggy, who was relieved to see him communicative again. No one would refuse Captain America. Unsure of what else to do, he waited. He waited to see her wake up, to make sure she would recover, and to hear her explanation. She sure as hell she owed him one, though he could not justify it to himself or the world.

His gut told him so.

Steve left the room at a quick pace but stopped halfway down the hall and, to his surprise, nearly collapsed with grief. He braced himself against the wall and leaned on it for support before heaving a few full-throated sobs into the crook of his elbow. His chest burned with anguish. Why was he taking this so hard? Why did Zaara matter so much? An innocent baby—surely that was it. That had to be it. He sniffled and cleared his nose, his breathing passages opening up again, and suddenly took note of the numerous scents hovering in the air. The medical unit smelled of chemicals and cleaning
products, machines and bodily fluids.

My nose, he realized. He had smelled it. Some part of him knew she was pregnant the moment he found her on the Hydra base. Suddenly, it all came together. Her unique, intoxicating scent enhanced with that extra dash of femininity—an accent he encountered only occasionally during his USO tours in the States. The mothers and young women in the crowd who would come to greet him offstage—a few of them must have been pregnant, for their scents carried the same curious accent as Zaara’s. Not even their perfumes could hide it. He had known the truth, deep down inside. Steve sighed, wiping the thick tears from his eyes. Personnel traipsed up and down the hallways and took no notice of him for he wore only his fatigues.

Alright, it’s the baby. Some kind of protective instinct of mine. Still confusing but I’ll go with it. It explains a lot. We’re going to have a talk about this, he decided. No matter what Peggy says.

“Hey, pal,” Bucky Barnes finally arrived, patting his best friend on the back. “What gives?”

“Nothin’ Buck,” Steve wiped away the last of the tears on his sleeve callously. But he could not conceal the sorrow in his eyes and the swollen, puffy skin around them.

“That ain’t nothin’,” Bucky frowned with worry. “She alright?”

“Yeah, she woke up,” Steve confirmed bitterly. “Just asked me to leave.”

“Why?” Bucky asked.

Steve took a deep breath. “She’s pregnant.”

Bucky gasped. “Pregnant?”

“She sure as hell is,” Howlett emerged from the opposite end of the hallway. “You can smell it a mile away.”

Steve raised his reddened eyes in surprise. “You smelled it, too?”
"'Course I did," the Wolverine came closer, miffed. "It’s obvious, ain’t it? Smells the same all over the animal kingdom. It don’t matter—bear, moose, or beaver. Anyone with half a nose can tell. Knew she was havin’ a baby before I even laid eyes on her."

*Half a nose,* thought Bucky. He himself had become a bit of a bloodhound since his capture by Hydra. Maybe it had something to do with that weasel Zola. He remembered him saying something about enhancements. *She always did smell a little unusual to me though I ain’t been around many girls lately. I think she smells great. Still—she smells real different from any of the nurses and Agent Carter, too. Maybe I can smell more than I thought.*

"Why didn’t you say something?" Steve asked in amazement.

"Not my business," the Wolverine cricked his neck. "Why? What’s it to you? She your woman, bub?"


"Hah! You wish she was. It’s written all over your face," Howlett observed dryly. He didn’t bother to mention the way Steve’s scent practically hovered all over Zaara. The Wolverine grinned smugly and raised his eyebrows. *She’s dripping with yer stench. You’re like a bear stakin’ his territory--might as well pee a circle around her to warn the other bears away, bub.*

Steve blushed with anger and shame, as if Howlett shared the sentiment out loud.

"Fellas…” Bucky drawled, squeezing his body between the two of them before placing a hand one on their chests to push them apart. "Let’s keep things civil. Shall we?"

The Wolverine snorted and brushed the future Winter Soldier’s hand away. "Just came to check on her, Sergeant Pretty Boy. Then I’ll be on my way. The Black Watch wants to see me."

"I wanted to talk with you about that," Steve interjected, consciously choosing to let the jibe about Zaara slide. Clearly, Howlett posed no threat. And they owed him for taking on Creed. If he hadn’t, Zaara would probably not be alive. "I want to invite you to join us."
“Who’s us?” the Wolverine wrinkled his nose.

“The Howling Commandos,” Bucky answered proudly, his mind still distracted by the thought of Zaara’s pregnancy. *What the hell is going on? Is she married or something? I didn’t see no ring on her finger.*

“The Howling what’s its?” Howlett asked, but his grin betrayed him. He had seen the films just like everyone else—the documentary footage of Steve and his team played in theatres all over the world.

“My team,” Steve clarified. “We could use a man with your talents.”

“I dunno,” Howlett mused. “Got it pretty good with the Black Watch.”

“They’re gonna court martial you,” Bucky piped up. “I heard Colonel Phillips tell the Canucks.”

Howlett raised his eyebrows, incredulous. “Oh, shiiiit.”

“Yeah,” Bucky grinned, enjoying his discomfort. *That’s what you get for callin’ me Pretty Boy, Furball.* “You’re better off with us. Besides, we need to know what you’re able to do. Got a pretty good idea so far. I saw you fight. And Peggy Carter mentioned you’re a . . . a healer?”

“Ain’t no healer, bub,” the Wolverine scoffed. “Can’t heal nobody. Got a healing factor. But I don’t talk about it and I don’t tell nobody. So you two better watch your step, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Alright,” Steve nodded. It made him feel a bit better to focus on business again after spending all his time around medical. It did not exactly heal the pangs he felt for Zaara and everything that happened, but it did make him feel like he could do something to protect her or possibly even help her. Clearly, she was not going to let anything stop her, not even the baby growing inside her. “Then join us. We’ll talk about it later, not here. No one but me and Buck will know your deal.”

“Mum’s the word, pal,” Bucky grinned. “I won’t even mention those claws.”

Howlett frowned at him. “It better be.”
“It is,” Steve nodded, feeling even better. Zaara had called Howlett an old friend. They could do a lot with him on their side.

“Howlett nodded. “Let’s go see our girl.” He led the way to her room. Peggy Carter still stood inside and the enhanced hearing of the three men granted them snippets of conversation.

“Shaw is on the list of commanders. The location was classified but he was last seen in Dusseldorf.”

“Dusseldorf. How long should it be?”

“Not long now. As soon as you can sit up again, when you are able to walk . . .”

“It’ll all be ready?”

“Yes. Just need to clear it with Colonel and prep the team.”

“The team is here,” Steve boldly interrupted, stepping inside.

“Captain Rogers, I thought we asked you to leave,” Peggy Carter frowned.

“Shut your piehole, sister,” the Wolverine chimed in. “We’ve come to see our girl.”

Steve’s jaw dropped. Peggy’s eyes became daggers and she was about to give Howlett a good right hook, but Steve quickly set his tall body firmly between them, willing to take a hit for him. He owed the guy.

“Everyone calm down!” Zaara scolded in a weak voice.

“Corporal Howlett, this is Agent Carter from MI6,” the voice of Bucky Barnes cut through the fray, seeking to ease tensions yet again.
“He’s going to join the team,” Steve added apologetically. “Agent Carter coordinates the Howling Commando missions with Colonel Phillips.”

“I’m sure Howlett was just giving us some down home Canadian hospitality,” Bucky added, fearful of what Carter would say.

Peggy bristled and her voice seared its deadly sarcasm into each of their bodies. “What a pleasure to meet you, Corporal Howlett.”

Zaara broke in. “Corporal Howlett, apologize to her. Now. Please.”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the Wolverine nodded shamefully. Obediently. “Just anxious to check on my friend. Ain’t used to answering to beautiful dames in command.”

“I think the Black Watch has been a bad influence on you, James,” Zaara spoke up again in her weak voice. “I’m gonna have to school you.”

Steve chuckled in spite of himself. In spite of everything.

“I’m so sorry, Agent Carter,” Zaara continued before addressing the group of them. “Thank you all for helping me. I want to apologize for the trouble I’ve caused. And I promise to work with you on the next part of my mission and to keep you all informed.”

“No more hiding anything?” Steve asked pointedly, the pain wrenching his chest yet again. Too many times in the last three days he had felt as if he would lose everything—all of it, without understanding why. He would never be able to forget that feeling, for it was not unlike when his mother died.

“No more hiding,” Zaara nodded regretfully. “Agent Carter was right. I should have consulted her first.”

Steve smiled bitterly at her admission, but he still wished to admonish her. He didn’t know what to do with these feelings. They troubled him greatly and some angry part of him wanted her to know, to suffer as he did, only so that she would never endanger herself, put herself at risk again. But he gave

Zaara sighed. “It’s fine. I’m just getting a little tired.”

“We’ll be leaving you, then,” Peggy nodded, sparing a glance for each of the three men crowding the small hospital room. She made certain to give Howlett another scathing glare.

Bucky stepped forward and took Zaara’s hand, the one not wrapped in bandages. His eyes sparkled and he felt so glad to see her alive and well he decided not to worry about her baby or husband for the moment and just be glad she was safe. “Hang in there, kitten. Be brave. I’ll be back soon, maybe take you on another romantic lunch date to the mess hall.”

“Sure thing,” Zaara gave him her biggest smile. It warmed her heart to have his acceptance; it was a huge relief after Steve’s condemnation of her. She reminded herself to give Bucky’s mind a full examination as soon as she was up to it since she knew he had already been captured by Hydra. They must have begun the experiments by now, for she could tell his body possessed enhancements, though nowhere near the level of the Winter Soldier. Not yet. It hurt to think of Bucky ending up back in Hydra’s hands but she could not alter the timeline. She felt glad of the robust mental shield she gave him back in 1942.

At the same time, she marveled at his willingness to suspend judgment on her condition. It told her that, for an American man in the 1940s, Bucky was far ahead of his time. Indeed, the Winter Soldier had always been able to grant others the compassion he could not offer himself. With his warmest smile, he released her hand and headed for the door.

“Good to see you awake, kid,” Logan added sincerely. “I still don’t remember you, but I’m glad you’re alright.”

“You know what I did to Victor, don’t you?” she asked earnestly.

“Not really,” the Wolverine confessed. “Do I need to know?”
“Yes, you do,” she replied. “I altered his brainwaves. A little telepathic manipulation. I don’t make a habit of it, but in his case, it was necessary.”

“Huh?” Logan appeared thoroughly confused.

Zaara wiggled her fingers and reached for him. Steve bristled slightly but said nothing as the Wolverine gently took her hand in his own. “James, I changed his brain chemistry. It means he can’t hurt innocents anymore. He’ll still be his nasty old self, but if he tries to harm anyone weak, he’ll end up hurting his own body instead.” That gave him pause. In fact, it gave all of them pause. “Yes,” she added, though she was becoming even more tired. “Sabretooth will self-inflict pain now. He will cut his own body with those claws if he even thinks of harming innocents. They can still use him in the war, he can still function as a soldier, but he’s no longer a danger to civilians.”

“Good work,” Peggy Carter murmured in wonder where she stood in the doorway.

“Yes,” Steve agreed, but he was still angry. Zaara’s achievement came at a high price.

Bucky nodded solemnly. You’re some hero, you crazy kitten. Brave, gorgeous, and completely reckless.

“Thank you, all,” Zaara addressed the room. “You’ve been so kind. It’s so good to know I can trust you with this mission. But I’m about to pass out . . .”

“Very well,” Peggy agreed. “Off we go. We’ll talk soon.”

“Steve,” Zaara called softly when most of them had already left. Of course he would be last out the door. His ears could detect the slightest whisper. He returned to the edge of the bed. “No,” she breathed. “Come closer.”

Steve obliged and took the seat beside her bed. He leaned in closer when she squeezed his hand tight, his face within kissing distance of hers.

“I’m so sorry for all of this. I owe you an apology; more than the others,” she admitted guiltily.
“Why?” he asked, sensing she spoke the truth though it made no sense.

Zaara looked at him with all the love she could muster but would say nothing more. He could see the pain in her eyes and, despite his anger (for he was still very angry with her), he softened his stance slightly. With a deep sigh, he resigned himself. “It’s alright. It doesn’t matter. We’re going to help you, Zaara. You’re not on your own anymore.”

She smiled, recognizing her Steve at last. He would do anything to help her. “You have every right to be angry. And that’s all I can tell you.” She squeezed her eyes shut, praying she had not said too much.

“Every right?” he felt even more confused, his stomach turning upside down.

“Yes. You saved my life now--twice. I owe you a debt. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you about the baby. There are so many reasons. But mostly—“

“It’s the mission,” he frowned glumly.

“Yes,” she whispered, on the brink of sleep. “Please. Don’t feel bad. You’re such a good man, you’re doing so much for the war effort. I wish I could do something for you in return.”

“Just . . . Just stay safe,” he murmured and, to his surprise, found himself near tears again.

“I will,” she smiled brightly. “Agent Carter never told you much about my mutation, did she?”

“Your telepathy. Telekinesis,” he murmured. It all sounded so strange to him.

“I’m quite powerful, you know,” she smiled. “And I have to hide it. I could have cleared the field back on that Hydra base, purified the air, protected myself from the smoke.”

“Why didn’t you?” Steve asked, shocked and uncertain whether to believe her or get even angrier with her.
“Because of the mission. Mutants have to stay secret. I was well within my powers to take on Sabretooth—I mean, Victor Creed,” she explained neatly. “If I hadn’t been trying to do two things at once, holding him still and altering his mind, it would have been much easier.”


“That’s the other thing you need to know,” she breathed. “This baby is safe. Period. He comes first. My powers protect him before everything else. It . . . it goes beyond my conscious mind, my conscious control of my powers. You don’t need to worry about him. He’s safe.”

Now Steve really had to stop himself from crying. “You’re having a boy?”

Tears formed in her eyes for about the hundredth time that day. But this time, they were tears of joy. Zaara nodded at him, beaming. “Yes. I can read the mindwaves. His thought patterns. It’s a boy. And the doctor checked his heartbeat. He’s healthy, swimming around in there.” She eyed her stomach, unable to reach it with her hands.

“May I?” Steve asked, not knowing why. His pulse raced as he beheld her slightly swollen abdomen with wonder, the unexpected boldness of his request making him tremble. He had never touched a woman so intimately before.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes,” she replied, her voice breaking. *What a thing for him to ask.*

Tentatively, his large hand released hers and he placed his broad palm gently over her stomach. Zaara figured it was too early for him to feel any movements for she had yet to experience any flutters herself. Her smile broadened and she released two tiny tears, feeling them slide down her cheeks. She knew she mustn’t cry, but this moment with Steve and their baby made everything worth it.

Steve himself could not understand it all, the boldness of his hand upon the belly of a woman he barely knew taking his breath away. He contemplated the tiny life resting below his palm, beneath the softness of her skin, and he found himself reciting a short prayer of protection for it, protection from this war, protection from any harm that might befall it. He didn’t know why he cared so much, but he had not seen a baby or been around children in nearly two years, and this tiny, secret child somehow felt so special to him. Utterly precious.
He looked up at her and smiled.
Chapter Summary

Here we finally have Zaara's perspective on her recovery, or lack thereof. I felt she needed to have more of a response to what happened to her emotionally speaking since reading Victor's mind had to have been traumatic in and of itself.

Trigger warning: Zaara has a post-traumatic response or nightmare of the violence, distortions of what happened and a sense of helplessness, depression.

So, more hashing over what went on and building up on her self-doubt. Some mentions of her wounds both physical and psychological.

I guess I am trying not to gloss over what happened, but hopefully I’m not dragging it out, either.

This is a romance, after all, and lovers need obstacles to overcome.

And, more Wolverine! I so enjoy writing him and I hope that you enjoy what I'm doing with his character.

Chapter Notes

Let us all cheer up, for we have a smut alert in effect for next week. XD

Again, thanks for all your hits, kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I appreciate every single one of them.

I love sharing this story with all of you.

Zaara fell into a fitful sleep the moment Steve left the room, her mind and body utterly spent. The encounter with her friends had overtaxed her and added a thick layer of guilt to the shame she already felt for going about things so foolishly. The Professor instructed her to get assistance with her mission, but she had acted on impulse and ignored that order. They could have helped me. They could have restrained Victor while I did the work I was sent here to do. God, why did I have to be so stupid? She would never forgive herself for going in light. For hours she slept a dreamless sleep, but when the dreams finally came, she tossed and turned in torment.
Images of Sabretooth dominated her unconscious: the stench of his breath, the wild hairs upon his throat, his fierce and gruesome snarls haunted her until she found herself pinned up against the same tree where she once held him. In the dream, he violated her, performed all the unthinkable acts she had seen in his deranged mind with no end in sight. She found no peace in this nightmarish rest and woke sooner than she should have, her heart pounding in grief, her mind tortured by fear. The memory of Sabretooth hurt far beyond the pain coursing through her ruptured arms. To read the mind of a monster, to have her consciousness become intimately acquainted with his brutality and his demented view of the world stung more than the lengthy stitches she bore. Reliving this anguish became her greatest fear.

_I hate this. I’ll never stop crying. Will it ever stop?_

In the dream, she had screamed and hollered, tried to fight back, but was helpless. Suddenly, she returned to the moment when he broke through her psionic hold and she could not prevent his hands from gripping her arms. They pierced the flesh just below her shoulders and his retractable claws ripped open her skin all the way down to her hands. She would have to release her hold on his mind to stop him and she just couldn’t do that—not when she could see the faces of his many victims, all the people he had hurt. She did it for them. She dared not leave the mind of Sabretooth intact a moment longer or she would be responsible for the next victim.

_How ironic, she realized. I was his next victim._

She wished she could tell Steve. And Bucky. More than ever, she needed a friend. But she had to keep things professional. She had a mission. She could not change the past or alter the immediate future, or impact any outcomes in the Second World War. She must do her duty. It was the only way to get back to Ellie.

As luck would have it, Logan stopped by shortly after she woke up. “Hey, you,” he grinned, almost jovial. But his smile faltered when he noticed the tears sliding down her cheeks. With her arms strapped down, she had no way to wipe them off. “Lemme get that for ya, kid.” He reached for a small piece of gauze left by her bedside and tenderly wiped the tears away.

“Thank you,” she whispered, trying to hold it all in.

“S’ok,” he answered gruffly. “Hey, let it out, honey. Ain’t gonna do you no good keepin’ it locked up in there.”

“No,” she agreed. So Zaara wept, releasing a flood of tears. Logan embraced her as carefully as he could, though it felt awkward since her arms were still strapped down. She heaved a few sobs and
managed to soak his shirt with her tears while Logan hummed to himself and found, to his surprise, his broad, hairy hands stroking her hair. His heart ached for her—he always hated finding Creed’s victims and he determined to keep checking on Zaara each day, make sure she was alright until she got out of that damned hospital. He had come to feel she was his friend though he could not explain exactly why. Though he did not want to admit it to himself, he longed to comfort her, protect her, knowing how he had failed the others. Indeed, the majority of Creed’s victims ended up dead.

“You did the right thing, kid,” he found himself saying.

Are you sure? I feel so stupid.

Yeah, I’m sure, he replied in his mind, surprised at feeling so comfortable communicating in this manner. You stopped a bad, bad man. Don’t know how or why I ended up with him. He had me feeling I was as bad as him, and bad likes to be around bad.

But you’re not bad, she insisted. You never did any of those things he did to those poor people.

Coulda, though, he mused. Feel like a monster most days. God made me a killing machine.

Your strength is not for hurting, she insisted. You use it to protect people. You’re helping them win this war.

So was Victor, he pointed out.

You’re not Victor. You’re one of the best men I ever met. Your heart is pure gold. Even after everything you’ve been through, all that pain—you still want to do the right thing. You have so much love inside. You can’t get rid of it, no matter how hard you try. Don’t try to fool a mindreader. I know the real reason you stuck with Victor, even if you won’t admit it to yourself: you wanted to protect them. And look at you here now, holding me.

Zaara grinned, forgetting her own suffering for a moment. She always loved shoving Logan’s goodness back in his face. “And you’re not alone, by the way. You’re not the only person who could be called a monster,” she pointed out. “The difference is—you and I want to stop the real monsters, stop them from hurting people. That’s why God or the Universe or somebody gave us these powers. We’ve got to use them to do good.”
“I think you did,” he murmured in all earnestness, eager to change the subject. He always had a hard
time accepting compliments. It made him suspicious—they never seemed to match his own views
about himself. “And it was the bravest, dumbest thing I ever saw.”

“Well, dancers aren’t known for their brains,” she shot back, ridiculously pleased he had called her
brave. Logan had never been generous when it came to handing out compliments.

Logan grinned back at her, but his nostrils suddenly flared out. “Hey, you smell that?”

“I sensed it,” she replied, blushing, for Steve had come. “A few minutes ago.”

“Think he’s gonna have my hide?” the Wolverine cocked an eyebrow.

“Probably. He’s kind of possessive,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“I wonder why that is?” Logan asked with just a tinge of irony.

>You smell it, don’t you? Please. Don’t tell anyone. No one can know.<br>

Girl, that’s none o’ my business.

“So we’re friends, now?” she asked, smiling.

Logan demurred, but Zaara wasn’t fooled. “Maybe. Say, I bet he’s here to see you. I best be going.”

Zaara snuggled a little bit closer to him. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able
to forget what happened that night. Wish I knew when the nightmares would stop. I can’t sleep this
way, I get no rest. I’m so tired.”

“I can stick with you, if you like,” he shrugged. “The Black Watch left. Ain’t got no squadron,
nowhere to go.”
“You’re supposed to be staying with the Commandos,” Steve interjected, boldly entering the room.

“Captain Rogers,” Zaara spoke quietly, clinging just a little more tightly to Logan.

“You’ve been crying,” he observed gently.

“What’s it to you, bub?” Logan challenged the Captain. What a bossypants—just like she says. “And I’ll stay in my own tent, thank you very much.”

“James,” Zaara admonished him gently, a half-smile upon her friends. “Thank you for coming. You’re the best.”

“Anytime, kid,” Logan patted her head in a funny way and rose from her bed. It felt unusual for him to care this much. It had been a long, long time since he last let himself care about anyone. This girl, this Zaara, suddenly felt like family. He addressed his words to Rogers, letting his frown speak for itself. “You be gentle with her, hear? She ain’t done healing yet. Got a lot to get over. Nightmares and things.”

“Nightmares. I know all about those,” Bucky Barnes entered the room and stood behind Steve as Logan walked out.

“Bucky,” Zaara welcomed him. “So good to see you.”

“How’d you sleep?” the future Winter Soldier queried, smoothly taking Logan’s place on the side of her bed while Steve stood awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Not well,” Logan answered for her on his way out the door. “Let her be, fellas. Girl needs a lot more rest—the kind without the nightmares.”

“Maybe they can give you something for that?” Bucky suggested tenderly. He himself needed help sleeping every now and then. It had been this way ever since he got tortured by that rat Zola. One of the doctors on base would give him a mild sedative occasionally and it helped—a little.

“No,” she shook her head. It was about the only part of her that didn’t ache. “Can’t. Might hurt the
“Oh,” he replied, not knowing what else to say.

“Thanks, though,” she added. “Hey, I think he’s actually moving right now. Ever felt a bun in the oven?”

“Will it burn my fingers?” he asked, amused and a slight bit nervous.

“Nah,” she laughed. “Go ahead—if you like.” She nodded her head toward her abdomen and Bucky glided his hand there, right over the sheet.

“Is that it?” he asked, laughing nervously. “Those little . . . flutters?”

“Yep. Flutters,” she laughed. “They just started this morning. It’s OK. You won’t hurt me. I know it’s weird. I just wanted to see you smile.”

Bucky’s grin broadened and Steve’s heart ached with envy.

“Aw, now that’s somethin’,” Bucky mused in wonder, his fingers following the flutters as they shifted across her waist. “It ain’t weird. Not at all. It feels . . . amazing.” He felt such affection for her, this Zaara. It’s like I used to know her, like I’ve seen her before. She seemed so sweet and, for a woman who was still essentially a stranger, something about her felt so familiar. Girl’s got a bit of a hero inside her, too. Although she was strictly off-limits, he sensed that his flirting was most welcome to her. He enjoyed the lightness between them, and he suspected she did, as well.

“Hold my hand, Bucky Barnes,” Zaara insisted. They stayed like that for some time, Zaara staring at him, happiness and trust beaming through dry, tired eyes. Since she could not wipe them on her own, she blinked several times. “You make me feel better. I’m sorry. I didn’t sleep well. Nightmares, you know.”

“I know,” he admitted. “All too well. Wish there was something we could do.”

“Just stick with me,” she shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe you can’t stop them from coming, but you
“...can make me feel better afterwards.”

“And I can take you on romantic dates to the mess hall,” he added, cocking an eyebrow.

“Hey, anywhere outside of this hospital room is a real paradise,” she smirked. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Coming by, holding my hand, not asking about my marriage,” she said pointedly. “You’re one of a kind, Bucky Barnes. Those nurses better watch out.”

Steve cringed with guilt.

Bucky laughed. “You going to introduce me to one of them? ’Cause I got my eye on that redhead . . .”

“Hmmm . . . not a bad choice. She’s nice,” Zaara admitted. “Though I’m a bit selfish. I kind of like keeping you to myself.”

It felt good to flirt with Bucky again. It brought her back to a time before all of this had happened, back to her old life—before she ever encountered the Juggernaut, or married Steve Rogers only to make him forget her. Back to the days when the Winter Soldier was her friend and Captain America was just a big, quiet guy who issued commands on missions and mostly left her alone. Zaara’s life had been simpler then. The single mother and class five mutant had enough on her plate with her responsibilities at the school and the X-men, though she would occasionally indulge in flirting with the Winter Soldier. He had been terribly handsome and roguish then with his long hair and sharp wit. She'd had great fun with him, often at Steve’s expense. But nothing ever came of it, for she always warned him off, telling him that class 5 mutants shouldn’t date. Anyone.

Indeed, she felt tempted to return to that life now. It would be so much simpler. At least she would not have nightmares about Sabretooth. And she would be with Ellie again. Sure, she would not have her Steve back—he’d be the aloof Captain America she had originally known, but she didn’t have her Steve at the moment anyways and the tiniest bit of doubt had begun to grow inside her, a doubt that falling in love with him had been the right thing to do. She glanced up at him where he stood awkwardly in his formal uniform and sincerely wondered whether he might be better off without her. In her grief and despair, Zaara told herself this man was not her Steve—not in this time, not in this place. It was as if that man had vanished completely to become Captain America. She didn’t want...
Captain America; she wanted Steve, the artist from Brooklyn. He was the man she loved.

Steve stood there now, still looking at her, not knowing what to say.

Bucky stared at him, amused. “Cat got your tongue, Steve?”

He swallowed nervously. “Zaara,” he managed to croak. “How are you?”

Zaara stared at him before turning to Bucky and raising her eyebrows. “I’m fine. How are you?”

Steve reddened.

“I’m sorry—that was mean. I’m hanging in there.” She turned her indigo eyes back at him and they looked so sad. She tightened her grip on Bucky’s hand. “Can’t take any painkillers, though. They could hurt the baby.”

“I’m . . . I’m sorry about what happened to you.” Steve’s heart suddenly took over and did the talking. “I’m sorry I got angry and . . . and that I didn’t realize you got hurt on the inside, not just the outside.”

Zaara stared at the floor and tried not to cry.

“The doctor says you’ll be able to use your arms again. No permanent damage,” he said gently, knowing it would be only a cold comfort.

“There’ll be scars,” she pursed her lips tightly so they would not tremble.

“That don’t matter,” Bucky shook his head, draping his arms gently over her shoulders and holding her the way she wished Steve would. “You’re still beautiful. Ain’t no scars gonna change that.”

“Oh, shut up, Sergeant Pretty Boy,” she laughed lightly. Leave it to Bucky Barnes to make her smile again.
“Hey,” he drawled. “Only Howlett gets to call me that.”

“No,” Zaara disagreed. “He gave me permission. And I gave him permission to call him Captain Bossypants.” She canted her head in Steve’s direction.

Steve, who had been feeling terrible inside, suddenly felt a little bit lighter. He rubbed his chin. “Bossypants, eh? I kinda like the sound of that. Been called a lot worse.”

“It’s Captain Bossypants,” Zaara corrected him, and it brought another smile to her face. She wondered if some unconscious part of him heard an echo of the nickname she had given him back in Brooklyn, two years earlier. She yawned.

“Need more sleep, sweetheart?” Bucky asked softly.

“Guess so. I’m real tired. It’s just . . .” she faltered.

“Nightmares, huh?” Bucky sounded so sympathetic, but he stared at Steve pointedly.

“Would you stay with me?” she all but begged. “If you have time, that is. Wake me up if it gets bad?”

“And how,” he grinned. “The Colonel’s waiting to see you so I got nothing to do until my next mission—which is your mission, by the way. Hey, is it alright if Steve takes the shift after mine?” He asked so tenderly she could never admonish him for it.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Does he want to?”

Steve tightened his lips, absolutely convinced he would bungle any words. He nodded enthusiastically. Gratefully.

“It’s settled then,” Bucky said. “I’ll take the first shift. Steve’ll come back in a while. You rest.”
“Don’t forget about the waking up part,” Zaara reminded him earnestly. “I can’t keep re-living what happened. It was . . . awful.”

“No worries,” Bucky took her face in her hands and leaned in close so she would get the message. “You stopped a monster. You deserve rest. Trust us. You’ll get some. We’ll be here to hold you when you wake up—if you need us.”

“Yeah,” Steve added, coming closer. “You won’t be alone. Not for one minute. I promise.”

Zaara closed her eyes since they were filling with tears. “Thank you.”

Steve nodded, afraid of saying something stupid again, and left.

Zaara made herself as comfortable as she could, her cheek nestling on the powerful bicep of Bucky Barnes.

“That’s it. Settle down. It’ll come,” the future Winter Soldier urged her sweetly, watching her lids grow heavy and droop down.

Zaara slept.

~

Ten and a half hours later, she woke. It was late in the morning and she did not sense anyone by her side. Half a moment passed until she recognized that blank spot that belonged to her one and only.

Steve.
Captain America had fallen asleep in the chair next to her bed and was snoring vigorously, his head tilted at an awkward angle, his cheek resting upon his own shoulder. Zaara slowly blinked her eyes open and smiled to see him there like that. Just like my Steve. Something about being in the midst of sleep—perhaps the vulnerability of it, his face an expression of peace and blissful relaxation—recalled the Steve he had been to her in the past.

She grinned and flinched, anticipating the crick in his neck from sleeping at that angle. Not even a supersoldier could avoid it. “Hey, Captain Bossypants,” she called softly, hating to wake him.

Steve fumbled, then shook himself up in his chair. “Wha-?”

“Good morning,” she smiled.

“You OK?” he asked as the realization of where he was slowly dawned on him. His senses kicked in and he remembered he needed to check on her, wake her if she had a nightmare.

“I slept well. I don’t think I dreamt a thing,” she smiled. “It was great.”

“Good, good,” he nodded happily. “Mission accomplished.”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Hey, why don’t you call in the nurse? I can have breakfast and you can go get some real sleep without cricking your neck the whole time.”

“Alright,” he nodded and rubbed at the sore spot, secretly relieved not to face her fully. He still felt deeply guilty for yelling at her. Zaara had been wounded terribly—inside and out. She needed time to heal and she still had a mission to complete. He was glad to stand guard over her during her sleep, grateful she had gotten rest, and though he did not want to leave her, he needed some rest, too, for he had barely slept a wink all night.

How she wished, not for the last time, she was able to read him. Steve had been through a lot. It was obvious that he had suffered right along with her, experienced pain when he saw her in pain, as if he knew that he loved her—and their baby. What else would have made him so angry? He could not understand his own feelings. It must be terribly confusing for him. Suddenly, her apologies seemed hollow, her words totally inadequate.

She owed him.
She remembered fondly how it had been between them before he ever had the serum--when he was that slender, gentle young man who treated her with such tenderness. They had meant the world to each other. The idea of falling for another woman the way this Steve had fallen for Peggy Carter was unthinkable. Yet, this Steve really did love Peggy, believed she was the right partner for him. And it isn’t far from the truth. Zaara could find nothing wrong with Peggy Carter. She was flawless--a fantastic and courageous person, probably a better partner for Steve than she could ever be. Her heart cringed and she found herself wishing things would go back to the way they were before all of this time travel.

Suddenly, she felt those little flutters inside her again.

She shook her head and vowed to stop thinking about herself.

Steve had suffered enough.
Chapter Summary

At long last . . .

Chapter Notes

So it looks like I’ve managed to depress everybody with the last couple of chapters and for that, I am very sorry! I guess it’s easier for me to write it than for you to read it since I already know where it’s all going.

More thanks than I can say for sticking with me through it. I know it’s been rough, but the violence and nightmares are mostly over. And, make-up sex really is the best ;-) And if that isn’t enough, I’ll do a double post next week, but if I don’t get it out before turkey day, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving!

OK, get ready for some smut (which just happens to serves a purpose in the plot). Enjoy!

When Steve finally left, Zaara decided to track him telepathically as he walked across the base. Though she could not read his mind, she felt compelled to watch over him as he had watched over her. God knows he deserves to rest. Feeling well-rested enough to close her eyes and concentrate, she sorted through a haze of minds to zone in on his precise energy signature, his thoughts still a blank to her. She sighed and gave a smile.

She had it.

He had gone to sleep.

Before he left her side, Zaara had ordered him straight to bed knowing he had been awake for nearly 72 hours. That’s way too long—even for a supersoldier, she thought to herself. Steve had looked down at his feet and obeyed, his feelings a mixed bag of relief, residual anger, and warmth. Where the hell did that come from? he wondered. But he felt far too tired to worry about it. He found his cot and let nature do the rest. His body did not move for ten entire hours. Even Bucky had come and gone from their tent, unnoticed.
Steve was down for the count.

For a long while, he did not dream. But gradually, an image emerged from the void.

~

I’m in a room—a huge, warm room. Everything’s white. I can’t see where it begins or ends. There’s no door. How did I get here? This can’t be on base. I’ve never been here before. There’s a huge bed up against a wall, the only wall I can make out. There’s no windows, no nothing. It’s white all over—the sheets, the wall, the carpet. Everything.

The rug fibers stick between my toes. They tickle a little but they’re warm, reassuring—like a massage. My feet are bare, I’m not wearing any shoes. Funny, I’m not wearing any clothes either. But it feels warm here. Private. No one’s around so I don’t mind. This is such a strange place, but I feel like myself. I don’t have to be anything to anyone here. For once, it feels like I can relax.

“Steve.”

Warmth spills into my chest. I’m melting. I know that voice. It calls my name again. It’s Zaara. She’s here. She’s sitting on the bed though I didn’t see her before. Her legs are folded beneath her. She’s got her arms wrapped around her body. She’s not wearing any clothes, either. I wish I could draw her like this but I want to do a lot more than that. She’s trying not to smile at me. I can tell.

“Zaara,” I growl. I feel a bit angry but I’m still relaxed. I move my hands to cover myself. I don’t want her to see me, even though I’m not embarrassed. Doesn’t make sense, but I want answers. “What is this?”

“A dream,” she answers and blinks her eyes slowly. Sexy. She drops her arms and lets me see her now. I can hardly breathe. I drink in the sight of her—full, luscious breasts sway with each breath, pale pink nipples make me ache inside. My mouth waters and I swallow. She covers her bottom modestly, her gorgeous legs crossed, her arms hang casually next to her hips. I bite my lip.
God, what is happening here?

“You can always wake up.” She lets herself smile a little. “You don’t have to stay.”

I feel torn. I don’t want this. Do I? My body does. This is so strange. I’ve never had a dream like this before. I’ve never been in a place like this. It’s not normal. And Zaara doesn’t look pregnant—not really. Her arms are healed. No scars, no bandages; they’re gone. Disappeared. This can’t really be Zaara. Maybe it is only a dream. I know how much I want her. Still, she has powers. She could be doing this.

“What the hell is this?” I murmur. It’s so hard to think in this place. All I want is to feel.

“I told you. A dream,” she says. Her smile fades a little. “I’m sorry. You don’t like it. We can end it now if you wish.”

I frown. I don’t want it to end. I want to see what happens next.

“No.” My voice drops even deeper though I don’t know why and I take a step closer. I’m too damn honest for my own good. “No, I don’t think I want this to end.”

I climb onto the bed beside her, still covering myself with my hands. I don’t want her to see me.

Her smile grows and her breath hitches. Her hands find my shoulders and she clutches me, soft and greedy, before she opens her mouth and brushes it over mine. My tongue tastes hers and it feels like heaven.

I gasp.

“Are we really gonna do this?” I have to ask because I’m completely hard now. I’m in a trance, drunk with her scent.

She laughs softly. “Only if you want to. It’s your dream, not mine. You’re in charge.”
I stop. I feel angry again. I brush her hands off me and grasp her shoulders roughly, not caring if she sees all of my body now. I get stern with her. “Are you doing this? Is this a dream? Tell me the truth.”

She looks me straight in the eye, like a challenge. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

I press my lips together and think about it. I don’t care. I want this. I need it. Badly.

“No.”

“Well, then.” She blushes and lowers her eyes, letting them linger on my chest. Sweat glistens there. “A little less talking, please.”

We kiss.

~

Zaara flung herself into the kiss. It felt deliciously wicked and wild. The dream was not a deception; not exactly. She transported Steve’s consciousness to the astral plane when he fell asleep—the psionic realm of telepaths and dreamers. But she carved out a space where they could be alone and uninterrupted. It was all she could do after the pain she caused. His terror and confusion had been her fault and she longed to heal him, to be with him in the way he desired even though his waking mind would not accept it. What she was doing was strictly out of bounds, but she no longer cared. She justified it to herself since everything from his memory loss to their painful separation seemed so unfair.

The astral plane was a realm beyond the body. As is the way of all dreamers, the portal of sleep sundered his consciousness from his own physicality, the very source of his mental shield, and so Zaara was finally able to enter Steve’s mind. Now, she could know his confusion, his doubt and desire for her. Now she knew the terror he felt when he came so close to losing her—and their son.
Their mind’s bodies intertwined in this psychic domain of dreams which plays with perception and alters the experience of reality. Though she could not read his waking mind, in sleep she could summon his energy to meet hers. Visiting the astral plane came second nature to her, as it does to all telepaths. Steve would, in all likelihood, be confused by what happened when he woke, though she did not care. Her compulsion to be with him overshadowed everything else.

She knew he would not experience this as a run of the mill dream; Steve was far too smart for that. But after her time in the hospital and everything that had happened, after the moment he touched her belly and felt something—what was it?—for their baby, Zaara yearned to connect with him, body and soul.

She thrust her hands upon his chest enthusiastically and felt his smooth skin sheathing rock hard muscle beneath. Though she absolutely adored Steve’s original body she found, to her shock, she desired his new body very much. It felt naughty and forbidden, somehow, though Steve was still the same man inside—she could tell that here on the astral plane. He could hide nothing from her in this place. He was still himself, the sweet, humble, and courageous man she had fallen in love with, although he still did not remember her. She knew his pain and imagined, selfishly, that her love would relieve him of it for a little while.

At least he’ll be the one in charge. I may set the stage, but he writes the script. I’ll follow his lead. I’ll do whatever he wants.

So this was not her dream. And yet it was. She knew his loneliness and despair. She also knew his love for Peggy Carter; his feelings for her were sincere though they had not yet had the opportunity to grow deeper. Nor would they, if history had its way. When this mission was over, she would have to wipe his mind again and this dream, too, would be taken from him, the same way everything would be taken from him when he went into the ice. Didn’t he deserve some happiness now? So what if she was wrong? So what if she was being selfish? If Steve remembered her for who she really was, he would agree.

He deserved to have her love.
I love feeling her hands run up and down my chest, they're soft and feminine but they grasp my muscles and knead them, stroke them, build up the heat between us. Some part of me knows what we’re doing is wrong but for once, just this once, I’m going to pretend that it’s right. I need this. I really need this. I’m so tired of waiting.

I pick her up easily, plant her right in my lap. When I was weak I could never lift a woman this way. I love being strong, my body so much bigger than hers. Makes me feel drunk. I’m tickled by the soft brown curls between her thighs, I love the way they rub against me. I squeeze my eyes shut because this is all so incredible I can’t even believe it. I can feel her slickness on my skin and I’m already so hard, I’m seeking her out. Her body is all softness and muscle, especially her legs--where did that muscle come from? It’s strong but feminine and soft. She doesn’t carry herself like a soldier or spy, but she’s no weakling. I don’t care, it doesn’t matter. I just want to have her. Now.

Her body doesn’t just feel strong it feels . . . real. Too real. This is no ordinary dream but I don’t care. My body’s wanted this so badly. It only got worse after the serum. Now it’s too much, too demanding. I’m so tired of keeping my feelings in check. All my dreams about Peggy never got me this far. This can’t be real. But it feels real.

I oughtta stop.

“No,” Zaara begs. “Don’t stop. Please. Let me make you happy.”

She kisses me like she means it.

It nearly kills me.

I push Peggy from my mind and my tongue delves deep into her mouth. She’s so eager that a few pants escape her lips when I finally let her up for air. I can scent her aroma and I want to taste her but I can’t wait any longer or stop what’s going to happen. I’m so hungry for her, I kiss her like a starving man. There’s no going back now. I push her body down on the white bed and she smiles at me. I let my tongue lap at her throat and travel down the valley between her breasts, feel their amazing softness bump against my cheeks. I kiss them both but I need more so I latch onto one of her pink nipples and suck hungrily. God, it tastes so good. I need this so much. My hand cups her other breast and it’s so, so soft. I stroke her, let my thumb swipe over her nipple and my eyes take in the way it responds. It swells and reddens, makes her pant hard. I can’t believe I can do this to her, make her feel this way, but I follow my gut. She digs her fingers into my hair and moans. She sounds like she wants me as badly as I want her. Below my waist I feel her slippery wetness coat my skin and I can’t wait any longer. I lick her nipple one last time and make my way down to taste her, one of my hands cupping her breast the whole time. I drink in her sweet perfume and I remember how it tortured me the first time I scented it on that battlefield.
This can’t last. It feels too good and I’m probably going to die. I can’t think anymore. Only feel. I don’t know what I’m doing but I push her body up against the pillows and enter her, her slickness takes in my whole length and it’s so tight and hot her dampness drives me into a frenzy. I moan and pummel into her and she cries out, throbbing all around me. She’s dazed and I drink in her eyes. They’re unfocused, filled with bliss. I come quickly then, with a huge exhale, and collapse on top of her, my heaviness burying her in the sheets.

We breathe together, gasping for air, until we slow down and rest. Her fingers stroke my face over and over. They feel so tender.

My heart aches and I wish that I loved her. For real.

Do I? How could I?

Love’s the only thing missing here.

She strokes my hair now and I kiss her chest, her breasts, her hands, any part of her in reach while I recover. I shiver with aftershock and so does she but she holds me through it all. I’ve never felt this way before but my body craves it badly. I don’t think I can live without it. I need more. I want more. Zaara rubs my back where my muscles have knotted up, tense and exhausted, prickling from all the pleasure her body’s given me. I slow my breathing and think about taking her again. I feel myself harden and I touch one of her breasts and look her in the eye. My hands used to be so small. They’re much bigger now, big enough to cup her whole breast, though it’s so full. So soft. It quivers as I stroke it and she catches her breath, but I won’t let go. I kiss her nipple, run my tongue over it to let her know I mean business. I look up at her again, stare at her deliberately and suck harder, a question in my eyes.

Zaara meets my gaze and smiles like she adores me. Loves me.

“Yes,” she answers, breathless.
Decisions

Chapter Summary

Steve comes to a decision. And, so does Zaara.

Chapter Notes

Please feel free to skip this chapter if you are weary of all the angst. I totally understand.

This is where the love triangle really kicks in and, since I’m doing a double post, we get going on the second part of the mission next. You can jump ahead to that if you want—it’s in the following chapter. I won’t mind. I promise!

Steve woke feeling refreshed and elated, his body finally at peace. Even with wet sheets sticking to his skin, he reveled in contentment and stretched out his arms and legs leisurely before indulging in a great yawn. Bucky breathed slow and deep in the cot next to his, sound asleep. Steve felt grateful for it. He climbed out of bed and stripped off his boxers to indulge in a simple sponge bath. Happiness flowed through his veins and he caught himself humming under his breath, imagining Zaara’s hands on his body instead of the damp cloth he used to wipe himself clean. At the sound of his own happy voice, he glanced over at Bucky to make certain he stayed asleep. The young Sergeant breathed steadily, curled up snugly in green army blankets. Steve breathed in relief, having no desire to explain how he came to mess himself like some overexcited schoolboy.

His eyes left his friend and suddenly caught sight of the compass on his bedside table where it lay open. Peggy’s picture stared back at him with her dark, sparkling eyes and something hit him square in the heart.

Guilt.

What was I thinking? Steve shivered in sudden shame. That dream, that fantasy with Zaara, had been so, so wrong. He thought of Zaara’s baby, of the husband he knew nothing about, and cringed in the knowledge he coveted another man’s wife.
This has to stop. I love Peggy, not Zaara. Why can’t I stop thinking about her? I’m going to end up hurting Peggy. No—I won’t let that happen. I’ve got to do something.

Only a dream could offer him ecstasy without consequence, a fantasy with no basis in reality—what else could it be? When he dreamt of Zaara, it was as if she had no husband, no baby. No lashes on her arms. It could not have been real. And what kind of person would Zaara Xaviar be if she created that sort of dream anyways?

Determined to find answers, his mind returned to his days in Azzano. On the long journey back to base, he had come upon a small artisanal jewelry shop. He did not know why, but he went inside. It astonished him to see the place intact and open for business, one of only two shops left in a small Italian village during the haze of war. The ring had a tiny but elegant garnet stone setting and, when he wandered in that quiet afternoon, he noticed its dark sparkles glinting in the noonday sun. The jeweler, who was old as the hills, complimented his choice and explained the story behind the unique cut, though that did not matter to Steve as much as the knowledge that there was none other quite like it in the world. He bought the ring right there and then, kept it hidden amongst the few prized possessions he could not part with when he got stationed overseas. It lay in a locked box next to his sketchbook and precious relics from his family of origin including a humble necklace that belonged to his mother and his father’s dogtags.

He lost his mother’s wedding ring a few years back, before he made the change. It baffled him because he had been exceedingly careful with it. She wanted him to keep it and he missed it grievously.

Steve bought the garnet ring on a lark, loving its beauty and knowing it to be totally unique. The jeweler told him the stone symbolized passion and devotion, and the deep, fiery red reminded him of Peggy’s lips. Red was definitely her colour. He figured he’d never have the opportunity to find anything like it again since he was unlikely to afford a trip to Italy after the war. He planned on giving it to Peggy someday, whenever he felt brave enough to pop the question. He would rather have offered her his mother’s ring for it had meant the most to him. Ma told him she knew he’d get married someday, but since her ring disappeared, the garnet ring would have to do.

He finished dressing and left to retrieve it.
Zaara opened her eyes. She could sense the familiar blank spot of Steve’s energy signature by her door. *He must be sitting outside. I wonder how long he’s been there?* She smiled to herself. He was so damn protective. To her surprise, she felt a flutter on the side of her abdomen. *The baby.* It was still so early to feel him move and she was not used to it yet. Her smile widened but turned into a frown when she realized she still couldn’t move her arms.

“Steve?” she called before she could stop herself.

He entered the room immediately.

“Hi,” she blushed, recalling in a flash their intimacy on the astral plane.

He blushed right back at her.

“We need to talk,” he spoke sternly, ignoring the joy that overtook his heart upon seeing her awake. She looked so different here than in the dream, her body strapped onto the hospital bed, her arms concealed by bandages. But he could still feel the heat of desire coil up deep inside of him anyways. Even now, to his shame, he still wanted her. But it would make no difference.

“Wait,” she protested, unsettled by the ominous tone in his voice. “Could you at least tell me what’s happening with my arms? Are they healing? When will they unstrap me?”

“You arms will be fine,” he said, not unkindly. “The nurse gave me permission to undo the buckles when you wake up. It’s just a precaution so you won’t reinjure yourself when you sleep.”

“Oh,” she blinked in relief. “Alright, then. Would you?”

He spent the next few minutes unstrapping her and propping her up as gently as he could, arranging a supportive cushion with her pillows. Zaara sighed in relief. It was good to sit up even if her arms still felt like hell for they burned and ached and itched. Not for the first time, she found herself wishing she could imitate Logan’s gift. If only she could channel her energy and heal herself, but her healing powers were notoriously fickle, especially when applied to her own body.

Virtually no mutant apart from Zaara could heal others. At most, they could only self-heal. Zaara’s
healing gift was nothing like Logan’s. Sure, she had managed to stop Steve’s asthma attacks when he was still a garden variety human, and thank goodness for that. She also suspected her powers provided him with an immunity boost during their time together. Now, in his current condition, healing Steve would be easy as pie. The tremendous energy of his cells stoked a fire just waiting to be lit. She’d only need to provide the spark. But her own body was a different story. It would be a gamble to try to heal herself now, not to mention a serious energy drain, even after the power boost of pregnancy. It was only a human body, after all. She dared not risk it, not when she still had to face Sebastian Shaw.

*If only I could heal from my nightmares,* she mused. *That’d be a worth a try.*

“No scratching,” Steve admonished absently when he saw her fingers reach for her opposite wrist.

Zaara rolled her eyes and sighed. Of course she would not be allowed to scratch, no matter how badly it itched.

Steve cleared his throat and struggled to begin.

“No nightmares this time. I had a good rest,” she continued to stall. She knew whatever he had to say could not be good. “You’re so lucky you didn’t have to read that monster’s mind. I’ve never seen anything like it. Sometimes I really hate my job.”

Steve seemed saddened. “Must have been pretty awful.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she confessed. “You were right—as usual. I went in light. I should’ve asked for help. But if you could read his mind, you’d want to do something right away, too. Sabretooth hurt all kinds of people—even women and children. I’ve never read a mind more violent or deranged. I knew I could stop it. So I did.”

“And nearly died doing it,” he countered bitterly. He had forgiven her, but he was still not over it. He would never be over it.

“Yes,” she admitted, sadly. “But I’m not sorry for stopping him. Mostly, I’m sorry about hurting you.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat and continued, undaunted. “That’s the confusing part,” he
admitted. “You wouldn’t be able to . . . to create dreams with that telepathy of yours, would you?”

Zaara nodded reluctantly, shame overcoming her.

“Uh huh,” Steve averted his gaze and said no more. There was no need to push it. *It takes two to tango,* he thought dryly. Real or fabricated, the dream ought to remain only a dream and he would not allow it any power over his waking life. He chose to leave her participation in it a mystery, more or less, since he felt shame enough for the both of them. If she had given him the dream, she had also given him the opportunity to stop it. Which he didn’t. “So my next question, if you don’t mind, is where’s your husband? Or do you even have a husband?”

She kept her eyes cast upon the floor. “Yes, I do have a husband. He’s a soldier in the US army. He’s fighting in the war. I love him very much. And yes, I can make dreams. But you have a mental shield and I can’t get inside your head.”

She knew it was weak, this denial of hers, a flimsy diversion to throw him off track. She could not let him know they were married. Once upon a time long ago, she promised never to lie to him and she would try her best not to do so now. She didn’t need to read his mind to realize he felt tremendous guilt over what happened between them on the astral plane. Of course he did. He was Steve Rogers; he always wanted to do the right thing. And right now, because of that dream, he must feel like he betrayed Peggy Carter. Zaara winced. *Oh, God. I thought I was making him feel better and I only made him feel worse. How could I be so selfish?*

Steve frowned to see her so unhappy. He was not sure what to do next but he found himself asking another question. “Where’s your ring?” he said suddenly, not knowing why.

Slowly, her arm cringing in pain, Zaara brought her hand up to her chest for she could hardly manage to bend her elbow. She clasped the locket containing Ellie’s picture with their wedding rings in her fist, shielding them from his probing eyes. “On my necklace. I promised myself not to put it back on until we’re together again.”

“Oh,” he breathed, not knowing what else to say. Her words hit him right in the gut. *She seems so sad, she must really love him. Of course she loves him—the way I love Peggy. Maybe she didn’t give me that dream after all. Maybe it was all me. I knew I had feelings for her when I first saw her on that Hydra base, but I wouldn’t admit it. What the hell is wrong with me?* “You know,” he pressed on awkwardly, determined to do the right thing no matter how badly it hurt. “Me and Peggy Carter . . .”

“I know,” she interrupted, as if she couldn’t bear to hear it. “I know about Agent Carter.”
“She’s my girl,” he continued, blushing even deeper.

To claim Peggy publicly like that, even if only in a hospital room, gave him a rush of feeling. Suddenly, everything that had happened made him realize how much he really did love Peggy. Finally, he could envision a future for them together. A sexy fantasy was nothing compared to his devotion to his girl and he had carried that torch more than two years now. Peggy was the best woman he’d ever met; how he longed to love her fully, body and soul. Zaara was essentially a stranger to him: married, pregnant. Off-limits.

Confidence surged through his veins. “I’m going to ask her to marry me. I’ve waited long enough. It’s time.”

Zaara wilted, his words taking her breath away. Numbly, she accepted it because the man speaking these words could not be the man she loved, could not be her Steve. He would never hurt her like this. After a long moment, she swallowed her sadness and forced out the words. “Peggy loves you very much. I think she’s a good match for you.”

Steve nodded. “I hope you see your husband soon. He’ll be excited you’re having a boy.”

“Yes,” she agreed sadly, tucking the necklace back beneath her hospital gown and away from his sharp, piercing gaze. He always seemed to be watching her. She moved her hand down to her stomach, the little flutters poking up from beneath her skin, and thought of the young, slender, passionate man she had fallen in love with.

Her Steve.

~

After he left, the emptiness overtook her. It started low, in the pit of her stomach, and fanned out over her chest until her entire body became a big ball of grief. She lay alone in the silent hospital room
devoid of light and life, her healing chamber a prison, its blandness a dull mockery of the love they once shared, her arms strapped down yet again.

Zaara knew he felt guilty. Of course he would. Steve Rogers was damn near perfect and sharp as a whip. He’d known he’d coveted another man’s wife (though of course he did not realize it had been his own wife). His heart was set on Peggy. He called her his girl.

And Zaara was in the way.

Is this how it’s supposed to happen? Did Steve ever propose to Peggy? What if I hadn’t brought him to the astral plane? Peggy’s his girl, but a marriage proposal? Hell, that’s a big deal in 2016, never mind 1944. I may have just changed history.

But what felt even worse, what shook her deep down in her bones, was the thought that Peggy Carter really was the right woman for him. The idea became a feeling, and the feeling, a belief. It was a potent brew, a spell to cloud the truth about her own marriage—the one real choice she had ever been given over her destiny. Doubt consumed her; doubt that she made the right choice to marry Steve, doubt that she ever deserved to love him and have his love in return. The thought of him proposing to Peggy Carter was a woeful confirmation of her own fitful hold on life. Things always happened to Zaara. Rare was the time when she was allowed a say in her own fate and, at this moment, it seemed whenever she did get to choose, she chose poorly.

They seem perfect for each other—the soldier and the spy. She’s brilliant and brave, a real class act. She belongs with him. I’m nowhere near Peggy Carter’s level. She’s done more for the world than I ever could. She’s a hero. She founded Shield. She wasn’t born with unstable cosmic powers, never made a baby with a man she’d never even met. Hell, I never even finished basic training with the X-men. I screwed up half this mission, got my arms torn apart, scared the shit out of Steve, and set us back weeks. Who am I kidding? I’m just a poor substitute. Peggy is his true love.

Suddenly, she longed fervently, desperately, for Steve—her Steve, the artist from Brooklyn—not this Captain America. She yearned for his tenderness, his compassion, all the love that should be hers now. If only I deserved it. How she clung to the image of that slender, wispy man, his wiry hands upon her body, his eyes gazing at hers with such love, such tenderness, his lips tracing over her own. She remembered the way he looked at her the first time she saw him in that dark little kitchen, the light in his eyes brighter than anything in the room. She remembered how he faced down the Juggernaut with nothing but a sense of determination to protect her. And she remembered how he trembled with fear just to say hello. She closed her eyes and prayed that love would see her through it all.

It was not enough.
Exhaustion overtook her and the darkness came. She tossed and turned in her sleep, seeing the faces of all those monsters she thought she had banished from the world. The Juggernaut. Sabretooth. Her breaths came faster and faster, her pulse raced, and her body convulsed against the straps that held her fast. The pressure tore open the scabs of three long stitches and a few tiny droplets of blood trickled out. With a shriek, she forced open her eyes.

The flutters deep in her belly interrupted her thoughts, reminded her she was going to be a mother for the second time. She had done it before, with Ellie—all on her own. And she could do it again. Zaara gritted her teeth. She had had enough. How she hated those villains who had taken her life and made her suffer. She would not let them stop her now. She knew what was most important.

Poor little baby boy. You’re last on everyone’s list. I promise I will put you first from now on. I’m going to be the best mama I can and nothing’s gonna stop me. You’re mine, you belong to me, and I will love you and protect you and put you and your sister first. I’m going to finish this job and get the hell out of here and not worry about Captain America or Peggy Carter or nightmares from hell. I can handle it. I can handle anything. You and Ellie are the only ones that matter.
Teamwork

Chapter Summary

Time to get down to business--we still have a mission to complete.

A grouchy Colonel Phillips finally meets Zaara.

And, Steve may have made up his mind to propose to Peggy--but he still can't forget Zaara. What's a lonely supersoldier to do? Hit the showers, that's what!

Chapter Notes

Definitely don’t skip this chapter ;-) 

I hope this one is a little bit more fun for everyone.

Happy reading!

Colonel Phillips was a very busy man.

Over the past week, he managed to coordinate four separate missions with the Alamo Scouts, the Canadian Black Watch, and the Soviet Night Witches, not to mention his own Howling Commandos. Now he had another mission to grapple with, one whose purpose remained a mystery.

Colonel Phillips had no time for mysteries.

Begrudgingly, he listened to Agent Carter ramble off a report of a top secret rescue to be led by some strange, magical person and found himself riddled with impatience. Somehow, he managed to schedule time in his calendar to meet with her later that afternoon only to be told she had fallen asleep. Overwhelmed by paperwork and determined not to allow anything else onto his plate, he refused to re-schedule. But it was not to be.

The woman had been the victim of an attack by one of the Black Watch privates. Even Phillips had
shuddered when he watched the enormous, hairy scoundrel named Victor Creed escorted off his base. Somehow, Steve Rogers got involved in the fray and Phillips was under pressure from Senator Brandt and various other high-ups (including those troublesome Canadians) to conceal what happened. No one was to know about the bloody mayhem that ensued and, in addition, no one was to know Captain America nearly killed a Canadian war hero in a vicious, brutal fight. Indeed, the medical records noted that Rogers actually managed to break the monster’s neck. Creed apparently recovered, though no one knew precisely how. Phillips had never heard of such a thing and neither had medical. When they carted the beast away, Creed had spat at them, threatening them with fingernails that looked all too much like claws. It almost seemed as if he was not quite human. Phillips would never forget the vicious, feral look in his eyes. He had no doubt that, given the opportunity, the monster in his wild rage would have killed them all with his bare hands.

Phillips sincerely hoped he had heard the last of it, but he still had three potential court martial hearings to avoid. Medics reported the physical brutality of Rogers’ attack bone by bone, but the bloody body of the woman in the OR more than justified what had been done. Creed walked away alive and seemingly healthy. He healed. No one died. Phillips should be able to lay it all to rest, as long as he watched his step. What came next was an intricate dance that had him earnestly maneuvering around various officers and administrators to try and keep things under wraps, praying he did not step on anyone’s toes. And it all took far too much time.

Colonel Phillips was a very busy man.

It vexed him to have to meet the girl it happened to at all. She was a civilian—and most likely deserved the blame. What the hell was she even doing on my base? Agent Carter had been adamant that they should meet. He finally agreed to it and it vexed him even more that he had to re-schedule the meeting since she had apparently fallen asleep in her hospital room. Carter assured him she should be up and moving in another day or so and that she would come to him. He accepted it with the same bitterness he nursed for the mess she had caused. He had a few things to say to her himself. So, when Zaara was finally up out of bed a full week after the incident with Creed, Phillips was indeed quite busy and really had no time for her.

The levitating furniture in his office, however, told him otherwise.

“I’m sorry about this, Colonel Phillips. I can see how busy you are and all the work you have to do,” Zaara began. She wore regulation men's army pants with a white tank top, her arms bare to circulate oxygen over her skin though lightly layered with fresh gauze to protect from infections. The effect appeared quite strange and she felt a little bit like an army bride of Frankenstein, translucent fabric shrouding her from shoulder to wrist on each arm. At least, that was what Bucky had called her in an attempt to lift her spirits.

Peggy Carter chewed her lip nervously. Was this really necessary?
Yes, it was, Zaara replied telepathically. We don’t have time. I need to persuade him right away.

“I’m going to cut to the chase,” Zaara said out loud. “I am a mutant. I have the powers of telepathy and telekinesis. In other words, I can read minds and move things with my mind. And I attacked Victor Creed. He is a mutant with an extreme healing factor. He is also a psychopath and a murderer. We are human beings with one small genetic difference—that’s where our powers come from. Despite the inconvenience it has caused you and your base, Victor Creed is no longer able to harm innocents and those who cannot defend themselves. That was the first part of my mission. I have come to you for assistance with the second part.”

Phillips glanced a wary eye at each individual item of furniture where it hovered in the air. His desk, his chairs, a floor lamp, and a wastebasket floated elegantly over his head, not a single paper or pen out of place. Though he felt fear and shock, to his credit, he did not show it. Steve, standing by the entrance to his office behind Peggy Carter, suppressed a smile as Phillips took a careful and deliberate hold of his desk chair and glared sharply at Zaara. He pulled it down to the ground, pressed firmly upon it, and took a seat. He then proceeded with their meeting as if his entire office was not levitating.

“Miss Xaviar,” Phillips frowned. “I’d say it was nice to meet you, but it isn’t.”

Zaara blinked in surprise. Phillips was one tough old dog.

“What I’d like to know, among many things, is why your mission warrants my attention. I’ve got a war to win.” Phillips crossed his legs, side-eyeing his desk and the other items still hovering in the air.

Zaara smiled softly. “Good question. And I don’t have an answer, other than I have my orders. The boy we need to rescue will grow into one of the most powerful mutants on earth. He can control metal and is destined to become an enemy of the US Army. Right now, we have a chance to... set a good example for him. Show him that things are not always black and white. That there are people he can trust, people who are willing to do the right thing. People like Captain Rogers.”

Zaara brought the rest of the furniture gently down to the floor.

Phillips took several deep breaths to steady himself, but still refused to acknowledge the oddity surrounding him. “Harumph,” he groused, acting thoroughly unimpressed.
“I know Agent Carter mentioned some of my abilities. There are others like me, though they can’t do what I do. Corporal Howlett of the Black Watch has been invited to join the Howling Commandos. He is also a mutant and a good man, loyal and trustworthy.”

“What can he do?” Phillips grunted. “Fly?”

“Heal. Like Creed. But he is nothing like Creed on the inside,” Zaara said adamantly. “He’s a fighter, but he’s a good man. He can take a bullet, lots of bullets, anywhere on his body and heal almost instantly. And he’ll fight for you.”

“What about you?” Phillips huffed. “Why should I trust you?”

“I can do a lot more than what you’ve just seen,” Zaara said modestly. “I am, in many ways, Johann Schmidt’s dream come true.”

Steve and Peggy exchanged surprised glances, unsure of this tactic.

Phillips’ eyes widened.

“Except,” Zaara raised her hand. “I’m a good person. You saw Creed’s record. I stopped him. He can never hurt innocents again. I may not have gone about it in the smartest way, but I did it. Power, control, all that junk—doesn’t really interest me. Not my thing. To tell you the truth, I used to be a ballet dancer before this mutation changed my life.”

“Mutation, huh?” Phillips prompted. “So how do we know mutants with all these powers aren’t out to rule the world just like Hydra? You could all be monsters like Creed.”

“I stopped Creed, didn’t I? Having powers doesn’t automatically make you a Nazi or a member of Hydra. Captain America’s abilities are beyond human and he uses them for good. There are very few mutants in the world right now, and I’m probably the most powerful,” Zaara admitted with some hesitation. She could tell Phillips harbored a begrudging admiration for her bravery in taking on Creed. But he also believed her an idiot for doing so alone. He’s not wrong about that. “But world domination? That’s a page out of Schmidt’s book, not mine. You saw what I did to Creed and what he did to me. If these arms don’t convince you, then nothing will. I’m here to do my duty.”
Phillips wrinkled his nose distastefully and eyed her bandages. The girl had a point about Creed. “What about the rest of the war effort? You plan on sticking around to help us?” he asked skeptically.

“I can’t,” she admitted. “That’s your job. There’s not a lot I’m allowed to change. There could be . . . consequences. I’m under strict orders from someone who knows better than both of us put together. That’s why I’m leaving you Howlett. He’s meant to play a part in this, long after I’m gone.”

“Gone? thought Steve. Where is she going? The idea hit him hard. He had not imagined her leaving them. Of course she should go. This is war. She doesn’t belong here, she’s having a baby. So why do I want her to stay?

“Who’s your commanding officer?” Phillips demanded. “Or is that secret too?”

“Good people can have secrets,” Zaara admonished. “All of us do. My boss is an American citizen and a veteran. Together, we care for the children who are born with this mutation and raise them to be good citizens. Like Howlett.”

Phillips grunted. “What was Howlett doing with Creed, anyways? I read the reports. The two were inseparable.”

“He was protecting them,” Zaara answered quietly. “If you read the reports, then you’ll know Howlett never harmed innocents. He was keeping Creed in check, just like he did this time round. He was protecting me. Admit it—you could use someone bulletproof on your team.”

Phillips gave it some thought. Howlett might prove to be an asset. Together, a supersoldier and a bulletproof mutant could certainly do some damage to Hydra. The Canucks could be annoying, but they were certainly trustworthy and had sacrificed about as much as the Americans to this war. “Fine,” he finally groused.

“Colonel,” Zaara continued. “I need to know if I can count on your help on this mission. I hope you realize that Agent Carter and I could have conducted it in secret, on our own. But she has a great deal of respect for you.”

“Does she?” Phillips cocked an eyebrow. Figures Carter would team up with this crazy dame.
Oh, shit. Sorry, Peggy! Zaara grimaced.

Peggy’s face remained inscrutable.

“It’s true,” Zaara admitted. “But if we do this by the book, you’ll have Howlett for the rest of the war. You can keep him, send him off on his own missions. You can trust him, I promise. He’s your man.” She knew Logan had a long and illustrious career serving in the Second World War, and that he had served with Steve, even if he didn’t remember it himself. She could only guess this would be the case after she was gone.

Phillips looked sour, but Zaara sensed he would be true to his word and would help her. Now it was time to prepare for the next phase.

“So how do I know you’re not mind controlling me right now?” Phillips pouted and crossed his arms.

“Well, then you’d be tap dancing,” she smirked. “And Captain America would be doing the can-can. Is that something you’d like to see, Colonel? All reasonable requests will be accommodated.”

Steve flinched.

Phillips huffed.

“Seriously, though—you saw what happened with Creed. I went in light and it backfired.” Zaara glanced down at her arms in dismay. “I want to do this part of my mission right. I don’t do mind control, not unless it’s absolutely necessary. But let me sweeten the deal,” she added as an afterthought. “I can do you a little favor in return. In fact, I can help you out right now—with that court martial.”

“How’s that?” he shot Steve a glance.

“I can wipe the memory from their minds. Lead me to the key people, and I’ll make them forget about it,” she offered, smiling.
“Forget the whole thing?” Phillips frowned.

“It’s easy to make someone forget one thing. I can get the clerks to destroy the paperwork and forget it was ever even there. And the higher-ups, too. You just say the word,” she raised her eyebrows.

“Let me think about that,” Phillips rubbed his chin, seriously tempted. “That would save a few headaches.”

“You do that, sir. I won’t proceed without your order,” Zaara reassured him. People weren’t supposed to remember her, anyways, so she could wipe them without consequence.

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Steve stood outside the Colonel’s tent with Peggy, but he stopped Zaara on her way out.

“It’s official,” he asserted, pleased and more than a little bit smug. “We’re a team now. You do anything, you do it with us. No more going it alone.”

He stood there between them, the two women he desired. Both appeared calm and unperturbed by it, but Steve’s heart pounded and his head felt clouded. Why do I always feel this way around Zaara?

“I’m sorry for what I said in there, Agent Carter,” Zaara apologized, doing her best to ignore Steve. None of this is Peggy’s fault. “I can’t seem to stop making messes. The Professor should have sent someone more qualified on this mission. But I promise I will do everything I can to make things right.”

“All’s well that ends well,” Peggy chirped, nonplussed. “The Colonel has given us what we wanted, everything will be prepared, and, with any luck, the mission will go smoothly. We’ll evaluate your performance when the time comes.”
“Just what I wanted to hear,” Zaara shook her head, trying to withhold her sarcasm. “You know, I never was the best one on missions. Look what happened with Creed. But I’ll get the job done right this time. I promise.”

“Well,” Peggy frowned, unimpressed by her apparent lack of confidence. “You needn’t worry. The team will keep you in check and give you all the back-up you need.”

“Maybe so,” Zaara sighed in resignation. “I wish there was more I could do to help. At least, I wish I could let the team remember Lehnsherr when it’s over, just to keep them safe.”

“Let them remember?” Steve gasped, incredulous.

“That’s right, Captain,” Peggy pursed her lips. “We weren’t going to tell you, but Zaara is under orders to erase this mission from all minds except my own.”

“Why’s that?” he snapped, exceedingly threatened by the idea.

“Professor’s orders,” Zaara replied, shrugging helplessly. She sighed again. “I don’t think he should have found out about that part, Agent Carter. See? There I go again. Me and my big mouth.”

“Can you remove it from his mind?” she queried, impervious to Steve’s glare.

“I told you—I can’t read him,” Zaara replied, still ignoring the Captain. “I could try, but it’ll take some time . . .”

“No,” Steve asserted brusquely. “Don’t. And I don’t understand why you couldn’t tell us the whole truth.”

“That all of you will be made to forget this mission except for me?” Peggy asked.

“I wish I knew why, but I’m not in charge of that,” Zaara answered honestly. “How much does it matter?”
“How much are you going to make me forget?” Steve asked suspiciously. “All of it? Everything? You?”

“Yes. Me,” Zaara confirmed, nodding. “That should be easy. Good night, Agent Carter.” She took the opportunity to walk away.

“Don’t take it so hard, Steve,” Peggy placed her hand upon his arm, suppressing a chuckle. She had rarely if ever seen him so perturbed over nothing and she could not for the life of her imagine why it bothered him. Maybe he’s just being a bossypants, as Zaara says. “Let it be. I believe we’re doing the right thing. If she trusted us more, she would have asked for help taking on Victor Creed. The facts were on her side then and I believe it’s the same situation now. You’re being made to forget for a good reason, once the mission is over.” She paused. “And I have to believe I’m being made to remember for the right reasons as well. It’s a matter of trust, I suppose.”

Steve became saddened. “I don’t want to forget.”

That seemed curious, but she decided not to worry about it. She had work to do. “I need to get back to intel and make the arrangements,” she announced, undeterred. “Shaw was last seen in Dusseldorf and we have data on the location that seems most likely to be his base.” Whatever problem Steve had with Zaara was none of her concern, especially since he’d be made to forget about it in another week or so.

Peggy went to work.

Steve stood alone in the shadows, not quite knowing what to do with himself. He gave up and decided to call it a day.

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On the long walk to the officers’ showers, Steve tried to shake off his frustration. He hated the idea
of forgetting Zaara. It felt profoundly wrong. *It’s not just because of that dream,* he told himself, though he worried he was mistaken. He gave a deep sigh and started to appreciate the relief of having Phillips in on this mission. There’d be no more sneaking around for they could access all the intel and any of the resources they’d need and bring on the whole team of Commandos, even if Zaara had to wipe the memory from their minds. None of it mattered, as long as he kept her safe. This time, nothing bad would happen to her. This time, he would see to it. And no one could stop him.

It had been a long day in his formal uniform, meeting after meeting with talking heads to avoid a court martial. Seeing Zaara on the mend lightened his heart considerably. Bucky had already gone to bed and Steve knew he could not expect time alone in their quarters.

He entered the wooden shower stall, peeled off his uniform, and hung it carefully over the simple spartan rack. He stood there in the nude for a while, just breathing, the gentle night air blowing soft breezes over and around his body. His mind wandered and he thought again of Zaara. Usually, this was the place where he thought about Peggy. It was his only indulgence, this private time in the shower, at least on the days he was lucky enough to get a shower. The enlisted men had to share a shower, but Steve was an officer now. He stepped over the wooden barrier and turned on the water, aware that heat was in short supply on base.

He stood still, not washing, just thinking. He let the lukewarm water pour over his body, pushed Zaara from his mind and brought his thoughts back to Peggy, the women he adored, the woman he would ask to marry. But other feelings took over, feelings that dwelled deep inside his body, not his mind. He knew Zaara’s time with him now was short. She was to erase everyone’s memories of her, including his own. To his dismay, he realized he may never see her again.

Something felt wrong.

With a deep shiver, he realized now his desire for her had not changed; in fact, the dream only intensified it. It called to him and he could not fight it. He reached down and stroked himself slowly and firmly, wishing away his feelings at the same time. Before he realized it, his hand gained speed and intensity and his whole body trembled. He thought of the dream, put himself back in the white room, on the white bed with Zaara in all of her warmth and beauty. *I ought to be ashamed of myself.* But his body had no shame and he imagined her mouth, the way her lips parted to anticipate his kiss. He felt himself thrust his tongue inside her almost violently, his hunger for her never sated. His hand moved faster, harder, and he came quickly, the lukewarm water pouring over his body and baptizing him for the hypocrite he was.

Who was he? A man about to ask Peggy Carter to marry him. A man having inappropriate feelings for another man’s wife. Dreaming of her in the shower. And in his bed.
Disgruntled, he pulled on a clean robe and headed back to the tent he shared with Bucky. He needed to clear his mind, talk it over. He needed to ask for help.
Advice

Chapter Summary

Bucky offers Steve some sage advice, but Steve just can't stop himself from plumbing the depths of his feelings for Zaara. He decides to ask her to read his mind.

“What took you so long?” Bucky grumbled, admiring the gorgeous garnet stone.

“Well, you know me,” Steve demurred. “Girls were always so terrifying. You think it’s the right thing to do?”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed. “Course it is, even if you're too dumb to know it. You’d rather duke it out with the Red Skull than ask a girl to dance. No wonder you're too scared to ask one to marry you.”

Steve blushed, but didn’t deny it.

“Never knew what you were waitin’ for,” his best friend mused. “Christmas?”

“Looks like Christmas came early this year,” Steve smiled, taking the ring back from him.

Bucky cleared his throat. “There’s only one problem.”

Guilt immediately crept into Steve’s heart. “You know.” It was not a question.

“I knew when I saw you carry her off that Hydra base,” Bucky smirked good-naturedly. “Everyone knew.”

“Everyone?” Steve wanted to die.
“Sure they did. Ain’t never seen a fella so far gone on a woman before,” Bucky shook his head ruefully. “You’re playing with fire, pal.”

“But Peggy—“

“That’s different,” Bucky pointed out. “Peggy’s the kinda gal you marry.”

Steve raised his eyebrows at the implication. “So what does that make Zaara?”

“Look,” Bucky clamped his hand on his friend’s shoulder, hoping to clear things up. “What you feel for Zaara ain’t . . . Well, she’s married. Havin’ a baby. And you don’t even know her so well.”

“You seem to get along with her just fine,” Steve felt miffed, jealous of the easygoing and flirtatious friendship Bucky shared with Zaara.

“You’re just working something out. Marrying Peggy is a great idea,” Bucky’s voice sounded encouraging. “You’ve been stuck on her for ages. But it’s good you’re talking to me first.”

“Yeah,” Steve seemed crestfallen.

“So you admit it,” Bucky grinned triumphantly.

“Admit what?”

“You got it bad for Zaara. And that’s alright, Steve. You ain’t the cheating type. And I don’t think Zaara is, either.”

“But, but . . .” Steve tried to protest.

“Ain’t no buts when it comes to marriage,” Bucky cut him off, raising an eyebrow. “You might as well know what you’ll be giving up. Once we’re back in civvies again, all kinds of dames are gonna
be throwin’ themselves at Captain America. There’ll be lots of Zaaras, and you’ll have Peggy.”

There’s only one Zaara, Steve thought to himself. His body had never responded to another woman the way it had to her. Not to any of the dancers in the USO shows, not to the girls who sought his autograph. None of them made his heart ache the way Zaara did, not Private Lorraine. Not even Peggy.

“Look,” Bucky continued. “You talk about these things, you work them through. Then you get married. Commitment is commitment—even if it’s in the middle of a war. Gosh, I ain’t no good at giving advice. Your Ma woulda had a thing or two to say about this.”

Steve nodded. Ma would definitely have an opinion about my feelings. Problem was, he had not acted on them in waking life. Aside from scenting Zaara on purpose and having one little dance with her, all he’d done was gone and had a dream, a very naughty dream, about Zaara. A harmless fantasy. Or two. Whether or not Zaara participated in the dream courtesy of her telepathy did not matter. He absolved her from it, for the choice had been his. He could have ended it, but he didn’t. Nothing like that would ever happen in real life, he told himself. Not now. Not ever. Peggy is the one I love. “Ma,” he mused out loud. “Ma would tell me to follow my heart.”

“Then do that,” Bucky nodded at the ring. It glinted darkly at them.

“Right,” Steve mused. “But Zaara can read minds, you know. Maybe she can help.”

“What, you want her to read your mind? That poor girl,” Bucky cackled. “She’s in for a real headache.”

“Shut up,” Steve shook his head. “It’s, it’s just that, I get so confused. Maybe she can help me figure it out. If I follow my heart . . . I guess I feel like I want to talk to her about it. I don’t know why.”

“Like I said,” Bucky repeated, shaking his head. “Poor girl.”

~
Zaara could have continued her recovery in the hospital room, but her legs had not been injured and it felt better to move around, so Peggy secured her a private tent. She was exceedingly grateful for it. Privacy was all she wanted now and, in the last few days, the tent had become her refuge. She had seventy-two hours left before the mission and she preferred to spend them alone.

“Knock knock,” a familiar voice penetrated through the canvas.

“Captain Rogers?” Zaara called, sensing his familiar blank space.

“Please,” he answered. “Call me Steve.”

“Steve. Come in,” she said softly, bracing herself. Calling him Captain granted her a little bit of distance from him, but now even that small defense was denied her. Zaara heaved a great sigh. Quite frankly, she was tired. Tired of this mission, tired of all the secrets she had to keep, and tired of what she had been called upon to do, not to mention the nightmares that stole away her sleep. But she still wanted her husband back and felt guilty for it. What Steve had with Peggy seemed a beautiful thing—they were perfect for each other. The secret agent and the super soldier, like two sides of the same coin. Peggy was tough, beautiful. Smart. A perfect match for him. *What am I even doing here?* she asked.

*My duty,* she answered herself. She always thought herself stupid for falling in love with the Captain. He had caught her off-guard, completely unawares. The unassuming Steve Rogers, the slender, young man so honest and sincere, so giving and protective, had blindsided her. She had no business imposing herself upon her life. He gave everything to help her, never asked for a thing in return, and all she did was put his future at risk and get pregnant with a baby he never asked for. If she had faced down Trion Juggernaut in the first place, they might not have ended up in such a mess. Steve could be free to love Peggy without all the guilt and confusion he suffered now. And Zaara could go back to the business of raising Ellie, living a private life in the safety of the X-mansion.

“Hi,” Zaara said in dismay, struggling to be polite in the midst of her inconvenient feelings.

“How are you doing?” he asked, eyeing her arms with genuine concern.

Zaara unconsciously ran her fingers over the bandages. “I’m alright. Thanks.”
They stood in awkward silence for a time. He noticed her looking him up and down, and could not
guess that she was still unused to seeing him in his new, supersoldier body. Now that they stood face
to face, she was reminded of just how tall he had become. She was relieved they were not dancing
together as they had in the mess hall, for being close to Steve had become so difficult for her. She
took a small step back, as if to reinforce the distance between them.

“You’re a mind reader, Zaara,” Steve said suddenly, forging ahead despite his embarrassment. She
really didn’t seem to want him here. “Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“No,” she replied, taken aback. These were dangerous waters. *Why can’t he just leave me alone?* “I
thought Agent Carter explained. You’re the only one I can’t read. You, and Sabretooth. You both
have mental shields.”

Steve shuddered at the sound of the monster’s name. He hated hearing it used in the same sentence
as his own, hated having anything in common with him at all. “Would you try?” he asked suddenly.
“Please?”

“You want me to read you?” Zaara asked, incredulous. *God, why is he doing this to me?*

He shrugged. “Yeah. Why not? I mean, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Though he would not admit it to himself, he wanted her to know. He wanted her to know all the
feelings she inspired in him, all the things he could not explain to himself. He wanted her to explain it
for him. Maybe it would finally free him up to propose to Peggy.

Zaara felt a pang in her chest. *Holy God, this is like being friend-zoned by my own husband.*
Suddenly it was her job to make Steve feel better, feel confident about his decision to ask Peggy to
marry him, absolve him from the time they shared together on the astral plane, absolve him from
caring for her deep down in his very cells without understanding why. How could she refuse him?
Steve had always given her everything, had gone out of his way to help her, never asking for a thing
in return. But he was asking her now.

“Alright,” she agreed, swallowing her pain. At the moment, reading Steve’s feelings was about the
last thing she wanted to do. She forced herself to place her hands on his face and, for the first time,
touching him felt like a duty and not a pleasure. *But I already promised myself. I’m over it. Nothing
matters but my babies. I can handle this. I just want my old life back.* She took her time and
concentrated. But, just as she expected, she could see nothing. She protested weakly. “You know, I
tried this once before. On the plane. It didn’t work.”
“Try harder,” he urged.

*Of course. He never gives up.* With a wince, Zaara surrendered to the pain. *What difference does it make anyways? I already know how he feels about Peggy. I don’t need to read his mind to figure that out.*

Steve’s mental shield proved to be far stronger than Sabretooth’s. Cut from the same cloth, apparently, but the monster had not had a boost from a supersoldier serum. Zaara scowled in frustration. “You want a peanut butter sandwich,” she finally said in a woozy voice.

“What?” Steve barked, taken aback. His confusion only grew.

“Just kidding. It’s no good. It’s not going to work,” she finally shook her head, resigned.

“Isn’t there any other way?” he pressed, though he did not know why. “Can’t you try harder?”

“If I wanted to kill you,” Zaara furrowed her brow. “But I don’t. Not yet, anyways.”

Steve smiled his gorgeous smile and she almost felt as if he wouldn’t mind if she did. “I thought you said you were pretty powerful.”

“I am,” she tilted her head in confusion, forcing herself to be objective, as if she was not trying to read the mind of the man she loved. “It doesn’t make a lot of sense . . . Still,” she mused to herself, blinking her eyes. “There’s something else I can try. Your chest.”

“My chest?” Steve repeated, dumbfounded.

“I could try to go in through your heart,” she admitted reluctantly, for she’d really rather not do it. *That’s all I need, to read his feelings for Peggy again. Haven’t I seen enough?* “Highly unusual, but not unheard of. The Professor mentioned it as a way to help read mutants with telepathic resistance. But I need skin contact.”
Steve shrugged. “Alright then.” He unbuttoned his shirt quite easily for he was wearing only fatigues.

Zaara’s eyes widened. She had yet to see Steve’s new body unclad and in person, and here it was before her in the light of day. Truly, it was a thing of beauty, his masculine flesh shining with rosy, vibrant skin, the firm muscles beneath it so full and healthy it almost looked as if they were about to burst out of him. Holding her breath, Zaara boldly placed her hands over his heart. She marveled at the firmness of his flesh and how different it felt from the Steve she knew and loved. But she knew she must not indulge in that reverie. She took a deep breath and concentrated.

Nothing.

Another moment passed and then something strange began to happen, something that had never happened to her before. Wisps of energy trickled forth from his body, potent and vital, not exactly his life force but a strange, magical light, and she followed it, her fingers trembling. Slowly, an image emerged as though it originated from his chest. The spirals of sparks churned and floated through the air to form a delicate and distinctive shape. Steve and Zaara gasped simultaneously when the tiny fragments finally gelled into a three-dimensional image of the original Steve Rogers, the way Zaara knew him and the way Steve had always known himself. A brilliant, luminous, and living astral sculpture lit up the tent.

“Don’t be afraid,” Zaara whispered. Steve’s new body was still there. It stood stock still even as his original body took shape through the sparkles. Shorter and slimmer, Steve’s face was rendered into the delicate, fine-boned visage Zaara had fallen in love with. Steve the soldier closed his eyes and Steve, the young, wiry man from Brooklyn, opened his.

“Steve,” Zaara breathed, losing her hold on herself. “Don’t worry. I would never hurt you.” She never imagined she’d get to see him this way again as his original self—the man she loved, the man she had married. She removed her hands from his muscular chest and placed them gently upon the face of the shorter, slimmer Steve. The image seemed almost holographic for it was not solid, but it allowed her to read him and know his confusion and his conflict, his passion for her and his devotion to Peggy, and all that had passed between them.

_The poor man. I’ve managed to confuse the hell out of him. He just wants to be free—free to ask Peggy to marry him, free to be himself. I’ve hurt him so badly. It’s all my fault. And I still love him. God, I hate myself. Look at what I’ve done. He deserves so much more than this._

“OK,” she sighed before releasing him. The younger, skinnier Steve Rogers raised his eyes to her in surprise before his figure evaporated, vanishing into thin air. She found herself overcome by a powerful sense of loss. But the tall, muscular Captain Rogers opened his eyes.
“Well?” he asked, putting on a brave face. “Was that me? That was how I used to be.”

“Yes, that was you. And I did read your mind.”

“And?” he pressed, his heart throbbing with anticipation.

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, trying to conceal the pain from her eyes. “You’re confused right now, you have a lot of feelings in there, but I can see you really do love Peggy Carter. The rest doesn’t matter. You’re a good man. I don’t think you need to worry about anything else.” She dropped her eyes to the floor, ashamed of bringing him to the astral plane. It had done more harm than good.

“That’s it?” he asked. “That was fast.”

“I, I wanted to give you some privacy,” she admitted hesitantly. “I know you’re not . . . proud of all your feelings.”

“No,” he agreed, blushing deeply as he buttoned up his shirt. “No, I’m not. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” she shook her head, not meeting his eyes. “You’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve caused all the trouble here. Let’s focus on the mission, get it done. Then I can go home. And you can live your life.”

“Alright,” he agreed, though a sudden sense of hurt cut him to the bone. Something wasn’t right. He felt dismissed. Why did I come here? I guess I wanted to know how she felt about me, after that dream. She all but admitted she created it. There must be more to it. Why did she do it?

“Steve,” she hesitated.

“Yeah?” he replied, hope inexplicably piercing his heart.

“Stop worrying about this. Please. You shouldn’t torture yourself. There’s . . . there’s no answer to what you’re feeling. There’s no mystery to solve. Let it go,” she begged softly.
Steve nodded at her silently. Reluctantly. But he could not conceal the stubborn expression on his face.

After he left her tent, he reached for the garnet ring in his pocket. He had never been good at letting go. And he felt even less certain about asking Peggy to marry him.

*But I’m gonna do it anyways.*
Proposals

Chapter Summary

Some more Colonel Phillips, the Howling Commandos, and, more Logan. Yay! We get the whole team laying out the plan. After this chapter, the mission will finally be underway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Deep down in the most secure depths of the HQ bunker, the Howling Commandos sat at their long conference table, stunned and silent, their eyes having just been opened to the existence of mutants who possess astonishing powers. They accepted the information, jaws dropped, eyes filled with wonder, their thoughts a cacophony of shock, excitement, and fear.

Jeepers! Is it really true?

And I thought I’d seen it all?

I’m about to flip my wig.

I bet Johann Schmidt would love to get his hands on her.

Boys, we’re down the rabbit hole now.

Zaara concealed her smile upon hearing their thoughts, but she also felt humbled to be in their company.
“Strategy,” Colonal Phillips interrupted their silent ruminations. “We’re not going into this without knowing what the hell we’re doing. How do we break into a Nazi fortress, fight an energy-absorbing mutant, and a mutant that controls metal all at the same time?”

“I’ve considered all our options, sir,” Peggy asserted, standing tall and assured. “When they reach the compound, the team should split in two. One group deposes Shaw, the other liberates the boy. Rendezvous and extraction upon completion of both tasks.”

“Who goes where?” Steve asked bravely.

_He believes in her_, thought Zaara, unable to keep her mind on the mission. _They work so well together, they practically finish each other’s sentences._

“Given that Shaw is . . . an absorber,” Peggy said slowly, still unused to coordinating missions with mutants and superpowered individuals, “We must keep the powered people away from him. That means the Captain, Corporal Howlett, and Miss Xaviar.”

Steve nodded, pleased. There would be no way he would allow anyone to separate him from Zaara on this mission. Indeed, he decided to appoint himself her medic for the interim, though she didn’t know it yet. He had already used his influence to get a hold of her prescriptions and their refills from the pharmacist on base. Everyone trusted Captain America, and, this time, he took full advantage of it.

Logan furrowed his brow and stared hard at Zaara, but said nothing. _Good thing they’re keeping us together, kid. ‘Cause I ain’t gonna let ‘em separate us._

Zaara gave him a discreet smile, wishing she could hug him. _Thanks, James. I know you got my back._

“Copy that, Agent Carter,” Steve chimed in, staring hard at Zaara. “No sense in putting more at risk. Shaw can only absorb what’s around him.”

“Explain, Miss Xaviar,” Phillips looked like he had a headache. “I don’t think my men quite understand.”

“An energy absorbing mutant has no inherent power on their own,” Zaara replied. “Shaw has the
ability to absorb and re-direct kinetic energy. So if Captain Rogers or Corporal Howlett were to barrel in there and give him everything they’ve got, they’d only up his strength levels. If the Commandos shot him with bullets, he’d just turn all that energy right around and destroy them.”

The room fell silent. You don’t need to be superpowered to hear a pin drop in this room, Zaara thought.

“It has been suggested to me,” she added as an afterthought, “that I could overload him.”

“Overload?” Falsworth asked sharply.

Everyone but Steve stared at her with curiosity. The Captain only gave her an angry glare. I don’t like the sound of that. I’m not letting you anywhere near Shaw.

“Well, if my energy is more than he can absorb, I might be able to knock him out with the excess force,” Zaara suggested modestly. “It could work.”

“Were those your instructions?” Peggy queried, her mind quickly calculating all the variables.

“I don’t think it was a direct order. More like a suggestion,” Zaara mused. “There has to be more than one way to deal with Shaw. Everyone has a weakness. But he’s a crafty little stinker. And cruel, to boot. He murdered the boy’s mother and is brainwashing him to believe that mutants are superior to humans.”

“And does he believe that?” Gabe asked, feeling a little sick to his stomach.

She nodded slowly. Honestly. “I’m afraid so. But our team can make a difference. Maybe the Captain’s abilities are beyond human, but I can’t think of a better example for using powers responsibly.”

Steve cast his eyes upon the ground. It was always so difficult for him to take a compliment.

“He needs a father figure,” Zaara continued. “Someone better than Shaw.”
“Too late for that,” Phillips cut in. “I won’t risk ‘overloading’ Shaw, Miss Xaviar. If he’s able to absorb telekinetic energy then you won’t be any help with him, either.”

“I could psi-blast him,” she suggested. “Knock him unconscious, put him to sleep before he could channel any of it.”

“No,” Phillips shook his head again. “Too risky. We won’t give him one ounce of your energy. Save it for my office furniture. I believe Agent Carter’s right on the money. Let the powered people get the boy and let the Howlers take down Shaw. Then we’ll figure out how to transport the boy—”

“We set the boy free,” Zaara interrupted. “ Those were my instructions.”

Phillips glared at her. “If this boy’s going to be as powerful as you say he is …”

“Then we must set him free,” Peggy jumped in, sensing she needed to stop him right there. “If we hold the boy captive, we’ll be no better than Shaw.”

“Yes. We have to let him go,” Zaara earnestly agreed. “He’s done nothing wrong—not yet. Our example will make all the difference. We’ll show him that mutants and mutates can work together for all humankind.”

“Mutates?” the Colonel huffed.

Zaara and Peggy exchanged glances, agreeing to say nothing more about it. Steve didn’t need people calling him a mutate. He had enough problems.

“And that’s it?” Phillips asked. “You release the boy and come back to base?”

“Yes, sir,” Zaara confirmed.

“What about Hydra?” Phillips pressed. “What if Schmidt gets hold of the boy? Seems like he and Shaw booked the same suite in the bug house.”
“I don’t believe that will happen, sir,” Zaara suggested. “It may be a risk, but the boy is Jewish after all, and, given that Schmidt started out as a Nazi, I believe he would see him as an enemy just as much as he does Shaw. Schmidt wouldn’t be able to hold him for very long, anyways.”

“Shaw has gone to great lengths to keep the boy a secret,” Peggy added. “Intelligence never got a whiff of Lehnsherr’s abilities. It’s doubtful that any of Shaw’s staff knows the truth. If Zaara didn’t provide his name, we’d have never located him at all. As far as anyone whether Nazi or Hydra knows, he’s just another prisoner. So, we liberate him and return to base. And then, Zaara will wipe this mission from your minds.”

They had agreed earlier it would be best to be upfront and inform the men that their minds would be wiped upon the completion of the mission. Steve knew already, so it only seemed fair. Besides, the men would be putting their lives at risk. They deserved to know.

“I’m sorry about that, boys,” Zaara apologized quietly. She took a long look around the table and met each man’s eyes—Falsworth, Dernier, Morita, Jones, and Dum Dum. She deliberately avoided looking at Bucky, Logan, and Steve. “You’re all good men and I wish I didn’t have to do it, but I have my orders. Agent Carter and I could have left that part out, but we felt you deserved to know.”

Morita frowned. “So we forget all about the mutants?”

“Yes,” Zaara replied soberly. “But Corporal Howlett will remain with you. And he will have a choice as to whether he shares his secret again because, this time around, we spilled the beans on him.”

“Damn right,” Logan pursed his lips. “You owe me one.”

Peggy nodded. “Gentlemen, I can see you’ve got some reservations.”

“Oui,” Dernier nodded emphatically.

“Miss Xaviar,” Peggy prompted.

“Alright,” Zaara sighed. “Look. In my regular job, when I’m not at war, I work at a school. I protect
children like the boy we’re going to rescue—children who have gifts. We raise them to use their powers for good and to contribute to the world. And we haven’t lost one yet. You’re all good men and I know none of you believes in child soldiers. In fact, it’s the first thing I check when I want to trust somebody. And I trust you—each one of you. You’re all good men. So I’m asking you to trust me when I say the world isn’t ready to accept mutants. And the world can’t be trusted with mutant children. Not yet.”

Peggy jumped in. “Commandos, consider this mission top secret just like any other. When you see the conditions Shaw has kept him in, what he has done to him as his prisoner—the boy will know that ordinary humans took on Shaw to set him free and reaped no rewards, risking their lives because it was the right thing to do.”

Dernier frowned, determined to use his English, no matter how broken. “You want I risk my life for this boy you say will be danger to us all?”

“Yes,” Steve answered. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Bucky frowned on behalf of his friends but his heart remained firmly on Zaara’s side. “If you don’t want to trust Miss Xaviar, boys, I understand. I get it. But she already took a hit for us, getting rid of Victor Creed. Show ‘em, honey.”

Zaara’s face went white as a sheet and her blood ran cold. It happened every time someone reminded of Sabretooth. Steve clenched his fists, knowing what it did to her.

“I’m proud of you, kid,” Bucky continued. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” He got up out of his chair and went to her. Very slowly, with the utmost care, he pulled off her jacket. Zaara felt relieved that her baggy army pants concealed her small, swollen belly. At least none of the Howlers would know she was pregnant.

There was a collective intake of breath when the men beheld her stiches. The blood had finally dried and there were only a few bandages left. The ugly marks peppered her skin from shoulder to wrist and all the way down to the fingers of her left hand.

“Sorry you have to see this, boys,” Zaara stared at the floor, hating her wounds.

“Sacre bleu,” Dernier frowned, anger boiling up inside of him.
Dum Dum’s lips curled with rage as he took in the grotesque lacerations. “When do we hunt that bastard down? Can he be next?”

“Don’t worry,” Bucky assured them. “She got into his head and stopped him. He can’t hurt innocents anymore. She took a hit. Now we gotta do something for her.”

“Bucky,” Zaara shook her head, still ashamed no matter how many times he told her he was proud of her.

Steve swallowed his pain and the protective instincts that consumed him whenever he saw Zaara suffer. It was time to step up. “Well, fellas, here’s the pitch. Help us stop Shaw, set the boy free, and you may end up helping a lot of people in the future because all he’s learning right now is to hate. We can teach him the opposite of that. Sacrifice, helping others—he hasn’t seen much of that in his life, at least not lately. Shaw’s grooming him to become a killer. We can’t capture him or brainwash him out of his hate—he needs to come to it freely. On his own. What you do now will make a difference—I believe that. Miss Xaviar used her powers to fight Creed alone and paid the price. If you help us now, help her finish her mission, we can get the job done right.”

~

“Humph. That went well,” Logan smirked. They stood together outside the bunker, two mutants alone on a base full of garden variety humans. The grounds bustled with people. Equipment and all kinds of gear were being prepped for their top secret mission. The Howlers went about their business cool and efficient, well schooled in readying themselves for danger and the unknown. Dernier checked his stash of explosives, Bucky counted his bullets, and Morita was busy cleaning and assembling the weapons. Steve stood by watching all of it, supervising. But he also watched Zaara, noting her close proximity to Howlett with more than a little bitterness.

They would fly to an outpost in Denmark tomorrow and continue on a jeep provided by underground rebel forces the following day, relying on Zaara’s telepathy to see them through any Nazi checkpoints. Stealth, some off-roading, and a very long hike would lead them to the underground caverns below the medieval castle in Dusseldorf that served as Shaw’s fortress.
“Quiet, you,” Zaara grinned at Logan. She had not had anything to smile about in the last couple of days. She wondered if Steve had proposed to Peggy yet. She knew he planned to do it before they left, but Peggy’s energy was so perfectly focused on the mission, Zaara figured it might not even make a difference to her frame of mind. Or, perhaps it simply hadn’t happened yet. She hadn’t noticed a ring on her finger.

“So, you planning on making me forget you?” the Wolverine frowned, recalling her words at the meeting.

Zaara thought about it for a minute. “No, James. Not you. You’re different.”

“Because I’m, I’m a mutant?” he asked, the word sounding so strange on his tongue.

“Yes. Partly,” she admitted. “I, well, I don’t want to touch your mind. I know my memory will be safe with you.”

“Harumph,” he snorted, skeptical. “Don’t see why that is. I ain’t as good and pure as the Captain and his Howlers.”

“Liar,” she chided him, smiling. “So, it’ll be only you. And Peggy. You’ll both remember me.”

“Great,” Logan rolled his eyes. “My favourite person. She’ll probably strangle me after you’re gone.”

“Don’t worry,” Zaara laughed. “You’ll survive it, though I’m sure she’ll give it her best shot.”

Logan chewed on his stogie thoughtfully before biting off the tip and spitting it on the ground. “Hey, I never did figure out who’s leading this mission,” he shrugged.

“Does it make a difference?” Zaara asked. “I suppose it’s got to be Steve. He outranks us all.”

“You sure it ain’t you, kid?” Logan poked her in the shoulder with the cigar. Ever since the night of the dance, he always managed to have one in his pocket, though he would never light them in her presence. He knew she how much she hated them.
“No. Not me,” she shook her head. “I’d mess it up. It’s a good thing I’m not going alone.”

“No,” he agreed. “But not for the reason you’re thinking. You ain’t so bad at this stuff, you know.”

“Didn’t I already tell you to shut up?” she grinned again.

“Sure. I’ll shut up. But I want you to know that no matter what Captain Bossypants says, I’m sticking with you. And the little guy,” he poked her in the tummy with his stogie ever so gently, before bidding her goodnight.

Thanks. Zaara closed her eyes in gratitude. It’s good to have a friend.

~

“Steven Grant Rogers, get up at once!” Peggy blushed furiously, brushing away the sweat that suddenly coated her brow. Now was not the time or the place, but Steve didn’t care. Something about his stance reminded her of that slender, awkward young recruit straggling several paces behind the pack at the base in New Jersey.

“Margaret Carter,” he intoned, undaunted. “I’m asking if you would do me the honor of being my wife.”

Love and passion and outrage shook her. How could he do this to me? And on the eve of a mission, no less? Couldn’t he have waited until after the war? What will people think? How can I continue as an Agent?

But Steve only lifted his eyes, so hopeful and sincere, and she was gone.
Peggy caught her breath. “Steve,” she said more gently. “Now is not the time. I can’t, won’t give you an answer now. We’ve got a war to win. And a mission to embark on—tomorrow.”

He nodded, heartbroken. He thought of all the exciting, romantic wartime engagements before soldiers got shipped off. People wrote songs about them, he had seen it in so many movies, heard all kinds of stories. And here they were on base, him going on mission after mission with no ring on his best girl’s finger. It was time to take his happiness into his own hands, and he had failed. Crestfallen, he remained down upon his knee.

“You still have no idea how to talk to a woman, do you?” Compassion flooded her heart and she joined him, squatting down in her skirt as elegantly as only she could, even in high heels. “I’m going to take this ring though,” she smiled without a strip of sentimentality. “And I’m going to keep it. A promise ring, then.”

She put it on the third finger of her right hand. “Do you know the tradition?”

He shook his head silently, confused but thrilled.

“You ask me to marry you again. After the war,” her smile broadened. “And I’m promising I’ll say yes.”

Steve beamed.

They kissed, soft and gentle, and his heart melted. So this is what it’s supposed to feel like. It was totally unlike the kiss he shared with Private Lorraine, and far from the smoldering heat he felt in his dream with Zaara. This kiss was real, genuine. True. It had love in it—both physical and spiritual. It had the promise of a future together.

My best girl, he thought. My only girl.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if I tortured you again. My poor readers!
I mean this, sincerely. I know it must be hard to read, but lovers need obstacles or the story will be a lot shorter.
I hope I handled the proposal decently, and that it matches the characters' personalities. If this were a Steggy fic, I'd certainly indulge in a lot more passion between them. But, this Steve is very confused by his feelings. He is desperately trying to do the right thing. And, I think Peggy is wise to make him wait.

I can put out some spoilers about when our main couple gets back together, if you like. But it really happens after the mission, which takes up the next two chapters. If you can hold out, I promise it will be worth your while.

Have a fantastic weekend ;-)
Chapter Summary

The team arrives in Dusseldorf.

Warning: some mentions of blood and stitches, as in previous chapters.

Steve checked his watch. “We have two hours before Shaw takes his coffee break, if intel has it right. We can hold up here until he’s on his way.”

“Smells safe enough,” Howlett grunted, his nostrils flaring.

The party stood still, dwarfed by the vast, hidden cavern that lay below Shaw’s compound. They took in the luminous, jagged stalactites and held their collective breath in awe. *It’s like a dragon’s cave or something*, Bucky mused to himself. Intel had discovered the route and noted its proximity to Shaw’s fortress so it seemed the perfect way to sneak in. No doubt it also served as an escape route should the medieval castle come under attack. But there was no indication the tunnel had seen any regular usage.

*It may just be the ticket*, Bucky thought.

“Affirmative,” Steve agreed. “We’ll camp here for now.”

They settled and a few of them took the opportunity to sip from their canteens. The others found spots on the ground or on top of rocks, grateful for a breather after their long march. It had already taken them the better part of a day through the forest and their sore feet appreciated the rest.

Their journey had been a quiet one, so far. No incidents on the flight to the Denmark and Zaara had seen them through three Nazi checkpoints safely, joking about her Jedi mind tricks though no one understood what she was talking about. They left the jeep hidden under cover of forest, Zaara having concealed their tracks for the many miles of off-roading. It made the men gasp to see the blades of grass smooth over and blot out the impressions of their tires upon the soft, battle weary earth as their vehicle made its way towards the far outskirts of Dusseldorf. Several of them continued to watch the
grass bury their tracks for the entirety of their journey, hypnotizing them for mile after mile. Even Steve had to admit Zaara’s skills came in handy. She would have made an invaluable member of the team, if only things were different. But after suffering intermittent motion sickness from the jeep and braving the wearying hike through the thick brush, she relished the chance to stay put a while. The lamplight glowed dimly and fostered a peaceful haven from the darkness.

Everything was quiet until Dum Dum cleared his throat. “Say, Cap. I noticed a ring on Agent Carter’s finger just before we left,” he grinned and winked. He had kept it in as long as he could. “Is there something you want to tell us?”

Steve blushed.

Zaara’s heart sank. *He did it. She’s going to marry him.* She had not read the idea in anyone else’s mind yet, so it must be a secret. She had not seen the engagement in Peggy’s mind, either, for the mission had occupied her every thought before their departure. Of course Agent Carter would never let anything like an engagement get in the way of a mission. *That’s where we differ. Peggy is a true professional. I’d never be able to keep a lid on something like that.* Zaara tried to swallow her misery, but it was all in vain.

Falsworth, too polite to gossip, asserted his authority. “It’s on her middle finger—not an engagement ring.”

“What kind of rock is it?” asked Morita, having noticed the glint of the red gem himself. “Looked fancy.”

“It’s none of your beeswax,” Bucky chided, though he was bitter that Steve had yet to share the news with him. *That’s Stevie. The mission always comes first.*

“Back home, we’d have called that a promise ring,” Gabe piped up. “Let the Captain tell us on his own time. This ain’t the place for celebrating.”

Zaara glanced at Gabe gratefully and marveled, once again, at this group of men. Such character was in short supply in the 21st century. The Howlers shared a remarkable closeness, a unique sort of intimacy she had never seen before. Perhaps it was exclusive to wartime. These men saved each other’s lives so many times it had grown to be a habit. Though the team enjoyed a good-natured ribbing, they could sense whenever something hit a little too close to home. They always seemed to know when to let it go.
But the thought of a promise ring made her wince. Zaara knew she had no right to feel resentful or jealous. In fact, she had no idea whether the promise ring had been part of Cap’s history or not. It could have been her fault. Perhaps their encounter on the astral plane had pushed him to take the big step. His guilt had been crippling him—she saw it when she read his mind. She should have known Steve would have a problem with premarital sex, especially the casual kind. But it wasn’t really premarital sex, she told herself. It was only a dream. But she knew better. Her selfishness had put him up to it and now, though Steve and Peggy were not technically engaged, a promise ring had been given and Steve’s fate altered, if only slightly.

She got up and wandered the passage a few moments, careful not to stray out of sight from the group for that would have drawn attention to her. Indeed, Steve’s eyes never left her until she found a small nook by the cavern walls. She breathed a silent word of gratitude to the stalactites since they offered her a tiny bit of privacy from the rest of the Commandos. Perhaps the men would leave her alone for a while.

To her dismay, she felt a presence coming her way. Logan. He approached as stealthily as he could, though he knew it didn’t matter; she could sense him no matter how quietly he moved. He found her little corner and hauled his considerable bulk into it so that he rested next to her. They sat in silence a long while, Zaara gripping her knees in her hands, Logan caressing a stogie he had pulled from the breast pocket of his combat jacket. She glanced his way briefly but knew he would not light it. Nevertheless, he brought it up to his lips and chewed on it contemplatively. Zaara rolled her eyes. “You always were an addict.”

“Worse things to be addicted to,” he grunted.

“Actually, no,” she corrected him. “Not really.” At least two of her distant relatives had perished from lung cancer.

“Actually, yes,” he corrected her. “For me.”

“Humph,” she snorted, slightly annoyed. Still, his presence was warm and comforting—something like a big, furry golden retriever. Logan was not exactly subtle. But he accepted her for who she was and didn’t care what mistakes she made.

They sat in silence a while until he offered her an observation. “You’re hurtin’, kid.”

“Why? Can you smell that, too?” she asked sarcastically.
“Nah,” he removed the stogie from his lips and played with it in his hands for a bit. “Just that I smell that Captain all over you. His scent’s been hovering . . . ”

A lump formed in her throat but her eyes were dry. *He asked her to marry him.*

*Agent Carter?* Logan asked. *She’s a hell of a dame.*

“Yeah,” Zaara agreed bitterly. “She is.”

“He still smells . . . like you. Or somethin’. Can’t quite figure it out,” he mused.

“Well, go figure it out somewhere away from me,” she groaned in misery.

“Look,” Logan continued, not knowing why. Something made him want to connect with her, comfort her. “You said we used to know each other. Didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” she admitted numbly. “But you don’t remember.”

“Yeah, and I can’t figure that out,” he admitted. He finally felt comfortable enough to ask. “Why don’t I remember you?”

Zaara looked him straight in the eye. “You don’t want to know. You just have to trust me.”

For a reason he could not fathom, he accepted it and shrugged. “Well then, what were we to each other?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of him. She sure was beautiful and, if they used to share something special, he’d have to pat himself on the back for having good taste.

Zaara would have smiled in amusement, but her mood was far too grim. “Friends. That’s all.”

“Mmph,” he mused gruffly. “Friends. Ain’t never had no friends. Except—“
“Not him,” Zaara interjected, unable to stop herself. Logan’s heart was one of the few things she could still feel passionate about since her feelings for him remained clear and uncomplicated. “Never him. Creed was never your friend.”

Logan glanced over at her and held her gaze with skepticism. “Why’re you always so stubborn on that?”

She turned to face him directly. “James Howlett, you are a good man, no matter what you tell yourself. That liar tried to poison your mind all those years. You have to trust yourself because deep down, under all that fur, there’s a good heart beating there.”

Logan gave her a small smile. “You seem a little obsessed with that.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I am. And you are, it feels like you are . . .” she swallowed the tears that threatened to break through, “my only friend around here.”

“I dunno. Captain Bossypants seems plenty fond of you,” Logan cocked an eyebrow.

“You heard them. He’s engaged,” she snapped bitterly.

“But your scents . . .” Logan protested gently.

“Mean nothing!” she snapped more sharply this time.

“Okay,” he mused, still trying to be a friend. He didn’t understand why he put up with her ways sometimes. “What about Sergeant Pretty Boy?”

Zaara sighed, her affection for Bucky warming her a little. “Alright. He’s my friend, too. But I can’t talk to him about this. We both want what’s best for Steve . . .” she drifted off.

“What’s best?” Logan seemed incredulous. That ain’t her, kid. It’s you. You. I can smell it all over him. And on you, too. He shook his head. He’s fighting it, isn’t he?
Zaara blinked in amazement at Logan’s incredible senses. The man had no clue about pheromones or how they worked, but he was a master at detecting them. To her astonishment, she could tell that he was actually scenting the paternity of her child. It seemed impossible, but it was what he meant by Steve’s scent hovering on her body. "Logan," Zaara blinked suddenly in fear. "He can’t know. He can’t."

“What am I smellin’?” Logan growled.

You can tell, Zaara confirmed, with amazement. You know the truth.

It’s his? Logan’s eyes widened and his gaze focused on her small belly. He whispered it this time. “It’s his.” But his eyes jerked upwards and Zaara’s followed to see Steve approaching.

Although he accepted Howlett, he did not like him being so close to Zaara. He had caught snippets of their conversation and knew they had been talking about him though he could not hear all of it. In his most innocent voice, he cleared his throat. “Hey,” he said gently. “Time for your balm.”

Zaara’s face screwed up and she renewed her efforts to fight back the tears. The last thing she needed at the moment was to have Captain America lord it over her. “Now? Really?”

“It’s, it’s a good time,” he stuttered awkwardly and shrugging. “We have a break. We don’t need to be on the move for two hours. Coast is clear."

Logan raised his eyebrows. I ain’t gettin’ between the two o’ you, sister.

“I want Corporal Howlett to put it on me.” She raised her eyes in a challenge.

“What?” Steve said softly in shock. That’s my job.

“You heard me,” she pressed her lips together, her face a contortion of feelings. It perturbed her, to say the least, when she discovered Steve had appointed himself her personal medic on this mission. She resented it, of course, but he was in command. Why can’t he just let go? She sighed. Steve had always been such a fighter. He was the most stubborn man she ever met.
Logan turned to her in surprise. “Uh, you sure about that, kid?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” After the promise ring, Zaara had had enough. She was willing to bet her own sense of stubbornness would give Captain America a run for his money.

Swallowing his hurt and pride, Steve removed a small jar from his utility belt. “Your hands clean?” he managed to choke out at Logan.

Howlett nodded. “Never took my gloves off.”

“Alright then,” Steve handed it to him. “Just be careful with those claws.” He walked away, broken. Damn these protective instincts. I’m not her boss. She’s married. Pregnant. And I just asked Peggy to marry me. Why do I feel this way?

Logan looked at her, waiting for permission.

She swallowed and raised her arms. See? I can’t bend my elbows. “I need help taking the jacket off.”

He nodded and reached to undo her buttons. Not far off, while the men enjoyed their break, Steve sat and watched them, seething with jealousy.

Zaara breathed determinedly, grateful for the distraction. She’d take physical pain over the emotional sort any day of the week. Very gently, Logan pulled the jacket off of her. She wore only an undershirt, her arms completely bare except for the last few bits of gauze. “You have to peel it off.”

“You want it fast or slow, kid?” he smirked, unable to resist teasing her.

Steve cursed his supersoldier hearing.

“They’re not sticky like a bandage,” she gave him half a smile. “It’s just plain gauze. But it can stick to some of the dried blood so go slow, I guess.”

Logan nodded. “Ain’t no medic,” he muttered more to himself than to her. He was used to being the
one that started the bleeding, not the one who stopped it. The pieces of gauze were lightly caked with her blood and he caught his breath at the crooked Frankenstein stitches that ran all the way from her wrist to her biceps. Logan bit his lip to stop from making any stupid jokes for he could see the pain in her eyes and it looked so sharp he could practically smell it.

From his perch in a far corner, Steve continued to watch though now his angst centered on her wounds instead of his own abrupt dismissal. *I shoulda been there. I shoulda protected her. God, he could have killed her. Never again, I swear.*

“Keep going,” Zaara urged him, wincing with anguish. “Get it over with.”

Logan nodded obediently.

With the last bit of gauze finally removed, Zaara took a good look. Her arms had more stitches than her eyes could count. Tiny bits of gauze were still stuck between some of them but Logan dared not attempt to remove them. A couple of spots spewed tiny droplets of fresh blood. They glistened dark red in the dullness of the lamplight.

Steve took a deep breath.

“Alright,” Logan declared. “Ready?”

Zaara nodded.

He proceeded to open the jar, dip a finger, and tenderly apply the balm to her wounds. Zaara watched him do his work and marveled at how tenderly he went about it. For being the toughest person she ever knew, Logan performed his work with such care that it made her grieve for him. *He deserves a real life, one full of love. Not what’s waiting for him in the Weapon X program.* Dimly, she wondered whether she might craft him a mental shield similar to the one she made for Bucky. The problem was that the Wolverine’s brainwashing regimen had been of an entirely different nature than the Winter Soldier’s. Bucky’s mind was wiped clean dozens of times over the course of decades. Logan’s, however, had been sliced and diced, injected with false memories, wiped clean, and sliced and diced all over again. To alter him now could potentially make things worse. Even the Professor had trouble sorting through the mess in Logan’s mind. It always astounded her to know he kept his purity of heart through it all, for they never managed to alter that. It was what she loved about him.
“What’s all this here?” Bucky Barnes suddenly appeared. “Why wasn’t I invited to the party?” When he saw the look on Zaara’s face, he immediately regretted his words.

“Bucky,” Zaara acknowledged him. There was nothing more to say. She wore her wounds like marks of shame.

Bucky Barnes sat down next to her and reached for her hand (the one without stitches). He stroked it lovingly. “Brave girl. You’re a hero. And much prettier than the bride of Boris Karloff.”

“Shut up, James Buchanan Barnes,” she gave him a tiny grin. “You’re the hero, not me. I’m the idiot who went in light.”

“You got that right,” Logan agreed, smirking. “Damn brave fool. Ought to have your head examined. Not by Sergeant Pretty Boy, though.”

“Yeah,” she nodded in agreement before she shrugged. “Wouldn’t do me much good. I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

“Nope. You’re just our best girl is all,” Bucky Barnes grinned like a sentimental fool. He gazed down at her belly and made sure to lower his voice so the other men wouldn’t hear. “How’s the little squirt doing?”

“He’s just fine,” Zaara whispered back, smiling fully at last. “He’s all swimming around in there.”

Bucky Barnes invoked all her love. Not once had he asked her about her marriage and his mind was far beyond caring. Not that he was immune to society’s strictures, but Bucky regarded Zaara as a friend. And Bucky Barnes did not call many people friends. In addition, she realized that, like Steve although to a lesser extent, some part of him still knew her though he did not realize it yet. Bucky’s mind harbored a strange sense of déjà vu when it came to Zaara so that he took to her quickly and, though he had been less quick to trust her, he adored her anyways. She could not say it did not make sense, for she had never erased anyone’s memories before. Steve’s physical recognition of her and Bucky’s curious connection to her could all be chalked up to her inexperience as a telepath. And, once this mission was over, she fervently hoped she would never have to erase or manipulate anyone’s mind ever again.

She sighed and came back down to earth, content that these men, her dear friends, would remain with her and care for her, no matter what happened. Bucky continued to soothe her while Logan
coated her arms with the balm.

Almost against his will, Steve found himself moving closer until he stood by awkwardly, humbled by their display of affection and stubbornly excluded from their circle. Zaara hadn’t acknowledged him yet so he remained silent. When Howlett seemed finished, he reluctantly called attention to himself.

“Done?”

“Done,” Howlett grunted.

“I need the balm back,” Steve insisted, ashamed of himself without knowing why. Bucky raised an eyebrow at him, incredulous. “For safekeeping.”

“Here ya go, Bossypants,” Logan tossed it at his head as hard as he could, but Steve caught it effortlessly.

“Thanks. Next treatment in 12 hours.”

Moments later, Zaara fell asleep, her head nestled upon Bucky’s shoulder. Being wounded, he figured she deserved the rest. Logan agreed and pressed his body up against her opposite side so she would not slump down onto the cold, rocky floor.

It was their mistake.
Mission, Part II

Chapter Summary

Finally, we see some action.

Warning: brief mention of the Holocaust and concentration camps, as well as war-related torture, violence, and murder--standard WWII history stuff, just in case that triggers anybody. Also, some gunshots and consequences, but nothing too gory or explicit.

Gabe’s ears caught the tattletale sound of guns cocking and whipped his head up towards the top of the cavern, but not before Logan’s nose crinkled, scenting the gun oil high in the air. Steve, however, was the first to take action, his enhanced reflexes jarring him to leap on top of Zaara and shield her with his own body.

No one had a chance to blink before they fired, the shots crackling and ricocheting through the vastness of the cavern, the thunderous echoes seeming to go on forever. The men froze, unable to believe their own eyes.

A sea of silent bullets hovered in the air, two of them coming close to Jim Morita’s neck, the coldness of the metal making him shiver. Dum Dum’s mouth formed a perfect “O,” his bulging eyes trained on the bullet dangling just over the tip of his nose. Falsworth cleared his throat before he raised a finger and flicked away the two bullets aimed at his heart.

“Sorry, fellas,” Zaara apologized, still only half awake and trying to rub her eyes without hurting her arms. Steve still covered her body with his own and would not let her up. “My bad.”

Gabe lifted his hand and clasped the bullet only a few inches from his jawline between his thumb and forefinger. He decided to put it in his pack and bring it home with him when the war was over, a grim souvenir. “Holy---“

“Language!” Steve called, swallowing in wonder at the bullets surrounding his entire frame. Obviously, Captain America had been their number one target.
“Bucky,” Zaara nodded gently, squirming out from beneath Steve’s heavy frame. Steve reluctantly let her go.

“Sure thing, doll,” Bucky nodded obligingly, brushing the bullets away from his left arm with one swift stroke. He got his sniper rifle ready.

Steve helped her up, amazed that the bullets no longer posed a danger. Logan resisted the urge to growl at him. But Steve quickly resumed command. “On my count, Buck. Gotta cover our tracks. They need to know what stopped them.”

Bucky aimed towards the top of the cavern while Steve counted down, Zaara silencing the bullets that nailed the team of snipers. Two bodies plunged to the bottom of the cavern. She felt terrible to turn them into a bunch of sitting ducks, but she had no choice in the matter. Bucky would take the hit for her. To his credit, he didn’t shoot to kill. But he did end it.

“Did I get ‘em all?” he panted, still in mild shock over Zaara stopping the bullets.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “They’re not going anywhere now. There’s a couple still awake--I’ll put them to sleep for a good long time. Someone’ll come looking for them eventually. Thanks, Bucky.”

“Anytime, doll,” he said softly.

“Looks like we took our break right under a trap,” Steve observed dryly.

“No kidding,” Zaara agreed. “Sorry, fellas. Wish I could have known, but I had no minds to read when we got here. They patrol the passageway above us every two hours—I can see that now. There’s a corridor right over our heads. I could take us up there but we’d lose our stealth advantage, if we haven’t already. They’re due to report in the next half hour. That gives us just enough time to get a move on, assuming no one heard the shots.”

The team breathed a collective sigh of relief. They were safe—for the moment.

“Fellas, I’m sorry, that was on me,” Zaara apologized. “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep.”
But the team remained silent. Though Zaara had gotten them through Nazi checkpoints and covered their tracks in the jeep, they had never seen anything like this. The raw display of her power made them gape. Dernier felt a little weak in the knees and he finally brushed away the bullet aimed at his torso.

“Well,” Falsworth, ever the gentleman, swallowed and took the opportunity to speak up. “All’s well that ends well. Thank you, Miss Xaviar.”

She smiled at him. “You’re welcome, Falsworth. Let’s get a move on.”

“You heard her, men. We head out,” Steve commanded, trying to put the extraordinary display of Zaara’s talents behind him. It was too much to take in and he was determined to see the mission through to completion. I’ve gotta keep her safe.

The Howlers vacated the cavern in under a minute.

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The dark, cobblestone passageways gave the place the air of a medieval torture chamber. Thin, vertical slits of space between the rocks served as the only source of natural light, and Zaara realized they must have been used by archers to defend the castle from medieval marauders, the chains hanging on the walls only adding to the creepiness. They passed several rooms that reminded her of prison cells, but had been made to serve as offices. Zaara put anyone she saw in them to sleep. The trio moved quickly to make time, praying that Bucky’s team would be able to stop Shaw.

“Just like bein’ in Sleeping Beauty’s castle,” Logan smirked, unable to count the many unconscious bodies snoring along the passageways behind them.

“Keep moving,” Steve admonished him. “And be quiet.”
Finally, Zaara could sense the familiar energy signature of Erik Lehnsherr down a distant hall. He was by far the youngest person in the building, but there could be no mistaking the power of Magneto—Zaara would recognize it anywhere. It was weaker than she remembered, but that only made sense since he was still so young. This was not the awesome, earth-shattering force of the metal controlling mutant—only a fervent hint of what was to come. They approached his confinement chamber silently, for it had been marked by a heavy wooden door.

“He’s on the other side. I can read him,” Zaara whispered, all her attention focused on the mission, now. Too many things could go wrong and one simple mistake could endanger the lives of all the men who had come to help her. A stray thought about Peggy and that engagement ring could cost them all dearly. “He’s been locked up here for a long, long time.”

Steve nodded and canted his head at Logan. “Let’s go.”

“Sure thing, bub,” the Wolverine used his momentous strength to lift the heavy wooden barrier. At the same moment, they realized it had no metal. Even the hinges had been replaced by some sort of plastic. In a flash, Steve kicked the door down.

_I would have done it more quietly_, Zaara rolled her eyes. _Oh, well. Makes for a dramatic entrance._

The boy, aware of their presence, curled up into a ball upon the floor, his body shaking. He cried out incomprehensibly. Zaara could read his fear and immediately sent soothing sensations to him. “Damn it, Mags,” she whispered to herself. _Making me have sympathy for you. Well, who couldn’t, really? In a place like this. And with everything that’s happened to you._

The boy gazed up at them, suspicious, preparing for the next round of torture. Shaw liked to send different agents to do his dirty work—each with his own peculiar brand of cruelty. It was only a matter of time before they sent a woman.

Steve and Logan backed away and allowed her to take the lead. Zaara could read all of Erik’s losses now, each and every one of them, the many secrets the Professor had known but to which she had not been privy. Since the start of the war, Erik Lehnsherr led a sorrowful existence. He had seen everyone he knew and loved killed, his way of life destroyed forever. Already, thanks to Shaw, he had made up his mind to hate not only Nazis, but all garden variety humans. Zaara shook her head. She could not blame him for hating non-Jews after the concentration camps and the murder of his family, but somehow, under Shaw’s influence, he managed to transfer his hatred onto ordinary people, setting himself apart from the human race.

All of this trouble, she realized, to rescue a boy destined to become a villain and a murderer himself
for there was nothing she could do to alter his nature. The Professor would not have wanted her to brainwash him or make him into a different person and she was not sure whether she could have done it anyways. Brainwashing was not exactly her area of expertise, and she did not want to imagine her life if she went down that path. Besides, Lehnsherr was no psychopath in the way of Sabretooth. There was no singular thing she could do to alter his psychology for Erik Lehnsherr was far too intelligent, his personality far too complex, for that. Moreover, as a low-level telepath himself, he would not be easily swayed; the Professor had warned her of that long ago. She could not bring his family back and that was the fundamental loss he would remember always, the event that shaped his very existence. In the clutches of Sebastian Shaw, the young man had been twisted and warped, taught to weave evil upon evil, to manipulate his powers and wreak vengeance upon his enemies. He had been fantasizing about it for the last two years and had hatched a plan to hunt down the Nazis who killed his family. Shaw’s fate was sealed. Zaara shuddered, knowing what a violent end lay in store for the nasty ape.

She stepped aside to allow the boy a good look at Steve and Logan and, despite his new found hatred for humans, his eyes lit up when he recognized the star and stripes on Steve’s shield. *Kapitan Amerika?* The young Erik Lehnsherr also noticed the Wolverine’s claws for Logan had unleashed them when they entered Shaw’s fortress, telling the team he preferred to be prepared. The Wolverine glanced down at them, now, feeling awkward and exposed even in the darkness of a prison and looked up again uneasily to meet the boy’s eyes. They shared a brief moment of mutual recognition, as if understanding what they held in common.

Zaara took the opportunity to speak to the young Magneto telepathically.

*Hello, Erik. You are quite the young man. My name is Zaara, and I am a mutant, just like you. Like Sebastian Shaw. My team and I are here to set you free. She found herself kneeling down and reaching for him. Shocked, he placed his hands in hers, the first woman to have touched him since his mother died, and the first person to touch him with any kindness at all in more than two years. They rose together, the boy strong yet shaky. Zaara didn’t release her grip and moved closer, as if she would embrace him. He’s only a boy, after all. She wished her arms could comfort and soothe him, melt away the hatred in his heart.*

*Please,* she pleaded with him. *Hate is not the answer, Erik.*

The coldness in his eyes stopped her and she released his hands.

*Do you recognize Captain America?*

The boy seemed unfazed by having her voice inside his head, or by answering her without words. *Yes. A mutant like me?*
Well, a mutate. We are all of us a little different than human now. But we are still human beings—like your mother and father. You are free, now. All we ask is that you remember us.

The boy stood up and Steve stepped back, unsure. He doubted the boy could or would harm Zaara, but he remained on guard anyhow, the need to protect her overshadowing everything else. Zaara nodded at him to let him know it was ok and gestured for Logan to come to her side. “We’re letting him go. He’ll find his own way.”

“Are you sure?” Steve asked softly, eyeing his pale skin and emaciated body. “We can help him. He probably needs food, medical treatment.”

The boy shook his head. ”Nein.”

“Those were my orders,” she replied quietly. “I have to trust the Professor. The boy’s been changed so much already. He wants to go his own way and won’t like it if we interfere. We have to trust that what we’ve done here is going to make a difference. I’m just not sure how.” She looked to the boy. I wish we could do more for you. I know you already have plans and, if I didn’t have my orders, I would stop you. Killing them isn’t the answer.

You know what they did, the boy answered her bitterly. Don’t you see it? I see it in my head all of the time. Every day. And every night.

Yes. I do. I can see it in your mind. And I am very sorry for your losses. I wish it had never happened. I wish I could have stopped it. If I could, I would bring them back to you. But I can’t. You still have choices, though. You don’t have to kill your captors or become a murderer. If you do those things, you will be just like them.

I can take care of myself, the boy retorted stubbornly. I don’t need anybody. Those men deserve what’s coming to them.

An eye for an eye, huh? Zaara frowned, the coldness in his heart chilling her. She made a last-ditch effort and reminded him of his mother, her memory the only source of softness in his life. That’s not the way she brought you up.
They killed her, he replied, sullen and irascible. And now I shall kill them.

“Does he need any medical care?” Steve repeated, worried and frustrated that he could not participate in their telepathic conversation.

The boy turned to him, blinked his eyes, and tore the vibranium shield from his arm with inexorable force.

Zaara grabbed Steve in a desperate plea for him not to resist. Steve caught his breath, equally amazed by the floating shield and the feel of Zaara’s hand on his arm. Her wounds stung her and she winced, but her touch still electrified him.

The young Erik Lehnsherr spun the red, white, and blue disc in circles and raised it gracefully up over their heads, leaving Steve’s empty arm to hover in the air. Zaara took a deep breath and placed her other hand upon Logan’s shoulder, praying for both men to stand down, blinking back the pain. Lehnsherr directed the shield to circle around the chamber, his hand leading its movement rather elegantly. It spun around several more times before he lowered it back down to their eye levels. Then he waved his fingers slightly and the disc altered its shape as if by magic, melting first into a square, then a triangle, and finally into a star of David, the original pentagonal painted star still at its center. Finally, he brought it back to Steve and restored it to its original circular form. Steve gripped it with his fingers and returned it solemnly to its place upon his arm.

“Ich werde Sie vergessen,” the young Erik Lehnsherr said before he turned and walked out.

“Wait,” Zaara said out loud, knowing he understood English. “Not that way. Our team is fighting Shaw as we speak. They are only human soldiers and they are fighting to protect you, at this very moment. Don’t forget them, either, Erik. And, good luck.”

The boy nodded, changing his direction, and hurried off.

“That’s it?” Howlett grunted in disbelief. “That’s what we came here for? And he just walks away?”

“Yes,” Zaara confirmed. “He goes his way. We go ours.” She pulled Steve closer, worried he might go after the young Magneto despite their orders, her anguish about his engagement all but forgotten in Shaw’s fortress. “Give him space. We mustn’t follow him. He’ll be alright.” She glanced over her shoulder at the Wolverine. “Don’t worry. You’ll be seeing him again. But he’s not exactly going to turn into your favourite person.”
Logan snorted.

“Let’s hope Bucky and the boys have done their job,” Steve mused.

~

The three of them rounded the corner past dozens of unconscious bodies and headed towards the commissary. Bucky’s team had, so far, done an excellent job. No bullets, no noise. Shaw’s men had been taken out one by one and left unconscious. Rushing down the corridors, Zaara added her two cents’ worth for good measure, setting each of them to sleep an extra few hours or so. She nodded at Steve and gave Logan a wink, recalling his words about Sleeping Beauty’s castle.

“They’ll be out long after we’re gone,” she smiled. “Unless Prince Charming comes and kisses them.”

Logan snorted. “Well, then they’re outta luck. Ain’t nobody gonna kiss these sewer rats, toots.”

“Can you get a reading on what’s going on?” Steve asked. He had to admit her telepathy came in pretty handy during a mission. A stealth reading of the team’s progress would be a huge tactical advantage

“Hold on,” she put a hand on each of their arms to stop them from moving. “This’ll just take a second.” She closed her eyes and furrowed her brow, scanning for their friends. She could see them now several passages away in the midst of a melee, Dum Dum holding Shaw in a stubborn headlock, putting his past experience as a circus strongman to good use. She giggled.

Steve’s eyes widened and she immediately apologized. “Sorry about that. They’re taking down his personal guard. Dum Dum’s got Shaw in a headlock. I wish I could have seen how he did it!”
Logan pictured it in his mind. “Not a bad move.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I’m just not sure how long it’ll last. We should run.”

“Copy that,” Steve nodded.

But Zaara could not run nearly as fast as the two supersoldiers. She sighed in irritation, squinted her eyes, and raised them all up off the floor. Sometimes, telekinesis could come in very handy. “We’re going for a little ride, boys. It’s the only way I can keep up with the two of you.”

“You . . . can . . . fly?” Logan stuttered in amazement, his feet inches off the floor. Their speed increased exponentially.

“Yes,” Zaara laughed. “But if I do it too long, it makes me hurl.”

Steve struggled to keep his cool. “Is this tele--,”

“Telekinesis,” she said for him. “Yes. Not really flying—I’m just moving us with my mind.”

“Don’t--,” Steve barked out, terror in his heart. “Don’t let Shaw or anyone else see this. Do you copy?”

“Copy that,” Zaara nodded. “Hang on, we’re almost there. I’ll bring us down in a jiffy.”

She returned them to earth when they reached the second to last corridor and rubbed her stomach briefly in an attempt to ward off nausea. The place was eerily silent, bodies scattered all across the floor. From a distance, Steve could make out all the sounds that characterized unarmed combat; punches, groans, grunts, kicks, and shouts.

“That’s them,” Zaara whispered.

“When we get there,” Steve’s voice was still in command mode even though he kept it lowered. “None of us approaches Shaw. Zaara, you stay out of sight. We follow Bucky’s lead. How are they
“Dum Dum’s still got him in a headlock, it’s quite brilliant, actually,” she smiled with glee. “I can psi-blast Shaw, knock him out for a few days and give the boy time to escape, with your permission. None of them knows what makes Lehnsherr special except Shaw, I can see that now. He had the original guards who captured Lehnsherr executed. He wants the mutants all to himself.”

“Then I don’t want him to see you,” Steve said pointedly. “Or Howlett. It’s best if he’s taken down by our soldiers.”

“Agreed,” Zaara nodded.

“And I’m not sure about the psi-blast. Phillips didn’t like it. It’s a risk,” Steve frowned.

“It is. I can try the lowest level, though. It shouldn’t give him any kinetic force. If it works, I can hit him harder a second time,” she suggested.

“Don’t know about that,” Logan frowned before making a suggestion. “I could just stick my claws through him. End it fast.”

“No,” Zaara shook her head. “That’s not his fate.”


“You catch on quick, Captain Bossypants,” Zaara raised her eyebrows. “Yes—it’s going to be the boy. I can’t change that.”

Steve smiled in spite of himself. He always like it when she called him Bossypants, though he couldn’t explain why. “Let’s go.”

They came to the end of a corridor that opened to a long, narrow room with tall, gothic windows and a massive stone fireplace. Zaara guessed it must have been an ancient dining hall. Bodies lay all over the floor unconscious, the Howlers standing over them, triumphant. When one of them twitched, Gabe gave him a good kick and he lay still again. Dernier and Morita beamed with pride, taking
inventory of all the confiscated weapons with relish. Dum Dum cackled. “Alright, boys, who’s next? My arm’s getting tired,” he barked teasingly.

“The Captain’s here,” Falsworth announced.

“Aw, but it’s my turn to play Nazi-in-a-headlock,” Bucky cocked his eyebrow at the trio as they entered the room. “You’re not gonna put a damper on all the fun we’ve been having, are you Cap?”

Steve suppressed a smile. “Nice work, fellas. Now we just have to knock him out.”

“Why, Captain America,” Shaw cajoled slyly, sensing his opportunity. He was a powerfully built man with a nasty little toad face. It took all of Dum Dum’s strength to keep him trapped. “I’d be honored to be knocked out by you. Why don’t you give me a swing?”

Steve was seriously tempted, but he knew he mustn’t. He kept Zaara well hidden behind his body, using his shield for extra cover. He would not have Shaw catch sight of her for all the world. He spoke to her in fierce whisper. “Do it, Zaara. Now.”

Zaara nodded, tilting her head to catch the tiniest glimpse of Shaw so she could direct her psionic force accurately.

Shaw suddenly fell limp into Dum Dum’s arms.

“Hey,” Bucky protested. “It was my turn.”

“No, I got dibs. I tripped him so Dum Dum could put him in that headlock,” Gabe countered.

Zaara stepped out from behind Steve. “Well, Bucky, if you really want to touch him so badly, just give me a second. I’m going to make sure he stays knocked out for a few days.” She gathered herself, took a deep breath, and projected a psi-blast strong enough to induce a weeklong coma. "There. He’s all yours.”

Dum Dum opened his arms and Shaw slumped heavily to the floor.
“Aw, gee, that’s no fun, doll,” Bucky shook his head.

She shrugged, laughing. “You guys did great,” she said, looking all around the room. “Not one bullet. I didn’t realize you were so good at stealth maneuvers. I thought the Howling Commandos were a lot louder than this. Wish I could have seen it with my own eyes.”

“And how,” the Wolverine agreed. “Looks more fun than a barroom brawl.”

“It was,” Morita confirmed somewhat solemnly before cracking a grin.

“Oui. Except I did not get to explode anything,” Dernier lamented.

“Well, maybe you could hit up that passageway where we came in,” Steve mused. “After we get out, of course.”

“I always love a good parting shot,” Bucky smirked. “But I’m still disappointed.”

“Sorry, Buck,” Steve patted him on the shoulder. “Maybe next time. Good work, everyone.”

“Is it alright if we take some souvenirs with us, Cap?” Gabe asked with mock politeness. He had earned a bit of a reputation for being the team’s kleptomaniac on missions. Indeed, Shaw’s men had an unusual assortment of weapons, almost none of which had been fired. They seemed somewhat experimental and Dernier and Morita had already gathered up most of them.

Logan snorted, looking down at his claws. “Got all the weapons I need. Have at it, fellas.”

Zaara smirked, reading Gabe’s klepto tendencies. He made talismans of the enemy’s weapons for it brought him a sense of peace and she certainly could not begrudge a soldier that.

Steve laughed and shrugged. “Sure. Guess we can bring some back to HQ for research purposes. Take whatever you can carry. Let’s hope the trip back to base goes smoothly.”
He glanced darkly at Zaara. *We’re not out of the woods, yet.*
The journey back to base was, for the most part, a silent one.

Zaara squeezed between Bucky and Logan on the jeep for the long ride through the woods and fields, allowing the two of them to cushion her body from the bumps, potholes, and various other hazards of off-roading. She deeply appreciated it, not wanting to imagine herself going into premature labour from it all. The pain in her arms had eased off somewhat, but the ache in her heart grew worse. Now that the mission was over, she gave in to her grief and let her thoughts dwell upon the ring that lay on Peggy Carter’s finger.

He asked her to marry him. I can’t believe it. What have I done? Did I change everything?

She knew things should feel better once she wiped their minds, but she also wondered if she ought to wipe the proposal from Steve’s memory. But what if that had been part of his history? What if he had actually done it in the first place, without her influence? Would she be able to isolate that one event from the rest of his memories when the time came to wipe his mind? The confusion of it all made her dizzy. She sincerely hoped she was done with time travel for the rest of her life. She still loved Steve and knew he was worth it, but doubt plagued her mind and she wasn’t sure if she was worth it herself.

Peggy’s prettier than me. Smarter than me. Braver than me. She’s a better match for him. What business have I got being with Captain America? I’m such a screw-up. I need to go home. I need to be with Ellie again. I’ve been gone too long and I have to focus on being a mother now. I’m gonna have another baby. I can’t afford to live this soap opera anymore.

She sighed.

“You alright, doll?” Bucky asked, concerned, though his voice sounded weary. She could sense his relief at having survived yet another perilous mission, the constant sense of dodging bullets now a way of life for him.

These poor men, she suddenly realized, tearing herself from her pity party. Half the time they feel like they won’t survive the war, but they force themselves to act as if they will. It’s the only way they go
And suddenly, she realized that, in a way, Bucky Barnes would not survive the war; indeed, he might well have chosen death if he knew what was in store for him. Convincing Bucky and Logan that they were worth it, that they were good men who deserved a chance at life no matter what happened in the past, cheered her up a little. It gave her hope for she knew without a doubt they were innocent. They were worth it. Her friends were good men, and fighting their doubts about themselves made her feel stronger. She noted ruefully how much easier it was to help someone else than to think about the mess she had made with Steve.

Indeed, bit by bit, some secret part of her came to regret their marriage. Looking back at the joy they once shared only hurt, so she had to block it out. It was almost easy, the past seeming so far from her now, like a dream. And Captain Rogers seemed such a different man, so unlike the simple, tenderhearted Steve she once loved. She could no longer make herself believe that the big, stoic supersoldier sitting across from her in the jeep would love her the same way that slender, sensitive artist did back in Brooklyn, long ago.

Not with the way he loved Peggy Carter.

Turbulent skies rocked the plane’s trajectory across a gray and cloudless morning. Nearing the coordinates for the base, the Howling Commandos and their new friends had only a half hour left to go. Most of the men were asleep but Dum Dum Dugan kept watch, an old habit of his even though there was no reason for him to do so. The skies were empty and they had passed well beyond enemy territory. And so they slept, stealing what rest they could, relieved to have survived another mission and grateful to be alive, though uneasy in the knowledge their minds would soon be wiped by a certain telepath who also lay asleep near the back of the plane.

Curled up in tight in the corner across from the plug door, Zaara slept an uneasy slumber. Howlett had left her side for the moment to visit the lavatory. Her body was out cold. Exhaustion claimed her and she seemed dead to the world. Heavy, rollicking bumps of air suddenly shook the jet up and down, and her body was tossed onto its side. Her necklace slipped out from under her tank top from where it had laid hidden. A locket and two thick, golden rings glistened in the dull light that pierced through the dirt encrusted windows.

Not knowing why, Steve remained awake, always watching her. He needed less rest than his men,
and something always compelled him to keep an eye on Zaara. Though James Howlett had tried to usurp that role, Steve refused to give it up. With Howlett off in the lavatory, he took the opportunity to move closer, watch over her while she slept, not liking her to be left alone and ready to cushion her should a particularly bad patch of turbulence hit.

From his perch next to Steve, Bucky Barnes noticed the sudden absence of body heat that had been warming his side. He roused himself from his half slumber out of habit, always on the lookout for his best friend. His heart did not settle until he found him crouching and looking at Zaara.

Steve moved closer.

Even with the rocky turbulence, Zaara breathed so steadily it caused him to recall how haphazard her breathing had been during their first time together on a transport plane. Her jacket lay unbuttoned and he watched her bosom rise and fall, the soft movements of her breasts hypnotic as the buzzing motion of the plane rocked her back and forth in her sleep. He noticed the necklace swinging there over her bosom for it stood out against the whiteness of her tank top. Something glistened and Steve adjusted his supersoldier sight, zeroing in. He could see a locket, a plain gold band, and something infinitely more interesting. It appeared to be a thicker band of gold, wide and elegant. Heavy. Even from a distance, he could tell it had etching on the inside and out.

Squinting his eyes, he detected the pattern on it. It seemed graceful.

Familiar.

_Could it be?_ Steve’s heart fluttered with a sudden thrill of horror.

Unable to stop himself he took a step closer, Bucky watching all the while, and dropped down to his knees. He stopped breathing and lifted the ring from Zaara’s chest, tilting it so he could read writing on the inside.

_Pigeon._

It was what his father used to call his mother years and years ago—a pet name. He remembered the story. Unable to afford any kind of stone after he had paid for the thickest gold ring he could find, his father opted to have the ring engraved by a friend who happened to be a skilled artisan. A lump formed in Steve’s throat as he finally realized the truth.
She’s mine.

He was, had been, her husband all along.

Tears swelled in his eyes just as Howlett returned from the lavatory, furrowing his brow. The Wolverine felt extremely protective of Zaara and, given her recent words, figured the Captain had come a little too close for comfort. Sure, Steve posed no threat, everything Howlett smelled about him suggested a good man. But he also sensed the potential fallout that would come were he to discover her secret.

The Wolverine growled quietly. “You got a problem there, bub?”

“Nothin’,” Steve managed to expel the word from his body. He would not meet his eyes, but got up and returned to Bucky, barely able to contain his pain. He sat down next to his best friend, bending his knees and tucking his head between them, shaking, the turbulence in the air failing to conceal the agony that wracked his body.

“Hey, pal,” Bucky whispered discretely, keeping one eye on the sleeping soldiers that surrounded them. “You alright?”

Steve shook his head. “No. No, I’m not.”

Zaara stirred, sensing Logan’s heightened emotions even in her exhaustion. Wishing very badly that she could rub her eyes, she managed to crack them open and blinked several times. Her arms hung limp, sore and aching from having slept on her side.

“What is it?” she asked, yawning.

“Captain Bossypants,” Logan canted his head in Steve’s direction. “He came over here. Was lookin’ at you while you were sleepin’.”

Zaara stretched as much as she was able and sat up. She glanced over at Bucky who had his arm around his best friend and took in Steve’s prone position. Though she could not read his mind, the man was obviously in a world of pain. “What the hell happened?”

“Dunno,” Logan shook his head honestly.
Bucky raised his eyes to meet Zaara’s, bewildered. Steve kept his head down and would not say another word.

Zaara averted her eyes, wanting to give them what little privacy she could offer on the crowded transport plane. Suddenly, they hit a rough patch of turbulence and she felt the rings bounce and clink up and down her chest. She looked down at them, automatically clenching them in her fist. Pain flooded her heart.

*The ring. He must have seen it.* She swallowed the lump in her throat and her face contorted with anguish when she realized the truth.

*He knows.*

“Shit,” Zaara grimaced, glancing at Logan.

The Wolverine shrugged.

“I need to talk to him,” she whispered. “Oh, God.”

Her breathing sped up and Logan put his arm around her. “You alright, kid?”

Zaara nodded, trying to keep control. “Yes. Yeah, I’m OK. James, would you please go and get Steve? I need to talk to him. Right away.”


“It’s okay, it’ll be alright,” she panted, trying to convince herself as much as her friend. “Just . . . bring him here. And give us some privacy for a few minutes. Okay?”

Logan frowned, but agreed anyways. *She seems to know what she’s doing.* “Okay.”

He got up and left. Zaara did not hear the exchange between the three men, but Steve rose slowly and reluctantly from his position, shoulders hunched as if in defeat. He crossed the distance in only
three steps and squatted down to meet her gaze.

“Steve,” Zaara began hesitantly, her voice filled with tears. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t tell you.”

Rage overtook him, the small amount of control he had struggled to keep over himself utterly lost. He slammed his fist onto the floor of the plane. “Couldn’t tell me? What the hell has been going on?”

“You’re right. What you think, what you saw,” she said, nearly sobbing. “I can’t lie to you.”

“You didn’t lie to me,” he gritted his teeth. “You just didn’t tell me. Did you?”

Zaara froze, unable to move or speak.

Horror overtook him and he could swallow it no longer.

His voice went cold. Flat. “I’m leaving.”

He got up on his feet and Bucky instinctively rose right with him, transfixed by the scene, still having no idea what had happened. Logan got up as well, terribly confused. Steve’s rage permeated the cabin air, but the Wolverine could tell he would not direct it at Zaara.

“Steve!” she cried softly, terror overtaking her.

Steve ignored her and grabbed the nearest parachute. In the next heartbeat, he strapped it on.

Bucky ran to him, all pretext at discretion abandoned. If they woke the team, it no longer mattered. At the front of the plane, Dum Dum rose when he saw the parachute and Logan rushed back to Zaara’s side.

“Steve,” she wept openly now. “Don’t do this, please don’t do this. Please.”
Words no longer mattered. He had made up his mind. *I can’t stay here. I’m getting off this plane.*

Bucky resorted to begging. “Stop it! Stop this! What’re you doing? We’re almost at base! Don’t do this! Please! Steve? What the hell happened?”

Steve shook his head and shoved his best friend away.

“Captain!” Dum Dum cried, running over to them and waking the rest of the team. “It’s too dangerous at this altitude. You can’t. You’ll die!”

Steve shook him off as well. None of them was strong enough to stop him and Logan wouldn’t try. The Wolverine kept his arm wrapped tight around Zaara and would not let go. Steve tore open the plug door and howling streams of frigid air flooded the cabin. They all shivered but Steve got ready to jump.

“NO!” Zaara screamed, her voice fighting the power of the wind. “So help me, Steven Grant Rogers, if you jump out of this plane I’m jumping right after you!”

It was the only thing that could have stopped him. He turned and stared at her, the whites of his eyes shining.

“NO!”

“You think they could stop me?” she cried, rising awkwardly to her feet. He would not win this time. Her voice was hoarse from screaming but she lowered it, knowing he would hear her anyways. “Close it. We’ll deal with this after we land.”

Steve froze, his body trembling in fury. He could tell she wasn’t bluffing. With a deep scowl, he tasted the bitterness of defeat.

“Come on, pal,” Bucky grasped his shoulders, marveling at the way his buddy towered over him. He had dragged Steve away from a fight more times than he could count, but he still couldn’t get used to his new height. *He was a lot shorter when I used to do this back home, always cruising for a bruising.* Bucky shook his head. “Stand down.”
With great resentment, Steve unclasped the buckles of his parachute, a scowl plastered on his face, and allowed his best friend to pull him away. Dum Dum secured the door and everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

“Thank God,” Logan sighed to the high heavens. His arm clutched Zaara’s waist so tightly she could barely breathe. “Wasn’t gonna let go. I’d have gone right down with you.” He paused for effect. “And I hate jumpin’ outta planes.” Though the mutant with the healing factor did not require a parachute, jumping without one was never any fun.


“Anytime, kid. Anytime.”

~

The silence on the rest of the journey home was deafening. Howlett resumed his watch over Zaara and though she closed her eyes, she could find no peace. Steve huddled close to Bucky, his eyes stuck on the floor.

*I asked Peggy to marry me, but I’m already married. And I’m gonna be a father. What does that make me? What does it make her?*

Anger filled his heart and he could feel no love. Only coldness. Resentment.

When the plane finally landed, Steve left without a word. The Commandos kept quiet. Bucky followed close behind him though his eyes met Zaara’s with such tenderness she could hardly stand it. She had never known such grief. Steve knew. *He knew*—and he wasn’t happy about it. She did not have her husband back. All of her fears about Steve regaining his memory had come true. He was judging her. Their marriage was wrong. She was wrong. She never had any business loving Steve Rogers.
Logan simply shrugged.

“Dunno, kid,” he confessed. “I only left you for a couple minutes. When I got back, he was on his knees, just starin’ at you. Sort of creepy like, you know.”

Zaara reached up to clasp their wedding rings in her fist, sharp little shooting pains in her arms punishing her for her failure.

*I’m in for it now.*

~

When they reached the privacy of their tent, Bucky clung to his best friend’s arm and refused to let go. Though he knew Steve wanted to be alone, he would never abandon his friend.

“Sorry, pal. I ain’t leavin’ you. Not now, not ever,” he announced. “No matter how much you want to be alone.”

“Just go, Buck,” Steve said wearily. “You can’t help me.”

“You saved me,” Bucky countered. “You took on a Hydra base all by yourself, jumped through a ball of fire for me. And I’d do it for you--so I ain’t leaving you now. Fess up, punk. You need my help.”

Ever the stubborn one, Steve shook his head defiantly. But his heart betrayed him.

“Ma’s ring,” he sobbed suddenly. Brokenly. “She’s got Ma’s ring. On her necklace.”
“What?” Bucky murmured in wonder. “It can’t be.”

“It is,” Steve confirmed, desperately fighting his tears. “It had the engraving on it. It said Pigeon.”

“No,” Bucky gasped, dropping Steve’s arm abruptly in shock. He knew all about Sarah Rogers’ ring. Steve had cried on his shoulder too many times, holding that ring in his hand. “What do we do?”

Steve wiped away his tears impatiently. They had started to flow against his will. “Don’t know. I’ve gotta talk to her, I guess.”

“It means you’re married to her. You’re her husband,” Bucky said numbly, not believing his own words.

“How could it be? There must be some mistake?” Steve seemed to address his question to the great beyond.

“You sure it was that ring? THE ring?” Bucky grasped at straws. They had to be certain.

Steve nodded. “Uh huh. I’d know it anywhere. How did she get it? Did she steal it? Why would she do that? It can’t be real. I can’t be married.”

“You’re gonna be a father,” Bucky found himself saying before he could stop himself.

“I just proposed to Peggy,” Steve trailed off, stunned.

“How could this happen?” Bucky embraced his confusion. “How could you get married, get her pregnant? I don’t remember any of it. Did it happen when I went overseas?”

“I dunno, she can erase minds, right?” Steve clenched his jaw, anger and frustration overtaking his grief. “Why’d she do this? Why’d she make me forget? Damnit!” he pounded his fist on the bedside table. The rickety piece of standard issue furniture collapsed and Steve finally admitted it to himself,
clenching his fists until his fingers ached. “I knew it was me, Buck. All along. I can’t explain it, but some part of me recognized her, remembered her. I knew her scent when I found her on that Hydra base. How the hell did this happen?”

“You gotta talk to her,” Bucky urged, fighting his own disbelief. She smelled familiar to me, too, felt like déjà vu. What the hell? “If you don’t go, I’ll do it.”

They sat in silence a long while.

“Maybe you should,” Steve admitted at last, defeated. “I’m too angry to talk. She definitely didn’t want me to figure it out—not now. Not yet, anyways. How could she let me propose to Peggy? When she knew the whole time.” His guilt tortured him but his rage overshadowed everything else.

“Alright,” Bucky nodded. “She’s gonna wipe our minds soon. I’ll go talk to her while we still have the chance. And you be ready—I’ll let her know what it’s doing to you. She’s gonna have to save the real conversation for you.”

Steve nodded in silent shock. Let Buck go first. ‘Cause I got no idea what I’ll say or do.
For all the nuisance of having Steve serve as her medic over the course of the mission, Zaara had to admit that the regular applications of the balm made a difference. Her stitches had sealed up perfectly, though the thick, ugly scabs made her itch worse than ever. It still proved to be difficult to move her arms however, her mobility limited by pain so much so that she begged a nurse to help her wash and change into fresh clothes. If she kept her arms very, very still, Zaara might have been able to forget she had been hurt but for the itching. She bit her lip in frustration and re-directed her attention to the person standing outside.

_Bucky._

“Knock knock,” he called at the entrance to her tent.

“Come in,” she answered, feeling badly that he would see her arms bared in all their hideous glory. _But that’s the least of my problems,_ she reminded herself bitterly. _He’s come to talk about Steve._

The future Winter Soldier strolled in and stopped himself short. “Phew, doll,” he gave a long whistle. “Hope that feels better than it looks.”

“It’s real itchy,” she replied, wrinkling her nose. “But the balm helped. The pain’s not so bad anymore.”

“Good,” he nodded, the sides of his mouth turning downwards against his will. Sadness poured over him and she could see it in his eyes. “You know why I came, don’t you?”

“He saw my necklace,” she confirmed mournfully, more to herself than to the good Sergeant.

Bucky nodded. “He recognized his Ma’s ring. I swear, things just keep getting weirder and weirder around here.”
“That’s me,” Zaara whispered sadly. “I bring the weird wherever I go.”

“I’m sorry, kitten,” Bucky apologized, hating to see her suffer. “Do you want me to tell him anything?”

“I can see you have a few questions yourself,” she observed patiently. Poor Bucky, getting stuck in the middle of this. It's not easy for him. He really loves both of us. He’s just the best.

“Yeah, well . . .” he drawled, stalling. He didn’t want to pry, but he just had to help Steve, even though he hated hurting her.

Zaara decided to cut him off at the pass. “Look. The more I tell you, the more work it’ll be to wipe it from your mind. No, I am not brainwashing you or anybody else. Yes, Steve was, and is, my husband. There are good reasons why I couldn’t tell him, or anyone else. I had my orders. You’ve got a war to win. We’ll all be together again after the war is over. And I still need to make you forget me, forget this whole mission.”

“And Steve?” Bucky found himself sniffling. The whole thing just made him sad. He did not doubt her sincerity for the cruel wounds on her arms attested to it. They haunted him and he thought of them each and every time he doubted her. Nevertheless, the whole secret marriage and pregnancy thing did not sit well with James Buchanan Barnes.

Zaara looked at the floor. “I’ll talk to him, explain as much as I can. You know I really do love him. This whole mission has been tearing me apart.”

Bucky pursed his lips. “I can see that. Both physically and emotionally.”

“Tell me about it,” Zaara gazed up and down her arms. “I could probably spend the rest of the war apologizing to everyone. But I didn’t plan this mission, I only followed my orders--poorly. It’s done now, I’ve got to wrap up some loose ends and then I have to go.”

“Where are you going?” Bucky asked, worried. “Are you still gonna be in the war?”

“No, thank God,” Zaara met his gaze with relief. “I’m going home. And someday, we’ll all be
there.”

“How will Steve find you?” Bucky asked, perplexed.

“He’ll find me, alright. And so will you,” she smiled.

Then it dawned on him, the strange, exciting possibility. “Are you from the future? The way you talk about things, all your powers, the stuff you say about us being together after the war . . . Is that why you let him propose to Agent Carter? Because you know what’s coming?” Wild questions flew through his mind, but the look on her face gave him all the answers he needed.

“Bucky?” Zaara tilted her head. “Do you want to make my job easier or harder?”

“Don’t sweat it, kitten,” he grinned. I think I’ve heard enough. Telepaths, mutants with claws, Steve being married. It’s all above my pay grade. “I’m gonna head out. I’ll talk to Steve before he comes over. You get ready to see him. You’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“No kidding,” she smiled. “Look, soften the blow if you can. Tell him . . .”

“You’re sorry about all this,” he finished for her. “Always with the apologies. Look, do you need anything? Can I help you with those?” he nodded at the stitches.

“No, I’m okay,” she shook her head, touched by the way he cared about her. She really didn’t deserve it, but he did it anyways. That’s the kind of man he is. “The nurse already came by. Thanks, Bucky.” She moved closer to him, stood on her toes, and placed her hands gingerly upon his muscular shoulders, trying not to trigger the familiar shooting pain in her arms. She planted a most tender kiss on his cheek. “Bucky—you’re the best. I’m going to miss you. But we’ll be together again.”

He blushed slightly and gave her a sheepish grin as he put his arms around her waist and squeezed her tight. “Can I see it before I go?”

“I was waiting for you to ask,” she smiled. Bucky did not let her go but held her close as she released his shoulders and brought her hands down to carefully dig out the ring from under her top.
Bucky took it into one hand, keeping his other snug about her waist, and stroked the elegant engraving with his thumb. “You know, doll, I think I recognized you, too.”

Zaara nodded and smiled through her tears. “It’s hard to pull the wool over your eyes, Bucky Barnes.”

“You’re right about that,” he grinned, dropping the ring back into her hand. “Be strong. He’s gonna need you.”

“I know,” she whispered and they embraced once again.

He still smelled so sweet. And safe.

~

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Steve murmured when Bucky returned to their tent.

“Yeah, pal,” Bucky confirmed quietly. “I saw it with my own eyes. It’s your Ma’s ring. I’m sorry.”

Steve nodded, silent. There was nothing he could say.

“What are you going to do about Agent Carter?”

“Don’t know,” he confessed. “I feel the worst about that.”

“Well,” Bucky drawled. “Don’t forget the big picture. You’re married, you’re gonna be a father. No matter how it happened or what comes next, those are the facts. Zaara’s not so bad, is she? Not hard
“Shut up,” Steve managed a small grin. His best friend had some good points. All this worrying about hurting Peggy was making him forget one small detail: he was going to have a son. The confusion and bewilderment over how these things came to be didn’t make them any less real. He had felt the little flutters with his own hands. But he still needed to speak to Zaara, to hear the truth come from her own mouth. Then he would figure out what to do. For he wasn’t ready, not yet, to admit to the secret thrill, the excitement and joy that he had found her again. That this beautiful woman, with the sparkling eyes and the incredible scent, was actually his. It was a part of himself he could not admit to, could not embrace. Not yet.

“There’s one more thing I should tell you, though I don’t think she’d like it,” Bucky’s voice took on a confessional tone.

“What’s that?” Steve asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Well, she didn’t exactly say it,” Bucky drawled. “But, I had this feeling . . .”

“What?” Steve got impatient.

“You know how she has all these powers,” Bucky mused. “Well, I just had a sense, she knows so many things, seems to know what’s gonna happen, so I asked her if she came from the future.”

“From the future?” Steve hadn’t considered that possibility. With all the bizarre things that had already happened, it actually didn’t seem all that far fetched.

Bucky raised his eyebrows, nodding. “Yeah. I asked her if she did, and she didn’t deny it. Just asked me if I wanted to make her job harder, or easier.”

Steve swallowed, not knowing what to think. Makes sense, in a way. “She’s gotta tell me herself. I don’t know if I’m ready for any of that.”

“Ready or not, here you come,” Bucky cocked an eyebrow. “It ain’t like you got all the time in the world, pal.”
“Steve.” She could form no other words so she moved closer to him and gently placed her hands upon his muscular forearms where they lay tightly crossed over his chest. Her movements were slow and deliberate, constantly mitigating against the pain that would shoot up and down her arms as the cruel scabs dried out and caked against her skin. “Please.”

Steve felt his mouth tug downwards in grief. The feeling overtook him, the sensation of her hands upon his bare forearms making no difference. His sorrow trumped all else. He cleared his throat but spoke not a word.

“Your Pop couldn’t afford a gem, so he got it engraved,” she finally said. “It meant everything to you. Your mother wanted you to keep it in the family forever. It would have been better if I had given it back, but I hated the symbolism of returning it. So I kept it. I was selfish.”

He dropped his arms, but she did not let them go, her fingers trailing leisurely down their length, and only moved closer to him. “Steve, I’m so sorry. I’ve hurt you. I’ve messed up something awful.”

He remained silent and shook his head.

“You need to sit down. It’s a lot to take in. Please.” She led him over to her cot and sat close beside him, her hands releasing his forearms to trace their way down to his enormous hands. She squeezed his fingers gently. He allowed it, though he did not squeeze back.

“So I’m a married man, huh?” he asked in a half-hearted attempt at humor. He would do anything to conceal his sadness for he was so tired of grief. It seemed to be the predominant emotion in his life.

“Yep,” she nodded. “You know, I’m still being selfish here, which is not unusual, but I’m sort of glad you figured it out on your own. I wasn’t allowed to tell you.” She could feel the flash of anger as it overtook him. It stretched beyond the borders of his mental shield and reached her mind loud and clear.
“This is wrong,” his voice fell flat.

“I know. You’ve been asked to trust me blindly. It’s totally unfair,” she agreed.

“Well, it explains a lot,” he finally admitted with some small sense of relief. “But it also makes things worse.”

“I’m so, so sorry about the baby, Steve,” she whispered. “But he’s doing ok. I checked in with the doctor right after the mission. He’s got a strong heartbeat, I feel him kicking all the time. He’s doing just fine.”

“Good,” Steve whispered back, finally allowing a tear to fall.

Zaara carefully raised her arms up over his shoulders to embrace him, his face resting in the crook of her neck, his tears falling into her hair. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the pain in her arms. “Shh, it’s alright. Everything is alright. The baby’s safe, we’re all safe. The mission’s over. I’m happy you recognize me, even though you don’t remember anything.”

“Make me,” he said grimly, his face buried in her silken hair, his nose taking her scent into his body as if it would make it a part of him. “I want to know. Everything.”

“I can’t,” she shook her head. “Trust me on this, love. It’s too much. I can’t just bring back your memories tonight and erase them in the morning. Especially with that mental shield of yours. You have no idea how strong it is.”

“Dr. Erskine,” Steve mused in wonder.

“The man who gave you the serum?” she asked.

He nodded, sniffling a bit. He didn’t want to weep. Not now.

“Please don’t worry about it. That shield serves you well. It protects you. I’m glad you have it.”
“It protects me from you,” he growled bitterly, anger taking over again because it was easier that way.

“Steven Grant Rogers, you have a war to win. And we will be together in the future. That’s where we belong. You’re still in this war and you’ve got to finish it ’cause they won’t make it without you.”

“No,” he protested weakly, but deep down, he knew she was right. He had been given that serum for a reason.

“You know,” she hugged him closer, her breasts pressing against his white t-shirt. “We’re gonna be just like all those other couples, waiting for the war to end. What’s that song about apple blossom time?”

Steve sighed, accepting her embrace. He had never been held by a woman this way before—at least, not that he could remember. “There’s so much I want to know . . .”

“Then stay with me,” Zaara urged him. “We have all the time in the world; at least, we have tonight.” With the utmost care, she moved an arm up so that her fingers could reach his hair. She had wanted to touch him this way from the moment she first saw him on the battlefield, especially since Steve’s hair had not changed all that much. It did seem thicker, shinier, and healthier though he pretty much kept the same haircut. She had missed the way it felt when she ran her fingers through it. The sensation always made him shiver.

Slowly, he began to relax, his anger dissipating enough to start taking in the wonder that they were married, that she was his. The thrill of touching her, holding her body close, distracted him but the questions would not leave him. “When did we meet? Get married? Can you at least tell me that?”

Zaara nodded hesitantly. “I can tell you a little bit, I guess, but not too much. I’m still following orders and I need to save my energy. Remember—I have to wipe all the Howlers tomorrow, and Colonel Phillips, too. I’ll tell you just enough so I don’t have to take away too much.” She paused a moment, thinking carefully before she began. “We met before the war. Before you got the serum, actually.”

“That long ago?” he frowned. Then she knew me the way I was back in Brooklyn. How could I ever forget her?
She smiled, looking him up and down. “You know, I must confess—I miss your old body. You look like a different person now.”

That made him chuckle, warmed him up inside. It was not a sentiment anyone had shared with him before. No one missed his old body, except perhaps Bucky. So, Peggy Carter had not been the only woman to value him before the serum. Peggy. “I just proposed to Peggy,” Steve said out loud, agitated. It was the key reason he had wanted to jump off that plane.

“Shhh, calm down, love,” Zaara whispered, stroking his hair. The sensation soothed him a little and returned him to the present. He had no recollection of anyone touching him like this as a grown man, but it brought back some beautiful memories to Zaara. “It’s alright. Don’t worry. You won’t get married twice.”

But Steve could not stop himself. He recalled what Bucky told him about Zaara being from the future. “Does, does Peggy . . . Does she make it?”

“Yes, yes she does. Don’t worry about her. Things will unfold the way they’re supposed to, especially after I wipe this mission from everyone. You and I will be together after the war, the way we’re supposed to be. I can’t tell you much more than that,” she met his gaze tenderly.

“How can I, how could I ever go back to the way things were?” he trailed off, suppressing his sobs. It was killing him, having this knowledge. “It’s too much . . . I just got you back. I don’t even get to remember you and I have to forget you again?”

“You can and you will. It will all work out. Tomorrow, in the morning after I’ve rested, I’ll start wiping the team. I’ll save you for last,” Zaara smiled sadly, then suddenly became playful. His stubbornness reminded her of his old self, the Steve she fell in love with, the Steve who asked her to marry him. “Curiosity killed the cat, Captain Bossypants. You were the one who had to go and look at my necklace. It took everything I had not to spill the beans, and you came along and just bungled it—all my work, for nothing.” Zaara planted a few quick, feathery kisses over his throat, making him shiver. I don’t even care anymore. This time, it’s not on me, not my fault. He did it. At least I get to kiss him again.

“And Peggy?” he asked, his breath hitching, his body betraying him. He could not let those kisses distract him now.

“Authorized to remember. Everything. Just as I told you before,” her lips lingered on his throat.
“Can she know about us?” Steve asked fearfully, shivering. He felt scared of those kisses, frightened of where they would lead him.

“No,” Zaara shook her head. “Leave her be. You’ve already done enough damage and so have I.”

He was crestfallen. “How’s that going to work? I have to be honest with her.”

“I know. That’s so you, I know you want to do right by her. But it’s not your fault. You let me worry about it,” Zaara insisted. “And you won’t be lying to her. I’m going to wipe your mind so you won’t even know. I’ll talk to her, she’ll understand. We can’t compromise this war. There are way too many lives at stake.”

“I hate not knowing. I hate having to forget you,” he suddenly cried.

“Steve,” she shook her head, changing the subject. “You picked a helluva dame to fall for. Peggy’s great, she’s a perfect match for you. You’d be better off with her, you know. I wish I was half the woman she is.”

Steve pulled away and gave her the funniest look, making her wish for the hundredth time that she could read his mind. “Don’t sell yourself short, Zaara.” He brought his face back towards hers until their lips were so close she could feel his breath.

“Is it,” he whispered hesitantly. “Is it alright if I kiss you?” He looked as if he wanted to very badly indeed.

*I might have known this was where things were headed,* she smiled to herself. “Oh, alright. Might as well,” Zaara agreed, trying to sound more casual than she felt, and his full, handsome lips suddenly pressed down upon her own in a kiss both firm and bold, hesitant and tender, his size dwarfing her, his touch both heavy and tentative. “Ooh!” she breathed and giggled quietly when he was done.

“Was that alright?” he asked eagerly, wanting so badly, even in the midst of all his messy feelings, to please her.

“Yeah,” she breathed. “Wow . . . Feels different from the way you used to kiss me back in Brooklyn.”
“A lot of things are different from when I was back in Brooklyn,” Steve observed dryly, his words teeming with irony. Who was this woman? He felt so comfortable, so natural, being with her, kissing her. Sure, it would feel good to be close to any girl in this new body of his. It called to him all the time, longed for a woman to touch, to hold, and to kiss. All his instincts urged him to follow his desire but he never gave in. Except that one time with Private Lorraine, he reminded himself, the guilt still clinging to him. That exciting, forbidden kiss had come at a high price—and he remembered the way she attempted to plant her body upon his own, claim him like a possession, the hero that rescued hundreds. But Zaara loved him before anyone ever called him a hero, before he was ever known as Captain America.

“Can I kiss you again?” he breathed hopefully, for he could not quell the fire that had woken deep within.

“Hold on, Bossypants,” Zaara chuckled, her chest burning right along with his, her cheeks reddening. “What’s going on here?”

He carefully grasped her hips, allowing her arms to slide gently down his shoulders, her palms resting on his biceps, before he sat her on his lap, making her gasp at his strength. “I just want to be near you. And him.”

“Oh, my love,” she whispered, a lump forming in her throat, her words bringing sweet sensations to his chest. How could she refuse him? Gingerly, she brought her hand down from his bicep, marveling at its hardness and bulk, to grasp his hand. Then she placed it upon her belly. “You want to feel him again?”

“Yes,” Steve blurted out, unable to contain his excitement. No woman had ever called him her love. He stroked her tummy with joy, but he couldn’t feel any flutters.

“It’s easier this way.” Zaara slid off him to lie down upon the cot, her legs resting in his lap. She marveled at his thick, powerful thighs. He was so much bigger than the Steve she fell in love with—in every way imaginable. It was like being with a whole new person. She lifted her tank top up from her waist and folded it over her breasts before she undid the buttons on her khaki pants.

Steve caught his breath, never having been in such an intimate situation with a woman before. At least, I never remember being with a girl like this before, he admitted to himself.

Zaara smiled the brightest smile he had seen from her yet. “Go ahead. Don’t be afraid. He’s moving.
Give me your hand.” Awkwardly, managing the pain as best she could, she guided his enormous hand around her rounded little belly until they found the flutters together. Steve smiled widely and met Zaara’s gaze. They stayed this way a long while until Zaara had an idea.

“Come here.” She wiggled her fingers at him, for it was still so uncomfortable to move her arms.

Steve slid out from beneath her legs and knelt down on the floor. He brought his face closer and she caressed his cheek softly before pushing him gently toward her belly. “Like this?” he asked in surprise.

“Uh huh,” she nodded and pressed his face to her bare skin.

Steve rested his head upon her body in silent communion. For the moment, he forgot everything else and focused completely on the tiny life floating beneath his cheek. The little flutters flared up again until he could feel them pound insistently upon his jaw. “Jeepers!” he laughed.

“Looks like you just got a boot to the head,” Zaara laughed with him.

But Steve only became sad again. He lifted his face to meet her eyes. “When will I get to meet him? Can I be there when he’s born?”

Zaara chose to be honest. “Of course you’ll get to meet him. As for when he’s born, probably; I don’t know for sure.”

Steve bowed his head, his nose touching her belly and allowed his words to come from the heart. “I never knew my own father. I don’t want you to go--either of you.”

She ran her fingers through his hair again, a touch so intimate it made him burn. She hummed. “We’ll be together again, I promise. I know it’s tough. I wish I could do more. You wouldn’t want me to stay here and have our baby in the middle of a war, would you?”

He couldn’t argue with that. He lifted his head. “Can I kiss you again?”

“Darling.” The floodgates of emotion finally tore open and Zaara had had enough. “You don’t need
to ask. You can kiss me as much as you’d like.”

His heart opened wide as he realized his triumph—despite all the losses, all the uncertainty, Zaara finally belonged to him. She was his. He let go of his fear and guilt and moved his face close to hers, kissed her fully on the lips and lingered there, savoring her taste, taking in that scent that had been driving him crazy since he first found her on that battlefield. When he finally released her, aroused and starved for affection, she cleared her throat.

“Had we but world enough, and time, this coyness, lady, were no crime.”

Steve blinked in surprise, warm feelings taking over the whole of his body so that he felt in a daze. “What’s that?”

“One of my favourite poems,” Zaara grinned. “To His Coy Mistress, by Andrew Marvel. It’s about making the most of your time together.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow at her. “Is that so?”
“I wish I remembered you,” Steve murmured, running his huge hand up and down the sides of her body, carefully avoiding the wounds on her arms until he stopped and cupped her breast, squeezing it gently. “I must have loved you like crazy.”

Zaara chuckled softly. “You were a little obsessed, I think.”

“How could it be otherwise?” he asked. “You’re so beautiful. You’re a peach.”

“Oh, I’m just the first girl you ever saw naked,” she joked, trying to lighten things up. *It’s already hard enough knowing I have to wipe his mind in the morning.*

“It wouldn’t have been like that.” Steve shook his head in disbelief, though he had to admit he could not get enough of her body. “Would it?”

“I still can’t read your mind,” Zaara confessed. “But if you’re asking what I think you’re asking . . . Hey—are you just trying to get more information out of me?”

“Always,” he blushed.

“I really do need to get some sleep, you know,” she chastised him. “I’ve got a big day tomorrow.”
“Please,” he begged. “Tell me. I want to know.”

She could not resist him. She never could. “Of course we loved each other. But it took us a long time to fall in love . . .”

“Now, that—” Steve interrupted her. “I find hard to believe. I would have fallen for you the minute I laid eyes on you.”

Zaara sighed. “And here I was, thinking you loved me for my mind.”

“One thing at a time,” he laughed.

“Hey—did you just quote Carey Grant?” she furrowed her brow in disbelief.

“Not a bad guy to quote,” Steve mused. “But I think he was doing Groucho Marx.”

“A Night at the Opera is one of my favourites,” Zaara mused.

“Mine, too,” he confessed with a grin.

“Steve,” she relented, undone by his affection and fighting back tears. “You really did love me. You were the best. You gave me everything you had and never asked for a thing in return. I was . . . I was so selfish . . . It was impossible not to fall for you. You’re the best man I ever met.”

He fell silent and cast his eyes to the ground.

“And I felt so bad,” she continued. “It wasn’t supposed to happen—I was on a mission. You were young, infatuated with me. I was just a girl who paid you some attention at a time when you didn’t get much, for whatever reason. I can tell you now—those girls were stupid. Any of them would have been lucky to be with you. But somehow, you ended up with me. Now look at us.”
“Why?” he asked, a bit confused. To have her love, her body entwined with his own, their baby in her belly—it was almost too much. Steve had never felt happier in his life.

“I’ve messed things up. I can’t explain it. I just think Peggy Carter is a better match for you,” Zaara admitted shamefully.

“Stop saying that,” he whispered, refusing to let her words diminish his joy. “I know I love you. I must have loved you—I married you. And I already love our son.”

“Steve,” she sobbed quietly before she could stop herself. “I still love you. I’m so sorry.”

He curled his muscular arm around her waist and rolled her body closer so that he could kiss her, lingering there, tasting her in his mouth. Wishing he could do it forever.

~

Zara slept the rest of the night in his arms. Steve lay awake most of the time, not quite believing they were actually, finally, together. But her deeply familiar scent, the light wisps of auburn hair tickling his chin, the warmth and softness of her skin, told him otherwise. He planted his great hands upon her bare belly, her body completely nude and asleep atop his, and took in all the flutters and kicks of their son.

This is the best part. They’re everything to me. They’re mine.

Every now and then, he’d make smooth circles over her tummy with his huge palm, or move one of his hands down to tenderly stroke her mound. Not daring to wake her, he lay there with his hardness pressed up against the tantalizing cushion of her buttocks, his wetness coating her, feeling so aroused and warm and loved.

Only half-awake, Zaara could feel his heart beat underneath her head strong and steady. The cot was
small, so sleeping this way seemed to work for them since, given the cruel pain of her stitches, there was no way she could lie on her side. His round biceps framed the soft curves of her body, cradling her between his arms, and made him feel as if she were, finally, his.

He planned to keep it that way. Forever.

“Steve?” she murmured sleepily.

“Huh?” he answered absently, unwilling to be roused from his blissful state.

“Is it time to get up yet?” she asked.

“No,” he insisted, stubborn.

“Aw, it’s morning,” she protested, noticing the tentative wisps of light streaming in from under the dark canvas of the tent. “Someone’s going to find us together.”

“Let them,” he grouched. “We’re married.”

“Hey,” she chided him. “You know that won’t go over. We’re on base. And this time, they really will court martial you.”

He quickly decided to put an end to her protests. Distraction was always a good option. He sat up slowly in the cot, lifting her body carefully with his own, clutching her waist in his arm. “You know, you still haven’t been completely honest with me.”

“Haven’t I?” she asked sleepily, suddenly aware of his hardness against her back. He wasn’t playing fair.

“That dream,” he continued, relentless. “What was that dream of us together?”

She sighed. “That dream again, huh? Well, you were right. It came from me. I missed you. I was being selfish—again.”
“Hmmm,” he smiled, amused. “Wish you’d be selfish like that more often.”

“Steve!” she murmured. “That’s what started this whole mess. That dream made you so suspicious of me, it made you propose to Peggy.”

He sobered, remembering Peggy. His adoration of her was real, even though he knew now that he loved Zaara fully. Completely. “What are we going to do?”

Zaara sighed. “I’ll talk to her and figure it out. You won’t remember proposing to her anyways, after I erase your mind.”

How he hated hearing it. He owed Peggy more than that; she deserved better. “Why?”

“I can’t erase everything that happened in the last few weeks and leave that one memory intact. It won’t make any sense to you, after I wipe your mind. It’s better to clear it all and start from scratch. Don’t worry,” Zaara attempted to turn her head and meet his eyes without disturbing her arms. “I’ll talk to her about it, ask her what she wants me to do. She can have some input, she’ll know you won’t remember. I had a sense she didn’t like your timing, anyways.”

He nodded silently, realizing how he had indeed rushed the proposal, for he had been egged on by that dream. Suddenly, he noticed the way she strained towards him. He clasped his hands about her waist and lifted her like she weighed nothing at all until she faced him fully, still careful not to touch her arms.

Zaara blushed. The only way to sit facing him was to straddle him in his lap. “Steve . . .” she warned.

“Yes?” he answered, implacable. He moved his face closer to hers. “You did give me permission to kiss you without asking.”

He plunged his lips onto hers and drank her in, all luscious wetness and joy. Zaara did not understand how she could be ready for him so quickly, but her pregnancy had been bringing her intense sexual feelings. He lifted her boldly and brazenly, and her body sheathed him in her tight, hot warmth. It was not long before they came together, Steve never knowing such ecstasy was possible in human life, the thrashing waves of it even surpassing his experience in the dream. Zaara squeaked and moaned her release, toes curling and heart pounding, succumbing to all the desires her body
craved. Slowly, she raised her hands and ran them up his incredible chest, feeling every hard ridge of muscle and sinew, every last drop of sweat, her fingers exploring all the way to his throat until her palms cupped his cheeks. She planted a sweet kiss upon his hungry lips.

“I love you, Steve Rogers.”

He murmured sweet nothings into her hair and reveled in her glorious scent, the same aroma that tortured him the moment he first found her on the battlefield. He wanted to drink it in, possess it, make it inhabit his own body and his enormous hands cupped her breasts and reveled in their fullness and beauty. He had never felt anything so soft in his life.

“Steve,” she whispered while they trembled together in the aftershocks. “I have to tell you something.”

“What?” he asked, distracted by her beauty and the burning joy of being together.

“I’ve had a really awful time on this mission,” she confessed. It felt easier to talk with him in this way, with everything still so intimate between them. They could feel each other breathing, their hearts almost beating in time, their pulses racing.

“I know.” He moved his hands from her breasts and cupped her face, looking into her eyes. He hated seeing the pain in there. “I’m sorry. I wish I could take it all away.”

“No—it’s more than that,” she went on, shaking her head. “I made some wishes, had some feelings I’m not proud of. About you and me. Regrets. Things I’d never dreamt I’d feel, and I can’t believe I felt them, after this mission. But I did.”

He frowned slightly, determined to accept her. All of her. Love, to Steve, meant acceptance. “Zaara. We’ve been through a lot together, and I know you’ve been hurt badly. Missions make you feel these kinds of feelings; they come and go. You don’t believe in them. Do you? After last night?”

“Look at you on that plane,” she cried now, bitter. She had not gotten over it. “What you wanted to do—that’s how I know. You should be with Peggy, not with me.”

“How can you say that? Even now?” He couldn’t believe it.
“I still know you and Peggy belong together.” She hated herself for saying it, especially after sharing such intimacy with him. What did she expect? He had lost all his memories of her, he hardly knew her. And yet—he loved her anyways.

“Zaara,” he stroked her cheek one last time then placed his hands on her belly. “That’s my son in there. I know I must have loved you in the past. I married you. And I know how much I love you now. Can’t you feel it?”

Tears brimmed in her eyes but he would not let her turn her face away.

“Oh, God. You still don’t believe it, do you?” he whispered. “There’s nothing I can say that’ll convince you?”

“Your mother’s ring,” she mused, looking down at the chain that still hung upon her neck. They had not put their rings back on. “If you hadn’t found out . . .”

“I’d have missed this time with you!” he broke in. “You’d have left me to fight this war, taken my memory away. No. I don’t regret finding out. Not for a second.”

She sighed and snuggled closer to him. *I’m done with words. I only want to feel. I only want to feel this—with him. Forever.*

~

When they could put it off no longer, Zaara had to practically tear herself out of his arms. “Steve, I’ve got to go to work.”

He watched as she attempted to get dressed, feeling himself die inside.
She dug about the tent and found a pair of panties, her hands grasping them but her arms not quite able to hold them down low enough so her feet could reach the holes. Steve observed her all the while finding it fascinating. He had never watched a woman get dressed before. It was intimate and slightly comical, given her limited range of motion. “You know, I could just leave you here naked,” he cocked an eyebrow at her. She really looked so cute and sexy this way. “Then you’d have to stay with me.”

Zaara frowned. “I don’t need your help, Captain Bossypants.” The panties suddenly floated up into the air. She was about to raise herself off the floor and put them on with telekinesis, but she suddenly felt his powerful hands clasp her hips.

“No,” he said quietly. “Let me.” Very tenderly, he placed each foot inside and pulled the panties up all the way to her hips. Then, he knelt down and planted a possessive kiss just over the cleavage of her buttocks, squeezing them reverentially before he turned her around and kissed her small belly, his lips searching for their son. Zaara tried not to cry.

He let her go and found her khaki pants on the floor. The next moment, he pulled them on her, using his body to balance her. She did not have to use her arms at all. He did up the buttons and when he was done, he stood up. “I’m not quite sure how these work,” he puzzled, picking up one of her bras. But he dropped it abruptly, getting an eyeful of Zaara topless in her khakis, a sight to behold. He found himself cupping her breasts, thumbing her nipples, kissing her neck.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” she shivered, both of them desperately trying to distract themselves from their imminent separation. From having him forget me again, her heart cried. “Steve, you have to stop.”

He planted a last, tender kiss on her shoulder and released her breasts with great regret before he picked the old fashioned cotton brassiere back up again. He slipped the bra straps very gently over her wounded arms and pulled them up onto her shoulders. Then, after a good deal of fumbling, he managed to do up the tiny clasp.

“Hmmm . . .” he hummed, trying not to let grief grip him. Taking her by the hips, he turned her around and gazed upon the gold necklace and the locket and rings that hung upon it. Last night he had been far too busy to pay them much attention. Taking them in his fingers now he played with them a little, his hands grazing her breasts. Even now, he was still distracted by her body. It was so new to him–too new. The thought of forgetting her tore him up inside. How could he give her up now when he wanted her more than anything? He loved her in a way he had never loved anyone before, his love for Peggy notwithstanding. His passion for Zaara went beyond mind, body, and reason. The two rings dangled over his fingertips and he suddenly slipped the larger one onto the fourth finger of his left hand. This one must be mine.
Zaara watched, a lump in her throat.

He decided, in that moment, to fight for her. Fight her, if need be.

*If that’s what it takes to keep her, then that’s what I’ll do.*

~

“Agent Carter,” Zaara began. “I know you’re aware that Captain Rogers and I have had our . . . differences on this mission.”

“Yes,” Peggy appeared unfazed, though she had to admit she found it curious, the tension between Steve and Zaara. Everyone noticed it; it was impossible to miss. She chose, of course, not to interfere lest she get caught in the crossfire. After the incident in the hospital when Peggy had thrown him out of Zaara’s recovery room, the two of them obviously exchanged words and suffered intense disagreements. Peggy was a spy, after all, and not unaware of the brawl that nearly went down on the transport plane, though no one but Steve himself knew the reason for it. And Peggy was not about to ask him. She knew he would tell her, if it mattered. She sensed it had something to do with Zaara’s baby. It had bothered him back when he fought Creed, and Peggy was certain it vexed him further to have to take a pregnant woman on a mission. Zaara clearly had her own way of doing things—just like Peggy. And Steve had an terrible time accepting it.

“I just wanted you to know how much I admire you, and respect you,” Zaara nodded soberly, eyeing the garnet stone. It glinted darkly at her. “But I’m afraid Captain Rogers may not be able to remember giving you that ring after I wipe his mind, and I wanted to prepare you for that.”

“Not remember?” Peggy seemed taken aback. *This was unexpected. Perhaps I should have known.*

“Yes. I’m sorry about that. It may be difficult if not impossible for me to sustain one individual memory when I wipe his mind of everything else that happened in the last few weeks,” Zaara
confessed. “And it wouldn’t make sense for him to remember it anyways, without all the other events that preceded it. I don’t want to pry, but I’d like to know how you want me to handle it.”

“Well,” Peggy rubbed her garnet ring, giving it some thought. “It’s not an official engagement, you know. Only a promise ring.”

Zaara nodded. “Yes. But I’m sure he put his heart into it. He’ll have to screw up his courage to propose to you all over again. I would spare him that, if I could. Still,” she mused, shrugging. “It could be fun to make him squirm.”

“Perhaps,” Peggy admitted, sharing a small but conspiratorial grin with her. “He really has no clue how to talk to a woman.”

“You got that right,” Zaara agreed, laughing. “I’m sorry about this. Let me know what I can do to help. I could still try, you know, to keep that memory. I just wouldn’t want to get your hopes up.”

Peggy looked thoughtful. “No. No—it will be alright. Do your job. I can leave the ring in his tent. Maybe he’ll improve his timing.”

“You know,” Zaara looked hard at the garnet stone again. “He thought of you when he bought it. He really does care for you.”

“Thank you,” Peggy sighed happily, but she quickly put her professional mask back on. Though she appreciated Zaara’s honesty, her personal life was not up for discussion. “So, do you anticipate any other loose ends with the rest of the men? The Colonel? Corporal Howlett?”

“No,” Zaara shook her head. “The Captain is our biggest worry, what with his mental shield—not to mention his sense of stubbornness. I’d have a lot less to erase in him if he hadn’t been so bossy with me.”

“Ah, yes. Captain Bossypants, as you call him,” Peggy chortled drolly. “Well, I’m sure you’ll do your best.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And,” Zaara added earnestly. “I want to thank you, for all you’ve done. On this mission, and for everything I know you’ll do in the future—not just for mutants, but for everyone. It’s been an honor serving with you, Agent Carter.”
“Thank you, and might I say the same, Miss Xaviar.”

~

Zaara had wiped most of the team by eleven o’clock. Only Bucky was left.

And then, Steve.

She had decided not to wipe Logan. She had not been given specific instructions regarding the Wolverine and felt a such strong sense of trust in him that she figured she could tell him everyone’s mind had been erased but his and Agent Carter’s. But she would not tell him the real reason why she would not wipe him: she did not want to be among the many people who had played with his memories. She knew his mind was to be sliced and diced so many times, it hardly mattered what he recalled from this mission.

When she finally came to the future Winter Soldier, she flinched.

“I’m so sorry, Bucky.”

“Why, doll?” his blue eyes twinkled and he actually winked at her.

“I hate making you forget. I just do,” she shrugged, not daring to give him the slightest hint of his future.

“It’s not me you need to worry about,” he raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, you’re right,” she agreed. “It’s him.”
“He’s not going to let you, you know, he told me as much. He’s a pretty stubborn guy,” Bucky nodded. “You know once, back when we were about ten years old, I bet him he couldn’t swallow a penny.”

“Oh, no,” Zaara cringed. “I know where this is going.”

Bucky gave her a shit-eating grin. “I could get that kid to do anything. All I had to do was tell him he couldn’t.”

“Reverse psychology,” Zaara nodded, realizing how easy it would be to provoke Steve. He could never tolerate the word “can’t.”

“What?” Bucky blinked.

_Oops. Guess that hasn’t become part of pop culture yet, _she thought. “You can get him to do whatever you want by telling him to do just the opposite.”

“Yes. You might want to try it sometime. Maybe when you try to make him forget you’re married. Could work,” Bucky grinned, trying not to think naughty thoughts. His eyes travelled up and down her body with deep admiration, and he had to admit he felt more than a little jealous of his best friend. He had never seen Zaara this way before, for he had always thought she belonged to someone else. Knowing she was Steve’s changed his connection to her, somehow, for this was the woman his best friend had kissed, touched, and loved. He tried not to picture it in his mind, but his sense of déjà vu had not been unwarranted. They both loved the same man, after all. *No wonder Steve doesn’t wanna give her up. I sure as hell wouldn’t—not by a long shot.*

“Oh, I doubt that. Steve really likes being a married man,” Zaara blushed, not believing she had just alluded to her sex life to the future Winter Soldier. She tried to block his thoughts from her mind; it was obvious they were headed in the wrong direction.

Bucky actually blushed right back at her, a rare occurrence. Zaara could not recall ever seeing the man him with red cheeks; as far as she knew, he had always been completely shameless. Bucky swallowed, his throat suddenly feeling thick. “Just tryin’ to help, doll.”

“As always. Thank you. You’re an angel,” she said softly, ignoring her embarrassment and planting a tender kiss upon his cheek before she embraced him as best she could with her wounded arms. It
was as if she could never forget that dream she had had on her wedding night, that dream of being
with him, and Steve. The three of them, together. It embarrassed her and excited her at the same time,
and even Steve had admitted he liked her dream, though not in words. She had seen the images in his
mind, visions of him and Bucky loving her, together. But none of that mattered—she adored Bucky
for his intrinsic goodness, even when it was coated in sarcasm. Her feelings for him were intense and
protective, but not exactly motherly. Steve loved him, and that was enough for her. She raised her
palms to his forehead, knowing it would be more difficult to wipe his mind after the enhancements
Zola had already forced upon him, and took the opportunity to scan his changes.

The poor man had indeed been wounded both emotionally and physically, from his imprisonment.
They had not specifically tortured him, not yet, only injected him with chemicals designed to
enhance his physical strength and endurance, a primitive imitation of the original supersoldier serum
given to Steve. Bucky had not changed all that much. Yet. But it was a taste of what was to come.

Zaara reinforced the shield she had given him before completing his mind wipe. Somehow, she
managed to push Bucky’s most tender, personal sentiments far behind the barrier, beyond all human
method or knowledge. Nothing could touch them, no human intervention could take them away; it
would require a telepath on the level of the Professor to break through the bonds Zaara forged in his
mind. It was only a part of him—but a precious slice. The bits that adored her, that felt love for
others; his mother, his sister. Steve. His capacity for erotic love managed to slip beyond the barrier as
well. I guess the Winter Soldier won’t be having much of a sex life, at least, not in the romantic
sense, Zaara mused to herself. Not that he needs it. That’s not what they used him for—I think. It
should be OK. The Winter Soldier was not exactly recruited to be Casanova.

The whole process wearied her tremendously. Finally, she stepped back and released him.

“Huh?” Bucky rubbed his forehead. “Where am I?”

“Return to your quarters, soldier,” Zaara instructed, her heart breaking. She already missed him so
much; his friendship had seen her through so much of her pain and loneliness. “You don’t remember
any of this.”

“I don’t remember any of this,” he murmured before leaving the tent.

Zaara felt her heart go out with him.

Steve was waiting for him outside.
“Hey, buddy,” Bucky patted him on the shoulder.

“Hey,” Steve put his hand over his best friend’s. Bucky’s face seemed blank and a slight bit confused. “You alright, pal?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Bucky cricked his neck. “Just a little headache.”

“Go rest,” Steve nodded towards the barracks. “You got the day off.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Bucky saluted him and disappeared over the hill.

Zaara pulled open the entrance to the tent. “Your turn, Bossypants.”

Chapter End Notes

Glad I could post this by Christmas Eve.
A little gift for my readers XD

Love to you all and Happy Holidays!
Ricochet

Chapter Summary

Steve and Zaara's final confrontation.

With gratuitous sex.

You're welcome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Zaara. Wait.”

His heart pounded. He could have run away and hidden himself from her, not given her the chance to get close enough to do what she claimed had to be done, but that wasn’t his style. Steve Rogers never ran away from a fight. He entered the tent face first, determined to meet her challenge head on like the soldier he was. Despite everything—all the minds she had erased, all the reasons she had given him, he had come to the conclusion that he could not let her go. Keeping her had become a physical imperative. A necessity. His body insisted on it, her scent having become as vital to him as air, as intimate as his own breath. Everything inside him told him she belonged to him and that they belonged together. It was a matter of heart and mind, both. He braced himself and geared up for a fight, for how else could it end?

Steve Rogers never ran away from a fight. “I won’t let you,” he said in a tone both deep and inexorable.

“Won’t let me?” she laughed bitterly. Figures he’d start something. Bucky warned me. It’s so Steve.

“No. I won’t.” His voice sounded resolute and unwavering, as if he had never been so certain of anything in his life. My son won’t grow up without a father, the way I did. And I won’t let the woman I love leave me. The means to achieve these ends were irrelevant. It might not have made any sense, but he did not care. All that mattered now was keeping his memory of her and their son.

“Excuse me?” she whispered, shocked by his arrogance.
“You heard me. I won’t let you do it. I won’t let you erase my mind.” Steve crossed his arms, steeling himself not only against her power, but the way her body called to him for, even in his anger, he still desired her.

“Captain Bossypants,” she spoke slowly, shaking her head in disbelief. Nervous, she skirted the edge of his anger and made a weak attempt to keep things light. “We talked about this. Stop being so stubborn.” God, I might as well tell him to stop being Steve.

“I never agreed to it,” he asserted with authority and narrowed his eyes. “I’m never going to forget my wife and son. Never.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. This was exactly the reason why she had concealed her pregnancy from him in the first place back in Brooklyn. She had never wanted to make him forget his own child. The thought of it made her feel terrible, absolutely sick inside. His resistance only made it worse. But Zaara knew there was no choice. I’m not changing history. I’m not changing World War II. There’s no way out of this. I’ve got to do it. “You’ll remember me someday. I promise,” she pleaded, begging for him to reconsider. “You’ll remember our son, we’ll be together in the future. But right now, the world needs Captain America. And Captain America’s not married. And he’s not a father.”

Steve fought back his tears and allowed his anger to take over. It made him feel stronger that way, though his voice sounded gravelly and trembled with denial. “No. You’re wrong.”

“I’m right,” she snapped, her temper growing short. She was already weary from this day and the toll this mission had taken on her. Pain rippled up and down her serrated arms, accentuating her suffering. “Stop making this so hard.”

“No,” he growled. “I’m not giving you up. Not without a fight.”

“A fight?” she squeaked, incredulous. He’s got to be kidding.

“If that’s what it takes.” He clenched his fists, even though he knew it was probably futile. She was too powerful, but he was counting on that mental shield. She had told him it was strong. If she can’t do it, if she can’t get through that shield, then I’ll have her. I’ll be able to keep them. Even if they leave me. If he thought about it too much, it would break him. He knew all about war, about suffering and sacrifice. But he would not let himself die without knowing he had a wife and son, without knowing he was loved. And if he was going to die in the war, then he would carry them in his heart when he did and he would not let her take that away from him.
“Steve.” Her voice sounded a warning and she found her consciousness practically hovering outside her own body. He was pushing her to it. “I’m not fighting you. There’s no way you can stop me. Enough of this.”

He could see that look on her face; the determination, the resolve. The fear. He looked her straight in the eye.

“I could do this all day.”

Zaara winced. She knew he meant it, she didn’t have to read his mind to tell that much. Suddenly, she was back in her lessons with the X-men, walking the fine line between wielding her power and avoiding collateral damage. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’d rather you hurt me than make me forget you,” he countered. He was taunting her, sensing her weakness, all too familiar with this powerful feeling and the buildup of tension that preceded a fight. Suddenly, something about her reminded him of every bully he had ever met. The woman he loved, the mother of his child, had become something like an enemy to him now, and he had to fight her. And he would not give up. Whatever happened next, well, it was going to hurt.

“You’re being selfish. Remember—apple blossom time?” Zaara made a last ditch effort to appeal to his conscience. But something felt off. Steve had no power to stop her. Did he? Nevertheless, it would be best to have his cooperation for she was so tired. And there was still that damned mental shield of his. She found herself praying for him to give in. Captain America always does the right thing. Doesn’t he?

“I don’t have apple blossom time. I don’t have any time. I don’t remember a thing about us, how we met, how we got married. All I have are these weeks with you, and one night. One night. And you want to take that away from me.” He hurled his words at her like weapons, the accusation in his voice enough to draw blood.

He’s right. Zaara’s heart broke. Nevertheless, she raised her hands and brought them to his face. “I’m sorry.”

“Do your worst,” Steve muttered defiantly, his body frozen to the spot.

At the first brush of his skin she could sense his passion and desire surging deep in his veins. His
pulse raced and her hands fell from his face to clutch his muscular shoulders. Hunger overcame her and she brought her lips to meet his, kissing him fiercely. Possessively. She would never stop loving him. "I love you," she whispered out loud and abruptly released her hold on him, dropping her gaze to the ground.

He had won, for the moment.

Seeing Steve use his full strength of mind to resist her, giving his all just to remember their love, undid her entirely. Her longing for him suddenly overwhelmed her and her body thrummed with a glorious ache. She found herself admitting the truth in a ragged voice: “I want you.”

He smirked and his hands, freed from her hold, reached for her breasts, stoking them deliberately and reverentially. With his eyes locked on hers, he slowly slid his hands down to undo the belt on her cargo pants and they fell abruptly to the floor, pooling at her feet. With his thick fingers, he tore her panties from her body as if they were made of paper and lifted her up to meet his hardness.

“Steve,” she moaned in immediate ecstasy, her tongue seeking his.

Supporting her body weight with only one hand, he unzipped his own fatigues and slipped himself inside her sweet wetness. He kissed her lips and her breasts before clutching her ass with both hands and guiding her movements until she neared her release. It was fast, intense, and inevitable, the speed and pressure of it bearing down like a meteor plunging to earth.

Suddenly, he stopped. Freezing the motion of her hips with his unfathomable strength, he held her so still and so tightly in place that his fingertips would leave their marks upon her bottom, black and blue.

“Steve,” she cried wantonly, nearly in tears. It was too much. He had to let her finish. If he didn’t, she would probably die.

“I could do this all day,” he murmured in a voice dark and dirty, mocking her. But she didn’t care. He could mock her all he wanted.

“Ungh,” she heaved, a tear escaping her, her body ragged and desperate for release. She found herself begging, practically crying for him. “Please!”
He growled like an angry bear, and, when he was finally satisfied that he had asserted his power over her, allowed her to come. Losing himself in the motion of her quakes he abruptly reached his own release, relief flooding him, satisfaction that even though he wasn’t playing fair, he had done his best, used every weapon in his arsenal to have his way.

Still trembling from the aftershocks, he let her go and she slipped down to the floor, quickly summoning her pants. She shivered and pulled them back onto her body with the power of her mind while he watched, then she tossed the ruined panties into the trash can. Her lower body remained coated with his wetness, but there was nothing she could do about it. She looked up into his eyes.

His tactic had certainly thrown her for a loop. Their brief, passionate joining exhausted her, forced her consciousness firmly back into her body, back into the physical sensation of their love and he had taken her there with a vengeance. He knew it, too, for his face smacked of satisfaction, satiation, and a wicked sense of smugness and entitlement. But she would not let any of it stop her. Even with her body trembling from the echoes of his touch, even with her longing to hold him and be held by him and indulge in all the joy that only his arms could bring, she froze him back in place and raised her hands to his face.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and launched her strongest psi-blast yet.

It did nothing.

“Shit,” she whispered to herself.

Steve only stood there, still smug, drinking her in with his eyes. He had zipped his pants back up, but she had left her own marks of wetness upon him, too, laced with the scent of her body’s decadent perfume. It pleased him to know he would find her sweet scent there later, even if she did erase his mind.

Zaara brought her hands down to his chest. With Steve still frozen to the spot, she boldly lifted his shirt to get skin contact. It was not long before the tiny specks of light began to wind their way out of his body, twisting and churning to compose an astral sculpture as they had once before in the image of his original, slender self. As soon as the figure was fully formed, Zaara laid her hands upon its face—the face of the young man from Brooklyn.

Zaara. The astral sculpture opened its eyes.
“Steve!” she gasped, shocked to see him take control of it. How could he do that? What the hell? He’s not a telepath! These were uncharted waters. Suddenly, Zaara wished she had trained longer with the Professor. She still had so much to learn.

*I know you can read me this way,* the sparkling Steve continued, speaking with the slender mouth of the man she fell in love with. *But I’m still going to fight you.*

“You did last time,” she admitted, weak and vulnerable, drowning in the aftershocks of loving him. She had to shove that all too recent memory behind her. “But you lost.”

*Not entirely,* the glittering statue replied, and it was as if the young, wiry Steve she had loved reprimanded her, for now he knew the truth. *I remembered your scent. You couldn't take that away from me then and I won’t let you do it this time, either.* He had the power of guilt and he fully intended to use it. He cast his eyes upon her in retribution, shaming her for daring to conceal their son from him, for making him forget their love.

“Enough,” she repeated.

She took a deep breath and concentrated. Even with her fingers upon his astral body, she could still feel the warmth of his living body, the body that had just made mad, desperate love to her own. “I love you, you stubborn jerk,” she sobbed suddenly, rage entwining with passion, and launched her second attack. It took all of her perseverance to push past his defenses and a great deal of power, far more than she needed with the other men. It only made sense—none of them shared his enhancements, not even Bucky. *God, he’s such a fighter. This is my only way in and he’s doing his best to block it.*

*I love you, too,* the astral sculpture admitted. But Steve fought her every step of the way until she was forced to wipe each day, each hour, and each minute from his mind one by one in a steady stream, a Herculean labour, until it all vanished but for their last night—the one night they had spent together. The one night that meant everything to him.

Steve tried desperately to grab hold of his memories, every last cherished thought and feeling, but he found them slipping away and fading into a cloud of smoke. No matter how hard he tried, he could not bring them back. Rage and defiance burned hot in his chest. In a panic and not at all understanding just what he was doing, he braced himself and used his sheer force of will to launch a counterattack with every stubborn bone in his body. Their one night together had been the best of his life. Making love to her, feeling their son move against his body, knowing love and being loved; it all belonged to him. She had no right to take that away. And his son, what about him? How he loved him already. His son deserved a father that remembered him.
Zaara seized up in frustration, enraged by his resistance and all the punishment this mission had inflicted on her body, mind, and soul. She gathered herself the way she had when she faced the Juggernaut, stunned to have to muster such force just to fight Captain America, a mutate whose strength was supposed to be nowhere near her own. Yet, whether by love or guilt or sheer force of will, Steve held his own against her. He used everything inside him in a last, desperate attempt to keep the memory of that one night his own forever.

Zaara clenched her teeth. She knew what had to be done. Steve gave her no choice. She had never dreamt she’d be battling her own husband like they were foes. Enemies. She summoned the resolve to fight the love of her life with everything she had. She cast off all limits, all doubts, and all hesitation to take her final shot.

In an impetuous bid to end their stalemate once and for all, she blasted him furiously. Recklessly.

Just before his last memories were about to escape him, Steve used his final shreds of consciousness to thrust the energy away, casting it from his own mind and body. Even as Zaara’s final blast overtook him and wiped his mind utterly clear of her memory, he managed to send the residual vestiges of her force to ricochet back onto her own mind.

They collapsed together in a heap.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year to all my lovely readers!

I really hope this chapter worked for everybody. It was the hardest one to write (a psi-battle action scene, what a headache, lol!) and I seemed to have the least amount of time for it with tons of distractions to get in the way. I'm still not sure I'm satisfied with it, but I think I got about 95% of what I needed to across, and I am desperate to wind down this story for the new year.

I also added a little gratuitous sex scene as a special gift for everyone ;-) 

Only a short coda left!
Coda

Chapter Summary

The finale--and a little plot twist to set-up Part III of the series, which will be called All the Time in the World.

Trigger warning: brief reference to Sabretooth's violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A flash of light tore through the tent and an enormous man with ebony skin materialized out of thin air like some strange alien apparition. He wore a shining white uniform and carried a huge, platinum gun. His eyes widened at the sight of the two bodies collapsed in a heap upon the floor where a beautiful woman in uniform knelt over them.

Waking abruptly, Steve nearly jumped out of his skin. He pushed himself up onto his knees and rubbed his head. It felt tremendously sore. Catching sight of the strangers in their midst both conscious and unconscious, he forced out his words. “What happened? Peggy? Who is this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Peggy Carter knelt lower and grasped the unconscious woman by the arm. She had entered the tent only moments before Bishop, having heard some strange sort of blast. To her shock, she had found the two of them unconscious on the floor but had little chance to register it for in the next moment, the man in white armor had appeared out of thin air.

Bishop nodded respectfully to Peggy and Steve. “Ma’am. Sir.”

“Peggy—,” Steve looked around him slowly, his head pounding, and struggled to organize his thoughts. A woman lay beside him, face down upon the floor. He repeated his question. “Who are these people?”

“That’s classified, Captain,” Peggy cut him off quickly. “You need to get back to your quarters immediately. I’ll take care of this.”

“Are you sure?” Steve asked suspiciously. A sense of worry permeated his body. The woman on the
floor did not move. What's wrong with her? “I can help.” The man in the white armor looked imposing, but he was not aiming his weapon at them. And Steve hated to defy Peggy.

“I am positive,” Peggy annunciated each consonant clearly and clung to the woman’s arm somewhat possessively. “Go back to your quarters, Captain. Sergeant Barnes is waiting for you. You’ve been given the day off. Get some R&R.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve nodded reluctantly, stealing a glance at the woman on the floor, her face concealed by her arms. She smells so good. Who the hell is she? What happened to her? What happened to me?

“Captain,” Bishop nodded respectfully. “It’s an honor.”

Steve nodded back hesitantly, taking in his strange appearance. It piqued his curiosity, but his head still hurt and, more importantly, he trusted Peggy. The next moment, he was gone.

Peggy swallowed her panic. The strange armed man’s body language did not seem to suggest a threat. “Sir?”

Slowly, Zaara was roused. An enormous ache pounded in her head and she reached up to rub her brow, the shooting pains in her arms hastily ushering her to full consciousness. She blinked several times. “Who are you?” she asked hesitantly, staring at Peggy. Dimly, she was reminded of the painting that hung on the wall outside the Professor’s office. Agent Margaret Carter? From Shield? Then she caught sight of the tall, ebony man standing before her. “Bishop!” Zaara sang in relief, grateful to recognize someone at last. This tent, everything colored khaki, the vintage style radio on the shelf—nothing seemed right. What was she doing in this place? Camping? She took a better look at the woman at her side. Her hairdo and clothing seemed strangely out of style, somewhat vintage yet fresh and in mint condition.

“Zaara?” Bishop asked cautiously. “Do you know where you are?”

“No,” she whispered. “Where am I?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” he asked, puzzled.

Zaara allowed Peggy to help her to her feet. She furrowed her brow, thinking hard. She could read
their minds, but her head pounded and it was all she could do to stand up. “The Juggernaut. He came to the school. He . . . he chased me. Hurt me. I ran away. That’s all.”

Bishop stared at her.


“Zaara . . .” Peggy began.

“Please excuse me, ma’am,” Bishop nodded politely at her. “But I need to get Zaara home.”

“Home,” Zaara mused, trying to get used to the idea. “You’re taking me home? Will Ellie be there? Where is she? I miss her so much.”

“Sir,” Peggy interrupted. “Is this . . . alright? Are you one of them?”

“Yes,” Bishop confirmed proudly. “I’m one of them. And I’m here to take her home. She’ll be alright. She can have her baby there, see her daughter again.”

“My . . . baby?” Zaara’s eyes widened considerably and she looked down at her still small belly. Her hand traced over it, and suddenly she knew the truth without a doubt. But how? “I’m pregnant? Again?”

Peggy raised her eyebrows. “Yes, Zaara.”

Zaara shook her head in confusion. She reached for Bishop and felt pain shoot up and down her arms, making her panic. “My arms? Bishop—what happened to my arms?”

“You’re healing,” he said soothingly. “You had a bad mission. You don’t remember most of it, but you’re gonna be alright. No worries. I’m taking you home. We’ll fix you up good.”

Zaara nodded appreciatively, grateful he had come. “Bishop, I don’t know what I’m doing here.”
Bishop frowned. “Don’t you remember anything?”

She paused and concentrated, taking a good look around the tent. It was so strange, not at all like home, or anywhere else she’d ever been. “No. Just . . .” Her arms prickled and Zaara glanced down at them in horror. “Sabretooth. I remember. He did this to me.”

“You altered his mind,” Agent Carter stepped in. “You changed him so he could no longer harm innocents. Now he can only hurt himself instead. Zaara?”

Zaara raised her hand, asking for a moment. Her breaths came fast, uncontrolled, and she knew she was on the verge of hyperventilating. She gulped down some air and forced herself to hold it in, then exhaled slowly, counting to ten. “Yes. It was Sabretooth. I stopped him. He tore my arms.” How could I ever forget what he did to me? Even if I wanted to, I don’t think I ever could.

“That all you remember?” Bishop asked.

Zaara squinted, trying to piece together what had happened. All she could see was Sabretooth hurting her, the vile look in his eyes, the white hot pain of his claws ripping open her skin. The memory was entirely physical. It dominated her consciousness until she could see nothing else, nothing but running away from the Juggernaut. She shook her head. “No. Just the Juggernaut, then Sabretooth. This must have been one hell of a mission.”

A strange turn of events, thought the time-traveller. He exchanged glances with Peggy Carter before adjusting the settings on his gauntlet. “I’m sending you home. Now.”

With a flash of light, Zaara vanished.

Peggy Carter caught her breath. “What just happened?”

“Like I said, Ma’am, I sent her home,” Bishop repeated quietly.

“How?” Peggy managed to gasp.
“How is no concern of yours, Ma’am,” Bishop informed her politely. “Just doing my job—same as you.”

“What happened to her?” Peggy asked, worried. “She couldn’t remember . . .”

“I suspect,” Bishop replied, deep in thought. “I suspect she may have wiped her own mind. The trauma of what Sabretooth did . . .”

“Looked a bit like shellshock to me,” Peggy finished for him.

“Yeah,” Bishop agreed, finding the term useful. “Shellshock. She’s got some shellshock. Don’t worry, Ma’am. She’s in good hands. We’ll take care of her.”

“Sir,” Peggy began tremulously, “Are you a mutant as well?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Bishop nodded. “Name’s Bishop. Pleased to meet you.”

“Am I,” Peggy breathed deep. “Am I authorized to remember you?”

“Guess so,” he grinned. “I’m not the mindreader. I couldn’t erase your memory even if I had an eraser. By the way, it’s an honor.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Peggy smiled, nervous yet thrilled to take in the fascinating world of mutants. “Do take good care of her.”

“Don’t worry, Ma’am. We will,” he nodded at her before punching what she guessed must be coordinates onto the keypad of his gauntlet.

He vanished.
Peggy spent the rest of the day wandering across base, marveling at all she had learned. Every now and then she would pass by one of the Commandos and even Sergeant Barnes, wondering at all they had forgotten. They took no particular notice of her, but she made a point of looking very hard at each one of them. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary; they appeared to be the same old Howlers, just regular soldiers enjoying a rare day off.

Steve did not appear.

This mission remained, in many fundamental ways, a mystery to her, but meeting Bishop certainly was the icing on the cake. Briefly, she wondered about his particular powers. He had not volunteered the information and she did not think to ask. Perhaps it was better that way. She thought of Zaara’s memory loss and decided it a cruel irony. Seeing her recall the wounds of Sabretooth especially so, for it was probably the most painful part of the mission for her, as far as Peggy could tell. She knew Steve had been unwilling to have his own memory wiped, but it was for the best. She had been sure to place the beautiful garnet ring back inside his tent. He’d be surprised to find it lying there on the table for surely he would have kept it hidden away somewhere. Peggy was unafraid. She fully anticipated seeing it again and feeling its weight upon her finger.

Late in the day, she ran into Corporal Howlett.

“Hey, toots.” The Wolverine gave her one of his wolfish grins just before chomping off the tip of his stogie. There ain’t many dames on this base, but every single one of ’em looks like the cat’s pajamas. War does that to a man.

Peggy allowed it. “That’s Agent Toots to you,” she mused. The use of the term roused her from her reverie and made her realize an alarming truth. “She never wiped you—did she?”

“Didn’t need to,” he shrugged. “Told me so.”

“Told you what?” Peggy asked, astonished.
“Said she didn’t want to play mind games with me. Said it was best to leave well enough alone. Seemed sad about it,” he mused, missing his friend. *She sure was a beaut. But she told me I’d see her again and I believe her; what else can you do with a mutie as powerful as that? Glad to know I ain’t alone in the world.*

“Oh,” Peggy breathed, sensing more was at play than she had imagined. *Howlett is a good man,* Zaara had told her repeatedly. “Well, alright then,” Peggy nodded resolutely. “Your secret is safe with me, Corporal. No one else will discover it.”

“Good,” he practically growled, their uneasy truce more important now than he could have ever imagined. “You think she wanted it this way? Just you and me?”

Peggy stood still, staring back at Zaara’s empty tent. She glanced up the hill, towards the officers’ quarters where Steve was resting.

“Yes,” she confirmed, a wistful look in her eye. “Yes, I do.” She watched the man otherwise known as the Wolverine saunter away. Just before he vanished over the hilltop, he paused and turned back, giving her a wry smile.

He winked at her.

Peggy smiled back at him, thrilled to share in his secret.

*There are mutants in the world. I know that now. Someone else definitely wanted me to know it, too. Things will never be the same again.*

FIN
Chapter End Notes

Wow, this interlude turned out to be just as long as the first story!
I hope you enjoyed it because I loved writing it and exploring these situations with the
characters, all in the knowledge of their bright, sexy future together, wink wink!

I know this story was dark, and it turned out to be much darker than I anticipated, sort of
my Empire Strikes Back, lol.
Thanks for sticking with it.

I'm already well into Part III, All the Time in the World, which takes place in the present
day, and, because I love you all, I promise to post an excerpt from Chapter One to whet
your appetite if you ask nicely ;-)

All the best to you and yours and a Happy New Year XD

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!