The Ability to Stop

by Aliset

Summary

At the end of Civil War, Team Cap retreats to Wakanda to rebuild and regroup, and to learn what stopping means for each of them.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
I. Sam- That Others May Live

Author’s Note:

This story is canon-divergent. It takes place within a few days of the ending of CACW. Since it focuses mainly on Team Cap, there are not a lot of friendly feelings towards Tony Stark, especially in the early parts of the story. If this is a problem for you, please feel free to hit the back button and move along.

Many thanks to the following, who encouraged me both to start this story and to keep writing: thecommodore_squid; Cluegirl, whose story, “The Cobbler’s Children Go Barefoot,” provided much of my early inspiration about a Sam Wilson who is neither “a good bro” nor the team therapist, but a good man with struggles of his own; escapologistldn on Tumblr who has been a sounding board and a constant source of encouragement since I first mentioned I wanted to write this story; jayleeg, 3fluffies and Moonfire1, who also provided both venting space and sounding boards when needed. Thank you all!

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“It occurred to her that mercy was the ability to stop, if only for a moment. There was no mercy where there could be no stopping.”
- Frank Herbert, “Dune”

I. Sam- That Others May Live

They were nearly three hours away from the Raft when Clint’s jerked head alerted Sam that something was wrong. Wanda and Scott were sleeping; Wanda in the small med bay with an IV which had a mild sedative to keep her calm until the shock collar could safely be removed (Scott had said there was a dead-man’s switch inside the collar and he hadn’t wanted to try removing it until they’d landed) and Scott had promptly pulled an emergency blanket out of storage and collapsed on the floor. Sam wasn’t surprised; none of them had slept much at the Raft and he could feel the sandpaper-grit of exhaustion prickling around his eyes.

Clint was standing guard over the sleeping Wanda and Scott, relaxed as Sam had never seen him since Steve’s muttered They’re safe. They’ll meet you in Wakanda had gentled the tense lines of muscle in his neck and shoulders. Sam stood and ignored his own aches and pains. “What is it?” he asked quietly.

“You need to check on Steve,” Clint answered in a low whisper. “Really check on him. He’s hurt.”

His mouth twisted in a bitter grimace. “I don’t think his meeting with Stark went all that well. And his shield’s missing.”

Clint didn’t miss much; never had in all of Sam’s acquaintance with the man. He thought of how stiffly Steve had moved as they’d carried Wanda into the quinjet, of how, even now, he was sitting in the pilot’s chair hunched over, one arm bracing his ribs. They’d had to go through the control room to escape, and the piles of bodies meant either Steve had help—who else had been there? Natasha, maybe?—or that he’d overdone it, or both. He’d learned in the past year that there was nothing Steve wouldn’t do for the people he cared about, but getting him to rest and heal was very nearly the eighth labor of Hercules. “Roger that,” Sam answered, wondering where the shield had gone but dismissing it—for the moment—as being of not as much concern as the wounded people around him. “You get
some sleep. We’ve got a few hours to go yet.”

“I’ll sleep when I get to Wakanda,” Clint replied with a tired grin and Sam left him to his solitary watch.

The quinjet was on autopilot until they hit Wakandan airspace. Nevertheless, Steve’s hands rested on the controls as if he could possibly change something, anything. “Hey, man,” Sam said softly. Steve’s breathing was shallow and rasping---definitely broken or cracked ribs. “How are you doing?”


“Uh-huh. You wouldn’t be lying to your friendly team medic, would you?”

Steve shot him a look. “Sam, you know---”

“That you have the self-preservation of a lemming? Yeah, I know.” He sat down in the co-pilot’s seat. He’d learned through experience that Steve’s reflexes traveled a lot faster than his conscious thoughts, particularly when he was exhausted, and so, Sam was very careful to telegraph his movements. “You mind if I check your pulse?”

“I still have a heart,” Steve quipped, dryly, and Sam rolled his eyes. He found the pulse point on the inside of Steve’s wrist and noted how cool his skin was, almost clammy. Steve normally ran a good three or four degrees warmer, due to the serum. His pulse was strong but slightly elevated. Beginning stages of shock, and oh, that was not good. There was also not a lot they could do about it right now. The serum had altered most of Steve’s stress and injury responses, so he shouldn’t be in any immediate danger so long as they weren’t delayed in getting to Wakanda. “You’ve got broken ribs. What happened? That from the fight on the tarmac or Siberia?”

Steve’s hands started to clench, then relaxed abruptly. “Siberia, then,” Sam went on. “Pretty bad fight, was it?” Steve flinched, and Sam continued going through his mental checklist. Keep the patient warm and comfortable. Elevate the legs twelve inches or so above the heart. Sam mentally rolled his eyes. In a patient with broken ribs and probable stress fractures? Good luck.

He stood and opened one of the overhead bins. If his hunch was right, Romanoff had supplied this thing much as she would any of the other quinjets, which meant both a fully-stocked medical kit and a supply of blankets. He pulled out one and felt the hard square plastic tablet placed under the blanket. In the year before Tony Stark and Ultron had managed to blow everything so spectacularly to shit, he and Banner had worked out a treatment protocol for Steve and the other Avengers, their medical records kept on a secured tablet in the medikit that traveled everywhere with them. He reached for the tablet, then reconsidered. Tony Stark was a paranoid SOB---with good reason---and the odds that the tablet had some kind of tracking device or software were pretty good.

He closed the overhead bin and thought for a moment, recalling what he remembered of Steve’s normal physical profile (he almost snorted at that one—“normal” when it came to supersoldiers, that is.) Sam had helped organize and index the records and he knew Steve’s healing factor should have taken care of nearly all of his injuries by now. Should have…but hadn’t. Tony had left the Raft for Siberia just a few days ago----and yet the bruising was still visible on Steve’s face and hands. By comparison, Steve had healed much faster after the helicarriers had fallen. Several conclusions were coming to mind, and Sam liked none of them. Shock. Possible internal bleeding, a few broken ribs, maybe a concussion from the bruising on his face. What the hell happened out there?

“I made a mistake, Sam,” Steve told him, low and broken, when he returned. Sam unfolded the blanket around Steve’s broad shoulders and was surprised when Steve didn’t fight him. “He was
gonna kill Bucky and---”

No doubt at all who “he” was. “I sent Tony there as a friend,” Sam hissed, furious. “Is Bucky in the hospital?”

Steve nodded. “Lost his arm. He’s banged up pretty bad…” It wasn’t Sam’s imagination that there was a greyish tint to Steve’s skin. Exhaustion, stress…sometimes Sam wondered if the serum forced Steve to keep going even when he most wanted to stop, or if it was something unalterable in the man’s personality which had kept Steve alive this far.

Sam gazed at his friend. “When was the last time you slept, man? Or ate?”

“No doubt at all who “he” was. “I sent Tony there as a friend,” Sam hissed, furious. “Is Bucky in the hospital?”

Steve nodded. “Lost his arm. He’s banged up pretty bad…” It wasn’t Sam’s imagination that there was a greyish tint to Steve’s skin. Exhaustion, stress…sometimes Sam wondered if the serum forced Steve to keep going even when he most wanted to stop, or if it was something unalterable in the man’s personality which had kept Steve alive this far.

Sam gazed at his friend. “When was the last time you slept, man? Or ate?”

“Why?” Steve challenged and there it was, the “I’m fine, don’t worry about me, I have to be strong for everyone” tone that Sam had heard and learned to loathe over a year’s fruitless searching. He’d heard it too damned often---when they’d missed Bucky by hours, when Steve’s nightmares or his own left them both sleepless and shaking. They’d stopped looking at the last, both of them worn out and worn down by attrition, too emotionally shredded to keep going as they had. They’d called a break and Sam had returned to the states, and resumed his counseling position at the VA along with part-time Avenging while Steve…Steve was as lost as he ever was. The “man with the plan” who thought he’d failed his best friend…again.

Sam couldn’t carry them both. He hadn’t been able to save Riley either. Or Rhodey.

“Because you look like shit,” Sam shot back now, matching Steve’s tone. Steve wouldn’t appreciate being coddled. “Because I know you. How long?”

Steve knuckled his eyes, improbably looking like an exhausted child. “I can’t remember.” He breathed out and Sam tensed, not liking the sound of that harsh rasp. “I got some things I need to say, and I’m not gonna want to tell this story twice,” Steve went on, the curled edges of Brooklyn edging into his speech. “So let’s save this conversation for later, all right?”

“All right,” Sam agreed, relenting for now. “But you’re gonna eat one of the MREs if we have any on this thing---”

“We do,” Steve interjected. “Check the other storage cupboard.” He smiled faintly. “Natasha took care of stocking everything.”

He did and found some of the MREs that Steve favored---though as a child of the Depression, Steve was rarely picky about his meals. Count on Natasha to have noticed which ones he liked. “You’ll need to drink some water at least. And when we land…you need to get seen by a doctor, Steve.”

He nodded once, short; a commander pushing his own weaknesses away. Sam didn’t try to push him further. “How are the others? How are you?”

“Exhausted and dehydrated, but no permanent harm done,” Sam said simply. “At least, I don’t think so. Wanda…she’s gonna be a harder case to treat. I’m hoping some of T’Challa’s scientists can help her once Scott gets that damned collar off. They were…really hard on her. She’s just a kid, man---I keep forgetting how young she is.”

Steve closed his eyes. The faint light from the helm controls reflected in the yellow bruising on his face and guilt washed across his face, certain as the tides. “I’m so sorry, I came as soon as I could---”

“Steve, man—stop it, okay? We all agreed it was the right choice. You couldn’t know we’d end up at the Raft.”
“Didn’t I?” Steve replied. “What do you know about our illustrious secretary of state?”

“Other than he’s a son of a bitch, not much. He was a general, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered. “He got involved with an Army project to recreate Project Rebirth. The Hulk was the accidental result.”

“I’d heard rumors,” Sam said. “But you don’t immediately suspect it, looking at Bruce.”

“No, you don’t. Ross was responsible for the destruction of Harlem a few years back. He blamed Bruce, and chased him all over the planet for years. A man who would do that isn’t going to let a little thing like the Constitution stop him.”

Sam had a sudden vivid memory of Tony and Bruce, crowing over some discovery in their lab. Thick as thieves, his mama would have said. “Wait. Ross hounded Bruce, Tony’s best friend, and Tony sprung that asshole on us right after Lagos?”

Steve speared him with a wry look, as if to say With everything else that’s gone wrong, this is what you’re focusing on? And yeah, things had gone (were going?) spectacularly FUBAR’d but…Sam was an optimist. A frustrated optimist, to be sure, but still, an optimist. “Yeah. I’d have liked some more warning there myself,” Steve went on, dry as dust. He shrugged around a wince; the movement must have aggravated his ribs. “I don’t know what’s going to happen next. Ross has the upper hand right now.”

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They landed in Wakanda just after dawn, in an airfield Sam would have sworn wasn’t there until it suddenly was. The airfield merged with the surrounding jungle so much so that he wasn’t at all surprised to see the gold glint of a jaguar’s eyes as they got off the plane. Man, what is my life, he wondered. Wakanda had always been a paradise in his mind; the one African nation that had fought off colonialization and kept its culture as other countries fell to ruin and chaos. Yet here he was, in the place of all his childhood stories.

They were met by the new king, his retinue of guards, and Laura Barton and the Barton kids. Sam stepped aside, allowing Clint and his family some privacy. “It is good to see you return,” T’Challa said to Steve. Steve nodded briefly. “Thank you for all your aid, Your Highness,” Steve answered. “We need some medical help.”

“I hope you’re counting yourself in that number,” Sam retorted and thought he saw an amused smile cross T’Challa’s face.

“We received your message,” the king said to Steve. “Miss Maximoff will be well looked after.” He paused. “The collar used on her is not unknown to us. It can be removed, and removed safely. You were wise to not attempt to remove it; there was a poison that would have killed her had you tried.”

Sam closed his eyes. Those fuckers. The matching horror and guilt was etched on Steve’s face.

And before Sam blinked—or at least, that’s what it felt like—there was a small group of medical personnel standing just behind the king. Sam walked over to the one who looked like she was in charge and rattled off Wanda’s vitals as he’d done a thousand times before in the field. At least there weren’t RPGs flying overhead, he mused. It felt good, somehow, to be doing his work again. To be healing…even if he couldn’t fly, even if he never flew again, he was a healer.

“She is not the only one injured,” T’Challa continued. “You will allow yourselves to be examined by our doctors.” It wasn’t a request.
Sam thought Steve was going to protest, stubborn as he was, but to his eternal surprise, he didn’t. “I’ve…been told I should, yes.”

Sam was standing closest to Steve and so he had the slimmest of warnings—the wash of grey on already-pale skin, the sudden wobble as Steve’s knees buckled—before the other man fell to the ground.

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The hospital waiting room was clean and bright, not at all like the tired dingy greyness of the waiting room in DC, where Steve had been taken after the helicarriers fell. Sam supposed that if he wasn’t keeping his own eyes open by force of will, he’d have been able to spare some attention for how advanced the facility was. He’d spent a fair amount of time in Stark’s lab, but the hospital in Wakanda was as far above that as the space shuttle was to a biplane.

He paced back and forth, drawing on survival skills he hadn’t used since his pararescue training. Never mind that he’d probably sleep for twenty hours when all was said and done, Sam wasn’t going to leave Steve. After all the man had been through, he just…couldn’t. He wondered if Steve had Sharon’s number, wondered if it was even safe to call her to let her know.

There was a slight, very delicate cough behind him and he whirled, reaching for the knife he no longer had. “Don’t point that finger at me,” Natasha Romanoff said lightly, “it might go off.”

Sam sighed. “What are you doing here, Natasha?”

“I got in a few minutes ago,” she replied, curling up as gracefully as a cat in one of the chairs. “T’Challa…sent a message, saying to come. I had to finish throwing some false leads Ross’s way.” She held up her hands. “I know you want to yell at me for not fighting with you guys,” she’d said. “But…later, okay?”

Sam was flummoxed; yeah, he’d been angry that she’d chosen to side with Stark, but man, he got it too. That the Accords had been sprung on them with only three days for review before ratification wasn’t really her fault. The rest of it, he supposed they could hash out later. “Nah, I’m good,” he said. “You helped Steve spring us from the Raft. We’re more than even.”

She forced a smile and shook her head. “Still plenty of red in my ledger. I’d have been here sooner but I had to get Clint’s family out. Ross was…looking for them.”

Sam had felt himself pale then, thinking of Gideon, of Sarah and Jody, of Mama. All the family he might not see for years. Somehow, even knowing what a raging asshole Ross was, it hadn’t occurred to him that he’d go after their families. “It’s…they’re all right too,” Natasha said. “Maria’s having them watched. We have an evac plan, though. Please don’t worry.”

“Did you see them?” Sam asked. He’d forced himself not to think about his family—a soldier’s necessary habit—but now he felt beaten by a sudden wave of longing: his monthly chess game with Gideon; Sarah’s laughter; the colored beads on the ends of Jody’s braids; Mama’s apple pie.

“I didn’t, but Maria did. They’re fine, Sam.”

Sam hadn’t been a soldier and a VA counselor without knowing just how wide the definition of “fine” was, but if they were healthy and unharmed, that was more than good enough. “Thank you. That’s… good to know.”

She inclined her head towards the general direction of Steve’s hospital room. “What’s happened to him?”
Natasha wasn’t Steve’s next of kin, but the guy who most likely was would be getting the bed right next to Steve in the ICU. “He’s still in surgery. He went a few rounds with a guy in a metal suit who knew exactly how to kill him, and damn near succeeded. Broke several ribs and a few of them splintered. Internal bleeding would have killed anyone else.”

She closed her eyes briefly. “And Barnes?”

“Lost his arm, Steve said. From the shape he was in, I’m guessing Barnes is as bad off, if not worse.” He gazed at her. “You look as tired as I feel. Did you... are you staying?”

“I’m... not sure I should, or that I’d be welcome, considering I attacked T’Challa,” she stated grimly. “I’d do it again, to help them, but...I need to get in touch with Sharon, make sure she’s all right for the moment. We lost contact on my way back here.”

“Do you think she’s in any danger?”

“Yes, but not like that’s anything new. She knew what she was getting into.” Natasha quirked a small smile. “Sharon would have helped regardless. Steve has that effect on people.”

Sam couldn’t disagree. He’d seen the blond runner three, four days before he’d finally worked up the nerve to talk to him, and not long after, both Steve and Natasha were at his doorstep, on the run from Hydra. It had never occurred to him, not once, to simply feed them and send them on their way. And he’d never looked back, not in all the crazy months that had followed. “Right,” he said. “I know how that is.”

“There are warrants out for all of us now,” Natasha said, rising. “I’m going to do my best to muddy the waters as to your exact location, but I need you to do something for me.”

Sam sensed it was not the notorious Black Widow asking, but Steve’s friend Nat. “What?”

“Steve, he...doesn’t know how to stop. This time, he has to. Tony’s working to undo the Accords on his end, but Steve has to do his part to not muddy the waters more. Wakanda is going to have to be your home as long as the king will allow.”

“And you believe him? You believe Tony Stark?” Sam asked, feeling the anger rush through him all over again. “Come on, Nat. The guy tried to kill Steve. He sicced General Ross on us. Put us in the Raft and didn’t so much as blink. And Steve’s shield is missing. You can’t tell me Tony didn’t have something to do with that too.” He held up his hands. “I’m not gonna buy his shit now.”

She folded her arms. “Look, I get that Tony’s made some mistakes—big ones—but if Steve acts, he’s acting in violation of the Accords and it’ll him doing time on the Raft. Or worse. Let Tony at least try to fix this.”

“I get real damned tired of being of watching my friends be on the receiving end of Tony Stark fixing his mistakes. Beside which, have you met Steve Rogers?” Sam asked dryly. “The man doesn’t know how to stop. Something goes wrong, he’s gonna be there.”

“Sam, please.” And that was desperation, from the Black Widow who never, ever begged. “I may not be able to save him the next time.” And there it was, Sam noticed, that streak of protectiveness Steve seemed to inspire in people. He couldn’t blame her, not when he’d felt it himself.

“Ever consider that might not be your job? Steve knows the risks he takes.”

“You’d know,” Natasha said dryly. “But I owe him a debt, many times over. Next time you talk to him, ask him how long he was out of the ice before the Chitauri invaded.”
After a while, Sam dozed—the peculiar kind of dozing alertness he’d experienced many times before, around campfires in Iraq and Afghanistan. He’d long since learned to snatch rest where and when he could, so although the chairs weren’t particularly comfortable, the background hum of ventilation was soothing, at least. It could even have been the low sounds of his wings as they extended, flying high above the desert…

A hand touched his shoulder; he flinched and reached for a weapon just before he remembered where he was. “I’m sorry,” Sam said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “Dr. Nomsa?” She had been the lead healer when they had first arrived and had taken the tablet containing Steve’s medical records and shortly dismissed his warnings about the possible tracking software.

“If you are Samuel Wilson, then yes,” the older woman said dryly. He noticed she was wearing a surgical smock stained with blood. “Your friends are out of surgery and in recovery now.”

The plural---friends---caught his attention and lodged in his exhausted brain. “Barnes was in surgery too?”

The doctor nodded. “Yes. He was…severely injured as well. I expect he will make a full recovery given sufficient time.” She sat down in the empty chair next to him. “May I ask what you know about the serum he and Captain Rogers were given?”

Sam scrubbed his eyes and fought back a yawn. “What I know is on that tablet I gave you. Were you able to disarm the tracking programs?”

“She assured him. “Regarding the serum, I have some questions I wonder if you might be able to answer.”

It had been nearly 24 hours since they’d left the Raft, and closer to 48 hours since he’d slept for more than a few minutes at a time, but his instincts were prickling unpleasantly. He’d once watched Steve set a used bandage on fire after a skirmish and at Sam’s surprise, had merely uttered quietly, “There’s a whole lot of people who want what Erskine gave me. I can’t take the chance.” Recalling Steve’s caution, Sam stated, “I’m not an expert, ma’am.”

“But you worked on these files. You served with Captain Rogers quite closely over the last few years.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Sam found himself considering that the rumored vastness of Wakanda’s intelligence network might not have been an exaggeration. He chose his next words with care. “I did. But I don’t know how much more I can tell you about how it works. Bruce Banner was the closest thing we’ve got to an expert, and even with full access to Howard Stark’s notes, there was always a lot he didn’t understand about how Erskine got the serum to work in the first place.”

She reached up to retie a part of her colorful headscarf. “That’s not…really what I want to know. Sergeant Barnes’s injuries were much more severe yet he seems to be healing more quickly. To your knowledge, is there some reason why Captain Rogers is not healing as rapidly?”

Sam could have listed several: months, years of compounded stress, grief, depression and guilt, the never-ending search for Barnes, Peggy Carter’s death, the battle in Siberia. Steve had been beaten and exhausted before he’d even arrived at the Raft. Aloud, he replied, “Steve has been through a difficult time lately.”

Dr. Nomsa smiled, pinning him with a gimlet stare. “You do not trust me.”
Sam spread his hands. “I don’t think I can tell you much.” And most of this isn’t my story to tell.

“Very well,” she replied. “Then I will tell you what I have learned. The notes on your tablet indicate his unique metabolism requires several thousand calories a day to maintain optimum health. It’s my estimation and that of my colleagues that he has not been eating properly for at least several weeks. Additionally, he has poorly healed injuries predating the most recent ones. We have him on the glucose and vitamin solution Dr. Banner recommended, but it can only do so much. When he awakes, he will need to eat properly at the very least.”

“That’s…not a total surprise,” Sam stated, and indeed it wasn’t. How often had he seen Steve simply stop eating when he was stressed? The serum required tremendous amounts of fuel to function. Without that fuel, the serum couldn’t work nearly as effectively. Steve could go without for a brief period—and had done so, several times—but long-term? Guilt lanced through him. Shit. I should have done something. I knew he was driving himself too hard.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Dr. Nomsa said. “There are concerns among my colleagues that perhaps the serum itself is degrading.”

He stared at her. “But you don’t think so.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to think, Mr. Wilson. There are questions I will have to ask Captain Rogers himself when he regains consciousness. If you would, please impress upon him that it would be in his best interests to be…honest with me.”

Sam almost smiled at that. Steve was always honest, for a given definition of honest, so long as the questions weren’t about him or his health. “I’ll talk to him.”

She eyed him closely. “And have your injuries been attended to, Mr. Wilson?”

“I’m fine,” Sam answered. He was bruised and exhausted, but that was nothing compared to what Steve and Wanda and even Barnes were going through.

The doctor’s gold earrings shimmered in the light as she shook her head. “Your records never said you were a comedian, Mr. Wilson. Let me check you over and then you can go see the rest of your team.”

My team. Sam supposed they were his, at least while Steve was unable to lead them. “Fine,” he allowed. “And…thank you, doc.”

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As Sam had expected, his own injuries weren’t bad at all—some bruising and muscle stiffness, plus a couple of bruised ribs. With stern warnings to take it easy over the next few days, Dr. Nomsa had completed her exam and then guided him to where Wanda, Barnes, and Steve were recovering. “The shock collar no longer works,” the doctor said quietly outside Wanda’s room. “The poison has been disabled. We’ll remove it in the morning, but we had to request an engineer from one of the outer provinces to come. She’ll be here before lunch.”

“Tic-tac—sorry, Scott—is an engineer,” Sam replied, fighting a yawn. Between the time zone changes from Germany to the Raft and now Wakanda, he wasn’t even sure what time it was. “He might have some idea of where to start.”

“I did not know that,” Dr. Nomsa said, making a notation in her chart. She bit her lip. “Mr. Wilson—”
“Sam, please.”

“Sam, very well. I am…troubled by the design of this collar, that your General Ross just happened to have such a thing. It was not made overnight, you understand.”

Sam nodded. “Right, it didn’t seem like something you’d order from Amazon.com.”

A faint smile crossed the healer’s features. “No, indeed. Wakanda…takes a dim view of any device which could ensure the compliance of another person in such a manner. I’m sure you can imagine why.”

“Yeah, I get it.” The accounts of what Wakandan warriors had done to the slave-traders foolhardy enough to invade in the 17th century were still being debated by historians, but the results, he thought, spoke for themselves. “You’re saying this thing…was a slave collar?”

“From your account and that of Mr. Barton, she could not move, eat, or talk unless the collar allowed it. I don’t know what else you’d call it, but I shall be making a full report to the king once the collar is fully removed and examined by our scientists. Should we be able to discover who actually made the device, there will be repercussions.”

“Even though she isn’t Wakandan?” Sam had to ask. Sokovia as a country no longer existed; Wanda was essentially stateless, and a stateless fugitive at that.

“She is here under the king’s protection, as are you all,” the doctor stated.

“And what about that bomb in Lagos that killed some of your people?” Sam asked bluntly. He had to know if Wanda was in any danger.

Dr. Nomsa folded her arms. “Samuel, we deeply mourned those we lost. But many more would have died if she’d let that bomb explode on the streets. The fault lies only with the person who wielded the bomb, not the woman who tried to stop it.” She reached out, touched his shoulder. “Do not fear for your friends, Sam.”

In his exhaustion, his emotions were running too close to the surface, and all he could manage past the lump in his throat was a brief nod. Sam watched as Dr. Nomsa placed her hand against the lock panel on the door, and gestured for him to do the same. The panel flared briefly green, then subsided. “This door opens to myself and now, you. When your friends come to visit, contact the duty nurse and have her page me.”

Sam followed the doctor into Wanda’s room. She was sleeping, curled on her side, and Sam thought again how very young she was—nineteen, maybe twenty, and she’d lost everything, every home she’d ever known. Even if Tony Stark was working to undo the Accords, as Nat had insisted, it could take years before Wanda’s status was resolved. Wakanda might end up being her permanent home.

And as for the rest of them? Sam felt weary to his bones, tired and worn. He’d gone and fought with Steve because he couldn’t have ever signed the Accords in good conscience, but the weight of all the uncertainty suddenly felt like a lead blanket on his shoulders. He was somehow not surprised to feel Dr. Nomsa’s hand on his arm, gently guiding him from Wanda’s room. “You will want to see the captain and Mr. Barnes before you go to bed yourself, yes?”

“Are they…resting comfortably?” Sam asked, concerned. Steve’s recuperation after the helicarriers fell had been brutal, and he either had the highest pain tolerance of anyone Sam had ever met, or he was just resigned to the inevitability of being in severe pain every time he was injured. No drug,
including anesthesia, had worked for very long. In his nightmares, Sam still heard the screaming.

The doctor nodded. “We were able to extrapolate from some research that Dr. Banner had included on your tablet as to what formulas of pain medication might work. Sergeant Barnes was significantly more resistant to it than Captain Rogers, but I do believe they’re at least sleeping without pain now.”

And so they were, Sam could see when he entered their room. Steve was spread out like a giant blond starfish in the bed, snoring slightly, obviously very deeply asleep, and Barnes was eerily still in the bed opposite his ---so they could see each other when they awoke, Sam realized---and was once again grateful for the doctor’s care. It was such a small thing, but considering how much both Steve and Barnes had lost, maybe it wasn’t such a small detail after all. “Thank you,” he murmured as he closed the door behind them. “I don’t think I’ve seen Steve sleep that deeply…ever. And I can’t imagine what Barnes has gone through.”

Dr. Nomsa shook her head. “Nor can I. They have both been ill-used.”

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Sam was guided to their assigned rooms by a young woman who bore a marked resemblance to T’Challa. “I am the king’s sister, Shuri,” she said, answering the unasked question. “I am a member of his guards as well.”

She moved with an easy, almost feral grace that reminded him strongly of Natasha. “I am honored to meet a member of the Dora Milaje,” he stated, hoping he wasn’t mangling the pronunciation too badly.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “You are…not what I expected,” Shuri said finally.

Sam decided he maybe didn’t want to know what she had expected. Her father had been murdered, and her brother had given sanctuary to one of the men once accused of being his murderer. Shuri’s impressions of the rest of them could scarcely have been positive; Sam might be running on literal fumes, but he wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t appreciate what a problem their presence might be in Wakanda, particularly for a king so newly on the throne.

Thankfully, Shuri didn’t seem to want to pursue the topic right then; the fatigue was beginning to hit Sam hard and he wasn’t sure he could hold up his end of the conversation. “We’ll speak later,” Shuri went on. “But for now, here is your apartment.”

Sam wasn’t entirely awake enough to pick up more than just the bare floor plan---a kitchen, a communal seating area, a hallway, two bathrooms, two bedrooms. “When you awake,” Shuri said, pointing to a small digital panel on the wall, “press this button and your needs will be attended to.”

She gave a brief bow and left, shutting the door behind her.

Sam picked the closest bedroom and stripped down to just his boxer shorts and the t-shirt he’d been wearing under his flying suit, and collapsed face down on the bed. The bed, thankfully, wasn’t soft, and he fell asleep almost instantly.

There was a soft knock at the door and he groaned. “Coming,” he managed around a yawn. The knock came again, louder. “Hold your water,” Sam called out.

The door opened. Riley stood there, bold as life. Dressed in his old flight suit, and with the smell of smoke and oil and fire clinging to him. A deep gash dripped blood into his blond hair. “Aren’t you gonna let me in, man?”

Sam blinked, horror freezing his breath. “What…what is this? You died, man. We buried you!”
Riley snorted, a faint shadow of his old braying laugh. There was a half-full bottle of beer in his hand…because of course there was. “Buried an empty uniform and a pile of ashes, more like. You could have done more for me, you know.”

Sam sat down hard in the bedroom’s only chair. He reached out, but caution stayed his hand. “You were dead before you hit the ground, Riley. I would have done something, anything if—”

“You didn’t tell them I was hung-over that night.”

“You said you felt well enough to fly,” Sam retorted, and wasn’t that an old battle? “You weren’t going to go to medical and you said you felt well enough. I trusted you.”

“So you don’t feel anything?” Riley sneered, and yeah, that was an old response too. Riley, deep in one bottle or another (cocky bastard had even managed to get booze in a Muslim country!) picking at him for being too calm. And---Sam realized now---for being able to hold it together while Riley had been falling steadily apart. “You just keep pretending like nothing gets to you.”

Riley, come on, this isn’t you Sam wanted to say. There was nothing of his cocky, sarcastic friend in this apparition, nothing of the good-hearted man who had helped him through the EXO-7 program. It’s a dream he told himself. Wake up.

Riley laughed, cold and chilling. “Still the same old Sam. Can’t take hearing the truth, same as always. I died because of you. Don’t you feel any goddamned guilt about that?”

Sam woke suddenly, his scream freezing in his throat. He started the calming rhythmic breathing he’d taught his vets and tried to focus on the five things he could see near him. The alarm clock. The pile of filthy clothing in the corner. The outline of a dresser. The stars visible through the open window, bright in the Wakandan night. And he could just barely hear the hooting of an owl outside.

The sheets and bedding were sweat-damp and cooling. Sam pulled them off the bed into what he hoped was a neat pile. He’d talk to housekeeping (or whomever ran this place) about getting some more bedding in the morning, but the shivering was making it impossible to do much more than crawl into a hot shower and hope it chased the last of the dream away.

Six months before, he and Steve had been in nameless hotel in an equally anonymous town, when a variation on this same nightmare had slapped him awake, and he’d opened his eyes to see Steve’s blue eyes highlighted in the mellow glow of a cigarette, the chill night air still clinging to him. “Sam,” he’d said. “Do you… need anything?”

What he’d needed, wanted, right then was the one person lost to him forever, to sit down and have that last talk with Riley they’d never be able to have, but instead he’d taken the cigarette from Steve, and gone to the roof of the hotel with him. They’d passed a bottle of warm beer and half pack of cigarettes back and forth until the dawn, saying nothing at all. From then on, it had been their ritual when things went sideways—when Steve didn’t sleep and couldn’t eat, worn and furious; when one demolished Hydra base after another made it plain that Bucky didn’t want to be found. Sam had quit smoking cold turkey once they’d given up looking for Bucky, and so had Steve, but right now, he craved the bite of nicotine like he craved a fat juicy cheeseburger.

He glanced at the clock. It was just after 2am, local time, which meant he’d been asleep maybe an hour or so. It was too late to find any 24 hour cheeseburger joints, assuming they had any in Wakanda, and tobacco was illegal in the country. He dried off and pulled on some warm clothes that were very nearly his size, and dialed Dr. Nomso’s number. “I’m sorry to bother you,” he said, “but do you have anything that can help me sleep?”
“I’m surprised you didn’t ask earlier,” she responded. “Shuri provided your address; I’ll be there shortly.”

She arrived a scant few minutes later, looking somehow totally unruffled. “I’m sorry,” Sam repeated, too quickly. “Did I wake you? I know it’s late.”

A hand on his arm slowed the nervous judder of his words. “Samuel. Sit, please.”

He let her steer him to an overstuffed couch in the living room and watched as she turned on one of the lamps. “You look,” she said finally, “as if you were on the verge of a panic attack. Do you have such dreams often?”

“No for a few months, but…” Sam breathed out, feeling the awful tension around his chest begin to relax some. “It’s been a rough few weeks, Doc.”

She acknowledged this with a graceful incline of her head and he was reminded suddenly of his mama, how she could tuck whole paragraphs into a single gesture. “So His Highness has informed me. Do not forget that you, also, need to heal.” She pulled a small bottle out of her doctor’s bag and handed it to him. “These are sleeping pills. There are four in here. Take one each night. They are not addictive. If you are not sleeping better when this bottle is empty, come see me and we’ll look at other methods.”

Therapy, Sam heard quite clearly, and couldn’t disagree. It’s what he would have told Steve—had told Steve, in fact, only a few months before. They’d stumbled (almost literally; Sam would learn to hate Hydra’s preference for underground bases before they were done) into an old Hydra base which had unexpectedly yielded some intel in the form of a battered old ledger. By his indrawn breath, Sam knew Steve had recognized the handwriting. “Zola,” he’d spat with a venom Steve reserved for the worst of Hydra. The ledger recorded a number of initial experiments the scientists had performed on the Winter Soldier. The earliest dates in the ledger began not even a week after Barnes had been picked up by Hydra.

Steve had made an inarticulate, animal sound of rage and pain and Sam wasn’t nearly fool enough get between his fists and the concrete walls. When his fury was spent, Steve had slumped down onto the dusty floor, bloody hands loose at his sides. Sam knelt next to him, and chose his words with care. He knew what would happen next: Steve would apologize profusely, go silent and hurting for the next few days, and for the next month or so, he’d take chances that would have killed ordinary folks. Until the next base, the next set of records, the next empty lab.

To his shock, Steve had spoken first. “Sam, I… look, I recognized some of those tests.”

“From Natasha’s file?”

“No. Those were…some of the same tests they gave me, after Erskine died. Zola… must have obtained some of Erskine’s original research.” He leaned his head against the wall. “To think that Bucky had to go through that because I had…”

Sam winced. “Yeah, I get you. Look, we can’t stay here, but here’s what we are going to do. We are going to leave this place, blow it up, whatever. Then we’re going to go eat a nice dinner that didn’t come out of a box, and when that’s done, we need to talk.”

Steve met his eyes, unflinching. “You think I need a therapist.”

“You need a therapist, Steve,” Sam agreed. “You need help. And I can’t be that kind of help for you. I’m your friend—you know that—but I can either be your friend or your counselor. I can’t—I won’t—
--be both. It wouldn’t be right, and you know I’m dealing with my own shit too.”

“I get it,” Steve said. “Besides, I need a friend more right now.” A half smile with absolutely no humor in it quirked Steve’s mouth. “I was seeing a therapist, for the first few months after I… awoke.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Yes,” Steve replied. “SHIELD insisted. She turned out to be Hydra. Lord only knows what she told them.”

Abruptly, Sam realized Dr. Nomsa was studying him quite closely. “Where did you go, just then?” she asked gently.

Sam chuckled. “Let’s just say you’re not the first to suggest that one of us needs therapy.”

“Good,” she told him, rising. “Because in my professional opinion, you all do. We can discuss those options once you all are recovered.”

***

He awoke late the next morning, disoriented and sore with the kind of exhaustion he’d not felt since his pararescue training. Sam doubted he’d moved much in the night, but jetlag was---as he remembered only too well---brutal. He stretched out slowly in the bed, trying to avoid muscle cramps and slowly sat up, looking around him.

There was a small desk in his room---carved, as most things seemed to be here, with patterns of intertwining sigils that could be purely decorative or could be (he reflected with a snort) some Wakandan version of “Yankee, go home.” He stood and hobbled over to the desk and saw that there was a cellphone and a tablet on top of a sealed envelope. The cellphone, he noticed, was already activated and programmed with the cell numbers of the other ex-Avengers and Dr. Nomsa. The interface wasn’t much different than the iPhone he’d owned or the StarkPhone Tony had made all of them carry at one point, and it wasn’t tough to see that he had one message.

When he tapped the flickering button, a hologram appeared. He’d begun to wonder if he was going to see Princess Leia when the image stabilized into the form of a matronly woman clothed in a brightly-colored dress. “Greetings, Samuel. My name is Cendisa. I am the king’s director of households. He has directed me to make sure you and your friends are comfortable. If you require anything, please call or text me.” The image winked out and Sam sat down heavily at the desk.

Yeah, he imagined himself saying, can you tell me how I’m supposed to fix all this?

He felt as adrift as he hadn’t been since the long months after Riley’s death. Steve and Barnes were still in the hospital, and while Clint at least had his family with him, Scott was a convicted felon---Sam would see his family a long time before Scott would see his daughter again. And that wasn’t even talking about Natasha, or Sharon. Or Wanda, who had been so still, so silent at the Raft that they’d feared for her mental health. How was anything going to be all right for them, ever again?

Sam rested his head in his hands. In a memory, he heard a ghost of a whisper, Riley gently chiding him: “You gonna carry the whole world on your shoulders, Atlas? Shit goes bad sometimes, Sam---it’s not always your fault.” He breathed out once, twice and lifted his head. They didn’t have time for him to get mired in what had been…he had to focus on what was going on now.

The envelope under his hand, it turned out, was an English-language list of local restaurants and markets, while the tablet had a number of translation applications, but what struck him the most was
the lack of depth, very little on Wakandan literature and history, nothing beyond the basics of language. It was reminiscent—and not in a good way—of the cultural briefings he’d once received for Iraq and Afghanistan. They’d never had enough about the culture, never enough to truly understand, only just enough to get through and hopefully survive without inadvertently causing an international incident.

Sam could understand that, in a time of war, but they were refugees here and the impression he was left with was: you may stay here, but this is not your home. Sam thought of the Pashtun he’d picked up from the local children in Afghanistan and breathed out. He could do this, he could learn and adapt. He had done this before, but he’d never had to do it as a refugee. He’d worked with refugees while getting his MSW. He’d never thought he might be one himself.

Focus. Focus. Sam dug out a pencil from the desk drawer and began to write a list on the back of the envelope. Routines were good, he’d told his vets, and lists were a good way to track what you’d done that day, what needed to be done. Time for him to take his own advice.

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After a shower and a shave, he contacted Dr. NomSa, who informed him that Steve and Barnes were still unconscious and Scott was helping the Wakandan engineer remove Wanda’s collar. “Contact Cendisa,” she suggested. “It’s going to be some hours before anything happens here and you might as well talk to her in the meantime.”

Cendisa, it turned out, had been responsible for provisioning all of the living areas assigned to the ex-Avengers. “His Highness told me of your needs, and left me to handle the rest,” was how she’d put it. “Is there anything you can tell me? Cultural, dietary needs?”

They’d all taken turns cooking, back at the Avengers compound, so Sam was at least on familiar ground here. “I don’t know anything about Scott, but Wanda is Jewish and she tries to keep kosher as much as possible. Once Steve wakes up, I’m afraid our food bills will go up a lot.”

She smiled, a sphinx’s curve of the lips, and said, “We are not unfamiliar with the nutritional needs of enhanced people, Samuel.” She made a notation on her tablet. “What about Sergeant Barnes?”

Sam had seen the pictures taken of Barnes’ apartment in Bucharest, photos taken as evidence back when half the world had believed him to be the UN bomber. There had been some food in the cabinets, and he’d been spotted buying plums in a market. “Nothing I know about, but he should be out of the hospital soon.”

Cendisa nodded. “May I speak bluntly?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“You may not be welcomed by many people here.”

Sam blinked. “I had…concerns about that, yes.”

“The king is young. He lived in your country for some years and graduated from some of your best universities. Foreign influence is not something we tend to tolerate and there are those who believe he is too much of your world and not enough of ours. Tread…very lightly, Samuel.”

Sam nodded; message received and understood. “Of course. It would be good if we could discuss what precisely ‘treading lightly’ means here. Nobody wants to misstep.”

“His highness is in the period of formal mourning for his father. Once that is completed, I expect
there will be more discussions of your presence here. In the meantime, please rest, and recover.” She rose then. “I am off to see Clint Barton and his family. Should you have any further questions, please consider me your liaison as well.”

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Sam spent much of the remaining day puttering around, getting the lay of the land, keeping a lid on his unease by dint of staying busy. There was a garden outside, covered in shade trees and with a small water fountain in the center, a good-sized library on the floor just above him (which would have been great, except most of the books were in Wakandan.) He checked in with Dr. Nomsa, and was told that both Steve and Barnes were still asleep, long after the effects of their sedatives should have worn off. “How did you manage that?” he asked. Steve had never slept well, at least not that he’d ever seen, and Barnes…well, if Steve had sleeping problems, he could only imagine what Barnes’ were like.

“It’s not magic,” she responded. A beat, then, “Well, maybe it is. Miss Maximoff came by.”

“She’s all right? The collar is gone?”

“Yes. Mr. Lang came by and with our engineer, was able to safely remove it. She went to visit the captain and Sergeant Barnes and did…something.”

Considering the footage of the explosion in Lagos, Sam knew how that must have looked, the eerie red light emerging from Wanda’s fingertips, the inward-focused gaze as she directed her powers. It could be unnerving to watch, even for people who knew Wanda well. “She wasn’t trying to hurt them.”

“No, of course not. She told me she eased their dreams so they could heal.”

“That’s…quite a skill,” Sam said, reminded of Steve’s account of his first meeting with Wanda in Sokovia. And yet, Dr. Nomsa did not seem concerned. He tilted his head, studying her. “You’ve seen this before.”

Dr. Nomsa raised her eyebrows. “We have people with similar abilities, yes. I was surprised to find that Ms. Maximoff knew of the art.”

Sam refused to rise to the bait, to say what he knew or suspected about Wanda’s abilities. They were guests here, refugees, but they lived on the goodwill of a king only days on the throne who might be seeking any advantage. They weren’t going to launch themselves from the frying pan into the fire, not if he had anything to say about it. “I don’t think she even knows the extent of her talents,” he said carefully.

“Your loyalty does you credit,” Dr. Nomsa said with a smile.

Something she had said earlier came to mind, and Sam recalled T’Challa’s incredible, almost unearthly, speed and strength. The man had nearly taken down Barnes and having sparred with Steve, Sam didn’t think an ordinary person could have done it. “You’ve got enhanced people here in Wakanda, don’t you?”

“Ah, Samuel…when you speak with the king, ask him. You will find his answer most…illuminating.”

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Night was beginning to fall by the time Sam returned to his apartment. He made a quick dinner of
fruit, bread, and some sort of cheese, then went out on the balcony to eat and try to make some sort of sense of what he’d observed. He wouldn’t have called it reconnaissance so much as training that had resurfaced during the hunt for Barnes. If Steve was all tactics and brutal, efficient grace in battle, Sam was the one who handled the logistics, the one who found their lodgings and made sure they ate, answered Nat’s messages (he was never quite sure how she’d found them, but it was Nat, after all) and generally tried to make things run as smoothly as they could when searching for a brainwashed ex-Hydra assassin.

Sam leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the stars, so different from home. There was remarkably little light pollution, considering how big Birin Zana was, and that was an interesting detail. Cities needed light, after all---what had made the people of this city decide to prioritize the night sky over something as crucial as light? There hadn’t been much in the way of streetlights during his short walk back from the hospital, just enough to illuminate the streets but not much more. That led to another memory, of Steve’s unerring ability to see in the dark, even in what had looked like pitch darkness to Sam. Some common ability of enhanced people?

He stretched, feeling a yawn coming. It wasn’t really late, local time, but as the doctor had reminded him pointedly before shooing him away, he was also healing. Sam turned away from the window, just in time to hear a soft, angry conversation.

“….so what’s your plan, Clint?” Laura Barton---it had to be her---asked, her voice echoing from the courtyard below. “Just…hide, raise our kids here? Or go on the run? You don’t even know if they’ll let us stay here---did you even once think of tour kids before you decided to go be a hero again?”

Sam had known Clint only long enough to see he was something of an amiable disaster on a good day; to think that the man had a wife and a family had been a shock. Clint said something Sam couldn’t quite hear, but it didn’t calm his wife. She spat out a number of curses in an impressive array of languages, still in that soft, steely voice. A mother’s tone, Sam recognized, calculated not to wake sleeping children. There was a pause, then, “You told me you were done, Clint. I left SHIELD, why couldn’t you just….stop?”

Clint came closer, or at least Sam thought he had. Sam flushed, realizing he was eavesdropping and should just step away and leave them to their argument. But Clint’s next words brought him up short: “Laura, I was retired, yeah. But Nat got a good look at the Index, and they wanted to put you on it. That was worth coming out of retirement.”

“Why would they want that?” Laura asked shortly. “I’m not special, not a mutant or---”

“Sure, babe. You were one of the best translators SHIELD ever had---did you ever think they wondered why you were so damned good? Didn’t you? How many languages do you speak now? Twenty? And how long does it take you to learn a new one? Hours, a few days?”

“You never told me,” she accused. “Why?”

“You wanted to be normal,” Clint replied. “And I wanted that for you. But the Accords were always a dirty business---”

A sound like a muffled sob, then, “And Nat signed them. Signed something that would put us under constant suspicion for the rest of our lives---”

“She didn’t want to lose all her family,” Clint responded. “And she figured they could always fix the Accords after the fact.”

“Steve didn’t trust that,” Laura said, and Sam had to smile at that---Laura might not be too fond of
Cap, but she clearly respected Steve.

Clint laughed. “Steve doesn’t trust any government. Which, I have to say, there are three helicarriers rusting in bits in the Potomac to say the guy isn’t wrong.”

That wrung a reluctant chuff of amusement from Laura. “No, I’ll give him that. However, we are going to have a few words once he’s out of the hospital.”

It wasn’t possible to hear a shrug, but Sam could picture Clint doing precisely that. “Fine, but just… keep it to English, French, German, Russian or Irish, will you? He speaks those fluently.”

“Amateur,” Laura Barton scoffed, but Sam could hear the smile behind it. “Fine. You win. But we need to meet with the others soon and figure out where we go from here. I won’t risk our kids losing their home a second time because we’ve outstayed our welcome.”

Sam turned away from the window then, feeling the tide of anger and hurt beginning to rise. He knew this anger only too well; it had made him reckless years before, and the taste of it, the acid burn, was familiar. After Riley’s death, he’d spent a long time flailing, mourning what was lost, what would never be found. And now… Another home. They’d all lost a home. And for what? In the end, Tony had nearly murdered Steve and Barnes (Sam was a pararescue; he knew what the pattern of injuries suggested, even if Steve wanted to deny it) and the Accords? Well, they were still in force until---if you believed Nat, and Sam did, up to a point---Tony Stark or somebody decided to rewrite the thing. We were heroes and now… The injustice of it nearly choked him.

He sank into a nearby chair and breathed out, letting himself feel the anger before his older, wiser self reminded him that he was very much not alone on the list of people the Universe had fucked over. Steve. Barnes. Wanda. Clint and Laura. Scott. Even T’Challa, who was mourning a beloved father and who must have thought he’d have years before he had to become king. They were all here, wounded and damaged, but here. Alive. The anger, the hurt, was real, and he’d have to find a way to deal with that too.

He gazed around the room. There was a TV on a stand---nothing terribly big or complicated, but Sam hadn’t turned it on. He knew full and damned well what a shitstorm Tony Stark was capable of stirring up and he could only imagine what the news back home---back in the US, he reminded himself---what they might be saying about him---a black ex-pararescue who’d taken up with Captain America when he’d “turned traitor” and “gone rogue.” Yeah, he could almost hear Fox News now….

Resigned, he turned on the TV and was surprised to find some very familiar faces staring back at him. Sarah. Gideon. Mama. Friends, co-workers, clients from the VA, standing in a large group of other protestors…protestors against the Accords? Sam shook his head, astonished. Sarah stood just behind their mama’s shoulder holding a sign with the lettering partially blocked, but her usually calm face was fierce. A newscaster stuck a microphone into his mama’s face. “Ma’am, can you tell me why you’re protesting here today?”

Darlene Wilson stared at the man. Sam knew that look; she’d worn it pretty much his entire teenaged years, when he’d said—or was about to say---something incredibly dumb. “I am protesting against the Accords,” she said with fierce dignity. “My son is a hero and the government has him and they won’t say where he is!”

That got the reporter’s attention, and Sam’s too. Nat had talked to his family but of course, she must have been very vague on the details of his location. Before the reporter could speak, his mama continued, “My son, he’s the Falcon, flies with Captain America and the Avengers. These Accords--.” she fairly spat the name with a venom Sam hadn’t heard since she’d encountered Riley’s parents at
his funeral--- “they want to make people, people with abilities, register with the government. He’s a hero, why are they persecuting him?”

The reporter looked as if all his birthdays and Christmases had come at once, Sam thought sourly. “Captain America is a fugitive from justice, ma’am.”

Gideon---broad-shouldered and easily four or five inches taller than Sam---entered the frame. “My brother is a good man. If he’s with Captain America, there’s a good reason for it.”

Sam stared at the image of his brother on the screen. Dressed all in black with his clerical collar, he was impressive and as solid and impenetrable as a mountain. Gideon was the oldest by almost seven years, and for all their shared DNA, their contact was mostly through their monthly chess game and the occasional email. He’d never thought Gideon would have protested on his behalf. “And another thing,” Gideon went on, and his voice was almost drowned out by the protestors around him, “this thing with the Accords? Time was, we put Japanese-Americans in internment camps because they looked different. Or kept my ancestors as slaves because we were property. I don’t blame my brother for not signing and I’d urge anyone who is considering signing to actually read it closely.”

Sam heard Steve’s words in the echoes of Gideon’s statement. “Sam, do you see this?” Steve had asked, furious, gesturing to his copy of the Accords, which was dog-eared and tabbed with colored flags for all the worst parts (there were a lot of colored flags. When Steve did a thing, he did it thoroughly.) “Jim Morita’s family was in Manzanar while he fought with us. We didn’t learn a damned thing.”

The segment on the news ended, and was doubtless turning to whatever celebrity news counted for “important.” He did a rough calculation on the time---the segment had been live, and it looked like early afternoon there. Maybe there was a way to get a message to them, to let them know he was fine, that they shouldn’t draw attention to themselves on his behalf. He sent a quick text to Cendisa: *Forgive me for calling you so late. Is there a possibility I could speak with my family, safely?*

He received a very polite, automated text back saying that Cendisa would return his message in the morning. It was getting late anyway, and he should probably try and sleep. Then his phone vibrated: *Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes will be awake soon.*
II. Steve- The Other Side of the War

Whenever Steve was asked, “What was it like?” he’d had to hide a flinch, because the “it” could be only one of two things: piloting the Valkyrie to what he’d assumed would be her watery grave (and his) or reawakening in the 21st century. With a lot of harrowing experience (we couldn’t have Captain America unable to answer a simple question because the memory of the ice stabbed his lungs, now could we?) he’d learned to evade the question with a USO smile and some deflection.

But if people had really wanted to know—as opposed to, say, validating some historian’s viewpoint or a tabloid’s breathless coverage, Steve could have told them. Of course he could have. His memory had been good before the serum; after it, he couldn’t forget anything, no matter how much he wanted to. So yes, he remembered what it was like, thinking he was going to die, and then the experience of waking up in a world which was never supposed to be his.

Scent had been the first clue. The air had been too clean, too sterile. The New York he remembered had been full of scents—rotting garbage, the rusty smell of cold water taps, Bucky’s cigarettes, the thin watery soup they’d always managed to conjure up if there wasn’t anything else to eat, the laundry drying on the line. Everything had a scent and in this strange room, reeking of scents that were too chemical to be real, Steve had known immediately that wherever he was, wasn’t home. Not his home.

Now, the first thing he noticed was the smell of flowers—tropical, not the poor hothouse blooms which never had a scent for all their beauty. Tropical flowers that had no place to grow in a cold New York or DC winter. So he wasn’t there. Then he heard the faint strains of the “Trouble Man” soundtrack and couldn’t prevent the flinch. No, this couldn’t be right after the helicarriers, struggling to breathe against knife and gunshot wounds and it hurt so bad---Bucky---

“Hey, man. Hey,” a deep voice soothed. Sam’s voice.

Steve opened his eyes. “Where---where---?”

“Wakanda,” Sam answered. “Specifically, the Royal Provincial Hospital of Birin Zana. You’ve been out for two days.”

Normally, when he awoke it was a sudden thing—he was asleep, then he was awake, with no grogginess in between. Now, though… “Why do I feel like I could sleep for another week?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Because you haven’t been sleeping at all. You’re worn out, man.”

He shivered, cold with the ice that never entirely left him. And that was…well, he knew it was crazy. Wakanda was tropical most of the year; even the monsoon season was warm. Yet here he was, shivering. He rubbed his hands together and didn’t miss Sam’s sharp stare. A falcon’s eyes, too clear---

A warm, heated blanket settled over his shoulders. Steve looked up to see a tall, stately woman wearing a doctor’s coat over a brightly colored dress. “I am Dr. Nomsa,” she introduced herself as if nothing at all was amiss, as if he wasn’t sitting there in a hospital bed in a tropical country trying very hard not to let his teeth chatter. The warmth of the blanket should have felt oppressive, but instead, it was comforting. “Would you like to sit up?” she asked.

Steve nodded and felt his vision grey out almost as soon as he swung his legs over the side of the
bed. That brought back some more unpleasant memories—being weak from fever and illness, starving and exhausted. “Lot like old times, eh, punk?” a dry, raspy voice said from the other side of the room.

It was Bucky, leaning against the pillows on the back of his bed, Brooklyn drawl as strong as ever. “Don’t move too fast,” he went on, the warning edge sharp. “You look like hell.”

Considering that was coming from a man who’d just lost an arm to a repulsor blast, Steve had to smile. “Yeah, jerk. I feel—”

“Like you haven’t eaten recently?” Sam asked, too calmly. There was a look in his eye that reminded Steve why his father and brother were preachers. “Something like that,” he allowed.

The doctor came to sit next to him on the bed. Not too close, but at least she wasn’t staring down at him. “We will discharge you to your home shortly. When you are there, you will find I have scheduled a session with a nutritionist tomorrow afternoon. It would be…very much appreciated if you would listen to what he has to say. He began working on his meal plan almost as soon as you and Sergeant Barnes arrived.”

Steve didn’t know how to tell her that food simply didn’t taste good most of the time; he tended towards the protein bars Bruce had developed for his post-Hulk snacks because they at least had enough calories to keep his metabolism going, but there had been plenty of times when he’d forgotten to eat even those. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but words failed him.

The doctor gazed at him, not with pity or scorn, but simple understanding. “Captain Rogers, may I call you Steve?”

Some of the building pressure in his chest released, the feeling that he’d landed in yet another place which only saw the icon and not the man. “Yes,” he managed, aware that Bucky was watching, and Sam, and he couldn’t break down here, now. He had to be strong for all of them, after what he’d done to them.

“You have fought in many battles, Steve,” she said gently. “Do not be afraid to seek help with this one.”

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Discharge turned out to be a simple process; an electronic signature on a tablet, and he was done. Bucky was going to stay another day in the hospital for observation, and the doctor had been quite firm in her instructions: go home. Sleep. Eat. He hadn’t wanted to leave Bucky and would have argued more for his release, but Bucky’s, “Go home, punk” had gone a long way to making him feel a little better. It was becoming obvious that Wakanda’s medical care was more advanced than they were used to and if they could help Bucky, then…

An automated car picked them up at the hospital to deliver them to the small apartment building where they were apparently now living. “I think this where they put diplomats when they’re in residence,” Sam was saying. “It’s…you know, it’s not half bad.” Steve didn’t dare say what he was thinking—that however nice it was, it wasn’t home—because he’d done this to them, made them refugees. Last thing they needed was him complaining.

Sam turned to him. “Hey, did you know there are protests against the Accords in the US?”

Steve shook his head. “No, I hadn’t heard.”

Sam nodded. “You weren’t the only one to draw the internment camp parallel. Saw my family on the
news, and they weren’t alone.”

“Wow. That’s…something.”

“It is, it really is,” Sam said, chuckling. “Mama and Dad marched with Dr. King back in the day. I don’t know why I was surprised to see her there.”

Sam kept up his amiable chatter as the car took them home and Steve was grateful for it. He was beyond tired at this point and if Sam stopped talking, he was afraid he’d simply fall asleep again. And no…not that, not where the dreams would always, always follow. “How are Wanda and the others doing?” he asked.

Sam hesitated. “Clint and Laura and their kids have the apartment just underneath ours. They were…arguing the other night.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it,” Steve answered. It was yet another bill he’d owe and have to pay---Clint’s family, uprooted from their home.

“Wanda and Scott have the apartment on the other side of the courtyard,” Sam went on. “I haven’t seen much of either of them, to be honest. But Dr. Nomza said Wanda has been visiting you and Barnes.”

“Yeah. I think she did something so our dreams weren’t as bad,” Steve replied.

Sam gave him a speculative glance, which he ignored. Sam knew, better than most, how poorly he normally slept. The car came to a gentle stop. “This is us,” Sam said, opening the door. “I’ll show you around, then I’m going to make something for you to eat, and then you’re going to bed.”

Sam, trying to take care of him, after all he’d done to him and the others. “Sam, I---”

“Steve.” And there it was, the stern tone which brooked no arguments. “Steve, man, listen. Your blood sugar is somewhere in the toilet, you haven’t been sleeping regularly and you’ve had the worst few weeks of anybody I’ve ever heard of—which, since we’re talking about you, is saying something. Are you really going to tell me you don’t need to stop for a while and heal?”

Steve breathed out. “I can’t stop, Sam. I can’t.”

Sam folded his arms. “Yeah, well, you also can’t fight in this condition. You know it.”

During the war, he’d gone into combat with worse injuries than a few cracked ribs and a concussion, but that was wartime. “All right,” he relented.

“Good,” Sam said, nodding. “Now just keep being all reasonable and shit so you can feel better.”

“I don’t think anybody’s ever accused me of being ‘reasonable and shit,’” Steve said, feeling a smile emerge from somewhere.

“No, I guess not,” Sam said, chuckling, as they entered the apartment. “Maybe try it on for size, see how it fits you.”

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The apartment was, as Sam had said, not half bad. It was also three or four times the size of the cold-water walk-up he and Bucky had once shared. “How many bedrooms?” Steve asked.

“Two,” Sam replied. “Oh, that’s…interesting.” He scratched his chin. “Perhaps they…made some
assumptions?”

Steve shrugged. It wouldn’t have been the first time he shared a bed with Bucky. “It’ll be fine, I’m sure. Don’t want to cause trouble for anyone by making them rethink our quarters.”

Sam nodded as if he wouldn’t have expected any other response. “Steve, you know, I’ve never asked…”

“Yeah,” Steve replied. He couldn’t even begin to express how much he’d appreciated that, in a world where everything he said and did was presumed to be something the public had a right to know. The gossip rags had been awful in his day but were beyond venomous now. He sat down heavily in one of the overstuffed chairs in the living room, seeing, if only for an instant, another world long since vanished. “Bucky and me…when I was fourteen and he was fifteen, we saw one of our neighbors get killed for bein’ queer. Not a damn thing we could do.”

“Jesus,” Sam said into the silence. “Steve, I---”

“We never talked about it. Not once,” Steve said. His stomach roiled, remembering the gory mess of what had remained of David’s body, the tight grasp of Bucky’s hands on his arms as he’d muttered, _Nothing you can do, Stevie, leave him be, he’s gone._ Gentle, quiet David with one leg short from polio, David who was sometimes Jane if you saw him early in the morning. And through the telescope of years: Bucky’s raw fear that David could have been him.

There was some quiet after that, the kind that Steve treasured about Sam. The other man could be a chatterbox, could wear his ears out given half a chance, but he also had the kind of social antennae Steve still struggled with at times and knew when to let the silence rest. Finally, after what could have minutes or months, Sam spoke. “I’m sorry, man.” He clapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

***

Dinner (or breakfast; his usually reliable time sense was totally shot by this point) was the first thing in weeks that had taste—albeit, the kind of taste that left him gasping. “This tastes like Bruce’s radioactive curry!” Steve managed once he’d stopped coughing. Bruce had once made huge bowls of the stuff, marked with the radioactive sign so the other Avengers would know it was spicy. He wondered where Bruce was now, if he was safe, if he’d managed to slip the net of both Ross and the Accords.

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “Didn’t seem that spicy to me.” He tore off a slice of flatbread. “Here, try this.”

Steve did, and was pleased to find the burning sensation slowing down some. “Makes me wonder,” Sam went on, “are your taste buds more sensitive too?”

They had done so many tests back then. He couldn’t remember all of them, even with his eidetic memory. Everything had been such a blur after Erskine’s death and half the time he’d been recoiling after so much change so fast. Even the simple joy of breathing without wheezing had left him stunned and reeling some days. “Maybe. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Sam poked at his curry, added more to his plate and Steve’s. “Must have been hard, getting used to that.”

Steve eyed him carefully. There was the voice of Sam-his-friend and then there was Sam-his-friend-and-his-deeply-concerned-voice. He was a good counselor; Steve had seen that at the VA, but Sam
never tried to be his shrink, and Steve was beyond grateful. Emerging from the ice and into SHIELD’s custody had felt like one long stretch of people who had wanted him to talk, to confess how he felt when anything other than grief and loss had been beyond him. People didn’t talk about feelings in his day and being asked to do it in the bright, sharp-edged future had caused the words to clot thickly in his throat.

Still, Sam’s concern was warming, and he was a good friend, so Steve answered. “Yeah. It really was. I tripped over everything for months, ran into walls because I wasn’t used to being so tall. And the Army had me under constant medical supervision. Nobody—including Erskine—really knew what all of the effects would be of the serum. And considering the last person who’d used the serum also got a removable face in the bargain…”

“Hell of a risk, wasn’t it?”

Steve shrugged. “I wasn’t supposed to see thirty, Sam. I didn’t think I had much to lose. Another winter might have finished me off---most years, it was a near thing.” He glanced down at his plate, startled to find that he’d finished the curry. “Sam, you sneaky bastard.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, arms folded. “I never claimed to be anything but.”

***

The sound of a heartbeat---juttering, terrified---woke him from an uneasy doze. Steve had tried the bed---the over-soft, too large bed---and had finally dragged one of the blankets and a pillow onto the floor. He considered that it might look weird---SHIELD had certainly thought it was, when they’d confronted him with pitying looks and, “Captain Rogers, you don’t have to sleep in the tub when you have this nice soft bed”---but that had been four years ago and Steve wasn’t the same person.

The heartbeat, of course, was Sam’s. The nightmare was also Sam’s. Steve sat up and walked into Sam’s room, in time to see him bolt upright, eyes wide and staring, arms flailing. “Rhodey, no! NO!”


Sam relaxed, subsiding into the sweat-damp sheets. “Steve?” he asked hoarsely.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

Sam scrubbed his face. “I’m sorry, man. Woke you up.”

“No, don’t be. I wasn’t really sleeping that well.” And that was nothing more or less than the truth, one more thing he didn’t need to hide from Sam.

Sam scoffed. “Look, it’s okay, you can go back to bed. In the bed,” he added pointedly.

Steve nodded, accepting the deflection for what it was. “Can I ask you something?”

“You want to know about Rhodey,” Sam answered. “Yeah. He got hit. Accidentally, I guess, but he lost power in the suit and hit the ground at near terminal velocity.”

“It was like you were up there to watch. Again,” Steve said softly, understanding exactly how much that must have twisted him up inside. “Sam, I am so sorry.”

“I came back to see if I could help. There’s a protocol for treating people with possible spinal injuries, you know…and when I landed, Stark stunned me with one of his repulsors. Didn’t even get
a chance to do what I was trained to do. Next thing I knew, I was being shoved into a cell at the Raft with a bag over my head.” His mouth twisted. “Never even got a chance to help Rhodey.” He shrugged, looking small and defeated. “For all I know, he didn’t make it. Just like…”

Riley Steve heard. There was nothing he could do or say to reassure Sam about Riley---at least, not that Sam didn’t already know—but Rhody was a different matter. “We can get a message to Nat, maybe check the news and see. There has to be a way to find out what happened.”

“You know they brought in Rhody to do the first pilot evaluations on the EXO-7?” Sam asked. “Riley and I were four, five days out of PJ school, still exhausted as all hell, and when he showed up in those prototype wings…man, he showed you how it was done. He made us want to fly, and now…”

_He won’t fly again_, was unspoken. “I’m sorry,” Steve said again, and the words had never seemed so futile. He remembered Rhody and Sam bickering over the Accords like they had so many times before, only to declare a draw and get a beer.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Jesus, I’m tired.”

“I know,” Steve replied. It was a soldier’s tiredness, heavy and leaden.

“The doc gave me some pills,” Sam went on. “I…think I’m going to take one now. Would you stay until I go back to sleep?”

In his mind’s eye, he heard Dugan ask Morita to keep watch over an injured Gabe _because we’ve spent fifteen hours getting out of this goddammed forest and if I don’t get some sleep I won’t be able to see straight_. And then he and Bucky taking Morita and Dugan’s watch because that’s what you did when your friends were hurt, when they needed you. “Of course, Sam. Of course. You didn’t even need to ask.”

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Steve awoke a few hours later, sprawled in the chair at Sam’s bedside. The air was heavier, denser, somehow and there was the sound of rain, oddly flat against the roof. He stood and made his way over to the window that overlooked the outside of the building, and beyond that, the jungle. There was a very subtle distortion in the air, as if the buildings were covered by an invisible barrier of some kind.

_They’re keeping the rain out of the city_, he realized, stunned. Wakanda had not been an unknown, even in his time; there had been stories and about the “magical Negro kingdom” (Steve winced now at the phrasing) but very few of those stories had ever made it past the pulps Bucky liked to read. And Steve thought of his shield, wherever she was now, and wondered just how Howard Stark had come by that much vibranium…The thought led to others, of Bucky with his nose in a book, always reading, _We’re going to the future_. They’d never foreseen this particular future and yet, somehow, they were here.

Behind him, Sam stirred. “Big as you are, how do you never make noise?” he asked around a yawn.

Steve smiled; it was a familiar question. “It’s raining,” he said.

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “Yeah, so I hear.” He stared outside the window. “Steve, is the sky kind of…wriggly?”

“Yes, I think it’s…well, I think it’s a weather barrier to keep the rain off the city.”
“We sure aren’t in Kansas anymore,” Sam murmured. “Look, it’s still damned early. Are you up or are you going to try and sleep some more?”

“I’ve already slept more in the last two days than I’ve slept in the last month,” Steve admitted.

“Unconscious doesn’t count,” Sam retorted, with a Lord, deliver me from dumb-ass supersoldiers under his breath, which Steve pretended not to hear. “And my ass is too tired to argue with you. Gimme a couple of hours before I have to see your smiling face, okay?”

Steve grinned. He wasn’t so tired that he couldn’t tease Sam. “Sir, yes sir!”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Get out of here, Army.”

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The thing was, Steve didn’t really need a lot of sleep, not since the serum. Sometimes---a lot of times---only needing four hours at most had been useful, particularly during times of crisis (or on days ending in “y” he could hear Sam saying, which…fair enough. Crisis had become his normal.) But the switch from crisis to non-crisis wasn’t one that flipped easily. He’d said as much to Sam once, after a parade of sleepless nights broken by inchoate dreams of snow and ice, and Sam had stared at him. “Steve, you’re a soldier. You’re the soldier. Of course you can’t just turn it off.”

Sam had worked with him then---breathing exercises, some visualizations (though Sam had cracked up at “Focus on your happy place…” Steve had struggled for a scowl and failed miserably and they’d both broken up laughing.) And if they didn’t exactly put Steve to sleep now, at least he was able to relax a little more. He breathed deeply and tried to focus on what was going to happen next. Bucky would be released that day, provided he’d passed Dr. Nomsa’s evaluation, and this afternoon, the nutritionist she’d recommended would be stopping by. After that…he couldn’t see his way through that particular forest. They were safe (for now) in Wakanda, but there was just so much unknown to contend with too.

He glanced at the cellphone and envelope which rested on his nightstand. Sam had one too, and there was a duplicate set on the other nightstand--Steve assumed one of them was for Bucky. If he comes home. If he wants to live here. If. If. If. The spectre of the trigger words, Zemo’s goddamned book, which Nat said had not been on him when he was turned over to the UN, haunted them still. And would have to be dealt with, if Bucky was ever to be safe anywhere again.

But Steve couldn’t deal with that now---there was literally nothing to be done until Bucky came home, until they all had a chance to talk through what had happened. Until he had a chance to explain to them what had happened in Siberia.

He turned his head on the pillow and winced---the fractured cheekbone was knitting together well, but it ached fiercely in counterpoint to the headache between his eyes. He eventually slipped into a light doze and dreamed, not of Bucky falling or the shield striking Tony in the face instead of on the chest plate, but of dancing with Peggy in that smoky dancing hall.

It should have made him feel uneasy---Wanda’s visions had, after all, hit everyone at their weakest points and had torn at barely-healed wounds. But he only had eyes for Peggy in a blue dress Steve had never seen her wear in life. “Oh, my darling,” she whispered. “You look quite done in, love.”

Steve looked down at himself, surprised to find he was still wearing the loose pants and t-shirt he’d worn to bed. Not for the first time, she’d left him speechless. “I, well…”
Peggy chuckled, that dry whiskey-and-cigarettes laugh which promised all sorts of mischief and which he’d never quite stopped hearing whenever he thought of her. “Steve, this is your dream. If you’re comfortable in pajamas, who am I to say no? It’s quite a look.” She leaned against the bar. “What’ll it be, soldier?”

“Peggy, I….you’re dead.” He winced---couldn’t he be better with women in his dreams?

“Always one for the smooth pickup lines,” she replied with a grin that noticed and dismissed his embarrassment. “Still, I suppose I am quite dead. Sounds dreadfully boring and I’d much rather talk with you.”

Steve had read Lewis Carroll as a boy. *Six impossible things before breakfast* didn’t even begin to describe this feeling of disjointed disbelief. “I’ve missed you so,” he said simply. “You were---Peg, I don’t know if I ever told you what it meant that you were still alive when I came out of the ice.”

Her hand against his cheek was warm. “Don’t you think I knew? Steve, I had a whole life after you---and it was a good one, for the most part. Seeing you again…well, you were and are the greatest of blessings.”

Peggy handed him a whiskey in a cut crystal glass and he stared at it for a time, watching the light refract. “Peg, I’ve done some awful things.”

Her lips thinned---*ruby red*, Steve thought, dazed---and when she spoke, it was with a cutting edge that he well remembered; Peg’s patented “don’t be a fool” tone. “I very much doubt you were the only one at fault. You forget, I’ve known Tony since he was a child. I was his Aunt Peggy for a time, though I doubt he remembers that now.”

“What happened?” Steve asked, curious.

“Howard,” she said simply. “Howard and his drinking and his obsession with you. We argued at the last, and he cut me out of his life and Tony’s. Howard was…always the final word at home. Not even Maria could argue with him.”

Steve thought he must have been told this, at one time, but Tony had never been one for confidences about Howard. “I wanted to be there for him,” she went on. “Maria did her best, but Howard was the last man on earth who should have been a father.”

That much he had known, and he’d never gotten the chance to tell Tony that his first response upon finding out Howard had a son had been horrified disbelief. “Howard was never good at focusing on anything or anyone that wasn’t himself.”

Peggy nodded. “And the angry child who couldn’t get his father’s attention for the brilliant things he was doing, became an angry man who pushed everyone away before they had a chance to hurt him or leave him.” She took a sip of her drink---scotch, he noticed. “Steve, how much of the Winter Soldier material was accessible in the SHIELD data dump?”

“A lot of it,” he answered. “Nat kept the…the training videos from being uploaded---they were encrypted anyway, but she didn’t want to take the chance---but the kill orders made it through. She only had a few minutes---”

“She did yeoman’s work,” Peggy said. “I would have loved to meet her.” She took a deep breath. “To get on with it, then. Steve, Tony had access to the Hydra kill orders on his parents. He could have found out what the Winter Soldier had done, only he didn’t want to know.”

With all the weird certainty of dream, Steve knew this was only his subconscious offering him a
relief he wasn’t sure he deserved. “I should have told him, Peggy. He deserved to hear it from me.”

“Natasha also knew,” Peggy went on, relentless. “But you’re the one he blames. And you’d think a man who had been tortured would understand, at least a little, that James had no choice.”

James, not Bucky---Peggy never called Bucky anything but James, disdaining the childhood nickname, which had cause no end of confusion with James Morita and James Montgomery Falsworth in the bunch. “When Zola implied the Winter Soldier was involved, I…Nat and I talked about it. Zola was a liar and we couldn’t just go to Tony without some proof. When she left after Fury’s funeral, it was on me to tell Tony and I just couldn’t. That’s on me. I should have been stronger.”

“…and proclaimed the time was neither wrong, nor right,” Peggy quoted. “I want you to consider something, darling—” And oh, he remembered the low rumble of her voice saying that word, the warm silk of her skin, the rasp of a camp blanket spread out in a French barn because she couldn’t wait and neither could he—“That you were afraid Tony would kill James if you told him, and that he nearly did once he found out.” Her hand reached out to clasp his, warm and solid, not the fragile aged hand lined with the tracery of purple veins. “Steve, you weren’t right to keep the truth from Tony. But neither were you wrong. One day, Tony will understand that, even if he never admits it.”

It was a humbling thought, that there might be understanding one day, if not forgiveness. “I just… God, Peg, it all went so wrong.”

“Things do,” she said crisply. “And you always felt things so deeply. Even that first day I met you, jumping on a dummy grenade—Steve, you cannot take the world on your shoulders. Nor shoulder all the responsibility for this farce.”

He let himself lean into the comfort of her touch. “I really miss you, Peg.”

She kissed him gently and he smelled the scent of rosewater, faint but lingering. “I miss you too. But now you know where you can always find me.”

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“So what did you think of them?” Sam asked later that morning, gesturing to the packet in his hand.

Steve picked up the thin packet of documents---maps, menus, a brief (very brief) cultural analysis---and considered. “After we---the Howling Commandos, I mean---became an official unit, there was some talk about a meeting with the Wakandan king to…influence him towards the war effort. Even then, there were rumors about Wakanda’s power, and the Allies needed all the help we could get.” He snorted. “Some generals thought that showing them an integrated unit might influence them towards our cause. Never mind that we were the only integrated unit in the entire service and I managed to hold on to Gabe and Jim Morita by the skin of my teeth most months because those same generals didn’t want a ‘Jap and a Negro’ there---only they weren’t as polite about it.”

Sam whistled. “Man, that was pretty ballsy of you. Defying generals? Integrating your unit almost ten years before it became official policy? Damn, you really don’t mess around.”

Steve shook his head. “It wasn’t just me---Colonel Phillips did a lot to keep Gabe and Jim with us too.” He paused, remembering his shock that Gabe, who was the only one of them who’d been to college, had been a cook in his other unit. “Gabe spoke three languages and was working on a fourth when he enlisted after Pearl Harbor. Jim Morita should have been a doctor, as skilled as he was. I didn’t pick them to make a point. I picked them because they were the best men for the job. I’m glad President Truman eventually integrated the military, but it was a ridiculous barrier anyway.”
Sam looked like he wanted to say more, but instead asked, “So what happened with Wakanda then?”

“Nothing came of it—-the Wakandan ambassador sent a very pointed letter telling the Allies to more or less forget his country existed, and since they’d told the Axis nations the same thing, they ended up neutral during the war. But I think there was more information in the materials I was given than what they’ve given us now. This…tells us something, but not nearly enough.”

Sam nodded. “I thought so too. Either they don’t get much in the way of refugees or there’s a whole lot they don’t want us to know.”

“From their point of view, I can understand it, though,” Steve replied. “We’re an unknown quantity here, and T’Challa is very new to the throne. They may see it as the less information, the better.”

Sam poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Steve. The caffeine was more or less useless, thanks to the serum, but Steve wasn’t going to deny there was something comforting about the feel of the warm mug in his hands. “I agree, but you know that’s a two-edged sword. We also don’t know what we’re walking into here, and we don’t have enough context to know if we’re temporary guests or if T’Challa’s hospitality really extends to us staying here for years.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “You think it could be that long?”

“With the new administration, and with Stark making friends with every asshole who wants to throw us all back into the Raft? You bet I do. We have to think for the long term. If Wakanda isn’t going to be it for us, then where do we go next?”

“Somewhere the US doesn’t have an extradition treaty,” Steve answered. “And also places where Stark Industries doesn’t have a foothold.”

“I can probably count both of those on the fingers of one hand and still have some fingers left over,” Sam grumbled with no heat. “Still, it’s a good starting point.”

Steve studied his friend in the morning light. The bruising on his cheekbone still bloomed purple against Sam’s dark skin and he was moving stiffly too. “They checked you out at the hospital, right?”

Sam sighed heavily. There was a whole language to those sighs, Steve had learned—-exasperation, fondness, barely restrained anger. Now it was just…resigned. “Steve. I’m not going to tell you I’m fine. But Dr. Nomsa checked me out and it’s just bruising and muscle strains right now. It’ll heal.”

“What did they do to you there?” Steve made himself ask. What did you endure because I asked you to? Because I left you behind?

There was an angry twist to Sam’s mouth. “I was a black man in a secret underwater prison and I knew where you’d gone. What do you think they did?”

Steve reached out to grasp his wrist, cautious as always of his strength. “Sam. Tell me.”

“Why? So you can torture yourself with something else that wasn’t your fault?” Sam demanded, pulling free. “This shit’s on Ross, man, and whoever backs him. You didn’t put us in the Raft.”

“I left you all behind,” Steve said. “I should have seen—-”

“You got a crystal ball I don’t know about?” Sam retorted. “Come on. Think this through. You told Tony—-told Stark about the other supersoldiers on the tarmac.”
“I tried,” Steve replied, feeling the frustration well up all over again. “He didn’t want to listen.”

“We ended up at the Raft because someone had to stop them, and if it wasn’t going to be Stark---which it clearly wasn’t---then it was going to have to be you and Barnes.” Sam’s voice softened. “Steve. We knew you’d come for us. It wasn’t even a question. We just had to hold on until you did.”

The captain in his title had been an honorary one until after the rescue from Kreichberg; it had begun as a publicity stunt because “Captain America” sounded better than “Private America.” Steve had rarely felt equal to the icon whose symbols he’d worn, and in the face of Sam’s faith in him…. “I don’t know what to say, Sam.”

Sam grinned. “Well, bless my soul. Steve Rogers, speechless?”

Steve laughed. “Mark it on your calendar.” He took a sip of the coffee, which was---per Sam’s usual---just about strong enough to stand up and salute. “So…are you going to be okay with Bucky living here?”

“Sure,” Sam said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you two reminded me of Bucky and his brother and sister in the backseat of his dad’s Model-T,” Steve answered. “Right before Mr. Barnes said he’d turn the car around and just see if he didn’t.”

“I thought Bucky’s family wasn’t wealthy,” Sam said.

Sam had revealed, somewhere between month three and four of their attempt to locate Bucky, that he’d been fascinated by the Howling Commandos as a kid. “After the Crash, nobody had money. This was before. His dad was a grocer and his mam sewed clothes. After he lost his business, there were a lot of months she kept them afloat.”

Sam tilted his head. “You know, you’ve got a bit of an Irish accent under all that Brooklyn.”

“I didn’t speak English until I was six,” Steve replied. “My mam came over after the Easter Rebellion; she was hell-bent I wasn’t going grow up not knowing the language, and the devil take anyone who argued with her about it. Irish was for family, English for everybody else.”

“The history books never mentioned that,” Sam said.

“Bucky’s dad was Jewish; his mom was Romanian,” Steve went on. “But I know what the history books say about that: he was the eldest son of a couple of God-fearing Protestants who never ever attended meetings of the local Socialist Party of New York.”

Sam blinked. “Wait…they were…and she was Romanian? With a name like Winifred?”

Steve smiled, remembering the cheerful chaos of the Barnes household. “Her name wasn’t Winifred, any more than my mam’s name was Sarah.”

“What was your mom’s name?” Sam asked softly and Steve caught himself. He’d never, not in this time, told anyone her real name—not out of a sense of shame but because his mam had never used it except in family conversations and then at the last, on her deathbed. My name is Sorcha, she’d said in Irish, don’t you forget. As if he could.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. “Sorcha,” he said. “And she delivered half the babies in our building and kept a lot of our neighbors from dying when the influenza came. She marched for
unions and women’s suffrage with me on her hip. When she died, the neighborhood came to her
funeral. But history says she was only a nurse. Only.” He scrubbed at his face, not surprised to feel
the dampness there. God, he really was a mess, worn to tears over a woman almost a century dead.

“Hey,” Sam said, “hey. It’s okay, you know. It’s okay.”

It was the kind of thing Bucky had said, once upon a time---when the rent came due and it was either
medicines or food, but not both; when Mrs. O’Malley screamed in the dead of night and nobody
dared look too closely at the bruises on her face the next morning; when Steve had been sick or in
too much pain to work. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief and blew his nose. “Thanks,
Sam.”

“No problem,” Sam said gently. “You…don’t mention your past much. I mean, before the serum.”

“For the first year I was…here,” Steve replied, “the only questions I was ever asked were about
Captain America. He’s…not me. After a while, I figured people didn’t want to know anything else.”

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Misumzi---the nutritionist---arrived just before mid-day. Steve had washed the dishes from breakfast
and had managed a shower before dressing in the clothes provided for him. That had been a familiar,
if still unnerving, experience. SHIELD had bought his first clothes for him after he’d awoken and at
least whoever had bought the clothes this time had a better grasp on what he normally wore. There
was a selection of slacks and t-shirts, a few other items of a more formal cut, plus shoes that actually
fit. A good thing too, since there’s no newspaper around, he thought dryly, remembering when the
first pair of new shoes he’d ever owned came from the Army.

The door chimed just as Steve heard the water turn on in the other bathroom. Steve ran a comb
through his hair and straightened his shirt. There was not much else to be done, so when the panel by
the door flashed the name of the visitor, he opened it. “Please, come in,” he said.

The nutritionist had a good three inches or so on him and was seemingly carved from the same
leashed energy Steve had observed in T’Challa. Whatever else this man might be now, his bearing
was that of a warrior. “I am Misumzi,” the man said in a deep, resonant voice. “Dr. Nomsa told you I
would be coming, I take it?”

Steve nodded. “Yes, she did. I’m Steve Rogers.”

Misumzi nodded. “It is my great pleasure, Captain Rogers.”

The title had the power to make him wince and he wondered if it always would. “Steve, please. I’m
not the captain of anything anymore.”

“As you say,” Misumzi said. “Steve, Dr. Nomsa indicated there would be three men sharing this
apartment and two of you are…enhanced?”

“Yes,” Steve answered.

Misumzi tapped something on his tablet and a hologram appeared. Steve recognized it as an updated
version of his medical records. “Dr. Nomsa also informs me that you have not been eating regularly.”

He had a whole host of excuses ready, the ones he’d given SHIELD Medical when his weight had
dipped below what they considered normal---he was busy, he often forgot to eat, there had been a
bunch of missions back to back---but something about the talk with Peggy in his dream had cleared
aside some cobwebs in his mind and made things clearer. If he wanted to be trusted here, he had to
trust. “No, I haven’t. It just…wasn’t on my mind. Food hasn’t really tasted good for a while.”

Misumzi made a note on his tablet. “I see. Many of the foods which grow here are nutrient-dense; I have made some calculations based on the rate of your metabolism and I believe we have a partial solution for your problem.”

“How did that work for you?” Steve couldn’t help but ask.

“Food must be eaten for it to have any effect,” Misumzi observed dryly. “I have scheduled a grocery order which will arrive soon, and I will have a consultation for Sergeant Barnes’ particular needs later on.” He made a hand movement and the hologram disappeared. “As to the rest of your particular issue, Dr. Nomsa has spoken with Samuel about the need for some sort of mental health treatment for your group. Would you comply with that?”

Steve had never really clicked with his SHIELD psychiatrist (for what turned out to be good reason, he reminded himself) but Wakanda was neither SHIELD nor Hydra. He became aware that the water had shut off and that the bathroom door was slightly ajar; Sam could probably hear the entire conversation if he wanted. “Sam tried to get me to see someone at the VA when I lived in DC. I kept putting it off.”

Misumzi spread his hands in a sort of How did that work for you? gesture. “It is not my field, but every warrior is wounded, ever war leaves scars. If the mind is not healed, the body cannot heal.”

“Yes. The new king and I, we did our manhood rituals together and trained and fought together many times. And it was my mother’s privilege to have been one of the Dora Milaje in her younger years.” He paused then, voice strangely gentle. “Steve, there are rituals, techniques in our culture for restoring a warrior to health, both mental and physical. It is not a matter of locking someone up or drugging them into insensibility.”

Steve’s mouth quirked. “I see you’ve been reading your history.” Those kinds of things had been all too common in his youth, and he could still hear the crack of his mother’s hand against the face of the doctor who had as much insisted he was making up his illnesses for attention.

“And your file. It is…very small wonder that you are made uneasy by such things. You are an honored guest of His Highness,” Misumzi went on. “But you are also a patient and deserving of treatment which honors your unique journey.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a set of silver bracelets with one bead each on them. “These are kimoyo beads.” He gestured to his own bracelet, which sat on his left wrist and which had many more beads, some lit, some not. “These are…health trackers, I believe you would say, but they serve many other purposes in our culture.”

“Such as surveillance?” Sam inquired dryly from the kitchen. “I didn’t sign the Accords largely because I didn’t want my every move to be watched by the government, and you want us all to agree to this?”

Misumzi had the grace to look slightly flustered. “Yes. But surveillance is locked down to the individual or the family normally, however—–”

“We are ‘honored guests,’ ” Steve surmised, leaning back in his chair, “but we’re still an unknown quantity and you want to make sure we’re not going anywhere we shouldn’t.”

“It is not a lack of trust,” Misumzi said, “but for your safety as well. The bead will allow us to gain some baseline readings on your health and your location in case of emergency.”
Steve raised one eyebrow. “Who sees the data you collect?”

“The raw data—only Dr. Nomsa and myself. Cendisa might be made aware of conclusions from the data—”

“Cendisa?” Steve asked.

“T’Challa’s head of households,” Sam supplied. “You’ll probably meet her soon.”

Misumzi nodded. “She has plans to come by once Sergeant Barnes is released, yes. To return to your concerns, Steve: the data from these bracelets will only be accessible to a select few, and the king himself, should he wish. But the bracelets are removable and should you wish to decline to wear them at all, you may.”

*But it will be an insult*, Steve thought, and realized they could have done any amount of testing on him while he was unconscious at the hospital, with him none the wiser. At least they were being open about their surveillance, unlike SHIELD who had had him tailed by agents for months after his awakening and bugged his apartment and furnishings to boot. “I’ll take it,” Steve said, and held out his left wrist.

The bracelet seemed too small, too dainty but then the material expanded somehow and sealed itself securely on his wrist. “It’s waterproof,” Misumzi continued, “and indestructible, for the most part.”

Sam hesitated. “Sam,” Steve said, “I know this was one of your concerns with the Accords. You don’t have to do this.”

“Everybody here wears one?” Sam asked Misumzi.

Misumzi nodded. “Even our newborns. That’s actually the bead you’re getting, modified somewhat for your age.”

Sam nodded. “All right,” and held out his own wrist. He looked at Misumzi’s own set of beads. “What do your beads do?”

Steve could have sworn there was a twinkle in the other man’s eye. “Many, many things.”

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Misumzi departed, leaving behind both the receipt for grocery order he’d placed (apparently one of the beads allowed access to the internet, but not the ones on their bracelets) and some homework. Steve was asked to list a set of his food preferences, which spices he preferred and how often he had to eat in order to not feel hungry, as was Sam. It was Steve’s turn to cook dinner—or reheat it, anyway, so Sam set the table. “How do you feel about answering all that?” he asked, gesturing to the holographic screens which now flickered in the air.

Steve shrugged, stirring the soup—goat meat stew with vegetables in a thick broth. “It’s more than SHIELD ever asked. At least their reasons are good ones.”

“And you’re okay with the surveillance?”

“I don’t think ‘okay’ is the right word,” Steve answered, hearing the bitterness in his voice, and not caring for once about trying to appear upbeat and positive. “But I lived in a succession of apartments bugged by Nick Fury ‘for my own good,’ so maybe I’m not the best one to ask.”

Sam made an expression somewhere between disgust and appalled understanding. “Man, that’s…
How did you find out about it?"

“The first set, Natasha told me.” Steve tapped his ear. “Enhanced hearing, something SHIELD kept
forgetting about. I could hear them but I didn’t know what I was hearing. She came one weekend
with a…deluminator—–”

Sam laughed. “A ‘deluminator’? You’ve read Harry Potter?”

“Well, why not, the books are good…” Steve looked up from the stew to see Sam barely hiding a
smile and laughed in return. “Okay, yeah, I know, it sounds silly, but I couldn’t think of what else to
call the device she used. Anyway, Nat shorted them out and left a scanner behind so I could see if
more were put in. I was called out the next weekend for a training mission and when I returned, I
used the scanner. It lit up like a Christmas tree.” He stirred the stew, thinking. “You know, Sam…I
didn’t like the bugs but…this was what SHIELD wanted, so I learned to deal with it. What else was
I going to do?”

Even as he said the words, Steve knew they were wrong. He could have left SHIELD entirely
(assuming they would have let him go,) but he’d been so isolated, it had simply never occurred to
him to try and make his own way in this sharp-edged world. And now, knowing what he did about
Hydra’s infestation of SHIELD, he had to wonder just how much of his isolation had been created
by SHIELD to keep him dependent on them long past the point where he should have been asking
questions. It was troubling, to say the least.

Sam didn’t speak for a bit. “I… Steve, I spoke with Natasha just before she left.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked.

“She told me to ask you how long you’d been out of the ice before you fought the Chitauri.”

“Ten days, give or take a few hours,” Steve answered. He’d done his best not to think of the stunned
grief and horror, the retreat into numbness, of those days, how fighting had been the only thing to
make him feel alive. Or of how every time he tried to sleep, the fear of losing time again had kept
him awake.

This time, there was no mistaking the horror on Sam’s face. “Ten days? They set you loose into that
and told you to fight? After what you’d been through? Goddamn, if Fury wasn’t officially dead…
dammit, what the hell was he thinking?”

“I’m a soldier, Sam,” Steve replied. The stew was done; Steve turned off the oven and removed the
pot from the burner. “It’s what I was made for. And to be fair, Fury asked. Came to the gym and told
me we were facing with the tesseract.” The remembered anger---why didn’t they leave that
goddamned thing in the ocean?---made his grip tight and the handle on the pot began to twist.

“Hey,” Sam said, “why don’t you just… step back for a bit?”

Steve wiped his hands on his slacks. “I’m sorry, I---”

Sam moved the pot to a trivet on the table. “No worries. We’re just having lunch, talking like friends
do.”

And that took away much of the sting of Steve’s awkwardness; he was usually much more careful
with his strength, and to forget himself in a moment of anger made his stomach churn. Not a good
soldier, but a good man. Sometimes he wondered what Erskine would have thought, seeing him
now. He closed his eyes briefly, thinking of Peggy and what had turned out to be his last visit with
her in DC. Sometimes, all we can do is start over. Message received, Pegs. Message received.
There was a buzz from Sam’s cellphone and he looked down at the screen and smiled. “It’s from Cendisa,” Sam said, “they’ve worked out a way I can safely contact my family.”

“That’s really good news,” Steve replied. “You must be worried about them.”

“Yeah, but not for the reasons you’re thinking. I told you Mama was demonstrating against the Accords yesterday. So was Gideon, and my sister Sarah. Nat said Maria Hill has them protected but I don’t want them getting arrested on my behalf. Especially not with what’s going on over there now.”

They’d spent a fair amount of weeks on the hunt for Bucky just…talking, the kind of talking soldiers do when the mission goal is known but the mission isn’t going to end anytime soon. One sunny afternoon, in a battered car designed to not attract attention, Sam had mentioned that his brother Gideon kept getting pulled over on his way to church. “Pulled over?” Steve had asked blankly.

“Yes,” Sam had answered. “The quickest way to Gideon’s church is through a wealthy suburb, which tends to attract attention. And if the cops are looking for a black man---” this was said with a bitterness Steve could still hear, all these months later---“then any black man will do.”

Steve had been aghast. The casual racism of this time still appalled him. Gabe, too, had marched with Dr. King—hadn’t they all expected better by now? No wonder Sam was worried for his family. “Sam, if there’s anything you need---” he said now, before he realized the stupidity of the words. He’d already done enough, not only to Sam but to the rest of the ex-Avengers.

Sam merely nodded, and Steve thought again how lucky he was to have Sam as his friend. “I’m gonna meet with Cendisa,” he said. “She’s a busy lady, and I don’t want to hold her up.”

“I’ll put your part of the stew in the refrigerator,” Steve replied.

“Good,” Sam said. “Steve, do me a favor while I’m gone?”


“Get some rest. You look like shit.”

***

It was a paradox of the serum that when Steve most wanted to rest was when his body demanded some sort of action. When he’d first been unfrozen, that extra energy (and a grief he could hardly bear, he acknowledged now) had driven him to the decrepit gym near his apartment. After that gym had been destroyed during the Chitauri invasion, he’d taken up running—anything to settle down enough to get a few brief hours of sleep.

Exhaustion still dogged his steps now—but when he most wanted to rest, Steve felt the energy, the demanding need to move, rise again. He could take a walk, he supposed—they weren’t prisoners, and Misumzi had shown how the bead on his bracelet could activate basic maps anywhere in the city (though some locations were, of course, off-limits.) Plus, he had his phone.

He first ventured into the courtyard garden. The air was muggy, thick with moisture, but the benches were mostly dry and the scent of flowers hung in the still air. There was the smell of something like jasmine in the air, and he thought of his mam and her love for jasmine tea. It had been one of her few luxuries, that, and the battered teacup which had belonged to her mother. The teacup, chipped and mended and chipped again, had been returned to him only recently in a carefully-packed box of things the SSR, then SHIELD, then the Smithsonian, hadn’t known what to do with and Steve hoped with a pang that Tony would leave it safe in his room, next to the box containing her rosary.
“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man stare at a jasmine bush with quite that expression before,” a woman’s voice said dryly and Steve whirled around, combat instincts surging to the front. It was Laura Barton and he flushed, flustered. If she’d been just a bit closer… “Ma’am,” he said, squaring his shoulders, forcing himself to relax.

Sarah Rogers had been a midwife and Steve, when he had been well enough, had accompanied her on a good many of her rounds. Laura’s hand rested lightly on the small swell of her abdomen, and Steve filed away his suspicions for later. “Please, don’t be embarrassed,” she went on. “It’s a lovely garden.”

He nodded. “And how are things with your family, ma’am?”

“Lila says she saw a panther the night we got here and Cooper heard a monkey. Nathaniel has his days and nights mixed up and has decided not to wear clothes because it’s too hot,” Laura replied ruefully. She sat next to him on the bench and folded her hands in her lap. “We need to talk, don’t we?”

Steve had always appreciated direct women. “Yes, we do. Mrs. Barton, I---”

“It’s Laura. Is this where you take responsibility for landing my husband at the Raft?” Before he could even get the words out, she clasped his wrist in a firm grip. “Clint knew what the risks were. He was a soldier too, once. Army, if you didn’t know.”

“He was retired,” Steve said.

“He was bored, and underfoot, and kind of driving us all nuts---but the main reason he went is because he believed in you, because you trusted him once when you had no damned reason.” She released his wrist. “Did you know I was a SHIELD agent?”

Steve shook his head. “Ma’am---Laura---until the day we showed up at your farm, I didn’t even know you existed.”

“That was Nick’s doing,” Laura went on. “It was a condition of Clint joining SHIELD. He wanted a safe place, off the books, for all of us.” Her hands clenched into fists. “I’m guessing it’s neither safe nor secret now.”

“Someone told Ross about it?” Steve asked.

“Tony Stark told Ross about it,” Laura hissed with a fierce glare that boded absolutely nothing good for Tony Stark. “While Clint was at the Raft. Said he shouldn’t have gotten in cahoots with you when Clint had a wife and children at home. The wife and children nobody knew he had, outside of the Avengers.” She tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ears. “We were lucky for so long---but now Ross knows, which means we won’t be able to return.”

“And that’s my doing,” Steve answered. “I didn’t need to ask Clint for help.”

“That’s not how Clint tells the story,” Laura said dryly. “Look, you’re really quite frustrating, you know that?”

“I’m sorry?” Steve asked, perplexed.

“I had this speech, you know---I was all set to be angry with you for getting us into this mess, but you’re wanting to take all the responsibility and I can’t let you do that either.” She tapped lightly on his bracelet. “Are they eavesdropping on us, do you think?” she asked in careful, fluent Irish.
He blinked, stunned. His own Irish was…rusty, but never forgotten. “Perhaps,” he answered in the same language, picking his way through the words carefully, “but I don’t think so.”

“You’re not suspicious of them?”

“I didn’t say that,” Steve replied around a laugh. Something about being able to speak his first language again, to hold a conversation, was a small balm to the scars he carried. He’d had this long before the serum, long before Captain America emerged from Howard Stark’s metal coffin. “I think that they have greater concerns now than what we’re up to.”

She nodded. “Ah. Clint had wondered too. They seem remarkably hands-off for a country which historically hasn’t had much use for outsiders. Clint said he’d expected a lot more in the way of interrogations or at least a lot more nosiness. But being left alone for the most part is…a bit unnerving.”

“I think all we can do, right now, is be careful and keep our heads down until we know the lay of the land better, so to speak,” Steve replied.

“Yes,” Laura said. “How is your friend? Clint said he was still in the hospital.”

“He should be released today,” Steve answered. “I…don’t know how much you know, but—”

“Clint told me he nearly killed you that day in DC,” Laura replied. “Was he brainwashed?”

Steve nodded. The ever-present grief and horror of it all—that Hydra had made one of the best men Steve had ever known into their soldier—twisted at his insides again, and he felt the icy tremors come closer. He rubbed his hands together to hide their shaking, and mustered an even-toned response. “Yes. For seventy years, give or take a few decades in cryo.”

Laura’s mouth opened then closed with a soft click, in the way of people who suddenly realize that nothing they could possibly say is going to be enough. Finally, she said, “Do you know what happened to Clint after the Battle of New York?”

Steve shook his head. “No. I…left, afterwards. Fury didn’t keep me updated on anything.” Not until a SHIELD agent had been dispatched to bring him back from the Badlands because he’d been gone too long, as if he’d been a wayward child. “Was he…with you?”

“Not at first. SHIELD wanted him held at The Fridge in case he went crazy or something, but Nat sprung him from the transport and brought him back home.”

“And nobody showed up to look for him?”

Laura laughed. “Nat and Nick had what you’d call a unique working relationship. Nick trusted Coulson; Coulson trusted Clint; Clint trusted Nat. Nick wasn’t happy that Clint had up and disappeared, but he also knew exactly where he’d gone, and he let it go.” She rubbed her hands together again, a nervous, fretful gesture. “What I got back was…not really my husband, not entirely. He didn’t eat. Couldn’t sleep without all the lights being on and the nightmares—well, you can imagine.”

The absolute hell of it was, he could imagine. Vividly, in fact. “Whatever Loki did to him, Clint had to…reconstruct how to be a person again,” Laura went on. “We had two small children at the time—Lila was only four and Cooper had just started walking—and if it hadn’t been for Nat, we never would have made it.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Steve asked. It wasn’t information Clint had ever volunteered, no
matter how long they’d worked together.

“Because the first thing you’ll want to do when your friend comes home is protect him. And you’ll feel like shutting the whole world out to do it—but you can’t. You can’t do it alone. Clint only regained his security clearance the month before the helicarriers fell, and that was two years after Loki—and after the best treatment SHIELD could provide. You’re…going to be taking on someone with a lot more potential problems than Clint had. If you’re going to be of any help to him—you have to know that first.”

For a moment, he was standing with Sam on a dam in DC: “He’s someone you stop.” And the gunshot wounds, which had healed years ago, ached anew. “I…thank you, Laura.”

“Is that a ‘thank you, but I’m going to ignore you’ or is it the other kind?” she asked dryly. At his startled laugh, she continued, “I was a translator for SHIELD. You’d be surprised at how much communication isn’t verbal at all. And your reputation, shall we say, precedes you.”

“I’ll bet it does,” Steve grumbled, but without any real ire. “What’s your suggestion?”

“Take advantage of your resources,” she answered firmly. “I had Nat, and we had Nick Fury, who went to bat for Clint about a hundred times while he was recovering, and helped us get the treatment he needed. We’re in Wakanda—surely you’ve heard the rumors about this place?”

Steve nodded. “Can’t confirm any of it yet, but yeah, it’s hard not to look at these”—and he held up the wrist with his bracelet, unsurprised to see a matching one on Laura’s wrist—“and not think there’s a lot to those rumors.”

“And you have Wanda,” Laura continued. “She stayed with us for a time after Sokovia. She’s a good kid. Once you talk to the doctors, ask her what she thinks. You’re not exactly lacking in resources here.”

He breathed out, feeling some of the jittery, nauseating anxiety abate. “It’s…thank you, for forcing me to think of something I hadn’t considered.” And that was true, as far as it went: he’d gotten so used to being alone and separate—the man out of time, as Tony’s malicious bucket of bolts had had it—that he’d forgotten that there were people who cared, who might help if he’d only just ask. “What helped most, with Clint?”

“Routines,” Laura answered promptly. “Order. Consistency. Something he knows he can rely on when the world between his ears is off-kilter. It was still hard—difficult beyond bearing some days. We had…a very large woodpile those two years.” She peered across at him and he was uncomfortably reminded of Bucky’s ma, who had a glare that could split tinder when the mood was on her, as it often was. “Anybody tell you recently that you’re not good to anybody else if you don’t take care of yourself first?”

Sam, as long as I’ve known him. Nat, in a thousand different ways, before that. Bucky, from the time we were kids together. He rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s been said,” he replied.

“Then listen,” she retorted firmly. “Wouldn’t hurt you to eat meals when he does, either. And I have a proposition for you.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“The maps we were given say there’s a large market within walking distance. How fast do you learn languages?”

He remembered Dernier’s French—on guard with Dernier one night, he’d realized he could
understand the other man without Gabe interpreting. The German he’d picked up from surveillance they’d done on various Hydra outposts. “A few days. Sometimes more. Russian was the hardest and that took me a few weeks. Granted, Natasha and I were undercover on a mission and got shot at a few times while she was teaching me, but the point stands.”

She chuckled. “You have to love SHIELD’s idea of on the job training.” She sobered. “We all need to work on our Wakandan. I don’t think it’s wise to rely on translators long-term, particularly if we’re going to be here for a while.”

He couldn’t disagree. “Somehow I don’t think they’ll have Wakandan language classes for us. Not in a society as reclusive as this one.”

“Ah, but they do. I have children. Children need to go to school. I’ve made inquiries with Cendisa and she’s agreed to bring it up with the king. We can all learn from the materials they’re given, and in the meantime…how do you feel about the market?”

“The market?” Steve can’t help but ask. “What---?”

“Simple concepts,” Laura replied. “How much, what is that, how many? That’s a good start, in any language.” She paused. “And we need to figure out what to do about funds. Tony Stark bankrolled the Avengers after SHIELD fell, right?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. Which obviously isn’t a resource we can rely on now.”

“No,” Laura answered. “So, what other resources do we have as a group? Our accounts were frozen before Nat got us out.”

He raised his eyebrows. “All of them?”

Laura chuckled. “Now I know you’ve worked with Nat and Clint when you ask that question. Not…all of them, but getting access to the funds is going to be a delicate operation which---unless I miss my guess---is going to require the consent and cooperation of the Wakandan government as well. So we’re back to where we started, for now.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “And frankly, the jet lag is doing a number on everyone. I’ll be doing good to operate a calculator for the next few days.” Steve nodded; they had been through a lot, and with three young children besides. The exhaustion was dragging him down—what must it be doing to her?

There was a sharp wailing squall behind them---a crying child, probably their youngest. Laura rose. “That’ll be my cue to head back. Steve, look---” she fidgeted---“we’ve all got a lot of shit to unpack from this mess, and I’m not talking about the clothes in our luggage. Don’t be a stranger.”

For a moment, Steve pictured himself saying that the stranger he saw every morning wore his face, but it wasn’t what she meant and was self-pitying besides, so he didn’t. “I won’t, Laura. Thank you.”

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When he returned to the apartment he shared with Sam, it was to find the other man snoozing on the couch with a set of headphones, listening to music on his phone. It was how Sam relaxed and Steve shut the door quietly behind him. He was halfway into his bedroom to go and try to read when Sam’s voice stopped him. “How’d it go with Laura?”

Steve’s mam would have said Sam had the Sight; Steve was not sure she’d have been wrong, either. “Fine…uh, we talked in the garden.”

Sam sat up, thumbed the music off and took off his headphones. “Yeah. I heard.” He jerked a thumb
towards the long window that overlooked the courtyard. “Sounds echo, man. It’s how I heard Laura and Clint argue that first night we were here, before you woke up.” He smiled a little, open and friendly. “So, she speaks Irish?”

“I had no idea,” Steve replied, astounded all over again. “I didn’t think I’d ever meet anyone who did.”


“A few months after the Battle of New York, I got a bad concussion following a skirmish,” Steve began. “I was unconscious for most of it, but I couldn’t remember how to speak English when I was awake. And nobody understood what I was saying---not JARVIS, not anyone. Eventually the team concluded I was babbling, out of my head. It wasn’t until I listened to the recordings Tony had made that I learned I’d been speaking Irish.”

Sometimes Sam’s face was still, making Steve think of calm skies with a storm gathering in the far distance. “And you… never set them straight?”

He shrugged. “I heard a lot of cracks about how I was getting senile in my old age from Tony, which was a nice change from being called ‘Capsicle.’”

Sam breathed out, scrubbed at his face. When he spoke, his tone was weary and sad. “Steve, I want you to listen to me.”

Steve met his eyes, kind eyes that had seen too much and yet still wanted to help. “What, Sam?”

“You…wall yourself off, man. They were your teammates. They are your friends---some of them are here right now. You trust us to be there for you when it’s a matter of life or death, or supersoldiers on ice, but you’re gonna have to figure out how to trust us with the mundane stuff too.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “All of you?” he asked dryly.

“Well, if you want to leave Stark off that list, I can’t really blame you right now,” Sam answered with an eyeroll. “Look, we’ve only been here three days and there is a lot going on---”

“Laura said we all had a lot of things to unpack,” Steve cut in.

“She’s not wrong, Steve. Promise me that you’ll contact Dr. Nomsa and get some help with unpacking all you need to do.”

He folded his arms. “Will you?”

Sam smiled, a bit ruefully. “Point. Yeah, man. I had a standing appointment in DC with my own shrink. And that was before Rhodey fell out of the sky and I ended up at the Raft.”

“Were you able to talk to your family?” Steve asked, seeing Sam’s gaze dart now and then to the phone in his hands.

Sam brightened. “Oh, yeah. Shuri---the king’s sister---found a solution. She ran it through some algorithm she wrote and bounced my call all over the world. I suppose if Ross’s goons are really looking for me, they’ll end up in Kuala Lampur. Or Cairo.”

The thought of Ross being inconvenienced in any way made Steve smile. “And they’re okay? They’re safe?”
“For now. But you have a standing invitation to Sunday dinner to explain yourself, according to Mama.”

Steve blinked. He’d bet even Red Skull would have shrunk from that invite. “Um…”

“She wants to know why you didn’t go public about the Accords.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t--- Sam, we had three days from the time we found out about the Accords until the UN was going to ratify them. There wasn’t time enough to do anything.” And Peggy died and Bucky was framed for a crime he didn’t commit…and…

“I told her that,” Sam said mildly, “but the River Mama only runs in one direction. She thinks people need to know what the Accords really mean--- not just the garbage Ross and our new ‘president’ ”--- Steve could almost hear the air quotes--- “are telling people. And she’s not wrong. But with the new administration? I don’t think she’s going to find many people in the government who are worried about the civil rights of enhanced people and superheroes.”

A year ago, even six months before, Steve would have mustered up some sort of defense on behalf of the American people, who almost certainly deserved better than the lunatic they’d been saddled with, even if a few of them had voted for him. But now, weary to his bones, exiled and outlawed, he could only shrug. “The US needs more people like your mama, Sam. I just don’t think it’ll be enough to stop the Accords. Not until individual nations start pulling out.”

“Great Britain already did,” Sam said. “And the EU is debating it now. It’s a start.”

Steve sighed. “In 1939, the Nazis held a sold-out rally at Madison Square Garden. And now we have someone in sympathy with their views running the US. The US isn’t going to pull out of the Accords, not with all the power it’ll give them once they have all the enhanced individuals under their control.”

Sam whistled. “Steve Rogers, cynic?”

“Steve Rogers, realist,” he replied. “There’s only so many battles we can fight at one time. Right now, we’re here. Let’s figure this out first.”

****

The day wore on in lengthening shadows. The grocery order from Misumzi arrived and Steve and Sam killed a few hours going through the accompanying recipes and matching the Wakandan names for the vegetables and spices to the invoice list. Their phones, it turned out, had a simple translation program---“not as basic as Babel Fish, but bad enough,” Sam said, which spun off into a discussion of translation programs in the 1990s---but it was clear that they were going to have to learn the language to have any hope of communicating beyond basic concepts.

“Steve, you think there’s something…odd about their approach?”

Steve hefted what he supposed was a form of squash in his hands and carefully set it aside. “You mean, we’re refugees in a technologically advanced society, yet the translation program we’ve been given is something Gabe could have improved in his sleep in the 1940s?”

Sam flashed a quick smile at the mention of Gabe Jones---a childhood hero, he’d revealed---then sobered. “Could mean a lot of things, or it could mean nothing at all. I don’t suppose they get many refugees here, so maybe this is what they could cobble together in a short time. Or…”

“Or,” Steve filled in, “it’s a statement. They’ll help us with the basics, but we’ll have to earn our
“Well,” Sam said, “as to that, I have an idea. Did you ever watch ‘Sesame Street’?”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Sam, I was on ‘Sesame Street,’ after the Battle of New York.” It had been one of the few public appearances on behalf of the Avengers and SHIELD that he’d truly enjoyed, talking to kids about dealing with fear.

“No way,” Sam said. “How did I miss this? Oh, wait, I was…at the tail end of my last deployment when the Chitauri invaded.”

For a moment, Riley’s ghost flitted between them, a good man who hadn’t made it home. Steve could see it in the tightening of Sam’s shoulders, the sudden clenching and unclenching of his fists. “Sam—”

“So, um, yeah,” Sam said, as if Steve hadn’t spoken, “that’s how I missed it. But anyway, the program is shown all over the world, and I would bet that there’s a version in Wakandan. Or Xhosa, at least, which seems to be very close.”

Steve nodded and cast an uneasy glance at the clock on the wall. It was getting later in the day, yet there had been no word on Bucky. The cruelty of it all, that Bucky would come home but Riley never would, struck him all over again. “You know,” he said carefully, “if you wanted to talk about Riley….”

Sam smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Thanks, man, but…” He shrugged. “I thought I had this all under control, you know? It’s been years since I missed him this much, but seeing Rhodey fall…I went to help him and for a second, it was Riley there on the ground.”

Steve wanted to say I used to see Bucky everywhere. A flash of blue coat out of the corner of my eye. Thought I was losing my damned mind. And nobody else remembered him---to them, he was a footnote in a history book. But Sam so rarely talked about Riley, even after the worst of his nightmares, that Steve didn’t want to interrupt.

“Riley drank Mountain Dew,” Sam said suddenly. “Always had a bottle with him, that and some booze. He’d drink too much, then drink Mountain Dew to sober up. After he died, I couldn’t even look at the stuff without getting nauseated.” His fingers twisted in a rhythm Steve recognized; the rhythms of someone who used to smoke, reaching for an invisible cigarette.

Dernier drank to keep his hands steady; Falsworth, to forget. The long-ago taste of brandy and his own tears in a bombed bar nearly choked him. “That happen a lot, with Riley?”

Sam, the man who had brought a literal knife to a gun fight and never once backed down, actually flinched. “Too much,” he said shortly, and Steve hadn’t had to see the door to hear how firmly it had been shut.

Sam ducked his head before Steve could say anything else. “Look, man, I’m gonna…take a walk or something. I need to get my head together. Text me when Barnes is released if I’m not back yet, all right?”

There were a lot of things Steve wanted to say, but closed his mouth on all of them. “I will, Sam.”

***

The call from Dr. Nomsa came about an hour after Sam had left. Steve had been sitting at the small kitchen table, watching a panther sunning herself on a rock formation. At an earlier time, he would
have reached for a pen and paper, but his hands felt stiff and frozen now. So he simply watched the panther, awed and impressed that she felt free enough to sleep where she chose, without fear. The serum had made his eyes preternaturally sharp and cured his color blindness; he could just barely make out the sleepy green of the panther’s eyes in the distance…

The vibrating buzz against his wrist drew him out of his reverie. He recalled Misumzi’s instructions and tapped the bead, turning his wrist outward to open the communications program. A hologram appeared on the table. “Dr. Nomsa?”

She nodded. “Yes. Can you come to the hospital?”

“Of course,” Steve replied. Even in the hologram, he could see her face was drawn. “Is there something wrong?”

“Sergeant Barnes has requested you and Samuel,” she answered. “I will explain further once you arrive. A car has been dispatched and should be there shortly. Thank you.”

She closed the communication on her end. Steve fired off a text to Sam and sat down heavily, trying to control the racing of his heart and the shaking of his hands.
III. Bucky- Like All the Mortals, Unavoidable

The problem wasn’t that he didn’t remember.

The problem was that he remembered too much—a genius child born to the wrong parents in Leipzig, a dissident scientist in Leningrad, the politician, the soldier, the sons, the wives, the famous and the unknown, names and dates from a thousand places, a thousand orders “shaping the century.” Those things were not him, but they were done with his hands, and the weight of the blood he’d shed would never leave.


“My head hurts,” Bucky said into the silence, opening his eyes from a wary doze.

“You had a seizure and fell,” the doctor—Nomsa, he thought her name was—said. “I have called your friends, as you asked. They’ll be here soon.”

“How long was I out?” he asked.

“Just a few hours.” His ears detected the rustle of cloth. “Have you had seizures before?”

He wasn’t drugged, not this time, but his thoughts were fuzzy, the residue of the seizure. “Mmm… sometimes. I’d have some missing time when I was in Bucharest. Fell a time or two. I had good neighbors.” And he had, Maria and Vasile, who had asked no questions when he’d rented the apartment next door and who had watched out for him as much as they could. “I didn’t see a doctor.”

The doctor’s voice was amused. “I’m not at all surprised, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Bucky,” he said. “I’m not a sergeant of anything now.”

“The captain said much the same,” and yes, there was definitely amusement there, “have you known each other very long?”

Since before I knew who I was, he almost said. “Longer than you’ve been alive,” he answered instead.

There was some beeping. He cracked his eyes open again to see her entering notes on a tablet. “Do you know what year it is?”

“2017.”

“And the US president?”

He groaned. “Come on, Doll, do I have to?”

“Very well,” Dr. Nomsa said, smiling. “I’ll record that you’re oriented as to time and space. Are you in any pain?”
Assets do not feel pain, a ghost, an echo said in his mind, words ringed round with fire and lightning. He forced the words out anyway, though it made his head ache more---the Asset didn’t feel pain, but he sure as hell did. “Some.”

The doctor narrowed her eyes. “Several cracked ribs, a concussion, scalp lacerations from when you fell, to say nothing of the burns on your left side. And your pain level is ‘some’?”

“Nothing you can give me for it anyhow,” he muttered, closing his eyes against the nausea. The mattress dipped a little lower; the doctor, sitting down on the edge of his bed. “Bucky. We are not limited to current US medical technology in Wakanda,” she said with a firm, caring tone he’d once heard from another woman, a nurse with hair the color of the sun. For a moment, he could almost say her name, but it—and the memory—dropped off into the void. “Please, let us help you.”

By all rights, he should have been terrified of her; people in white coats had never meant anything good for the Asset. But Bucky found he couldn’t muster up any sense of unease around the doctor; for one, he was damned sure that nobody at Hydra had ever cared anything for the Asset’s comfort and for another, she was Wakandan. Hydra had never employed non-white people in its upper ranks (goddamned Squid Nazis, as he’d read at least one internet commenter describe Hydra and well, if the many-tentacled skull fit…) So as far as it was possible, Bucky knew he was safe here. “All right,” he said.

The pain stopped so quickly, between one breath and the next, that he felt more dazed in its absence. “Give it a few seconds to take effect,” the doctor murmured, “and then you can try sitting up.”

“What did you give me?”

“A pain killer we use here for people with similar injuries.” Bucky eyed her with a smirk. “You get a lot of cryogenically frozen ex-Hydra assassins around here?”

“No, but we do have people with…unique metabolic challenges which affect how their bodies metabolize pain killers and sedatives.” She quirked an eyebrow at him. “How do you feel now?”

Hydra had given him drugs--- of course they had. Drugs to make him more compliant, to fog his memory, poisons to make sure he had to return to his handlers for the antidote, all delivered via a port in his arm. Never had he been given a drug purely for his own benefit, to heal him or make him feel better when he was in pain. It was…astonishing. “Better. How long is it gonna last?”

“Until you don’t need it any longer,” she replied. “Do you want to try sitting up? Your friends should be here soon.”

Bucky took a deep breath. With his arm missing, he figured he had even odds of either sitting up or falling flat on his face. The doctor was a lot stronger than she looked, though, and came around quickly to help him. She took almost his full weight on his left side and he stared at her. “How are you able to do that?”

“I exercise,” she said dryly. Once he’d recovered his balance and was able to sit up, she stepped back. “There, now.” There was a muted chime in the air; Bucky didn’t recognize it but the doctor clearly did. “Your friends will be here soon. What do you want them to know?”

Bucky blinked. “I asked them here,” he said, not fully understanding.
“You have a concussion, and you have a seizure disorder from years of mistreatment at the hands of Hydra,” Dr. Nomsa said. “Some of this, they should know, since you’re all sharing an apartment for now. But if you wanted me to say nothing, I would do that too. I will release only the information you tell me to release. Even if the king himself asked.”

The idea that he had privacy and rights that this doctor chose to respect was somehow more astonishing than being in Wakanda in the first place. “I…I was someone’s property until a few years ago. I don’t know how to do… all this.”

“It is the king’s express wish that you should heal,” the doctor said, her voice soft and kind. “I can tell your friends only what’s medically necessary for them to know, if you like, and you may tell them the rest later.”

Bucky shook his head. “Nah, Doll. Tell them everything. I’m gonna be a lot to deal with. They should know everything.”

“From what I have seen of your friends, you’re very much wrong if you think the information would dissuade them.”

There was another, slightly louder chime. The doctor smiled. “They’re just down the hall now.”

A few seconds later, the door opened and Steve and Sam Wilson walked into the room. Bucky was used to assessing targets—people, he reminded himself firmly, people—in an instant, and from the way Steve walked (hunched over, always in pain, Ma, why is he sick all the time? I don’t know, Jimmy, but you must be gentle with him, all right? The man on the bridge. I knew him) and the stiffness in the way Wilson carried himself, he could see both were still injured. That disturbed him---Steve should have been well on his way to healing by now and Wilson’s injuries spoke of some bad trouble at the Raft.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve said softly. “Glad you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“Short-handed,” Bucky said dryly.

There was a choked-off snort; Wilson, who clearly appreciated gallows humor. “Man, you never said he was funny!”

Steve rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. “Funny looking, maybe,” and the Brooklyn they’d grown up with was thick in his voice.

“You just keep tellin’ yourself that, Stevie,” Bucky retorted, and the old nickname felt warm and comfortable in his mouth. Yeah. The man on the bridge. I did know him. What are you going to do about it now, Pierce?

Steve glanced at the doctor. There was a grim set to his jaw that Bucky couldn’t help but recognize as the same look he’d worn when he’d surfaced from Zemo’s trigger words in Leipzig. “Bucky, what’s wrong? The doctor called us.”

Dr. Nomsa walked over to the windows and tapped the panel in quick succession. The windows blacked out and a low hum, clear enough to his serum-enhanced ears, began emitting from the windows. “It’s a security measure,” she added. “No electronic signals will leave this room.” She gestured to the darkened beads of her bracelet; Bucky noticed Steve and Wilson were wearing similar ones with far fewer beads.

“Are they prisoners?” he demanded suddenly, hearing his voice go flat and dangerous. “Those bracelets—-”
“They are not prisoners,” the doctor replied calmly. “We all wear them here. Kimoyo beads, they’re called.”

He flicked a glance at Steve and Wilson. “Are you being held against your will? Stevie, don’t lie to me.”

Steve shook his head. “No, Bucky. T’Challa gave us sanctuary after Siberia. Do you remember that?”

He did, but he’d only been half-conscious for much of the conversation. He remembered hearing a dull thud as something hit the ground, and had recalled nothing else until he’d awoken in this hospital. “What happened then?”

“T’Challa flew us back to Wakanda, and as soon as you were safe, I went to rescue Sam and the others from the Raft.”

Bucky stared at him. “As hurt as you were? Steve, what the hell?”

“I made it back here with all of them,” Steve said, uncomfortable. The tips of his ears were red, one of his few tells that had survived the serum.

“We’re gonna have words about that later,” Bucky retorted. He glanced at the doctor. “Tell them, Doll. Please.”

“Sergeant Barnes suffered a seizure a few hours ago,” the doctor began. “A brain scan revealed that in addition to the damage from his recent trauma, he has decades of injuries to his brain. Those injuries have begun to heal, slowly, but it makes him an unsuitable candidate for the methods we’d initially considered to rid him of the trigger words.”

Sam put a hand on Steve’s shoulder; Steve flinched but didn’t pull away. His voice was rough, low and pained, when he spoke. “So what happens now? He just lives with those damned things stuck in his head?”

“There are…alternatives,” Dr. Nomsa answered. “Are you… sure you’re up to hearing about them now?”

Bucky could see the reason for her hesitation. Steve was far too pale, and had obviously not recovered from the injuries he’d gotten in Siberia. *(Come on, Stevie, take my coat. The heat’s off again. Drink the soup. Don’t worry about where I got it.*) “I’m fine,” Steve insisted. “What are the options?”

Dr. Nomsa folded her arms. “Cryonic preservation is one. It would buy us time to–––”

Steve lost what little color he had, then flushed nearly incandescent. “Are you–– no, you can’t be serious. He spent seventy years of his life in and out of cryo!”

Bucky stood up, awkward and unbalanced, but able to stand at least. “’He’ is right here, Steven Grant, and I already said no to that option. I’d rather die than go back into cryo.”

Sam’s hand tightened on Steve’s shoulder; Steve breathed out once. “I’m sorry, Buck. It’s… whatever you decide to do, it’s your choice.”

“I’m not decidin’ anything yet, punk,” Bucky huffed out. “Because some trigger words, a metal arm, and brain damage wasn’t all Hydra left me with.”
Dr. Nomsa typed a command in her tablet. Two holograms appeared side by side, rotating slowly in the air. “The scan on the right was one we did on Sergeant Barnes after he was admitted to the hospital; you can see damage to the areas of the brain which control long-term memory and fear response.”

Sam looked furious; Steve, like he very much wanted something to punch and wasn’t particular about the target. It wasn’t the first time Bucky had seen the scans of what Hydra had done to his brain; the doctor had showed him earlier in the day. But here, with Steve in the room… “Buck, you okay?” Steve asked.

“Not really,” Bucky managed. His heart began to speed up. The cold sweat made his thin t-shirt stick to his back and his own voice sounded thin and hollow.

“Sergeant Barnes,” the doctor said, coming to stand in front of him. “Where are you?”

“Wakanda.”

“And the year?”

“2017.”

“Can I touch you, Buck?” another voice. Steve.

“Yeah.” Warm arms surrounded him, fever-hot and strong, and Bucky turned his face into the other man’s shoulder, holding him, holding on.

“I got you, Bucky. I got you.”

****

Time passed in a crawl; Bucky didn’t know and didn’t care how long they sat there before full awareness returned. There was a warm hand feeling for a pulse, and Steve’s presence, grounding him. Sam had dragged up a chair and sat waiting, watching them both. “You okay, man?” Sam asked softly.

Bucky dragged open his eyes. “Sure.”

Steve’s heartbeat, no longer weak and thready, vibrated behind him, just below the level of his hearing. “You get panic attacks often?”

“Not as many as I used to,” Bucky said. “Never can tell what will trigger them, though.”

The doctor entered his field of vision. “Forgive me, Sergeant. We should have waited for a better time to go through all this.”

“Bucky,” he said, “my name is Bucky. M’not a sergeant of anything.”

She inclined her head. “Of course, as you said before. Bucky, are you feeling well enough to continue or should we wait?”

Bucky shook his head, warmed and unnerved by her concern. “No. Let’s get this over with.”

“Very well.” The doctor reopened the scans and enlarged the second scan. “Here is a scan we did just before his seizure today. You can see that the damaged areas are shrinking.” She collapsed both holograms and folded her hands. “It’s my belief, and that of my colleagues, that Bucky’s seizures are part of his brain trying to…rewire itself, if you will, around the damage.”
Sam tilted his head. “Seizures are damaging to a healthy brain. What’s your plan for controlling the seizures?”

“We are currently working on a medication which can stop the seizures while encouraging his brain to heal. Once the seizures have been eliminated, we can focus on removing the trigger words. The risk of further injury is too great to do otherwise. Is that all right with you, Bucky?”

_The Asset does not speak on its own. The Asset has no choice. It is a weapon._ Bucky opened his mouth to speak, forcing the words past the panic that wanted to pull him under again. “Yeah, Doll. It’s fine.”

***

There wasn’t a lot of chatter once he was released and Bucky was grateful for that. He left with a schedule of doctor’s appointments, the first trial of a medication the doctor hoped would reduce the worst of the seizures, and a tablet full of his medical records. Steve---Steve, of all people---was quiet beside him, not too close, but closer than Bucky had let anybody else get since he’d emerged from Hydra’s programming. It was nice…peaceful, but disarming too. Steve---the old Steve---hadn’t ever managed to be quiet unless he was working himself into a truly epic fury.

The car which took them from the hospital to where they were all apparently living was self-driving, which probably would amaze him when he had time to think about it. When the car came to a stop out front of a nondescript building, Steve announced this was where they lived now. “Do you need help getting out?” he asked.

Without the constant burden of his heavy metal arm, Bucky was unbalanced, prone to fall. “Yeah, I do.” And that too was new; accepting help. Maria and Vasile had offered many times, but Bucky had been touch shy and terrified for too many years to easily accept aid from near strangers, at least at first. Steve, though? Steve was as much a part of him as the blood in his veins.

When he stepped into the bright light of mid-afternoon he handed the tablet of his medical records to Wilson. “You can make sense of these, right?”

Wilson’s eyes widened in surprise. “How did---”

“You were on Insight’s list,” Bucky said uncomfortably.

“Yeah, me and about twenty million other people,” Wilson replied. “The Insight targets were one of the first things Natasha dumped online. But you knew I was a pararescue?”

“After DC…I might have looked you up,” Bucky confessed. “I…need help with those records. Can you tell me if they mean what she said they do?”

“You don’t trust the doctor,” Wilson said. “Not that I blame you, given your…history.”

“I don’t trust anybody save myself, you, and that guy over there. It ain’t nothing personal. Doc seems like good folks but good people get misled all the time. I just need to know if she’s on the level.”


Whatever it was, Steve seemed to shake himself and the moment passed. “Nothing. Only I haven’t heard an accent that strong since we were kids.”

It was strange to think he could speak in ways born of a past he no longer fully remembered. “Seems you got a bit of an accent yourself there, Pal.”
The apartment had good sightlines and was easily defensible. Bucky also noticed, because it was impossible not to notice, that the apartment had two bedrooms for three people. It was almost a ridiculous amount of space (a sister under each arm, Ma and Dad on the other end of the mattress, all of them burrowed under quilts as the winter wind howled outside) and far nicer than anything he would ever have chosen.

“I know,” Steve said from slightly to his right once they were inside. “I can’t believe how big it is either.”

Bucky shook his head. “Any plans about what to do with the bedrooms? There’s three of us, unless you and Sam are bunking.”

Steve flushed pink and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Yeah, about that---”

Sam chuckled. “No, we’re not bunking. Did that a few times while we were looking for you. He’s a damned space heater.”

(Making camp in the middle of nowhere as winter’s chill was beginning to set in, too afraid to risk a fire, Dernier and Dugan and Morita and Gabe and Falsworth huddled around Steve like he was their personal heater. And feeling briefly angry that they’d each taken his place. His.) Bucky coughed. “Yeah. We shared a bed in Brooklyn enough times when we were kids. Right, Stevie?”

Steve was still a piss-poor liar, and something furtive and nervous crossed his face before he forced a smile. “Yeah, Buck. We did.”

“Not a lot of beds back then?” Sam said lightly, teasing.

Steve rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t that.”

“It was that,” Bucky retorted. “C’mon, Steve. I’d say we didn’t have a pot to piss in, but we at least had that. Not much else, though. Remember that old rat trap we lived in?”

“Which one?” Steve asked. “The one with the paper thin walls, the one where the windows were painted shut, or the one where the fire escape was so rusted over we’d have been better off jumping?”

“The last one. That was our last apartment, right?” Bucky said. He could almost smell the place---mold, the stench of the city streets--- and hear old Mr. Allen’s radio cranked loudly next door. Sometimes the memories were so strong and at other times, they were just…missing.

“Honestly, I think that applied to all of our apartments,” Steve mused. “The heat either never worked, or we couldn’t afford to have it turned on. So, we shared body heat.”

Sam looked between the two of them. “Uh-huh. Well, you’re welcome to him.”

Bucky’s head began to ache, something which happened more and more often as his memories started to return. “Sam, what do the records say about when I can take pain medication?”

Sam paged through the tablet. “After you eat, you can take something. Bad headache?”

It was beginning to feel like someone was stabbing an ice pick in his brain. “You could say that.”

Steve took his arm and guided him to the couch. “Rest a moment, Buck. You don’t look so good.”
“Pot, meet kettle,” Bucky replied. “There an ice pack in that fancy refrigerator?”

Bucky wasn’t so out of it that he didn’t immediately recognize the look that flashed across Steve’s face—Steve, steeling himself to do any number of uncomfortable things. (I can do it, Buck. Let me carry your books. M’back don’t hurt that bad. Come on, Stevie, let me help you.) “Um, sure. Yeah, I think there must be.”

“I’ll get it, Steve,” Sam said, and yeah, there was some undercurrent there.

Steve smiled weakly. “Thanks, Sam.”

Bucky let himself lay down on the couch. It was really too soft, but then, it also meant a small chance of his body ever thinking he was back in cryo, even for a moment. He closed his eyes and heard footsteps behind him—not Steve’s light, almost bouncing, tread, so it must be Sam. “Here you go,” Sam said softly, handing him the ice pack. “Migraine?”

“I don’t think so,” Bucky answered. “Just hurts. The ice helps some.”

“Kind of ironic, isn’t it?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Bucky muttered. “Steve don’t like the ice?”

“Probably something you should ask him,” Sam said lightly. “You think you could eat something?”

The nausea, at least, was staying away. “Maybe. Toast, if we have it?”

“I can make it,” Steve said from behind Sam.

For a time, Bucky drifted a bit, dozing. Then he smelled the warm cooked bread and sat up slowly. Steve handed him the toast. “You get these headaches a lot?”

“Since I broke programming, yeah,” Bucky said bluntly. Breaking through Hydra’s brainwashing had been days and weeks of sweats and nausea and migraines and probably more than a few seizures along the way and it was nothing he wanted Steve to know about. He took a slice of the bread—it was chewy, with a vaguely nutty flavor. “You’re thinkin’ loud, Stevie,” he said once he’d swallowed and it seemed like the toast was going to stay put. “What gives?”

Steve had been about to say something, Bucky was sure, but he seemed to change his mind. “I…uh, I’m glad you’re here, Bucky.”

“I can’t be him, you know,” Bucky blurted, awkward and unsure. He had to make Steve understand. “I know you look at me and you see him, but we’re not the same people.” In many ways, though he’d never say as much to Steve, that had been the worst of his recovery from Hydra—having memories erupt with no warning, no context. For a good many months, he hadn’t known what was real, what wasn’t. Some days, the memories had flooded in, making him almost wish for cryo just so the pain of their emergence would stop. Then he’d go weeks without a new memory, which gave him a chance to try and put the recollections in some kind of order. “What happened to my notebooks, do you know?”

“The ones in the backpack?”

Bucky nodded. “Sharon—you met her in Leipzig—was going to try and get them for us, but they weren’t kept in the same place as my shield and Sam’s wings, and she wasn’t able to find them quickly. I’m sorry, Bucky.”
“Nothing too important in those notebooks,” Bucky said, knowing it was a lie. He’d had lists in there, of people he thought he might have killed as the Winter Soldier. It would probably answer a bunch of historical questions, but it couldn’t tell him what he wanted to know now: Who am I?

Steve sat down next to him on the couch. “Bucky, I don’t…do you think I’m the same I was then? I’m not.”

Bucky shook his head. “Sure you’re not. Still taking on the forces of evil with a shield—”

Steve’s wince was impossible to miss. “I don’t do that anymore.”

The dull thud of the shield hitting the cold floors of the missile silo had echoed, Bucky recalled now. He’d been too out of it at the time, stunned by the neural feedback from the loss of his arm, from broken bones and blood loss. “You gave that up for me?” he managed, stunned.

From the look on Sam’s face, this was also new information to him. “Steve, you gave up the shield?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “Tony made a…pretty persuasive argument.”

Bucky snorted. “Sure. After he tried to kill us both. I guess you can call that persuasive.”

Sam stared at the both of them. “I figured that’s how you were injured, but you’re probably gonna want to have that conversation you were talking about sooner rather than later, Steve. The others…they don’t know what happened.”

“I got some questions there myself,” Bucky stated, “but they’ll keep for a bit.”

“Do you think you could eat some more?” Steve asked, clearly uncomfortable.

Bucky stared at the plate. The toast was gone and he couldn’t remember having eaten both slices. “I’ll take the pain meds first, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m gonna come sit on your other side, okay, Bucky?” Sam said quietly, and Bucky decided it really wasn’t a stretch to picture him as the pararescue he’d once been. There was something in his voice, a we are going to make this right quality that Bucky liked and wanted to trust. It might not be accurate in his case---there were things wrong with him that would never be fixed---but he appreciated it just the same.

“I’ll move,” Steve offered.

“It’s just an injection, man,” Sam replied. “I don’t need a lot of room for that. Bucky, are you okay with me touching you?”

If there was one thing that separated then from now, it was the idea that Bucky had the right to consent---or not consent. It was a hard concept, particularly when the echo in his thoughts insisted he would be punished if he didn’t comply, but Bucky pushed through it. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

“All right,” Sam answered. “I’m going to clean the skin off with this swab. It’ll feel cool on your skin, then I’ll give you the shot. According to the doctor’s notes, you should feel relief very soon.”

“They finally found a pain medication that works,” Steve said. “I’ll be damned.”

There was a slight pinch, and Bucky felt the medication begin to work almost immediately. “It’s…I never had this before. What did they use on you at S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve?”

“They didn’t,” Steve answered. “If they did have something, I never found out about it.”
“That’s messed up,” Sam said, shaking his head. “If they were going to keep sending you out against aliens and the like—–”

“Aliens?” Bucky asked.

“The Battle of New York,” Sam responded. “Were you…sorry, I don’t know how to ask this. And I probably shouldn’t, now that I think of it.”

“I was in cryo for that,” Bucky said, dismissing his embarrassment. “What on earth—–”

“Outside it, actually,” Steve said, quirking a half smile.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Very funny, Steve.” He made a notation on the tablet, and shut it off. “All right, I think it’s time we all ate. Steve, that means you too.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed. So it wasn’t his imagination, then. A flash of memory, this time of taste—–thin, watery soup, bits of vegetables (Mr. Carver gave ‘em to me for painting that sign out front. They’re not the best but at least they’re not all rotten) and meat that had to be boiled to be chewed at all. “I doubt it’s like that stew you used to make,” Bucky said, trying for lightness. “Remember that? Everything boiled.”

Steve nodded slowly, but not before Bucky saw a flash of something unnamed cross his face. “Yeah. Old Mr. Carver—–” He cut himself off and Bucky wondered what he’d been about to say. “Whose turn is it to make lunch?”

“Yours,” Sam said with a grin.

“We had this stew he used to make,” Bucky mused, feeling his way through the shreds of the memory. “Steve worked for a greengrocer for a bit one summer, painting signs and stocking. Didn’t make a lot of money but we got food out of it---sometimes, really good food.”

“He tells me everything was boiled,” Sam said, jerking his thumb to where Steve was puttering in the kitchen.

“It was,” Bucky answered. “Kind of had to be. Spices were expensive and nobody had refrigerators, not in our neighborhood.”

“Unless you count the apartment,” Steve put in with something close to his usual tone. “It was always cold in there.”

It was as if Steve’s words had unlocked a door and for a moment, Bucky could feel the perpetual chill of their apartment. They’d talked a lot of moving somewhere warmer, in the way of people who know there is never going to be the money for that---a place where the winters didn’t bring the risk of pneumonia, where spring wasn’t a trigger for Steve’s asthma. He wasn’t sure he’d have called their situation hopeless---everybody was poor, everybody was struggling---but no doctor they’d been able to afford would give Steve a long life expectancy. Something fluttered, a memory---(Take the food, son. Tell him I made you take it if it makes you feel better)---but then it was gone as soon as it had emerged.

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Somewhere, somehow, Steve had learned to be a proficient, if not fancy, cook. They were eating some stew—–oxtail with dumplings—which Steve had been able to recreate from the recipes that had been included with their grocery delivery. “It’s got some Wakandan name I can’t even begin to pronounce,” he said with a half-smile, “but it was easy enough to make, since we had the ingredients
“And you know the food won’t last forever,” Sam said, tearing off a hunk of flatbread. “You think Laura was serious?”

“About what?” Bucky asked.

“Laura Barton—Clint’s wife—suggested we should start going to the market as a means of learning the language,” Steve explained. “And I think it’s a good idea.”

Bucky reached for the printed recipe Steve had used; it was written in Wakandan with the English translation. The symbols sorted themselves into words, and the words into meanings. “I can read this,” he said softly, obscurely horrified.


“Hydra. They had…plans for Wakanda.” He closed his eyes and the mission objectives began to unspool in his memory. “The plan was to assassinate the Wakandan king, T’Chaka, and destabilize the country. Before he had children to succeed him.” A ghost, a whisper.… Mission Report: 13 November 1963. Outcome: reassigned.

Sam leaned back in his chair. “How was that even gonna work? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’d stand out here.”

“T’Chaka was scheduled to visit South Africa at the time, in an attempt to influence the government to drop its apartheid policies,” Bucky replied. The details were there in his head, what he’d been ordered to do with the hands that Hydra had trained and tortured, but which were still his own. “I was to have assassinated him at that meeting and make it look like the work of someone in the South African delegation. The mission was scrapped before it got out of the planning stages because Hydra had another assignment.”

Steve must have seen something in his face. “Bucky, you don’t…”

Bucky waved him off. “Still my hands, Stevie. Still my hands. I was in Dallas at the end of November, 1963.”

Sam blew out his breath explosively. “Damn. Historians have been chewing over that one for years. You were the shooter on the grassy knoll?”

“No, I was the one in the schoolbook depository. Oswald wasn’t the shooter. The man on the grassy knoll was my handler at the time. Oswald was… a useful idiot, nothing more.”

Sam scrubbed his face. “We need to make sure T’Challa knows about this.”

Steve tilted his head. “Why? T’Chaka is dead, it won’t do T’Challa any good to know he might have been killed earlier.”

“Steve,” Sam replied. “Your friend here just confessed to the murder of President Kennedy. You want his name cleared eventually? You want him recognized as the United States’ longest serving POW? Then you don’t hold back any information from T’Challa about what Bucky did as the Winter Soldier. T’Challa might be the only person we know with enough influence to make any of this happen—but all the cards need to be on the table.”

Steve flinched and Sam’s too-sharp gaze pinned them both. “Something you all want to tell me?” Sam asked calmly.
For a moment, Bucky was back in that abandoned missile silo in Siberia, feeling the press of a metal hand against his throat and a voice hissing, “Do you remember them?”

*I remember them all. It’s the forgetting I can’t manage.*

Steve folded his hands on the table. Bucky thought he might be the only person alive who could detect the tension knotting the other man’s shoulders, but from Sam’s concerned glance, he wasn’t the only one who had seen it. “Do you remember me telling you about finding Zola?”

“The Hydra scientist who got himself downloaded into a computer? Yeah, I remember,” Sam answered.

“He showed Nat and I a…video of sorts, about what Hydra had done inside SHIELD. One of the clips was of a newspaper announcing the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark. The next image flashed to a faded photo of the Winter Soldier. ‘When history did not cooperate, history was changed,’ Zola said. We were meant to infer that the Winter Soldier had killed Tony’s parents.”

“Did you tell Tony?” Sam asked.

“Nat and I talked about it,” Steve replied, “but the final decision was mine. At the time, I told myself we didn’t have any proof, and then later, there was the Mandarin and Ultron and…” He glanced at Bucky. “I’d read your file, saw some of the material Nat dumped on the web, what Hydra did to you. There was no doubt in my mind that it wasn’t you, Bucky. Not really.” He breathed out. “And honestly? I was afraid once I told Tony my suspicions, he’d go half-cocked and try to kill Bucky.”

He stared down at his folded hands. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“He wouldn’t have been wrong, Steve,” Bucky said into the silence. “I killed his parents. I don’t blame him.”

“And Tony found out about this…in Siberia?” Sam guessed.

Steve nodded. “Yeah. We were all played by Zemo. Somehow, he’d gotten a video of Howard and Maria’s assassination. Howard…recognized Bucky.”

“Jesus,” Sam whispered. “And that’s why you both had near-fatal injuries, because Tony Stark had tried to kill you both.”

“I kept that from him. I should have said something,” Steve said.

Sam shook his head. “When? When was that even an option? When you were recovering from your injuries after the helicarriers? After the Mandarin, when he was recovering from heart surgery? While we were in and out of more countries than I can name, looking for Barnes? During Ultron, while Tony---while Stark---was building the murder robot that nearly wiped out humanity? After Ultron, when he was retired and stopped taking your calls for months?”

“Pepper might have had something to do with that,” Steve admitted uncomfortably. “We emailed back and forth. She was worried about me, after the helicarriers.”

“Wait, you were friends with his girl?” Bucky interjected.

“Ex-girlfriend, at the time,” Steve said, “and there wasn’t anything there but friendship, Buck. Also not the point, Sam. I owed him the truth, even if he didn’t want to talk to me outside of work.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I get that. But…tell me, what was your plan? Let’s say Zemo hadn’t managed to fuck up everyone’s lives and you’d found Bucky. What did you plan to do?”
“I wanted to get you help, Buck,” Steve said softly. “Whether you stayed with me or not--- I felt I owed you that.”

(The bitter chill of an October night, washing his hands at the kitchen sink, Steve hollow-eyed and pale. “Don’t look at me like that, Stevie. I did what I had to do. You don’t owe me nothin’.”)

“And what then?” Sam prompted. “Once Barnes was well, were you planning to tell Tony then?”

“Yes,” Steve answered, “but honestly? I thought he’d find the information himself. He had JARVIS, and this was the man who hacked into SHIELD’s computers the first day we met. Natasha had removed the encryption on most of the Hydra files---so I thought Tony would have seen something by then, some proof.” He stared at his clasped hands. “I didn’t want to have to discuss this with him.”

Sam smiled. “Human nature—and you are human, man---is to let sleeping dogs lie. I’m not sure I would have wanted to poke this particular dragon either. But what I’m getting at is this: even if you’d told Tony, we’d likely still be on the run, still hiding. Not much difference in outcome, if you ask me.”

“ ‘We’?” Steve asked. “None of this was your doing, Sam. If I’d just told Tony, you would have been left alone.”

“And you think the guy who built Ultron using Loki’s goddamned scepter is capable of that much nuance?” Sam scoffed. “He’d have thought I knew and was just hiding the truth from him. And we’re going to have that talk about why you didn’t tell me at a later point—but Steve, this isn’t all your fault. It was an impossible situation.” His eyes narrowed then, as if caught by a sudden thought. “Man, I have to ask---when you and I were looking for Barnes, who paid for all of that?”

“I did,” Steve replied. “You thought Tony---?”

Sam shook his head. “No, not really. But it couldn’t have been cheap. I wasn’t able to contribute much, between the mortgage on my place in DC and helping my sister out.”

“I had a…lot of back pay once the Army was forced to recognize that I was alive,” Steve explained. “SHIELD gave me a housing allowance, so I didn’t need to spend much of my pay from them. I would never have asked Tony for help.”

Bucky recalled how much Steve had hated asking anyone for help, even when he desperately needed it. “I knew you guys were following me,” he said. “What did you plan once you’d found me in Bucharest?”

“I was planning to retire,” Steve said, “ask you to come with me, buy a house someplace with plenty of land, and just…”

“Steve, you were gonna quit being Captain America for me? How many times I got to tell you I ain’t worth that?”

“It wasn’t just for you,” Steve replied, infuriatingly calm. “The Accords had a lot to do with it.”


“Oh, that’s right, you wouldn’t have---” Sam put in. “Steve, you want to do the honors of explaining that clusterfuck, or shall I?”

“By all means,” Steve answered, a shadow of his old sarcastic grin crossing his face.
When Sam finished, Bucky repressed a heavy sigh by dint of sheer will. “So let me get this straight: you guys save the world a few times, in spite of both the World Security Council and the goddamned Squid Nazis, but the Avengers are the bad guys?”

“Kind of sounds like it,” Sam replied with what had to be forced lightness. “Now, us ending up here? That was entirely due to the Accords. Since we all refused to sign, we’re ‘retired’ and ‘unauthorized’ and the fight at Leipzig has been classified as a ‘terrorist action by enhanced individuals.’ Which also, thanks to the Accords, means we’ve lost our civil rights as American citizens, without any way to appeal, and if we set foot on US soil—or really, the countries of any of the signatories to the Accords—we can be locked up in ‘protective custody’, until such time as the completely unnamed authorities decide we’re not dangerous. Which means a cell at The Raft, and there’s nothing protective about it.”

Seventy years in and out of cryo, and Bucky was impressed that he could still be appalled. “So you’ve got indefinite detention, suspension of civil rights and probable torture. You ever think that general was Hydra?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” Steve answered. “Not all the assholes in the world came from Hydra.”

Bucky grunted. “True. But it sure seems like a lot of the rest of them come straight from Satan’s asscrack.”

That startled a laugh out of both Sam and Steve. “You’re all right,” Sam said, grinning.

Bucky shrugged, feeling somehow lighter. “So what brought you guys to Europe anyway? Aren’t you based in New York state?”

Steve swallowed and blinked rapidly, looking away briefly. “Buck. Peggy…she’s gone. Died in her sleep. They’d moved her to a care facility outside London once SHIELD fell and her safety was in question.”

“The hospital texted him,” Sam said flatly, disgust radiating out in every bitten-off word.

“Peggy’s granddaughter, Elaine,” Steve corrected. “I used to…run into her when I’d go to visit Peggy in DC. She told me she’d let me know when…” He blinked again, and Bucky remembered Peggy, vivid in her red dress.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky said. “She was a hell of a woman.” And it was nothing but the truth; sometimes memories punched through with such vividness that he might as well be reliving them, and his memories of Peggy Carter were painted in technicolor.

“Yeah,” Steve muttered. “She was.” He swallowed, rubbed at his eyes. “Look, I’m gonna take a walk. I can’t…do this now.”

Sam nodded, clearly unhappy. “All right. You got your phone?”

Steve nodded. “I won’t be gone long, I just…”

“I get it,” Sam said, and Bucky had the sense that he truly did understand—so who had he lost?

Steve was out the door without a backwards glance and Sam slumped in his seat. “Man, I ought to thank you.”

Bucky had been thinking of all he should have said, maybe even that he should have gone with Steve instead of letting him leave, and the other man’s comments left him flummoxed. “For what? I
“Yeah, you did. Remember what I said about the Accords, and that bullshit three day review period they ‘gave’ us to either sign or retire? He got news of Peggy’s death during that, and we flew to London for her funeral. He wouldn’t talk about her at all, not even when he got the message, not even on that long flight there. Man keeps everything so locked inside I wonder he’s not exploded yet.”

Bucky shivered, feeling the ice of the Siberian missile silo again, witnessing Steve’s explosive, protective rage. “He has. He…” There was a sense that maybe he didn’t have the right to say the words—after all, hadn’t he left Steve on the side of the Potomac, half-dead, nearly drowned and bloodied with injuries he’d caused? He picked through what he was going to say, and finally came around to the obvious. “You’re good for him. Steve, he needs people that see him. Not the suit. Peggy was the same.”

“He does at that,” Sam agreed. “You remember her much?”

“Some,” Bucky said. “I don’t think I liked her at first. She wasn’t like any woman I’d ever met before, and she only had eyes for Steve.”

Sam studied with those sharp falcon’s eyes, and Bucky wondered what it was he saw. “He never had a girlfriend before…?”

“Nah,” Bucky said. “He was…sick, a lot, as a kid and most of the girls wouldn’t give him the time of day. Didn’t help that a lot of their mothers didn’t want them breeding with someone like that.”

Sam jerked back, in disgust or astonishment, Bucky couldn’t tell. “They…said that?”

“Eugenics,” Bucky said flatly. “They not only said it, they said it to his face. And his doctors too---his ma was constantly afraid the doctors wouldn’t take care of him like they should.”

Sam went silent for a few moments while Bucky tried to pull the threads of memory together. He remembered Sarah now---blonde and far too thin (well, they all had been, hadn’t they?) standing in the pale light of a winter sunrise, coming home after a night shift at the hospital, totally unsurprised to find him there---why? He had the feeling she hadn’t totally approved of him—why? So many questions without answers.

“You want something to drink?” Sam asked.

“Anything but milk,” Bucky said before he thought about it.

Sam frowned a bit, but nodded. “Fair enough, though I’m guessing they may not be big on cow’s milk here anyway. Milk not agree with you?”

Pierce’s sneering face in the darkened kitchen rose to his mind’s eye. “Something like that.”

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It was full dark before Steve returned, tired and sweaty but calmer, at least on the surface. “Steve,” Bucky began but Steve brushed past him. “I’m dirty and I stink, Buck. Let me get a shower first.”

It might have been some weirdness of the serums they were both dosed with, but Steve didn’t stink---he was sweaty, sure, and he looked like he went running hell for leather for hours, but he didn’t smell. Bucky filed that new/old knowledge away with the rest of the shards of his memory. “All right. We saved you some food.”
Somehow, Bucky knew what Steve was going to say next. “I’m not hungry, but thanks.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. Even Hydra had fed him some kind of nutritional slurry because the requirements of his metabolism were so high. For Steve to not be hungry after running all that way? “I’ll be waiting when you get out,” he called to the closed door.

He waited for the water to turn on full blast and then sank down into the overstuffed chair. “That kind of thing normal?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Sam said simply. “Since I’ve known him, anyway.”

Old, old instincts, so deep in his bones that not even Hydra had been able to burn them out, rose to the fore. “Is he…sick?”

Sam sat down in the opposite chair. “Bucky. Talk to Steve. Ask him. He’s my friend, but you guys have known each other longer than I’ve been alive. Talk to him.”

Before Bucky could say anything else, the bead on Sam’s bracelet began flashing at the same time the phone on the coffee table began buzzing. “Oh, it’s Cendisa.” He tapped the phone lightly and a hologram appeared. “Greetings, Samuel,” Cendisa said. “Is Sergeant Barnes with you now?”

Bucky had to admit he liked that she got right to the point. “I’m here.”

The hologram turned to face him. It was eerie; he’d seen holograms before (where?) but there was none of the tell-tale shimmer around the woman’s form, nor was there any real transparency to the image. “Greetings, Sergeant. My name is Cendisa. I am the king’s head of households.”

“Hi,” Bucky managed, suddenly very, very conscious of how he must look, not even a day out of the hospital. He’d cleaned up some there, but he probably needed a good shower too. His apartment in Bucharest had had iffy water pressure on the best of days, but the water that came out was always hot, and he felt a sudden longing for that place, the place where he’d started to become human again.

Cendisa smiled. “I’ll be visiting tomorrow, if that’s all right, but I wanted to make sure you didn’t need anything right now.”

Bucky considered. A bed, a roof over his head, food, people who didn’t want to see him as the Asset? What more could he ever need? “I’m fine, thank you, ma’am.”

She nodded. “If you would pass a message along to the others?”

“Sure,” Bucky said.

“The king’s funeral will be held tomorrow at sundown. All business will be halted after the funeral until the end of the week, except for emergencies. The official mourning period will be over then, and His Highness will want to meet with you all, as will I.”

“I’ll let everyone know,” Bucky said, and wondered what the meeting with T’Challa might involve. T’Challa had not yet been born when Hydra had planned their aborted mission to this country, but the fact that he was here instead of rotting in a Wakandan prison spoke volumes about the new king.

Cendisa did a sort of half bow, and closed the connection. Bucky glanced over at Sam. “What do you make of that?”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “I think we better plan Laura’s market trip sooner than later, and stock up, assuming we can figure out how to pay for that. Then we need to have a group meal and get ourselves sorted before Cendisa and T’Challa come over.” He inclined his head towards the closed
bedroom door. “You want to go beard the lion in his den, or should I?”

“At this point, you probably know him better,” Bucky scoffed. “I’ll go reheat his dinner if you can get him to come out here.”

“Now that,” Sam said firmly, “is nonsense, Barnes. Go get your boy. And I’ll reheat the food.”

Bucky shrugged but went towards the bedroom anyway. It was…nice, he decided, that Sam thought he still had anything to offer Steve. He knocked once. “Steve, you decent? I’m coming in.”

Steve didn’t answer, but then, Bucky hadn’t thought he would. He remembered, or thought he did, moods like this, where Steve had gone silent and still with emotions he didn’t know how to deal with. Bucky mentally rolled his eyes at himself---like he was any better, trying to become human after decades of being something…other. He opened the door slowly and paused.

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed, a large hand braced on either side of him, head down and still as a statue. “Steve? Are you all right?”

It was a dumb question, Bucky thought---hunched over like he was, Steve looked every bit his actual years, old and tired and worn down. Smaller, and a pang shot through Bucky. “No,” Steve said after a moment. “I’m not, but thanks for asking. I’ll be fine.”

The stiff politeness was not Steve---not his Steve, anyway. “I’m real sorry to hear about Peggy,” Bucky said, and it was nothing more than the truth. She’d been the best of all of them. That memory, at least, had stuck.

“I can’t talk about her,” Steve said, voice raw. “If I start talking about her, I won’t stop and if I can’t stop, then…”

(“She’s gone into the hospital, has she?” “Yeah. She ain’t comin’ home, Buck. You got to know that.” “Lady like Mrs. Rogers? Think she’ll let a cough keep her away?”) They had pretended, Bucky recalled, for days, and then weeks and then that last month of autumn, when it had been obvious to anyone with eyes that Sarah Rogers was never coming home again. Steve’s voice had held that same panicked fear, of losing, of letting go.

The door closed behind him and Bucky sat down next to Steve. “I ain’t much,” Bucky said into the silence, not quite meeting Steve’s eyes, “but you got to know, you don’t have to hide with me.”

“You remember that?” Steve asked.

“Enough,” Bucky said. They had been…more, once. What the more had been, he didn’t quite know, but he knew it as surely as he breathed. “Say what you got to say. I ain’t the type to go clutching my pearls at the idea that you’ve got actual feelings.”

Steve laughed, but the laughter was just on the edge of tears. “The team’s broken up,” he said finally. “My fault, a lot of it, because I couldn’t sign the Accords. Peggy’s dead. I wasn’t there when she died. We’ve made an enemy of one of the richest men in the US and a good chunk of the Federal government and now we’re refugees, wanted men.”

“You haven’t ever stopped, have you?” Bucky asked. “Not since you woke up.”

“What does that even mean?” Steve asked with a glimmer of his old fire.

“It means---when I was in Bucharest, I kept looking you up. Couldn’t figure out why, for a while---thought it might be something, a trick of my mind---but I kept wanting to know more about you.”
“You had a flier from the museum in your notebook,” Steve said. “You went to the exhibit?”

“Yeah. Right after…” Bucky shrugged. “You know. I didn’t really know who I was, but you did, so… After that, some memories came easier.” He decided not to discuss the weeks and months that had followed, detoxing and dodging the remnants of Hydra until he’d finally made his way to Bucharest. “Seems to me, our enlistment should have ended years ago. What do you say we stop fighting?”

Steve leaned against him, just a little. “I’m…you’re right. I’m not sure I even know how, though.”

“Who says you have to figure it out today?” Bucky asked. “I’m hungry. You need to eat more. Let’s start there.”

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“Tell me about Bucharest,” Steve said suddenly, as if they hadn’t both been about to sleep. Well, maybe Steve had, Bucky mused. Sleep was not exactly a friend of the Asset and even two years away from Hydra hadn’t done much to change that.

Dinner had been warm and filling and the whole thing had called to mind Maria’s meals in Bucharest, made when she fusssed over him the way she would have over her adult sons. Steve had eaten some of the Wakandan dish, but considering what his appetite should have been, he hadn’t eaten nearly enough of anything. “Why you want to know?” Bucky asked. He had sudden flash of memory: Winifred Barnes, declaring that her son would speak “like a proper American.” Doubtless she was spinning in her grave now…he stopped that thought before it could go further. She was years dead, and if there was one mercy, at least she’d never known what he’d become. What he’d been made into.

“We had neighbors in Brooklyn,” Steve answered. “Good people, who tried to look out for us. Did you have that?”

“Maria and Vasile, yes. They were…,” he shrugged. “She decided to rent her mother’s old apartment to me, then decided I was too thin and needed to eat.” He gave a short laugh. “I hadn’t eaten real food for decades by that point and I know I looked at least as awful as I felt. But they looked out for me. I just don’t know why. I was barely human when they first knew me. She gave me a home, and Vasile put me to work, helping him fix old cars.” He hadn’t trusted either of them, not a first---not coming from Hydra where kindness was always, always an act.

“I’m glad you weren’t alone,” Steve said quietly. “I was…afraid of that.”

They were lying on the floor, with the blankets pulled off the bed and the pillows stacked carefully so they’d each have enough space to sleep. “I can’t sleep in beds like that either, Buck,” he’d said. “Why don’t we just take the floor?”

Bucky could have given a thousand reasons, not the least of which was my metal arm almost smashed your face in, you dumb punk! Steve had silenced him with a look so familiar that Bucky had just given in, though he had insisted on some distance in case his nightmares came back.

“Who was there for you, Steve?” Bucky asked. It bothered him, suddenly, to think of Steve as alone in the world as he had been.

“Sam,” Steve answered quickly, and Bucky nodded---of course. That much was obvious. “Natasha,” Steve went on. His face twisted slightly, not really a grimace but not really not one either. “Kate, the nurse across the hall. Who turned out to be not actually named Kate, but a SHIELD agent Nick Fury assigned to watch over me. Then she turned out to be Peggy’s great niece, which I didn’t know.
about until the funeral.” He breathed out once. “Sharon’s a good woman. I hope Nat’s able to get in touch with her.”

Bucky remembered the blonde Steve had kissed, the one who had recovered the shield and Sam’s gear. “You and her…?”

“Yes. No. Maybe, I don’t know. We tried but…she’s with the CIA, or was, and I was…” He shrugged. “I wasn’t ever around enough to be good for her. When the Accords came, I thought I’d retire, try being there.”

“And then you didn’t. Because of me,” Bucky said.

Steve shook his head. “No, Bucky. Because a madman disguised as you bombed the UN because he wanted to destroy the Avengers. Not nearly the same thing.”

“Still,” Bucky said. “You looked for me for how long?”

“Almost a solid year. Then Sam and I figured out you didn’t want to be found, and stopped.”

The way he said it, Bucky knew there had to be more to the story---Steve Rogers, of any era, simply giving up? “Was Bucharest because of your ma?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Bucky replied, “though I didn’t even recall that until I’d been there about a year. Ma made sure I spoke Romanian and I knew enough to blend in, at least more than I would have anywhere else. It…wasn’t home, but it wasn’t someplace foreign either.”

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Bucky woke suddenly with a need, a compulsion: check the locks, check the door. Steve slept, snoring slightly, next to him.

It was dark when he emerged into the living room, but the full moon outside was enough light to see Sam sitting by the balcony window. “Hey man,” Sam said. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“How did you hear me?” Bucky asked. He wasn’t so far removed from his decades as the Winter Soldier that he would have made a sound when he walked.

“I didn’t,” Sam said. “But I knew someone was in the room, and odds are, it was gonna be you.”

“Why not Steve?”

“There was enough carbohydrates in that meal to put even a super soldier down for the count. Plus, he’s been up for too long to wake easily now. You… probably don’t sleep much, I’m guessing.”

Bucky nodded in acknowledgment; the Asset had never slept, as such---there were periods of Awake and periods of Cold, but sleeping had never been part of his routine. “I’m…I need to check the locks.”

Sam didn’t bat so much as an eyelash. “I already did, but feel free.”

“That why you up?”

“Nah. Nightmares,” Sam replied. “Every night since we landed here. Like my brain says I’m safe, so here’s the house of horrors.”

The windows didn’t open up through any system of locks Bucky was familiar with, but the front
door was locked securely. He checked it, and came back to sit at the kitchen table. “We are safe, so far as I can tell. I’d almost forgotten what that feels like.” He studied the other man, noticing how tired he looked. “I get why Steve didn’t sign the Accords,” Bucky said. “But why didn’t you?”

Sam leaned back in his chair. “That’s a hell of a question, man. Were you---” and his face was uncomfortable--- “around for 9/11?”

Bucky shook his head. “Wasn’t my op,” he replied quietly. And indeed it hadn’t been, but he could dimly remember Pierce crowing about how Hydra couldn’t have arranged things better if they’d tried.

“I enlisted the day after 9/11,” Sam went on. “Then it turned out I was fighting the wrong war against the wrong people because the people who made the decisions had an agenda which had nothing at all to do with the truth. These Accords? Same deal. There were a million ways, at least, that the government could have addressed their concerns about us. And hell, some of their concerns were legitimate ones. But legislation like that? That was a power grab and if we’d signed, who knows where it would have ended? My ancestors were born into slavery; I’ll be damned if I’ll sign anything that’ll make that a possibility for anyone.”

Bucky nodded. It was a sensible, logical decision not to sign---but how had things got to that point in the first place? The Avengers had intervened to stop a greater evil, and only once had that evil been their own fault. “And…Stark backed the Accords?”

Sam’s mouth twisted. “Like it was his hope of heaven, yeah. I ever get the chance to talk to him again, we’re going to have some words.”

Bucky chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll bet you will.”

Sam nodded. He was not, entirely, the same man who’d fought beside him at Leipzig; this was Steve’s friend, the one he trusted to have his back. “Can I say something to you?” Sam asked.

Bucky shrugged. “Of course.”

“Steve’s messed up. He’s a good man, but….don’t let taking care of him stop you from pursuing your own recovery. You both need time to recover.”

Bucky breathed out. “You’ve seen it too. Seen Steve---”

“Yeah. I have, and I’m worried too. But that’s--- look, you know I worked at the VA. He has people who care about him---but you need help too. Don’t be afraid to ask for it, even if you think Steve needs help more.”

“I told him, maybe he could finally stop,” Bucky forced out through a throat gone suddenly tight. Who was he fooling? Even through his torn patchwork of memories, he knew they’d never been able to rest, not once---if it hadn’t been the Great Depression, it was the war, if it wasn’t the war, it was decades on ice or in and out of cryo, only to emerge in a century neither of them should have survived to see. They had, he realized, been in one kind of war or another all their lives.

“I think we all want that for him,” Sam said quietly. “The last few years have been rough. And nobody really sees that---outwardly, he’s so strong that…” He could hear Sam swallow. “I lost someone, my wingman, Riley.”

Bucky waited---a sniper’s patience, he supposed. Finally, Sam spoke again. “Riley, man, he was brilliant up there. Smart guy, so damned funny too. But the combat, the missions did something to him—he wanted to stop, to go home, but he couldn’t. We couldn’t. There were only four of us in the
program and by the time he died, it was just the two of us left. So we had a lot of back to back missions and he started drinking and I…” He swallowed again. “I made excuses for him, too many excuses. Should have told our command, but I didn’t. I wanted him to get help but I thought he’d get there on his own, and if I’d told our command, it would have been a permanent mark on his record.” There was a rasping sound—Sam, scrubbing his face. “The night he died, he was hungover. Not worse than before, but it made him a fraction too slow and an RPG shot him out of the sky. Wasn’t enough left of him to bury him.”

Bucky opened his mouth to say something, but Sam went on. “Riley was suffering. I saw it, but I didn’t see how much. And he was needed in the air, on a mission, so….” He scrubbed at his face again. “Sometimes knowing when to stop—and being able to—is harder than deciding to fight.”

“You’re a good man, Sam Wilson,” Bucky said. “And if you repeat that, I’ll deny it to my last breath.”

Sam chuckled. “You’re not so bad yourself. Which I’ll also deny but…truce?”

The Asset hadn’t known friend from foe; to him, they had all been a piece, Handler or Not-Handler. The Asset would have found Sam’s open friendship confounding; Bucky welcomed it. “Truce.”

***

He awoke the next morning to a very familiar scene; something out of his dislodged memories. Steve, the blanket hog, was also apparently an octopus in his sleep, and Bucky was effectively trapped between the blankets and the strong arms of an exhausted super-soldier. Also he had to use the facilities and the more he tried to move, the tighter Steve held on. “Punk, either let me up or I’m gonna piss on you,” Bucky muttered under a grin he couldn’t quite suppress. It felt like he’d said it about a million times before, in another life. No doubt that memory was real.

Steve grumbled something indistinct but moved just slightly and Bucky edged out of the mess they’d made of blankets and pillows. He grabbed a brush—probably Steve’s—to smooth the wild mess of his hair and a shirt on over a pair of sleep pants that were either his or Steve’s and stepped into the hallway. His hips and lower back hurt slightly from the loss of the arm, but he ignored the pain; it was much less than the pain he’d lived with because of the arm. There was a weird sort of bouncy, cheerful music echoing in the hallway that seemed out of place, but probably Sam had left the TV on.

Once he finished in the bathroom, Bucky saw the source of the music—a children’s show. More specifically, Sam, a woman, and a young girl who was clearly her daughter were watching a children’s show in Wakandan. Sam saw him first and grinned. “It’s Sesame Street,” he said. “Go get some coffee and join us.”

“The future is goddamned weird,” he muttered, but did as he was asked.

“Steve still sleeping?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Bucky replied. On screen, the characters—eye-searing in neon fur—were singing a song to the clicking sounds of Wakandan. He shook his head. He’d seen some crazy stuff in his day, but this? It was irritatingly cheerful, especially at this hour.

“So, I’m Laura Barton,” the woman said. “This is my daughter Lila.” Lila waved, clearly unafraid of him or uncaring about the missing metal arm, the scarring visible beneath his shirt. “Sam tells me you speak Wakandan,” Laura said. “That means you have to come with us to the market in case I accidentally insult someone’s parentage.”

She didn’t appear to be concerned or curious about how he’d learned the language—not one of the more common African languages, for sure—nor did she seem to be uneasy around him, though her sharp glance at his arm told him she knew exactly who he was. “I’m Bucky,” he introduced himself. “And I don’t know about the market, exactly.”

She tilted her head. “Why?”

_Because I don’t like crowds. Because the goddamned trigger words are still in my head._ Aloud, he said, “Well, what are we doing for money?”

“Cendisa sent a messenger this morning. Apparently—quite mysteriously!—the freezes on all of our bank accounts have been lifted and the funds transferred to individual accounts with the Wakandan Central Bank.” She flashed a little blue card with a metallic chip at one end. “I was told this is a very primitive way to access our money, but—” and she did an excellent impression of an indignant huff—“since we are a more simplistic culture, it will have to do.”

“I love that woman,” Sam said reverently, and Laura chuckled.

“Hydra tried to hack the bank,” Bucky remembered suddenly. “They…chose to give up and focus on just assassinating the king.”

‘Just,’ ” Sam said dryly. “Well, if it kept Hydra out, I’m guessing it’s safe enough for us. Why don’t you get Steve up and—”

“Sam, I can’t,” Bucky said, desperate, the clawing fear roiling inside him yet again. “The trigger words are still in my head. I don’t want to hurt no one. I don’t do that no more.”

“Cendisa thought of that too,” Laura said. She reached inside her pocket and pulled out what looked like tiny earplugs. “These are…filters. The only languages you can hear with these are English and Wakandan. Were your trigger words in either of those languages?”

“I…don’t know,” Bucky said and that was in some ways the worst of it: that he could be turned back into a weapon, and not even fully know how.

“I do,” Steve said from behind them, as calm and as easy as if he hadn’t just woken up to another day of an indefinite exile from the country they’d both sworn to protect. Bucky had to admit, it was a damned good act. ‘Good morning, everyone. Buck, I went through Karpov’s files while we were on our way to the Raft; Zemo did have those on him, at least, when he was turned over to the UN. Everything I saw—” and his face twisted into an expression somewhere between fury and utter hatred—“indicates the trigger words were only in Russian. And Karpov was the only person responsible for—” He shook his head and Bucky could almost see him forcing the emotion away. “Anyway, the earplugs should keep you safe.”

“And if they don’t?” Bucky asked softly.

“You won’t hurt me, Bucky,” Steve answered, just as quietly.

Sam rolled his eyes, and Bucky relaxed a bit. Sam took the danger seriously, even if Steve wouldn’t. “Look, Bucky? Yeah, you put this guy in a hospital, but he’d be the first to say that wasn’t you. I trust him, so I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t,” Bucky began.

“We aren’t going to keep you locked up,” Sam said firmly. “You don’t have to be a prisoner here, unless you want to be.”
Bucky stared at Laura. “And you’re willing to risk your girl on what they say?”

Her hand rested on Lila’s dark blond hair. “Life is risk. And if I can’t trust Captain America and the Falcon, who can I trust?” She raised her chin slightly. “I was a SHIELD agent too. Your name is on the Wall of Honor at the Triskelion, or was. I trust Bucky Barnes.”

Steve spoke and though his voice was quiet, there was steel under his words. “Bucky, we’re refugees here, now. We have T’Challa’s protection. But at any moment, we could be forced to leave, or have to choose to leave for our own safety—regardless of whether your trigger words are removed or not. Staying here won’t help you deal with what’s outside that door.”

Bucky shook his head. “Dammit, Punk. You’ve managed to find people who are as crazy as you are.” He reached out his hand and Laura dropped the earplugs in his hand.

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The market was…not at all what Bucky expected. He’d had images in his head from somewhere (where?) of open-air markets in other countries, and he’d expected much the same here. There were a few similarities: women in brightly colored dresses carrying baskets on their heads, the mingled odors of spice and flowers and produce, the conversations in Wakandan, Igbo, Yoruba, Xhosa. But while there was all that, there were also a lot of neatly organized stalls selling mechanical items that were totally unfamiliar, and one larger stall selling what his mind could only identify as the greatly advanced descendants of Howard Stark’s flying car. “Sam, you seeing this?” Steve asked and heard Sam’s low whistle of astonishment. He put the question of what, exactly, they’d recognized aside for now; Steve would surely tell him later.

The other thing he wasn’t quite prepared for: they all, save for Sam, stuck out like sore thumbs. It made him uneasy; the Asset had always been hidden, a ghost, save for that last mission when (he’d realized sometime later) Hydra hadn’t cared if he was seen, because he was going to be killed once Project Insight was operational. There were a few murmurs as they walked through the crowd, but not whispers born of dislike, just surprise. A lot of surprise, which…he couldn’t exactly blame them.

He breathed out, trying to shut out the part of his brain that looked for exits, that calculated attack positions and hiding places. It was then that he noticed the peculiar shimmer overlaying the air above the market. Steve had mentioned seeing a weather shield, or what he thought was a weather shield, recently, but the part of Bucky that always calculated risk and threat assessment knew this wasn’t just a weather shield, but something else entirely. Camouflage, most likely, but from who, or what?

A girlish voice drew his attention. “Mama, look, dresses!”

Laura laughed. “It’s her birthday next week and she wants a dress.” She gestured to a flower stall seven or eight stalls down the row. “Let me go figure out how to get some cash out of this card, and I’ll meet you guys there in a bit. Why don’t you start looking for some food for dinner tonight?”

Sam and Steve looked at him, then at Laura. “Dinner tonight?” Steve asked finally.

She sighed and Bucky hid a smile. He knew that sigh, or thought he did---the sigh of a woman who has been thinking nine steps ahead since the day she started walking. “I think we should all get together for dinner and catch up. We talked about that, remember? Scott’s talking to Hank Pym and Wanda…didn’t want to leave her room, else they’d have met us here. And you can’t deny we need to talk before T’Challa comes to visit.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, we need to do that. All right. I’m taking menu suggestions now.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “No cabbage and nothing boiled.”
Dinner came together almost too easily. Everybody brought something, adaptations of dishes they knew with Wakandan ingredients. Simple foods, nothing requiring a lot of preparation or time cooking. “Reminds me of something we used to do when I was a kid,” Steve said as they were moving a series of folding tables into the courtyard. “When a dame got married, or a baby was born. Everybody came together and made a meal like this.”

“Was that back in the stone age?” Sam asked with a smile, setting up the chairs.

“Nah, iron age,” Bucky answered dryly. “We had tools, at least.”

The leg of one of the tables wouldn’t unfold despite his best efforts and Bucky sat back on his heels, trying to figure if he could make it work with just the one arm or if he’d need to ask for help. “Let me help you with that,” a lightly accented voice said behind him.

Bucky stood to see a young woman who could only be Wanda. He didn’t know her personally, but Strucker had been involved in the Winter Soldier project before relocating his experiments to Sokovia. They had been so young the last time he’d heard of her and her brother. “Please,” he said.

She did a small, graceful movement with her hands, and red light swirled around the table leg. With a small pop, it came down to join the others. “Thank you, Wanda,” Bucky said.

Wanda smiled slightly. There were deep shadows under her eyes and Bucky had the sense that in other circumstances, her smile would be quite lovely, but right now, she was simply too tired. “I’m glad you’re here,” she replied and went to go help set up the rest of the tables.

Sam was watching them—not obviously, but Bucky had been a sniper and knew full well when he was being watched. “She all right?” he asked for Sam’s ears alone.

“No,” Sam answered. “Those assholes on the Raft—”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “I figured. They did something to her.”

“She wouldn’t cooperate with them, not for anything. When they put that…thing on her, she didn’t speak another word.”

Bucky knew, without having to be told, that Sam kept the others strong while they’d been at the Raft. “Hey,” he said quietly. “She’s here. We’re all here. Let’s eat.”

“So,” Clint asked, as he put some yams on Nathaniel’s plate. “What happened after you guys went to Siberia? Tony went to go see you as a friend—”

Steve, Bucky was not at all surprised to see, hadn’t eaten much. He fiddled with his fork, and Bucky was sure he wasn’t imagining the tremor in his hands. “Yeah, about that. The whole thing was a set up. The guy who impersonated Bucky’s psychologist wanted to draw us to Siberia, where the other winter soldiers were.”

“Why? Seems like a lot of work,” Laura observed. “Do I guess that Zemo was also bat shit crazy?”

Steve glanced at Wanda. “He’d…lost his entire family in Sokovia. Blamed the Avengers for it, and wanted to see us fall apart.”

“When Ultron was Tony Stark’s fault,” Wanda said firmly. Her eyes narrowed. “What did he show you to make Stark turn on you?”
“You read my mind,” Steve said softly, an undercurrent of anger edging his words.

“It was all over you,” Wanda murmured. “You were still injured when you came to get us. I didn’t reach into your mind, Steve. I wouldn’t.”

Steve was seated on Bucky’s right; Bucky reached over and touched his clenched fist under the table. The tension in his hand relaxed, as if a spring released. “I’m sorry,” Steve said. “I’m---of course you wouldn’t, Wanda.”

“So Stark attacked you,” Clint said.

“Man, what was that all about?” Scott said, speaking for the first time. “You’re, like, way stronger than he is.”

“Not in the suit,” Bucky said. This part really was his story to tell. “Zemo had a video, a surveillance video of…” he swallowed. “I killed Tony’s parents in 1991. It wasn’t a car accident.”

He didn’t know what he’d expected---shocked, appalled murmuring? Condemnation? Angry voices telling him he had to leave, blaming him for where they were now? Instead, Clint leaned back in his chair. “Man, that’s about the worst secret around---it was common knowledge at SHIELD that Stark’s parents were assassinated. We just didn’t know it was Hydra.”

Bucky blinked. “It… was?” Then again, his orders hadn’t been to hide the evidence, just to execute the Starks, retrieve the…the…his head began to throb miserably. A flash of blue---liquid in containers, puzzlement (what is this? Why does he have this?)—and a fierce, disappointed fury.

“You okay?” Steve asked.

“Just a memory,” he managed to get out through the wall of pain that forced him away from the memory. He drank some water, but the instant he swallowed it, the nausea rose. He bolted back into their apartment just in time to lose everything he’d eaten. Bucky flushed the toilet and sat down hard on the cold ceramic floor.

The door opened and Steve stepped in. “Hey…do you need anything?”

His mouth tasted foul. He rose, rinsed his mouth out with the mouthwash and sat down heavily on the closed toilet lid.

“Steve, I think Howard worked for Hydra.”
IV. T'Challa- Coming Forth by Day

Author’s note: quotes in [ ] are adapted from The Egyptian Book of the Dead, a translation of which I found here

"The forepaw of a lion, the forearm of a man, the primal ray of the sun.
I wake in the dark to the stirring of birds, a murmur in the trees, a flutter of wings.
It is the morning of my birth, the first of many.
The past lies knotted in its sheets asleep.
Winds blow, flags above the temple ripple.
Out of darkness the earth spins toward light.
I feel a change coming.
My thoughts flicker, glow a moment and catch fire.
I come forth by day singing.”
~~~ “Coming Forth By Day” from The Egyptian Book of the Dead

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“My king.”

The voice was quiet. The earth would rise and the sky would fall before that voice would vary one bit from its assured serenity. The voice of the queen, his mother, arriving to see his father off to his eternal journey.

T'Challa turned and bowed to her. “My mother. Is it time?”

“You know that it is, my son.” Indeed, his windows were open to the sun, facing the valley where his father’s body would be taken to rest. His father’s spirit waited to journey to the lands of Bast and Sekhmet. The ceremony today would send both body and spirit on their way, and guarantee his presence among the green flowing fields. “At sundown, we will begin. You are ready?”

To bury baba? How could I be? he wanted to ask, but did not. King he was, now, and he was not the only one who had lost. His mother was now burying her second husband; Shuri was burying her father as well, and then there were the others, his people who had lost a beloved king. And now I have to lead them. What mighty shadows you cast, Baba.

T'Challa studied his mother, tall and stately in her gown of mourning green. Twice had she buried a husband. He could not imagine doing this once, let alone twice. “Stand tall, my son,” she murmured. “Your father prepared you well for this day. You are a good man.”

And it is very difficult for a good man to be king, T'Challa heard his father say, as he often had. This, then, was only the first of the difficult things.

The sun was sinking lower into the sky by inches; the time to bid his father a last farewell was nearing ever closer. His mother touched his wrist. “My son, when this is…over, we will need to talk, you and I, about your…visitors.”

T'Challa nodded. Cendisa, Misumzi, and Dr. Nomsa had, he knew, taken care of their immediate needs, provided them with medical care and food and shelter, but he understood his mother’s
concerns. The crowning of a new king did not always guarantee peace, and the presence of the ex-Avengers might inflame an already tense situation. I did this in your name, Baba, in honor of the things you tried to teach me. Please continue to guide me. Aloud, he said only, “Yes, it will be as you say.”

Ramonda darted a quick look at him, as she often had when he was a child and she suspected him of some partial truth, some story not quite fully told. “In two days, then,” she said. “You should visit them too, soon.”

He raised an eyebrow. Wakandan women—particularly women of the court—were not known for their subtlety. “Why?”

“It’s a poor king who doesn’t see to his guests,” she said dryly. “And seeing them may help you decide what to do about them.”

***

T’Challa entered the torch-lit temple; Shuri at his right, Ramonda on his left, the women of the Dora Milaje behind him. Guarding him, as the new king. The thought still seemed unreal.

Shuri, the last surprising fruit of his parents’ marriage, stifled a quiet sob in the temple, and T’Challa wished he could join her. But if he started weeping now, he feared he would never stop. Still, he could provide some comfort to his young sister; T’Challa gathered her close and felt her strong arms embrace him briefly before she stepped back, composure restored.

The priestess waited beside a fabric-covered bier where T’Chaka’s body rested. The body was only a container for the spirit, T’Challa had been told from childhood, and the spirit waited only for the body to go to its rest so they could journey onto whatever land lay beyond death. But not until the prayers were said, forming the magic that would give the soul protection. [“O spirits that guide a man through the dark halls at death, guide T’Chaka safely in life past sorrow and hopelessness, steer him from fear and anger…let him sit in the lap of the gods and hear words of comfort,”] the priestess intoned.

The next part in the ceremony was his, as the new king. The words were thousands of years old, and they should have been worn smooth with time and repetition, but they stuck like daggers in his throat. [“Let the gods touch his face. Let him go forth shining. Let his feet know the way. Let him walk and pass through fire. He loves for nothing but to live as a light within, to come forth by day with the gods singing.”]

The prayers done, the women of the Dora Milaje moved the body of their old king to the ceremonial barque that would take him to the burying grounds, there to rest with his fathers and mothers before him. Ramonda’s back was strong, her shoulders unbowed but her hand clasped his own. They watched as the barque gently entered the waters; the Dora Milaje alone would accompany the body of their old king, and see him safely buried.

“It is time, my son,” Ramonda said, and they turned and left the temple.

***

It was custom, in the first day after a royal funeral, for the family to be left entirely alone. T’Challa found himself grateful for the quiet, for the knowledge that while tomorrow he must be the king, today he was only a son, a brother. He twisted the king’s ring on his finger—a stylized eye of Wadjet, the eye that saw and knew all—and considered what must be done. His father’s journey was clear—onto the lands of Bast and Sekhmet—but the path for those he’d left behind was bound to be
far more challenging.

“T’Challa?” a voice said from the doorway. Shuri, looking as tired as he felt. Much of her characteristic gaiety was gone and he felt, for once, every bit of the age difference between them. She had been born during his studies at MIT and had been a precocious toddler when he’d returned to Wakanda. Now, though, she was a young woman who’d just lost her father and the weight of their loss…

“Come in,” he said. “Are you well, my sister?” She had, he knew, been practically living in the labs since their father’s death. He worried for her most of all, losing their father so young. “You do not need to be brave, Shuri, not with me.”

She fidgeted a bit with some curved bits of metal on the brench---the blackened, loosened plates of Sergeant Barnes’ metal arm, he realized. “What do you want me to say?” Shuri asked. “Baba is gone, and death is only a passage to another place.”

T’Challa had forgotten this characteristic of her; she would grieve, and grieve deeply, but not where anyone could see. “Very well, then. Tell me of your projects, Shuri. What are you working on down there?”

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“Some updates to your suit,” she said, seemingly relieved at the change in subject. “Would you like me to begin the preliminary work on the replacement arm for Sergeant Barnes?”

“Yes, of course,” T’Challa said. “He would not have lost the arm had I not…believed so strongly that he murdered our father.” He rubbed the ring again, remembering the strange current—some sort of feedback, he now suspected—as he’d fought the Winter Soldier. His ring had made contact with Barnes’ arm and there had been a reaction of some kind, almost as if the metal itself shivered.

Shuri nodded. “Oh, and I have an answer for you as to the…reaction you described.”

He smiled; Shuri’s mind tended to work like that, on a parallel course with his own. It had both amused and delighted their father. “Was my…theory correct?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Your ring and his arm are both vibranium, almost certainly formed from the same source.” She leaned up against him. “Brother, I do not trust this coincidence. How did anybody acquire enough vibranium to build the arm in the first place, let alone the knowledge to work with it?”

“The captain’s shield was also vibranium,” T’Challa mused. Stark had left with the shield, and where it might be now was anyone’s guess. Perhaps he might seek its return, if it was made from stolen Wakandan vibranium.

“And there have been rumors about the source for that since our grandfather’s day,” Shuri said tartly; it was something of a sore spot in a nation where the export of vibranium was strictly controlled, limited to a few grams a year. Her eyes widened. “Do you think—?”

“I think nothing that can’t be true,” T’Challa said. “But the odds of more than one person outside Wakanda being able to work vibranium with the skill necessary for the shield and the arm are…astronomical.”

Shuri favored him briefly with her wry grin. “You could calculate them.”

“I could,” he agreed. It would have been child’s play. “But I’m choosing…not to. Regardless, this will bear some thought. I wonder if Captain Rogers has any insight?”
“You could ask him. Since you’re going to see him anyway.”

T’Challa raised his eyebrows. “I am?”

“As the queen our mother commands,” she retorted with no heat. “And if you think that wasn’t a command, then…”

He nodded. “She is wise.”

The edges of Shuri’s green gown fluttered slightly in the breeze. “And you, my sister,” he went on, “have you given thought to your role now? I cannot always be king and black panther both.”

“You would ask me to train as you were trained?” she stammered. “Why not Okoye, or Nakia, or Kasi, or any of the other women in your guard?”

“Okoye leads the Dora Milaje, and leads them well. I cannot move her from that position, and she wouldn’t thank me if I tried. Kasi is ambitious, but she is too young. There is…much that is not settled between Nakia and myself, and I would not add to her burdens. Shuri, who else could I trust?” He took her hand. “There will be challengers. You know this. Baba’s death, and the manner of it, will bring those who see my claim as weak and Baba’s death a lesson in why Wakanda must remain hidden.”

Her fingers curled around his, cold. “They may not be entirely wrong about that last part, T’Challa. What Baba did wasn’t without some controversy.”

T’Challa nodded. “Yes. But in the end, even the council agreed with his reasoning. Will you do this?”

“I need to think on it,” she said. “My work in the laboratories---”

“Can continue. I promise you, Shuri. You will always call these labs your first home.”

She studied him a little. “You should consider spending some time down here too. Even after…” her hand gesture somehow encompassed all the burdens waiting to be borne “…this place is good for you. And you should take a look at the arm as well.”

“I’m sure your analysis is more than adequate.”

“It is,” Shuri said with a small smile, “but I would welcome another set of eyes. There are…things about it I find deeply disturbing.”

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His day began at dawn. After morning prayers and the pang of uttering his father’s favorite one, T’Challa ate breakfast and drank some coffee. His father had not approved of the drink (“Look at our people. Do you think we need stimulants?” he’d asked with a laugh, and T’Challa had had to agree. Whatever else might be said about Wakandans, “relaxed” was not one of them) but it was a habit which had served him well at MIT and now, it was…grounding, somehow.

He saw a glint of light through the cuff of his sleeve; a bead on his bracelet, already flashing. He repressed a groan, thinking of his father’s enduring serenity towards such matters. The messages sent to him via the communications array would be sorted, filtered, and identified and ranked for importance, but the sheer fact of so many messages this early did not bode well. A good many of them were probably condolences--T’Chaka had been well-liked and his reign, stable and prosperous---and simple manners dictated some level of response to the messages, but he couldn’t
face them quite yet.

Though much of the official business of governing had ground to a halt immediately following\
T’Chaka’s death, there were parts that could not wait—pleas and petitions, and oh, yes, here were
some he had definitely expected: the official notices by the ruling members of a few clans to
challenge his claim to the throne. He summoned his father’s domestic advisor and waited for the man
to arrive.

Mbeki had met him at the tarmac when he’d first arrived from Siberia and informed him that there
were already rival claimants to his throne. “The utter temerity,” he’d scoffed when the first of the
formal notices began to arrive. His face had been damp with tears, but he had let them fall as they
would. No warrior was ashamed of grief. “As if any of them were fit to stand in your father’s
shadow.”

“It is my fitness they question,” T’Challa had murmured, looking at his hands and still seeing the
blood there. He was…empty of all emotion, even grief. Shock, he realized, and the aftermath of grief
would be terrible for its absence now.

Now, Mbeki assumed his usual position of leashed ferocity as he inclined his head in greeting. “My
lord. Have you made a decision as to the rivals? Shall I dispatch them?”

“No,” T’Challa answered. “If they obey the forms, then I will meet them. The gods will decide.”

Mbeki looked askance. “Your father would argue that the gods’ will is best expressed by not putting
yourself in unnecessary danger, my king. Let me meet with them first. Only the truly worthy should
challenge you.”

T’Challa considered. It was not in his nature to delegate, but his life was no longer, in any sense,
purely his own. “Very well. Consult with Okoye as well.”

Unexpectedly, Mbeki grinned. “A worthy suggestion.”

Mbeki took his leave and T’Challa turned his attention to the dossiers on the ex-Avengers which
Mbeki and Okoye had compiled, using the resources of Wakanda’s intelligence service. He had
given them all refuge, in a burst of shamed recognition that he’d been willing to destroy a man’s life
because of the machinations of a madman, and now that they were here…well, his mother had been
entirely correct. He did not know what he was going to do with them, or what their future might be.
Wakanda had taken in refugees in the past, but they had been refugees from other African countries,
not Westerners steeped in an entirely different culture. Could they be trusted? Should they be?

There were several files, linked via a secure network and accessible by his retinal print and his alone.
The information was no doubt complete and in-depth, and at the end of it, T’Challa thought he might
know his new guests better than their spouses or friends did. Yet something stayed his hand. Even
his basic information about Captain Rogers indicated he was a man who did not trust easily (with
good reason, T’Challa concluded.) It felt vaguely dishonest to go through the man’s dossier without
his knowledge, merely to satisfy curiosity that could be better served by simply speaking with him.
With a wave of his hand, he returned the files back to the server and pondered, for a moment,
whether his guests might welcome a visit from him today.

Okoye had hinted at something that continued to trouble him. “The captain refused to sign the
Accords. I do not understand this. I have seen the Accords. They seem entirely reasonable.”

T’Challa had nodded. “I have read them. Captain Rogers was not the only Avenger to refuse. I
wonder what their reasons were?”
“Perhaps things only they can answer,” Okoye said, “but I fear we may not have heard the entire story from their government.”

Okoye was as sharp as the blades she carried, as the weapons she wielded. If she had concerns… “I will ask them,” T’Challa said. He supposed that the answer might help clarify who they actually were as people, and whether they might be trusted to remain.

***

His last meeting of the afternoon, it turned out, was with Cendisa. She had just returned from getting some schoolwork together for the Barton children and was able to join him for lunch. As was the tradition, T’Challa rose when he saw her standing at the entrance to the kitchen. “Greetings, sister of my mother,” he said formally.

Cendisa inclined her head. “My king.” A smile broke through her formality. “It is good to see you, after…”

He nodded. Cendisa had been a favorite friend of his father’s and continued to be a confidant of his mother’s. T’Chaka’s absence loomed large between them. “I made some oxtail soup,” he went on, “and there’s some fresh bread ready from the bakery. Would you care for some?”

“I would,” she said. “I’m glad to see you still know how to cook.”

“Baba insisted,” T’Challa replied, and that was true. Ramonda, for all her skills, had never been a decent cook, and it had been their father’s passion.

She sipped delicately at her soup. “I miss him so. You were among his greatest joys.”

“I hope that was so,” he replied. “Have you… had a chance to meet with our guests?”

“I have,” she answered. “And you would like my impression of them?”

“Please.”

“Most of them are on the path to recovery from their injuries,” Cendisa said promptly. “They are eager to learn more about us and have expressed—though not to me—some unease about what’s to happen to them next.”

T’Challa hid a smile. One of Cendisa’s many talents was the ability to make people feel comfortable enough around her that they simply ceased to notice her presence. “What else have you learned?”

“They are unfailingly polite and respectful, though angry at the circumstances which led to them being refugees. They are also deeply concerned about the captain.”

“Dr. Nomso said much the same when I received her report, though she was understandably vague on the details. Have you learned the reasons for their concern?”

“Not as much as I would have expected. They are also…very protective of him.”

“I am glad the captain has such friends. He seems a man who needs them,” T’Challa replied.

“We all do,” Cendisa retorted. “But yes, his circumstances are unique.”

“And the kimoyo beads?”

“All but Sergeant Barnes have the bracelets,” Cendisa reported. “Misumzi informed them which data
would be collected and who would have access to the data, and they all agreed. Sergeant Barnes will be asked if he wants one soon, though I suspect he will not consent.” Her mouth twisted slightly. Even in Wakanda, the story of the Winter Soldier was not unknown. “I would not expect him to, given the…things he endured. At some point, we may wish to consider adding more beads beyond the basic set—that is, if you’re planning on allowing them to stay.”

T’Challa let that unasked question go unanswered. “What have you learned from the beads?”

“Sleep disturbances are…very common. The Barton children sleep well, but the adults? It’s a matter of concern, and Dr. Nomso agrees.” She finished the last of her soup and placed the spoon to the side. “There’s also a matter of some of them not eating as much as they should.”

“Due to the unfamiliar diet?” T’Challa inquired.

“Possibly, but they had a communal dinner last night which seemed to go well. They have been to the market and seem to be trying to adapt.” She paused. “May I speak frankly?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Have you ever not been frank, Cendisa? Say what you will.”

“I am no mind-healer, you understand, but they are not as well as they appear. They are, almost all of them, survivors of deep or long-lasting trauma. I am particularly concerned for Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes. They have been cruelly displaced from their own time, and now, from their own country. And then there is Wanda, who was rendered unable to communicate at the Raft. Such treatment will leave deep scars.”

T’Challa nodded; it was more or less what he had expected. “What do you suggest for them?”

She leaned back in her chair. “That all depends on what you decide about them, my king. If they’re going to stay, then my suggestion is we treat them as we treat our own. Help them transition to new lives here and guide them to whatever aid they need.”

“You think such a transition would be successful?” T’Challa asked, curious.

“They’ve lost everything,” Cendisa replied simply. “What more motivation could you ask for?”

***

Just as the sun was beginning to set, T’Challa slipped quietly out of the palace and made his way to the building on the outskirts of town where the ex-Avengers were being housed. He knew far better than to think he was actually unobserved as he left; for one, the Dora Milaje had begun as expert hunters and trackers long before they had evolved to be the king’s personal guards and for another, both Shuri and Ramonda would have noticed his absence at dinner. He’d sent them a message and arranged for its delivery well after he’d left; he didn’t wish them to worry but this was something he felt he had to do by himself. To be…just T’Challa and not the king.

He had arrived just as dinner was cooking—the smells of the food were varied and not totally unfamiliar—and they’d obviously figured out the mechanism to open the windows because he could hear the chatter of people talking and the clatter of dishes. There was also the thread of other conversations: someone reminding Sergeant Barnes to take his medications, a woman talking to her children.

In his own culture, what he was about to do would be, at best, a grave insult. Negotiations just to enter another’s house could take months, for once an invitation was given and food offered, it effectively started the process of entangling families and clans. He had been a young child, not yet a man, the last time T’Chaka had entered into such negotiations with a newly-fledged clan, and the
months it had taken, the ceremonial minutiae back-and-forth, had nearly put him off the idea of being heir permanently. Years later, as an anonymous college student at MIT, T’Challa had seen and participated in many, many meals where people had simply dropped in, bringing a dish to pass. It had been startling to him, but he’d come to appreciate how much he’d learned about his fellow students, just from sharing a meal.

It occurred to T’Challa then that this was, in large part, what his father had intended by sending him so far away---that he would learn from another culture and be able to bring the useful parts of it back home. He took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

It was Barnes who answered the door. His eyes widened slightly, startled. “Um, hello, your grace.”

The man can’t have met many kings in his life, T’Challa observed, amused. “It’s…just me,” he said aloud. “Am I here at a bad time?”

“Nope,” Barnes replied, popping the “p.” “If you haven’t eaten---?”

“I haven’t,” T’Challa said. “And thank you.”

The apartment was the one Barnes shared with Captain Rogers and Sam Wilson, T’Challa recalled. Stepping inside, he found it full of people---the other ex-Avengers (what the American media was calling “Team Cap,”) and a woman who had to be Laura Barton and her three children. Perhaps soon to be a fourth, he thought, gazing at her critically and considered that some conversations should really be held sooner rather than later.

Right now, Laura Barton was helping direct traffic, more or less—making room for him to sit down, keeping her youngest out of the way. He was pleased to see Clint pick up the youngest child and place him firmly on his lap while serving the other children—he clearly wasn’t one to let his wife do all the work. “Scoot over,” Laura urged. “We’re not having the king eating on the couch.”

T’Challa smiled. “It would not be the first time,” he said. “I was a student at MIT for some years. Couch, floor, it’s all the same to me.”

“MIT, huh?” Sam Wilson said, deliberately casual. “Did you know Tony Stark?”

“Our interests were in different paths. I knew of him but we didn’t meet until…this recent unpleasantness.”

Sam chuckled, though T’Challa thought there was a brittle edge to the sound. “That’s a nice way to put it.”

Captain Rogers was in the kitchen mixing a salad, and T’Challa took a few moments to study him. He could see, almost immediately, what had so concerned Cendisa and Dr. Nomsa; there was a pained quality to his movements that hadn’t been there during the tarmac battle. The captain was hiding it well, as a leader must, but to the eyes of someone who’d been trained to lead men into battle, he was all but shouting the signs of deep, continual trouble, exhaustion, and grief.

His attention shifted to Sergeant Barnes, who had apparently been drafted to bring the bread to the table. His gait was somewhat unbalanced, likely due to the missing arm, and he clearly had some massive muscle soreness as a result, but he was, paradoxically, much more functional than the captain, at least on the surface.

The others were varying degrees of traumatized: Wanda Maximoff, who had apparently done much of the cooking this time, was pale and silent and even Scott Lang was mostly quiet. As a group, they presented all the appearance of people who had endured something catastrophic and were trying to
find their way back to normal.

Sam caught his eye as he was studying the other ex-Avengers; the other man tilted his head slightly towards Barnes and Rogers and shrugged slightly as if to say _What are you going to do, eh?_ Because even as T’Challa and Sam were watching the others, Barnes was focusing on Rogers to a degree that might have been too intense in anyone else. A sniper’s focus, T’Challa supposed.

Barnes took the large bowl of salad from Rogers and handed it off to Sam, who put the bowl on the table. “Siddown, punk,” Barnes said firmly. “Eat.”

“It’s a Sokovian dish,” Wanda put in. “Or, you know, the Wakandan version of it. It’s probably most similar to lasagna.”

“You were able to find what you needed in the market?” T’Challa asked.

“I…didn’t go to the market,” Wanda said, flushing slightly. “Laura found what I needed.”

“If you find yourself…missing anything,” T’Challa said, “please contact Cendisa. You’ll find her an excellent scrounger.”

Barnes, to his surprise, chuckled a bit. “Time was, that was my job. I…can’t remember if I was good at it, though.”

The tips of the captain’s ears went pink. “You were very good at it, Buck. Peggy told me once—–” and he clamped the words shut, a savage grief twisting his features.

The others exchanged glances, but it was Barnes, sitting closest to Rogers, who reached out to clasp his shoulder. The movement was nothing overt, nothing to risk shaming a man who was (if T’Challa’s hunches were correct) feeling the costs of his losses all at once. Rogers and Wilson had been at Peggy Carter’s funeral in London just before the UN was bombed, he recalled from the intelligence briefing he’d received at the time, and there were few people who didn’t know something of the looming figure she’d been in Rogers’ life.

T’Challa tried to picture it then—–what would it be like to wake seventy years in the future, to find all you’d loved and known gone? Friends and family dead? As a thought experiment, it was painful enough, but this was Steve Rogers’ reality and T’Challa couldn’t begin to fathom how the man had kept on moving under the weight of his losses. The man on the tarmac had fought like a demon, but the man at the table, eyes shadowed and thinner than he should be…was not the same person.

He became aware that Barnes’ eyes were on him—–some weighing, sharp look moving behind those grey sniper’s eyes—–and he took a bite of the lasagna. “This is delicious. Please eat, Captain Rogers, I wouldn’t want to interrupt your meal.”

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T’Challa stayed at the apartment until long into the night. Eventually, the crowd of people began to thin out; the Bartons took their children to bed, and Wanda and Scott both left not long after. Before he left, Clint Barton made a series of complicated hand signs which the captain returned, apparently in the affirmative. “Clint is partially deaf,” the captain explained.

“I wasn’t aware,” T’Challa said.

“I don’t think he likes it known,” the captain observed. “It was from a long-ago injury, and he uses hearing aids—–really, implants—–now. He said he’s turning off his hearing aids for the night and asked me to keep him informed.”
“I see,” T’Challa replied, and made a mental note to ask Dr. Nomsa about Barton’s hearing aids. It would be surprising if they were still fully functional after the Raft.

Once the dishes were cleaned up and the leftovers put away, they moved into the living room. “So, you never answered my question,” Sam Wilson said.

“Which one would that be?” T’Challa asked. “You didn’t ask me a question tonight, I don’t think.”

Sam smiled. “Do you like cats? Because with that costume, I have to think—–”

Captain Rogers was bringing in coffee. “Sam. You just asked the king of Wakanda if he liked cats? Again?”

T’Challa chuckled. He could see very easily the wisdom in Sam’s approach: the man was no fool, and clearly understood this must be more than just a social visit. So he’d aimed a well-placed joke to lighten things up a bit. “My people trace much of our history and culture to the ancient Egyptians,” he answered, “so yes, I do like cats. Most of us do, even the ones who don’t worship them. Does that answer your question?”

Sam leaned back in his chair. “A bit, yeah.”

The coffee was strong, the flavor of many late nights in the labs at MIT. “What else do you want to know?”

Captain Rogers took a sip of his own coffee, then placed the mug on the coffee table. “Not that we’re all not…very thankful, because we are. But why all of this? You could have placed us on the first plane out of here just as soon as you’d patched us up. But you didn’t, and I have to think that might cause you some trouble here at home. What makes the risks worth it for you?”

It was a direct question, and nothing less than he expected from such a man. “In my culture, there is a tradition that a great wrong must be righted if one has the power. My father and many others are dead because of Zemo. I cannot bring my father back, but I can honor what he would have wanted.”

T’Challa folded his hands, remembering the conversation he’d had the morning of the bombing—what turned out to be the last time they ever spoke. “Wakanda… has not taken its place on the international stage, largely out of choice and for reasons I will not trouble you with right now. It was my father’s wish that we would one day join the UN and take a larger part in the outside world.”

“What makes the risks worth it for you?”

“Are we a…bargaining chip, then?” the captain asked, voice low and raspy like the whisper of a sheathed blade as it moved out of a scabbard.

“You misunderstand,” T’Challa said. “He believed we had a capacity to be a force for greater good in the world. Is that not what you have believed, what you fought for?”

Barnes jerked a thumb at the captain. “He did, yeah. Steve’s never backed down from a righteous cause. And Sam too, I’m sure. But I spent the last seventy years as the Fist of Hydra.” He shot a glare at the captain. “And—don’t say it, Stevie ---I may not have… consented…to any of it, but the hands which did the crimes were still my own. How are you planning to square that with your people?”

“Just before I left, my sister Shuri sent me a report.” T’Challa gestured to his bracelet. “If I may?”

Barnes looked bemused, but shrugged. “It’s your show, so…yeah.”

T’Challa opened the report and watched as it solidified in front of them. “Shuri is a metallurgist, among her other talents.” He gestured to the relevant paragraphs and the enlarged text shifted from
"My analysis indicates that the arm recovered from Siberia is not only made of vibranium, but vibranium from the same mine as your ring," Barnes read aloud. "How…?"

"Current theory is that a Hydra agent or agents stole the vibranium which was later used to make your arm. But regardless, my country owes you a debt, Sergeant Barnes. A material found only in our country played no small role in what happened to you."

"You don’t owe me anything," Barnes said. "They would have found some other way."

"Perhaps," T’Challa allowed. "But to have a material which is sacred to our culture used in such a way? It was dishonorable, what happened to you."

"Understatement of the century," Sam put in with a grimace.

T’Challa inclined his head in agreement. "Regardless, we would offer to replace your arm. I believe Dr. Nomsa has already discussed removing the trigger words from your mind so…” he shrugged “…your life would be your own again."

"You would do that?" Barnes asked. "I’m a murderer many times over and you would just…do that for me? Why?"

"Because it is the right thing to do," T’Challa replied. "Why else?"

"And…what do you need from us?" the captain inquired.

"In a few days, there will be a much more…formal meeting with my advisors. All of you will be expected to attend. It is there that—should my claim to the throne prove the strongest one—you all will be offered official asylum here in Wakanda."

"Forgive me for asking," Barnes said, "but what happens if your claim…is not the strongest one?"

"Plans have been made to send you to any number of countries which do not have extradition treaties with the US," T’Challa answered promptly. "We own properties in a number of countries, including those which either never signed the Accords or are preparing to withdraw from them. You and yours will be safe."

"Thank you for that," the captain said with a tired smile. "It’s…I’m afraid we’re going to ask a lot of questions, your highness."

"It’s T’Challa," he answered, returning the smile. "For tonight, at least. And questions are expected and understood." He folded his hands. "You may be wondering what your role will be here. I have…many advisors, but a king can always use friends and allies. I have no other ulterior motives."

"So we’ll…just be free to live our lives here?" Sam asked. "That’s it?"

T’Challa nodded. "Yes. Under my protection of course. Once asylum is officially offered, we can discuss how best to deal with the…political risks of your presence."

"I spoke with Natasha right after we arrived," Sam said. "She said we all had warrants out for our arrest."

"Ah," T’Challa replied. "Wakanda has no extradition treaty with the US. If they want you, they’ll have to come here. Historically, that…doesn’t tend to end well for the invaders. Our official position
is that we do not comment on matters involving people within Wakanda’s borders. So long as you do not leave the country, you should be quite safe.”

“Our country currently has us classified as ‘enhanced terrorists,’ ” Sam said. “Steve’s right. This could cause a lot of problems for you.”

“As to that,” T’Challa went on, “more will be explained later, but…for now, rest. Heal. We can hash out the minutiae of all of this later.”

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Ramonda was waiting for him in his residence when he returned. “You met with them?” she asked without preamble.

“Yes, I did,” he confirmed.

“And?” she prompted.

T’Challa recalled the tired, drawn face of the captain, the way the captain and his friends supported each other, the respectful way in which they’d asked questions and included him in their meal when he hadn’t been expected. “I begin to think all is not what we were told by Secretary Ross. They are not…vigilantes, Mother. Or rogue agents prone to act without care or concern for their actions.”

She folded her hands. “Secretary Ross has more agendas than Okoye has knives. Your father did not trust him. Do your homework, my son, and know where you stand.”

“Yes, of course,” he murmured. A thought occurred to him. “Do you know where Baba’s copy of the Accords is?”

“It should be in the royal archives,” Ramonda answered. “Why?”

“Part of my homework,” he replied. “I wish to understand fully what Baba signed, and what the captain and his people refused to sign.”

Ramonda raised one eyebrow. “Should they not be…the same thing?”

“I am beginning to wonder,” T’Challa replied.

***

He wasn’t able to access the archives until much later. There were a succession of meetings with his advisors, plus a final accounting from Mbeki and Okoye of who might now be expected to challenge him for the throne. As Mbeki had expected, almost all of the initial challengers had rescinded their demands once they learned they’d have to fight Mbeki and Okoye before they even got to T’Challa. “That brings the list down from seven to just one.”

T’Challa stretched, gazing out the window where the panthers sunned themselves, unafraid. “That’s progress. Who’s left?”

“Some fool who doesn’t really want the throne, but who does want to tell his clan that at least he tried,” Mbeki said wryly. “Okoye is presently trying to convince him that his clan’s pride would be better served by not risking his life, because---she assures him---she will grant him no quarter once they fight.” Mbeki tilted his head. “What are you planning to do today?”

“Sparring with Okoye. And I’m hoping to spend some time with Baba’s copy of the Accords,”
T’Challa said. “I fear we were misled.”

Mbeki’s bracelet began to flash the code for an alert. “I’ve been tracking various feeds in the American media in an attempt to learn more about our…guests,” Mbeki said.

“And?” T’Challa asked. He wouldn’t govern by public opinion---no leader could---but he acknowledged that one dinner made for an incomplete picture at best.

“This is airing live now,” Mbeki went on, and the clip materialized in the air. It was some sort of news program, a group of reporters who all looked astonishingly similar (white, and very blond) interviewing an older man in a suit. “And now we welcome Secretary Ross to the show tonight. Thank you ever so much for coming,” the lead reporter said.

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” Secretary Ross said. “Thank you for having me.”

They exchanged some fawning platitudes, and then the host asked about the Sokovian Accords. “We’re seeing demonstrations all across the country against the Accords, Secretary. What would you like to tell the demonstrators?”

Ross smiled. It was not, at all, a pleasant expression and how the man thought it could be might well be a mystery for the ages, T’Challa mused. “Well, first of all—while I am so happy they’re exercising their right to assemble, they’re just misguided. The Accords exist to protect ordinary people from the dangers of enhanced individuals. That’s all. We’re not locking up people just for the hell of it.”

“And enhanced individuals are defined as what?” one of the blondes asked.

“People with advanced, powerful abilities, which they acquired either as a result of natural means or through scientific experimentation.”

“And how are these individuals being identified?”

Ross folded his hands. “That’s a matter of national security, I’m afraid. We feel that it’s in the best interests of all enhanced humans and their families to come forward and be registered so we can keep them---and the rest of us---safe.”

T’Challa paused the clip. “I don’t remember Baba saying anything about a registry of enhanced individuals in the Accords.”

Mbeki frowned. “There’s more.”

The clip resumed. “And what about Captain America and the Avengers?” the other blonde asks.

“Captain America was asked, as were several members of his team, to sign the Accords. In defiance of the law, he and his team refused and went renegade. The Avengers no longer exist. There are warrants out for the arrest of Captain America and his team and once they are arrested, they will face trial for their actions in Leipzig and the attempted murder of Colonel James Rhodes.”

T’Challa paused the clip again. “I was there in Leipzig. Colonel Rhodes’ injury was caused by Tony Stark’s android. It was an accident.”

“I don’t think the truth has ever bothered such a man,” Mbeki said. “It seems the secretary wants our guests back and under his control.”

There was much tut-tutting on the clip about how Captain Rogers really came from a long line of
socialist agitators and his mother had probably come to the country illegally and was rumored to be an abortionist and didn’t that just prove--- before T’Challa shut the clip off in disgust. “Can you get me the file on Secretary Ross?”

Mbeki inclined his head. “Just the précis or the entire report?”

“Everything. Secretary Ross was thwarted this time; I would like to know what drives him.”

The other man flashed a rare grin. “It’s a thing your father might have said.”

***

Much of the information in the report was from SHIELD’s own files, released in the Black Widow’s data dump after ’14 and then decrypted by Wakandan analysts. There was much of the standard information—education, family (wife, Carol, deceased; a daughter, Elizabeth, who was estranged and whose whereabouts were at present unknown.) Ross had been commissioned at West Point and had served tours in a number of global hotspots before attracting the notice of a small rogue group in the Army that was obsessed with recreating the super-soldier serum.

SHIELD’s own analysts had credited Ross’s utter ruthlessness and ambition with this latest career development, which on its face seemed odd for a man with no real science background. Ross had been placed as the military liaison of several civilian groups at major universities that were all attempting—and mostly failing—to figure out what Dr. Erskine had managed to do in the 1940s. Wakandan intelligence suspected that the scientists at those universities didn’t know exactly what they were researching; Ross was too canny for that.

The scientists at Culver, led by a brilliant post-doc named Bruce Banner, came closest to figuring out the super-soldier serum, but there was an accident, and the Hulk was born. (There was an additional report, composed by a Wakandan analyst, which posited that Elizabeth Ross’s relationship with Bruce Banner was deeply despised by her father and that the accident may not have been an accident.) The next series of reports detailed Ross’s continual search for and obsession with the Hulk, even to the point of trying to create another super-soldier, the Abomination. That had worked about as well as could be expected, and although the witness reports were conflicting, it seemed a fair assessment that without Ross’s involvement, the battle of Harlem wouldn’t have happened.

Beginning in 2012, there were a series of letters from Ross to Nick Fury, insisting on access to the corpse of Steve Rogers, then insisting on custody of Rogers once he was revived. Nick Fury, it appeared, hadn’t given either request much more than a terse answer in the negative, but it spoke of Ross’s continual obsession with Erskine’s serum. “Captain Rogers is property of the US Army,” Ross had written in one letter and had attached Rogers’ own consent forms for the procedure back in 1943. Nick Fury hadn’t been persuaded.

T'Challa noted that SHIELD had continued to keep a close eye on General Ross, even after his retirement in 2013. Given what the world now knew about SHIELD’s infestation, he wouldn’t have put it past them to have watched Ross to see if Ross’s continual interest in the super-soldier serum paid off. Ross had been sidelined during the early part of 2014 by a massive heart attack, but after SHIELD fell, Ross entered the political arena and with the election of the new US president in 2016, Ross had been appointed Secretary of State.

T’Challa leaned back in his chair. Ross was intelligent, ruthless and ambitious and obsessed with the super-soldier serum. His advocacy of the Sokovian Accords, then—where did that fit in his plans? He closed out the files, and sent a message to Mbeki. I wish to see Baba’s correspondence about the Sokovian Accords and his private notes. Baba had kept a diary; with typical efficiency, the materials had been moved to the royal archives and placed under seal after his death.
There was a small chime, then, Acknowledged. Did you find what you were looking for?

Yes and no. More questions, and just a few more answers.

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“T’Challa,” Okoye said later that afternoon, “is that not Captain Rogers?”

Since Okoye’s latest move had him on the ground with one of her spears pointed at his throat, T’Challa couldn’t exactly see what she was looking at. “Is it?”

Okoye planted her spear in the soft earth next to the training grounds and offered him a hand up. “There,” she said once he’d recovered his balance, “next to that statue of Bast.”

There were several statues ringing the narrow valley where the Dora Milaje trained but T’Challa was able to easily spot the blond figure. “He’s very close to the edge,” he murmured. “Should I be concerned?”

Okoye had helped compile the dossier on Captain Rogers, and although T’Challa had decided not to read it, her insights were valuable. She lifted one eyebrow in her version of a shrug. “He has much to think about,” she replied. Not suicidal just preoccupied, T’Challa mentally translated. “And I would warn any visitor away from that edge.” She grinned wryly. “Also, get that man some sunscreen.”

T’Challa nodded. It was common knowledge that the captain’s hearing and vision were enhanced, and if he called to him now, there was a pretty good chance the captain would hear him. “Captain Rogers!”

The captain waved at him. So, hearing and eyesight approximately Wakandan standard, T’Challa mused. “Please step away from the ledge,” he shouted.

The other man glanced down and nodded. He stepped back a few steps to a safer point on the ledge and T’Challa breathed out, once. “Go to him,” Okoye murmured, face turned away so the captain couldn’t read her lips. She handed him two large water bottles. “I don’t think he was just out for a walk today.”

T’Challa wiped the sweat off his face (if nothing else, sparring with Okoye was a good reminder why she was the leader of the Dora Milaje and he was very much not) and walked up the carved path. The captain had seated himself on a bench in the shade cast by a tall statue of Sekhmet, and T’Challa could see what Okoye had meant. The other man was flushed a deep red as if he’d been running, but he wasn’t sweating. Sunburn, possibly, or the beginning stages of heat stroke. “Captain?” he asked. “How are you?”

“I went out for a run,” he replied. “I didn’t mean to… did I interrupt you?”

T’Challa grinned. “No, Okoye had, as you say, ‘handed my ass’ to me enough times today. We were just about ready to stop when she noticed your arrival.”

The latter was a mild fiction, but there was no harm in it, T’Challa decided. He discreetly activated one of the beads on his bracelet, asking for medical monitoring of the captain. He would hardly have been the first person in Wakanda to be caught off guard by the summer sun. The bead flashed twice in acknowledgment; Dr. Nomsa or her staff would check the readings from the captain’s bracelet and dispatch medical support if it was needed. “I went out for a run,” the captain repeated. “And then I… you know, I don’t actually know where I am.”

“You are approximately fifteen miles away from your apartment,” T’Challa told him, “as you
measure such things.” At the captain’s inquiring look, he went on, “We use the metric system here.”

“It’s Steve, by the way,” the captain said. “I’m not a captain of anything anymore.”

It went against any number of his own cultural mores to refer to the other man by his first name this early in their relationship, but T’Challa nodded anyway. “So you just…kept running?”

The captain---Steve---offered a rueful grin. “It sounded like a good idea at the time. Sometimes I just…have to move, you know?”

“Do you run often?” T’Challa asked, handing the other man one of the water bottles.

Steve took it with a grateful smile. “Thank you. Um, yeah, I used to run all the time in New York City and when I was in DC. Couldn’t run when we were looking for Bucky, for obvious reasons. Sometimes it settles me down, helps me relax.”

T’Challa privately decided the run hadn’t done him much good at all; the knots of tension were visible, tight across his neck and shoulders. “Did it work for you today?”

Steve stared at him intently, as if deciding whether to answer the question or deflect. At length, he responded. “No. Too much going on, I guess.”

T’Challa took a drink of his own water. “Your friends, they are well?”

“They are, thank you.”

T’Challa waited the beat of a few seconds to see if Steve was going to be more forthcoming, but it appeared he was as protective of his friends as they were of him. “And you?”

“I’m…I’ll be fine. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to start over in a new place,” Steve said, and T’Challa wondered which of them he was trying to convince. “At least this time, I knew what year it was.”

“I think we forget how…different your journey has been,” T’Challa replied, and it was nothing more than the truth. It was several orders of remarkable that the man wasn’t a gibbering wreck, considering all he’d lost. “May I ask a question?”

“Of course,” Steve answered.

“Did you have any encounters with Secretary Ross prior to his arrival at your compound to discuss the Accords?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘an encounter,’ ” Steve replied, dry as dust. “I know he tried to assert the army’s rights over my corpse when I was frozen and that he kept trying after I was…awakened. SHIELD kept him away from me for the most part.”

‘The most part’?

“There were some…pointed attempts to remind me that I’d more or less consented to become the property of the Army back in ’43,” Steve said ruefully. “But that was if I didn’t survive the procedure, and SHIELD’s legal department pretty much put paid to that notion once I’d awakened.” He grinned, but there was something a little hollow about it. “There’s some interesting legalities involved in being awakened after seventy years, apparently.” He took another drink of water. “Bruce Banner could tell you all you want to know about Secretary Ross.”
“And you don’t know where Dr. Banner is?”

Steve shrugged. “Tony---Stark---looked for him for a while after Sokovia, but I think came to the conclusion that he was probably safer not being with us, at least for a time---the media spotlight was intense, plus there were a few governments calling for his extradition and arrest.”

“Consequences that Mr. Stark managed to avoid,” T’Challa observed, perhaps a little archly. Wakandan aid had helped rebuild Johannesburg, just as it was now helping to rebuild Lagos.

Steve raised an eyebrow, and his smile was a little sharp-edged. “Yeah. Probably not a subject we should get on unless you want to spend the next several hours here listening to me rant. Why do you want to know about Secretary Ross?”

T’Challa considered. He could demur, claim his interest was a matter of Wakandan security, and Steve would most likely understand. But he also needed these people to trust him. “I have…some concerns about the Accords.”

“Why?”

T’Challa finished his water and considered his words. “Secretary Ross is now on your news channels talking about a registry of enhanced persons, something which we would not and do not support.”

“That’s what leads to internment camps,” Steve muttered, disgusted. His accent broadened a bit as he spoke. “There was a camp we liberated back in the war, Auschenberg. Once you’ve seen that…” He shivered and T’Challa watched him, concerned. Shivering in this heat? “The thing with history,” Steve went on, “is that nobody wants to believe it could possibly happen again. But the Accords were, I thought, laying the foundation for everyone who was enhanced or a mutant to be identified and locked up.”

He breathed out but T’Challa saw the tremors in his hands, at war with the passion in his voice. This was a man who had seen horrors T’Challa had only heard of. “The whole thing was just…surreal. Ross came to us right after Lagos, said we had three days to sign that thing or retire. No debate. Nobody asked us for input. Just…sign, or go away. And agree to life-long surveillance, among other things---well, you know what was in there. I couldn’t sign. I was gonna retire, and figure out another way to fight the Accords, but…”

“Bucky?”

“Yeah, when he was blamed for the UN bombing. I didn’t know, I didn’t think he’d do something like that, but a whole lot of people were gonna get hurt trying to capture him. And here we are.”

“For my part in this…I am sorry,” T’Challa told him. It didn’t seem like nearly enough and the shame of hunting an innocent man---of wanting to kill that man---burned. That was not what he had been given his powers to do.

The captain---Steve---shook his head. “Your father died. If anyone had reason to let grief blind them, it was you.”

T’Challa flexed his fist, remembering the extension of vibranium claws in his suit. “I was supposed to be stronger than that.”

Steve’s eyebrows bobbed, a wry look. “When it comes to people we love, nobody is that strong.”

***
T’Challa dropped Steve off at Dr. Nomsa’s clinic, much to the other man’s protests. “It’s a sunburn; it’ll heal. I’m fine and you must have better things to do.”

“I do,” T’Challa agreed. “And I’m doing them. The sun in Wakanda can be brutal and you are not accustomed.”

Dr. Nomsa shot the both of them an arch look. “This is sunscreen,” she said, handing the tube to Steve, “please use it the next time you’re so inclined to go on a 15 mile run at midday. We can take the lecture on proper hydration and running when it’s not so hot as delivered, since you’re smart enough to never do this again, correct?”

T’Challa smothered a grin. Dr. Nomsa had been using the same tone for years with ambassadors and dignitaries alike, as fierce a warrior in her way as Okoye was in hers. “And as for you,” she went on, “you were sparring with Okoye in this heat, but at least you’re used to it. Do be careful, your highness.”

She turned her attention back to Steve. “You have this…serum, and yes, it means you apparently heal much faster. But there’s no reason to go seeking out pain.” Her tone softened and T’Challa wondered if Steve could hear the worry behind her words. “You need to let yourself heal. If you need pain medication—–”

“Thank you,” Steve replied, “but SHIELD never found a pain medication that worked on me.”

“Well, as you may have noticed, this isn’t SHIELD,” she retorted with no heat. “We have something which worked on Sergeant Barnes and while I know your serums aren’t the same…”

He smiled at her, one that reached his eyes. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be interested to try it.”

Dr. Nomsa folded her arms as she watched him go. When he was certain Steve was out of earshot, T’Challa spoke. “You are concerned.”

She nodded. “Very.”

“What troubles you?”

The doctor straightened the folds of her lab coat. “My king---T’Challa---I won’t reveal specific details of his medical history to anyone without his consent. Including you.”

“Of course,” he agreed. It was one of the things that had made him ask her to take on the ex-Avengers as her patients. “That’s entirely appropriate.”

“Consider what might be inferred of the mental state of a man who runs fifteen miles in the heat of midday, in a foreign country, and doesn’t take the appropriate precautions,” she said quietly. “And then consider the nature of the same man’s…history. What might you be concerned about, if he was one of your warriors?”

That brought him up short. Wakanda had not fought a major war in generations, but there had been skirmishes now and then at the borders, and T’Challa had learned at his father’s knee what it was to see wounds that didn’t bleed in the drawn faces of warriors. “I would…be concerned that the warrior might be too reckless and,” he said delicately, picking his way through the words, “I would wonder whether his risk-taking was a symptom of something else entirely.”

The doctor nodded. “As would I. Hypothetically.”

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On his way back to the palace, T’Challa received a message from Shuri. She had some designs for
the replacement arm and wanted his opinion. He smiled a bit at that; that section of the labs was
Shuri’s domain, and she might ask his opinion but the final decision would be hers. Not something
most people would expect from a sixteen-year-old girl, but she’d never been typical.

The final coda to her message was interesting, however: “Sergeant Barnes is here too.” T’Challa was
not particularly worried about Shuri’s safety---she was already a formidable warrior---but just the
same, she was his sister. He made a discreet check of the safety systems in the laboratory and
relaxed. Shuri had engaged the passive forcefield normally used to contain substances that might
suddenly explode, and had temporarily adjusted it to conform to the man’s size. As a barrier, it was
impenetrable and Sergeant Barnes should be totally unaware of it unless he made some threatening
move.

Just the same, he hoped Ramonda never found out about this; she would, as the American saying
went, have kittens.

He walked down the hallway leading to the lab, just in time to hear Barnes’ Brooklyn drawl: “How
old are you anyway, kid?”

“Why do you want to know?” Shuri asked. T’Challa could hear the laugh in her voice; depending on
her mood, Shuri could seem either twelve or ninety.

“Stark had a kid with him on the tarmac in Leipzig. Couldn’t have been more than fifteen and he
damned sure shouldn’t have been there. I’m…safer than I used to be but I could have killed him so
easily when we fought.”

“But you’re not planning to hurt her now, are you?” T’Challa asked as he entered the lab.

Neither of them started in surprise, of course; Shuri’s hearing was excellent and Barnes’ hearing must
be the equal of the captain’s. “I don’t do that no more,” Barnes said, facing him squarely.

T’Challa held up his hands in what he hoped was a calming gesture. “If I thought you did, you
wouldn’t be here with my sister.”

Shuri shot him a glance and the forcefield snapped up between herself and Sergeant Barnes, then
released. “I can take care of myself, T’Challa.”

“Yeah, kid, but you shouldn’t have to,” Barnes stated with something approaching a wry grin. “I
was a big brother once too.”

Shuri glanced between them and sighed. “I’m sixteen, Sergeant Barnes. Now about these arm
designs—is one there you like more?”

He chuffed out a short laugh. “First time I ever been asked that question, kid. What is it gonna be
made of?”

“Vibranium,” Shuri answered. “It’s the most durable material we have. Lightweight too.”

“The old one was vibranium too, I think,” Barnes said. “Weighed a damned ton.” And hurt all the
time was understood; T’Challa could only imagine what had been done to his skeleton to make it
accommodate the weight of the old arm.

“Vibranium isn’t a heavy metal; your old arm was heavy because of the… rotors and circuitry inside
it. This one will not weigh much more than your right arm,” Shuri told him. “You may need some
physical therapy to get used to not having the extra weight tugging on your spine and shoulder blade,
but Dr. Nomsa can help you get set up with that.”

Barnes stared at the pictures of the different arm designs. Shuri had done some of her best work with them, T’Challa decided. Some of them were more aesthetically pleasing than others, but each reflected Shuri’s keen eye for detail. “I think I like this one,” Barnes said, tapping the third prototype design, a darker brushed vibranium arm with gold inlay in the joints and in between the panels. Some of its lines echoed the design of his latest black panther suit and T’Challa nodded, pleased.

Shuri grinned. “That one was my favorite too. The gold you see isn’t really gold; it’s a composite material we’ve developed to help keep the arm from overheating, even under extreme weather or exertion. It should maintain a normal body temperature otherwise.” She touched the picture of the arm, causing it to rotate in the air. “I also think we can restore more of your sense of touch but I’ll have to work with Dr. Nomsa to be certain.”

“That’s…you came up with this?” Barnes asked. “Kid, you got to be a genius or something.”

“Or something,” Shuri said with a laugh.

“These labs are hers,” T’Challa said with no small amount of pride. “You are in the best of hands.”

Barnes looked as if he wanted to say something, stopped, then decided to brazen it out. “Why are you doing this?” he asked. “I know what you told us at dinner. But my arm was---my arm was---a weapon as much as a gun or a knife. You don’t have to fix this. And you might be safer if you didn’t.”

“What were you doing in Bucharest, Sergeant Barnes?” T’Challa asked. “Before Zemo planted that bomb. Surveillance photos had you fleeing a market in broad daylight. You were looking for…what was it? Some kind of fruit?”

“Yeah,” Barnes said. “Plums. I read somewhere they were good for memory. Was gonna give a few to Maria---my landlady---because she liked them.”

“So, you were living a quiet life? And before the world---and I---decided you were responsible for the UN bombing and my father’s death, you hadn’t…hurt anyone in a few years?”

“Two years,” Barnes said.

“You are not the man they called the Winter Soldier,” T’Challa told him. “You were a weapon. You aren’t a weapon any longer.”

“I still have the trigger words in my head,” Barnes said with an edge of desperation. “I’m the furthest thing from safe that exists.”

“We want to help you with that too,” Shuri said. “I have a few ideas and Dr. Nomsa will have more--with your consent, of course.”

Barnes stared at her like he couldn’t quite believe her. “I…of course. I don’t want those goddamned things in my head any more. Whatever you need to do, do it.”

“Not today,” Shuri said, “but soon. I expect the arm will be back from fabrication much sooner.”

An expression crossed Barnes’ face, one that T’Challa couldn’t quite place. “What is it, Sergeant?”

“It’s Bucky,” he said. “And…I don’t know what to say.”
Shuri smiled, looking rather a lot like Ramonda in that moment. “Then say nothing. And accept. You deserve help.”

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The package was waiting for him when he arrived back at the palace, wrapped in heavy paper and sealed with the wax seal that bore his father’s sigil. Three smaller books, which must be his father’s diaries, and lastly, the thicker document that must be the signed copy of the Accords. T’Challa opened the Accords first; the sudden wave of grief at the thought of handling his father’s diaries was too strong. He poured a cup of tea---his father’s favorite, bracing in its familiarity, and did what a king must.

T’Challa had not spent all his time at MIT studying engineering; he had, at his father’s request, interned with a congressman for a semester, and learned much of how the game was played. This copy of the Accords was in reality no different than the many bills that had come across the congressman’s desk. Once the dense legalese was dispensed with, it appeared---on the surface---to be exactly what it was: a codification of a UN policy governing the extralegal activities of enhanced individuals, backed by 117 member nations and the nation of Wakanda. The Avengers were named, though the signature page bore several blank spaces.

T’Challa frowned. The signature page was at the end, yet…where was the registration requirement Secretary Ross had discussed on the news? The surveillance? The removal of civil rights from enhanced people who refused to register? Was it in some codicil that he’d missed?

He thumbed through the document again, reading carefully. There was nothing, no mention of what Secretary Ross had been bragging about. So either he had been only bragging (possible, but rather more brazen than even Secretary Ross would consider, given how easy it was to fact check) or, more likely…

T’Challa rose to stare out towards the valley where his father was buried. T’Chaka would never have signed onto a document which required the registration of enhanced people, not when the entire nation of Wakanda could be considered enhanced because of the vibranium in the soil, in the air, in the water they drank and the food they ate. So for his father to have signed this document… that section must never have been included in his version.

The cup of tea on his desk grew cold. He opened the secured channel, staying still as the retinal flash scanned his eyes, and waited the few seconds for the message to encrypt. “Captain Rogers--- Steve-- - please contact me at your earliest convenience. This is not an order but it is urgent.”

Five minutes later, there was a call from Steve’s Wakandan cellphone. “Your highness, how may I help you?”

T’Challa glanced down. The channel was still secured. “I have uncovered some things about the Accords which are…very troubling. Do you have your copy of the Accords?”

“Yes,” Steve answered, and there was no mistaking the disdain in that tone. “Why?”

“I will send a car for you,” T’Challa answered. “Please, come soon. And bring your copy of the Accords.”

Chapter End Notes
I have a Tumblr Stop by and say hi!
Wanda was a morning person, to the great annoyance of many people in her life. She had been born just past dawn (Pietro, dear Pietro, had lurched into the world when the sky was still dark, the eternal night to her day) and years and countries later, the early morning was still her favorite time of day. At the compound, she had often encountered Captain Rogers, who was either an early riser or—far more likely—hadn’t slept the night before.

It seemed these patterns were repeating in Wakanda. She awoke just past dawn and poked a bit at the coffee pot on the counter—she was able to manipulate its controls just a bit with her magic but it was a weak and frail thing, nothing like she’d been able to do before the Raft. The doctor, though, had been optimistic. “You will heal. You must give yourself time.” So Wanda turned the coffee pot on and let it brew while she gazed into the courtyard.

Her mental abilities had returned full force once the shock collar was removed—something which had surprised her, because the effects of the collar had been intended to be permanent. Wanda had heard the guards at the Raft joking about it, about what they’d do to her once she couldn’t fight back. She would have spoken, would have spat that there was no hobbling of the things Hydra had done to her, given her, but by then she had been far beyond speech.

Captain Rogers—Steve—was sitting by the jasmine she’d learned was his favorite, looking a little rumpled and a lot exhausted. That was…concerning. She knew he didn’t sleep well; the compound had had soundproof walls, but the way his mind flailed and suffered in the dark was obvious to her. Very often they’d ended up in the kitchen together, watching the sunrise. Was he waiting for her now? She opened the door and walked out into the courtyard. “Steve?” she asked, his name still strange and unfamiliar.

He turned and she was struck by how much she couldn’t sense from him, as if his emotions were buried under a thick dark layer of ice, brittle and frozen. The Steve Rogers of Sokovia had been fire and light—intense enough to burn, bright enough to lead the way forward. Now, though... “Wanda? I’m sorry—did you want to sit here?”

“No, but you’re sitting here. Why?”

“I need to call everyone together. T’Challa and I were going over the Accords late last night and” he rubbed a hand over the stubble on his face, a light raspy sound, “this is something we need to get everyone in on. Then I realized it was too early and—”

Sounds echoed in the courtyard and Laura, who otherwise liked Steve, would bury him in the garden if their conversation woke Nathaniel. “Let’s go inside to my place, all right? I’ve made coffee and we can hang out until it’s a more decent hour. I might even have some bread ready.”

Steve hesitated, less out of a sense of propriety than…the wash of guilt hit her again. He blamed himself for their presence here. “Thank you,” he said instead of whatever he’d been about to say. “I don’t want to wake anyone else at this hour.”

“Where is Scott?” he asked as they entered her apartment.

“Talking with his girlfriend,” Wanda replied. “My guess is that Hank Pym is trying to pull some
strings on his behalf so he can return.”

“Good,” Steve answered. “That’s…good. He didn’t really ask to be there.”

Well, that was at least one emotion he felt. Guilt, thick and tarry. “Steve. Clint told him what was
going on. And you offered him an out in Leipzig. The choice was his and he chose you. Us.”

He gazed at her steadily. “How are you doing, Wanda? We…haven’t had much time to talk lately.”

“What with you having all this free time on your hands and all,” she teased gently. The truth---that
most nights she woke thinking she was still on the Raft, her screams caged inside her mind, unable to
communicate---was something she didn’t want to talk about. Not on this quiet still morning, and
especially not to the man whose nightmares she’d helped create.

“I’m serious,” he said, and indeed he was. “How are you, really?”

“I like it here,” Wanda told him. And it was nothing more than the truth. It was hard to explain to
anyone who wasn’t what she was (whatever she was,) but if anyone could understand, Steve could.
“There are currents of magic interwoven everywhere here. It’s…comfortable.”

His reaction didn’t surprise her in the least, though she supposed that after all he’d endured in his life,
his weird meter might be permanently destroyed. “It’s…home for you?”

She offered him a quick grin. “Not yet. But it could be.” She didn’t really know where home was
anymore--it wasn’t Sokovia, which now lay in ruins (though if she was going to be honest, that
wasn’t really different than Sokovia in its heyday) and it wasn’t the compound where she’d once
lived and trained. Not anymore. Wakanda was as good a place as any to live. “And how are you
finding your roommates?”

That earned her the rare smile that actually reached his eyes. “Good. I never really lived alone until
I…awoke here. S’nice to have people around.”

Wanda nodded. His memory of a crowded tenement in a New York City she’d never known rose
briefly before her mind’s eye, and disappeared. It had been that way for their family too---so many
older people who had tried to look out for them as best they could before their home had been
destroyed. And even then, she had always had Pietro around. “And the Barnes and Wilson Show?”

He chuckled. “They seem to have called a truce. At least I’m not quite as worried about finding one
of them with a suspicious quantity of shovels and garbage bags.”

The coffee pot beeped and she stared it, then realized she’d actually have to get up and pour a cup
for each of them. At the compound…before…she’d been able to send out a wave of her magic and
have the cups poured. She frowned a little. “All right. What do you take in your coffee?”

“Black, sugar if you got it.”

The kitchen had come ridiculously well-supplied. Wanda handed him the cup of coffee and the small
sugar container. “They thought of everything.”

He nodded. “So what do you think of Wakanda?” Wanda asked. “Could this be home for you too?”

She knew, because it was impossible not to know, how desperately lonely he was most of the time; it
had been how she’d first gained entrance to his mind to create the hallucination in Sokovia. The
shame of that now burned her. Steve---or really, Captain America---had been hated in Sokovia with
a fervor second only to the national hatred for Tony Stark, whose weapons had continued to destroy
her country years after he’d supposedly given up weapons manufacture. Captain America had been a symbol of the colonizers, the occupiers, the Americans, the Europeans, who had marched through her country on their way to war, leaving ruin and disaster in their wake.

Looking at Steve now, it was hard to square that image of the imperialist American in the gaudy costume with the tired, ragged, but utterly human man who was sitting at her table sipping her coffee and looking as if he’d fall asleep if he stopped moving long enough. “I don’t know,” he said at length. “Everyone has been good to us, but T’Challa is a new king and he’ll have to fight someone tomorrow to keep his throne.”

That was news. She had thought the succession was assured, a done deal. “You think we may be asked to leave if he loses?”

Steve shrugged. “I think we could be asked to leave either way. We may be too much of a hot potato for him this early in his reign. There are…a lot of secrets here, and his first duty is to his people.”

“But if you could choose---would you stay here?” Wanda asked.

He didn’t answer for a bit, obviously considering. It was the first thing she’d decided she liked about him: he was rarely careless with his words. “Yeah,” he replied finally. “Yeah, I think I would.”

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“We’re going to have to make bread,” Wanda announced. “You feel like pounding something?”

“Tried exercising yesterday,” Steve confessed ruefully. “Got myself a nice sunburn and a lecture from the doctor.”

Now that he mentioned it, Wanda noticed that he did look a bit pink around the edges. “I need some help with the kneading the dough, guaranteed to be lecture free. And once this goes in the oven, you won’t have to worry about waking everybody up. I’ll just open the window and…”

That caused another chuckle to erupt from him. “You’ll have to show me how. I haven’t done this since the last time Bucky and I shared a place.”

She wondered if Steve knew how much longing he was broadcasting just then---not just homesickness (which was her own close companion) but the endless aching want for a friend changed forever and a life forever gone. “How long did you live together?”

Water, sugar, yeast, molasses and rye flour. At least those hadn’t changed much, one country to the next, one language to another. She added them to the mixer and pushed what she hoped was the start button. The bread would be thick and dark, the kind that spoke of honey butter and childhood mornings. “About four years,” Steve said eventually. “My mam died when I was 18 and Bucky’s family needed the room he’d leave when he moved out, so we got a cold water walk-up together.”

And how had she not known this about him, that he was orphaned young too? “And he looked out for you?”

Steve nodded, and that desperate longing was back. “More than I probably appreciated at the time, yeah. I was sick a lot and Buck had to do for us both. It wasn’t an easy way to live.”

Wanda thought of empty husks of buildings where families had lived---where her family had lived before Stark’s bombs had laid waste to the place. If she’d ever known why the bombs had been dropped (some petty warlord? A feud that was older than its current participants?) she’d long since forgotten. “It’s a hard way to grow up.”
The mixer beeped. The dough looked just as she remembered it, and Wanda smiled. “I’m going to divide this now and let it rise, then we can knead it.”

Steve was staring into his coffee cup as if it contained the secrets of the universe. “How long do you think that’ll take?”

“It’s warm here, so maybe a few hours?”

Steve scrubbed at his face with his free hand. “I should head back. I need to---”

Wanda folded her arms. “Steve, it’s not even 6:30 am yet.”

“But you must have things to do.”

“I do,” she admitted with a smile. “Cendisa has arranged for a Wakandan teacher to meet with Clint and Laura about their children, and Laura asked me to be there. But that’s not until later on this afternoon and I’m betting you haven’t slept.”

“Don’t need to sleep much,” he said mulishly, and there it was, the Brooklyn accent he normally kept muted.

“How often did you make me go to bed when I was afraid to sleep?” she asked softly.

“C’mon, kid, it’s not the same thing,” Steve said, shaking his head. “You were traumatized and grieving.”

She reached out to touch his hand. One of the very first things she’d noticed at the compound was that almost no one touched him, unless it was in training or combat. Sam had been the lone exception and even he had seemed unsure if his casual touches would be welcomed. Looking back, Wanda saw now how much Steve had walled himself off after Ultron, as if he’d given up hope of being anything other than the soldier.

_Than what he’d been made to be._ And oh, that was an echoing pang. “Are you not also?” she asked, gentle. “Traumatized and grieving---you’ve lost a lot too.”

“It’s not the same,” he insisted, mulish again, and she shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a competition, Steve. Your losses and mine, and Sam’s, and your friend’s…they’re all equally awful. You must learn to be gentle with yourself.”

Sometimes thoughts were a dropped stone in a lake, casting ripples far beyond their origin. Other times, they were a skimmed stone, impacting only the water but nothing else. Steve stared at her and Wanda could feel her words sinking into him. “‘Gentle’ isn’t what people think of when they think of Captain America.”

She held his hand loosely and felt the rough edges of the callouses from his shield, the shield which was now missing or lost. “Maybe,” she allowed. “But Steve Rogers was kind to me when he had no damned reason to be, was gentle when I was grieving and hurting. Captain America? He’s a good man, but I don’t know him. I do know you.”

The ice within him was thick and dark. Wanda felt it as he did, a heavy pressing weight that sometimes left his breath short and aching. She just barely refrained from asking him how long the ice had been with him; it would have unnerved him to realize how much he revealed, even as walled-off as he was. “The couch is really comfortable,” she said instead.

“Shoulda turned you loose on Hydra,” he said around a sudden yawn. He stiffened in his chair. “I’m
sorry, Wanda, I didn’t mean to make light of what you went through."

Of course he hadn’t; that kind of petty cruelty simply wasn’t in him. “I know,” she replied simply. “And for what it’s worth, I was bothered for a long time that Ultron got Strucker before Pietro and I did.”

Steve nodded, and something dark and dangerous shifted behind his eyes. “I feel the same about Karpov.”

“Who was that?” Wanda asked.

“Bucky’s handler before Russia’s branch of Hydra…sold him to Alexander Pierce. Zemo had Karpov’s journals on him when T’Challa turned him over to UN custody and reading what they did to Bucky….” He swallowed. “Killing Karpov might have been the only good thing Zemo did.”

“I’ve come to believe the same thing about Ultron,” she acknowledged. “The news back in the US had it that we volunteered for Hydra. ‘Volunteered.’ As if two Jewish kids would knowingly volunteer for a Nazi organization. Strucker said he was with SHIELD, said he wanted to recruit us to put a democratic government in power. And we were young and naïve and thought we wanted a revolution. By the time we realized what Strucker was, who he really worked for, it was far too late.”

Steve nodded. She’d told him as much at her debriefing after Ultron, but it was suddenly important to her that he hear the words again. “I didn’t doubt that,” he told her. “Sam and I…we got pretty good at determining the people who were forced into working for Hydra from the people who were true believers. Sam never doubted you and neither did I.”

It shouldn’t have mattered, two years and however many battles later, but it did. She smiled and wiped her eyes. “Come on, Steve. The couch is ready for you.”

He pulled back a little and she had the mental image of young child, scowling up at a much taller boy. “One hour, then you wake me up.”

“One hour,” she agreed.

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Wanda let him sleep for three.

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“Thanks for letting us know,” the hologram of Sam Wilson said. He had a full mug of coffee and was clinging to it as if his life depended on it. “Barnes--- Bucky---didn’t sleep much last night either, but we figured Steve wouldn’t be in until later after that meeting with T’Challa.” His expression sobered. “You think it’s serious?”

Wanda shook her head. “I don’t know. Steve said he wanted to meet with us all, though, so I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Yeah, you will,” a sleep-graveled voice said from behind her. Steve, awake, if only barely.

Sam must have seen him on his end of the connection, to judge by the size of his grin. “That’s some impressive bed-head you got there, man. Sleep looks good on you.”

Wanda suddenly realized how it must look, how it could look to anybody who wasn’t Sam. “He slept on the couch,” she said, flushing.
Sam raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. “Hey, no, I wasn’t implying anything.”

“Good,” Steve retorted, but there was no heat in it. “Sam, I’m going to want to meet with everyone around noon or so, if that works. T’Challa says he’s available then.”

“Did I hear you tell Bucky that T’Challa’s going to have to fight with someone for his throne?” Sam asked.

Steve nodded. “He thought all the challengers had backed down, but some cousin of his from one of the outer tribes announced at the last minute that he wants to try his luck. They’re gonna fight tomorrow morning and then…” he shrugged. “I expect we’ll know more once that’s done.”

Sam yawned. “Okay, man. I’m gonna make some brunch for the meeting, if you eat that sort of thing.”

Steve chuckled. “Oh, so that’s how it is?”

“You know it, man,” Sam replied with an answering smile, and closed the connection.

Wanda glanced at the loaves of bread. They’d risen nicely and were ready to be kneaded and then baked. “Feel like beating up some bread?”

Steve grinned. “You bet.”

***

Wanda knocked on the door of Steve’s apartment a few hours later. Steve had gone ahead to shower, change into clean clothes and help Sam and Bucky set up, which gave her time to finish her set of chores. After leaving a note for Scott, she walked across the courtyard.

Almost everyone was there, except for Laura and Scott. “Laura will be here soon,” Clint announced from the kitchen, where he was cutting up a large fruit into smaller pieces. “Where’s Scott?”

“Still talking to Hank Pym,” she responded. “I left a note for him though.”

“Hmm, you think Pym can pull off something for Scott?” Clint asked.

Wanda shrugged. “Pym has government contacts, and he wants Scott, and his suit, back in the US. I’m sure they’ll figure something out.”

She handed her loaves of bread to Steve, who smiled and took them from her. Behind him, Sam was scrambling a bunch of eggs while Sergeant Barnes—Bucky, as he’d insisted—kept an eye on the bacon in the pan. Bucky saw her watching and said, pitched for her ears alone, “I know you keep kosher, or try to. There’s other things besides the bacon to eat. You won’t starve here.”

At the compound, she had tried to keep a kosher kitchen, but hadn’t made it to a synagogue. She was, by any standards, a barely-observant Jew, but his concern touched her. “Thank you,” Wanda told him. “It…in Sokovia, we couldn’t afford to be picky, but here, I…”

Bucky nodded. “My dad was Jewish during the Great Depression, kid. I get it. Now get on the eggs and fruit before this guy” and he jerked at thumb at Steve, who was slicing the bread “eats all of it.”

It was the kind of remark that had decades of history behind it, and Wanda sensed Bucky was thinking of a much smaller, frail child who had learned to eat everything he was offered because there was no guarantee of the next meal. She didn’t dare to look closer; his mind was a scarred,
fragile thing that astonished and horrified her by turns. How was he still alive after all this time, after all Hydra had done to him? Her own experiences with Hydra’s experimentation, while horrible, did not even come close.

Something of this must have showed on her face from the way Bucky’s sharp grey gaze studied her. “Kid, I…”

Wanda mustered up a smile. Hadn’t she been telling Steve just a few hours before that awful wasn’t a contest? “I’m glad you’re here,” she said impulsively. And she was; while she barely knew Bucky Barnes, it hadn’t taken a genius to sense how much of Steve’s life was interwoven with the man standing next to her. “And the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David,” she thought, and smiled an inward smile.

Bucky grinned and something of that long-ago soldier surfaced. It wasn’t too hard to see him as the big brother to a bunch of little girls. “Now, can you help me get the table set?”

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The king arrived not long after the table was set, accompanied by two of the most genuinely fierce—and intimidating—women Wanda had ever seen (and she had trained with Natasha Romanoff.) From the way they stood, armed and hyperaware, they were clearly members of the king’s guards, the Dora Milaje. They hadn’t been with him the other night, and Wanda was instantly warned. Luckily, they’d made breakfast enough for two supersoldiers, even if Steve still wasn’t eating as much he should. “Your highness,” Wanda said, recovering her wits, “would you all like some breakfast?”

T’Challa nodded. “Thank you, that would be very kind.” He gestured to the women behind him. “These are my guards, Okoye and Ayo.”

“We have eaten,” the younger woman (Ayo?) said. Okoye inclined her head in a way that suggested she didn’t do anything as mundane as eating.

The king raised an eyebrow and said something in Wakandan which was far too fast and idiomatic for her to catch. But when he’d finished speaking, Ayo inclined her head and said, “But perhaps some fruit would be good.”

Clint passed the bowl of mixed fruit—oranges, pineapple, and plantain—to Wanda, who handed it to Ayo. For a time, there was a lot of silence as everyone ate. Or almost everyone—Steve was eating, but there wasn’t much on his plate. She could feel the barely contained nausea as he stared at the food, along with his determination to keep everyone else from worrying about him. Sam met her eyes across Steve’s bent head, and the concern in his own eyes was obvious.

Sam shook his head slightly and Wanda nodded in return and concentrated on her own meal. The eggs, bread and fruit were surprisingly filling. Now, if she could just get another cup of coffee…

“Here,” Laura said, handing her a filled mug and taking her empty one. “You look like you need it.” She leaned a little closer and said, quietly enough for nobody but Wanda to hear, “I know you’re worried,” she murmured in Sokovian. “Sam and Bucky are keeping a close eye on him.”

Laura had reckoned without supersoldier hearing; Bucky, who was sitting closer to Wanda, plainly heard every word and nodded, just slightly. Wanda relaxed; Steve was in good hands.

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“I’m afraid this isn’t purely a social call,” T’Challa said sometime later. Only the adults remained; Lila, bored, had taken Cooper and Nathaniel back to the Barton’s apartment to watch Wakandan
holo-vids. Wanda had marveled at their ease with the advanced technology here; barely a week in the country and they were already adapting, accepting all of the new and the strange with hardly any confusion at all.

“They’re not on Tony Stark’s levels of genius,” Clint had said to her once, “and thank God for that, but they’re bright kids. The challenge most of the time is keeping them busy and keeping them as kids for as long as possible.”

Now, Wanda studied the room, gauging, weighing. It was an old habit, born first of her years on the street with Pietro, when body language would sometimes give away clues to imminent danger, and then later, once she and Pietro realized what manner of demon was experimenting on them. Gauging Strucker’s moods had often been all that saved them from the fate of the other prisoners.

Clint and Laura sat very close together, as they usually did; to her amusement, Bucky and Steve sat about the same distance apart. Sam had taken the end of the couch opposite Scott, who had returned during breakfast. T’Challa was sitting in the overstuffed chair and he was, of course, flanked by Ayo and Okoye. He touched a bead on his bracelet and two screens appeared in the air above them—identical pages of the Accords.

Or rather, not identical. “I became concerned,” T’Challa said, “about claims Secretary of State Ross made in the American press, statements he made about certain provisions in the Accords. Specifically, the creation of a registry of enhanced people, and the withdrawal of legal protections for those who refused registration.” T’Challa steepled his hands and the ring on his left hand flashed dully. “My father would never have signed something which would put enhanced people in that kind of danger.”

T’Challa glanced at Steve and Steve nodded. “Right. He called me and asked me to bring my copy of the Accords. We went through them page by page until…well, until early this morning.”

The king gestured at the page on the left. “This is from the copy of the Accords that was presented to the Avengers. You will see that it’s a signature page, ending on page 500.” The page on the right is the version of the Accords my father signed. The same signature page ends on 412.”

Sam frowned. “And…what’s in those 78 pages?”

“Exactly what Ross has been bragging about on the news back in the US,” Steve said. “Ross wanted this to happen. All of this.”

“We…had a dossier on Ross,” T’Challa admitted. “It was prepared some months ago, when he became Secretary of State. It is my belief that the Sokovian Accords were orchestrated so that Ross could gain complete control over enhanced people in the United States.”

Wanda felt herself pale. “He…caused the bombing in Lagos?”

Okoye glanced at T’Challa and at the king’s nod, spoke. “We are not certain. I’ve asked one of our most trusted agents to look into Ross’s finances to see if he, or one of his associates, paid the mercenaries to steal the biological weapon in the laboratory. It is possible that Ross was not behind the bombing, but merely…took advantage of circumstances to move his agenda forward.”

“Regardless,” T’Challa went on, “Ross, with the approval of the new US president, approached the government of Nigeria and stated that his government viewed the Avengers as a security threat and promised something would be done.” He breathed out. “I am not breaking any diplomatic rules by revealing that some of my father’s contemporaries are…short-sighted, at times. The bombing in Lagos unnerved an already paranoid government and they were all too willing to agree to Ross’s
“I don’t think Ross ever intended that any of us would sign this thing,” Steve said into the sudden silence. “He had us where he wanted us, either way. If we refused to sign, the consequences went way beyond just ‘retiring.’ They’d have put us all at the Raft, under his complete control. And if we had signed, we’d still have been under his complete control.” Steve sighed heavily. “He got what he wanted in the end. The Avengers are split up, and half of us are outlaws with warrants out for our arrest. We’re no threat to him, or to what he plans for the enhanced humans in the US.”

“Well, I’d like to thank Clint for that visual,” Sam said, rolling his eyes with a muttered Jesus, man under his breath. “But no regrets here either.”

T’Challa observed this with an amused smile. “Ross never thought the copies of the Accords would be compared. The one the UN ratified is...far less strenuous, and though it bears all the hallmarks of a bill put together in great haste, it can be worked with and amended given sufficient time and with wiser, calmer heads involved. This...thing of Ross’s, on the other hand?” His gaze grew stormy and Wanda recalled the stories Clint had told her of this man’s incredible ferocity in battle. “He lied to my father and many others to advance aims we would never have supported. It will not go well for him.” He paused, and spoke in a calmer tone. “If I am...affirmed king tomorrow, I will contact the other signatories and begin the process of withdrawing from the Accords. Wakanda cannot be attached to a document so full of lies from the start.”

Bucky had been absorbing all this in silence. Finally, he spoke. “With no disrespect to your father, how can you be so sure he wouldn’t have signed Ross’s version?” Wanda heard the underlying question he wasn’t yet willing to ask: How do you know we’ll be safe here?

T’Challa inclined his head. “There are no ‘enhanced people’ in Wakanda, because we are all enhanced.” He ignored Okoye’s indrawn breath and Ayo’s stunned look. “Vibranium is not only the metal which was used to make your shield, Steve. It’s in the air we breathe, the soils we grow our food in, the water we drink. There is not a single person who lives here who could be classified as a standard human by Ross’s definition. Does that... answer your question?”

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T’Challa and his guards left with Scott not long afterwards; as Wanda heard Bucky mutter to Steve, there was no denying that the young king knew how to make an exit. She sank down onto the couch and rubbed her cold hands together, trying to still the press of fear and the anxious rabbiting of her heart. There was a prickle along her nerves, something she’d not felt fully since before the Raft: her magic flaring to life in response to her emotions. If she lost control here---

“Clint,” Wanda managed to get out as the magic began to flow faster than she could hold it back, “I need... get me out of here.”

Clint and Laura had taken her in after Sokovia, when her magic had careened wildly out of control in her grief and fury. Luckily, Clint had had plenty of land for her to disperse the worst of it, but here? Now? “All right, kid,” Clint murmured. “Breathe easy first. Can you center yourself?”

When Wanda had first arrived at Clint’s farm, she’d thought they were planning to execute her quietly, and some part of her mind, the part that had grown up with death squads and people who disappeared, never to return, noticed that the property was ideal for it. Rural, hidden, and just about the last place on earth anyone would ever go looking for a Sokovian orphan who’d assaulted several Avengers and almost helped a robot destroy the world. Instead, Clint and Laura had taken her in and
—by calling in however many contacts or favors—Laura had found a telepath willing to teach her, to help her control her powers no matter her emotional state.

She hadn’t needed the exercises in control for years now, but Wanda found herself returning to them. Slowly, the horrific pressure around her chest began to ease and the swelling sparks of magic receded. When she opened her eyes, she found Steve kneeling in front of her, Sam and Bucky on either side of him. “You okay, kid?” Steve asked.

Wanda managed a weak smile. “I feel like I could throw up.”

A cold washcloth was placed on the back of her neck—Laura, by the deftness of the touch. “Breathe in through your nose,” she said. “It should help.”

And it did, miraculously. “You want to talk about…what set this off?” Sam asked gently.

Wanda breathed out, testing her composure. Her magic was safe; they were safe from her. “After Ross came to the compound, and you and Steve left…Stark came to talk to me.”

Something wild and angry flickered in Sam’s eyes. “Yeah, I know all about his talks. Go on.”

“He tried to convince me to sign the Accords; said we could— he could—fix whatever was wrong with them later. Said if I’d sign, he’d pull strings so I could become a US citizen.”

“He tried to bribe me with psychiatric care in a US hospital for Bucky,” Steve admitted. She didn’t miss Bucky’s sharp glance at Steve. “And I almost signed, for that. Until Stark mentioned you.”


“We argued,” Steve said simply. “I didn’t think it was right, him keeping you penned up at the compound, and I told him so. He said you were safe, we went back and forth on that one and,” he drew in a harsh breath, and some old pain and horror flared out between them, “Wanda, I’ve seen what happens when you make someone—or a group of people—the Other.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, and his own voice was rough. “I remember Auschenberg too.”

The name was unfamiliar to her. “Concentration camp,” Steve supplied. “One of the Hydra ones, stumbled on it not long after Kreichberg. We weren’t even supposed to be there, but we….” He breathed out, “We liberated the camp. Anyway, Stark and I argued about the Accords and about you and he…told me ‘they don’t grant visas to weapons of mass destruction.’”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, and his own voice was rough. “I remember Auschenberg too.”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise to her, after all this time, that Stark had lied, that maybe he had never intended to get her a visa, to help her become a citizen. But still… “And…could he have done what he said, altered the Accords? Helped Bucky? Helped me?”

“Using what as a bargaining chip, exactly?” Clint muttered. “Stark signed the thing—was the first one of us to do so. Nah, kid, he made a lot of promises but couldn’t— or wouldn’t— have kept a single one, if you want my opinion. Didn’t even keep my family safe when I asked him to do it.”

“That’s Howie through and through,” Bucky grumbled. “Guy was always bragging about this or that other thing he could do if he just had the materials, even said he’d recreate the serum if the damned Russians would let him alone long enough to do it.” He paled, the loss of color making his blue eyes nearly grey. He reached out blindly for Steve’s hand and Wanda saw the other man clasp it, hard. “Stevie?” Bucky asked, voice going distant, as if he’d just realized what he’d said. “That…he never had that conversation in front of us, did he?”
Steve shook his head slowly. “No, Buck. Howard talked a good game about a lot of things, but he never mentioned the serum.” His mouth twisted. “Or the Russians.”

Bucky sank to the unoccupied loveseat. “Oh, god,” he muttered, and Wanda was certain she wasn’t imagining the edge of panic in his words. “I was right there when he said that, right there and he… he… How did he not know I was right there?”

“Barnes,” Sam said sharply. Gone was the affable medic, or the friendly guy who had hip checked her at the compound when she reached for his waffles. His voice was all command, the voice of a man who had carried broken and bloodied people out of war zones for years and it was exactly the right tone to break through the edge of Bucky’s panic. “I’m going to need to you to breathe now. Head between your knees if you’re feeling dizzy.”

Bucky complied, Steve’s hand at the back of his neck, murmuring, “I got you, I’m here.”

Slowly, his breathing began to even out some. “Jesus, Steve, I’m a goddamned mess,” he said. The words were muted somewhat, said as they were with his head between his knees. He sat up slowly and leaned against the back of the loveseat.

“I think,” Laura said slowly, “you do this kind of business, ‘mess’ is pretty much a foregone conclusion. You’re in good company.”

The remark caused a smile to break out on Bucky’s face. “Probably, yeah.”

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People meandered in and out of Steve’s apartment the rest of the day, much to Wanda’s amusement. Clint and Laura left for a time to meet with the Wakandan teacher and Wanda, whose own formal education had stopped in grade school, had enjoyed meeting the young teacher and was pleased—if bemused—to have been given a test of her own to complete. But once that was done, they’d returned back to Steve’s apartment.

“We might as well own our caveman past,” Laura said with a grin as she took her turn helping to make lunch. Bucky, on the other side, was doing a fair job as a sous chef, even one armed. Nathaniel was down for his nap and Cooper and Lila had taken over one corner of the room for the assessment test the teacher had set them. “Think about it. We’re all nervous---nobody knows what will happen with T’Challa, but we’re safe here, hunkering down in our cave. What do you think, Steve?”

Steve looked up from where he was getting the table set. “This isn’t all that different from the way Buck and I grew up. Hanging out in groups. Talking to each other instead of isolating ourselves in our homes. We…knew our neighbors, some a lot better than we wanted to.”

Bucky gave a short huff of laughter. “You can say that again, pal. If I never hear Mr. Carver singing on his way to work, it’ll be too soon.”

There was a wave of guilt and fear from Steve when Bucky mentioned the name and Wanda looked up, startled. The name meant something to Steve that it didn’t, as yet, mean to Bucky, but she kept her attention on her own assessment test. She’d come to realize that Steve guarded and clung to his privacy and his past as much as any dragon with its hoard; she wouldn’t threaten their friendship by asking him questions he wasn’t yet ready to answer.

There was a knock at the door. It turned out to be Scott, relaxed and happy. Even at the Raft, the man’s good cheer had never wavered but she was nearly blinded by the joy he was projecting. In the instant before he spoke, she knew. “You’re going home.”
Scott ducked his head. “Yeah. Hank Pym is coming here for a scientific conference in South Africa, with a stop in Wakanda before he heads home. Officially, he’s coming to work out a trade deal for Pym Enterprises, and I’ll go home in his luggage.” His expression fell. “I never regretted coming with you guys and helping out, but I spent too much of my daughter’s life in prison as it is. Hank’s pulled some strings to get my charges reduced; I may have to do some time under house arrest but… at least I’ll be able to see my kid.”

Steve smiled. “You have a home to go back to, and a child that needs you. No need for apologies.”

_A home to go back to._ Some thoughts had resonance, woven deep with memories and hopes. Scott’s thoughts were on his daughter; Sam’s were on his family, Clint’s ran parallel with Laura’s, and were on the family they were building here, the roots they thought they might be able to put down, but Steve and Bucky? Bucky’s home was a patchwork of half-memories so worn and broken that he wasn’t always sure they were real. Steve, though… he’d lost one home, then another and now… One word rose to her mind: _Nomad._

“Will you stay for lunch?” Laura asked, interrupting Wanda’s thoughts.

“Of course,” Scott said with an easy grin. “I’ll do my turn at dishes too.”

Lunch was ready then---fried fish in a spicy sauce, served over rice and vegetables with a side salad. Sokovia had no access to ports and the rivers had been so polluted Wanda had an instinctive fear of eating anything that came from there. But the fish here was fresh and caught and very good. “There’s left-overs on the stove for second dinner,” Laura said dryly.

“I think we’ve been caught,” Steve said to Bucky in a stage whisper, though there was something a little hollow about his smile.

Bucky gazed at him with a fond half smile. “Aren’t you a little tall for a hobbit?”

“I didn’t used to be,” Steve replied. “You remember.”

Bucky grinned in what looked to be relief. “That I do.”

Steve fronted well, Wanda observed, acting as if he had an appetite at all. He did eat a few bites and complimented the chef, which Laura accepted with a mock curtsey and a concerned look of her own. “I made more because I’ve heard about you guys and your appetites from Clint.”

Clint nodded sagely. “There are whole restaurants in the US that will never be the same. Remember that one that refused to open when the cook saw Thor coming, Steve?”

That drew a rare laugh from him. “Oh, yeah. Right after those Doom-bots, a few years back. They just wouldn’t let up and when it was done…we were all starving.”

“And?” Bucky prompted gently.

“And,” Steve said dryly, “I’ll admit the wallpaper was looking pretty good by the time we found a restaurant that was not only open, but willing to serve us.”

“They turned away paying customers?” Sam asked.

“Paying customers who might eat everything they had and---if Thor was feeling really good---might break the dishes too,” Clint explained. “They…liked us in small groups rather than all of us at once.”

“Of course,” Steve said, “Thor alone counted for the appetite of a small army.”
“Man, I wish I’d have seen that,” Sam said. “You guys haven’t heard from him since that whole Ultron fiasco?”

Clint shook his head. “No. Remember him saying he was afraid there was danger coming to Asgard?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. Anything that scared Thor that badly… I liked him, but I’m not sorry he wasn’t involved in this mess.”

Clint waved that aside. “Eh, you know which side he’d have been on. Same with Bruce, if he’d surfaced. That was why Tony had to get T’Challa and that kid, whoever he was.”

“Spiderman,” Sam said. “More like Spider-teen if you ask me. Couldn’t have been more than sixteen, if he was that old.”

“Yeah,” Clint replied with a frown. “And if the government finds out about him, who he really is, now that the Accords are in place? He’ll end up right where we were, at the Raft.”

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The day wore on. There was still no word from T’Challa—but, as Sam said as he flipped through the news reports (thoughtfully subtitled), there was also no word that anything bad had happened either. “Mama,” Lila asked at one point, “what’s going to happen to us?”

Clint had gone on a run with Steve ( and good luck there, Sam’s wry glance had as much said); Bucky was contending with a headache and had gone to hopefully sleep it off in his bedroom. Laura looked up from where she was feeding Nathaniel some yams. “Well, we’ll either live here or somewhere else. But we’ll be together.”

It was said calmly enough, but Wanda could feel the echoes of the other woman’s worries. One late night at the farm, Laura had revealed who she was, who she had been. She had gone on the run more than a few times when ops had gone bad—it was a necessary risk for a SHIELD agent. It was the kind of thing a woman might accept as part of her job, but a mother would fight against for her children.

“I like it here,” Cooper said. “The animals are pretty cool.”

“They are, aren’t they?” Wanda said. “Maybe we can take a walk later and you can show me.”

The children relaxed, and Laura shot her a look of pure gratefulness. “I think that sounds like a great idea. But you need to finish your assessments first.” Her kind face grew solemn. “We may be… guests here in this country for some time to come. And part of being a good guest is adapting to the culture around you, and learning all you can. So you need to keep up with your lessons.”

Cooper, who had finished one part of his test early, pointed at his tablet excitedly. “Mom, I think you need to see this.”

Laura took the tablet from her son and brought up the news program he’d found. “This is… the raw feed before they put our translations on,” she said. “There’s news.”

A woman with an elaborate headdress and greying braids addressed the camera. “The gods have spoken,” Laura translated. “Today we celebrate the ascension of our king, T’Challa. Wakanda forever!”

“You’re sure about that translation?” Sam asked, all caution.
“Yes,” Laura breathed out. “It’s… the king is safe.”

Wanda clasped her hands together tightly. And so are we. For now.

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“And you were how old when your formal education ceased?” the man—Samkelo—asked. He was, as Cendisa had said, a tutor from their Ministry of Education, and had spent years working with refugees from all over Africa.

“Ten or eleven, I think. Maybe a little older,” Wanda said, uncomfortable. It was four days since T’Challa’s coronation, and a little over 24 hours since Scott had left Wakanda to return to the US. Though she had known Samkelo would be coming to check the results of her testing, Wanda felt again the sense of utter hopelessness that had characterized so much of daily life in Sokovia. No schools, no hope, no way out. What was she thinking, hoping she could catch up, that she could learn all she’d lost? The Barton kids were smarter and were going to leap ahead of her---

Samkelo smiled gently. “I do not ask these things to make you feel badly,” he said, breaking into her thoughts. “You are… not the first refugee I have tested.”

Wanda rubbed her arms briskly. “All right. Why did you want to know?”

“The test was built, initially, for those who had completed a standard, continual course of study. Knowing you have gaps in your education means we can program it to score you results more accurately. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Wanda said. “The school was… lost in one of the first bombings. Perhaps our parents might have found some way to teach us, but they were killed as well. After that…” She shrugged. “I’m sure you can figure out the rest.”

Samkelo nodded. “Yes. So often schools are the first targets in a war.” He paused and made a notation on his tablet. “What would you like to do? Is there a career you’d like to pursue?”

That brought her up short. Outside of her abilities, who was she? What could she do? “In the news, they are saying there are more inhumans every day,” she said, her accent coming thicker as it always did when she was stressed.

“Yes,” Samkelo agreed. “It is so.”

“When… my brother and I were experimented on by Hydra…” Wanda swallowed through a throat gone suddenly dry and began again. “We were… not trained to deal with what we were given, not prepared. It took ages for us to get used to our powers, and there were many times when it felt like we would go mad. I don’t want that to happen to anyone else.”

Samkelo turned off his tablet, then his kimoyo beads, and faced her gravely. “Ms. Maximoff—”

“Wanda.”

He nodded. “Very well. There has been some… discussion as to the nature of your abilities.”

Oh, no. No. They’re going to send me away. Where will I go? What can I do? Strong hands clasped her own. “Peace, child,” Samkelo said, shaking his head ruefully. “I chose my words poorly. It is our understanding that you can sense emotions and thoughts?”

The beads on his wrist were all dark. “You turned your bracelet off. Why?” Wanda asked.
“Because my part of this conversation is not something I will make part of the official record unless you agree,” he said. “Can you do all that? Sense emotions and thoughts?”

Wanda nodded. What had she to lose, after all? “Yes. And…other things too, though I haven’t been able to do those as much since the Raft.”

“I have…come across many inhumans whose transformations were traumatic in the extreme, who lost family and friends in the aftermath. Or those who simply had the misfortune to be born with the mutant gene in cultures which were…not welcoming. I have frequently struggled how best to reach them---I am a man of no particular abilities, you understand.”

Wanda sincerely doubted that could be said of anyone in the king’s employ, but waited for the man to finish. “And there is a limit, you understand, to what I can reveal to them.”

She recalled the king’s declaration the other morning, how stunned Okoye and Ayo had been by what he’d revealed, because he’d said something she now guessed was a closely-guarded secret. “No, of course you can’t say much,” she murmured. “Not without making it obvious that you understand only too well what it’s like to be enhanced.”

Samkelo’s eyes sharpened. “The king told us at breakfast a few days ago,” she said.

Wanda watched as he forced himself to relax; it wasn’t, she sensed, something that ever came easy to him. “The new king… is not his father. It is something I need to remember. If you wish it, we---I---would want you to consider joining our efforts once your education is complete.”

Wanda had joined the Avengers almost by accident---grieving and orphaned, she’d felt she had so much to prove and debts she could never repay. Clint, then Steve, had seen something in her worth redeeming and for a brief time, that had been enough. But she had seen enough of war and death. Could she do what this man was asking? Could she reach out to other inhumans and help them? “I have less than a grade school education,” she said. “How---?”

Samkelo turned on just one bead on his bracelet and the holographic array showed a series of reports. “These are the results from your assessments,” he explained. “While you might have stopped your formal education in grade school, it’s clear that you did not stop learning. If you apply yourself, I would estimate no more than two years before you are caught up---after that, any college here would welcome you. And if your interests are still where they are now…we would be honored to have you join us.”

She pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to keep the flood of emotion back. Possibilities. The future. “I… don’t know what to say.”

Samkelo smiled. “We can decide the details later. But for now, I’ve set you up with a customized educational program. Have you begun learning Wakandan?”

Wanda nodded, pulling her emotions back under control. “A bit. It’s very complicated.”

“It will become less so, as you use it,” he promised. “I would suggest attending the tutoring sessions with the Barton children, unless that is too uncomfortable?”

Wanda shook her head. “No, of course not.” She had never quite had the courage to ask, but Laura had tried—with great finessse, she realized now—to make sure that Wanda was involved in their schoolwork too. “I’m…used to learning with them.”

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That night, she dreamed of a white, echoing room where the lights hummed because they were never turned off, of sneers and taunts by faceless men who bragged nobody knows or cares about you here. Your captain isn’t coming, what should we do first, hmmm?

They didn’t expect an answer; even if they had, the straightjacket delivered an electric shock with any movement. Talking was beyond her and they knew it. After a while, Wanda had simply begun to drift, then to hallucinate, seeing Pietro, who urged her to be strong as he had when Strucker’s experiments had left her dazed and aching for days on end. The white walls became the softer grey of her room at the compound, the buzzing was maybe the softer hum of the air conditioning…

The guards weren’t supposed to physically harm her; Wanda had heard that much from Secretary Ross himself. He wanted to study her, and that required her to be at least physically healthy. But they could threaten, and threaten they did---unspeakable things that were coarse and brutal even to someone who’d grown up on the streets of Sokovia.

She could have dismembered them with one movement of her hands, but her hands were bound, trapped---

---and she awoke on the close edge of a scream, her magic flaring scarlet between her fingers again. Sweat poured down her back and she pushed her hair out of her eyes, trying to regain control of her breathing. Dr. Nomso had warned her that as she recovered from the aftereffects of the straightjacket that her magic would eventually return, and be stronger for the time it was kept bound.

There was the touch of a warm hand on her shoulder. Sam, looking concerned. “It’s okay, you just had a bad dream.”

Her hand picked at the woven fabric of the blanket that had covered her---an old quilt, then. “You fell asleep on our couch,” Sam explained. “Figured you needed the rest.”

“What time is it?” she asked around a yawn.

“Near midnight.”

She gazed at him critically. “And you’re still up.”

He spread his hands. “I had a few…nightmares of my own. Figured it was just smarter to stay awake at this point.”

Well, she’d certainly had her share of those nights. “And Bucky and Steve?”

“They’re in their bedroom, probably still up too,” Sam said. “Unfortunately, they don’t make sleeping pills for super-soldiers. But this goes on too much longer, I wouldn’t put it past Dr. Nomso to try.”

Her eyes weren’t like Steve’s, capable of seeing clearly in the dark. But Wanda could hear the concern in Sam’s voice, even if he was just a vague shadow in the night. The concern, and the feeling of… “Sam, you know this isn’t something that’s on you to fix.”

“Using that red smoke on me again, kid?” Sam asked. He might have smiled—she couldn’t be sure, but at least his voice was friendly.


“Huh,” he said, “I hadn’t thought about that. Do… all of us?”
She considered his words, even as she acknowledged his attempt at deflection. Sam would try to save them all, because of the one he couldn’t save; the guilt of his burdens was engraved so deeply on his soul it might as well have been painted in neon. Yet he was also wise enough to recognize the impossibility of the task. “Some do. Forceful personalities tend to be forceful everywhere.”

A flash of white---Sam, grinning. “So people are consistent? I bet Steve is something like a bulldozer.”

No, Wanda could have said, it feels like he’s still trapped in the ice, unable to think or move. It presses on him every day and sometimes I wonder how he’s still breathing through all of that pain. But of course, she didn’t. The young woman she’d once been had taken pleasure in another man’s demons, but she wasn’t that person anymore. Instead, she said, “He’s…pretty consistent.”

Sam nodded and she had the sense—as she did with him, sometimes—that he was aware of far more than he’d ever admit. “I always think of him as a rock,” Sam said, picturing the rock of Gibraltar clearly enough that she saw the image too. “But everybody forgets that even rocks have fractures.”

They were good people, all of them, Wanda thought. All of them, torn and damaged and mended and broken again, but they were her friends, and she was lucky to have them struggling right along with her.

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The next morning, Wanda had an appointment with Dr. Nomsa. She’d thought to cancel or reschedule it; a few hours of sleep broken by nightmares was nobody’s idea of fun, but ended up going anyway. Sam was going to call his mother (it was her birthday) and wanted to use the secure communication system Shuri had set up in her lab, so he gave Wanda a ride to the Royal Provincial Hospital of Birin Zana. Afterwards, he said, they’d go to lunch. How they were to manage that when neither of them spoke more than a few words of Wakandan, Wanda didn’t know, but if anyone could pull it off, Sam could.

The exam itself wasn’t a long one, but Dr. Nomsa listened to Wanda’s account of her returning powers and was disturbingly silent for a time. In her years with Strucker, Wanda had learned to fear the silence of doctors and scientists, but—as she reminded herself---this was a routine appointment, a follow-up, nothing at all to fear. And the doctor was scrupulously careful about gaining her consent for every test, explaining what she was asking her to do and why, and assuring her that her reports would be segregated into a separate file, secured to her biometric profile and Wanda’s. Not even the new king would have access, unless they both agreed to give it to him.

So it really shouldn’t have come as a shock when the next words out of the doctor’s mouth were, “With your abilities, do you think you could help Sergeant Barnes?”

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t considered it before---his trigger words were both a festering wound in his mind, and the cause of his greatest anxiety. He feared being used as a weapon again, hurting Steve, hurting the rest of them. And until the trigger words were silenced or removed, the fears would be his biggest block to recovery. “It’s possible, and I’m willing.”

Dr. Nomsa raised her eyebrows. “But?”

“How you have described to me, the trigger words are linked to the deepest parts of his mind.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes. Once you have found the source and weakened the links between his memories and the trigger words, we believe Shuri can destroy the connections between his memories and the traps Hydra placed there.” She tilted her head. “What concerns you?”
“He will have to trust me, enough to let me work, enough to not fight me while I search for the trigger words. I don’t know if anyone trusts me that much. I don’t know if I trust myself to do…what needs to be done.”

“I have had…several occasions to meet with your friends,” the doctor began, folding her arms. “What I have noticed, and what is remarkable, is how much they trust each other to be there, to do the right thing. It’s really quite unusual for what you’ve all endured… truly.” She reached out and touched Wanda’s hand. “Wanda. They trust you. All that remains…is for you to trust yourself.”

“But we don’t have the book of the trigger words,” Wanda objected.

“The first set of them was written down in Karpov’s notes,” Dr. Nomsa said, “and those we do have. We have…people looking for the other manual now.”

‘‘People’?’ Wanda asked.

“Natasha Romanoff, and another of her contacts,” Dr. Nomsa said. “Regardless, treatment can at least begin without the manual. Sergeant Barnes believes---and I have no reason to doubt him on this---that there were many such trigger words implanted over his time with Hydra. But as Karpov was his main handler---”

“---Karpov’s notes should have the majority of them,” Wanda finished. She breathed out. “All right. Did you ask Bucky what he thought of all this? Last time I used this ability, I was attacking his friends.”

“I spoke with him first,” the doctor confirmed. “Nothing happens without his consent, or yours.”

“Then, yes,” Wanda said. “If you truly think I can help him, I will.”
She was Jane, a librarian.

She was Holly, a call-girl.

She was Celeste, an actress.

She was Svetlana, a diplomat’s wife.

She was Natalie, a PA to a billionaire.

And finally, she was just herself, Natasha Romanoff, former assassin of the Red Room and now, former SHIELD agent and ex-Avenger. Though who or what she might be after that was anyone’s guess. Natasha stared at herself in the mirror and tried to analyze the face that stared back at her. What would a stranger see, looking at her?

She’d exchanged her characteristic red bob for a darker brown, and adding the careful use of stage makeup, she’d managed to look at least a decade older. The circles under her eyes weren’t the result of any makeup, but of a few weeks’ restless and interrupted sleep. She only hoped Sharon, at least, would recognize her, because if she didn’t—or didn’t think she could be trusted---this whole thing would be for naught.

They had parted weeks earlier. Sharon had left for one of her great-aunt’s safe-houses in the wake of the Battle of Leipzig, but their last conversation had been telling. “I don’t have many illusions left,” she’d said quietly. “Not after the helicarriers fell. But my boss was going to throw Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes into a jail cell without so much as an attorney. And the CIA would have just made them disappear.”

Natasha hadn’t disagreed. SHIELD had run all kinds of ops with the CIA in its day---not many were the type that made for easy consciences. And Sharon was a Carter. “So where will you go?”

“Best you don’t know,” Sharon replied, pulling up the hood of her sweatshirt and somehow looking more like a refugee hipster than the polished and professional Agent 13. “I’ll get a message to you when I can. You’ll keep looking?”

_For what_, hardly needed to be asked. Zemo’s book, the manual that contained the trigger words for the Winter Soldier, hadn’t been on him when T’Challa had turned him over to the UN. “Yes, I will. And you?”

“I’ve got a few contacts left who might still speak to me,” Sharon said ruefully. “I’ll see what I can figure out.” She’d bit her lip then, her one obvious tell, and then only because she’d decided to let it be obvious. “Steve and Bucky and the others, were they…”

“They’re…well, I won’t say ‘fine,’ ” Natasha said. “But they’re alive. Getting medical help. And safe.”
The other woman relaxed minutely. “I won’t ask more,” Sharon replied. “But…thank you. For doing what I couldn’t.”

“But you would have,” Natasha stated. It wasn’t a question. “I should have realized what an absolute cesspool this was going to turn into. But I didn’t, and that’s on me.”

“Doesn’t sound like you were the only one who came to that realization,” Sharon said lightly, and Natasha repressed a laugh. Oh, she knew Steve Rogers, all right.

“Damn the man,” Natasha said instead, with a twist of the lips that was the closest she’d come to smiling in days, “for always being right.”

Sharon did grin then. It was one of the reasons she’d pushed Steve to ask “the nurse across the hall” out. Sharon saw the measure of people very quickly; not just the masks they wore. Steve needed someone like that in his life, someone who could see him for who he was. Of course, there had been the minor detail of Sharon being Peggy Carter’s great-niece, but that hadn’t seemed like such a big thing at the time…

“Natasha?” Sharon asked.

She started, realizing she’d been woolgathering—an unforgiveable lapse in a spy. “Sorry. What?”

“Will you…give him a message for me?”

“You could give it to him yourself,” Natasha answered.

“He’s got enough on his mind,” Sharon briskly. “But please tell him I’ll be in contact soon. I don’t want him thinking I’m in danger because of him.”

Natasha recalled what Sam had told her of Steve’s medical condition. “I doubt he’ll be in any shape to run a rescue mission soon,” she said reassuringly, because that had undoubtedly been at the top of Sharon’s concerns. Anybody who’d had experience with Steve’s unflinching loyalty would be worried. “He’s got a whole bunch of people who will sit on him if he tries. There’s… a lot at stake.”

“No shit,” Sharon agreed. She inclined her head. “Did you know, when you set me up with Steve that I was…?”

“I only pretend to know everything,” Natasha retorted dryly. “But this? Yeah, I knew. Fury could have put any agent on that detail, but he picked you and I wanted to know why. So I did some digging.” She shrugged. “I don’t have so many friends that I can afford to be careless with any of them.”

Sharon smiled, a little archly. “You do have a reputation for being thorough.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now?” Natasha asked with an answering smile.

“Maybe. In polite company,” Sharon said, and rose from the park bench. “I’ll be catching that train to the airport now. Same code as our usual?”

Natasha nodded. “In French, this time. It doesn’t do to be too predictable.”

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The message, when it finally came, was located in the want-ads of a local newspaper. In French, which attracted no attention at all since the paper was bilingual and had a large Quebecois
readership. Natasha read the notice—a seemingly banal account of a lost wallet left by a woman in a taxi, and the writer unable to return the wallet lest she miss her own flight.

_The book is most likely in Siberia. My source confirms there was only one copy, kept under lock and key. Call me._

Natasha—she was Irene this time, a bored receptionist at a marketing firm—picked up the phone. Lapsing into perfect Parisian French, she introduced herself, as might be expected, and identified the wallet (“a red one”) and arranged for its return. Her bosses, both of whom credited her with roughly the same brains as a tree stump, waved her out the door and went on with their day.

Once she was out of the building and away from the street’s cameras, she pulled the burner phone from the concealed pocket in her purse. “Talk to me,” she said when Sharon picked up.

Sharon didn’t ask if the line was secure, if Natasha was safe in some place where surveillance cameras couldn’t see her or read her lips. That was the benefit of having worked in the same agency for so long: they knew each other’s capabilities. “The book is in Siberia still. Zemo had it when he set up that fight, but it wasn’t on him when T’Challa dropped him off. Best guess is that it was forgotten in the commotion. Or intentionally left behind. Zemo had accomplished his mission—which did he need the manual for, after that?”

It seemed logical, but… _Siberia. Of all the places._ “And the silo is… still standing?”

There was a pause, then: “What makes you ask that question?”

Sharon was too smart by half, Natasha mused. There wasn’t really any gentle way to say what she must. “The injuries on both Barnes and Steve suggest a brutal fight with Tony Stark. Even the oldest of Stark’s suits carried enough weaponry to bury a silo. With the constant improvements he makes? I’m stunned they’re still alive, in any form.”

“I can ask my source for satellite confirmation,” Sharon said finally. “Natasha. You’re sure they’re all right?”

“Yes,” she said. “Or they will be.”

Sharon seemed to accept this—or, at least, was as good at compartmentalizing as her reputation suggested. “All right. What’s the plan?”


“You’ll go by yourself?” Sharon asked. “Seems pretty risky.”

Solo ops always were, but Natasha had come to appreciate them—they were, at least, less complicated than trying to plan around a partner. “You offering to come?”

“I can’t,” Sharon said. “I’m pretty damned sure the CIA is having me watched. So far I’m staying off the alerts by acting exactly as a CIA agent on ‘administrative leave’ should act, but that’s going to change once I fail to come back.”

It was the answer she’d expected. “All right. But you’ll be safe?”

Sharon nodded. “Yeah. Aunt Peggy had bolt-holes SHIELD never found out about. I think one will be good enough to hide out at, at least until I can figure out what to do next.”

Irene the receptionist disappeared the next day, called away on another assignment from her temp
agency. Natasha boarded a plane, not to Siberia (not at first,) but to London and a counterfeiter who was willing to call his debt settled for three new identities, currency, and passports. Three new lives she could be, if she had to disappear again. After this the counterfeiter would disappear himself, so she needed to make these documents work for her.

When she boarded the plane to Siberia, she was Anya, a wildlife researcher.

***

“Jesus Marie, Shar, you look like ninety miles of bad road.”

Sharon pushed her hair---brown this time---out of her eyes and grinned at the other woman. “You know how it is, Gen.”

Genevieve Dernier stepped out of the doorway to let her in, then embraced her in a hug that had grown no less strong over the years they’d known each other. “I do, indeed. I could tell you some stories of the DGSE that would curl your hair, but…I’m glad you’re here.”

Sharon unexpectedly felt the tears gather at her eyes. She hadn’t cried at Aunt Peggy’s funeral---too many people relying on her to be a Carter---and the wake had been interrupted by the UN bombing. Before that, it had been all the funerals for the SHIELD agents killed at the Triskelion and again, Sharon hadn’t cried, afraid if she’d started, she’d never stop.

As always, Gen acted as if she hadn’t seen it. “I’ve got your room ready for you upstairs.”

“Above the pub?”

“Above the pub,” Gen confirmed. “Just as Aunt Peggy would have wanted.” She paused. “You sure about all this? You’re…leaving a lot behind.”

Was she sure? In the space of two years, Sharon had watched one agency fall---Peggy’s SHIELD, she thought again, heartsick---and burned her bridges to another. “You still need help running the pub?”

Gen nodded, though her hazel eyes were sharp. “That, and…other things.”

“Then I’m sure.”

Gen grinned, elfin under a cap of blond curls. “Grandpa would be so proud.” Her smile faltered. “I’m so sorry to hear about Aunt Peggy. I’d have come to the funeral but I couldn’t get a medical release in time to be there.”

Sharon nodded; by all accounts Gen had been lucky to escape Batroc. “I don’t really think the funeral was what she would have wanted, but,” she shrugged, “you know Thomas and Elaine. They had everything in hand.” She struggled to keep her voice even---Thomas and Elaine, Aunt Peggy’s surviving son and eldest granddaughter, had indeed had “things in hand” to the point of officiousness. At least Elaine had included Steve in the funeral; Sharon was sure Thomas wouldn’t have thought of it. He’d always been…uncomfortable with any reminder of his mother’s life before meeting his father.

“Hey,” Gen said, breaking into her thoughts, “once things are… a little calmer, we’ll close the pub early and give her a proper wake. What do you say?”

Steve won’t be there, Sharon thought but did not say, and decided to deal with the complications of Steve Rogers and what he was and might be in her life later. Right now, she was simply…too tired.
“I think Aunt Peggy would like that, very much. And so would I.”

***

The apartment hadn’t changed at all from Sharon’s last visit back when Jacques Dernier had still been alive—a simple two room flat, with stained wood floors and pale walls. Sharon fancied she could still hear the muted tap-tap-tap of his cane on the floor, hear the old record player he’d kept on pretty much all day long. “This still suit you?” Gen asked.

“Oh, it does. Thank you.”

Gen shook her head. “None of that now, Sharon. We’re family. And Grandpa always had it in mind that one of us would come and live here, someone who could…appreciate this.”

Jacques Dernier had been a spy, a saboteur, as much a legend in the DGSE and MI6 as Peggy Carter had been in the SSR, then SHIELD. He and Peggy had owned this apartment, and the pub beneath it, jointly, though the actual deeds of ownership had been run through any number of shell companies over the years—because, as Jacques had said around a cigar, every spy needs a place to forget the Game, even if the Game doesn’t want to forget them. “All right,” Sharon said. “Show me the features of this place.”

Gen nodded. “Bulletproof glass, for starters.”

“Who installed it?”

“A technician from MI6. I verified his bona fides, don’t you worry.”

Sharon bit her lip, chagrined. “I wasn’t---”

Gen laughed. “You were. And I would have asked the same. Don’t worry.”

Sharon followed her into the kitchen and showed her a small, unobtrusive switch. “There’s one like this in each room.”

“What is it?”

“It shorts out cellphones and any other electronic devices.”

“Localized EMP?” Sharon guessed.

“Yeah,” Gen nodded. “No point in making it easy for anyone set off a bomb from across the street. Just turn it on before you leave.”

Sharon nodded. “What else?”

“The kitchen is laid out for efficient brawling,” Gen said with a perfectly straight face, and Sharon laughed. One of Aunt Peggy’s first fighting lessons had been how to use whatever was at hand, whether that was a suitcase, a bag full of coins, or a refrigerator door. (It wasn’t until many years later, watching Steve Rogers fight in a street brawl, that Sharon had recognized they’d had the same teacher.)

“And you’ll want to see Grandpa’s stash,” Gen went on.

“It’s still here?” Sharon asked in some amazement.

“Well, not like we could trust a museum with some of this stuff, but Tripp asked for some of it and
the rest is still here.”

The name brought Sharon up short. She and Tripp had entered the Academy together, two legacies with a lot to prove and no desire to let their family history get in the way. “I haven’t seen him since just before the Trisk fell. How is he?”

“Officially?” Gen snorted. “He’s been under deep cover since right after SHIELD fell.”

“That’s the story,” Sharon said. “But it’s a strange team led by a couple of dead men.”

“You do have good contacts,” Gen replied, quirking an eyebrow.

“Had,” Sharon said. “The last piece of information I got from that one was some satellite imagery, and now he’s going to go pretend we never talked.” She shrugged. “It’s the name of the game. He owed me and—”

“Now the debt is paid,” Gen finished. “I’m glad Tripp is all right.”

“I sent him a message just before I… left. Via the old family code. If he gets it, he’ll know how to respond.”

“Good,” Gen replied. “Let me know if you hear from him, okay? He owes me a poker match.” She glanced at her watch. “I need to go get the pub opened for the night. Once Deirdre comes in, I’ll give you a ring and we’ll go get some dinner. And if you’re up for it, tomorrow we’ll start… sorting things out.”

Sharon fought back a yawn by force of will. “I’ll get unpacked. If you call and I don’t answer, just come on by. I’m probably sacked out on the bed.”

Gen nodded. “Roger that.”

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Natasha Romanoff had lived in the United States for nearly twenty years. The Madame of the Red Room, her old instructor, would have said living in the capitalist West had made her soft, because at some point, she’d forgotten just how fucking cold it was in Siberia. Which made it the perfect place to store some super soldiers, at least, but did make her wish they’d built storage in Cuba or someplace at least a smidge warmer.

Her credentials had checked out; the forger had been worth his reputation, and she borrowed a snowmobile with the expressed intent of visiting a blind that another researcher had set up to observe the Siberian tiger. The blind was a few short miles from the abandoned silo was marked clearly on the map and she was given strict warnings to stay away. She’d affected the proper respect for the warnings that her current cover demanded—wildlife researchers needed the continuing consent of the government to operate, after all—and after demonstrating her skill with the snowmobile, had been allowed to set off.

By her calculations, she’d have a few hours before her deviation from the course was noted. Which gave her enough time to enter the silo (and hope that the entrance code Sharon’s source had provided was correct,) find the book, and leave. The roar of the snowmobile’s engine provided a counterpoint to her thoughts as she considered what she might do if the manual wasn’t there, if she couldn’t even get into the facility. Though Natasha counted the odds of that last as being pretty slim; between the now-dead super-soldiers and whatever remained after Tony, Steve, and Bucky had fought, it wouldn’t have been worth anyone’s trouble to reprogram the lock to the silo.
She parked the snowmobile just outside of the entrance to the silo and consulted the satellite imagery Sharon had obtained. “T’Challa reported the interior is structurally sound, if damaged,” Sharon had said, “and there’s some residual power so you should have light. But I wouldn’t stay there long.”

Natasha walked up to the control panel and debated—briefly—taking her glove off to punch in the combination code, except at these temperatures she might end up with a case of frostbite instead. Still, she managed to punch the numbers in the correct sequence, and the doors slid open with a heavy groan.

The first thing she noticed when she exited the elevator was the smell. It was still frigid, a few degrees warmer than the outside, but the smell of old blood and ozone—the cryo coolant, her mind supplied—was thick in the air. She walked past the corpses of the other Winter Soldiers and spared them not a glance. It was the living she was concerned with; the dead here were already past help, and were hardly worth mourning anyway.

She stepped into the remains of what must have been the control room and considered where Zemo must have been as his scenario played out. He wouldn’t want to be in the center of the action—even someone with his long list of murders and assassinations wouldn’t want to be in the middle of a conflict between two super-soldiers and an enraged Iron Man. So where would he have been? He would have wanted to see and hear everything—so, that meant an area with no blind spots.

Natasha walked around the circular room, trying to get a feel for location—where they all had been standing, actors in an unknown play, when the video began to play. Some of it was easy to deduce—she’d recognize the tread of Steve’s boots in the dust and the Iron Man armor blindfolded. There were footprints that must have been Bucky’s, just behind and to the left of Steve’s: guarding him. And there was the video machine…so, they all had been standing close together when Zemo delivered his final blow.

She turned and saw it just behind the collapsed wreckage of the ceiling—the narrow room with the door half open, just as Zemo must have left it as he fled all those weeks before. And there on the floor, hurriedly tossed aside, she found the manual, red with a silver star on the cover. Could they be any more ridiculous? Natasha thought, annoyed, and picked it up. It seemed an odd thing for Zemo to leave behind but again, maybe not. He had counted on someone dying down here, and if that had been the original Winter Soldier—well, the book would have been useless. If Bucky had survived and either Steve or Tony had died, then Zemo must have reckoned he’d not be alive long to worry about it.

After flipping through the journal to make sure there were no missing pages, she tucked it inside her parka and left the silo. She had a man to see about a Siberian tiger, after all, and then she would disappear again.

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“So what exactly do we do here?” Sharon asked Genevieve about a week later, after her mind was swimming with drinks recipes and liquor regulations. The pub was closed for the night and she and Gen were cleaning up the pub.

Gen affected an innocent look she’d probably not worn properly since she was five. “Why, we serve drinks. Whatever do you mean?”

“Gen.”

“Sharon.”
Gen dried a wet spot on the bar’s counter. “Oh, okay, very well.” She flipped a switch under the bar that would short out any bugs that might have been planted. “After SHIELD fell, there was a tremendous vacuum in the intelligence community. Once the Black Widow files and subsequent data mining helped sort out Hydra from everybody else, the remaining intelligence agencies---MI6, DGSE, CIA, all the alphabet soup agencies---realized there were a lot of agents still on assignment who no longer had jobs, or could no longer safely return to them. For some, staying safe means staying off the books.”

Sharon winced. Fully half her SHIELD graduating class had been Hydra and some of the rest had been executed as Hydra took over SHIELD facilities. The remainder were scattered and many of them, two years later, were still missing. “And this pub…?”

“It’s a safe place. Or at least, safer. We’re…unofficial, but the thought was to create a network so spies could come in from the cold, so to speak, and get help. So, this pub is one place, and there are a few others, in bookstores and hostels and the like. Some don’t operate all the time, but others do. We…are year round. ”

Sharon nodded. “Count me in.”

Gen smiled. “All right. We’re expecting a package from this bookstore. Tomorrow morning, before we open, you’ll need to go there and identify yourself as Lucille and say your aunt needs some large print books.”

It’s my aunt. She’s an insomniac, Sharon remembered. It seemed a lifetime ago. “Sure. And then what do I do with it?”

“I’ll see it goes where it needs to,” Gen assured her.

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Over the next few days, Sharon began to get used to the rhythms of life in the pub---they had a few regulars, who were almost always pretending to be “new to the area” (even if she was sure she’d seen them just a few days before in different clothes or a different hairstyle.) Sometimes they made pleasant conversation, sometimes the conversation was anything but pleasant, coded phrases: I need exfil out of here. My cover was blown, I think we have a leak in our op, do you know anyone who can help?

And Sharon would hand them a shot of Glenfiddich, which was the answering code for Yes, please stay here. Or---much more rarely---she’d accidentally spill the drink on the bar, and Gen would come out to chastise her. “Monsieur, I am so sorry, she’s new, please forgive her.” And Sharon would look up and the spy would be gone.

“So, you got any vodka here?” a familiar voice drawled and she looked up to see Natasha Romanoff, blonde and blue-eyed this time. She was a little rumpled, in clothes that didn’t quite fit her---a secretary or a low-level clerk, maybe. Her voice was liquid, a studied American drawl that managed to be of any place in North America and no place at all.

“Possibly,” Sharon said. Why are you here?

“I’m new here. Got a recommendation from the bookstore up the street. Said you had good food too.”

It was the kind of code phrase that was the best because it was true. The pub did serve good food;
Sharon had eaten dinner there often enough. *I have a package I need to deliver.*

Sharon managed to control her reaction by the ease of long practice. “There’s a hostel up the street if you need a place to rest.” *Meet me upstairs in an hour.*

After Natasha had eaten, she met Sharon upstairs. Sharon hit the EMP button to short out the bugs, and then sat down heavily on the couch. “So you found the Winter Soldier manual?”

“Yeah,” Nat said. “Just where your source guessed. Inside the silo. I’m going to catch a flight to Wakanda in the morning, unofficially, of course.”

Sharon nodded. T’Challa’s reception was anything but certain and it was at least possible that he’d take the book from her at the border and then turn her back. “Will you come with me?” Natasha asked.

“No,” Sharon said.

It was rare that Natasha was startled by anything. “But I thought—”

“That I’d come to Wakanda and resume my relationship with Steve?” Sharon asked. “Yeah, maybe I thought so too, but…” She bit her lip. “You know how many actual dates we had in the two years we were together? Two. And then only because one of his missions coincided with one of my ops—we were both undercover at the same time.”

Nat chuckled, and Sharon had to give her that. The idea of Steve Rogers being undercover for any reason was more or less ridiculous on its face, but damn if he hadn’t managed to pull it off. “We couldn’t even be ourselves together, and if that’s not a metaphor, I don’t know what is,” Sharon went on. “He’s a good man. But I’ve burned so many bridges lately I don’t even know who I am anymore and I’m…not at a place where I’m any good in a relationship. Not for him.”

Nat nodded. “You have a message you want me to give him, then?”

“I’d call him, but I guess they don’t get frequent messages in Wakanda,” Sharon said.

“Better you not try, right now,” Natasha replied. “Wakanda is as secure as any place can be, but Steve and the other have to lie low right now, especially now that there are international warrants out for their arrest.”

Sharon snorted derisively. “*Steve Rogers* is on Interpol’s watch list? Now I know the world has gone crazy.”

Natasha came to sit next to her. “You know, he can always use more friends. So can you.”

If someone had told Sharon ten years ago that Natasha Romanoff—Black Widow, ex-Red Room assassin—would one day be sitting on her couch in an apartment in a London suburb talking to her about friendship, she would have laughed in their face and demanded to know what they were drinking. Now, she could only be grateful; there wasn’t anyone at S'HIELD who hadn’t lost a friend, a partner, a mentor, a handler to Hydra’s infiltration. Sharon had learned to value her friends where she found them. “You’re right,” she said finally. “Do you have a moment for me to write him a letter?”

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Natasha boarded a plane for Uganda the following morning. She wore no disguise, traveled under no name other than her own—or at least, the name that had been hers the longest. If she was going to petition to enter Wakanda, better she do it honestly, under her own name. T’Challa’s reception might be frosty (or not; her impression of the young king was that he was a practical sort above all else and might understand, if not fully approve, of her actions on the tarmac in Leipzig) but she wasn’t about to risk compounding his anger by appearing to sneak into his country. No, she would do this openly and *alea jacta est* --- let the dice fall where they may.

Wakanda maintained an embassy near Jinja; it was there she made her appointment and respectfully asked for a visa to enter Wakanda. The passport official pinned her neatly with one sharp stare. “You come to join the colonizers?”

“I come to join my friends, who are guests of your king,” Natasha said carefully, aware that she was treading in some murky waters. She hadn’t spoken to Sam, Steve, or Clint in the near month since she’d helped Steve rescue everyone from the Raft; she honestly didn’t know how they were doing or what their current situation was in Wakanda. Had she made a mistake coming here? Were they in trouble?

The woman’s expression thawed marginally. “His Highness has been expecting you, Ms. Romanoff. Welcome to Wakanda.”

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“Hey,” Gen asked, a week or so later, “you know an S. Grant?”

Sharon only barely managed to not roll her eyes. Really, he was so terrifically unsubtle… bless him. “Yes, I do. Why?”

“Got a letter from him,” Gen answered. There was no fooling Gen; there never had been. “Sharon. Are you pen pals with Captain America?”

Sharon took the letter from her and smiled. “No. I’m writing to Steve Rogers.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a shorter chapter because I didn't really have enough material for either Sharon or Natasha to have their own chapter, but I had plenty for them to have a chapter together. Next chapter is back to my usual posting length :-)
VI. Bucky- Human on My Faithless Arm

The high thin whistle of a train…

The sound of a child, choking in the night, struggling to breathe against his metal hand…

A woman on a lonely country road. Her neck had been so very small…

A blond boy, breath coming thin and reedy against his chest. “Breathe now, punk, just breathe…”

Bucky opened his eyes, expecting that the reedy gasping for air would stop once the fragments of dream and nightmare fled. Instead, he found Steve, crouched into the smallest corner of their bedroom, trying desperately to breathe. His head was buried in his arms and he was shaking—panic attack Bucky realized.

Bucky crept over to him. “Hey, pal, I know what this feels like, but I need you to breathe with me… In and out… in and out… Stevie, look at me.”

Steve raised his head. He’d always been pale, even when they were kids and the rest of them tan from hours playing outside. But this pallor—-

—his face, bloody and beaten, as the ships exploded around them. The sudden, painful clot of memory. Steve? Not my mission—always my mission—I did this to you!

Bucky shook his head, banishing his own demons for the moment. “Okay, your breathing is sounding better. Can I touch you?”

Steve nodded, as if his head was suddenly too heavy for his neck. “Yeah,” he managed. “Sorry, Buck.”

“Got nothin’ to apologize for, near as I can tell. Seems like it was you helping me the other day, and a few nights ago too. And don’t argue that it’s different because it’s you going through this. I think Mrs. Laura’s right and all of us got demons.”

Steve managed a smile, and didn’t fight the arm Bucky wrapped around his shoulders. He was clammy, soaked through the material of his thin sleep shirt. “I think she’s right about a lot. Best work Clint ever did, finding her.”

Bucky nodded. They sat there for a time in silence; Steve had had enough of these panic attacks by now that Bucky knew too much talking was simply exhausting. Finally, Steve spoke. “Aren’t you gonna ask?”

Even his hair was soaked; Bucky could feel it damp against his collarbone. “That depends. You want to tell me?”

“The train,” Steve said. “A few other things too. That silo in Siberia, when Tony kicked you in the head. I dreamed he actually killed you.”

They hadn’t much talked about that final battle in Siberia, or that Tony Stark had been out for murder. Bucky couldn’t really blame Stark in the abstract, but Steve was still reeling from the grief,
the traumas of all the might-have-beens. “Well, he didn’t,” Bucky said firmly.

“I know,” Steve said raggedly, breathing in. “I know. But my brain hasn’t gotten the message somehow.”

He shivered against Bucky’s side and Bucky remembered--- Christ, Stevie, you’re sick again, you’re burning up, we got to call the doctor if you’re not better soon--- “You’re shivering. Think you can get a shower now?”

Steve sat up and ran his hands through his hair, making the blond strands even more messy. “Yeah, probably best that I do.” He tilted his head. “You don’t have to---”

“I’m gonna wait up until you’re done, punk,” Bucky said, “so stop asking. Get your shower and you can help me change the sheets when you get out.”

“Okay,” Steve replied, clambering to his feet as if he was still 5’4 and knock-kneed. Bucky waited for the water to turn on and stripped the sweat-soaked sheets. He balled them up and threw them into the hamper in the corner, then sat down heavily on the vacant bed. Sometimes the emotions associated with his memories were vague and distant, but not (so far at least) the ones he’d recalled of his life with Steve before the war. They had been very different people then but that Bucky? Had loved that Steve. And had never said a word.

***

Steve slept fitfully after the panic attack, arms wrapped around Bucky like he was the world’s most blond octopus. Bucky wasn’t able to go back to sleep and so he watched the patches of shadow on the walls change until the sun went up. Steve turned in his sleep once, planting his face firmly against Bucky’s collarbone, and oh, the memories that went with that. They’d shared a bed for reasons other than the cold, or being poorer than church-mice, but neither had ever said….or done…anything about it. Then.

Except that Bucky wasn’t all that certain he was remembering things right. Hydra had, from time to time, implanted false memories, to give him a more effective cover or make him more loyal or more successful on a given mission. The notebooks—which were God knew where now---had helped him to sort out truth from fiction, but so much was still lost. What if he didn’t remember him--- them ---correctly? What then?

There was a change in Steve’s breathing; he was awakening. “You okay, Buck?” he asked, voice still sleep-graveled.

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “I’m good.”

“Not worried about your appointment with Dr. Nomsa today?” Steve asked.

Bucky repressed a groan. Steve was a morning person. How could he ever have forgotten that? “Because I know it’s a big one,” Steve went on, annoyingly chirpy, “and if you wanted---”

He reached up and placed a hand over Steve’s mouth. “Steve. It’s so early yet the birds aren’t even up. Can we…maybe have this discussion in a few hours?”

Steve blinked, as if suddenly remembering the hour. He said something which was smothered behind Bucky’s hand. “I said,” Steve went on, once the offending hand was removed, “that I didn’t know what time it was.”

“You never did,” Bucky said. “The number of times you and your ma were almost late for Mass---”
Steve ducked his head and the tips of his ears were pink. “You remember that, huh?”

“Some of it,” Bucky admitted. “I went with you a few times, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. And to temple with your dad when he was…well enough.”

“My dad was sick?” Bucky asked. He didn’t remember that at all.

“Yeah,” Steve said, balling up a pillow in his hands—a nervous gesture. “They…they call shell-shock something different now, PTSD, but he wasn’t quite right after the Great War. He lost the grocery after the Great Depression hit and couldn’t pick up another job the way your mom did with her sewing. It hit him hard, because he wanted to provide, but he just…couldn’t. And him being Jewish didn’t help.”

Bucky thought he could see his dad now—a big, broad-shouldered man, standing in the shadows, looking down at him. It must have been a very early memory, because his dad seemed so large, larger than life. “Was he a good father?” Bucky asked, ashamed because he had to ask, because he didn’t just know.

“He was always good to me,” Steve answered. “Didn’t beat your mom or you or your sisters, and you never seemed afraid of him.”

“Seems like that’s setting the bar for good parenting pretty low,” Bucky muttered.

Steve spread his hands. “Bucky, a lot of us didn’t have dads in the neighborhood. The ones who did, didn’t always have the good ones. Trust me, you had one of the good ones.” He quirked a smile.

“Did you know he taught me how to throw a punch?”

“No,” Bucky replied, startled. “I thought I would have done that, or…your mam.”

Steve laughed a bit at that. “Mam had a mean right cross, true, but she despaired of me fighting. No, I’d gotten into a fight on your sister’s behalf and your dad saw it happen. Took me aside, and once my nose stopped bleeding, said he’d teach me to teach me how to punch someone right.”

“Where was I?” Bucky asked. “I should remember this, at least.”

“You, Jeanie, and Alice were all sick with chicken pox,” Steve recalled. “I was walking Becca home from school and,” his face twisted, “you’ll maybe remember what they used to call Jewish kids back then. I got in a fight defending her, and your dad saw the end of it and pulled us out. Then after he made sure we weren’t hurt, he took me aside and showed me how to punch.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Sarah wasn’t happy about it?”

Steve sighed. “She said it was the thing my da would have done, except he was long gone by then. I think she was glad that George—your dad—cared enough to see it done.”

“Steve, your dad—was he a big guy too? Black hair, blue eyes?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, but there was something a little abrupt about it. “He left us—”

“Died of mustard gas before you were born, right?” Bucky asked. It had been in the Smithsonian, after all.

“No,” Steve corrected, with the air of someone steeling himself. “Died in my teens, not long after my mam did. By that time I didn’t even remember what he looked like, and I only found out he’d died
because he left enough debts that I had a debt collector after me.” He gave a short laugh, utterly without humor. “I’d sold everything of value to get mam decently buried. There wasn’t enough left for anyone else.” Including me, he didn’t have to say; Bucky knew it was part of the reason why Steve had ultimately agreed to moving in with him. Steve’s bout of pneumonia in the spring, then Sarah’s death in the fall, had cost him dearly. And Bucky remembered the sour taste of his own desperation as he’d tried to convince Steve to take any help at all from him. “Da…Mustard gas was what killed him, but I’m sure the booze didn’t help.”

Something else clicked--- a linked memory, the neighborhood women talking about Joseph Rogers in quiet, hushed tones. Such a shame, they had muttered, that he’d died and left Sarah and her son alone. “You always said he was a hero.”

Steve folded his hands. “Mam told me on her deathbed what happened--- said some part of him never came home from his war. When I was a baby, he told her he was traveling upstate for work and never returned.” He shrugged. “I can’t blame her for not telling me the truth. Mam had a hard enough time being Irish, poor, Catholic and a single mother without adding ‘deserted by her husband’ to the list. A widow of a war hero was…respectable.”

***

Steve had been right, on at least one front: Bucky was damned nervous about his doctor’s appointment. It was a consult with Shuri, Dr. Nomsa, Wanda, and a couple of other specialists they’d brought in to see what the best method of removing his trigger words might be. And although he knew none of these people meant him harm, it was still a struggle to eat and not get sick from the fear. Unfortunately for him, he was also living with two of the most perceptive people in Wakanda, and there was an actual telepath just across the courtyard. Bucky had no hope at all of keeping his nerves quiet.

He’d gone outside to try and get his rabbiting thoughts into some sort of calm when he saw Sam. “Comin’ to check up on me, Wilson?” Bucky asked. The smell of jasmine was thick in the early morning air; he could see why Steve liked this spot so much.

“Would you be angry if I was?” Sam asked, reasonably.

“Nah,” Bucky said, and it was true. Sam was good people, as his mama would have said.

“Well, then,” Sam replied, “you mind if I sit?”

“Not at all,” Bucky answered.

They sat there for a time in silence, listening as the unfamiliar birds began to chirp. That was a thing he was coming to like about Sam; the man didn’t need to fill the silence with chatter. “I need you to do something for me,” Sam said finally.

That was unusual. “What?”

“You’ll have noticed how Steve is doing.” Sam replied.

Bucky could no more have failed to notice that than he could have failed to notice the spectacular Wakandan sunrise. “You mean, not at all well. Yeah, I noticed.”

“He’s been dodging his appointments with Dr. Nomsa. She just wants him to come in so she can see how he’s doing---nothing major, but he won’t get within a mile of her clinic.”

Bucky nodded. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”
It was an opening, but also a test. He expected Sam to ask why Bucky wasn’t surprised, what Bucky knew about Steve that Sam didn’t. But Sam merely nodded. “Right. So what I need you to do is… be positive about this appointment you have today. If Steve thinks you’re worried, that just reinforces his own inclination to stay away. And as we both know, he very much needs to see Dr. Nomsa.”

That request slowed his thoughts like nothing else could. His memory might be patchwork and fog most days, but there wasn’t a thing Bucky Barnes of any era wouldn’t do for Steve Rogers. “He’s going to want to come with me this morning and you want me to look like I’m not about to puke my guts out?”

“If you can,” Sam said. “I know it’s asking a lot, man, but,” he ran a hand through his close-cropped hair, “I’m worried about him. And you too. Steve’s your main support system so I figure…he’ll do for you what he won’t do for himself.”

Bucky leaned back and studied the other man. “You’re a sneaky bastard.”

Sam grinned, but didn’t deny it. “Only for the forces of good.”

***

The four people gathered in Dr. Nomsa’s office---Nomsa, Wanda, Shuri, and a man Bucky did not recognize---clearly were trying to put him at ease. There were no white coats, no medical instruments present, just four ordinary people dressed in the Wakandan version of casual clothes. Even Wanda, with her hair braided back and wearing a long skirt and blouse, looked worlds away from the traumatized young woman he’d met the previous month.

Dr. Nomsa rose to her feet. “Greetings, Sergeant Barnes, and welcome to you as well, Captain Rogers. I was afraid you’d forgotten how to get here.”

Her tone was wry and lightly chiding; Steve ducked his head and flushed slightly. He’d come to military attention, Bucky was amused to see. “Ma’am.”

“Before we begin, I should introduce myself,” the unknown man said. His greying braids were tied back into a neat ponytail. “My name is Dr. Methuli. I was asked to consult on your case, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Bucky,” he said. “It’s Bucky.”

Dr. Methuli inclined his head. “Very well. I’ve worked with Doctors Without Borders for several years, so I have experience working with traumatized individuals and victims of torture. I hope you will allow me to consult on your case.”

There it was again: Consent. Request. Allow. All words which said they viewed him as a human first. It was a strange feeling. “I don’t see why not,” Bucky said.

“Methuli was one of our most celebrated War Dogs before he changed careers,” Dr. Nomsa put in. “He is a former soldier too. You are truly in very good hands.”

Bucky could feel Steve tense up next to him, Steve who---when it came to Bucky---never trusted anything or anyone at first glance. “Pal, it’s okay,” Bucky murmured and out of the corner of his eye, saw Sam lean just a bit closer to Steve.

“We’re waiting for someone else,” Dr. Nomsa said, as if she hadn’t noticed the interplay among the three of them. “Wanda, did you get an ETA from her?”
“She said there was a delay in her flight. Fog or something at the airport,” Wanda replied.

Dr. Methuli nodded. “The airport is in an area where our weather screens don’t always work as well--too many microclimates.”

“I’m working on it,” Shuri said with an easy grin. “Should have a fix for that by next week.”

“Oh, just like that,” Bucky murmured, amused.

“Well, it might take me two weeks. I have to leave time to improve on my solution,” Shuri said with a scamp’s smile, but damned if Bucky didn’t believe she could do it.

“Before we begin,” Dr. Nomsa said with a fond smile at Shuri, “Bucky, you should know what to expect during our examination today. At every step, you will be told what we’re going to do. We will explain and if you don’t understand, or don’t understand the explanation, please ask. Nothing that happens here will ever happen without your informed consent.”

Bucky nodded, though his throat had gone dry. “I understand.”

“Any records we keep will be secured and locked to your biometric profile and mine,” Dr. Nomsa went on. “Both of us have to agree to release the information.”

“This is the same thing they’ve done for me,” Wanda said quietly. “Only the people who should have access to my records will have it. Nobody else. Same for you.”

There was a muted chime in the air. “Ah, she’s here,” Dr. Nomsa said.

A few minutes later, the door opened. “Hello, fellas,” Natasha Romanoff said.

Natalia. The oldest and best of the girls he’d trained. The sole survivor. The memories rushed back, inescapable. “You were one of my students. And I shot you,” Bucky blurted, ashamed. “Twice.” He felt both Sam and Steve start behind him; they clearly hadn’t known he’d been her teacher once. That was going to be a fun discussion.

“I survived, Yasha,” she said lightly. Yasha---what she had called him then, before Hydra decided he didn’t deserve a name of his own. “These things happen. You’re looking better.”

She accepted hugs from Steve, Wanda, and Sam, then sat down next to them, facing the others. “I found the book, thanks to Sharon Carter and one of her contacts,” Natasha explained, pulling it out of her satchel.

The mention of Sharon’s name caused Steve to flinch slightly next to him. “Is it…do you think it can help undo the trigger words?”

“I don’t know,” Natasha admitted. “I haven’t really had a chance to look at it in depth, but I skimmed through it a bit on my way here; it’s in Russian, and I can work up a translation if you’d like.”

“That would be welcome,” Dr. Nomsa said. “We have translators”—and she pointed to the small button that rested behind her ear--- “but it’s imperative that nothing get lost in translation. And Russian simply isn’t a language we have to use much.”

“Then we can improve our translators,” Shuri put in. Bucky wouldn’t have put it past her--- at all---to be trying to lighten the mood by distracting him. If so, it was working; she reminded him so much of Becca that he couldn’t help but be charmed.
“Now that we’re all here,” Dr. Nomsa said, “I need to ask. Bucky, are you all right with having Ms. Romanoff present?”

“Actually,” Natasha said, “I’m going to go find a hotel and get some sleep. It’s been a long few days and I don’t think I’m thawed out yet from Siberia. And I…don’t really need to be here.”

Bucky looked at her, saw the exhaustion hidden under the spy’s craft, and considered what she must have risked to bring that single red book here when she could have walked away, and stayed safe. “Natalia,” he said quietly. “It’s fine. Stay, please.”

He supposed nobody surprised the Black Widow, but it looked like he’d managed it. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know,” Bucky acknowledged. “Still, stay. Please.”

Natalia---Natasha now, he reminded himself---had been a quiet, grave child who hadn’t owned a single atom of sentimentality (or, he reflected now, she’d learned too early to bury it deep.) She had been, of all the girls he’d trained, the most determined to be useful and brave. There was something of that quality still as she said, “We…came from different arenas of the same training program. I was able to break my conditioning, my brainwashing, as an adult. If there’s anything I can do---”

“Thank you,” Dr. Nomsa said warmly. “That will be very helpful.”

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The treatment plan, when all was said and done, boiled down to this: while the trigger words were read, Wanda would enter his mind and prevent the trigger words from affecting his mind while Shuri, using her technology, would destroy the linkages between the two. “It’s not without some risks,” Shuri said, looking solemn for once. “You might lose a memory entirely, depending on how deep the conditioning went. Or I might not be able to fully destroy all of the trigger words. In which case---”

“I’m no worse off than I am now,” Bucky supplied, though the very thought of this procedure failing left him cold and aching. He needed to know he couldn’t be forced to hurt anyone ever again.

“There will also be side effects,” Dr. Nomsa told him. “Seizures, most likely, migraine headaches, possible periods of unconsciousness. You will require continual medical monitoring, though that can be done on an outpatient basis, if Mr. Wilson---”

“Sam,” he corrected gently. “Mr. Wilson is my brother. Or my dad.”

“If Sam,” Dr. Nomsa went on, “will consent to that. You were trained as a pararescue before, correct?”

Sam nodded. “Yes, I was. And of course, I’ll do whatever I can.”

He had been sitting just to Bucky’s right the whole time, observing but never commenting. And it struck Bucky just what a good man Sam Wilson was---beyond good, if he was willing to help a man who’d tried to kill him a few times. “Thanks, Sam,” Bucky said quietly.

“As for my presence,” Dr. Methuli said, “it’s entirely possible that these procedures will stir up some traumatic memories you’d forgotten. Processing those will…not be easy.”

Bucky was aware of Steve, sitting so still next to him that he might have been carved from marble. Only his clenched fists betrayed some tide of emotion he couldn’t entirely hide. How could he burden Steve with the details of his crimes, the things he’d done? Steve might insist it wasn’t his
fault, but it had still been his hands, and just the things Bucky had remembered on his own were horrific enough. “Yeah, Doc. I think I’d like some help with that,” he said.

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Dr. Nomsa, to precisely nobody’s surprise, caught up with Steve just as they were getting ready to leave the clinic. “If I might have a word, Captain.”

Steve folded his arms. “I’ll come to my next appointment.”

“Of course you will. Because we can have it now, while you’re here.” Steve had a good six inches on her, and probably a hundred pounds or more and really couldn’t help but loom, but she held her ground.

“Why do you need to see me?” Steve asked, and Bucky fought to keep from rolling his eyes. This, at least, was entirely too familiar; Steve, ill, dodging the doctors he didn’t think could help him. Except that when they were kids, Steve hadn’t been entirely wrong, but now….

“Steve. Let the doctor take a look at ya,” Bucky said, the old edges of Brooklyn curling his words.

“Ain’t nothing wrong,” Steve muttered, a call-and-response from almost a century before.

“You ain’t never been a liar,” Bucky retorted with a glower. “Don’t start now.”

Steve breathed out, looked like he wanted to say something, but changed his mind, and that concerned Bucky far more. When had Steve Rogers ever backed down from him? “Fine,” he said shortly, and when he turned to follow the doctor into one of the exam rooms, he noticed that Steve’s shirts—always too small on him—were hanging more loosely on his frame.

“I hope she does a thorough exam,” Bucky said when the door closed. “It’ll be the devil’s own work to get him back in here after this.”

“I think he’s been turning off his kimoyo beads,” Sam replied. “Otherwise, she wouldn’t have necessarily had to examine him in person.”

“You know, it’s kind of amazing that they can be turned off,” Bucky observed.

Sam nodded. “Yeah. They’re big on consent and privacy here.” He ran a hand through his hair; a nervous gesture. “Are you sure you’re okay with all of this? With me monitoring your medical care when you’re at home?”

“Well,” Bucky said. “I know what you did before, during your war. And I know you got skills. And I know for sure you ain’t Hydra. Yeah, I guess you could say I’m fine with it.”

Sam smiled. “Okay, then. So…you and Nat?”

Bucky shook his head. “Not like that. I was only her teacher, her trainer, but we were both other people then. She was a child, and I thought I was the son of a Russian farmer.”

“So she defected and you…?” Sam asked, trailing off delicately.

That was a series of memories he wasn’t eager to explore. “I helped her escape.”

***
When they returned to their apartment, Steve was strangely silent. He’d been angry when he’d left the clinic, but it was the white hot implosion of the older Steve, not the loud fury of the younger one, and Bucky hadn’t really known what to say. Dr. Nomsa, of course, did not discuss the details of their meeting, except to encourage Steve to speak to his friends.

Given Steve’s current mood, that was about as likely as pigs flying in Wakanda, so Bucky occupied himself helping Sam with lunch—it was his turn today—and hoping that Steve would unbend enough to say something. Steve, meanwhile, took his turn setting the table and Bucky took the chance to observe him when he wasn’t paying attention.

For one, he’d clearly lost some weight, and given the way Bucky suspected their serums worked, that took some doing. It spoke of months of food not eaten in enough quantities or not eaten at all. For another, there was a tightness around Steve’s eyes that used to herald the arrival of a migraine—but did he even get those anymore? (God, Buck, don’t make a sound. It hurts too much. I’m sorry, Stevie. I’m sorry.)

He glanced outside to their small courtyard. “Steve, I’m gonna have lunch outside. Want to join me?”

Steve looked up from the table, wary. “I don’t suppose I could tell you I’m not hungry?”

Bucky shrugged. “You could. But you’re an awful liar.” He poured soup into the bowls and handed one to Steve. “You’re gonna have to help me with the door, pal.”

Steve nodded, apparently accepting his fate, and opened the door. “Shuri still working on your arm?”

“She says ‘improving it’ but yeah, that’s the sense I get. She’s running the thing through testing now, wanting to make sure it’s right before she has me try to wear it.” He paused. “Steve. Were kids that bright when we were young?”

“You were,” Steve said with a slight twist of his lips that might have been a smile. “Can’t tell you the number of times you got me caught up in school so I wouldn’t be held back.”

“I don’t remember that,” Bucky answered.

“That’s okay,” Steve said. “If you don’t, I’ll remember for us both.”

They sat down at a table near a shaded alcove which was on the opposite end of the courtyard from the other two apartments. “So, you want to tell me what set you off at the doctor’s office?”

“I’m fine,” Steve replied, stirring his soup absently.

The fires of a very old frustration began to kindle. “You’re not. Did you try to pull that with Dr. Nomsa too?”

“Bucky, she’s your doctor. You need the most help. Not me.”

“Pal, she’s everyone’s doctor. And she’s worried about you. And she ain’t the only one.”

Steve stopped stirring his soup. “What do you mean?”

“I asked around,” Bucky went on, relentless. “Nobody here’s seen you draw so much as a circle. What are you plannin’ to do when I’m with the doctors, hmm? Because this ain’t gonna be a trip to Coney Island—it might take weeks or months for the procedure to work.”
Steve opened his mouth, closed it. “Sam says you barely sleep,” Bucky went on, “and I know he ain’t wrong there—hell, I could have told him that, considering we share a bed. We should be going through our groceries a lot faster than we are. So you’re not eating as much as you should and you’re not sleeping…dammit, Stevie, can’t you talk to me?”

“I’m fine,” Steve said again. “I just need to—”

“Sayan’ it don’t make it so,” Bucky retorted. “You can fake it for everyone else, but don’t you try that shit with me. Sam’s noticed. Wanda’s noticed. Clint’s noticed. Laura’s noticed. We’re worried, Steve. And so is your doctor. So try again—why were you so mad when you left?”

“Because what she’s gonna do, eh?” Steve burst out. “Nobody can fix this, Buck. SHIELD tried---oh, wait, that was Hydra. Something’s wrong with me and nobody can help. I don’t belong here.”

“Well, who does?” Bucky asked, trying for lightness and failing by a mile. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re a bunch of white people in Wakanda, on the run from the tender mercies of the Sokovian Accords. We’re the definition of ‘not belonging.’ ” He reached across the table to touch one of Steve’s clenched fists. “Steve. I know what you mean. You and I, we weren’t ever supposed to make it this far. But we’re here, now. Tell me how to help you.”

“The next time you say you don’t remember much about my Bucky Barnes,” Steve replied, “I’m going to remind you of this conversation. You were always tryin’ to help, even when I didn’t want it. Maybe especially when I didn’t want it.”

“So not much has changed,” Bucky retorted. “Stevie, what did Dr. Nomsa have to say?”

Steve lowered his gaze, speaking to his soup bowl. “She says I’ve lost weight. That my injuries still aren’t healing as fast as they should and that I have all the signs of clinical depression and PTSD. She says they have some medications that might help but as they’re experimental—they don’t get many supersoldiers here---she won’t prescribe them if I’m not going to be compliant with treatment.”

“You trust her, right? To take care of me?” Bucky asked.

Steve met his eyes. “Of course. But--—”

“Then I trust her to take care of you,” Bucky went on.

“It ain’t a matter of trust,” Steve said.

“Then what is it?”

“It don’t make no sense,” Steve replied, and Bucky thought it was a measure of his exhaustion that his accent was not only Brooklyn, but poor Brooklyn mick. Steve’s mother would have recognized it in a heartbeat. “This stuff in my head, it’s the same stuff that’s been there since I woke up here. I thought I was doing better with it, but now it just won’t… stop.”

“Nightmares,” Bucky said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” Steve admitted. “And other things.” Bucky didn’t ask what those other things were, though he wanted to; from what he did recall of Steve in their youth, pressing him too much might cause him to shut down entirely. “How’m I gonna tell a stranger about this?”

“I’m gonna,” Bucky told him. “Dr. Methuli, I’m gonna talk to him. Give him a chance, anyway. It ain’t that I don’t wanna talk to you, but…the shit that’s in my head is plenty bad without sharing it with the people who see me everyday. I can’t put that on any of you.”
He didn’t know what he’d expected Steve to do. Rear back, rant, insist that he was strong enough to take on Bucky’s burdens too? Instead, he rubbed a hand over his eyes and attempted a smile. “Well, if you think that’s right—”

Bucky realized he hadn’t left off touching Steve’s clenched fist, and that the other man’s hand was clenched so tightly the knuckles were white. “I do. For me, anyway. Who you gonna talk to, Stevie?”

“The doc said she had someone in mind but he was out of the country right now,” Steve answered. His fist unclenched slightly. “She asked me to promise not to turn my kimoyo beads off.”

Bucky nodded; that was a reasonable request and one he would have made if she hadn’t. “What else?”

“The guy she wants me to speak with won’t be back until next month. She wants me to keep a journal of my…episodes. What happens, when it happens, what the triggers are, if I know them. And if I can’t write about them, to draw them.”

Bucky kept his face still with an effort. Dr. Nomsa was an absolute genius; she’d figured out a way to get Steve talking that was guaranteed to reach the parts of Steve Rogers which had nothing at all to do with Captain America. “And you’ll do it?”

Steve nodded slowly. “Yeah. I hate feeling like this. Not sure about the guy she wants me to meet, but I can give this a shot at least.”

“Good. Now, do me a favor?” Bucky asked.

Steve narrowed his eyes, a look that a Bucky Barnes of any era would have recognized. “What?”

“Eat some of your soup, huh?”

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Steve did eat some of his soup, about half of it, before the migraine Bucky knew was coming hit him hard. Certain things, it turned out, were automatic for him, and one of them was taking care of Steve Rogers; Bucky led him into their bedroom, turned the lights to night mode (otherwise, they’d turn on when someone entered the room) and pulled the covers up to the other man’s shoulders. For an instant, he felt the rough patchwork of a quilt worn thin, the nubby texture of a crocheted blanket, saw skinny shoulders lined with sweat, but the memory, if memory it was, disappeared.

Bucky wasn’t surprised to see Sam at the small table, a cup of coffee beside him. “Can you call Dr. Nomsa? Steve’s having a migraine and maybe she has some pain meds for him.”

“Why don’t you—” and Sam glanced at his wrist. “Oh. You don’t have the kimoyo beads, do you?”

“No yet,” Bucky said, fighting down the ever-present panic at the thought of being watched so completely. “Not sure I’d agree if they’d offer them, but I’m glad you’ve got them.”

There was a small chime; Sam tapped one of the beads and a holographic image of Dr. Nomsa appeared. “I just saw the readings on Steve’s kimoyo beads,” she said without preamble. “Sam, you can give him the pain medicine we have for Bucky; we’ll just alter the dosage to correct for his weight. I’m sending you his dosage now.”

Sam nodded sharply. “Got it. Thanks, doc.”
The doctor signed off and Sam went to pull out the small medic’s kit that Bucky knew he kept in the hallway closet. They had a small pharmacy on the shelf above the kit; his anti-seizure meds, Sam’s small bottle of sleeping pills, and the vial containing Bucky’s pain medicine for his own migraines. Sam drew the fluid into the syringe, then stared at it. “I meant to ask, did he have a…thing about needles, before?”

Bucky tilted his head. “Why?”

“He…I saw him in the hospital, after…” Sam trailed off but Bucky filled in the rest of the gaps. The battle on the helicarriers, yet another thing he’d done—to Steve, to countless others—for which he’d continue to pay the price. “He really didn’t seem to like needles. Or the doctors. Every time he was conscious, he fought.”

That at least had an explanation, but he wasn’t sure it was the one Sam wanted to hear. “Steve probably never had a good relationship with most doctors until Dr. Erskine. When they weren’t trying to convince his mom to let him die, they were treating him with expensive shit they couldn’t afford and which didn’t work anyway.”

Sam whistled low. “Yeah, and I bet the whole Hydra thing didn’t help.” At Bucky’s questioning look, he went on, “Current estimates are that about sixty percent of the medical staff at SHIELD were Hydra. You didn’t know?”

Bucky shrugged. “I was a gun, a weapon. You don’t tell your grenade operational plans. You just launch it where you need it to go.”

An expression crossed Sam’s face that Bucky didn’t entirely know how to interpret. It wasn’t pity or sadness or grief or anger, but Sam simply gave him a brief nod in return. “All right,” Sam said. “Let me give this to him, and I’ll be right back.”

***

“He’s sleeping it off,” Sam said as he emerged from the bedroom and quietly shut the door behind him. “Man, I am glad for the soundproofing in these apartments. The birds never stop chirping around here, and with his migraine—which he shouldn’t be having migraines…” Sam trailed off. “How are you doing? And don’t say ‘fine,’ please.”

Bucky shrugged. “Would you take an ‘I really don’t know right now’?”

Sam gave a wry half-smile. “If it’s the truth, yeah. How are you feeling about this procedure coming up?”

On the run, Bucky had lied and stole merely to survive; here, now, in this new place, he simply didn’t have the desire to be anything less than honest. “I broke my programming between Greece and Romania,” he said. “Migraines, seizures, fever, chills, nausea, you name it, I had it. I didn’t know who I was, what I was, but I knew I had to keep going. Compared to that? I expect that Dr. Nomsa’s procedure—”

“And Shuri’s—”

“And Shuri’s,” Bucky agreed, “will be a walk in the park.”

Sam grinned unexpectedly. “Shuri, that girl…did you know she was one of the first Wakandans I met? She’s something else. My sister was scary as hell at sixteen and that one? Is running a
laboratory. Inventing things I can’t pronounce. And she’s a member of the Dora Milaje, but I gather she’s too young to fight with them, so she trains with them until she is. ”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “Not only that, she has these gadgets and the first time I saw that laboratory, I couldn’t believe it.”

Sam chuckled. “Bucky Barnes, science nerd. That’s something the history books never mentioned.”

A memory: two girls, a fair, a flying car. And Steve, desperate and thin as a rail, fresh from yet another fight. “My last night before I went to war, we went to a science fair.”

Sam leaned back in his chair. “I forget sometimes how weird this must all be for you. Like, I can barely remember how life was in the 1980s, and I was in grade school then. You and Steve both, you’ve lost a century. Even if you were awake for part of that, still—there has been so much change.”

“Some, yeah,” Bucky agreed equably. “But people still fight and fuck and go to war, same as they ever did. They still get married and fall in love and have families too. Nothing much ever really changes.”

“It’s just… you missed a lot of life. You could go back to school here.” Sam said. “Learn science or whatever it is that interests you. So could Steve, for that matter. Seems like you’re both owed a life that doesn’t involve fighting.”

“Steve Rogers, of all people, is on Interpol’s watch list. There are historians today who still say he should have been court-martialed for rescuing me and the others from Kreichburg. And if you talk to some people, I’m owed either the death penalty for treason or a life sentence in solitary confinement. And maybe they’re not far wrong.”

“Well,” Sam said with a wry grin, “speaking as the guy you shot at, and the guy whose wings you damaged, and the guy whose car you totaled, I call bullshit on that one. Bucky, you’re a POW. Did you want to do any of those things?”

“No,” Bucky replied. “Of course not.”

“There may be a time when you’ll have to say that before a judge and jury. But T’Challa doesn’t seem like he wants to allow extradition, so,” and he shrugged, “why not try to have a life. Establish for yourself that you’re not what Hydra made you.”

***

“Hey,” a voice said behind him. Steve, pale and wan, but still looking better than he had ten hours before. The moonlight was bright on his bare shoulders. “Didya get the number of the truck that hit me?”

It was late; Sam had long since gone to bed, and it was just Bucky up in the middle of the night again, keeping watch. “Nah, pal. It was moving too fast.”

Steve grunted as he took a seat on the couch next to him. “Figures. I’d forgotten how awful migraines are.”

“How long you been havin’ them, Stevie?” Bucky asked.

“Off and on since DC,” Steve admitted. “Never thought of going to SHIELD since none of their pain meds worked on me anyway. What were they going to do?”
*Turn your information over to Hydra, if they hadn’t already.* Bucky thought. “I get it. You up to eating something?”

“Probably. Any of that soup left from lunch?”

“Some,” Bucky said. “Sit down, I’ll reheat it.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve began, but Bucky shook his head. “Relax, you look like hell.” And he did; Bucky had personal experience with just how bad you had to feel to make the effects of illness overcome the serum. Steve had pale shadows under his eyes, not as dark as they had been, but he still looked ill. Exhausted.

“Okay,” Steve replied. “Feel like I got run over a few times anyway.”

They ate for a while in silence. Bucky kept a covert eye on Steve (*why you starin’ at me, you mook? Got to keep my eye on my best guy, don’t I? Steve’s face had flamed then—I’m not one of your girls, Buck, go practice your flirting on them*) which seemed like something he’d been doing at least since 1925, and possibly earlier. “So,” Steve said as he tore off a chunk of Wanda’s bread, “you worried about this thing tomorrow?”

Bucky started. He’d forgotten that Steve, no matter how awful he felt, never lost track of him. “Haven’t had someone mucking around in my head since the Squid Nazis and it’s not like they asked permission. Wanda should be the hell of a lot gentler.”

“Probably,” Steve agreed. “But that’s not what I asked.”

Bucky sighed. *Damn him.* Steve always had seen too clearly. “Yeah. I know. I got these things in my head and there ain’t no way they’re coming out without a lot of work. Whatever it takes—because nobody’s safe around me with those stuck in my head.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not afraid of the procedures, Stevie. I’m afraid of being stuck being a loaded weapon. And I can’t…I won’t…hurt you or anyone else again.”

*Especially not you.*

***

The flashing light of one of the beads on Steve’s bracelet woke Bucky the next morning. That, and the simulated shutter sound of a cellphone camera. Sam, taking a picture. “Whuzzat?” Bucky asked around a yawn.

“Sorry, man, you were just too cute,” Sam replied, infernally and unrepentantly perky at what must be an early hour.

“Sam. I am an internationally known assassin. I am a ghost. I am not cute,” Bucky said with what he hoped was a fierce scowl. The effect was ruined by yet another yawn.

“Nah,” Sam said lightly. “I am an expert on cute, and that, my friend, is cute.”

Sam turned his phone around to show Bucky the picture he’d taken. Part of him—the part that never ceased warning about operational readiness and mission security—cringed to be so easily identified. But the other part, the part that was trying to reclaim the best of what he’d been, had to agree. Steve was sprawled on top of him with his head on Bucky’s right shoulder, drooling peacefully, and seemingly unaware that they had an audience.

“Yeah, okay,” Bucky allowed, “that’s pretty cute. And if you tell anybody I said so—–”
“You vill break every bone in my body,” Sam said in a horrible Russian accent.

“Maybe,” Bucky said, with a smile that showed all his teeth. “And I pick which bone.”

“Enough, you two,” Steve muttered against his shoulder. “Bucky’s cute, it’s a fact, let’s all acknowledge that and move along.”

“Shut up, Rogers. I am not cute,” Bucky protested.

How Steve managed to sit up and not hit any vital parts, Bucky never understood, but he did with his own particular grace. “Buck. You’re the cute one. You were always the cute one. Don’t try to deny it.”

Bucky sat up. “And what were you?”

“The feisty asshole,” Steve answered with the first real grin he’d seen recently. “What else?” The bead on his bracelet continued to flash. “Did you get a message too, Sam?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied. “It’s from Wanda. She wants to have us over for breakfast later on, sort of a welcome to Wakanda thing for Natasha.”

“Oh, she’s living there now?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. She had the only apartment with an extra bedroom now that Scott’s gone back to the US,” Sam replied. “And Nat and Wanda got along pretty well at the compound.”

“They did,” Steve agreed. “What time are we setting up in the courtyard?”

“About eleven or so. What time is your procedure, Bucky?” Sam asked.

“Four pm or thereabouts,” Bucky answered. “They need us to bring anything to this shindig?”

“Steve, why don’t you answer the man, since you got the same message?” Sam said, amused.

The tips of Steve’s ears went pink. “Oh, right.” He tapped one of the beads and a small hologram of Wanda appeared, reiterating what Sam had said and asking for help setting up and cleaning. She also said that Laura would be walking to the market in half an hour.

“I think that’s my cue,” Sam said. “I need to get some coffee before this all starts.” He walked into the kitchen. “We’re out of coffee. That settles it, I’m going with Laura. We can’t live without coffee.”

“The horrors,” Steve agreed with a nod.

“Eh, what do you know, it doesn’t affect you,” Sam grumbled, but there was no heat in it. “What about you, Bucky? Caffeine affect you?”

“Some,” Bucky said. “Maria—my landlady in Bucharest—made coffee so thick we could have used it for roofing tar.” He grinned at the memory. “I was the only one who could drink it.”

“Like your mama’s coffee,” Steve said.

Some memories came back in fragments of sound. This one was thick, acidic—a blue ceramic coffee pot on a stove, the coffee left there to heat and then burn because Bucky’s mama had other children than just him, and no time to really watch the coffee pot. “You took a sip of it once. Said you felt your heart try to leap out of your chest,” he said slowly, hearing his mama’s laugh again.
“To be fair,” Steve said dryly, “there were a lot of times my heart felt like it was trying to do that. But only your mama’s coffee made it do the lindy hop.”

Bucky squinted against a sudden memory—somebody (him?) had been trying to teach a bony, flustered, and frustrated Steve how to dance (Nah, pal, you lead with this foot! What does it matter? Whaddaya mean by that? Ain’t nobody gonna line up for me, y’know. Not with that attitude—you been suckin’ on vinegar or somethin’?) Not the lindy hop—that dance was old and out of fashion by the time they were old enough to try dancing—but one of the dances at the dance halls. “Did you ever learn to dance?” he asked Steve.

Steve shook his head, but the smile didn’t come close to reaching his eyes. “Nah. Never quite got the chance.”

Bucky folded his arms. “Well, we’ll have to fix that.”

***

Breakfast, in spite of his spiraling nerves, turned out to be pretty good. Wanda was turning out to be one hell of a cook—between her and Laura and Clint, there was enough food to feed a small army. “I like that we do this, get together,” Wanda said, leaning back in her chair and surveying the food like a general might. “It’s fun.”

“You do this often?” Natasha asked, picking delicately at her eggs.

“About once a week, sometimes more,” Laura answered. “Gives us all a chance to touch base and see how we’re all doing. Everybody takes turns cooking and the ones who don’t cook, do cleanup.”

Natasha nodded, balancing Nathaniel on one knee. “Next time, let me know what you need. Maybe I can help make something.”

Laura laughed. “Honestly, just feeding him so we can eat is help enough, but yeah, we’ll come get you.”

“How are you liking Wakanda so far?” Bucky asked Natasha.

She quirked one eyebrow at him. “For all of the twelve hours or so I’ve been here? It’s… nice. Weirdly so.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I think we all kept expecting the other shoe to drop. So far, it hasn’t.”

“And you trust that?” Natasha asked. “You trust this?”

“I do,” Steve answered. “They’ve given us no reason not to. We’ve been treated well and welcomed with…I won’t say ‘open arms’ but we’re not prisoners.”

“Which is more than any of us can expect from any other government right now,” Natasha agreed.

From the other end of the table, Sam spoke up. “Natasha, do you have any word on Rhodey?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t get word to you sooner. Rhodey is…walking, with the help of a Stark Industries exo-skeleton. He won’t fly again in the suit, but he’s alive and in no pain.”

“I saw his fall,” Sam replied. “That’s he’s even doing that well is a goddamned miracle.”

“It absolutely is,” she agreed. “He’s also had… a fairly significant falling out with Tony Stark over the Accords.”
“Oh?” Sam inquired archly. “I thought it was the UN and that made it all right and good?”

“The UN isn’t the problem,” Natasha said. “Or at least, not all of the problem. The problem is the Secretary of State. Rhodes is…concerned that the man has some other agenda.”

“Yeah, we recently got some proof of that,” Steve put in. “The version you signed of the Accords? Wasn’t the same one that the UN ratified.”

Natasha’s jaw dropped minutely, but she recovered quickly. “How… what…?”

Steve caught her up to speed fairly quickly. “…and now T’Challa is planning to pull Wakanda out of the Accords, and he seems confident that the other nations will follow.”

“But in the meantime,” Sam said, “we’re refugees. And with Steve Rogers of all people on Interpol’s watch list? I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

Steve shifted a bit in his seat. “You all keep saying that. It’s just as ridiculous for the rest of you to be on Interpol’s radar, you know.”

“Um, no, it kind of isn’t,” Clint said dryly. “Assassin, retired.”

“Spy, and former assassin,” Natasha put in.

Wanda folded her arms. “Former Sokovian revolutionary and Hydra test subject.”

“I was a translator with level 6 clearance at SHIELD,” Laura said. “I’m sure that put me on someone’s list somewhere.”

Bucky shrugged. “Former Fist of Hydra. Face it, Stevie, you’re the only one without an actual criminal record.”

Steve grinned, and oh, Bucky knew that grin. “In this century, you mean.”

Several pairs of eyes stared at him. “What?” Steve asked. “This can’t have been new information.”

“History books never mentioned it,” Sam replied. “Man, what were you in for? Misdemeanor jaywalking?”

“Criminal trespass, resisting arrest, arson, and breaking and entering,” Steve said without a shade of remorse. “Turns out the cops took protesting peacefully—”

“—with sharp sticks,” Bucky said severely.

“They were for self-defense,” Steve retorted with no heat.

“Still,” Bucky said, feeling as if they’d had this discussion before.

“I did a lot of protesting,” Steve went on. “The cops had their sticks, we had ours. The Depression era…we had a lot to protest.”

“And the breaking and entering?” Wanda asked, clearly amused.

“The local newspaper was going to print the names of people who’d been arrested during police raids of…I guess you’d call them ‘gay bars’ now.” He shrugged. “One of them was our pharmacist and if that had gotten out, he’d have been lucky if all he lost was his license. So I got together some people—–”
“Fellow rabble-rousers,” Bucky put in.

“---and we broke into the newspaper offices and burned the list. I would have done it anyways, even if I hadn’t known somebody on the list, but… Mr. Miller was one of the few who’d fill my prescriptions even when he knew Buck and I couldn’t pay. He was a good man.”

“And you got caught?” Sam asked.

Bucky knew this story. Bucky knew this story. “No, he didn’t. There was an arson fire at the local precinct, and the cops figured Steve and his friends had done that one too, so he got arrested. They let him go when there was nothing to tie him to it. Unwillingly, if my memory isn’t shot—they thought he might be able to tell them who’d set the fire.”

“Officer, I can’t believe any of my associates had such hate in their heart,” Steve said solemnly, eyes wide and blue and oh so innocent. “We were all home playing poker that night.”

Sam snorted and rolled his eyes. “And they bought that?”

“I doubt it,” Bucky said, “but without evidence…”

“You got lucky,” Laura observed.


“The precinct fire was on December 6, 1941,” Bucky supplied. “After that… we all had other things on our mind.”

***

After breakfast, Natasha stayed behind to help clean up. “You’re doing a lot better than I would have thought,” she said as they stacked the dirty dishes together.

Bucky found a smile from somewhere. “It’s a process, as Sam says. Got a long ways to go.”

He didn’t know Natasha—but he did remember Natalia and one of her few tells seemed to have survived all the intervening years. She bit her lower lip a little when she had a lot on her mind. “Out with it,” he urged gently. “Say what you want.”

“We don’t know each other,” Natasha said.

“No, but we did. Say what you will.”

“What name do you use now?” she asked. It wasn’t what she’d wanted to ask, Bucky thought.

“Bucky’s fine,” he told her. “But I don’t mind being called Yasha either.” And it was the truth. Yasha had been the first identity he’d been compelled to assume, probably through the Red Room’s manipulation of his amnesia and head trauma after his fall from the train, but it hadn’t been entirely bad. And as he had learned only too well in subsequent decades, as the Red Room’s leadership and mission changed, as he was traded first to the Russian branch of Hydra and then sold (apparently) to the branch led by Alexander Pierce, there were far worse things than being assigned the identity of a farmer’s son and war hero.

“You should,” she said firmly, pulling him from his woolgathering. “He wasn’t you.”

“I thought I was him, then,” Bucky stated. “You know how…persuasive they were. And it wasn’t
like I remembered anything from… before. You were training to dance for the Bolshoi and I was a farmer’s son.”

“I still dance,” she said with a small smile.

“I don’t farm,” he replied equably.

“How much do you remember?” Natasha asked.

“Sometimes more than I want, sometimes not nearly enough. Why?”

“I’m… missing a lot of memories of my family,” she answered. “SHIELD’s doctors… they said I was lucky to remember as much as I did, and to find a way to make peace with what was missing.”

“Easy for them to say,” Bucky grumbled. “When it wasn’t their life. Did you know that the majority of SHIELD’s medical staff was Hydra? Sam said it was something like sixty percent of them.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “I wish I could say I was totally surprised, but looking back, there were signs. Times when Clint was rushed back into service, or I was, even when Coulson said we needed more time before he’d want us back in the field and there was no real operational need to rush us. There were tests whose results we never saw, but we never questioned, though we probably should have. Then there was Clint’s shrink. The main reason I busted him out of SHIELD custody was because Clint wasn’t healing, mentally; his shrink kept telling him in a thousand subtle ways that he really could have resisted Loki more, could have done more to fight. Never mind that both Nick Fury and Maria Hill were still alive.”

Bucky shied away from the whole topic of Clint’s brainwashing. They had a lot in common, he and Clint, but just hours before a procedure to start reversing his own brainwashing, it was the last thing he wanted to talk about. “I don’t follow. They were alive— shouldn’t they have been?”

“Clint’s an expert marksman,” Natasha explained. “Good enough that SHIELD evaluated him for the mutant gene. He doesn’t miss. Ever. Yet he shot Nick Fury right in the chest, right where he was wearing a bulletproof vest, and completely missed Maria Hill. My take on it, for what it’s worth? He never stopped fighting Loki. Not once.” She raised one eyebrow, which seemed to be a sort of punctuation for her analogy, and strung a few dirty coffee mugs on her fingers as she retreated to the kitchen. “Nice talking to you… Bucky.”

Bucky sat down on one of the remaining chairs and considered how deftly Natasha had made her point. He was still sitting there when Steve came out a few minutes later to help collapse the tables. “Buck? You okay?” he asked.

“Just spoke with Natasha,” Bucky began.

Steve smiled. “Say no more. I’ve had a few of those… conversations… with her. She gets right to the point.”

“What did she ask you?”

Steve flushed slightly and his hand went to the back of his neck. “Um, she kissed me as a diversion when we were on the run from Rumlow and his goons. She asked if that was my first kiss since 1945.”

Bucky leaned back and raised an eyebrow. “And was it?”

Steve turned pinker even as his eyes narrowed. Bucky recognized that expression well enough, or
thought he did: Steve, embarrassed and trying to decide how angry he should be about being embarrassed. Then the moment passed and Steve grinned. “Maybe. Though that’s not what I told her.” He shrugged. “I wanted her off my back and I didn’t want to talk about it.”

Bucky snorted. That much, at least, hadn’t changed. Steve appeared open and unguarded, but when he didn’t want to talk, he wouldn’t, and no force on this earth or any other would move him. “She drew a parallel between what happened to Clint with Loki and what happened to me.”

Steve tilted his head slightly. “You knew about Clint and Loki?”

“Rumlow…talked about it a lot with Rollins. Acting under the assumption that I couldn’t hear or understand what they were saying, of course.”

Steve grunted. “They always were a pair of arrogant SOBs.” There was a tightness to his expression—anger, disappointment?—that Bucky thought he understood. Rumlow and Rollins had fought with Steve (they’d bragged about that too) and had turned on him and every other SHIELD agent. Their betrayal must have been bitter.

His next words took Bucky by surprise. “You know, she’s not wrong. You and Clint have a lot in common.”

“How do you figure?” Bucky asked. “I nearly killed you in DC.”

“There were at least a few other times in DC that you could have killed me, but didn’t. Even when you didn’t know who I was, you weren’t really as efficient about it as your reputation suggests.”

“I still put you in the hospital—” Bucky objected.

“I stopped fighting you,” Steve admitted, quietly but no less fierce. “Because I wasn’t going to be the one to put a bullet in your brain.”

It was the most they’d talked about DC since coming to Wakanda and Bucky was appalled. “Steve, you…can’t. You just can’t…stop. Not like that.” It had been a dangerously foolhardy thing to do—he had nearly killed Steve. If his programming had broken just a few seconds later, Steve might well have been dead before he hit the water.

*Steve had given up. And Steve didn’t give up. Ever.*

“Sure I can,” Steve said, too easily. “It was you, after all.”

***

After breakfast was cleaned up, Sam announced he wanted to get a set of Bucky’s vitals as a baseline before the procedure. “Just to be on the safe side, and I figure you’d be calmer here than at Dr. Nomsa’s clinic.”

Bucky nodded, one part of his mind still preoccupied with Steve’s revelations. He barely even felt the constriction of the blood pressure cuff on his right arm, but Sam releasing the cuff and then sitting down next to him was enough to draw him out of his thoughts. “Hey, man, your blood pressure is higher than it was last time I did this, when you had a migraine a few weeks back. Anything you want to talk about, as a friend?”

Bucky checked to make sure the door was shut. Steve was getting a shower; he could hear the water running. “Steve and I talked about Insight Day.”
Sam’s eyebrows bobbed up. “Oh. That… it didn’t go well?”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair. “It did but…Sam, he gave up on the helicarriers. I nearly killed him because he refused to fight back. What the hell?”

Sam’s hands played for a bit with the blood pressure cuff. “Look, Bucky?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re his weak spot. From what I gather, you always have been. Is this really such a shock?”

Before Bucky could answer that no, it was really very much not a shock but the damned punk shouldn’t risk his life for him, Sam went on, “And you broke through I don’t know how much brainwashing in time to save his life. You two… do incredible things for each other, time and again.” Incredibly, Sam dropped a teasing wink. “So, that whole ‘best friends since childhood’ thing? Am I right in thinking there might be more to it?”

He felt heat on the back of his neck. Surely, that hadn’t happened in a near-century. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Uh-huh,” Sam said with a smile. “Look, I’m gonna be serious here for a moment. Remember that conversation we had earlier, where I talked to you about how you need to make sure that you’re prioritizing your own treatment? I want you to think about whether you want Steve there this afternoon.”

“He’ll want to be there,” Bucky said.

“Yeah, of course he will, but that’s not what I’m getting at,” Sam replied. “If you want him there, fine. But consider what he’s going to see, what you’ll have to endure to get those things out of your head. And consider,” he folded his hands together tightly, “what it might do to him, all over again. And to you, except now he’ll see it. I’m not telling you what to do, but I’m worried for you both.”

“The only thing that could make me go through those memories again,” Bucky said, “is the idea that once the trigger words are gone, I’ll have control over who and what I am. I don’t think I want Steve to see it.”

“Steve knows a lot of it already, because he’s read it in the files Natasha found in Kiev, and from material he was able to scavenge from old Hydra servers when we were looking for you---man, did you know he was that good with computers? I didn’t. But reading is a lot different from seeing the results up close and personal and if Steve has half the feelings for you I think he does, the last thing he’ll need to see is his loved one in pain.” Sam leaned forward, earnest. “But I also totally understand if you do want him there. The call is yours, man.”

It wasn’t just words with Sam, Bucky realized; he really did mean that the ultimate decision would be his. He had control. He, a man who had spent much of the last century being an “it” or an “asset,” treated with no more (and in many cases, much less) consideration than if he’d been a grenade or a gun. Bucky breathed out, and heard the water shut off. “I’ll talk to Steve.”

***

Bucky knocked on the bedroom door. “Steve, you okay for me to come in?” Asking was a tad ridiculous on its face; it was his bedroom too, and they’d always lived in each other’s pockets, but Steve tended to startle badly and Bucky wanted to give him some warning.

“Jesus, Buck, of course,” he heard from the other side of the door and Bucky smiled a little. If Steve
He opened the door a little and was astonished to find Steve on the bed, drawing on a spiral notebook. Bucky couldn’t see what Steve was drawing, but he was drawing. “Everything okay?” Steve asked.

Steve’s hair was damp and curling at his neck; Bucky’s fingers twitched with the unexpected urge to smooth the curls. Had he done that once? He thought so—the longing was at least familiar, but he pushed it aside for now. Instead, Bucky sat down on one corner of the bed, not wanting to jostle Steve as he drew. “I need to talk to you about this afternoon,” he began. “Steve, I want you to stay here when I go to my appointment.”

Steve never stopped drawing; he was shading something in, Bucky recognized. “Okay,” he said simply.

There was no bite to the words, no underlying glare or snarl. “Wait. You don’t mind?” Bucky asked.

Steve placed his pencil on the pad and looked at him steadily. “Buck. I have flashbacks. I don’t sleep well and you know I get panic attacks. I want to be there, but I…” he bit his lip “the things you went through…I want to be there for you, the way I wasn’t when it happened—”

“Hey, no,” Bucky started, but Steve went on.

“But that’s not fair to you. And you’d be worried how I was doing, watching you, and maybe you’d try to conceal how badly you felt. I want you well, Buck. And that means you have to focus on getting better. And besides,” he offered up a small, if wan, smile, “you know I’ll be here when you get back.”

A memory broke through, the same memory that had started the unraveling of his conditioning on the edge of an exploding helicarrier two years before. “To the end of the line, pal.”

***

To Bucky’s surprise, his appointment wasn’t at Dr. Nomsa’s clinic, or in the labs he’d visited with Shuri. It was in the most unscientific place he could think of: what appeared to be the palace greenhouse. “We thought laboratories might have… unfortunate connotations for you,” Dr. Nomsa told him. “Shuri suggested this place.”

The air was thick and heavy with the smell of damp earth and growing things. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Wanda asked, rising from where she’d been smelling a small rosebush.

“It really is,” Bucky said, the nerves in his stomach settling down a bit more. “So, how do we start this?”

Dr. Nomsa smiled as if she hadn’t expected any other response. “We’ve set up an overstuffed chair for you. It’s from my office and I speak from experience that it’s very comfortable.”

“I have a machine that will scan your brain as Wanda reads the trigger words,” Shuri put in, and there was nothing at all of the giggling sixteen year old she still was. This was a young woman who took her job very seriously. “It will not have to be on your head, mind.”

“That’s… a relief. Thanks, kid,” Bucky said.

Shuri inclined her head as he’d seen T’Challa do a time or two; a restrained Wakandan gesture, acknowledging his thanks but dismissing it as entirely unnecessary at the same time. “There is also
a…forcefield, which will automatically activate should you become violent or aggressive. We do not anticipate needing it, but---"

“Kid, I attacked my best friend because of those trigger words. I’d want you safe before I’d let any of you muck around in my brain. I’m glad you have it set up.”

Shuri smiled then. “Good. Dr. Nomsa will monitor your vital signs, and when we locate where in your brain that particular trigger word is located, we should be able to isolate it and stop it from activating. Theoretically.” She folded her arms. “The procedure is not without risk. Are you sure you want to try this?”

“What’s the alternative?” Bucky asked. “Shuri, I won’t be used as a weapon by anyone ever again. If everyone else agrees this is my best shot at undoing at least some of what Hydra did to me, then hell yeah, I’m in.”

“Since we are agreed then,” Dr. Nomsa said, “shall we begin?”

Bucky sat down in the oversized chair in the room of growing things and tried to relax. “Longing,” Wanda said in flawless Russian—better than Zemo’s Russian had been. An ache, a pull in his mind began to grow and knot.

Behind him, Shuri muttered something. “Say it again,” she urged, “I can’t quite---”

“Longing,” Wanda said again, and Bucky felt his heart pick up speed, adrenaline flooding his system, breath coming harsh.

“Got it,” Shuri said fiercely. “Now, Wanda!”

“You think I don’t know?” Sarah Rogers asked late on a spring night in 1935. “I see how you look at Steve.”

“He’s my best friend, Mrs. Rogers,” Bucky insisted.

Sarah coughed. She’d been doing that a lot lately. “Steve is sick again and here you are. You think any of his other friends come by when he’s like this? No. Just you. You think I don’t see?”

Bucky’s eyes kept darting to the door. An early spring had set off Steve’s allergies—and his asthma—something fierce, and this latest bout looked fit to keep him in bed for the next few days. “His da looked at me like that once,” Sarah said, coughing again. “I know what longing looks like, boy.”

“What do you want me to say?” Bucky asked. He’d put in a long day at the docks, and come straight to Steve’s apartment to take care of him—as much as Steve would let him, anyway—because Sarah was supposed to be at work. Yet here she was, and while Bucky didn’t remember Steve’s da at all, he could see where Steve got both his temper and his fierceness.

“I know what they say about my son in the streets,” Sarah said, as she crumpled a handkerchief in her hands. There was a rusty stain on it that Bucky tried not to notice, because if he noticed, he couldn’t tell Steve and he couldn’t tell Steve. “That he’s an invert. A fairy, queer.”

“He’s not---” Bucky began, but Steve might be. It wasn’t like they ever talked about such things.

“And I also know,” Sarah went on as if he hadn’t spoken, “that the only thing keeping them from saying it much more loudly is you. That you defend him. And because everyone knows and likes you… they believe you when you say he just hasn’t found the right girl. But I see how you look at him, and how he looks at you. You’re a better actor than I would have thought.”
She coughed, harsh and wet, for several seconds. “You’ll take care of him?”

Sarah Rogers had a curious reputation in their tenement—it wasn’t so much that she couldn’t lie, but that she couldn’t be lied to. Bucky had never experienced it before tonight. “I promise, Mrs. Rogers, I will.”

“Then that’s good then. Go on now and check in on him while I make us some tea.”

Bucky opened his eyes against a swelling tide of nausea and the aura of an oncoming migraine. Someone--- Dr. Nomsa, maybe?--- handed him a bin full of plant clippings and he threw up into the bin. The same hand pulled his hair back from his face and handed him a glass of water. “That’s the first one gone,” Shuri murmured from his other side. “That one…it’s done. You’re free of it.”

Wanda helped him back to his chair. “Rest here for a bit; Dr. Nomsa is going to give you some medication to help with the pain.”

Bucky leaned back in his chair and ignored the vertigo from shifting positions. “They all gonna be that tough?”

He heard the rustle of skirts--- Wanda, coming closer. “Bucky,” she said in her soft Sokovian accent, “that was one of the easy ones. We must expect the rest of them to be far more intertwined with your memories, and far more difficult to remove.”

Bucky sighed. He should have known. “Of course.”

Dr. Nomsa injected the pain medication and the migraine began to ease off some. “I will let Sam know you’ll be ready to head home in a few minutes.”

He nodded, grateful that he could without being nauseated. Wanda came to sit next to him. “You will tell him, yes?” she said for Bucky’s ears alone.

*How can I burden him with all of this?* Bucky wanted to ask, but stopped. Steve wouldn’t see any of it as a burden. And if Sarah Rogers had seen in 1935 what two teenagers were trying desperately to hide…well, he couldn’t very well lie to her son. “Yeah, I will.”
Steve- Cliffs of Fall

TW: This chapter contains a non-graphic description of attempted sexual assault and murder in self-defense. If this bothers you in any way, you can skip the section beginning with “They ended up leaving early anyway” and ending with “It’s gonna be okay, man. It is.”

***

Bucky returned late that night. Steve had managed, by some miracle, a nap of an hour or so, cooked a simple dinner for himself since Sam was with Bucky (and managed to eat half of it, which he counted for a minor victory,) and was just cleaning up the dishes when Bucky and Sam returned.

“You okay to walk in or do you need help?” he heard Sam’s low voiced rumble ask. Bucky’s response was muted and indistinct, but he walked into the apartment under his own power.

“You need to eat something if you can,” Sam said, “and then go rest.”

Bucky waved him off and slumped into a chair at the table. “Not sure I can eat just yet,” he muttered. “Let me sit here, will ya?”

Sam nodded but didn’t move far from Bucky. “What happened?” Steve asked.

“One of the trigger words is gone,” Sam said, “but it set off a…booby trap, I guess you’d call it. One minute he was fine, then the next, he was seizing. Dr. Nomsa thinks it was a conditioned response, something Hydra set up so that even if he managed to dislodge one or more of the trigger words, he’d be incapacitated.”

It wasn’t like they all hadn’t had several object lessons in how brutally awful Hydra could be, but Steve closed his eyes against a welling tide of grief and anger. He pushed it aside; Bucky didn’t need his fury now. “Hey Buck, I reheated some of the stew from lunch. You want some?”

Bucky raised his head to meet Steve’s eyes. “That depends. You cook it?”

It was an old, old joke---Steve was a decent cook, but he’d never had the best ingredients to work with when they’d lived together the last time. “Nah, it’s the stuff you made yesterday.”

Bucky nodded slowly. “All right.”

Steve busied himself reheating the stew, all the while wondering why Dr. Nomsa had sent Bucky home. What if he had another seizure, or his conditioned worsened? Sam was a skilled medic, sure, but… “Steve,” Sam said urgently. “Steve.”

“What?” he asked. Only then did he realize he was bending the handle of the pot yet again. He jerked back as if he’d been struck. “Oh,” he said numbly.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Uh-huh,” and Steve knew that tone; it was Sam-his-friend-and-his-very-concerned voice. “Tell ya what. Why don’t you go sit with Bucky and I’ll finish getting dinner on?”

Steve nodded and sat down next to Bucky, and was pleased to feel the other man leaning into him. Hydra had destroyed so much of their lives, but they hadn’t been able to touch that. “Hey, Buck,” he murmured, “I’m here.”

When Bucky turned his head into Steve’s shoulder, Steve saw a small metallic bead worn on a chain
around his neck and recognized it for a smaller, more subtle version of the kimoyo beads they wore as bracelets. “He’s being monitored by Dr. Nomsa and her staff,” Sam said. “At his insistence, though they wouldn’t have just turned him loose anyway.”

“I should have realized that,” Steve said, chagrined.

“I’m all right, punk,” Bucky said, softly slurring his words.

“Sure you are,” Steve agreed.

“I’m as all right as you are,” Bucky insisted archly, and Steve had to smile because, well, fair enough.

He noticed that Sam had added the entire leftover portion of the stew to be reheated—more than Bucky would normally eat, much more than Sam would on his own, and far more than Steve had eaten at one sitting for…months, now. Steve recognized the set of Sam’s jaw and decided not to argue. Sam had a thousand ways of making a point, and only a few of them were verbal. “So what’s their plan now?” Steve asked.

“Gonna wait a few days so Shuri can recalibrate her instruments,” Bucky answered around a mouthful of bread.

“Could take longer than that,” Sam said. “Wanda’s exhausted—I think it took more out of her than she realized it would—and Natasha’s going to work with Dr. Nomsa to translate Karpov’s notebooks to see if there’s some way to remove the failsafes. Laura’s offered to help too.”

“Karpov had shitty handwriting,” Bucky said suddenly. “Said it was as good as writing in code.”

Steve hid his dismay at what information Karpov might have wanted to keep secret. The dismay was followed by disgust---Karpov couldn’t have been one for confidences, so most likely, he’d muttered those words in front of a brutalized, brainwashed man he’d assumed would never understand or be able to repeat the words. “Eat your stew, punk,” Bucky ordered. “You look like you’re about to lose your lunch.”

“Not far from the truth,” Steve admitted, stirring the thick stew aimlessly.

The feel of Bucky’s hand on his own stopped him. “Steve. Whatever else, I’m here, and Karpov isn’t. He’s dead. And I’m not.”

Steve breathed in sharply. “Right.” He took a cautious taste of the stew, surprised when there was none of the ever-present nausea. Maybe there was something to be said about the familiarity of sharing a meal with Bucky when one or both of them wasn’t feeling well. “So where do we go from here?”

Sam looked to Bucky for confirmation, and at Bucky’s nod, said, “Well, first, Dr. Nomsa is going to want a full scan done tomorrow evening—that can be done remotely via his kimoyo bead, so he won’t have to go to the clinic unless she finds something to be concerned about. Second, he has a session with Dr. Methuli scheduled once Dr. Nomsa gives the all-clear.”

“I was serious, Stevie, about talking to him,” Bucky put in. The raised eyebrows were a challenge in their own particular language: *don’t think you’re getting off the hook, punk.*

Sam ignored the interplay, but given that Sam was not at all oblivious, Steve figured he was simply being tactful. “And then,” Sam went on, as if nothing had happened, “if Karpov’s notes can be translated or decoded, Shuri should be able to recalibrate her instruments.”
“Sounds like a lot of ifs,” Steve said.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. But I don’t think there’s another alternative if I want to be free of these bastards.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “There was… another option mentioned, Bucky.”

Bucky shot him a glare that would have set lesser men on fire. “It’s not an option for me.” The handle of his spoon rattled against the empty bowl. “They talked about cryo, Steve.”

Steve folded his hands so tightly he feared he’d leave bruises (but of course, he didn’t bruise, not for long, he left his bruises on the back streets of Brooklyn.) His choice. His choice. His choice. “And you said…?”

“What I said before. I told them I’d rather be dead than go through that again.”

“And nobody is going to force you,” Sam said just as firmly. “It was an option Dr. Nomsa felt she had to mention, but…nobody here would put you through that kind of hell.” He yawned suddenly. “Look, guys--Dr. Nomsa set it up so one of my kimoyo beads will alert me if Bucky has any kind of medical distress, but even if it doesn’t, if you’re concerned or just something plain doesn’t feel right, come get me. I’m going to try and get a few hours sleep before the doc takes over the monitoring.”

“Good night, Sam,” Steve and Bucky said, in a kind of synchrony that used to happen all the time.

“Hey, Stevie,” Bucky murmured once Sam was out of earshot. “I need to tell you something about one of the trigger words.”

Steve shot him a concerned glance. Bucky was still too pale and looked, frankly, like he was holding on to consciousness by sheer willpower. “Should you, though?”

“Well, if you don’t want to know---” Bucky began, bristling.

“That’s not what I meant,” Steve said over an irritation nearly as old as they were. Sometimes Bucky understood him so well, except when he didn’t, or was choosing not to. Nothing about that had changed in the intervening years. “Are you well enough to talk about this now? That’s what I meant. I want to hear anything you want to tell me, Buck. You got to know that.”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I do,” he said. “I just---this one is important.”

“Let’s go to bed and talk there. That way neither of us will fall asleep in these chairs.”

Bucky’s who are you fooling, pal? glare was something right out of their childhood. “Point,” Steve said as if he’d spoken. “Neither of us are winning the award for best sleepers these days. But at least we’ll be more comfortable.”

Bucky shrugged. “Fair enough. Help me up, pal?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Like you had to ask.”

***

“So what’s this about?” Steve asked sometime later. If he closed his eyes, it might have been any year before the War, the two of them huddled together in one bed, first because it was easier, then later, because they preferred it. He’d never told anyone at SHIELD (thank God, I can only imagine what Hydra would have made of that) but his sleeping issues once he’d been defrosted had far less to
do with time displacement and a lot more to do with the fact that he hadn’t slept by himself since 1935.

Bucky’s breath was hot on the back of his neck and Steve fought the urge to relax against him—it might be unwelcome, that much contact, and he wasn’t sure what Bucky remembered. “Jesus, punk, you’re stiff as a board. No wonder you can’t sleep. Would you at least face me?”

Steve turned over to find Bucky staring at him. “Now,” he said, “I’m gonna say something and I want you to listen until I’m done, all right?”

Steve nodded. “The first trigger word was ‘longing,’ ”—Bucky pronounced the Russian word with a savage snarl that would once have made wiser men run for cover. “They… Hydra tied it to a memory of a conversation I had with your mam the spring before she… passed away.”

Steve nodded. “Go on.”

“She knew she was dying, Stevie. And she asked me to take care of you. But there was more to it than that… she knew about us. And while I don’t think she was entirely thrilled about how queer we were for each other, she knew I’d look after you.” Bucky swallowed. “She said your da had looked at her with that kind of longing once.”

Steve froze. The words, the bald truth of what they’d been—his mam had known, and if not entirely approved, had understood? His mam had liked Bucky well enough, but there had always been a sort of wary mistrust about her, enough that Steve had just thought it was an inborn part of her nature. A poor Irish Catholic single mother…it wasn’t like she didn’t have enough reasons to be cautious.

“And you didn’t tell me,” he managed, turning the knowledge over and over in his head until all the sharp edges, the grief of might-have-beens were worn a little smoother.

“I don’t think so, no,” Bucky said. “But Steve—I wanted to. Hydra didn’t take that. I wanted to.”

“I know,” he said into the dark, and it was true. The longing was an old, constant companion, intertwined with the aches of his losses. “I did too.”

It was Bucky who moved first—Bucky, who had always been braver. Bucky’s hand encircled his own; he could feel the pulse hammer against his wrist. “So what now?” he asked.

Steve could no more have pulled away than he could have stopped breathing. “Depends on what you want, what you think we could be.”

Bucky’s thumb rubbed against his. “I… Pal, on a good day I maybe remember a few things more than I did the day before, and I’m lucky if those aren’t memories of the things I did….but when I remember us, then? I don’t wanna keep pretending that we don’t have something. Way I figure it, we just… take it day by day and see where this all leads us. We ain’t the same people we were then, Stevie.”

Steve hadn’t ever known which fights to fight; he’d always fought all of them, but Bucky, as always, daunted and amazed him by turns. “I feel like you’re offering me all I wanted,” he said, “but what if it doesn’t work out?”

Bucky released his hand to smooth the hair back from his eyes. His hand was warm against the side of his face as he spoke. “No matter what, we’re forever. I promised you that in 1935 and I don’t see much has ever changed or will.”

Stepping into Howard Stark’s metal coffin to be remade had been an act born more of desperation than courage; turning to press a kiss to the palm of Bucky’s hand made his heart lurch and his pulse
speed up more than it had back then. “Then let’s do this.”

Bucky pulled him closer, as easily if he’d been the Steve of 1935 or earlier. “First thing we’re gonna do is get some sleep, all right?”

Steve pulled back a little to give him a dubious look. “Okay,” Bucky relented, “we’re going to try and sleep. Better?”

The weight of something bone-weary and exhausted inside him began to settle, and Steve closed his eyes. The last thing he felt was the light ghosting brush of Bucky’s lips against his forehead.

***

“So,” Sam said the following morning, “seems your heart-rate was elevated last night, Bucky. Something you want to tell me?”

They’d come out of the bedroom hand in hand, intent on coffee, sure that they’d gotten up before Sam. Except Sam was already sitting at the table and the coffee had been made and breakfast was baking in the oven—a couple of his large quiches, by the smell. Steve fought a blush, but it was Bucky who spoke. “We just figured some things out,” Bucky said.

Sam grinned. “I’m happy for you two crazy kids. Looks like the Wakandans knew what was up by only giving us two bedrooms.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“Laura and Clint have the largest apartment because of the kids,” Steve explained. “Cendisa clearly thought—or T’Challa told her—you and I were together, because we weren’t assigned a three bedroom apartment.”

Bucky chuckled, a short huff of laughter that was startling for its rarity. “I’m beginning to think this whole country is made up of scarly perceptive people.”

“Sure does seem like it,” Sam agreed. “Which reminds me, I owe Natasha some money.”

“There was a betting pool?” Steve asked, totally unsurprised. When they’d fought as Avengers, there had been friendly bets on everything: how many arrows Clint would use, how long it would take Doom to start monologing before a battle began, and so on. Steve, who remembered a very similar tradition among the Howlies, hadn’t objected, and had taken part in some of the wagers himself.

“You bet your ass there was,” Sam said with an easy smile. “Natasha was the last entry and damned if she didn’t call it.”

“What was her entry?” Steve asked, curious.

“‘As soon as Barnes gets back from his treatment,’ ” Sam answered. “She threw that one in just before we left.”

Steve looked at Bucky. “Don’t look at me, Pal,” Bucky said. “Near as I can tell, she’s always been that good.”

Sam poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Steve. “How’s Wanda doing, have we heard?”

“Dr. Nomsa is monitoring her through her kimoyo beads. She’s just worn out, no permanent harm done, but Natasha said she’d make sure she ate once she got up. That was a problem back at the
compound, you remember.”

Steve nodded. “I sure do.” Wanda, grieving for her brother, alone for the first time in her life, would often train until she was exhausted, and forget to eat. Steve had stepped in and confronted her, which became one of their first and only arguments. Wanda hadn’t survived as long as she had by being oblivious and she’d argued, vehemently, that if Steve was training for hours and skipping meals, he could hardly tell her not to.

“Can you let me know when she’s up and all right to have company?” Bucky asked. “I want to tell her thanks. I…broke some of Karpov’s oldest trigger words by myself in Romania; she was far more gentle.”

Sam’s face went through a complicated set of reactions; Steve recognized it as I want to ask but I don’t really want to know but maybe I should anyway. “I’ll do that, sure. And when you’re…up to it,” Sam said finally, “maybe let Natasha know which words you broke, so that she won’t look for how to disable their failsafes.”

Bucky took a sip of his own coffee. “I’ll do my best. Some of them stopped working the longer I was out of cryo and away from the chair, but a few of them were triggered accidentally. Sputnik was a right bastard to deal with.”

“Sputnik? The Soviet satellite?” Steve asked in confusion.

“Mmmhmm,” Bucky said. “It was also a one-time shut down word. I was watching a space documentary on my landlady’s TV—fixing something, I don’t remember what—when the voice over mentioned that word. Next thing I knew, I woke up four days later in her spare bedroom.” He pulled a face. “It was an automatic shut-down command, only I’d been out of cryo so long that it nearly killed me instead.”

“She didn’t take you to the hospital?” Sam asked.

“Maria and Vasile were good people,” Bucky answered, “but they knew there was something…off about me. And I’d asked, begged them, if I was injured, to keep me out of the hospital. I was terrified Hydra would find me again.” He stared into the coffee mug. “Maria lost one of her sons during Ceausescu’s purges. She wasn’t about to trust a government hospital to keep my secret.”

“Do you still have their address?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, if they didn’t move on once the manhunt for me took off in earnest. Why?”

“To thank them, you jerk,” Steve said fondly. “They made sure you weren’t totally alone, and it was…something I couldn’t do.”

Bucky put the coffee mug on the table and reached out with his remaining hand. “Steve. Listen to me. My recovery—how it went, then—wasn’t about you. I didn’t hide out in Romania because of you, I hid out there because I spoke the language and people who have survived one fascist aren’t usually eager for another. And Hydra didn’t have ops in the country that I knew of. Not everything that goes sideways is your responsibility to fix, punk.”

It was something Bucky had said in a thousand ways since they were old enough to bicker back and forth ( “Yeah, like you got nothing to prove.” ) A younger Steve Rogers, the one who hadn’t lost his friends, the woman he loved, the man he loved, and an entire world—that Steve Rogers would have reared back, maybe spoiling for a fight at the suggestion that he might not be up to any task. For the first time, Steve heard the truth rattling beneath Bucky’s words and wondered what it would take to
have that kind of certainty.

“Bucky,” Sam said dryly, “I think you broke him.”

“Nah,” Bucky said, “I know that look. He’s just mulling it over.”

Steve leaned back in his chair. “Oh, go on with you both.” The words came out tinged with just the slightest trace of an Irish accent, and for a second, he saw his mam, chasing both of them out of their narrow kitchen with the hand towel she had thrown over her shoulder. They must have been very young, but Sarah had been laughing.

“Punk,” Bucky said, gentle. “What are you remembering?”

He realized his face was wet---why was his face wet? “Mam, chasing us out of the kitchen. She must have said that at least a hundred times if she said it once.” The gnawing ache was back---for her, for the loss of her, much too soon, for the first of many losses that had left him all alone. He scrubbed at his face. “I’m sorry, I miss her---”

“Ain’t nothin’ to be sorry for,” Bucky said. “I don’t remember all about her, but she was a great lady from what I recall. And she loved you.”

Of all the things—that tore it. The kindness undid him and he let out an ugly sob, burying his face in his hands. Had he cried at all since emerging from the ice? He couldn’t remember (couldn’t remember didn’t think didn’t want to think who am I why am I here oh god almost everyone is gone and there’s no going back home) “I need to---” he choked out.

“No,” Bucky said firmly. “No running. Ain’t nothing wrong with you that you need to hide, Stevie. Let it out.”

***

Time spun away from him then---it could have been an hour, a week, or a galaxy’s creation, but eventually, Steve resurfaced. He felt as wrung out as if he’d been fighting for a solid week without a break, wrung out and boneless. “Hey,” Bucky said and Steve mustered the energy to look at him. “You’re back with us.”

“Didn’t think I went anywhere,” Steve answered slowly, but he had. All the memories of all his losses had come rushing to the front, in a kaleidoscope of grief and fury and pain, and he had simply vanished into the maelstrom.

Sam’s face was wet too, he noticed distantly, as if from the wrong end of a telescope. “Did I...hurt you?” Steve asked.

Sam wiped at his face, but unlike Steve, made no attempt to hide his grief. “No, Steve, why would you even think...okay, wait, I know why you’d think that, but you didn’t.” He sighed heavily. “I miss Riley too, but I got to miss him. I was allowed to miss him, to grieve for him, and to come home from my war. You and Bucky here, you never got the chance. And it’s fucking terrible.” He held up a forestalling hand. “And don’t even start thinking that I hurt worse than you, or that Wanda did, or Clint, or Natasha. Pain isn’t a competition and there’s a lot of us on the same team here, you follow?”

Steve nodded. “I think, maybe, yeah.” He chanced a look over at Bucky, who was tapping a distracted rhythm on the table. “Bucky---”

“I’m glad you’re gonna see someone,” Bucky said roughly, the way he did when he was trying to cover up strong emotion.
“You are?” Sam asked. “Dr. Nomsa got you to agree?”

Talking about any of this to an outright stranger was the absolute last thing Steve wanted to do, but he’d promised Bucky. “Yeah. She has a colleague who returns next week.” He refused to think about that anymore. Surely this one would be like his last psychologist, the pretty one with the soothing smile who wanted to know all about his losses in graphic detail and, in retrospect, had seemed mostly preoccupied with reinforcing his sense of grief and responsibility. *Fucking Hydra.*

He rubbed the heel of his hand against the sudden burst of a pinprick headache. “Migraine?” Bucky asked.

Steve shook his head. “I don’t think so. Just a headache.”

Bucky looked as if he wanted to say something more, but didn’t. “I’m hungry and I know you haven’t eaten.”

Sam nodded sagely. “Low blood sugar is a thing, believe it or not.”

Steve shrugged. There hadn’t ever been a point to arguing with Bucky and when Bucky and Sam combined forces? Steve hadn’t been called a master strategist for nothing; he knew when to retreat. “All right. I’m not hungry, though.”

“You’ll eat,” Bucky said firmly and Steve felt the ghost of the younger man he’d once been --- oh, I will, will I? *Who made you the boss o’me?* ---rise up, then subside. They’d looked out for each other for almost a century, after all, even if his hackles did still rise because he was *just fine, thank you.*

“We’ll all be eating,” Sam said, equally firmly. “I didn’t make these quiches for decoration.”

And to his surprise, Steve was able to eat. Not as much as he probably would have, back when food had a taste, but the painful bite of the headache began to ease off. “What are your plans today, Sam?” he asked.

Sam speared a bit of quiche on his fork. “Gonna head to the market with Laura, Clint and the kids, then Dr. Nomsa wants me to meet one of her colleagues.”

“Oh?” Bucky asked.

“Her daughter is due to give birth this month and she didn’t want to leave us in the lurch while she’s gone. So she’s asked me to meet with the other doctor and get her filled in, since I’ve been handling your basic care as outpatients.”

“Nice of her,” Steve stated, and it was. He wasn’t really a fan of doctors, aside from Dr. Erskine, but he thought he’d make an exception for Dr. Nomsa.

Sam nodded. “It really is. I’m glad she’s looking out for us.” He put his fork down. “Steve, as your friend? Please don’t ignore what happened here this morning.”

“I had a crying jag,” he said tersely. “That’s it, that’s all there was.”

“No,” Sam said, very firmly, and the edge in his voice brought Steve up short. “That’s *not* all it was. You were unresponsive for almost an hour. Dr. Nomsa was monitoring your vitals and while you weren’t in any physical danger, your stress responses were way off from what your baseline normally is.” Sam met his eyes --- *falcon’s eyes, too sharp, too all-seeing* --- and went on, “I’ve already lost one friend to depression and PTSD. I will be *damned* if I’ll lose another. You need help, brother.”
After the breakfast dishes were cleaned and put away, Sam left to run his errands. “What’re you gonna do now?” Bucky finally asked as he dried off the last bowl, compensating for his missing arm by wedging the bowl firmly against his hip so it didn’t scoot off the counter.

Steve felt…wiped out and tired but mainly numb, as if the storm of emotion that had taken him over had scoured him clean and left nothing in its wake. “Thought I might work on my drawing,” he said. “Or sleep.”

One corner of Bucky’s mouth twitched. “You’ve got a smudge of charcoal on your nose.”

“So maybe a shower first?” Steve said, rubbing at his nose and almost certainly making the mess worse.

“Draw first,” Bucky replied. “Then shower, then sleep if you must. No point in showering only to get the paint in your hair again.”

Steve nodded. “Think I might go for a run later.”

“Right,” Bucky uttered, drawing the word out. “You sure you gonna know when to stop this time?”

The numbness vanished into anger that he tried to push back. “It was only the one time,” he ground out. “You gonna keep reminding me of it?”

Bucky stepped back from the counter. “That depends. You gonna remember to use a parachute? To not take on a whole prison staff when you know you have broken ribs?”

How had he forgotten just how perceptive Bucky was? “I couldn’t leave them there, Buck.”

“Did I say you should have? Come on, punk, you know me better than that. But you went out there with serious injuries and” he scrubbed at his face, the light rasp of stubble loud in the sudden stillness “what would you have done if one of those ribs had punctured a lung? It could have happened—hell, that’s why you ended up in surgery once you got back here. You were bleeding to death.”

“I had help,” Steve said, sullen. “Natasha was there.”

“Well, score one point for not being a complete moron then,” Bucky retorted. “But you could have had more help. The king offered us asylum and asked you specifically if you needed help when he found us in Siberia. What stopped you from telling him you needed help getting your friends out of the Raft?”

“It wasn’t his responsibility——” Steve began, but the sharp smack of Bucky’s hand against the counter stopped his words.

“You’d think the serum would have given you more brains, not less,” Bucky snarled, scathing, and oh, that was a line right out of one of their worst fights during the war, right after Azzano. “Christ, do you have to be such a martyr? You could have killed yourself getting them out of the Raft. You could have been captured, all because you wouldn’t take help that was offered to you.”

Steve glanced down at his hands and saw the tremors--- a sure sign that he was reaching the end of his tether, that he needed to go someplace and just hide away until he could regain some emotional footing. Bucky followed his gaze and his voice softened. “Stevie, hey. I want you to take care of yourself. Think you could maybe learn to do that? I know you got to fight, but you got to learn how to come home.” And only Bucky could do this, gather him close the way they had been all those
“Think you want to get stuck with me, Bucky? I’m a damned mess,” Steve replied around the lump in his throat, the tangle of anger, fear, need, love, breathing in the faint scent of him that was all he knew of home.

Bucky let out his dry, raspy chuckle. “You see any sane people around here? I don’t even count the Barton kids in that group, let alone us.” He stepped back a bit, gazing at him critically. “You gonna do some drawing?”

“Guess I probably should. But I think I want to sleep first.”

Bucky nodded. “All right. I’m up for a nap too, since some asshole kept stealing my covers last night. But go wash your face. No point in getting charcoal dust all over my pillow.”

It was a decades-old complaint but under it was the comfort of familiarity. I’m here. You’re here. We haven’t changed.

But oh, sometimes Steve worried he had…too much.

***

Steve woke up before Bucky, not surprisingly--- it wasn’t like either of them were known to be good sleepers. He could hear the sounds of Sam in the kitchen, maybe making lunch or dinner. He stretched a bit and pulled out the sketchbook he’d wedged between the mattresses, a pencil stuck in the wire binding. The first picture was simple---just a length of bent and twisted metal, what Bucky had been holding onto before his fall. He grimaced; lately almost all of his nightmares had been about that train. He couldn’t imagine explaining that to someone--- yeah, my best friend fell off a train and was tortured for seventy years because he was on a mission that turned out to be for nothing because Hydra came back because I didn’t do my job because I wasn’t there.

He closed the book with a snap, feeling the pressure around his chest begin to increase. Sam’s patient, calm words as he’d coached Steve through a panic attack late one night in Belgrade came back to him. Breathe...in...and out...in and out...in... Focus began to return, seeping in slowly, and he concentrated on the five things he could see around him. Bucky, curled next to him. The sketchbook in his lap. The colored pencils which had appeared out of nowhere a few days before (he suspected Wanda’s hand in that.) The feel of the woven blanket over his legs.

Steve took a tentative breath, as always more than half-surprised there wasn’t a wheeze or a rattle when he breathed, that his back didn’t ache. He flipped the sketchbook open again, to the picture he chose was the one he’d been working on yesterday morning after his shower---his mam, standing in front of the sink, washing dishes. She would sing sometimes under her breath, old folk songs in Irish. She’d talk to him too, walking him through his schoolwork, listening to his day. It was often one of the few hours they’d spend together in the course of a day, between her job as a nurse and whatever odd shifts she could pick up, and Steve was grateful, in one respect, for his serum-enhanced memory. At least he’d never forget her voice or the language she’d taught him.

Steve picked up the pencil, shading in the line of her skirt, the lighter fabric of her apron. There had been one window in their apartment, but the tenement building just behind them had often blocked the incoming light. It had so often been dim in their apartment that even the colors he could see had been muted and washed out. He wanted to draw her with brighter colors now, but which ones should he use?

Bucky’s breathing had changed; Steve looked over to see a pair of blue-grey eyes watching him.
“Oh,” he breathed, “you’re awake. Did I---?”

Bucky shook his head. “Nah. Woke up and thought I’d watch you for a bit. I think you used to get so involved in your art that I could tell you anything and you’d never hear it.” He looked at the picture. “Sarah?”

Steve nodded. “Been thinkin’ about her a lot. Wondering what she’d make of all this.” Wondering what she’d make of me.

“She’d be proud of you, punk,” Bucky said, no doubts at all in his words. “And probably pretty astonished too. I don’t think any of us expected you to be…healthy.”

Everything special about you came out of a bottle, Steve remembered, and maybe Tony had had the right of it after all, but his mam would have been nothing but overjoyed. And then she probably would have wanted to take a spoon to his backside for risking his life. “You know what I wish sometimes?” Steve confessed.

“What?”

“That they would have found a use for the serum other than making supersoldiers. Think of all the kids we knew who were sick. Think of my ma. The serum cured everything that was wrong with me---even my damaged heart valve from the scarlet fever. What could it have done if they’d used it to heal people?”

Bucky rubbed his chin. “Y’know, if that’s what you want---there’s nothing saying the Wakandans couldn’t maybe make use of what’s in your blood to help people. And there’s…my blood too. Maybe we could both do some good that has nothing to do with fighting.”

Steve tilted his head and remembered Bruce in his lab back at Avengers Tower, taking a blood sample after an injury during a skirmish had left him with some signs of poisoning. Bruce had promised, solemnly, to destroy the sample once he was done, but by then Steve hadn’t even needed to ask. Caution had been native to them both. “You’d trust the Wakandans?”

“As much as I trust anybody, yeah. They’re helping me, when they’ve got no reason to.” His mouth twisted. “Seems like they’re maybe the one group who wouldn’t try to make more super soldiers out of it. If we could make sure the serum wasn’t weaponized...”

Bucky’s own instincts for people had always been more acute, more sharply honed than Steve’s own. Still, there was a long line of people, broken or dead, who’d had the serum in their hands and tried to unlock its secrets. “You think that girl, Shuri, can handle that kind of burden? Erskine died because of that formula; it’d be one hell of a risk.”

“Erskine died because he’d managed to thwart both Schmidt and the squid Nazis by working for the SSR,” Bucky corrected. “The moment he fled, he was doomed, whether or not the serum ever worked.” He shrugged. “When I was living in Bucharest, I had some time to catch up, you know? Turns out, there have been a bunch of historians focusing on the SSR since SHIELD fell. And historians love to argue about their pet theories online.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Steve replied dryly. “Still, I don’t want to put Shuri in that kind of danger. She’s just a kid.”

“A kid, yeah,” Bucky agreed, “but also, a brilliant young woman whose brother is the king of Wakanda and the current Black Panther. She’s probably safer than most heads of state. And I don’t think the government of Wakanda needs or wants super soldiers. We both saw T’Challa fight; he
nearly took me down a time or three in Bucharest and Leipzig."

“And I saw Okoye spar the other day,” Steve put in, recalling the general’s unearthly speed and grace. “She had T’Challa on the ground in about three minutes.” He folded his hands. “I agree that they probably wouldn’t want or need the serum for military purposes. But they have had incursions here before and if it was stolen again, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I can see that,” Bucky said softly. “This ain’t the kind of genie you could ever put back in the bottle once it was out. Never has been.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “But I don’t think it’s a bad idea either. Let’s…wait and see, okay?”

Bucky nodded, and in a graceful movement, sat up and placed his chin on Steve’s shoulder to look at the sketch closer. “Her apron had some red trim, zig-zag like. You couldn’t see it, back then.”

The way Bucky said the words---soft, tentative, like he was waiting to be corrected because he wasn’t sure he correctly remembered any of it---made Steve both want to hug him and piss on the grave of every squid Nazi that ever touched him, then salt the earth on top of it. Since he couldn’t do the latter, he chose to do the former. “It was brown—I think maybe it came from feed sacks. The fabric had some flowers on it. She liked it because she was a messy cook and it hid everything,” he murmured to the top of Bucky’s head. (When did his hair get so soft?)

“Hmmm,” Bucky breathed. “Feed sacks?”

“Yeah. They were—a lot of girls and women in our neighborhood wore dresses made from them. Your ma had some chickens for the eggs, and chickens had to eat. Once the food was gone, the fabric made dresses for your sisters and that apron for my mam. I think it was a birthday gift.”

“Chickens, in Brooklyn?” Bucky chuckled. “My ma—she must have been something else.”

“She was,” Steve assured him. “Kept all you kids fed when George was between jobs. And she took care of me too, like I was her own.” If Sarah Rogers—kind, principled, and fierce—had been the tenement healer, Winifred Barnes had been the counselor, the one the girls came to when a relationship went sour, or when they found they were expecting one more mouth that they couldn’t feed, or when their man drank the week’s grocery money. “She looked out for everyone.”

“And they were friends, your mam and mine?” Bucky asked.

That was a harder question to answer. Steve had been born half deaf and sickly, and being so isolated due to his many illnesses, was never good at reading social cues as a child. Towards what turned out to be the end of Sarah’s life, Steve remembered Winifred and his mam being very close indeed but at the beginning… “My mam had lost a lot and she didn’t trust easy. But they were great friends eventually. She told me once she could count the number of people she could rely on with the fingers of one hand with a few fingers left over, and your ma was one of them.”

“Do you think I’ll remember more about her?” Bucky asked.

That was a thing nobody could know—even Shuri, in all her optimism and boundless faith in science, wouldn’t even hazard a guess. “I hope so, Buck. I hope so.”

***

Steve was working on another drawing when the flashing light of an incoming message lit up on his bracelet. Bucky had gone to visit Wanda, Sam still hadn’t returned from his market trip with Laura and Steve found himself at their kitchen table, colored pencils and charcoal spread out and the
beginnings of a real headache starting. He’d dozed a bit after Bucky left, only too aware that he hadn’t been sleeping nearly enough, but had awoken from another nightmare---this one, of the missile silo in Siberia and Bucky, bleeding and dazed on the frozen ground.

He stood to stretch, only then realizing that he’d been sitting hunched over the table, like he would have done once, back when he had a crooked spine that no amount of good posture would ever fix. The drawings, his recent ones, were spread out on the table---some no more than sketches, rough outlines, and others….well, it wouldn’t have taken an interpreter to figure out what they were about. Sketches of his mam, the tenement apartment he’d shared with Bucky after she died. The train in the Alps. The Howlies gathered around a campfire, half-frozen, exhausted and starving, but alive and smiling because of it. The shield, paint scratched and damaged. The last picture, the most recent, he’d just finished---Bucky’s face was in profile, bleeding from the nose and ears because of his internal injuries. For a bare few seconds in that frozen hell, Steve had thought Bucky dead.

“Was that…what it was like then? When you and Tony fought?” Natasha asked from behind him. There was a light pressure on his shoulder---her hand, touching him.

Steve started and flinched hard, managing to pull his instinctive reaction—a defensive blow that would certainly have hurt her badly---at the last instant. “Jesus Christ, Nat. Warn a guy, will ya? What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d stop by,” she said as if she hadn’t noticed a thing. Being that it was Natasha, Steve knew better. “I sent you a message, but your door was open. Thought you wouldn’t mind a visit.”

Steve managed not to sigh. He glanced down at his bracelet, at the flashing communications bead he’d ignored. The doors were open because there was a cross-breeze and it was hot and muggy. “Yeah, it’s…it’s fine. I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Getting deaf in your old age, Rogers?” Nat asked lightly.

“I was concentrating,” Steve retorted. He sat down at the table and hunched his shoulders, making him loom less. He never wanted Natasha to be scared of him. “How are you doing?”

“Better than you, looks like,” she said. “You look rough, though I have to say I like the beard. What’s going on?”

There were many people who would buy the standard Captain America line of “I’m fine, really.” Nat was not among them. Nor was anyone else in Wakanda, apparently. “I can’t sleep, food tastes like cardboard and doesn’t even look good most of the time. Dr. Nomsa says I have depression and PTSD.”

“Are you getting help?” Natasha asked.

He gestured to the scattered papers. “This…is part of it, yeah. Supposed to meet someone next week about handling the rest of it.”

“Mind if I sit?” she asked. Steve nodded, and she sat next to him. “When I first met you…Steve, I was your handler and you were fucked up. You were ticking all the boxes for depression and PTSD and I advised Fury---strongly---to leave you off the Avengers Initiative, at least until you’d adjusted more. You weren’t doing well at all, and SHIELD wasn’t helping. I should have done more than just argue with Fury, and for my part in all of that, I’m sorry. What you’re going through now---I think it’s a delayed reaction from all you weren’t allowed to do then.”

“I had a shrink, then,” Steve protested. Nat had never been anything but kind to him, and he
wouldn’t have her blaming herself for how messed up he was. “You remember her?”

“Yeah. I told Fury she was a mistake too.”

“Why?” Steve asked, curious. At the time, dazed and exhausted and unable to fully wrap his head around all he’d lost, he would have gone to counseling sessions with a department-store Santa. Or a Nazi, which was more or less what had actually happened.

“SHIELD Medical always had an agenda. Always. Hers was getting Captain America back on the front lines, and reporting to Hydra. I don’t think she ever knew Steve Rogers. Or tried to know him. Am I right?”

Steve shrugged. “That wasn’t unique to her. I don’t think I heard the sound of my own name until I’d been…defrosted a few months.”

Natasha rarely had any tells that weren’t artifice, but when she did, they were minor and almost imperceptible if you didn’t know what you were looking for. Steve, after many years of knowing her, did, and he saw her minute wince. “Yeah. Like I said, we could all have done better by you.”

She withdrew a letter from a pocket in her skirt. “Sharon gave me this for you.”

“She’s…well? Not being hunted by Ross?” Steve asked. God. Sharon. He could only hope he hadn’t endangered her.

There was a small mysterious smile on Natasha’s face. “I think she’s probably about as safe now as she ever has been. And she knew what she was getting into when she chose to help you. But you should read that. And you can write her back, you know, if you want.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Still playing matchmaker?”

Natasha shook her head. “No, not this time. For one, if what I hear is true, you don’t need it, and for another…well, Sharon will tell you herself.”

Steve smiled. “ ‘From what you hear’? Who won the bet?”

“I always bet on sure things, Rogers.” She rose then. “I’m gonna head back now and help Wanda with dinner. You’re welcome to join us when we’re done cooking. I bet Bucky’s probably staying.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say no, he wasn’t hungry, he didn’t feel like eating, but Natasha knew that and had invited him anyway. And very plainly wasn’t going to take that for an answer. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll be over there as soon as I read Sharon’s letter.”

She smiled. “See you soon, then.”

***

The letter was ridiculously chatty, not at all Sharon’s style, the kind of letter a woman might write to a casual friend, but it was the mention of working for a bookseller that tipped him off. The letter was written in the code Peggy had taught him, decades and another life before. He could see her, dark eyes shining, as she described the code—something she’d created as a lark at Bletchley Park—and he missed her with a deep and savage ache.

There was a small desk in the living room; Steve opened the drawer to find paper and a pencil. He remembered the cipher vividly—as he remembered almost all things since the serum—and it was easy enough to sort Sharon’s letter out once he wrote it out. And there it was, very much more like the emails she’d sent him during their brief relationship.
Dear Steve,

sorry for all the rigmarole with the code and everything, but I didn’t want this to fall into the wrong hands. I’m staying with Jacques Dernier’s granddaughter, Genevieve, outside of London now. I don’t see myself going back to the CIA or the rebuilt remnants of SHIELD (that last is a rumor, by the way, but all my sources point to something moving on that horizon. People have a way of not staying dead, you might have noticed.)

My days at the CIA are done for, and before you apologize: don’t. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I’d do it again. Genevieve runs a pub here, and—I can see your raised eyebrow—she’s followed very much in the family line of work, if you take my meaning, and I’m sure you do. But she has her contacts and I have mine and...it’s not Peggy’s work, necessarily, but it isn’t Peggy’s world anymore either. And I do like it here.

Natasha told me you and the others are safe—at least you were, when I saw her last, and I hope this letter finds you still safe, and sound. And maybe, just maybe, healing. You’ve earned that rest, carried the weight of all of us, for too long. Aunt Peggy and I talked about you— not a lot, even when the dementia began to advance she kept a lot of her secrets buried deep, but she often said how much she wished you’d gotten to live your life. So, take that chance now, will you?

I don’t know what this thing of ours was, but I think you know—we’re better as friends than we would have been as lovers. Two face-to-face dates in two years (and both of us undercover) should have been a giant clue, right? But I have to be honest with you—I’m not in a place where I can handle much beyond friendship. Half my graduating class from the Academy turned out to be Hydra. And my boss at the CIA was ready to make both you and Sergeant Barnes disappear—he had orders, you see, to make that happen. (I found that out later.) Our longest-serving POW and you, of all people, to be made to disappear in a “freak accident”? No. I don’t have many illusions, not anymore, but I can’t, I won’t, work for an organization or a government that thinks that’s anywhere near all right. I guess if Peggy could learn to go on, I should too...but if there’s one mercy, I’m glad she passed without knowing the horror of what her SHIELD had become. I’m not sure I could have explained that all to her.

But I guess I’m preaching to the choir there. All of this is to say, Steve—please be safe. Please give yourself a chance to heal. Stay...wherever you are. You can write to me at this address (though maybe not with your real name) because I do want to hear from you. (The address is a secure postal drop that Genevieve set up just before her grandfather passed away.) And I’ll let you know if I hear anything you should know about.

Sharon

Steve leaned back at the old desk chair and considered, not for the first time, that Sharon deserved a lot better than what she’d gotten— from him, from the country she served, from pretty much everyone. He folded the letter back into its envelope and tried to think what he’d say to her now. Despite their kiss in Leipzig (which had indeed been late, as Sharon had said, and wrong-footed, as she’d been too nice to say—what on earth had he been thinking?) he’d known, but had not been able to admit to himself, that as attracted as he’d been to her, their spark was only that, a spark.

He pulled the cipher and opened up a clean page in the notebook. Dear Sharon, I received your letter today. Thank you for writing—I was worried about you but had no way to contact you until Natasha came. I won’t say I’m well, but I’m trying. Natasha delivered this letter so you know where I am...

***
Steve had just finished the letter when Bucky returned from visiting Wanda. “Come on, punk,” he urged, “we have time for dinner before I have to have that scan Dr. Nomsa wants done. Sam is already over there, and so is that other doctor—Lindelwa?”

There was something wry and knowing about Bucky’s glance that made Steve smile. “What are you thinking, Buck?”

“You’ll see,” Bucky said mysteriously. “Now put your stuff up and let’s go eat.”

Steve complied—he’d never gotten into the habit of leaving his sketches out in the open even when they weren’t part of his therapy, and the pencils were fresh from a Wakandan market and finer than most things he’d used in this century. Sharon’s letter was tucked into the sketchbook, as was the letter he’d finished to her. “Let me go wash my hands,” he said, “and I’ll be ready.”

“You’ve got charcoal on your nose. Again,” Bucky said lightly.

“I wasn’t even using charcoal this time,” Steve said, bemused, but sure enough when he looked in the mirror, there was the smudge. He washed his face quickly and considered, not for the first time, that barring seventy years, a few inches, some geographical boundaries, and some muscle, much of their conversation could have been lifted straight from 1935. “What are you thinking?”

He was leaning in the entrance to the bathroom. “Sam has himself an admirer. The new doc that Dr. Nomsa is bringing in to take care of us while she’s out.”

Sam was a good man, one of the best. It had never made sense to Steve that a man who was so good, and so giving, might also be so lonely. “Oh, that’s good. Does he know?”

Bucky chuckled. “Pal, I’m not even sure she knows yet. But she couldn’t take her eyes off him, according to Laura. Lindelwa was at the market the same time Laura and Sam were and from what Laura said, they really seemed to hit it off.”

Steve dried his face and his hands. “You know, this may have to be his home. All of us. We may have to stay here for the foreseeable future. Sam finding himself a good woman won’t be the worst thing.”

Bucky spread his hands. “Who said it was? I’m all for romance.”

Steve felt his face grow hot at the other man’s appreciative gaze. Odd that he could still feel tongue-tied and knock-kneed after so many years and so many lifetimes apart. “Let’s um…get going before everyone starts wondering why we’re late.”

“Stevie, I promise you, when we’re late—they won’t be wondering. They’ll know.”

***

They were, by Steve’s internal clock, ten minutes late for dinner. Wanda merely chucked her dishtowel at him and volunteered them both for clean-up duty. Which he would have done anyway, since she and Clint and Natasha had cooked, but the teasing light in her eyes was worth all the knowing glances from everyone else. Even though they hadn’t done more than kiss, Steve felt like he must be branded, like everyone could see.

Bucky, with his unerring and uncanny ability to know exactly where Steve’s line of thought was going, murmured, ‘Don’t ya love this new century? All of these people knowin’ what we are to each other, and none of them carin’?'
Steve ducked his head and reached for the plate of bread. Even though he wasn’t exactly hungry---hadn’t been for months---there was something appealing about eating dinner like this, together with his chosen family. “What did you make tonight, Wanda?” he asked. The serum had enhanced his sense of smell, but sometimes that wasn’t an advantage---he could smell all the individual ingredients in the recipe but not be able to tell what the recipe itself was because the sensory input was overwhelming.

“Smells like pot roast of some kind,” Bucky told him. “Like that recipe Mr. Carver gave us---remember, that summer when you worked for him.”

Steve felt his stomach give an unsettling lurch (the strong hand on the back of his neck, the dull splash of a body in the water) and tried to swallow down his nausea. “You okay, Steve?” Sam asked from across the table. “You don’t look so hot.”

Bucky’s hand clenched on his own, a tether, and Steve fought down the urge to run and hide from them all. He couldn’t let them know about this, not when Bucky himself seemed to have forgotten. It was dead, in the past, and why couldn’t his ghosts just stay dead and buried?

“Do you need to leave?” Bucky asked, in words too soft for anyone else to hear. “We can go. You don’t have to stay.”

Yes. No. Steve rubbed his forehead, swallowed against the tide of memory. “I’m…I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Wanda said from the kitchen entrance. Her face was white and stricken. “Steve…you…I…” She folded her arms. “Don’t you dare believe it was nothing, what happened to you.”

Several sets of eyes pinned him and when did it get so hot? The comforting closeness of everyone around him began to feel oppressive. They were staring at him ( “They’ll just think you’re crazy, that you came onto me like a two dollar whore, when I tell them my story.” ) and his breath began to come shorter, heavy and aching. He rubbed at his chest where his heart had once beat unevenly, where lungs had once rattled, and felt very, very small.

Steve looked up to see Bucky giving Wanda one hell of a glare. “Whatever this is about, he doesn’t want to talk about it here. Knock that shit off.”

“She… she can’t help it,” Steve managed. “Don’t take it out on her.”

Bucky rubbed his hand. “Do you want to talk about it?”

*Maybe on the 12th of Never.* “Yeah, but…not here. Not now.” The Barton kids were staring at him, wide-eyed, and he swallowed again, regaining some of his composure. “Later. Not right now.”

“That’s fine, Steve,” Laura said softly. “But you do know, don’t you, that we’re all here for you. Whatever you need.”

He nodded shortly, not trusting his words, and Laura---bless her---rerouted the conversation as if nothing had happened. “Wakandan bears some close similarities to the Xhosa spoken in South Africa,” she said to the woman sitting across from her---Lindelwa?---as she passed the salad bowl down the table. “There are important differences too, differences which make Wakandan different from other languages spoken in the region. I know some linguists who would kill to find out if there were more than just trade contacts with the ancient Egyptians.”

Lindelwa inclined her head slightly. “I am no linguist, but some studies have been done; they could be out of date, but they should be available via the Central Library.”

Laura grinned. “A research trip. My idea of fun.”
Clint groaned theatrically. “Now you’ve done it. I’ll just come look for you in the stacks when it’s time for you to eat, right?”

She batted her eyelashes. “You know me so well.”

***

They ended up leaving early after all; Wanda had understood, had in fact ushered them both out of the kitchen with orders to go home and a murmured, “Take care of each other.” Steve would have laughed if he’d been able to muster up any humor at all; the one thing they both knew how to do was take care of each other. Sam made a point of saying he’d be back in their apartment in about half an hour (giving them time to talk, Steve realized, and was grateful all over again for the fact that Sam existed.)

“So, this thing with Mr. Carver?” Bucky asked without preamble as they entered their dark and silent apartment. “I don’t remember…anything about him, aside from that you worked for him and that he gave us groceries now and then. You wanna talk about it now? ‘Cause I can tell shit is festering some.”

Steve scrubbed at his face. “I…Bucky, look, I haven’t told anyone about this in seventy years.”

“Did I know… then …what happened?” Bucky asked.

Steve managed a nod, but not much more as the memory of the smell of the docks that summer night hit his stomach again. “Yeah. You could say that. You want the whole story?”

“You gonna tell me the whole story?” Bucky asked, challenging, and Steve flushed. It was…well, it was a fair question. Nobody knew---once it was over, he’d simply buried it deep with all the other things he couldn’t talk about or wouldn’t disclose. Small wonder if Bucky wanted to make sure he’d get the full story.

“I will,” Steve said finally. There never had been a point to keeping things from Bucky. “Let’s go sit down for this, okay?”

Bucky’s hand on his shoulder stopped his retreat to their bedroom. “You…you know you don’t have to hide from me, right? Whatever this is, we’ll handle it together.”

“Funny,” Steve said around a lump in his throat. “That’s what you said then, too.” He glanced at the clock; Sam would be back soon. “Do you mind if we wait a bit? I don’t want to tell this story twice.”

“You trust Sam that much,” Bucky said. It wasn’t a question.

“I do,” Steve replied. “And I feel like…he deserves an explanation.”

Bucky merely gazed at him, curious. “For what?”

“When we were looking for you…This one hotel in Berlin, I think it was, Sam was about half-drunk and he grabbed me hard on the back of my neck to pull me closer, you know, to hug me. I damn near punched him out before I even had time to think about it. Next morning, he assumed it was just a reaction from the war and apologized. I didn’t, I couldn’t tell him why…but, he needs to know. That it wasn’t him.” Steve winced all over again at the idea that he nearly had hurt Sam, Sam who was one of the few purely good people Steve knew. There seemed no end to the people he had hurt unintentionally….

“He works with vets, right?” Bucky asked, breaking into his thoughts. “I’m pretty sure he’s seen or
heard worse.”

There was the muted snick of the door opening. “You fellas not like the lights on?” Sam asked.

“Not right now,” Steve said, resting his head against the back of the couch. “Look, Sam, I want to tell you what—”

Ever since the serum, Steve hadn’t really needed much in the way of light to see. Sam held up his hands, a shadow against the darker shadows of the unlit room. “You don’t owe me an explanation, man. You really don’t. But if you want to tell me, I’ll listen.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, but I guess I kind of need to,” Steve answered. He laced his hands together. “The summer after my mam passed—this was 1936—I got a job, my first one in months, with the local greengrocer, Mr. Carver. He hired me to paint signs, do basic stocking, that kind of thing. It was the Depression and most of those jobs went to other folk, but Carver hired me and I thought we were lucky.” His mouth twisted. “I hadn’t been able to contribute much that year.”

“You mean you weren’t able to help pay the bills what with your asthma and the hospital bill from your pneumonia and paying for your mom’s funeral on top of it?” Bucky interjected. “Come on, now. I don’t remember a lot, but I know I never kept a balance sheet between us.”

“You didn’t, Buck,” Steve answered, “but I felt…like maybe I was living on your charity if I couldn’t contribute something besides medical bills. Anyway, Carver was pretty generous; he’d send home groceries now and then, and never tried to stiff me on my paycheck. And I never did trust easy, but I’d started to trust him.”

Sam looked uneasy. “I hear a ‘but then’ coming.”

Steve nodded. “Carver had discovered, or guessed—I still don’t know exactly how—the nature of my relationship with Bucky. We never talked about it openly, not since we saw David get killed, but I guess he figured that we must be a couple of inverts to live together like we did, even though Bucky dated girls. And so Carver kept me late one night after work and made a…proposition. I’d sleep with him, or he’d call the cops and tell them I had propositioned him. I can still hear him now: "Who do you think they’d believe, boy?"

Bucky paled. “Steve, I—”

Steve waved him off. “The hell of it was, the man wasn’t wrong. I knew what people said about me in the streets, Buck. The only reason they didn’t say or do worse was when you were right there beside me, and everybody knew that ‘nice Barnes boy’ dated girls.”

“Lesbians,” Bucky said suddenly. “Most of them, anyway. They didn’t want the reputation that came with not liking guys, and I didn’t want to be with anyone but you, but I had to be ‘normal.’ So…”

Steve nodded; it hadn’t exactly been a secret between them. “I couldn’t go to the cops. And I didn’t want to worry you more by telling him what Carver was forcing me to do.”

“More?” Bucky spluttered. “What was going on in my life that you thought you shouldn’t tell me?”

“You found out your dad had cancer,” Steve said gently. “In his stomach, just a month or so after Mam passed. He didn’t last more than a couple of months after she died, and you were helping your ma support you and your sisters. So many people depended on you, Buck—myself included. How could I risk you getting into this kind of trouble for me?” He ran a hand through his hair. “So I told you I’d picked up an extra shift and I went to meet Carver at his apartment. What I didn’t know was
that you’d followed me, Buck.” Steve swallowed hard. “I didn’t want Carver to touch me—he wasn’t you—but I’d promised and I had to keep you safe. But when it came time to….I couldn’t and I tried to flee, but he caught me. You saw him backhand me, and there was a scuffle. You…Bucky, you stabbed him with this switchblade he carried.” He paused. “I don’t think you meant to kill him. But you got him in the femoral artery and he just…bled out.”

Something dark and feral flickered in the grey eyes. “We…dumped his body in the river,” Bucky breathed out. “Threw out that old rusty knife too, didn’t we?”

Steve felt ill, remembering. “Yeah, your old switchblade. Threw it off the Brooklyn Bridge. We went home, burned everything we were wearing, and never talked about it again.”

“The police didn’t investigate?” Sam asked.

“After his death, it came out he…had his fingers in what turned out to be a lot of very unsavory pies,” Steve replied. “He owed money to the Mob, among other things, and I think the belief was that one of his ‘business partners’ had done him in. If they’d looked a little closer, I’m sure my fingerprints were there, and they could have matched it to the ones they got when they arrested me when I was protesting a few years later, but…somehow, they never did.” He gazed squarely at Bucky. “I’m sorry, Buck. If I’d fought harder or just told you what was going on, maybe—”

“Steven Grant Rogers,” Bucky retorted with the roughness in his voice Steve had always associated with him during moments of high emotion, “there was literally nothing you could have done. Only thing that might have happened if you’d told me is I would have killed the son of a bitch sooner. None of this was your fault.”

Sam looked stricken. Steve recognized it as his “putting the pieces together” face. “So, when I was drunk in Berlin and I tried to hug you, your reaction was—”

Steve nodded, shamefaced. “Yeah. I…Carver grabbed me by the neck when he tried…. Haven’t really been able to stand it since.”

Sam nodded, accepting as always. “For my money, neither of you did a thing wrong, but I know that’s cold comfort now.” He rubbed at his chin. “You know, this explains some things I’d been wondering about.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“You never seem to want anyone to touch you,” Sam explained. He flashed his grin briefly. “Now, I’m not at all surprised you let Bucky touch you, but”--- he sobered---“I kind of worried, man. Touch is something we’re all hard-wired to need, and the fact that the only touching you got was in combat….yeah, it worried me some.”

He really didn’t deserve Sam. All the months they’d traveled together, all the scrapes they’d gotten into and the skirmishes they’d fought and not once had Sam said anything. “You could have asked,” Steve said.

“Nah,” Sam said, shaking his head. “I saw how it was with you. Everybody thought they had a right to you, it was like you weren’t allowed any privacy of your own. I just figured you’d tell me when you were ready to talk. And probably not a minute before. And look,” he said, trying for lightness, “I was right.”

One of the beads on Sam’s kimoyo bracelet flashed, as did the bead on Bucky’s necklace. “That’ll be Dr. Nomsa, wanting to start the scan. You up for it, Bucky?”
Bucky shrugged. “It just involves me sitting here and breathing, and I’ve been managing that for the last century or so. Sure.”

“Okay,” Sam responded, standing up. “Let me talk with her for a few minutes, and then we’ll start.” He looked at Steve. “Can I give you a hug, man?”

That was another thing he appreciated about Sam: the man always, always, asked. Steve smiled. “Yeah, sure.” He stood up and Sam hugged him hard. Steve felt, absurdly, on the edge of tears again.

After a few moments, Sam stepped back. “It’s gonna be okay, man. It is.”

***

Dawn found Bucky readying for his first appointment with Dr. Methuli. Steve watched him as he dressed, helped him tie his hair back, all the while conscious of the anxious energy thrumming just under the other man’s skin. It was the kind of thing he’d never have noticed a century before, but Bucky had been an old hat at concealing his emotions since well before Azzano. Steve paused while brushing Bucky’s hair to run a hand down the tense muscles of his neck and shoulder. “Thanks,” Bucky murmured. “I don’t…Steve, I don’t know how to do this.”

Though Bucky’s dark hair was free of tangles, Steve kept brushing. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how to not be the Winter Soldier,” Bucky confessed. “Not the killing part, I know how not to do that. But his instincts are very much a part of who I am and—I think now—who I was a long time before Hydra got to me.”

He was thinking of Carver, Steve realized. “Bucky, you didn’t—you went there because you were convinced I was in over my head somehow. And you were right.”

Bucky half-turned to look at him. “I liked protecting you. Even though I didn’t mean to kill him, I liked that you weren’t in danger.” And with a fierce ache, Steve recalled a dozen back alleys in Brooklyn, Sergeant Barnes nagging and pushing and training Steve into a more effective soldier in forests and towns throughout Europe, Sergeant Barnes who had been the backbone of the Howling Commandos despite the trauma at Kreichberg (and how, Steve wondered now, how had he missed what Zola did to Bucky?) Steve might have been a captain in rank but it was Bucky who taught him everything, who took whatever abilities Steve already possessed and made them dangerously effective in battle.

“And you think…what, that makes you a monster?” Steve asked softly. “You’ve always been a protector. Of me, of your sisters, of half a dozen kids in Brooklyn who probably each had a story of ‘the time Bucky Barnes taught me to fight.’ It’s who you are, who you’ve always been. Hydra weaponized that—” Steve heard his voice go hard—“and even Alexander Fucking Pierce had to convince you that you were doing something right before he could use you on an op. Even after all the torture, all they put you through.”

“You knew about Pierce?” Bucky asked, deathly still.

Steve swallowed. “Yeah. There were…videos. Natasha pulled them from the data dump before they could hit the internet but I watched some of them while we were trying to get any idea of where you might be. You were pretty specific as to which Hydra bases you targeted.” He breathed out. “I’m sorry, Buck. You probably didn’t want me to see them.”
Bucky managed a one-armed shrug. “Not the worst you’ve seen, I imagine.” It wasn’t a question.

“No,” Steve said slowly, “but Buck? If we ever have to clear your name in a court of law…”

“I did those things, Stevie,” Bucky replied. “I never consented, but they used my hands to kill and murder and maim. You think those videos would be any comfort to Stark?”

“I doubt it,” Steve answered honestly, burying a flinch at the thought of Tony Stark and the cold chill of a Siberian silo. “But there’s a difference between actively consenting and being brainwashed. One day, I hope Tony will realize that.”

***

The next morning, Steve awoke just before dawn. The tropical birds outside their window—the constant background noise in Wakanda—weren’t even up yet, but all he knew was that he had to move and move soon. It was the burning energy the serum had blessed (and occasionally, cursed) him with, the constant, demanding need of muscles to exercise. He’d thwarted that instinct before, and it only ended in misery as his muscles twitched and burned. Better to obey now than pay for it later.

Bucky was still sleeping—the session with Dr. Methuli had tired him out and he’d gone to bed early the night before, tossing and turning until the early morning—so after leaving him a note, Steve eased out the door and into the still morning air. He ran at a smooth, even pace, the thud of his shoes against the road beginning to unwind some of the tensions he’d carried from the day before and his mind began to drift, easing into the mental zone where there was nothing but the air in his lungs, the sky above, and the earth under his feet.

At a certain point, though, Steve noticed the sky above was darkening into an ominous grey. He vaguely recalled a message on the regional communications network saying that the weather shields would be down for a few days for system upgrades (Shuri at work, no doubt) just as the first raindrops began to fall. Steve shrugged. He could handle the rain—hell, he’d been frozen for seventy years—but he winced as his ears popped. The barometric pressure was dropping and dropping fast.

And as he looked around for cover, he realized he didn’t have a clue where he actually was. *Ya dumb punk, what’ve I been trying to teach you?* Bucky’s voice in his head asked caustically. It would have been one thing had he been jogging in Brooklyn, where even modern buildings were mostly familiar, but here? He had no idea how far he’d run, wrapped up in his thoughts, distracted and exhausted and emotionally worn out. He reached for the bead on his kimoyo bracelet and…

Oh, shit.

Shit.

He’d taken it off to put sunscreen on before he left and it was right on the bathroom sink. Next to his phone, because he didn’t need to take the phone with him if he was wearing the bracelet.

Steve had a mad urge to kick something hard. Some strategic genius I am, he thought, and cursed under his breath, then pushed the anger and the frustration away. The rain was coming harder and he needed to find shelter to wait out the storm. He closed his eyes, trying to picture the map of the local terrain he’d seen Wanda and Laura looking at the other day (they’d been planning to take a nature hike with the Barton kids, and Cendisa had sent them a map.) The map had been blown up large and Steve had glanced at it in passing. Okay, he knew approximately where he was now—18 miles or so from their building, near a nature preserve. He thought he might be half a mile or so out from the park guardian’s hut, which was near a distinctive stone outcropping in the shape of an elephant’s
head. If he jogged quickly, he might make it there before the weather got worse (not that he exactly knew what “worse” looked like in Wakanda) and he could at least get a message to Bucky and Sam so they wouldn’t worry. The lectures, he knew, would come later—for being so stupid as to leave both his bracelet and his phone behind, for losing track of where he was (again!) and for not even checking the weather report before he’d left.

The rain began to come down harder; even to his enhanced vision, visibility was almost nil. Steve glanced down at the earth under his feet, dismayed to find how much soil was in the small rushing torrents. He ran up an incline, searching for higher ground, and just before he reached the small hut, there was an unearthly sodden roar of water and mud and he knew no more.

***

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“He’ll be fine,” a woman’s voice said.

“Luckiest goddamned fool I ever seen,” another voice uttered. The voice was home and Steve fought to open his eyes, struggling against the pull of drugs and the exhaustion that wanted to drag him under.

“You should rest,” the woman—a doctor?—said. “He’ll be awake soon, and we’ll call you.”

“Not leavin’,” the voice said mulishly. There was a hand touching his own, the callouses of a right hand Steve knew almost better than his own; he could just about feel the other man’s pulse hammer. “Got to be here.”

There was a muted sigh, then: “As you will. There’s a blanket and a pillow in the cabinet.”

The man’s voice murmured something lost to the fog that surrounded him, pressing in. But the man’s words followed him, muttered against his skin. *Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare go without me.*

***

Time ebbed and flowed, in and out. Sounds became clearer, more distinct. Steve managed to drag his eyes open, but only briefly. Bucky was sitting next to him, hair loosened from its knot, looking as if he hadn’t slept in days. “Stevie?” he murmured. “You with me now?”

Steve managed some sound that might have been a word, or just a grunt. He tried to nod, only to find that the motion hurt. “Yeah,” Bucky said, “that would be your concussion. Damn near lucky you didn’t crack your skull open when you fell.”

“There was flash flooding near the preserve,” another voice, calm but with an edge, said. Sam, then, on his left. “Nobody was *supposed* to be out there, so the Wakandans didn’t take preventative measures. It was in the weather reports, which *of course* you checked before deciding to run a marathon. Right?”

Oh. That voice. It was sharp enough to cut vibranium. Steve managed a blink but couldn’t really come up with a response. Sam went on, worry thick in his voice, “I’m glad you’re meeting Dr. Nomsa’s colleague. I hope he’s cleared his schedule because Jesus, Steve, you can’t keep doing shit like this.”
Hey, he wanted to say, don’t worry about me. It wasn’t intentional. I did something dumb, that’s all, there wasn’t anything self-destructive about it. Except that he had gone for a run on a day when a very heavy rainstorm was predicted—without checking the weather forecast—and he had left behind both his kimoyo beads and his cellphone behind. “How long was I out?” he said instead.

“Couple of days,” Bucky responded. “You had some spinal injuries—which have healed—and a concussion, plus some bruised ribs. Not the same ones you injured the last time, so I’ll give you some credit there. Dr. Nomsa kept you under so the serum could do its thing. You heal faster when you rest, punk.”

“Jerk,” Steve responded automatically. He searched Bucky’s face. “I really am sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Bucky waved him off, and the coolness of his words was worse than any shouting. “Don’t. Just... don’t. Save it for your counselor.”

***

Somewhere, Steve was sure General Phillips was laughing his head off.

He’d been released to the care of Bucky and Sam later on that afternoon, after Dr. Nomsa’s scan revealed no lasting damage aside from a lingering headache caused by the concussion. “My colleague will stop by tomorrow morning,” she told him very firmly. “I’m asking you to comply with all medical directives and his therapy.”

“Oh,” Steve replied. “He has time to see me?”

A faint smile crossed Dr. Nomsa’s face. “You’re familiar with lancing an abscess, yes? Sometimes the poison must be removed before healing can begin. You’ll find his schedule is quite open, as you are his only patient.” She turned to Bucky and Sam. “I’m transmitting his discharge instructions to you now. Make sure follows them.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Sam said, somewhat ominously. “We’ve got a bunch of people lining up to make sure he stays put.”

And indeed they had. Wanda was at their apartment already, working on some of her schoolwork alongside the Barton kids. Natasha was immersed in a novel, curled up on the couch like the world’s most dangerous bookworm. Clint was in the kitchen, unpacking cartons of food and Laura was sitting with Wanda and her children, reading what looked to be a Wakandan newspaper.

They all looked up when he entered. Steve fought the urge to duck his head; he was embarrassed, and not a little grateful that he’d escaped without more serious injuries, but if they were going to yell at him for being foolhardy, he’d rather they just get on with it. But nobody seemed to want to—Wanda, usually not the most tactile person, rushed up to him and gave him a hug. “We were so worried,” she murmured.

“Better thank her, pal,” Bucky drawled from behind him. “She’s the reason we knew where to start looking for you.”

Wanda flushed a little. “When you’re angry, you tend to...broadcast very loudly. I saw the rock outcropping just before you fell.”

“Well, however it happened, thank you,” Steve replied, releasing her.

He was guided—there was no other word for it—to the couch next to Natasha, and handed a plate of
food he didn’t feel like eating. To judge from Bucky’s glare, he had best at least try to eat. And so he did. “They tell me this is the Wakandan version of Chinese food,” Clint said, deftly using chopsticks. “Tastes pretty good so far.”

To Steve’s surprise, the food did taste good. He wasn’t starving like he normally was after an injury—SHIELD had never been able to come up with the correct calculations for what his metabolism needed after a bout of healing—but he was surprised to find that the food smelled good, that he was feeling the first stirrings of an actual hunger instead of his usual nausea. “Go slowly if you can,” Natasha murmured. “You haven’t been eating much lately.”

Oh. There it was, the nausea again. “Is it that obvious?” Steve asked, just as quietly, setting his fork down and breathing through his nose.

She arched one skeptical eyebrow. “You think we’re all here just because you took a tumble in a mudslide? Come on, Rogers. We’re worried.”

*I never wanted that*, Steve almost said, but that would have meant opening his mouth. Instead he nodded and breathed in and out, slowly. To his great relief, the chatter continued around him—no looks of pity, just concern, and even then? Nobody was staring at him, save for Bucky and that was just… Bucky. Finally the nausea passed enough that he felt safe speaking. “I… I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Natasha said quietly under the chatter. “Jumping out of planes without parachutes is kind of what you do. We just…we want you to start thinking of why. You’re reckless when there’s no reason to be.”

“I hear you,” he said just as softly.

“Do you?” she challenged. “We’ll see. In the meantime, eat.”

***

He spent the night restless and awake. At some point, Bucky had turned on the dimmest light in their room and turning on his tablet, had simply pulled him closer. “Hush, Stevie,” he’d murmured. “You’ll wake the neighbors.”

Steve had managed a snort of laughter on that one; if he closed his eyes, it felt like he might hear Mrs. O’Neill’s endless nighttime snoring through the wall they shared. “Want me to read to you?” Bucky asked.


“What about goats?” Bucky asked.

Steve sat up a little. “What about goats?”

Bucky rubbed his back a little, the way he used to do when the muscles around Steve’s crooked spine had seized up at night. “Well, I was thinking we might get ourselves a small farm if we’re gonna stay here.”

Bucky had family in Indiana on his dad’s side who were (or who had been) farmers for generations, but he and Bucky were both Brooklyn born and raised. The Bucky of before wouldn’t have wanted to live anywhere near a farm, but this Bucky? “What’s bringing this on?”

“This”—and his gesture took in the apartment—“it can’t be a permanent thing, you know? Eventually we’ll all need places of our own.”
Steve nodded slowly. It was a thing he’d considered for the others, but pushed aside for himself—why? “So you want to raise goats?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. But not for slaughter. I…don’t want to kill things. Sell their milk for cheese or soap—–”

“Soap?” Steve couldn’t help but ask.

“Soap. Supposed to be good for the skin and all,” Bucky put in. “Been doin’ some research.”

He flipped the tablet around and Steve saw it was a manual on animal husbandry written in Wakandan. Bucky had one of the translation filters on it, probably more for Steve’s benefit than his own, and he was currently reading the chapter on making soap with goat’s milk. “Do you think we could do that, Steve?” Bucky asked.

For that amount of hope in his voice? Steve would have done far more difficult things than plan to go live on a goat farm. “I don’t see why not, Buck.”

Bucky grinned, that rare open smile that was like sunlight after a storm. “First though—we have to get our shit sorted. I got to get these trigger words out of my head.”

“I’ll do my best too,” Steve promised softly.

The grey eyes turned serious. “All any of us can ask, Stevie.”

***

There was a knock at the door mid-morning. Steve, in the middle of making another cup of coffee and wishing any of it still worked on him, paused. “I wonder who that is?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Probably the guy who’s gonna help you with your shit.”

The man who stood on their front step was a Wakandan Steve hadn’t met yet. He was dressed in the traditional robes, leaving one deeply scarred arm bare to his shoulder. He leaned against a carved wooden cane as he spoke. “My name is Viwe,” he said. “Dr. Nomsa told you I was coming.”

Steve knew he shouldn’t be surprised by Viwe’s appearance on his doorstep; neither his team nor Dr. Nomsa were fools. But still, the man was here, on his doorstep. “I…see. Yes, of course.”

Sam looked up from the tablet he was studying. “Oh, good. Hey, Bucky, it’s time to go to the market, isn’t it?”

The ploy was obvious, but Bucky nodded. “Yup, sure is. See ya later, Stevie.” Steve thought he’d have to be deaf to not hear Bucky’s muttered Good luck with him to Viwe.

Viwe stood on the threshold. “It is our custom to wait to be asked in, Captain Rogers.”

It was, and Steve felt his ears grow hot, remembering the fact now. “Oh, yes, of course. And I’m…just Steve. Not a captain. But you are welcome in my home.”

“Thank you,” the man said with a graceful incline of his head.

Steve decided to be direct. “Look, um, Mr. Viwe. I don’t know what Dr. Nomsa told you, or Cendisa, but I’m really not the best patient and I’m sure you’ve got other, easier people to deal with.”

“Perhaps,” Viwe retorted. “But they are not my patients. You are. In fact, you are my only patient.”
The man smiled. “Dr. Nomsa took your friend Sam’s advice and I cleared my schedule for the foreseeable future.”

He felt a sudden fury, an insistence that he was just fine and didn’t need help. But the words stopped cold behind his lips: they were not, after all, anywhere near the truth. “I’ve had exactly one therapist since I…joined this century,” Steve said instead. “She turned out to be a member of Hydra. I haven’t seen anyone since.”

Viwe arranged the folds of his robe around his legs. “To begin with, shall we…dispense with the bullshit, as you Americans are fond of saying? You are losing weight faster than you can gain it. You do not sleep. You are increasingly incautious and your friends, your chosen tribe, are concerned by your behavior. Any Wakandan would have been seen months ago, but your tribe preferred for you to pick your method of help, until it became obvious to them that your method was…not productive.”

“Everybody else needs help more,” Steve insisted.

“This is also not productive,” Viwe said. “Your…delays are both ridiculous and useless. You are afraid.”

Those would have been fighting words in a Brooklyn of another era. Steve rocked back on his heels in a stance Bucky would have recognized at once. “I have known this fear,” Viwe went on, evenly. “Gazing into the abyss when you bear such wounds is not pleasant.” He tilted his head. “Have you been outside recently?”

“No in the last day or so, no,” Steve replied.

“Well, then,” Viwe said, “let us walk. It is a fine day. No rainstorms are predicted.”

Steve spared a moment to be thankful that he’d managed a brief shower that morning—but even that had almost felt like it took too much energy. The exhaustion, which was never far from him, rose up again. “I haven’t… I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Or the night before, or the many nights before that,” Viwe agreed. “This is known. But you are going to come with me.”

I am? Are you going to make me? Steve almost asked, but like most Wakandan warriors, Viwe looked perfectly capable of dragging him if he wouldn’t go willingly. “All right,” he said, but the words were sullen even to his ears. “I still don’t know what good this is going to do.”

“Perhaps no good at all. Perhaps it’s merely a lovely day and there’s a spot near the river where we can sit for a time.” Viwe turned to face him squarely. “Is that reason enough?”

Steve flushed again. He was being rude, nearly hostile, and his mam would have twisted his ear and made him apologize. “I’m…sorry. Let’s walk.”

There was a light touch to his arm, but Steve saw the movement before Viwe’s hand reached him. It was the kind of consideration he’d seen from Sam, and more recently, from Bucky and he wondered which of them had told Viwe of how badly he reacted to being startled. “Steven,” Viwe said, “we are just going for a walk. That’s all.”

Viwe guided him along a path he would never have seen on his own. There was the heady scent of tropical flowers and the sound of a small river running by a circular copse of trees. “Here we are,” Viwe said. “Let’s sit.”
The sunlight was too bright on his eyes, Steve thought, but did as Viwe asked. “I should tell you who I am. I am Viwe, born of the river tribe. I was injured in a battle some years ago and when I healed, I found I no longer desired to fight. So I went back to school to become a counselor and eventually, the king requested my aid for you.”

“I didn’t think Wakanda had much in the way of battles,” Steve said, for lack of anything else to say.

“A colonizer,” Viwe said, “a man from the West named Ulysses Klaue. He wanted our vibranium and was willing to blow up a village to get to it. I was asked to help protect the village and…” He shrugged, gesturing to the thick rows of scarring visible on his legs, arm, and shoulder. “The result is what you see. There were others more badly injured than I, and by the time I was able to be seen by the healers, the damage had been done.” He smiled faintly. “Eventually, and after much struggle, I came not to mind the scarring and my injuries so much—I earned them honorably, saving others. What else can a warrior ask for?”

Steve remembered Klaue—an arms dealer, Tony had said, and the man who’d supplied Ultron with the vibranium the android had later used to rebuild himself and his army. Considering Klaue’s utter disregard for human life, he supposed Wakanda was damned lucky that they’d been able to restrict Klaue’s invasion to just one village. “Not much, I suppose.”

He was conscious of the other man’s scrutiny and wondered what he saw. “And I understand you’ve been drawing,” Viwe said.

“Yeah,” Steve replied shortly.

“Perhaps one day you will permit me to see them,” Viwe replied in the same tone.

Steve gazed at the man critically, suspecting a ruse. “You’re not going to insist?”

Viwe shook his head. “Do you want to show them to me?”

“Not really,” Steve admitted. “My art was always pretty private, except for my Mam and Bucky.”

“Well, then,” Viwe told him, “it’s my hope I’ll be allowed to see them one day. In the meantime, I will simply take it at your word that you are drawing.” He spread his hands at Steve’s dubious look. “Steven. We will get nowhere if we cannot be honest with each other.” He removed a small bead from a pocket hidden somewhere in the folds of his robe. “This will, if you allow it, sync to the other beads on your bracelet. It will allow me to analyze your brain chemistry to determine if the medication we have will work on you. Dr. Nomsa says it will, and I have no doubt, but—” he smiled a little—“we wish to make sure. I am not a scientist as such, that’s more her field, but—”

The mention of medication made Steve tense up. He knew this was part of Dr. Nomsa’s treatment plan, and intellectually, he also understood that he was probably the safest he’d ever been as a patient, here in a place he never expected to be but among people who saw him as Steve Rogers first, and Captain America a distant second. But older memories crowded---of medications that didn’t work, of dismissive doctors who told his Mam that if she just had a man around to “raise the boy right” his asthma and his migraines would disappear, of other doctors who said, gently enough, that maybe it was time to let “nature take its course.” (He’d heard that through a closed door and the delirium of scarlet fever and he thought---but could never now confirm---it was only Winifred Barnes who’d kept his mam from punching that doctor too.)

Steve breathed out, trying to force the memories back into their usual buried, hidden mental boxes and found Viwe gazing at him with a curious expression on his face.
“You are upset,” the man said softly.

Steve waited for the question of Why? How do you feel about this? How did it feel when... But Viwe said neither of these things. Instead, he folded his hands and said, gravely, “I’m sorry. I don’t intend to upset you.”

“You’re a strange kind of therapist,” Steve finally said.

“How so?”

“You’re not asking me to tell you how I feel. You’re not insisting I talk about things I’d rather keep private.”

“We’ve known each other approximately an hour and a half,” Viwe replied. “You don’t trust easily, and I wouldn’t expect---with all of your life’s many and varied experiences---that you would. But we’ve made a good beginning.”

“Even though I was a cranky bastard?” Steve couldn’t help but ask.

Viwe grinned. It softened the harsh lines left by warfare and pain considerably. “Given your reputation, I hardly expected this to be easy, and I’m sure we’ll test each other many times over the next few months. But you do wish to feel better, yes?”

Steve nodded. “I been through worse,” he said, hearing the Brooklyn come out in his words again, and not—for once---caring. “But I can’t seem to shake this.”

“Perhaps it’s not a matter of getting rid of how you’re feeling, but processing those emotions better,” Viwe suggested. “But that’s a matter for another day. It’s growing quite warm and---” his words turned wry and teasing---“Dr. Nomsa informs me you do not deal well with our sun.”

“Understatement of the century,” Steve grumbled but without any heat to the words. “I musta’ looked like I was on fire the last time I got sunburn.”

They began the walk back to Steve’s apartment, staying in the shade as much as possible. Just before they reached the door, Viwe turned to him and watched as Steve slid the additional bead on his bracelet. They flashed green then subsided back into their usual lit pattern. “We should have the results from the bead in maybe another day or so. Once that’s done, I’d like to see you twice a week, and more often if you feel you need it.” He smiled again. “That bead also syncs up to my bracelet. In an emergency, all you need to do is touch and hold it for ten seconds, and I’ll call you.” Viwe eyed him. “That is, if you want my help?”

Steve thought of his SHIELD shrink, about how—long before he ever knew she was working for Hydra—her cold, calculated questioning had never made him feel comfortable, but only more alone. He thought too of Bucky, of fragile new beginnings and the goat farm that had made Bucky smile. And he wondered what it might be like to live normally...to simply stop and heal and live for once.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Yeah, I sure do.”
Sam followed Bucky’s nervous glance at the clock. It had been almost two hours since Steve and Viwe had left. “I dunno,” Sam said into the silence. “What’s your thought?”

Bucky frowned slightly. “Well, they’ve either decided on a truce or Viwe has hog-tied Steve and dumped him on Dr. Nomsa’s front step for her to deal with. Even bet on either choice. Steve can be…mighty stubborn when it suits him. And it always suits him.”

Sam couldn’t help but laugh a little at that one. “True enough. I suppose we just wait.”

Bucky inclined his head a bit in answer. “What do we know about this guy, aside from he’s Dr. Nomsa’s colleague?”

Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky, Sam recalled, and hid a smile at the protectiveness. “Well, let’s see what we can find out.” He touched the communications bead on his bracelet with an ease that was beginning to become second nature, and left a message for Dr. Nomsa to contact them when she had a moment.

It was apparently a slow day at the clinic; Dr. Nomsa called them back almost immediately. “Samuel James. Is there something wrong?”

“No,” Sam assured her. “Steve is still out with Viwe and—”

“It suddenly occurred to you that you’d sent your friend off with a man you know nothing about, aside from my recommendation?” Dr. Nomsa said dryly. “Yes, I can see why that might be concerning. Forgive me, I should have realized you’d have questions first.”

“It’s not as if we don’t trust you, ma’am,” Bucky put in, with such a polite, disarming smile that Sam had to stop himself from staring. Sometimes he saw the glimpse of the man James Barnes had been before Hydra, before the war, and it was always astonishing. “But Steve is…special to us. To me.”

“I understand,” the doctor replied warmly. She touched a bead on her own bracelet. “I’m sending you the parts of Viwe’s file that he’s authorized for release.” At Sam’s inquiring look, she went on, “He was gravely injured when Ulysses Klaue invaded Wakanda several years ago. Those records aren’t included in this file, nor is much of his military service. To know those details, you will have to ask him directly.”

Something inside Sam, an old instinct borne of training and experience, whispered that Viwe had been an elite soldier of some kind. “So, he went back to school after fighting?”

Dr. Nomsa smiled. “You don’t sound at all surprised.”

“I was about halfway done with my master’s in Psychology when I met Steve in DC. It’s not an uncommon theme with veterans of all stripes.”

“And what about you, James?” Dr. Nomsa asked. “Is there schooling you would like to finish?”

“I was studying to be an engineer before the war,” Bucky said. “I think I had to drop out when my dad got sick. You all got much use for a one armed engineer?”
Dr. Nomsa’s mouth quirked. “Shuri tells me you won’t be one armed much longer. As to the rest of that, why don’t you ask her?”

Whatever Bucky might have said was interrupted by the sounds of Steve and Viwe coming up the sidewalk. “…hold it for ten seconds and I’ll call you,” Viwe said. “That is, if you want my help?”

There was a pause and Sam met Bucky’s eyes. Steve had every reason to mistrust psychologists, but Sam found himself mentally crossing his fingers and sending a prayer to a god he wasn’t sure he believed in that Steve would accept the help he was being offered, that Viwe was as good as Dr. Nomsa’s recommendation. “Yeah,” they heard Steve say finally. “Yeah, I sure do.”

Bucky smiled. “Atta boy, Stevie.”

***

Lunch was a quiet affair. Sam had picked up some goat cheese during the market trip and there was a thin flatbread similar in texture to tortillas. “I’m making quesadillas,” he told them from the kitchen. In Sam’s view, there wasn’t much that couldn’t be solved by melted cheese on bread of any kind. “Maybe a salad too, if you all want.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Steve leaning against Bucky, talking quietly. Sam could have heard what they were talking about if he’d strained his ears, but decided against it. Steve looked tired, emotionally worn out, and yet he seemed lighter, somehow.

Steve and Bucky came to sit at the table. “Now look,” Sam began, “Steve, I’m not gonna ask you what you and Viwe talked about. Same for you, Bucky, and Dr. Methuli. That shit is private, and I don’t need to know details unless you want to tell me. But as your friend—are you guys okay?”

Steve didn’t look at Bucky to make his decision on what to say next, and Sam found himself relieved. He hadn’t begrudged them one moment of their renewed closeness, but at the same time, they had been through separate hells, and would need to make their own pathways home. “About as okay as I can be right now,” Steve told him. “I don’t know if I like Viwe but I trust him as far as our next session.” A slow reluctant smile touched his face, one Sam hadn’t seen much since DC. “That’s what he asked for. To make my choice to see him at the end of each session instead of committing for several months at a time. Makes me feel like he don’t want something more from me than just my cooperation.”

And of course, Viwe would have been sensitive to that, Sam thought. He would have known that a man who had spent much of his recent adult life being on display would be extremely sensitive to any idea that there might be a hidden agenda anywhere. Viwe was treading in some very dark waters, and knew it, and was doing his best to navigate through them. *I have got to find out more about him,* Sam thought, *if only so I can thank him for being exactly what Steve needs right now.*

“What about you, Bucky?” Sam asked. “Things okay with Dr. Methuli?”

Bucky nodded, and swallowed. Watching them eat, Sam was reminded that both men were survivors of the Great Depression who’d learned to eat, and eat fast, because their next meal was never guaranteed. “He cusses worse than Steve here in a mood,” Bucky said with a dry glee, which earned him a dark—but-not-really-offended look from Steve, “but I think they found a good one for me too.”

After Steve finished his meal, he stared at his plate. “Whoa. I’m…I’m still hungry.”

“Good,” Sam responded, hiding his relief. “Now how many more of these do you want?”

***

Sam knew only too well the winding roads that recovery took—good days, bad days, all parts in
between. He’d walked those roads himself, in the years following Riley’s death, and had seen similar struggles play out in the vets he saw at group twice a week. He thought he knew what recovery might look like, at least in its broad strokes, for Steve and Bucky.

But one morning about two weeks after they’d begun treatment, Dr. Nomsa announced that Bucky was ready to resume the procedure to remove the next of his trigger words. And Sam knew he had things to do as a result—he’d already established that he’d take Bucky to and from the palace greenhouse so his condition could be monitored at home—but there was no energy to move, no color in the sky or in his day. Everything just felt heavy, weighted and dark. He’d slept like shit the night before—had, in fact, run into Steve at least twice in the kitchen—so that was part of his exhaustion, but this felt like the renewed beginnings of the depression he’d battled off and on for years. Well, shit, he thought, did you think this was gone too?

Sam fumbled for his bracelet and activated the chat program that linked right up to Bucky’s. “If you got a minute, I need to talk to you,” he wrote. Right then, he missed his bedroom in the condo in DC. There had been a list stuffed in a bedside drawer, of things he needed to do when this happened, little rituals of self-care, but hell if he could remember any of them now.

Bucky arrived in his bedroom not long after. He’d clearly showered and dressed but his hair, though combed, was still messy; Steve must not have helped him with it. “What’s up?” Bucky asked softly.

This was the hard part to admit, but Sam had never been a hypocrite. “I’m...having a bad day, man. Is there someone else who can take you to the greenhouse this afternoon? I need to make an appointment with Dr. Nomsa or her staff myself.”

“You feelin’ all right?” Bucky asked, and there it was again, the protectiveness that was so much ingrained into his nature. It was startling, considering how fearsome he’d once been, and Sam wondered if it always would be.

Sam shrugged. “Everybody’s got problems, Bucky. I just haven’t been taking care of mine.”

The other man nodded. “All right. I’ll find another way there. Take care of yourself, though, okay? There’s a lot of us who want you to feel better.” He tilted his head slightly. “What do you want me to tell the others?”

“Shit,” Sam muttered under his breath, because of course, the others would wonder and be concerned. As people he liked them, loved them even, but right now? More than just his roommates were just too much. “I’ll think of something.”

“Let me handle that one,” Bucky said lightly. “Everybody needs a day off. Why not you?”

***

Sam never did find out what Bucky told them all, but he was left mercifully alone, even after Bucky and Laura left for the clinic. Steve was somewhere close but he didn’t try to strike up a conversation or do much more than announce that meals were ready. He let Sam be, and eventually, Sam found the energy to take a quick shower, get dressed, and make his way to the couch.

Steve had made him something light—some fruit, some cheese--- and was seated on the loveseat, bent over in a contortion that should have been impossible, as big as he was. He was sketching something on a pad, angling it towards the last rays of the afternoon sun. “What are you drawing?” Sam asked.

“There was a rock formation Viwe showed me yesterday, near the palace. It’s in the shape of a black
panther and it looks like the thing is ready to jump out from that rock. It’s some sort of guardian spirit, from what I was told.”

He angled the pad so Sam could see the drawing better and once again, Sam was struck by just how damned talented Steve was. “That’s gorgeous, Steve,” he breathed, and it was. Somehow, he’d captured the movement in a sculpture of stone, a panther, its teeth bared, ready to leap from the side of the mountain. “You ever thought of doing anything with your art?”

“I was an artist before the War,” Steve told him. “Nothing big. Worked on some WPA projects I don’t guess have survived, did some work on some print ads for the papers,” and he grinned, mischievous “and illustrated some Tijuana bibles when money got really tight. But not much under my own name.”

Sam kept his face still, and let the reference to Tijuana bibles slide by unremarked for the moment. “You know, I don’t guess many people know that about Steve Rogers.”

Steve smiled, just a touch wickedly. “What, that I drew porn, or that I drew at all? It feels nice to draw again. I didn’t know how much until I just…couldn’t. It was like there was a block there and everything was just… dark. Gone. It’s hard to see beauty when everything feels still and cold.”

Sam shivered a bit, though the room was warm. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“I had a feeling you might,” Steve answered. “Are… you doing all right? It seems to me we never ask, and we should, and---”

“Steve,” Sam said, halting the flow of words. He hadn’t led group therapy sessions at the VA, nor fought alongside Steve Rogers for two years, without gaining the ability to realize how quickly Steve would blame himself for literally anything going wrong, and he hoped to hell Viwe was working with him on that. “I’m…well, I’m not fine. But I’m up and out of bed and dressed and eating. It’s a start. Once Bucky returns, I’m going to contact Dr. Nomsa and see if she can recommend someone to me.”

“So you’re not okay, but you’re going to be?” Steve summarized. “That about it?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. This is just a bad day.” I hope he didn’t have to say.

“Okay,” Steve said. “But you’ll ask me, or tell someone, if you need help?”

“Yeah, I will,” Sam said.

“All right,” Steve answered. “Viwe told me a story about the black panther. Did you want to hear it?”

Story time with Steve Rogers. What even is my life? Sam wondered, then realized---Steve was worried about Bucky, probably also worried about him, and instead of taking it out on the nearest punching bag, was trying to find some other, more positive ways of dealing with his emotions. “Sure, man. Talk away.”

***

Laura didn’t say a word as she hustled Bucky into his bedroom later that day. Sam could hear some murmured, soothing words in what sounded like a vaguely Germanic language, before she shut the door. “Migraine,” she said quietly. “This trigger word was awful. Well, I guess they would be.”

“I should have been there,” Sam said tersely, knowing how awful the procedure to remove the
triggers was, and he wasn’t even the patient. “I’m sorry, Laura, that you had to go because I---”

Laura held up a hand to take the mug of coffee Steve handed her; her glare over the rim of the mug was fierce. “Now you wait just a damned minute, Sam Wilson,” she said, and how her whispers could have the force of a shout, he didn’t know, but damn if she wasn’t managing it. “I volunteered. You think I don’t know what it looks like when the walls are starting to close in? I saw it on your face---you keep up a good game, I’ll give you that, but you needed a break. Should have asked for it sooner.”

Steve muttered something about *pot, meet kettle* from the kitchen; Sam chose to ignore him. Yeah, okay, maybe he and Steve did have a few things in common, but hell if he was going to admit it right now. “But the trigger word is gone?” Sam asked.

“Dr. Nomsa thinks so, as does Shuri. I’d ask Wanda but she’s down for the count herself. Natasha’s with her now, says it’s just a case of exhaustion.” She took a sip of the coffee. “The doc says you have some pain medicine for Bucky?”

“I do,” Sam said, rising from the couch. “He only has a migraine? No other symptoms?”

“Dr. Nomsa did a quick exam before we left. She didn’t see a reason to admit him, so I think you’re good there,” Laura answered.

That was good, in that it meant he could skip some of the neurological function tests he’d ordinarily have performed and just let Bucky rest. Sam opened the hall closet and prepared the syringe of the pain medication that had worked so well on both Steve and Bucky’s migraines. He drew the medication into the syringe, then tapped it to get rid of the air bubbles and walked (quietly, he hoped,) into the room Bucky and Steve shared.

Bucky’s face was partially mashed into the pillows; one grey eye opened a sliver, then closed. “Hey,” he managed. “Come to give me the good stuff?”

“Only the best Wakandan vintage,” Sam said with a smile. Luckily, Bucky’s remaining arm was closest to him. “Okay, I’m going to inject you now---”

“No need to give me the speech, Sam,” Bucky said. “I trust you.”

*That* rocked Sam back on his heels a bit. “Thanks, Bucky. Okay, just a quick pinch and…”

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“I’d wondered when you’d contact me,” Dr. Nomsa said, a touch archly. “I would have thought it might have been before the captain and the sergeant received help.”

Sam scrubbed his face, remembering that he’d forgotten to shave. “I’m sorry. I… it didn’t seem like I needed to, that I was handling things until I just…wasn’t.”

Her face softened. “I understand. You realize I can’t ask Dr. Methuli or Viwe to take you on as a patient?”

“Of course not,” Sam answered. Just handling Steve or Bucky would be a large enough caseload without adding his own issues into the mix. “I had a prescription, before, for anti-depressants. I’d weaned myself off of them but I’m thinking I may need to go back on them.” The words stuck in his throat even as he said them, but he forced them out. He wasn’t wild about the medication, reminding
him as they did of the horrible grey months after Riley’s death, but he couldn’t deny that they’d helped.

“All right,” Dr. Nomsa said, “I’ll set you up with someone who has prescribing authority as well, in case that’s necessary. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The words were not perfunctory, Sam knew; her title in Wakandan translated most closely to “healer” and she took her responsibilities seriously. “No, thank you, that’s more than fine.”

“Very well,” she replied. “I’ve sent a request out to the four or five counselors who, like Viwe and Dr. Methuli, have also trained in Western psychotherapy, as you may find the combined approaches beneficial. One or more of them will contact you this evening.”

Sam nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Just… be well, Samuel. That is the goal, is it not?”

***

Dr. Fundani was short, balding, with the no-nonsense air of Sam’s first TI. Sam found himself warming to the man almost immediately. “Dr. Nomsa has, of course, given me the rough outlines of your particular situation. Shall we meet on Friday afternoon to discuss matters in detail or do you need a faster appointment?”

Friday was just a couple of days away. Sam marveled at the idea he could get an appointment with any kind of mental health specialist so fast. *We should turn Wakanda loose on the VA,* he thought irreverently. “Friday will be fine,” he said. “Thank you.”

Dr. Fundani inclined his head. “It is, as you Americans say, no problem. Take care, Samuel, and I’ll see you then.”

The holograph flickered out in time for Sam to see Steve enter the living room. “That your guy?”

Sam nodded. “Dr. Fundani, yeah. I get the feeling he could bench press me if I don’t listen to him.”

“Hell, I get that feeling about Shuri, let alone everyone else here. These people are something fierce.” There was a smudge of chalk in his hair and on the collar of his shirt; Steve ran a hand through his hair, making the smudge worse. “I’m…uh, glad you’re seeing someone too.”

Sam noticed Steve’s shirt was inside out and smothered a grin. It was still too soon in Steve’s own therapy for much to have changed; he was still far thinner than he should be, and he wasn’t sleeping much more than he did before. But something in him seemed to have unbent a little, and Sam was glad to see it. “I never thought I’d get in to see someone so fast, but it makes sense.”

Steve raised an inquiring eyebrow. “I noticed it in the materials they gave us when we first came---remember all the emphasis on tribe and family lines?” Steve nodded. Sam went on, “If the basic tribal group is the family, family stability is of first importance for the tribe to stay strong. Therefore, they don’t mess around when it comes to physical or mental health. I have to say, that’s refreshing as hell, especially when I think of the number of times I had to wrangle the VA to get care for one of my soldiers.”

Steve rubbed his chin, clearly mulling that one over. “That makes a lot of sense. Right now I think Viwe’s strongest emotion with me is a general sense of horror that I didn’t get effective help sooner. Strangely, fighting space aliens two weeks after I woke up after being frozen for seventy years wasn’t something he’d recommend.”
Sam rolled his eyes. “If Nick Fury ever decides he’s not dead, he and I have to have a few words. Then Viwe can say his piece.”

“You’ll have to stand in line ahead of Bucky,” Steve said dryly. “When I told him about the hospital room setup when I first...awoke, and the cabin they sent me to so I’d ‘feel better’? I think he maybe invented some new curses. God, his ma would have washed both our mouths out with soap---him for cursing, me for causing him to curse.”

Sam had a healthy respect for Bucky’s temper when it came to anything that threatened Steve. “Um, yeah. I can imagine. So...um, you two? It’s good? You’re all right?”

“We’re muddling through,” he replied with a fond smile. “Still healing, still trying to sort ourselves out. But yeah, it’s good. You don’t need to worry about us, Sam.”

“I’m not---” Sam began, but stopped. He was worried, and it wasn’t like he didn’t have good reason. “Okay, fine, you got me there.”

“Maybe you need to take your mind off things. Buck was telling me about the new doc, Lindelwa?”

“Steven Rogers,” Sam said, utterly delighted. “Are you trying to set me up?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Um, maybe?” He grinned suddenly. “You can’t tell me you’d mind.”

“No,” Sam answered, thinking of Lindelwa’s braids bouncing in the Wakandan sunshine, and the warmth of her smile. “The women here are something else.”

***

The bad day stretched into two, then three. Sam had about enough energy to get a shower and retreat to the couch, but that was about it. When Steve or Bucky left for meetings with their own therapists, someone else stepped in---Wanda, sometimes, or Laura or Clint or Natasha. He was by himself but not alone, not really. And it helped, some. Nobody insisted he talk and Sam found himself with some new appreciation for why Steve didn’t talk much about his feelings until very recently. Talking was exhausting.

On the afternoon of the third day, Dr. Fundani came to the apartment. Steve and Bucky had returned from a trip to the market and Steve was sketching out what looked to be an animal enclosure of some sort. He’d labeled it at the top... “You guys are thinking about getting goats?” Sam asked.

“We saw some at the market, yeah,” Bucky answered. “Not gonna get some for here, of course, but later, once we have our shit sorted out.”

Sam studied the two of them. Steve hadn’t known what made him happy when Sam had first met him, and that had only been the first of a very long series of warning bells. And as for Bucky--- he could hardly be further from the menacing (and frankly, fucking terrifying) Winter Soldier then he was right now, barefooted, wearing a t-shirt and jeans, sitting at the kitchen table. And now, here they were, beginning to plan a future. It was...remarkable, on many levels.

There was a knock at the door. “My turn to get my shit sorted,” Sam said wryly. “I’ll be back later on.”

“Better wear walking shoes,” Steve said cryptically. “My last couple of therapy sessions involved some hiking.”
Sam had to think for a moment—where were his hiking boots, anyway?—before he remembered they were in the back of the closet. “I’ll get the door,” Bucky said. “Go and get ready.”

He walked into his bedroom, hearing Bucky answer the door in his careful Wakandan. The boots were under the folded pile of the clothes he’d arrived in, clothes which were mostly too heavy for Wakanda’s tropical heat. And he wondered, not for the first time, if he’d ever wear them again, if he’d ever return home. He sat down heavily on the bed. Gideon, Sarah, Jody, Mama. Half a world away, where he couldn’t do anything to protect them. Damn. Just…damn.

There was a very polite knock on the bedroom door. “Sam?” Steve asked. “Is it okay if I come in?”

Sam started. How long had he been sitting there, lost in thought? The door creaked slightly and Steve—who could walk amazingly quietly for such a big man—closed the door behind him and sat next to him on the bed. “Bucky’s accent isn’t that great, apparently, but Dr. Fundani is being very politely amused about it,” Steve said. “They’ll be occupied for a few minutes. Are you… all right?”

Sam scrubbed his face. “Nah, man. You ever—” and then he stopped, because of course, Steve knew exactly this kind of disconnect, finding his place in the world and the world around him unutterably changed. “Never mind. I’m being stupid.”

“I doubt that,” Steve replied. “Look, I…I can tell Dr. Fundani that today isn’t a good day for your appointment, if you want. But I think you should go.”

Steve was right and Sam knew it. “All right. You’re not wrong, man.”

“We’ll have dinner ready when you come back. I’ll even eat some,” Steve answered with his usual self-deprecating humor.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Sam retorted with no heat. Steve turned to leave. “Hey,” Sam went on, “Thanks, Steve.”

Steve inclined his head slightly—a Wakandan gesture he seemed to have picked up. “It’s no more than you deserve, Sam.”

***

Whatever Sam had expected the Wakandan version of therapy to be, it wasn’t this. The doctor had arrived at his door with a small basket containing what looked like craft supplies (Sam winced; he was pretty sure Jody could draw better than he could, and she was eight) and another bag full of… rushes? He wasn’t sure.

“Come,” Dr. Fundani said, “we have some work to do.”

Sam followed obediently. He really didn’t know (and hadn’t asked) what Steve’s therapy sessions were like, or Bucky’s, but they were obviously working for them. “Where are we going?”

“To the river,” Dr. Fundani said. “Where else?”

The river was a large body of water near the outskirts of Birin Zana, the doctor explained as they walked. In places it was a nearly dried up creek bed, in others, it was far deeper, fed by both glaciers and several waterfalls along its kilometers-long path from the mountains. This particular river, the doctor went on to say, had its origins in the Jabari homelands and was sacred to them.

Sam had spent summers visiting his grandmother in New Orleans and as they neared the water, something in him began to settle. It wasn’t the same muddy waters as the Mississippi---how could it
be?---but it was something familiar, a rhythm he’d all but forgotten in the sound of water over rocks, the smell of wind through the trees. There was a large thatched hut near the river, set back a ways from it by a narrow path. Sam eyed the hut cautiously; given what he now knew about the Wakandan attitude towards technology, chances were good the hut wasn’t nearly as primitive as it seemed. “Come along, Samuel,” the doctor beckoned. “It won’t bite you."

Sam flushed. “I’m sorry, I---”

Dr. Fundani smiled. “I went to medical school at Stanford University. The culture shock was unlike anything I have ever felt, before or since. The hut was my grandmother’s and she left it to me when she rejoined our ancestors. I use it now for…when I need to get away, mainly. My partner does not care for the river—he doesn’t swim--- so I always come here alone.” As they reached the door of the hut, the doctor opened the door, but with a gesture, asked him to wait outside. “Walk with me please. It’ll just be a few moments.”

Sam watched as the older man scooped something--grains, maybe?---with his cupped hands from a container near the door and walking back out to the river, murmured a few words (a prayer? a blessing? Sam didn’t know) and flung the grains out into the river. “There,” Dr. Fundani said with satisfaction. “Now we may begin.”

Sam had not spent a good chunk of his last two military tours in Iraq and Afghanistan without having enough sense to know when not to ask questions, but the older man’s face was smiling, open and encouraging. “What did you just do?” Sam asked cautiously.

“There are…older beliefs, ancient ones, that our ancestors never leave us, that they are found in the wind and the sun and the water. It never hurts to give Them food, now and then.” His mouth quirked. “My grandmother was of the river tribe; her father was Jabari. Seemed a good idea to remember Them here, alongside a river that was sacred to them both.”

Sam nodded. Dr. Fundani went on, “You still have the bag of rushes? Excellent. We’re going to make some baskets.”

“I’ve…never made a basket,” Sam admitted.

Dr. Fundani grinned. “Excellent. Then all the time to start.” He led them to a shaded path to the rear of the hut; the area was flat and bordered with small wildflowers. “Hand me the bag if you will.”

Sam did as he was told and watched as the doctor sorted out the rushes by size. “I always prefer doing something with my hands when I talk.” Once the rushes were sorted, five of the medium-sized ones into parallel rows, Dr. Fundani resumed talking. “So, Samuel, lay out your own reeds and tell me why you are here.”

Sam tilted his head. “Here with you? Or here in Wakanda?”

The doctor’s smile was mysterious. “Either. Both. You decide.”

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The afternoon wore on. They didn’t talk much, which astonished Sam later when he thought about it. For at least a few hours, their only conversation had been Sam had been Dr. Fundani’s calm patient instructions. Sam had begun, and failed to make, two baskets before the doctor’s instructions on the third basket finally made sense and while the basket probably wouldn’t hold water, it was at least recognizable as a basket. Sam told the doctor the story of how he ended up in Wakanda in the first place, all because a blond asshole on his morning run kept saying “on your left.”
“I shouldn’t really blame Steve, though,” Sam said. “I could have said no. Fed them and sent them on their way.”

“But you didn’t,” the doctor said, mild as milk. “Are you…angry with them that this wasn’t what you’d expected, being uprooted like this? That your act of good allowed such chaos in your life?”

Sam almost muttered that the doctor should have seen his life before Steve Rogers to see real chaos. He hadn’t been that many months out of daily therapy himself when they’d met. “Not angry with them, no,” Sam said. “But the situation---none of this shit needed to happen.”

“To which staggeringly large pile of shit do you refer, Samuel?” Dr. Fundani asked dryly, bending and twisting his own rushes with the skills of long practice. “It seems your group has endured much. There are many such piles we might discuss.”

Sam nearly choked on his tongue for laughing. When he could speak again, he said, “The Sokovian Accords, for one. Secretary Ross shows up at the compound a day after the bombing in Lagos, says we’re vigilantes who need to be controlled, and just drops the Accords on us. And Tony Stark---who fought with all of these guys before I did---lets him…say all that without so much as a word of protest. Never mind that the WSC was planning to nuke Manhattan, or that Steve and Natasha taking down Hydra saved millions of lives, or---”

“You were present when SHIELD fell, I understand?” the doctor asked, adding drops of water to keep the rushes supple.

“Got the burn marks to prove it, yeah,” Sam answered. “Why?”

“Because you leave yourself out of the narrative,” Dr. Fundani replied. “It’s curious. You were there. They would not have succeeded without you. And yet, you fail to mention that your role was important, that you were there.”

His hands clenched; Sam placed the fragile rushes to the side they wouldn’t get crushed. “Yeah, I was there but nobody’s opinion of this thing was asked. Not mine, not Steve’s, not Natasha’s, nobody’s. It was handed to us, all nice and bound and oh, it’s being voted on in three days. Read it quick so you can sign.” He made an exasperated sound. “Steve read the thing. Nobody else could wade through it so fast. What he saw there was enough to concern him and I figured I could do a lot worse than trust Steve Rogers. Then I read it and…yeah. He was right to be concerned where it was leading. We should all have been concerned. Even most especially the people who signed.”

Dr. Fundani accepted this with a nod. “Even so. If you were feeling angry with him, with anyone, it would be understandable. You were there. You saw SHIELD fall. You saw what happens when large security organizations are infested with an agenda. Yet your concerns were dismissed and ignored. And now you are here, separated from your family and all that was familiar to you.”

When Dr. Fundani spoke, it was to make what felt ridiculous seem normal, even accepted. “I was a soldier before,” Sam tried to insist. “I know what it’s like to be away from my family.”

“But this was different,” the doctor said. “Wasn’t it? Tell me, Samuel--- if all things and circumstances were equal, and your family was safe and secure--and you could go home right now, would you?”

The question brought Sam up short. Asking “what if” was a game he’d tried to train himself out of playing after years of being a soldier, but he thought about it now. His family was there in the US, in Harlem, in New Orleans, and he worried for them daily, and missed them with a constant ache. But if he could return right that second? If his family was safe and not at any risk? “No,” he replied,
surprising himself in the instant he said the words. “I like it here.” And it was true; Lindelwa’s presence aside, there was so much about Wakanda that was appealing. He felt freer here, in ways he couldn’t yet explain.

“Then I suggest, for our next session, that you work on accepting that you too have a right to a life where you can be happy. And if that means staying right here? Then work on accepting that as well. And I recognize that circumstances are not at all equal, and your family is not safe, but perhaps we may be able to put your mind at ease on that score as well.” The doctor set his rushes aside. “Now, let us talk of your physical symptoms. Dr. Nomsa and I have consulted over the readings from your bracelet and we do believe some medication in the short term may be of assistance.” He pulled out a small bead from his pocket and Sam recognized it instantly as being similar to the extra one Steve had worn on his bracelet since he started seeing Viwe. “Our medication for both physical and mental illnesses is tailored to an individual’s unique chemistry. Tomorrow, I should have the readings from this bead, and will have your prescription ready for you.”

“Just like that?” Sam asked, taking the bead from him and sliding it onto his own bracelet. Even having seen Wakandan technology up close, it was still difficult to believe. He’d seen the small, faintly glowing purple pills on Steve’s nightstand, proof that that Wakandan science had been able to do the impossible and successfully medicate a super soldier, but it was still astonishing.

“Just like that,” Dr. Fundani confirmed.

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Riley came to visit him that night. Sam, hours later and wide awake, wasn’t even surprised. Therapy, as he well remembered, had a way of stirring up old demons and Riley was surely one of his oldest and most persistent. This time, the Riley that appeared wasn’t the bloodied pilot of his first nightmares in Wakanda. This was Riley from their EXO-7 training, the carefree pilot with the sandy hair and an easy smile and a beer bottle in his hand. Even then he’d always known where the best bars were.

“So, you gonna forget them too?” Riley asked, fussing with a beer bottle cap. “Just like you forgot me?”

Sam sighed. “No, man. How could you even think that?”

“You used to think about me every day,” Riley said, “now it’s only once in a while. Soon you won’t remember me at all.” He ran a hand threw his hair. “You still call Katie?”

Katie was Riley’s widow; she’d been in the process of divorcing him when he’d been killed. “She’s the mother of your daughter, so yeah, I check in with her now and then.”

“Nice of you,” Riley drawled, “stepping in for me.”

Sam almost laughed. Katie had made it very clear that while she appreciated his occasional phone calls, she was going to raise their daughter very far away from both Riley’s friends and his family. Having had close knowledge of Riley’s family, Sam honestly couldn’t blame her. “Why are you here, man?”

“Seems like you might be in danger of forgetting what your duties are,” Riley said. Sam laughed; Riley lecturing him about duty? “You’re getting yourself a nice cozy life here, but what about everyone else? Everything else?”
That drew blood. “Some lecture, coming from you,” Sam retorted, furious. “Who was it who kept pulling you out of bars—”

“I’m just saying, man, if you weren’t so distracted by that pretty doctor, you’d—”

His clenched fist hit Riley’s nose before he’d even thought about it. In reality, they’d never fought like this, but maybe they should have at least once, Sam thought. Might have cleared the air of all the things they never had been able to say to each other. Riley reeled back, but instead of returning the blow, he grinned and wiped his bloody nose. It wasn’t broken, Sam assessed, though since this was a dream… “I expect I deserved that some.”

Sam’s fist ached a bit—he wasn’t a boxer like Steve, used to punching out his frustrations. “More than,” he grunted. “What the hell, man?”

“Just wanted to make sure you’d thought this thing through,” Riley said. “You’re seriously considering staying here?”

Sam nodded. “We haven’t been asked, but… yeah. If they ask, I might. Turns out I’ve been fighting for a government that isn’t the slightest bit interested in fighting for us.”

Riley grinned. “Now you get it.” He reached towards him and—

---Sam opened his eyes and sagged against the pillows. It wasn’t even dawn yet---dammit, Riley ---and he knew he’d never get back to sleep. He pulled on some loose pants and made his way into the kitchen, only to find Steve there, staring off into space. A cup of tea steamed faintly next to his clenched right hand. “Bad dreams?” Sam asked softly.

Steve made a face approximating a smile, but missing it by a mile. “You could say that. His and mine both. Why are you up?”

“Same,” Sam admitted. “Another nightmare of Riley.” He nudged the teacup a little closer to Steve. “Come on, soldier. I’ll buy you a drink.”

***

“I should take a picture of this,” a voice drawled. Sam opened his eyes. He was sitting on the couch, leaning against Steve. His head had been resting against Steve’s shoulder---Steve, who was somehow still asleep and snoring lightly---and Bucky was watching them both with glee. “Send it to Shuri. She’d get a kick out of it.”

Sam had had a teenaged sister once; he could only imagine Shuri’s reaction. He sat up slowly, hoping he wouldn’t wake Steve, and glared up at the other man. “You wouldn’t.”

Bucky folded his arms. “Wanna bet?”

“Shuri does not need to see me snoring, Buck,” Steve’s voice grumbled from beside him. His hair was sticking up all over the place, and Sam smothered a grin.

Sam noticed one of the beads on his bracelet was flashing---the communications bead. “Oh, look, someone’s been trying to call me.”

“You’re not getting out of this, Sam,” Bucky said with no heat. “I think I’ll have the photo printed, hang it up somewhere…”

Sam waved a one-fingered salute at him to the sound of Steve’s laughter, and retreated to his
bedroom. He had two messages—one from Dr. Fundani, advising him that his medication would be ready for pickup at Dr. Nomsa’s clinic later on this afternoon, and the second message, marked URGENT, was from the king. He glanced down at himself and sighed. If he was going to talk to the king, in a message that would almost certainly involve a hologram, he wasn’t going to do it in his pajamas. He made a notation to the king’s message that said he’d received the message and would be contacting him shortly and left to take the shortest shower he’d taken since the Air Force.

A few minutes later, clean and relatively awake, he reopened the communications program and waiting while the security protocol established itself. A few seconds later, T’Challa’s face, unusually grave, appeared. “Greetings, Samuel. I am sorry to contact you so early, but…”

“You wouldn’t have done it if there wasn’t a good reason,” Sam replied. “What’s going on?”

“Are you available to meet with me, say in an hour or so?” The king looked uncomfortable. “I must also request that only you come, for now.”

Oh, sure, I’m just gonna walk on over to the palace and several of the planet’s most perceptive people aren’t going to wonder why, Sam thought but didn’t say. Some of this must have shown on his face because T’Challa smiled. “I won’t ask you to keep secrets once we’ve done talking, but… for now, I need this to be a one on one discussion. Who you tell afterwards, is of course up to you.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” Sam responded.

The king looked relieved. “Thank you, Samuel.”

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T’Challa looked tired, Sam noticed, but nevertheless had a smile ready for him as he led him into what looked like a conference room. Okoye took her position behind the king, facing the doors. “Thank you for coming so soon,” the king said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you more earlier but---”

Sam shook his head. “It’s fine, honest. What did you want to tell me?” And why only me? Why not Steve or Bucky?

“You are aware that Wakanda is petitioning to join the UN,” T’Challa began, and Sam nodded. “Through diplomatic and other….channels related to that petition, I received some information which is potentially very concerning. Secretary of State Ross has intensified his search for Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, and Bruce Banner. He’s become convinced that we’re hiding all of them.” His expression turned sour. “It’s apparently not enough for him to have control over the enhanced people in his own country.”

“Well, Steve was the first—and only—real success, and Ross and Dr. Banner go way back. From what I’ve heard, there are some really toxic waters under that particular bridge. And capturing the Winter Soldier and bringing him to trial would be quite a coup.” Sam ran a hand through his hair, aware that he needed a haircut. “I will never understand how Ross isn’t in jail. Especially after the mess in Harlem.”

“Agreed,” T’Challa replied. “Our sources report that Ross is using his influence over the president to get him to agree to a plan to… extract the three of them from Wakanda. We, of course, do not have knowledge of Dr. Banner’s whereabouts, but I doubt the truth will concern Ross much.” T’Challa folded his hands and the ring on his hand flickered dully in the light. “I will be honest. My advisors and I agree that Ross is only guessing as to the captain’s and the sergeant’s location. We will either be told to agree to an ‘inspection’ by the UN, or see our potential membership in the UN put at risk.”

Sam swallowed around the rock in his throat, fearing what he knew must be coming. “And?” he
“And UN membership isn’t worth it, if our integrity—our honor—is the price,” T’Challa said firmly. “But men like Ross never stop, unless they are made to stop. Ross is as obsessed with the super soldier serum as he is with concentrating his government’s control over metahumans, and if he can’t have Dr. Banner, I suspect the captain and the sergeant would do equally as well.” He paused. “Did you know that Steve had a few encounters with then-General Ross after he was awakened?”

“No,” Sam answered, “he never said.” Because of course he didn’t, Sam thought—when had Steve ever complained, even when he should have?

“He only mentioned it when we discovered the dishonesty surrounding the Sokovia Accords,” T’Challa explained. “The captain has never measured his worth as being of great importance, I suspect, but I was disturbed by what he told me. Ross considered Steve property of the US Army, even after his awakening in 2012, and likely still continues that belief now.”

“So, if I may—- you are preparing for an invasion by Ross and/or his associates and you believe they’ll be coming here to capture Steve and Bucky?” Sam asked. “That about cover it?”

“Yes,” T’Challa answered. “But there is more, the reason why I asked you to come alone. I could not ask this of Steve and Sergeant Barnes—they are wounded, grievously, and they are finally only now beginning to heal—but there is a real likelihood that you’ll be asked to fight. That you all will.”

Sam could feel Okoye’s gaze boring into him. “And you want to know if I would?”

“You can speak only for yourself, I know,” T’Challa said. “Will you fight?”

Sam thought of his conversation with Dr. Fundani only the day before, how this country, this king, had asked literally nothing of them but had given them a place to stay, medical care, and a safe place to call home. The thought that all of it might now be threatened by the same man who had been behind the Sokovia Accords, who had them imprisoned at the Raft, and who had also been instrumental in Wanda’s torture was nauseating. “I will,” Sam said.

“It may not come to that,” T’Challa stated. He glanced at Okoye, saw her minute nod and went on, “Wakandan Intelligence is currently tracing the recipients of several unusual payments Secretary Ross made in the months and weeks immediately before the bombing in Lagos. It’s our current theory that he may be connected to one or more splinter groups that rushed to ally themselves with Hydra after SHIELD fell. If we can get verified proof, it is our intention to release the information to the UN Security Council and the worldwide media. There will be no burying of this story.”

“You mean… Ross is working for Hydra?” Sam asked, appalled but not really surprised.

“I think it more likely—and the head of Wakandan Intelligence agrees with me—that he was using their connections for his own agenda. It’s possible that he hired Crossbones to steal the biological weapon from the laboratory in Lagos, and then leaked the information that Crossbones would be present to lure your team there in the first place. Perhaps he was even working with Helmut Zemo.”

“What does Zemo have to say about this?” Sam wondered.

“We have been informed that he is ‘unavailable for questioning,’ ” T’Challa said. “I have personally been told that they fear for his safety should I encounter him again.”

Considering Zemo had killed T’Challa’s father, Sam thought it was a pretty reasonable concern. “Okay, but surely he’s being interrogated by someone. Who has custody of him now?”
“Officially, the UN Security Council has him in a ‘secure site.’ Unofficially, we suspect he’s being held at a CIA black ops site.”

Sam recalled the CIA official in Leipzig. He’d been Sharon Carter’s boss at the time. “The dude in Leipzig. Everett Ross? He any relation to the Secretary of State?”

“Half-brothers,” T’Challa confirmed. “It is curious, is it not? Coincidental, even, that they should both be rather obsessed with metahumans.”

Everett Ross had seemed a rather typical bureaucrat, up until the point where he’d denied Bucky Barnes—who was an American citizen, regardless of whatever else he’d been forced to be in the last seventy years—an attorney. “Are they working together?”

“If they are, they’re being very careful.” The king breathed out. “Even with our resources, this is a very… complex web to untangle,” he went on. “Our hope is that we can stop Secretary Ross with the results of our investigation before he has time to amass the kind of political support he’d need to invade Wakanda. And that once he is exposed, his other allies will fall with him.” He spread his hands, and Sam remembered those same hands, sheathed in vibranium gloves, tipped in claws. “And if Secretary Ross is foolish enough to come to Wakanda himself, well… We will have our ways of dealing with him. Lying to the king as he did is lying to the people of Wakanda. It is not something we would take lightly.”

Sam blew out his breath. “I’ll have to tell Steve and Bucky this---hell, everyone should know.”

“I would expect nothing less,” T’Challa said. “Speak to your team. Ask them what they are willing to do, and we will meet again once you have their answers.”

“I’m not their leader,” Sam protested.

“Aren’t you? At least one of the leaders?” T’Challa asked. “Do you not look out for them? Do you not count on them looking out for you? What else would you call it?” He smiled. “Do not undervalue yourself.”

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After he left the palace, Sam walked to the clinic to pick up his medication, his mind in a daze over what he’d heard. He turned a corner sharply and ran right into something soft and… “Oh, no. Dr. Lindelwa, I’m so sorry!”

Lindelwa smiled. “It’s fine, Samuel.” She reached up to rearrange coral-colored comb behind her right ear, knocked slightly askew when he’d run into her. “You seem preoccupied. Is everything all right?”

Yeah, he might have said, I just left from a meeting with the king, who told me I might have to fight against my own country to keep my friends from a power-mad general and the head of the CIA. “Just… a lot on my mind. You know how it goes.”

Lindelwa smiled. “It’s fine, Samuel.” She reached up to rearrange coral-colored comb behind her right ear, knocked slightly askew when he’d run into her. “You seem preoccupied. Is everything all right?”

Yeah, he might have said, I just left from a meeting with the king, who told me I might have to fight against my own country to keep my friends from a power-mad general and the head of the CIA. “Just… a lot on my mind. You know how it goes.”

She made a supremely Wakandan noise in her throat, which Sam had learned roughly translated as, “I know you’re not telling me the full story, but you will eventually, so I’m pretending for the moment that I don’t know you’re lying.” Aloud, she said. “I’m on my way to the pharmacy. Would you… like to walk with me?”

“A lovely lady on a day like today?” Sam said lightly. “How could I say no?”

“I’ve just come off a twelve hour shift,” Lindelwa retorted with a smile. “You might… need your
vision checked.”

Now that he had a chance to look at her, Sam could see that she did look a bit rumpled, but he wasn’t nearly fool enough to say so. “My vision is fine.”

They talked for a bit as they walked; Sam learned that Lindelwa normally worked in the ER at the hospital, that there’d been a flitter collision the night before (“which shouldn’t have happened at all, but they’d disabled the anti-collision system so they could fly faster. It’s a miracle any of them are alive.”) and that she was very much looking forward to taking over their care while Dr. Nomsa was with her daughter and new grandchild.

It was easy to talk to her, Sam found; she didn’t have any expectations of him beyond that he was the king’s guest (and as T’Challa was well-liked, and his family deeply respected, that carried some weight.) It was nice to just…exist without the weight of all the numerous hats he’d worn. Just before they reached the pharmacy, Lindelwa turned to him. “Samuel, Dr. Nomsa leaves at the end of the week. I will be your doctor for the next couple of months. Once she returns….would you like to have dinner?”

“You mean, on a date?” Sam asked, wanting to be sure.

Lindelwa nodded. “Yes. I would like to see more of you… in the non-clinical sense.”

Sam blinked, then started laughing. Lindelwa’s dark eyes danced. “I like the sound of your laughter, Samuel,” she told him. “I don’t think you’ve used it much lately.”

“Probably not,” he acknowledged. “But who knows? Maybe I’ll get the chance.”

She was standing close enough that he could have kissed her, or she could have kissed him. But he stood still and the moment passed. Lindelwa smiled, and he had the sense he’d passed some sort of test. “Later, then.”

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Steve leaned back on the couch and scrubbed at his face for a moment. “So we may have to fight?” he asked when Sam had finished. To Sam’s trained eye, he looked wan and tired, as if the thought of being a soldier again was exhausting. Sam could relate.

“T’Challa is hoping not, but yeah, it’s a possibility. To Secretary Ross, you’re still government property,” Sam told him.

“Which is what happens when you volunteer for a government experiment,” Bucky said acidly.

The words had the ring of a well-worn argument and Steve rolled his eyes. “I don’t think you’re off the hook here---Ross wants you too, Buck.”

“Of course he does. I don’t blame him---I did some horrible things under Hydra---but I’m not going to let him just take me. I know what his game plan is.” His grey eyes grew cold. “Ross will want to dangle my freedom, or yours, in exchange for my…services. In the interim, there will be experiments and then cryo. Or just cryo. That’s what men like him do.”

Sam didn’t know which Ross he was referring to, but it scarcely mattered. If the CIA thought they could make use of the Winter Soldier’s skill set… “So you’ll fight too?” he asked.

Bucky clasped Steve’s hand hard. “I haven’t fought on the actual side of right for seventy years. It’ll be a nice change. Yeah, I’ll fight.”
“What about you, Steve?” Sam asked.

“Where he goes, I go,” Steve answered, jaw squaring in a look Sam had seen a dozen times, in battles all over the world. He was sad to see it return. “I’ll fight too, if it comes to it.”

***

By the end of the day, he had answers from almost all of the ex-Avengers. Laura Barton, now visibly pregnant, was going to go with her children to a safe house in the country’s interior if either Ross came to Wakanda. Clint had agreed to fight, as had Wanda. Sam had been a little surprised at Wanda’s agreement—the young woman was far from a coward, but she’d been treated the worst of them all at the Raft. He wouldn’t have blamed her at all if she’d decided to go with Laura.

Wanda made a small motion with her hands and a curl of red smoke danced in the air. “I cannot let my fears dictate my actions, Sam. Twice I’ve lost my home due to the actions of powerful men; there will not be a third time.”

Sam spared a moment to regret all over again that such a young woman had lost so much in her life, but only a moment. Wanda was a fierce, powerful fighter and should it come to a battle, they’d need her. “All right,” he said. “Where is Natasha, do you know?”

“Wakandan Intelligence sent a flitter for her early this morning,” Wanda reported. “She told me they wanted to debrief her on Karpov’s notebooks and the Winter Soldier manual she found in Siberia.” Wanda clasped her hands together, and Sam didn’t miss how pale she was. “I didn’t try to stop them. Is that… is she in any danger?”

“I doubt it,” Sam said with a confidence he didn’t entirely feel. None of them had had direct dealings with Wakandan Intelligence but the rumors of a vast and effective global spy network had run rampant for decades. “Have you seen a situation that Natasha Romanoff couldn’t get herself out of if things went south?”

“No,” Wanda agreed, “but she was concerned when she left.”

As much as Steve was the soldier, Natasha was the spy. For her to be concerned was…DEFCON levels of alarm for anyone else. Sam breathed out, forcing calm. “She had her kimoyo bracelet on?”

Wanda nodded. “The beads were lit too.”

“All right,” Sam replied. “That’s something. I need to contact the king and let him know what we’ve all decided. I’ll ask about Natasha too.”

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“That is…welcome news,” the king told him. “Thank you. I know you didn’t come here to fight.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “But we’ve all found…things worth fighting for here.”

T’Challa smiled. “That also is good to hear. Do you have any questions I may answer?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “Natasha is being debriefed by Wakandan Intelligence, so I haven’t had a chance to speak with her.”

“More correctly, she was debriefed by the head of Wakandan Intelligence, my fiancée, Nakia,” T’Challa answered. “Their meeting is over and as of a few minutes ago, they were enjoying a late lunch. Please forgive us for not making it clear to Ms. Maximoff that we weren’t taking Natasha into
custody. She should be back within the next hour or so.”

Sam nodded. “Wanda…where she comes from, that entire scene would have played out very differently. Intelligence forces in Sokovia were also death squads. Zemo ran one himself, and I’m sure there were others.”

There was a minute shift in T’Challa’s expression. “As to Zemo, I have some news. He was found dead in his cell this morning. He hung himself.”

“That seems…convenient,” Sam said. He pictured the tiny cell Bucky had been imprisoned in after their capture in Leipzig, and the slightly larger cells of the Raft. “How did he find anything to strangle himself with? We didn’t even have sheets.”

“That is among several very intriguing questions,” T’Challa responded, “and while I can’t say his presence will be much missed, I am perturbed that he escaped Wakandan justice. Nevertheless, as you say, his death is no doubt very convenient for Secretary Ross. We shall have to redouble our efforts to uncover the rest of the conspiracy.”

***

Not surprisingly, nobody slept that night. Sam, awake in his bed, could almost have set his watch by it. Bucky, who had been the first to go to bed, was also the first to emerge from the bedroom he shared with Steve. Then there was the creak of the door opening again, and Steve’s low murmurs. Sam stared at his clock for a few minutes, then shoved the covers back and left his bedroom.

“Hi guys,” he said, “this club got openings?”

Steve and Bucky were sitting at the kitchen table, not really touching, but there was a cozy, warm feeling about them, the oh-there-you-are of not being alone, maybe. Sam wondered if he’d ever have that kind of closeness with someone; he’d dated some, but the relationships hadn’t worked out long-term. “Sure it does,” Bucky said, voice gravedled and sleep-worn. “I’m not sure what we’re calling the club, though.”

Steve yawned, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse as if he’d been screaming. “I personally vote for the ‘Fuck It, Can We Ever Stop Fighting?’ club, but I know that’s a mouthful.”

It was a mouthful. It was also the exact last thing Sam would have expected Steve Rogers to ever say. “This shit with Ross—I hate bullies, and he’s one of the worst. But I also really want to just…stop,” Steve went on. “I want all of us to be allowed to stop fighting.”

Sam could have hugged him for admitting anything of the sort. But Steve was still touch shy and probably—after his nightmare—feeling prickly and raw. Instead, Sam just smiled. “I don’t blame you one damn bit, man.”

They sat there for a time in silence until Bucky’s stomach growled. “What are you hungry for, Buck?” Steve asked with a smile.

“Do we have the fixings for cookies?” Bucky asked, yet another thing Sam never pictured either supersoldier ever saying.

“I…think we might,” Sam said, trying to imagine how in the world he’d ended up making cookies with two supersoldiers in the middle of the night. “I know I brought home some chocolate chips—-at least, I think they’re chocolate chip-- from the market and there’s eggs and flour. How does that sound?”
“Don’t let Steve bake,” Bucky said suddenly, as if a memory had suddenly unlocked. “He can cook like nobody’s business, but baking…man, I bet they’re still peeling batter off the ceiling from the gingerbread cake you tried to make back in 1934.”

Steve flushed slightly but didn’t deny it. “Not my fault you couldn’t keep the mix in the bowl, Buck.”

It was the commonality of soldiers, Sam thought---aching, tired, weary and so very much over whatever they’d been asked to do, but determined nonetheless---and he remembered a nighttime confession in the desert near Khandahar. Riley, unable to sleep though it was his turn. “I don’t think it’s workin’ out with Katie and me,” Riley had said softly. He’d crumpled a letter in one fist. “She’s pregnant.”

That had been a hell of a shock, Sam recalled. Their marriage had been on the rocks since Sam had met Riley during their pararescue training. Adding a child into the mix? “What are you going to do?” Sam had asked.

“Not much I can do,” Riley had said, sounding decades older. “My fault. My responsibility. I’m gonna try harder to be a better husband and father. She says she wants me off the booze, so I’ll try.” He’d flicked the ash off his cigarette. “Of course, it’d help if I wasn’t stuck here.” And Riley had died before ever meeting his daughter, Sam thought now. All the fighting, what had it ever been for?

“Hey,” Bucky said, soft and gravelled. “Are you okay, Sam?”

“Yeah,” he responded. “Just thinking about Riley.” It wasn’t something he normally admitted; mentioning Riley to his family had all but guaranteed some pitying looks. And he got it, or thought he did; there were no friendships like those formed in combat, and losing Riley had been like losing his arm. How could he expect anyone else to understand?

Steve, bless him, just nodded. “You wanna show us where the chocolate chips are?”

***

A late night cookie baking binge pretty much guaranteed they’d all sleep later---Sam, for one, didn’t wake up until he heard the flock of parrots chirping outside his window, and it was almost noon by then. He glanced at the medicine Dr. Fundani had prescribed, the bottle next to his clock; like Steve’s medication, it was a pale purple and seemed to glow faintly. Sam wondered idly what could possibly make medicine do that---aside from radiation, and that didn’t seem to be the Wakandans’ style---but focused on the label. *Take one a day, with food. Do not skip a dose. Do not take more than one per day.* All fairly standard directions. He shrugged and removed a pill from the bottle and walked out into the living room.

Steve was up, scrambling eggs into a large skillet. He was humming something off-key and Sam smiled. He couldn’t ever remember Steve humming anything, ever, and he stood there for a moment, watching the other man. Assessing, as was second nature from his pararescue days, how healthy Steve was or wasn’t. He looked faintly flushed and combined with the slightly messy hair… Sam hid a grin. *Well, well, well…*

“I know you’re watching me,” Steve said, throwing an amused glance at him over his shoulder. “Gonna ask what you’re wanting to, or are you gonna make me guess?”

Sam sat at the table, content to let someone else do the cooking. “How are you doing? I mean, really. And use words other than ‘fine,’ please.”
The eggs were done; Steve took out a couple of plates and started adding eggs, potatoes and cheese to the tortilla-like bread Sam had found at the market. “Breakfast burritos make the 21st century worth it,” Steve said with a satisfied grin. “I made enough for Buck too, when he gets up. Now eat that.”

Sam’s stomach made an obliging growl. As he ate, he noticed that Steve’s portion, while not up to his usual supersoldier standards, was at least a decent amount of food. “My appetite’s coming back slowly,” Steve responded to Sam’s look. “Viwe said after so long without an appetite, it might take a while. But at least food is starting to taste good.”

Sam chewed, swallowed. “Have you noticed any side-effects from the medication?”

“Aside from it glowing on my nightstand, you mean?” Steve observed wryly. “No. The…FDA wasn’t really a part of my pharmacy back in my day, you understand. I’m more astonished that the medication seems to help. Back in my day, it either helped---but got you addicted, or put you at risk of dying---or it didn’t help at all. Either way, it was too expensive for us.”

“I wonder what makes it glow like that,” Sam said.

“I asked,” Steve replied. “But---”

“Sure, now he’s concerned about radiation,” Bucky said from the hallway. Steve grinned, an easy smile Sam hadn’t seen for a long, long while. “Okay, spend almost a century in ice and eventually, you learn to be skeptical about radiation.”

Bucky sat down at the table and aimed an amiable swat at Steve that had no chance at all at connecting. “Maybe that serum gave you some sense after all, punk.”

Steve put a respectable heap of food on Bucky’s plate. “You’re up earlier than normal. Got an appointment today with Dr. Methuli?”

“No, with Shuri. She thinks she’s got an arm ready for me to test.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Steve over Bucky’s bowed head. Almost all of the neural circuitry for his metal arm had been traumatically severed during the fight with Stark in Siberia; to install a new one would almost certainly mean surgery of some kind. And surgery, with Bucky’s own unique traumas, could be all kinds of trouble.

“She gonna install it today or what?” Steve asked. Sam saw his hand tighten on the handle of the skillet, something he seemed to do in moments of high emotion, when Steve forgot for a moment how strong he was.

“Nah, not today,” Bucky replied, scooping the eggs and potatoes into his flatbread. “It’s a test, not full installation. But…if that works okay, I think I want to get it installed soon.”

Steve blinked. “You…do? But you said---”

“I know what I said, punk,” Bucky replied with no heat at all. “I told him I didn’t want the arm until the trigger words were gone,” he added for Sam’s benefit.

“What changed your mind?” Sam asked.

“Been doin’ some reading,” Bucky told him. “I think your mam had a copy of this book— *The Prophet*?”
Steve sat the skillet down on its trivet before he bent the handle. “Yeah, Buck. She did. Mam loved poetry. Used to read it me sometimes, when I couldn’t sleep.”

“Which was all the time,” Bucky interjected. “Between your back and your asthma and every other illness that tried to do you in, I don’t guess you ever slept through the night until…”

Steve’s ears turned pink; Bucky just smiled. “Yeah, until we started sharing a bed. Anyway, there’s a line from one of the poems- ‘life goes not backwards, nor tarries with yesterday.’ I… I want to move forward. I don’t need an arm to do that, necessarily, but it’d help in other ways. Shuri says the arm she’s designing shouldn’t hurt at all.”

During their search for Bucky, both Sam and Steve had read the Winter Soldier’s Kiev file thoroughly. With his medical background, Sam had understood viscerally that the metal arm Hydra had given Bucky had caused him severe pain, but that he’d been…brutally conditioned out of responding to it. That he was willing to undergo surgery---voluntarily---and have the arm reinstalled spoke volumes about where Bucky was now, mentally. “What time are you going over there?”

“After breakfast,” Bucky said. “Oh, and Dr. Lindelwa will be there too, you know, if you want to come with me, Sam.”

“I sense a conspiracy,” Sam replied with a smile. “First Steve, now you. You guys aren’t nearly as subtle as you think you are.”

“Do we look subtle to you?” Bucky asked. “He wore booty shorts and a red, white, and blue suit in the middle of a war, for fuck’s sake, and I’m sure as shit not sure how the Squid Nazis thought my metal arm was anywhere near stealthy.

Steve’s already coming with me, and I figured you’d want to see the doctor.”

“We’ve made plans, for after Dr. Nomsa gets back,” Sam told him. “She’s not gonna date me while I’m her patient. It wouldn’t be right.”

A satisfied, impressed look crossed Bucky’s face and Sam realized---this had been a test, indirectly, of Lindelwa. “Come on, guys, no shovel talks with her, please.”

“We wouldn’t dare,” Bucky said.

Sam rolled his eyes and grinned. “If that’s the best you can do—–”

“It’s not,” Steve put in. “I do innocent better.”

“Ah,” Sam replied. “Dazzling them with bullshit, eh?”

Whatever else Steve might have said was interrupted by the flashing of the communications beads on all their bracelets---something that now seemed more ominous, given what T’Challa had mentioned about Ross’ machinations. Sam tapped his bead and the beads on the others’ bracelets stopped flashing. A hologram of T’Challa appeared. “Forgive me for disturbing you,” the king began without preamble, “but if I could meet with you all in an hour, there have been some new developments.”

There was no mistaking the alarm in T’Challa’s normally measured tones. “Sergeant Barnes,” he went on, “are you there as well?”

“Yes,” Bucky replied.

“I have been…instructed quite firmly—–” and oh, there was amusement there “---to tell you that my sister is able to see you whenever you’ve finished talking with me.”
“Thank you,” Bucky said, bemused

The king’s face sobered. “I will send a car for you in an hour.” He gave a restrained head nod and the hologram winked out.

***

“I apologize for the dramatics and the short notice,” T’Challa said later, after they’d been ushered into an expansive suite of rooms by the king’s guards and told in no uncertain terms to wait. “But we’ve received some new information regarding Secretary of State Ross.” He touched a bead on his bracelet and waited for some kind of biometric security scan to complete. Two holograms appeared in the air. “We’ve conclusively linked the Secretary of State to one of the major Hydra splinter groups, Servants of the Skull. His money hired the mercenaries which attacked the laboratory in Lagos, including Crossbones.”

Wanda paled. The guilt for all the people she hadn’t been able to save was stark on her face. “All those people…died for nothing.”

T’Challa nodded. “The biological weapon in the laboratory, while dangerous, was a red herring. The plan seems to have been to separate Captain Rogers from the rest of his group, and use Crossbones to capture him. Once the captain was captured, Ross believed he could use him as bait to draw out the Winter Soldier. Ross reckoned without Crossbones’ intense…dislike of Captain Rogers, which was the ultimate reason the plan failed. He didn’t think Crossbones would take himself out in an attempt to kill the captain.”

“And what about Zemo?” Sam asked. “Because you can’t tell me Ross put all his eggs in one basket.”

“He didn’t,” T’Challa said. “Zemo was initially hired to flush out the Winter Soldier. Ross didn’t count on Zemo having multiple agendas of his own.”

“And now he’s dead,” Steve stated. “Was Everett Ross behind any of that?”

“It doesn’t appear so,” T’Challa allowed. “The man has what I would consider an unhealthy obsession with weaponizing metahumans, but he doesn’t appear to be involved, directly or otherwise, with his half-brother’s plans.”

“Which doesn’t mean that one of these Servants of the Skull didn’t order Zemo killed,” Laura put in. She shrugged. “I was an analyst at SHIELD. It’s not a hard leap to make.”

“Indeed,” T’Challa said. “We’re still investigating that, but right now we have enough—as you Americans say---rope to hang Secretary Ross with.”

“And what are you planning to do with the information?” Natasha asked, somehow looking as rested and refreshed as if she hadn’t spent most of the previous day debriefing with Nakia. Sam would never know how she did it. “The…political situation in the US right now is volatile. Put succinctly, the current president wouldn’t know the truth if it came up and bit him. And Ross has been one of his staunchest allies.”

T’Challa didn’t look at all dismayed. If Sam were to describe his expression, he would have described it as the cat who ate the canary. “The additional information we received was that the president and his family will have… some major legal troubles of their own to contend with by the end of the week. Regardless, Secretary Ross announced this morning that he’s planning to travel to Wakanda on a ‘fact-finding mission’---spurred on, no doubt, by our recent announcement that we’re
withdrawing from the Sokovian Accords.” He folded his hands. “Once Ross is on Wakandan soil, he will be arrested and charged with arranging the murder of Wakandan nationals in Lagos, and the death of my father. We will then release the information we’ve gathered to the United States and the United Nations.”

“The US will want extradition,” Laura said. “They won’t let you just detain the Secretary of State. They’ll want him tried in the United States.”

“Ah,” T’Challa replied, his expression changing not one whit. “How very unfortunate that we don’t have an extradition treaty with the United States. Or, well, anyone.”

Sam didn’t much care what happened to Ross---Wakandan justice, from what he’d read, was strict, but it was also fair. Still, he didn’t envy the legal wrangling over which nation got first crack at prosecuting Ross. Wakanda hadn’t been the only nation to lose people in Lagos after all. Or in Vienna. “The other reason why I called you all here is…” The king made a gesture to one of the Dora Milaje—Ayo, Sam thought, but couldn’t be immediately certain---who nodded her head shortly and withdrew from the room, only to return carrying a small box.

Ayo placed the box in front of T’Challa. “What I have to say next was not…without a certain amount of discussion with my council. I tell you this so you understand that I did not act unilaterally, that the upper levels of my government were ultimately in full agreement. It was the decision of our council to offer you all citizenship. This provides…an additional layer of protection for you, in that Wakandan citizens cannot be extradited. Inside this box are passports and citizenship documents for all of you.” He offered a faint smile. “Rest assured, we also recognize your US citizenship. For purposes of our laws, you will have dual citizenship. Should your presence here be discovered…well, that will be up to the lawyers to sort out. And that could take…years. There is a sizeable backlog in our courts. Such a shame.”

Sam was sure the same thought was in their all their minds: what the hell? And as he’d expected, it was Steve who spoke first. “Your Highness---”

“T’Challa,” the king corrected mildly.

“T’Challa,” Steve continued. “You’re…I don’t know what to say. You’re risking a lot for us. Why?”

“There’s always a risk when doing what is right,” T’Challa replied with a half-smile. “You have all been observed since you came to my country. At no point have you done anything but try to live your lives, quietly. I have several reports from Cendisa, Samkelo, Dr. Nomsa, Misumzi and others about your adaptations to my country. You are…not at all what we’d feared.” He spread his hands. “We are not a nation which has had much experience with immigrants. But we would have to be blind to not see your value as people.”

And our strategic value as soldiers and spies and former SHIELD agents too, Sam thought; the king was far too clever for that to have escaped his notice. “Take some time,” the king continued. “You do not have to accept, and if you choose not to accept citizenship, you will still have my protection for as long as you stay in Wakanda. I give you my word.”

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“Holy shit,” Steve muttered in the waiting room as they waited for Bucky to finish his appointment with Shuri. The waiting room—if you could call it that—was unlike any other Sam had ever seen. The couches were actually comfortable, for one. Sam flopped down on one couch and considered teasing Steve for the lack of his usual eloquence, but then again, he wasn’t able to come up with much better.
Steve kept an eye on the observation window where they could see Shuri and Bucky as he spoke. “I keep waiting for the other shoe to fall, but maybe there isn’t one, this time.”

“Seems like it,” Sam agreed. “But I would love to know what he said to convince his council.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “And this isn’t exactly going to be an easy decision for any of us---citizenship has its burdens too.”

That was an angle Sam had considered too, but leave it to the strategist to voice it. “Hey man, there’s this thing called the internet. I’m sure we can find out all we need to know about what the fine print is on this proposal. And I don’t think they’re asking you---or wanting you---to be Captain Wakanda.”

Steve smiled. “True enough.” His eyes were on Shuri and Bucky, manipulating some kind of holographic arm in the air; Lindelwa stood off to the side, making notes onto a tablet. Sam took a moment to study Steve, as he might have one of his vets. He looked a little worn, and a lot worried, but there was something in the set of his shoulders that reminded Sam of the man who’d insisted on a dam outside of DC that the Winter Soldier would remember him. “You doin’ all right?” Sam asked.

“For the most part,” Steve answered. “Not fine but not…as bad as I was. Getting there. You?”

Sam watched as Bucky smiled at Shuri and saw Lindelwa’s laugh at something Shuri said to him. “Getting there too, man.”
IX. Women of Valor

Chapter Notes

The structure of this chapter is entirely the fault of both Escapologist and Girlbookwrm. And posting just a couple of days past International Women's Day seems fitting :D

IX. Women of Valor

Laura

They didn’t talk about it until after they’d returned to their apartment, until after the children were fed and got to chatter themselves out before going to bed. Then and only then did Clint and Laura have their own conversation. “We really going to do this?” Clint asked. “Are we really going to commit to staying here?”

Laura took a minute to study him. He wasn’t really upset about the prospect of putting down roots; for Clint, who’d grown up in a succession of foster homes, home was where she and the kids were. “Do you have a better plan?” she asked. “I mean, let’s look at this rationally. Even if we returned to the US, we have to assume that we’re no longer as safe as we were before, especially now.”

His glance fell on the curve of her belly. “You’re not upset that we’re having another baby?”

She smiled. “I’ve never minded having your babies, Clint. Not about to start now. Though this one was a hell of a surprise in more ways than one.” They were having a girl, her Wakandan midwife had said, and the early genetic studies had shown that there were minute changes in her DNA that more closely matched that of native Wakandans---most likely from prenatal exposure to the vibranium that was all around them. Which was another factor; if they returned back to the US, there was an excellent chance this child would end up on the Index, watched and monitored and at risk for the rest of her life. Here? She was safe.

If they stayed.

“And how do you feel about staying?” Clint asked. “I’ve already cost us our home---”

“Ah, no. Let’s put the blame where it belongs, on Tony Stark and his big mouth,” Laura retorted. “You didn’t do anything but try to do what you felt was right. A home…well, I liked that house, you know I did, but you can’t tell me we couldn’t find a place here.” She glanced down at her belly. “In fact, we’ll need to, sooner rather than later. This apartment really isn’t meant for four children and two adults.”

He leaned up against her then, and his arm went around her, solid as always. “So what’s the plan?”

“We take their offer. And we find a place to live.”

“As simple as that?”

“I don’t know how it gets more simple,” Laura replied. “I don’t have any family left, and I’m pretty sure that SHIELD, being Hydra, won’t be wanting my services as a translator or as an analyst. Do we have any ties back in the US?” She very carefully didn’t mention his brother Barney, serving a
life sentence in prison---she didn’t even know which one. Clint had never talked about it.

“You know I don’t,” Clint muttered. “So. We stay?”

“We stay,” she confirmed. “Plus, the kids are making a life here too.”

“And what about you?” Clint asked. “Are you happy here?”

There was something about Wakanda that, as Wanda had observed only the day before, which tended to wrap tight around the heart. They weren’t yet fully a part of this place, but every day, little bits of Wakanda were staying with them. Their kids were already fluent in Wakandan, and were adapting more and more each day. And they were safe, safe as they hadn’t been the States, Nick Fury’s precautions notwithstanding. Nobody was going to create anything like an Index here. Clint wasn’t going to be forced to come out of retirement to head off some new threat---unless he wanted to.

“I did a lot of running,” Laura told him, “when I was a SHIELD analyst. Missions went south, covers got blown, somebody missed a nuance in translation and shit went south. You know how it goes.”

Clint nodded. “And?”

“I don’t think we’ll have to run again here. I don’t think our kids will. I don’t think Wanda will, or Nat. How could I not be happy?”

Only by his slight change in breathing did Laura know Clint was thinking hard about something. “What is it?” she asked.

“Wanda has no place to go, no family left. And as for Nat-- we are her family. We should… make room for them too.”

“If they want, of course,” Laura said. “But Wanda is no longer the scared, grieving girl she was when she first came to Iowa. She’s grown a lot since then. Maybe she’ll want her own place. And as for Nat--- ask her, if you want.”

“You don’t mind?”

The baby moved, slow and purposeful, inside her. “Have I ever? Clint, she’s a part of you. I knew when she first came to stay with us. I don’t think that’s ever going to change. And the kids love her.”

Clint smiled. “They do, don’t they. All right, I’ll ask her.”

“In the morning,” Laura said. She’d long ago gotten used to the idea that Clint’s body operated on time zones of its own, that he might be wide awake while the rest of them slept. Too many years of watchful waiting, of ignoring the needs of his body to take that perfect shot, to be the best sniper there was. And that was before Loki’s meddling in his brain had shot even that version of normal to hell and back. “I’ll talk to the kids. You can have that conversation with Nat. But not before you get some rest.”

He chuckled low against her hair. “Not much you miss, is there?”

“Now you figure that out,” Laura said lightly. “Go to sleep, Clint.”

***
Laura woke early to the sound of Nat’s voice enlisting Cooper and Lila getting breakfast on the table. For a moment, she felt like she was back in the farmhouse in Iowa, and Nat had come to stay, as she often did. But then a parrot squawked outside their window and… *We’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto,* she thought. She closed her eyes, allowing herself thirty seconds to miss their home, to be furious at Tony Stark and his big mouth, to be worried and afraid because this wasn’t the life either of them had intended for their children…and then breathed out, forcing all of that away, forcing herself to deal with what was. They were in Wakanda and they could, they would, make a life here.

The bed was cold beside her; Clint must have been up and gone for a good bit of time then. Concentrating, she could just hear him talking in low tones to Nate. He’d left his hearing aids out on the bedside table and she sighed. She knew they were acting up---had been, since the Raft, but what with one thing and another, Clint hadn’t yet asked for help with them.

She rose and dressed, heading down the short hallway. Nate was in his high chair and Nat was trying to feed him some eggs. Somehow, Nat never looked rumpled and Laura considered that she might have hated her for that, if she didn’t like her so much as a person. Nat held up a cup of hot coffee and Laura smiled. The day was already looking better.

“We were trying to keep it quiet and let you sleep,” Nat said, “but I guess…not so likely, huh?”

“I’ve got three kids and we’re going to have a fourth,” Laura replied with a smile. “Quiet is…about as likely as unicorns munching on the front lawn.” She glanced at Nat’s kimoyo beads, noticing there were a lot more on the bracelet than there had been yesterday. “You’ve accepted their offer?”

Nat nodded. “I was Russian, once. Then I was…whatever SHIELD wanted me to be. This? This feels like an actual choice.”

Laura nodded. “I’m glad you feel that way. More than glad, actually.”

Breakfast was chaos, but that too was normal and Laura settled into her plate of lopsided and slightly crispy pancakes. Once everyone was mostly silent---because everyone was eating---Laura spoke up. “Kids, your dad and I have some news.”

Lila dropped her fork, eyes wide and alarmed. “We aren’t leaving here, are we?”

Cooper folded his arms, looking more and more like a miniature Clint every day. “I like it here. Why are we moving again?”

Laura smiled. “Um, that’s the thing. They’ve asked us---the king has asked us, actually---if we want to become citizens and stay here under his protection.”

“So…we can stay?” Cooper asked.

“Yes,” Laura said. “And we won’t have to run again.”

“I like it here too,” Lila stated.

Laura breathed out. “Then we’ll stay.”

***

“So what’s the exact process?” Laura asked Nat sometime later, gesturing at her bracelet.

The kids were working on their schoolwork; Nathaniel was down for his nap. It was, for the
moment, just the adults involved in the conversation. “Well,” Nat began, “once I added the beads to my bracelet, I received a message from one of the king’s advisors wanting to discuss the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. Until we see him? Nothing is final or formalized.”

“That seems pretty straightforward,” Laura observed. “Any areas of concern that you noticed?”

“There’s some form of mandatory civic service once kids reach 18 here. Doesn’t have to be the military, or training as a warrior, but that’s not an uncommon path.”

Laura tried, and failed, to picture any of her kids picking up a spear with anything like Okoye’s deadly speed. “I guess we can cross that bridge when we get there. What else?”

Nat glanced at Clint and grinned--- a little bit like a shark scenting chum in the water. “Tony Stark only wishes he had NDAs this good. They take secrecy very seriously here.”

“Not a surprise,” Clint drawled, “not when pretty much everyone thought Wakanda was a third-world backwater until recently. Even now, I’m not sure what all the outside world really knows about them.”

“Very little,” Nat replied, “and that’s by design. I did some hunting around the internet last night; T’Challa has been very…slow about what he reveals and when. His main priority is the safety and security of his people, and it shows. He and his advisors are slowly getting the rest of the world used to the idea that there’s more about Wakanda than they realize, without letting them know too much. The last thing they need or want is another Ulysses Klaue trying to invade.”

“How easy will it be for us to travel?” Clint asked. “Me, I’m not planning on leaving this country, but our kids might want to attend college back in the US or something. Will they be allowed to leave?”

“From what I can tell---and you’ll want to ask the advisor to be sure---Wakandans have always had free right of travel. For the immediate future, I’d imagine they’d want us to stay put for our own safety but later? I didn’t see anything to hint it would be a problem.”

Laura quelled the angry thought that wanted to emerge: Oh, like you didn’t think anything in the Accords would be a problem? For one, it wasn’t fair; the Accords---from start to finish---had been designed so that nobody could read the thing all the way through before the UN took its vote. (No one, except a very determined, very suspicious super-soldier, that is, she thought with a certain amount of amusement. It probably wasn’t the first or the last time someone had underestimated Steve Rogers.) For another---Laura couldn’t bring herself to stay mad at Nat, not knowing what she did of her background and how hard she clung to any bit of her family. She’d made a mistake, true, but it was an honest one. Aloud she said only, “When is your appointment?”

“Later on this afternoon.” Nat smiled, and the smile was all hers, not the Black Widow’s or SHIELD’s spy. “I will say this for Wakanda: they really cut through the bureaucracy fast here.”

***

Early the next morning, Laura and Clint took the older kids to Wanda’s apartment (the tutor Samkelo had recommended taught all three of them there) and Clint went to the market with Nathaniel, leaving Laura by herself at the apartment. “Rest,” he told her. “I’ll clean up when I get back from the market.”

Rest. She could do that. She unfurled one of the blankets from the back of the couch and stretched out…which was, of course, when the baby began kicking. “Oh, come on,” she murmured—they
hadn’t yet picked a name out—but this one was rivaling Nathaniel for kicking. Eventually the baby quieted and Laura began to doze, only to hear the polite knock at the door.

It wasn’t Clint, she knew—his knock sounded entirely different and barring some emergency with Nate, he shouldn’t even be back for hours. “Just a minute,” she said, glad for once that Nate had confined the worst of his messes to the bedroom he shared with Cooper. She pulled her robe closer and opened the door to find a stately older woman accompanied by a guard. For a moment, Laura thought it was Cendisa, who had been a frequent visitor to their apartment, even as her mind registered that no, it wasn’t Cendisa. While there was a marked resemblance, Cendisa was a few inches shorter and didn’t visit with a guard. “Forgive me,” the older woman said, just as Laura realized who she was, “I should have called ahead. May I come in?”

Laura blinked. Queen Ramonda stood on her doorstep. “Um, yes, of course.” She panicked for a moment, seeing the apartment as others might—the laundry folded in the basket but not yet put away, the dishes soaking in the sink, the kitchen table covered with Cooper’s drawings and Nate’s finger painting from the day before. But then, Ramonda had raised children herself so… “I apologize for not being more…awake,” Laura said.

Ramonda waved her off. “Nonsense. It’s early. Is now a bad time?”

Laura considered that for a bare moment. “My husband is not here, if you wanted to speak with him.”

Ramonda shook her head. “No. It was you I wanted to talk to, actually.”

“Me?” Laura asked. “Why?”

“Do you have some tea?” Ramonda asked.

Right. What did you serve a queen anyway? “Clint brought back some from the market the other day. I haven’t tasted it yet.”

Ramonda smiled. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Laura had learned to make tea from her English grandfather; she hoped it was made the same here too. She poured herself a cup of coffee while she waited for the tea to steep; bless Clint for finding a reliable source for both. “It seems very quiet here right now,” Ramonda observed.

Laura grinned and handed her the cup of tea. “Clint took Nathaniel to the market; Cooper and Lila are with the tutor.”

“And I’ve come here when you have quiet time,” Ramonda said. “I promise not to keep you long.” She took a sip of her tea. “The tea is very good.”

Laura gestured towards Ramonda’s solemn guard, as quiet and still as a statue. “I made enough for more, or some coffee if that’s what you’d like.”

The guard—Ayo, she thought—smiled. “Thank you, but no. I await my queen.”

“Your queen would like you to relax,” Ramonda said, the affection in her tone taking all the heat out of her words. “But I can only imagine what Okoye would say to that.”

Ayo inclined her head. “As you say, my queen.”

Ramonda set her cup of tea delicately on an unoccupied space on the table. “The reason I came to
“Owned,” Laura said with some bitterness, thinking of Tony Stark and a few careless words that had changed all their lives, “and yes, we did. I ran it by myself when Clint was on assignment with SHIELD or the Avengers.”

“Was it a working farm?”

“It was,” Laura replied. “We grew corn and barley, had a few chickens for the eggs, and the occasional cow. Why do you ask?”

“Would such a place suit you here?”

It had been one of their main concerns in deciding whether to accept the king’s offer—they had a large family. “I wouldn’t be comfortable accepting anything without speaking to my husband.” She placed her own cup of coffee on the table. “Your Majesty, if I may—why are you doing this? Any of this? You’ve offered us sanctuary, and now, citizenship. And you come here offering us a home? Why?”

“You’re suspicious,” the queen observed.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or just the months of uncertainty, but Laura answered before she thought. “Yes. Yes, I am. Look, I trusted Nick Fury once, trusted his word that we’d be safe from SHIELD and the dangers of the world Clint moved in as an Avenger. Before that, I was a SHIELD agent, and I saw things that I still can’t forget. So I know the world is rarely kind or giving or thoughtful without some major strings attached. I don’t wish to offend—-and you’ve done a lot for us--but…”

“But you fear ensnaring your family in yet another web,” the queen finished serenely. “Yet you did not voice these concerns to T’Challa.”

“You came here,” Laura responded, “when you didn’t have to. I have a lot of respect for your son and he seems to be a good man, but he didn’t come here and just offer us a home. You did.”

The smile that crossed the queen’s face reminded Laura of the enigmatic smiles she’d seen painted on pyramid walls. “We understand each other, I think. It’s well that you question and my own manner of delivering this offer was…perhaps not as well thought out as it might have been.” She folded her hands. “The house I am thinking of is part of the holdings I brought to my marriage to the king’s father. In my clan, property is passed along the female line, yet my eldest daughter has told me she has too many obligations to think of settling down now, Shuri is too young to appreciate such a place and the woman my son loves…has yet to become his wife. And…I know what it is to lose a home and head to an uncertain future.”

Laura raised a questioning eyebrow, but sipped at her coffee and waited for Ramonda to continue. “My marriage to T’Chaka was arranged, by the heads of both our clans, after my first husband was killed in an accident,” Ramonda began. “Arranged marriage is not our usual custom, but there was need and our tribal elders decided that our marriage would bring stability to Wakanda. I knew T’Chaka of course—our clans had been allies for generations—but I didn’t spend any amount of time with him until a month before we wed. It was…not so unwelcome, by the time we actually wed, but I had a life before him, and I was scared to leave it, and scared my life might never be the same as his queen. The house was my mother’s gift to me, so that I might always have a place to return to and,” a tiny smile played about her lips, “after all these years, I find that I don’t have the need for it that you do, or will.” The queen touched her hand briefly. “It has never been a home. You and your family, you will make it one.”
Laura absorbed this for a moment. The unreality of the entire situation hit her---was she really having tea with the queen of Wakanda in her kitchen? “You may also,” Ramonda continued while Laura considered the wisdom of another cup of coffee, “wish to think of it a gesture of respect.”

To hell with it, she was definitely making some more coffee. “I’m…not sure I understand.”

“When my son told the Elders that he was offering you all sanctuary here, many were aghast.” Ramonda smoothed out a non-existent fold in her long skirts. “He hadn’t consulted any of them---including me. He made the decision based on his firm belief that his father and you…were all victims, and that if we could help you find some peace, we must. Once you arrived, you began to surprise all of us from the start.” The queen tilted her head. “What language are we speaking?”


“We have translator devices which work quite well.” Laura nodded; she’d considered one of the small devices for Clint, whose hearing loss made hearing and reproducing some of the sounds of Wakandan nearly impossible. He spoke four languages fluently, but Wakandan remained a challenge. “Yet one of the first things you decided as a group was to learn the language for yourselves.”

“To be fair, Your Majesty,” Laura said delicately, “it’s difficult to understand what is really going on if you must rely on translation, no matter how good.”

“We’re two women having coffee and tea,” the queen said. “I think you may call me Ramonda.”

Laura swallowed her coffee before she choked on it. “All right.”

“We had…ideas,” Ramonda went on, delicately, “of what people---what Westerners---could mean for Wakanda. We may have been isolated by choice, but we saw, throughout history, what colonization and invasion wrought in our neighbors. If my husband had been less well-respected, and T’Challa less well-liked? His offer of asylum might well have caused a challenge to his leadership.” Her lips curved a bit in a dry smile. “I won’t lie and say it wasn’t a near thing, but he prevailed. And so we---the Elders and I---we watched and waited.”

“We all thought we were being monitored in some way,” Laura said, remembering her earliest conversation with Steve, “but you were subtle about it, I’ll give you that. No bugs.” She glanced down at her wrist at the kimoyo bracelet. “Through this?”

Ramonda shook her head. “No. It is not our way. Cendisa met with you all and was pleasantly surprised that you didn’t want to do anything but heal. You didn’t send messages to compatriots abroad, you didn’t demand anything from us. At all stages, even when you were exhausted and injured or in pain, you all were nothing but polite and respectful.”

She and Clint had surmised that Cendisa’s presence in their lives hadn’t been an accident and the older woman, who must be a close relation of Ramonda’s for the resemblance to be so strong, was a welcome visitor to their home. “She did not spy on you,” the queen continued, “but we trusted her assessment of your needs. And we saw how much you all protected and cared for each other. You are not at all what we expected.”

Laura was no historian, but neither was she ignorant of what the Wakandans must have expected. The stereotype of the ugly American was pervasive, and not without some basis in truth. “I didn’t know the Avengers aside from Wanda, Natasha, and my husband,” she said, “but they’re good people.” Except for Tony Stark, she might have said, but didn’t. This wasn’t the time for that discussion, if ever there was one.
“Don’t discount yourself,” Ramonda replied warmly. “It is no small thing to flee your home in the dead of night with young children in tow and rebuild a life in a new land.”

Laura couldn’t help the sudden prickle of remembered fear. Even now, she wasn’t entirely sure how they’d all made it here, and had it not been for Natasha’s intervention, she was quite sure they’d be under house arrest somewhere, hostage to Clint’s compliance in whatever Secretary Ross had planned. He would have captured Clint eventually---the only Avenger he had a chance of laying hands on, the only one with a family, but there had been Natasha and her quinjet, and Steve and the breakout from the Raft and together they had been reunited here in Wakanda. Some days, she still couldn’t believe it.

“I did what I had to do,” Laura said.

The answer seemed to be enough for Ramonda; she nodded and handed Laura a small green bead. “This has the information on the farm; slide it onto your bracelet when you’re ready to review it with your family.”

The bead was cool in her hand as she placed it in her pocket, thinking of potentials and futures she never could have expected the first day she’d met Clint, bruised and grumpy, in a SHIELD cafeteria. “Thank you, Ramonda.”

The queen inclined her head. “We will speak again soon. Rest well.”

To her surprise, after all the morning’s tumult, Laura did. She woke up to Clint’s hand brushing her forehead and Nate trying to climb up her rapidly disappearing lap. “How was your morning?” he asked.

Laura sat up and felt for the small green bead. “Oh, you’ll never guess…”

***

Ramonda

“I wish to give Steve and James---Sergeant Barnes---the house which belonged to cousin Dengana,” Ramonda began without preamble.

It was a few days since her conversation with Laura Barton, days that had seen the Bartons and the rest of the former Avengers accept T’Challa’s offer of citizenship. Ramonda had been pleased, but not surprised. These were people of great strength and greater ideals; they would do well here.

There was a wry look in T’Challa’s eyes that reminded her of T’Chaka’s own mischievous smile. “You sought an audience to tell me what you’re going to do with your own property? You know I don’t control anything that belongs to you.”

“You are my son. But you are also my king,” Ramonda said, gently chiding. “As my king, I would…tell you of my plans.”

“But you will do as you wish?” T’Challa asked.

Ramonda inclined her head. “Yes.”

“Then of course, you have my permission.” T’Challa rose from the throne and moved closer to her. “This is your son who speaks, not your king. Why Dengana’s house? Why now?”

“Dengana’s house sits vacant,” Ramonda began.
“It is so,” T’Challa replied. “Yet, why now? You see the offers every month from those who wish to own it. You have never responded, except in the negative.”

“I have not,” Ramonda answered. “Because the house was not for them.”

“You’ve been speaking to Anathi,” T’Challa stated.

“Only to confirm my own feelings on the matter. Dengana’s own son did not wish his father’s house, and I would not see it go to anyone who didn’t appreciate it. Anathi concurs.”

“Did she suggest the captain and the sergeant to you?” T’Challa asked. Ramonda hid a smile of her own; while he liked Anathi personally, he wasn’t entirely comfortable with her role as astrologer. Then again, she mused, he likely hadn’t lived long enough.

“No,” Ramonda responded. “I thought of them, because…” She gathered her skirts and sat down next to him. “They have never had a home that wasn’t lost to them long since. I cannot correct the past—no one can—but they are a part of us now, and so, I can correct the present.” She folded her hands. “There is another matter.”

T’Challa raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“They have accepted citizenship, but you know---as I do---that there will be some who will…not accept them. No matter how worthy.”

“You believe they will have difficulties.”

“Don’t you?” she asked. “You have given citizenship to nine white Westerners, and one Westerner of African descent. Your decision is just and I support it, but what happens when they go to find a place to live? Our responsibility towards them does not end, merely because they’re citizens now. We must do what we can to equip them with the tools to live here successfully.”

T’Challa leaned back. “And the house is also a statement,” he surmised. “That you support them. You, the Queen, the widow of T’Chaka who would…”

“…probably not done as you have done, yes,” Ramonda finished. “Bast knows how much I loved your father, but we did not always agree. He would have kept the entire world out, had it not been for the bombing in Lagos.”

“That solves the matter of the captain and the sergeant,” T’Challa said. “What of the others? The Barton family alone will consist of six people in a few months.”

“Ah,” Ramonda said. “I had tea with Laura Barton the other day. Before their identities were revealed, the Barton family owned a small farm, which Laura herself ran much of the time. Do we not have at least one farm in our holdings?”

“One that is downriver from Dengana’s house, yes,” T’Challa admitted, clearly amused. “And the house is in your holdings, not the family’s. This is why Baba would never play senet with you. You always thought four and five steps ahead.”

“It is so,” Ramonda agreed with a small smile of her own. She decided not to go into greater detail about her conversation with Laura Barton; they understood each other in a way that her son, for all his acuity, might never fathom.

“And what are your suggestions for the others?” T’Challa asked. “I will admit I have not given as much thought to it lately.”
“As my king,” Ramonda told him, “you have had much on your mind. As your advisor? Perhaps I might share this burden.”

“You have ideas,” T’Challa agreed, “and I can only do so much on my own. Very well, the matter of housing them is yours to decide. What is Cendisa’s opinion?”

Ramonda inclined her head, pleased that her son had assumed she’d have contacted Cendisa first. “She thinks highly of them all, as you know, and believes that she may have some ideas. They are a close knit group and will likely wish to stay near to each other.”

T’Challa nodded. “Once you and Cendisa have come up with your suggestions, come and see me.”

“As you say,” she replied. “Is there anything else I might do to help you?”

He looked tired, she noticed---something she’d seen often enough on his father. T’Challa had advisors, good ones, but at the end of the day, the final decision was his and his alone. But—as Ramonda could have predicted—he waved her concern away. “The usual burdens,” he said. “I don’t know how Baba did this for so many years.”

The sting of the knowledge that he should have had more years was one they all felt. T’Chaka had been a good and decent man, a wise and just king. They couldn’t have asked for anyone more suited for his role. Small wonder if T’Challa felt uncertain stepping into that role years before he should have had to. “He had advisors, people he trusted, as do you. Do not think you must go it alone.”

T’Challa smiled his father’s smile. “Thank you, my mother.”

***

Ramonda left T’Challa to his security briefing with Nakia; the secretary of state’s impending visit was just days away now and preparations for that were a matter of exquisite planning and high level discussions. And for that, T’Challa had Mbeki and Nakia to rely on. Ramonda had other plans, including meeting (for herself) the captain and the sergeant.

The first was to dispense with the rest of her guard. Ayo, of course, was dismayed. “But my queen—”

Ramonda smiled. She had known this one as a babe in her mother’s womb, had watched her grow and become the fiercest of warriors. “Ayo, there are things I wish to do, and your presence will make that difficult.”

“You could observe them at any time,” Ayo protested. “You don’t need to risk your safety.”

“There is no risk,” Ramonda assured her. “The captain is sparring now with some of your fellow Dora, and the sergeant is with Shuri and her guard in her laboratory. Where is my risk?”

Ayo allowed herself to look mollified. “You will permit me to escort you to the training grounds, at least.”

Ramonda nodded. “I will. Then you will…take a walk for an hour or so while I converse with the captain.”

She inclined her head, but the guard was not fully happy with the situation, Ramonda knew. “Ayo,” she said softly. “I wish to know for myself what kind of man the captain and his friend are.”

Ayo raised her eyebrows delicately. “His…friend?”
Wakandan was a language with many complex ways of making a singular point. “You think they are something…more,” Ramonda stated.

“See them, and you will understand,” Ayo replied dryly. “If they are only friends, I’ll eat Okoye’s spear.”

***

It wasn’t, as Ayo had said, hard to find the captain. He was sparring with Okoye, and although it was clear to Ramonda’s practiced eye that Okoye would be the victor, he was more than holding his own. Ramonda slipped in between the shadows cast by the statues surrounding the training ring and watched as the captain ducked and parried with all the ease of a dancer. He wasn’t holding back, something Ramonda knew Okoye would respect.

Finally, a move from Okoye had the captain on the ground. She barked out a short phrase---“Do you yield?”---and the captain spread his hands and nodded. When she helped him up, Ramonda noticed he was smiling, grinning through the blood and bruises. His posture was loose and relaxed, and when he saw her, he stiffened to attention. “Ma’am, I mean, Your Highness…”

Ramonda waved him off. “I’m not here on official business. Ramonda is fine. Relax, please.”


He darted a wry glance at her, but took the water bottle anyway. “Was it that obvious?”

“It’s not often the queen shows up to a sparring match,” Okoye said. “My queen. Everything is all right?”

“There is no need for concern,” Ramonda responded. “How did you come to be sparring today, Captain?”

“It’s Steve,” the captain said. “If you’re not using titles, neither am I. And I’m not the captain of anything anymore. The sparring was…Viwe’s suggestion.”

Somehow, Ramonda was unsurprised. Viwe had been a warrior long before he had become a therapist; he would know, better than most, what drove another soldier. “And are you finding it useful?”

The captain grinned a half smile that brightened his eyes. Such unusual eyes, she thought---so intensely blue. “The therapy has been very helpful, yes.”

She returned his smile in turn; he had heard and answered the question she hadn’t directly asked. “Then may we talk for a bit?”

Steve gestured at himself---sweaty, covered in sand and bloody in places---and grimaced. “If I may, I should probably clean up first.”

Ramonda almost told him he was neither the first nor the last warrior she’d walked with, but she wanted him at his ease. “Of course.” She discretely sent a message to Ayo, informing her that she’d be delayed further.

A young woman---Ramonda recognized her as Kasi---came when Okoye beckoned her. “Show the captain where he might shower and change,” Okoye stated. Kasi nodded and Ramonda watched as Steve left the sparring ring, apparently uninjured or even sore.
After a few minutes, Okoye came to sit next to her. “He is well out of earshot,” Okoye said. “Why are you here, my queen?”

Okoye’s tone was friendly and respectful---as well it might be, given their long relationship---but there was an underlying concern too. “I haven’t spoken to the captain directly before,” Ramonda told her. “It is nothing more serious than that.”

Okoye relaxed, one eye on the other Dora who were sparring at the far end. “He did not challenge me himself, you know.”

Ramonda hadn’t known, not exactly. But there was an unusual quality to the captain: he was forever cautious of where and when he stepped. As if he was still smaller, and expected, on some level, to be disregarded. “Oh? Then how did you come to spar with him?”

“He was very polite,” Okoye said. “Asked if he might train with us, if that wouldn’t break any rules. And asked all that in Wakandan.”

Somehow, Steve Rogers had hit on exactly the right approach to take with Okoye. “And what is your…view on him? On them?”

“I did not agree with T’Challa’s offer of asylum here,” Okoye told her. “Not initially. I still think their presence is painting a large target on our nation at a time when we can ill-afford it, but….”

“But?” Ramonda asked gently. This was why she trusted Okoye, why T’Chaka had, and why T’Challa now did; she always put the well-being of the country first, no matter what it might cost her…as her former husband, W’Kabi, had learned to his dishonor.

“We made assumptions,” Okoye said. “Assumptions which—in their case, in his—were wrong. They are good people who have had great wrongs done to them, and for that reason alone…they’ve earned our help.” She spread her hands. “That said, I don’t think we can or should be a refuge for every pack of ex-superheroes, but…my views are not as fixed as they were.”

That was pure Okoye---what was earned would be given, and these strangers had at least earned some respect from her---and Ramonda hid a smile. “I see,” she said instead. She glanced at the clusters of fighters. “Have you decided which of them will make new Dora?”

Okoye grinned. “Shall we watch them spar and see how they do?”

***

They spent the next half hour or so in easy, bantering conversation. Ramonda herself had never been a member of Dora Milaje, but her sister had, and one of their aunts. As they talked, Okoye’s expert eye was separating the fighters into those who might be ready to move onto further training, like Shuri currently was, and those who were not yet ready. “It’s perhaps one fighter in ten who is ready to start the advanced training,” Okoye finished. “Some years, none are. All of these young women are capable on some level. But to guard the royal family, there is…some quality that not all warriors possess. They must be willing to fight and die for Wakanda. And if they are not…” she shrugged “it’s better that they stay where they are, as talented fighters, but ones who will never be asked to lay down their life to defend the royal family.”

Ramonda nodded. She knew what became of the ones that didn’t make the upper ranks of the Dora Milaje; often, they became spies working for Nakia, or they moved into the border settlements, keeping an eye out for incursions. A Dora’s life—at any level—was not, could not, be an idle one. “Do you see him?” Okoye murmured. “Watch what he does.”
The captain stood in the shadowed curve left by one of the larger statues of Sekhmet. He was looking at the groups of warriors, with the same weighing, assessing gaze as Okoye. “He sees them as women, yes,” Okoye went on, “but not as objects. If I called him over here now and asked for his opinion of their fighting prowess, I believe he would give an honest answer.”

Even in Wakanda, there were occasionally men who struggled with the notion of women in power, of women as people—the candidate W’Kabi had backed for the throne, T’Challa’s distant cousin, had been one of them. No wonder Okoye appreciated this particular quality so much, Ramonda mused. “I understand,” Ramonda said quietly. “I will speak with him.”

Okoye grinned. “I’ll be interested to hear your thoughts, my queen.”

***

“Do you mind if we hire a flitter?” Ramonda asked him once they were outside the training ring. “I have promised Shuri I’d meet her for lunch and her laboratory is farther than I want to walk.”

It was growing rapidly warmer as the day wore on, and she also wasn’t looking forward to the lecture she’d get from Dr. Lindelwa if she allowed the captain to succumb to heatstroke. “No, it’s fine,” the captain—Steve—said. He looked mildly suspicious, as though he was very much aware that he was being cozened, but had decided for the moment not to fight it. “I don’t think I’d much want to walk back myself. It’s…hot.”

“You will grow used to it,” Ramonda assured him as she called for a flitter. That it was one of the fleet owned by the Dora Milaje, tested for security and safety, hardly needed mentioning. “Even for native Wakandans, there are times when we simply have to let nature have her way.” At his questioning look, she went on, “Many stores simply close for a few hours when it’s this hot, as do some of the government offices. There is always time to resume business later after the heat of the day has passed.”

The flitter arrived with a polite chime. Ramonda activated one of her kimoyo beads, which performed a second, and more thorough, security scan before the doors unlocked. Steve climbed into the flitter and quickly figured out how to activate the passive restraint system. “Wise of you,” Ramonda murmured. “Our traffic flows faster than what you’re used to.”

The captain didn’t talk much, eyes focused on the scenery, looking at the silver arching spires of the buildings around them, the other flitters, the birds avoiding it all with a practiced ease. “What do you think of us?” Ramonda asked.

There was a twinkle in his eyes. “Ma’am, you’re asking someone born in 1918 what I think of all this? It’s magical, except I know it’s not. But it is amazing. When I was a kid, Buck and I used to read these old pulps—”

“Pulps?” Ramonda asked.

“They were…books, magazines printed on cheap paper, pulp paper, I guess you’d say.” Steve explained. “Cheap stock, the kind that didn’t last long. But it was enough for us. There were stories about Wakanda in there, but of course, nobody believed them.”

Ramonda nodded. “We have had… occasional adventurers over the years. Sometimes they were legitimately lost, sometimes they were treasure hunters, looking for El Dorado or some fool thing. The fact that nobody believed we could exist has been our greatest strength.” She made a slow turn; they weren’t far from the laboratory now. “And do we match the stories you’ve heard?”
The captain grinned. “More than, thank you.”

The flitter stopped and slowly lowered itself to the ground, and when the restraint systems loosened, he said, “I’d open the door for you but I’m not entirely sure how.”

There was an easy, kind charm about him—nothing false about it. She smiled back at him. “Some other time, then,” and released the hatch.

***

They didn’t enter the laboratory complex immediately—for one, Shuri was in the middle of compiling her latest simulation of Sergeant Barnes’ arm, and Ramonda knew that was delicate, focused work. For another, they were able to see Sergeant Barnes, Shuri, and Dr. Lindelwa from the observation window near the garden, and…Ramonda wanted to observe for herself what the others had seen.

“They are soul bonded,” Anathi had told her a few days before.

Ramonda didn’t ask when Anathi had learned this; she came from a long line of seers with an erratic, but persistent, gift for seeing what might otherwise remain hidden. Once, long ago, whole fortunes of clans had risen or fallen based on the skill of their astrologers, but theirs was a more modern age and Ramonda accepted Anathi’s perspective while still wanting to verify it for herself. “Go and see them,” Anathi had urged, and so, Ramonda was here.

The laboratory courtyard had some minimal weather screening, enough to mute the worst of the summer heat. Ramonda sat on the far edge of the shaded bench and watched the captain—watched Steve—watch the work in the laboratory. “He’s in the very best of hands,” Ramonda assured him. “Shuri is young, but—”

Steve flushed a little. “No, ma’am, it’s not that at all. I know Shuri is taking good care of him. It’s just…” He ran a hand through his hair, which was growing longer and starting to curl. It gave him a boyish look, at odds with the age, the weariness she sometimes saw in his eyes. “I was sick a lot when I was a kid—my mam, and Bucky, were the people who made that easier on me, as much as they could. When Bucky lost his arm again in Siberia…” he swallowed “it was traumatic for him. To see him accepting a replacement arm, even being willing to undergo surgery to get it? That’s something I never thought I’d see. And I’m grateful. That you’ve given him the means to regain his arm, and the care you’ve taken with us so we can heal….” He shrugged, a lifting of broad shoulders. “This kind of care isn’t something he’s had in a very long time.”

Ramonda nodded. The scars on his shoulder were evidence enough of that, even if she hadn’t known the broad outlines of the Winter Soldier’s story. “I was married before T’Chaka. You would not have known this, of course. Jikela was a noted photographer of our wildlife; he was killed a year or so after we wed. A rhino he was photographing got spooked, and charged his blind. He…wasn’t fast enough.” She folded her hands. The loss had been decades before and yet, she still missed his easy smile, his knowing laugh. “And suddenly, I was a widow with a infant daughter. And I didn’t think I’d ever find that kind of love again.” She smiled. “I was very wrong about that. A few years later, T’Challa was an infant, Nesiwe was a small child, and T’Chaka was injured in an accident while visiting a distant clan. And I thought… if I lose him, my heart will not beat again. I know what it is to lose and to think you will never recover who you were without that person.” Ramonda paused. “It is the same, between the sergeant and yourself, is it not?”

For a moment, she thought he had stopped breathing. His eyes were round with astonishment and a very old fear. “I—” Steve began, then swallowed and tried again. “You must surprise the people around you an awful lot.”
“Not really,” Ramonda said, amused, though his view was closer to reality. “Steve. My son has told me what you did for him.”

He was still dazed, she saw—and with a mother’s instincts, she saw also knew that much of his own healing was aided by seeing the sergeant’s. “What I did?” he asked slowly.

“He almost killed an innocent man. You prevented that. I don’t fool myself, Steve---my son has had to kill before, in defense of his people. But you prevented him from being a murderer.” She reached out, slowly, to touch his hand. “There is nothing I could do to fully thank you for that, but whatever I have is yours.”

There was a wave from Shuri, beckoning them to come inside the laboratory. She could see the sergeant’s smile, blinding as the sun, when he saw Steve. Ramonda rose, confident that Anathi had the way of it. “Shall we, Steve?”

***

Shuri

“You are up to something, Mother,” Shuri said after their lunch. Ayo sat on Ramonda’s right, as alert as a scenting gazelle and twice as fast. Sesethu, Shuri’s own guard, sat on her left. She had tried to persuade her mother that she didn’t need a guard, seeing as she was being trained as a member of the Dora Milaje herself, but Ramonda had been unmoving on that and many other topics.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

Shuri reminded herself that nobody played senet with Ramonda more than once, and smiled. “Because you hardly ever come to the laboratory, and never with a visitor. Today you have done both.”

Ramonda fiddled with her soup spoon for a moment, then twisted one of her kimoyo beads. The noise outside their table dampened considerably. No one would be able to hear or record what was said. “They have accepted citizenship. You’ve heard?”

Shuri only pretended that she didn’t pay attention to palace matters; she was sixteen and not stupid. “I did,” she acknowledged. “What of it?”

“They need a guide,” her mother said. “I am too old to teach them, too set in my ways. And you have a rapport with Sergeant Barnes, and the captain trusts you. They need someone who can teach them our culture, the nuances they’ll need to survive and thrive here. And I am not the person who can do it best. You are.”

“That’s all well and good for the captain and the sergeant,” Shuri said, “but what of the others?”

“What do they know of us?” her mother asked. “I speak of the time before they arrived, before we granted them sanctuary. What do you think they thought of Wakanda?”

Shuri knew exactly what they must have thought; it was part of the camouflage that had kept Wakanda safe and protected for centuries. “That we are a third world backwater and our main export is sheep or something.”

Ramonda tilted her head. “Just so. And these people, they are not the usual run of colonizers we have been expecting. You have this opportunity to show them who and what we are.” She smiled, a bit mischievously. “You could tell them about your kimoyo beads.”
Shuri groaned. They were not her kimoyo beads, not really; the beads had been used in one form or another since her grandmother’s day if not before. But Shuri had come up with the means of expanding the information the beads could carry, which in turn had opened up their use to all Wakandans. “Mother,” she protested. “I didn’t—”

“You did,” Ramona told her, gently chiding. She folded her hands. “I am giving you this job,” she went on, and it was the queen, not her mother, who spoke. “Because there is no one else as fit. You will be a fine cultural liaison.”

Shuri took a sip of her water to hide her flustered face. I’m only sixteen, she almost said, but small use claiming that when she wasn’t sixteen in so many other areas. She swallowed the water, pretending the chill of apprehension was from the ice in her glass. “As my queen commands.”

***

Shuri didn’t return to the laboratory that night, as she normally did. Instead she returned to her rooms at the palace and sank onto her bed. There were some messages in her communications queue---something from her sister Nesiwe, a doctor working with MSF in Syria. That one was good; Nesiwe’s group was being rotated out and Shuri breathed a sigh of relief. Nesiwe had been there for months, and hadn’t even been able to make it back in time for T’Chaka’s funeral, which must have devastated her. Are you coming home? Shuri asked.

There was a brief flash of blue; Nesiwe, answering. Yes, when I can. Are you well?

Shuri decided there was no real way to explain all the changes of the last few months, and instead provided the honest answer. Sometimes. I miss you. There was no response, but Shuri didn’t expect one. Communications were unreliable in some of the places MSF went to, even with Nesiwe’s hidden Wakandan tech. She closed out that message in the queue (even as one part of her mind was working on the problem of how to improve communications for Nesiwe) and saw another from Anathi, wanting to get together for lunch the next day. She sent a quick Yes, please to that one and signed out of the communications queue altogether.

Cultural liaison. To two soldiers born early in the last century, a former pararescue, three former SHIELD agents, a telepath, and three children. Shuri breathed out. What were the things they most needed to know, to start with?

***

“I think you’re overthinking this,” Anathi said the next day. By the teasing tone, this was her friend Anathi, not the seer. “Think of it like…oh, let’s say you went to America.”

“Why would I do that?” Shuri asked. Unlike either of her siblings, she hadn’t the slightest desire to do anything but visit there. America seemed a wild place, primitive and full of guns.

Anathi rolled her eyes. “As a thought experiment, genius. If you went there, what would you most want to know?”

Shuri had been too young to remember when Nesiwe graduated from Stanford Medical School and when T’Challa started at MIT; she supposed she could ask either of them, but they had other burdens now. “How…how to communicate. How to call people, how to find a job, what the weather was like in different seasons.”

“For starters,” Anathi said. “Shuri, why is this rattling you so? You make things in that laboratory of yours that impress scientists three and four times your age. You’ll be in training to be the next Black
Panther soon. What makes you so nervous about this task?"

“That’s just it,” Shuri answered. “I’m supposed to teach them things a normal person would want to know. I’m not normal. I’m sixteen and I haven’t even ever had a boyfriend, for Bast’s sake.”

“I don’t think they care about that,” Anathi said with a smile. “The queen could have asked anyone, but she asked you. Why do you think she did that?”

Shuri rolled her eyes. “Because she is my mother.”

Anathi flicked some ice water at her and switched to English. “Yeah, no. She’s not my mother and I know better than that. Who else would she ask? Okoye? Ayo? People who maybe didn’t want outsiders here in the first place? What kind of welcome would they give?”

“Okoye is fair, as is Ayo,” Shuri protested. “They would do their duty.”

“Yeah,” Anathi said, “their duty and no more. Don’t you see, Shuri? Your mother wants them welcomed. She wants them to feel comfortable here, especially now that they’ve chosen to accept citizenship.”

Shuri raised an eyebrow. “How did you---”

“It was a guess,” Anathi told her. “Why else would the queen go to all this trouble if they were just going to pack the ex-Avengers onto the next flight out of here? No, your mother is planning for the long-term.”

Sometimes, Shuri forgot that she and Anathi were the same age, but there it was. They were two teenagers who, in different ways, had never really been normal. And frankly, from what she had gathered from her interactions with the sergeant and the captain, neither had any of the ex-Avengers.

“All right,” Shuri said. “Will you help me?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Tell me if I’m being foolish or offensive. I don’t want to mess this up.”

***

The next morning, Shuri didn’t go to the laboratory right after breakfast, as was her usual routine. Instead, she decided to go to the market. Sesethu looked a tad nervous, as well she might; the market was crowded and bustling most of the time and even though Sesethu was a veteran of the Dora Milaje, Shuri knew it would be a security nightmare. “Are you certain you wish to do this?” the guard asked. “We could have items brought to you.”

Shuri shook her head. “No, Sesethu. My mother has appointed me a task, and I need to see what our country has to offer through different eyes.” That had been one of Anathi’s suggestions, especially as the former Avengers had been spending a lot of time there. If she could see it through their eyes, she could maybe anticipate their questions, and what they might need in the future.

“And…going to the market will accomplish this?” Sesethu asked.

“Yes, no, maybe…” Shuri sighed, feeling uncertain and overwhelmed. It wasn’t an emotion she knew what to do with—working with vibranium demanded both concentration and focus. “I don’t know. There’s much in the market that would be unfamiliar to them, and I can at least start my explanations there. What do you think?”
Sesethu was a decade older than Shuri’s previous guard, who had chosen to move to a border town after having a family of her own. “I would not presume to instruct you,” the guard finally said.

“It’s not a presumption if I’m asking,” Shuri retorted. “I want to do right by them, but I’m afraid I’ll mess it up.”

A ghost of a smile touched the guard’s carved features. “Start by asking them, perhaps. I’ve read the security reports; they’ve been exploring further and further into town now, but they must have questions about what they’re seeing.”

Shuri nodded. “That’s a good idea. Thank you.”

Sesethu inclined her head. “When would you want to go to the market?”

“Let me see what they have to say first,” Shuri told her. “Maybe in an hour or so? But I should probably stop by and see them first.”

***

Shuri had drafted a quick message to the ex-Avengers and their families. Hi everyone, I’ve been asked to be your cultural liaison. Is there anything you want to know? Send me a message!

There had been no response at all for about twenty minutes, then a message arrived that was sent to everyone in the queue: What do all these beads on the bracelet even do?

The message had been from Clint Barton’s oldest son, Cooper. Shuri remembered getting her first full set of kimoyo beads at around Cooper’s age, but she had known what they were for, their functions and when they would work and when they wouldn’t. That question has a lot of answers, she typed back. Would you like me to come by and demonstrate?

Yes, please, Steve Rogers typed back. We’re all playing catch-up here.

Shuri hadn’t read his dossier; only the king and Nakia, in her capacity as the head of Wakandan Intelligence, had full access to all of it, but she knew enough of his background to infer that he probably had some idea as to what most of the beads did or could do---the man was nothing if not adaptable---and would require minimal instruction once he had the basics down. She pulled a calendar into the message queue. When did you want me to stop by?

We don’t want to interrupt your work, Princess. That was from Sergeant Barnes.

She smiled. She rather liked the sergeant---during all of his appointments with her, all the times they’d worked to remove his trigger words, he’d never once varied from his courtesy or his respectful amusement. Don’t worry she typed back. This will be fun. And to her astonishment, Shuri realized it was true. She was beginning to look forward to this.

***

Her first stop, to Sesethu’s dismay, was the market after all. There were many booths where kimoyo beads could be purchased; Shuri made her own, but that was hardly an option for either the ex-Avengers or the majority of Wakandans, so she wanted to see what was commercially available first. “Cebo owns the largest stall,” Shuri said, “and he was one of the first to carry the beads so he’ll have the best selection.”

Shuri didn’t fool herself; by now she assumed Sesethu had decided Cebo’s stall would likely be her first choice and would have run a thorough security check on the man. The Dora Milaje were
nothing if not frighteningly efficient. “He is a good choice,” Sesethu observed. “When are you meeting your… students?”

“This afternoon, after the Barton children finish their tutoring,” Shuri told her as they stepped into the bright summer sunshine. Absently, she noticed a minor fluctuation in the weather shielding between the palace and the path leading to the market; that would need some fixing soon. Perhaps an update in the programming….

The market was bustling, full of Wakandans going about their normal business. Shuri was pleased as always that her presence didn’t cause more than a minor stir. Her father had emphasized over and over that the royal family was still of the people, serving and protecting the people, never to be set above or separate from them. It was why Shuri and both of her siblings had attended Wakandan schools until college and why all of them had careers and obligations that had nothing to do with their royal status.

Sesethu stood just behind her right shoulder, unobtrusive but watching, as Shuri walked up to Cebo’s booth. The old man was fanning himself in the afternoon heat and didn’t seem to immediately recognize her, which was all well and good. “Good afternoon. What kind of beads do you have for sale today?” she asked.

“We have a new recipe one here, and the ones for the religious calendar have been updated with the lunar schedule for the next year, and oh, these are new,” Cebo said, gesturing to a small display of beads on a light green background.

The beads were a dark grey, untethered as they were to either a bracelet or the Wakandan internet. “What do they do?”

“These were produced by the artist colony at Safreni,” Cebo stated. “Have you visited there?”

“Not since I was a child,” Shuri answered. The artists of Safreni were renowned in Wakanda for their skill and competition to live in the colony was fierce. Twice a year, they had an arts festival; Nesiwe had taken Shuri there just after she’d graduated from medical school. “What kind of information have they placed on the beads?”

“Lessons, art history, profiles of the artists,” Cebo told her. “It would be a perfect gift for any artist.”

Captain Rogers—Steve—had been an artist once, Shuri knew. “I’ll take those,” she replied, pointing to the beads she wanted. “And I’ll take two of the Safreni beads.” After all, she mused, perhaps the captain and the sergeant would like to visit there…

***

“And all of these beads, can do all of these things?” Laura Barton said sometime later, marveling. “Unbelievable. Who made these?”

Shuri felt her face warm. She was proud of the things she made, but at the same time, it was work done largely out of the public eye. “The Wakandan Design Group,” she replied.

Sergeant Barnes—Bucky—grinned. “That would be her, for the most part,” he said. “Kid’s a genius.”

Shuri inclined her head, reminding herself that she was supposed to be representing her people. “I improved on an existing design,” she said. “It was not all my doing.” She folded her hands. “I hope you find the beads useful. They really should have come with instructions only…” she shrugged “everyone here has them.”
“I get it,” Sam said. “It’d be like explaining how smartphone works back home. It’s becoming something that everyone is assumed to know how to use.”

Considering what she had to show them, smartphones were almost embarrassingly primitive, but---Shuri reminded herself---not every place was Wakanda. “That’s exactly it. We get our first kimoyo beads when we’re infants, with more added on as we grow. They’re…a regular part of our lives.”

“Well, I think they’re amazing,” Laura replied. “Full access to the Wakandan Central Library alone? Clint, you know where I’ll be if you need me.” Clint said nothing, but the fond smile said everything.

Out of the corner of her eye, Shuri could see Cooper and Lila Barton queuing up a selection of music on their beads. They’d mastered the interface very quickly, as Shuri had expected, and were now happily nodding along to the beat of the music.

Bucky—who had finally consented to his own bracelet---touched the beads gently and with a certain sense of wonder. “They never had these in the pulps, Stevie,” he said softly and the other man grinned.

She made a note to ask what “the pulps” were, and focused on the next part of her discussion. “You each have beads personalized to your own interests, and there are others available for sale in the marketplace.” Shuri placed the small bag on the table. “I brought some for you to start with. Everyone has a recipe bead and I was told it was updated recently with translation filters, ingredient equivalents, and measurement conversions if needed.”

“That’ll come in handy,” Laura said ruefully. “The metric system…not my thing.”

Shuri kept her face still at that. The metric system was so much easier, really, but Americans…. She handed one bead each to Clint and Natasha. “There are…groups of enthusiasts, fan groups, you might call them, of unarmed combat or combat using older weapons. They are always looking for new members, as well as people who want to learn how to make their own weapons.”

Clint smiled. “Thanks, that’ll be…I’ll be doing that.”

“As will I,” Natasha said. “I’ve missed sparring.”

Shuri pictured Natasha sparring with Okoye---or really, any of the Dora---and thought she’d pay good money to see that. “There are sparring events throughout the year,” she continued. “I hope one of them suits you.”

She glanced at Sam, sitting relaxed on the couch with Wanda. His background---and hers---wasn’t unknown to her either. “Sam, this is for you.”

“What’s on it?” he asked as he took it from her.

“It’s a more…sophisticated, and secure, communications program than the one I created for you earlier. Activate this bead near any phone and your conversation with your family will be encrypted and your location bounced around to any of a million possible locations.” She folded her hands. “At the end of the week, a courier from the Wakandan Embassy in DC will come and visit your family.”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “My family? Why?”

“They will be given a matching bead to that one. I have adapted theirs to work with your wireless internet protocols. You will be able to talk to them, see them, whenever you wish. And don’t worry, the couriers will be subtle. No one will know what they have, or where you are.”
Sam opened his mouth, closed it. “Thank you,” he said fervently. “Thank you.”

“My older sister is a doctor with MSF,” she told him. “I haven’t seen her in person for…two or three years now. It is not the same as what you’re dealing with, but I know what it is to miss someone you can only talk to in brief messages.” Sam nodded and slid the bead onto his bracelet with a smile.

The last bead in the pouch was for Wanda. “What is this?” she asked, a faint Sokovian accent edging her words.

“I asked Samkelo for his help with this one,” Shuri said. “I hope you don’t mind, but he mentioned you liked poetry.” He had said other things too, that she was a fast learner and one of his favorite students.

Wanda flushed a little. “Yes, I do.”

“Samkelo’s son is a noted poet. He told me you liked his first book, and Samkelo helped me put together a collection of other Wakandan poets. There’s an embedded translation filter if you need it, but Samkelo thought you were progressing enough that you probably wouldn’t.”

“Oh, thank you. This is…thank you,” Wanda breathed.

Shuri smiled. “Now for some other basics of these beads. Any of them, in an emergency, can be used for first aid, to temporarily halt the flow of blood, or to bind up a wound. You simply remove the bead like this—” and she demonstrated—“and apply it to the area like so.”

“Any bead?” Laura asked. “Even the recipe one?”

“Any bead,” Shuri confirmed. “The beads are made from vibranium which has…a certain affinity for healing wounds. There’s not enough in the individual beads to permanently cure, but in an emergency? They can stop a mild to moderate hemorrhage and temporarily splint a broken bone, among other things. And once they are synced up to our medical equipment, they can give an accurate health assessment to the healers.”

Several pairs of eyes turned to look at Steve, whose ears turned a light pink as he held up the bracelet on his left wrist. “All right. I’m wearing it, see?”

“They do tend to work better that way, yes,” Shuri said, wondering what exactly the story was there. “Now, they are not---generally---designed to work outside of Wakanda’s borders, but if you should be traveling, there’s an extra bead that most Wakandans buy once they get their passports. Some of the features are disabled as a security measure, but for the most part, the bracelets continue to work fine outside our borders.”

Steve stared at his. “All of that, in such a small package,” he marveled. “I never would have thought. Thank you, Shuri. This means…a lot.”

She might know only the broadest outlines of his story, but this was the second time in his life Steve had been forced to make a new life far away from everything he’d known, in a world that must be almost entirely unfamiliar to him. Shuri smiled back at him, feeling in some small way, that she’d eased the smallest of his burdens. He now understood the uses of this technology, as did the rest of his friends, and that was no small thing. “I am glad I was able to help.” She tapped the communications bead and sent a message to all of them. “I just sent you my direct contact information. If you have any questions, about anything at all, just send me a message. I may not be able to respond right away, but I will answer.”

There was a loud rumbling sound coming from her left. Bucky grinned, not at all embarrassed.
“Sorry, Princess. It’s lunchtime. Would you…like to stay? It’s my turn to cook.”

“Yes, I think I’d like that,” Shuri replied.

***

Shuri looked through the greenhouse windows and saw Steve and Bucky, deep in conversation. This was the last appointment before the final surgery to attach Bucky’s new arm that evening. They were talking in low tones, clearly not intending to be overheard, but they’d forgotten—or didn’t yet know—how acute Wakandan hearing was.

“…are you sure?” Steve was saying. “Buck, you don’t have to fight this one. You can go with Laura and the kids.”

“Laura can handle herself,” Bucky replied. “She’ll have two of the Dora with her, T’Challa says. My place is with you.” There was a look of almost indescribable tenderness on his face. “Stevie, what’s this all about?”

“Ross—Secretary Ross, I mean—he’s a nasty piece of work,” Steve began.

“So he is,” Bucky retorted. “Just like every bully everywhere. And?”

“I’m afraid I’m gonna lose you again,” Steve admitted as if the very words choked him. “I did that once. I don’t think I’ve got it in me to do it again. I know the fight is worth it, but losing you wouldn’t be.”

Shuri almost turned away from the window then. She wasn’t supposed to see this, wasn’t supposed to witness this moment of uncertainty and fear. But Bucky’s next words stopped her. “Stevie. If fighting this asshole means we can live here and have a life? If it means we can stop fighting? Then I’ll gladly run the risk. But you—you have got to promise me something.”

There was an odd quality to Steve’s body language at times, almost as if he felt himself to be somehow smaller. Shuri noticed it now as he smiled at Bucky. “What, Bucky?”

“No matter what happens out there, you need to live, do you hear me? No more of this self-sacrificing bullshit. You stay alive and you live, okay?”

They were almost of a height, and they stood close enough that their foreheads were touching. Shuri had seen echoes of this kind of care and love before—-with T’Challa and Nakia, with Okoye and her husband years before, even her own parents. For the first time, she wondered if she would ever know someone that deeply, someone she could love with that kind of perfect trust. “I’ll do that,” she heard Steve say roughly, “but you have got to promise me something.”

“You bet,” Bucky said with something that tried to be lightness. “After all, who will feed the goats?”

***

“I think it could be a very good thing,” T’Challa was saying later that evening, after dinner and evening prayers. “Once this situation with Secretary Ross is put to bed, of course.”

Shuri nodded. In a little over an hour, Bucky and what she thought of as his main support team—Steve, Dr. Methuli, Dr. Lindelwa, Sam, and Wanda—would arrive for the procedure to attach Bucky’s new arm. “An exchange program for young scientists,” she breathed, trying to focus on that instead of the nervous quaking in her stomach. She’d been present for the removal of some of his trigger words, but giving him a new arm….Shuri shivered. She was not a doctor but Dr. Lindelwa
was, and her look of fury every time she looked at the healing scar tissue of Bucky’s brain or the evidence of old surgeries on his bones spoke louder than any words.

T’Challa’s hologram paused. “Shuri, are you well?”

“I am nervous,” she admitted.

“The arm works, it will be fine,” T’Challa said, trying for reassurance, but Shuri waved him off.

“I know the arm will fit him. We have tested it, using holographic models, over and over. But he has been through so much. I can’t—what if I cause him pain?”

T’Challa tilted his head. It was their father’s gesture, and she smiled through the sudden pang of grief. “Did he ask for the arm?”

Shuri nodded. “He did.”

“Then it’s his choice. And you must trust the man to make that choice.”

She breathed out once, twice. “Yes, that is so.”

“And you would not be…who you are if you didn’t worry for him. But he has asked for this because he trusts you. We owe him this, Shuri.”

It was T’Challa’s logic, and one Shuri agreed with. The first arm—constructed from stolen Wakandan vibranium, its owner tortured into accepting it—had been used to maim and destroy, across seventy years of mayhem and war. They could, they must do better by Sergeant Barnes. “Take care of him,” T’Challa went on, “and we’ll talk about the exchange program later. I’ll need your input.”

“You’ll have it,” Shuri told him, beginning to relax some. “Are you going to ask Anathi?” she teased.

“Why would I ask an astrologer…?” T’Challa retorted with no heat. He liked Anathi, but was much less comfortable with her official role. Anathi, who knew all of this perfectly well, teased him unmercifully about it.

“Because she is a teenager too,” Shuri answered, laughing, feeling lighter for the release of tension. “And you do want someone else’s opinion besides mine, right? Anyway, she can give you the best day to start this thing.”

T’Challa made a small noise in his throat—not quite assent, but definitely not a no. It was very much their father and Shuri swallowed hard, missing him all over again. Before she could open her mouth to speak, there was a small chime. “That’ll be them,” she said unnecessarily; her brother would have heard the sound himself.

“Then be well, and come find me when it’s done.”

***

Shuri paced, back and forth, going over the procedure in her mind. They’d done several simulations of how the new prosthetic arm would be reattached to the socket, tried to anticipate pain and discomfort or the arm simply not working. But they couldn’t predict the roiling tension in her stomach. She had been present for all of the attempts to remove Bucky’s trigger words so far, but this was somehow more invasive, more personal. This was the visible sight of his torture, what he’d
endured at the hands of brutal men decades before her birth. Could they even come close to fixing that?

Dr. Nomsa had found her once, throwing up after her first appointment with Bucky, weeks before. The sight of the ruined arm, the livid scars around it, the repulsor burns that could have killed him, had devastated her. “I know,” Dr. Nomsa had said, not unsympathetically. “And you are so young.”

Shuri had spat into the sink, rinsed her mouth out, and glared at the doctor. “What does that mean?”

The doctor sighed, and hitched her hip on the corner of the sink. “Shuri, there is much ugliness in this world. Seeing it will always make you want to recoil, but if you are to help him? You can’t pretend it doesn’t exist. You meet it head on and beat it back as best you can.”

Nesiwe, on her last visit home with the dust of Aleppo still clinging to her, had said much the same---but this was the first time Shuri had seen such evil for herself. And she knew Bucky much better now than she had at that first visit. She had seen his wry, sometimes dark, humor, known his careful courtesy and his quick intelligence. That he’d endured so much…seemed absolutely unforgivable.

There were steps outside the greenhouse door. Shuri breathed in and out, preparing. “Come in,” she called as the door opened. “I am ready for you.”

***

Lindelwa, in place of Dr. Nomsa, spoke first. “As we discussed, there will be some intense discomfort as the nerves begin to reawaken with the prosthetic,” she said, face grave and concerned. “There is no way to know how long the pain will last. Are you sure you will not allow us to put you totally under?”

“No,” Bucky said firmly. “I can’t… no. No drugs, not like that.”

Dr. Lindelwa’s eyes flicked to Steve, but he shook his head. “His choice, doc. But Bucky—are you sure?”

Bucky’s fist clenched. “When I first got the arm, I killed five Hydra techs.” His mouth quirked in something that wasn’t a smile. “They deserved it, but I was…I can’t risk that here. Not to you or anyone. If I’m awake, then there’s less chance of me being disoriented enough to be...back there.”

“These matters are not predictable,” Dr. Methuli said softly. “And are not worth your suffering. We can help, Bucky. Will you let us?”

Shuri held her breath and thought she wasn’t the only one. They had run through various simulations in recent weeks, getting ready for this procedure, but all of them had assumed a patient who was unconscious. She thought she should have known, should have suspected that Bucky might choose to be awake, and should have run scenarios for that too. “Bucky,” she said just as quietly, “I don’t think the available options are ‘totally awake’ or ‘completely unconscious.’ Is that right, Lindelwa?”

Lindelwa nodded. “She’s correct. We can give you enough medication to dull the worst of it, but you’ll still be conscious and able to answer questions.”

“All right,” Bucky finally agreed. “But kid? You get ready to turn on that forcefield I know you’ve got in here and make sure you get behind it. I’ve killed enough. I don’t want to do that no more.” His gaze turned hard, flinty. “That means you too, Stevie.”

Steve returned the look and then some. He muttered a phrase in a language that stalled Shuri’s translation device, but his last words were in English. “…but you shouldn’t have to.”
“The end of the line, huh?” Bucky said. “Then promise me—”

Steve nodded. “I promise you, Buck, if you are a danger to anyone here, I’ll take you down myself. I won’t let you be a weapon. I won’t let you hurt anyone.”

“And if he can’t do it,” Sam said, very seriously, “I will. Nobody is going to let you be a weapon anymore.”

It was only then that Bucky relaxed. “Okay, doc. Gimme the good drugs.”

***

After that, the procedure went fairly smoothly. Shuri reattached the arm while Lindelwa monitored neural responses, and Bucky’s pain levels. The pain of the nerves reawakening after the installation of the arm would have been excruciating without the anesthesia, but Bucky lay there, completely relaxed, Steve holding his free hand. “Bucky,” Shuri said, “can you raise your left arm and wriggle the fingers?”

Bucky raised the arm and did as she requested. His breathing began to change and Wanda stepped forward. “Shuri. Steve—” she said, pale and alarmed at whatever she’d sensed.

Steve must have seen it too. Shuri froze, hand on the button that would activate the forcefield. **Oh, Bast, she had hurt him, he was injured at her hand… “Soldat,”** Steve said. Shuri didn’t know how he could sound so calm. When there was no response, he softened his tone further. **“Bucky. It’s me. We’re in Wakanda. It’s 2018. You’re not there.”**

“How is my mission?” Bucky said in a monotone.

Dr. Methuli stepped forward. **“There is no mission, soldat. It’s time to stand down,”** he said in Russian.

Bucky stared at him as if hardly believing what he was hearing. His breathing changed again—harsh, as if Bucky had been running a great distance. **“Stevie?”** he finally said. **“What did I…?”**

“Nothing,” Steve assured him. **“You got a little lost there for a bit, but you’re okay. You didn’t hurt anyone.”**

“Yeah,” Sam said, voice rough. **“You…you did good. You came back. How’s that arm feel?”**

Shuri held her breath, watching as Bucky reached up with his left hand to touch Steve’s head. **“Steve,”** he said, full of awe and joy. **“I can touch your hair. I can feel you.”**

***

*Nakia*

Nakia glanced up to see T’Challa enter her rooms. It was late and she had returned a few hours before from overseeing a months’ long mission to break up a large human trafficking ring in Nigeria. The mission had been a success, as far as she or anyone else could tell, and the victims either returned to their families or—if their families no longer wanted them—they would be possibly be quietly resettled somewhere in Wakanda. But with the mission came reports she had to read and… she was tired. But hearing T’Challa’s quick tread on the tile floors made her smile.
She could often tell, based on his address, if she was talking to her lover or her king. If he was visiting her here, then the odds were this was a more personal visit, but with T’Challa, one could never tell. “My king,” she said in the formal greeting. “What brings you here?” That was his cue, and she would know how to respond to him, as his fiancée or as his head of intelligence.

T’Challa was no fool. “Tonight, I have need of both your roles.”

Nakia smiled. “As you wish.” Secretary Ross’s visit was the following day and she knew the various associated stresses had worn on him deeply. If he needed her body, she would give it to him happily— he was a tender, skilled lover—but if he only needed her counsel, she would give him that too. “What may I do for you?”

He quirked a smile at her. “You could marry me.”

“I said I would,” Nakia responded with a smile of her own. “But not yet.”

“I wish I could acknowledge you, your presence in my life, openly,” T’Challa said. “You are not a woman who should be hidden.”

“I run Wakandan Intelligence. My life is hidden. What’s one more thing?” she said lightly. “Come now, T’Challa. You didn’t come here to talk about marriage, did you?”

He spread his hands. “No, not really, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to try.”

She chuckled. “All right,” she said, taking his hands between her own. “What troubles you?”

He waved her off. “First, tell me of your mission. It went well?”

“As well as can be expected. We never know, of course, if the women will be welcomed back.”

“But you have a plan for that,” T’Challa surmised. Nakia felt a renewed warmth; he knew her so well.

“Yes,” she allowed. “Samkelo is going to go with a team in the morning to assess their needs, and we’ll discuss a plan with the outreach team once he returns.”

There were callouses on his hands from the weapons he’d been trained to wield since he was a small child—spear, arrow, knife, even a shield now and then. Nakia rubbed her thumb over the ridge of one callous. “I missed you,” T’Challa said. “And I am glad you’ve returned.”

“I am glad to be home,” she told him. “Now, speak of your burdens.”

“I will never tire of hearing your voice,” he murmured against the coils of her hair.

“Flatterer,” Nakia retorted and felt him chuckle in the slow release of tension.

“They have accepted citizenship, as you suggested and the Council ultimately agreed,” T’Challa said. “And I am pleased for it. They’re making a home here and they see it as something worth defending. There is nothing more we could ask.”

“But,” she prompted.

“But,” he went on, “I am concerned about the machinations of Secretary Ross. If there is something else, some other thing we don’t yet know. I would not be the king who brings war to Wakanda.”

“We have prepared well,” Nakia reminded him. “There is enough information on Ross’s activities to
bury him and his co-conspirators. Research, financial documents, membership lists for this Servants of the Skull group, the money that went to hire Crossbones, his mercenaries, and Helmut Zemo, not to mention a paper trail that anyone could have found if they’d bothered to look through and fully decrypt the SHIELD data dump. It’s all packaged and ready to release as soon as Secretary Ross is in our custody. And the governments of Nigeria and South Africa stand ready to withdraw from the Accords as well. Where they go, others will follow.” She reached up to touch his face. “If war is coming, it will not be your doing, my king. They have lied to us, killed our citizens. This was not your doing, but theirs.”

There were few people with whom he could discuss the burdens and concerns of his sudden kingship. Though he was close to his mother, he feared reminding her of her lost husband and Shuri of their father. So he came to her, and Nakia treasured that she could give him some ease. “And just before I returned home,” she continued, “I had a report from one of our War Dogs in Washington.”

“Oh?” T’Challa asked. They had been monitoring the situation very closely ever since the current president had been…elected. If, Nakia mused, the term even applied.

“Indictments are coming,” Nakia told him. “By the end of the day tomorrow. The president, the vice-president, the cabinet, half of Congress. The new president will be sworn in shortly thereafter. And as she is a capable woman, I doubt she will do much to interfere with how we handle Secretary Ross. I expect she will do some obligatory protesting, but count him a thorn well out of her side. Ross has no allies who aren’t otherwise entangled with the current administration’s crimes.”

“So they’ll let us take out their trash?” T’Challa quipped.

“She’ll have enough mess on her hands without worrying overmuch about what happens to a traitorous Secretary of State,” Nakia said dryly. “They really must appoint such people more carefully. First Alexander Pierce, now Thaddeus Ross.”

“A task which will be made far easier once they manage to evict the remnants of Hydra from their government,” T’Challa observed. “I don’t envy them that task.”

***

T’Challa slept beside her, warm and very deeply asleep. Nakia smiled; she doubted he’d had much rest lately. She rose from their bed and dressed. There were the morning prayers to be performed, but Nakia was not particularly devout and Wakanda’s gods had never been the type to demand unconditional obedience anyway. But there was the ancestral altar, and she winced, thinking of how she hadn’t been able to be there for T’Chaka’s funeral—- T’Chaka, who had accepted her fully as his third daughter. Bast, but she missed him.

She washed her face and her hands, activating the small candle on the altar that flickered to life with a holographic flame. “I am sorry,” she murmured. “I should have been there. I should have—-” her voice choked on the words.

T’Challa’s arms encircled her from behind, strong and warm. It was a testament to her comfort with him that her instincts didn’t register his presence behind her as any kind of threat even though she hadn’t heard him approach. “Nakia my love, there was nothing you could have done. Your security team did their job, as did the Dora Milaje, but nobody could have foreseen Zemo. Baba was not even the target. He was…collateral damage in a madman’s plot.”

She had been deeply undercover in Nigeria at the time, but the security arrangements had been in place since the king had announced his attention to attend the formal signing of the Sokovian Accords. Nakia and Okoye between them had set up what they thought was a secure operations plan
but as T’Challa had said, nobody had foreseen that a lone assassin like Zemo might try to blow up
the UN.

Lone wolves were always the hardest to spot.

That didn’t make it less her responsibility---maybe if they’d had more people outside the UN, they
would have seen the truck with his bomb, would have uncovered Zemo earlier and unmasked him
before half the world went mistakenly looking for James Buchanan Barnes. If if if.

“You were needed in Nigeria,” T’Challa murmured against her neck. “Those women you brought
home, you and the others? You saved them. Please believe I have never---beloved, Nakia, my
Chosen---I never blamed you. Not once. Nor has anyone else. Had you been there, you would not
have been able to stop it. Worse, you might have died too.”

T’Challa loved fiercely and completely; it was a quality she both respected and feared in equal
measure. “I wish I could have been here for his funeral,” she murmured, relaxing against him.

“I could have called you home,” he said in a tone that said he’d strongly considered it. “But Baba…
he was so proud of the work you were doing. He would have wanted you to stay there.”

Nakia turned to quirk an eyebrow at him. “Your father… he did not want Wakanda openly involved
in the outside world, not until the aid mission to Lagos.”

T’Challa acknowledged this; he’d attended the same council debates. “Yes. But… he was proud of
what you were accomplishing. And he would have wanted you to stay and finish. So…I did not call
you home.”

It would have been disastrous had he tried, Nakia knew. She and her team had had months tied up in
the op---investigations, planning, false IDs and covers, all the logistics involved in breaking up one
of the largest trafficking rings in Africa. Had he called her, she would have gone, and willingly,
but…Nakia was suddenly glad he’d made the decision for her. “I understand,” she told him. “And it
pleases me to think your father did as well.”

***

“So walk me through today’s events,” T’Challa asked after their light breakfast.

Nakia would have rolled her eyes at him---they had gone over the plan several times since its
inception and he knew it at least as well as she did by now---but she also understood that he would
not rest until every niggling detail was considered. “Very well. In approximately four hours---noon,
our time---Secretary Ross will arrive with an entourage consisting of his aides and several members
of his staff on a UN inspection tour related to our application for membership. That’s the…official
purpose. Unofficially, he will also be arriving with three members of the Servants of the Skull,
disguised as his bodyguards. Their express purpose in coming here is to locate any signs that we are
harboring the ‘enhanced criminals’ Steve Rogers and James Barnes.”

“Such an odd story,” T’Challa said evenly, his tone giving away nothing, eyes as impenetrable as
basalt. It was, in its way, a mask as much as the black panther suit was, giving nothing away.

She acknowledged his performance with a nod of her head and went on, “We are aware that
Secretary Ross has both an addiction to alcohol and a complete inability to sleep on planes.”

“And he’ll be arriving at noon, during the summer. Excellent,” T’Challa put in.

Nakia grinned. She’d had one meeting with the man, when T’Chaka had first begun considering if
and how to guide Wakanda to the outside world. Secretary Ross had mistaken her first for a servant, then for a minor (and easily dismissed) aide, an impression Nakia had not tried to correct. T’Chaka had kept his air of absolute calm, but his shoulders had relaxed only when Ross was safely on his plane back to the US. “Ross will retire to his rooms early, and will be unable to resist the temptation of the unguarded computer left there.”

“He must think we’re completely unintelligent,” T’Challa observed.

“I don’t think he thinks of us at all, no. He thinks of…his idealized version of what we are. A third world backwater, easily dominated and manipulated to serve his country’s interests. Or his,” Nakia observed. “The computer will appear to link up to our country’s intranet. Which it will, but only to specific pathways. A tracker Shuri designed will notify us of his every move. Those pathways will appear to give him information heavily implying that we know the location of Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes.”

“Bast, how did she find the time to help you with that?” T’Challa asked.

“If you ask me, Shuri always finds more hours in the day,” Nakia responded, amused. “And beyond that? She’s spent some time with Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers. She doesn’t want to see them or their friends harmed.”

T’Challa nodded in acknowledgment. “I am deeply impressed with the amount of loyalty they are able to inspire.”

“Yes,” Nakia said lightly. It would have been a security concern—except for their absolute lack of any desire to interfere in Wakandan politics or government. That alone had forced Nakia to revise her opinions of these strangers several times. They were certainly not the usual run of colonizers she’d expected. “And after Ross has the information he seeks—or thinks he does—it’s expected that he and his ‘bodyguards’ will plan to kidnap Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers.”

“We will then be able to detain Ross and his cohorts,” T’Challa put in. “An attempted act of violence against two Wakandan citizens will not be tolerated.”

“Yes,” Nakia answered. “And then I will release our investigation on Secretary Ross. Our legal authority to detain and prosecute him will not be questioned.”

***

Nakia did not squint in the light of the sun, if only because it was behind her, warm on her bare shoulders. Secretary Ross’s plane had landed, per her specific instructions, on the tarmac facing into the sun. She wanted Ross uncomfortable from the moment he landed. Hung-over, jetlagged and overheated suited her just fine.

She adapted her posture slightly; standing just behind T’Challa and Okoye, she must appear to be the king’s servant, not the woman who ran Wakandan Intelligence, nor even his confidant or his lover. She had chosen a simple gown in the same muted colors as Cendisa; in the midst of the Dora Milaje’s weaponized finery, Ross would underestimate her.

Nakia watched as Ross descended the ramp with his eyes shaded, walking with the careful gait of a man with a severe, painful headache. He was not dressed for the weather, in a heavy Western suit that must surely be uncomfortable. The three men walking behind him were… she narrowed her eyes. There was something in their movements… “They are enhanced,” she muttered under her breath, in a tone pitched for T’Challa’s ears alone. “I know not with what, but Sergeant Barnes did indicate the serum had been replicated by Hydra at some point. It’s…not beyond probability that
“These men received some as well.”

“Yes,” he murmured just as softly. “I shall be on my guard.” Okoye stiffened as did her fellow Dora; T’Challa wouldn’t be the only one on guard.

Ross finally reached the area where they stood. He squinted in the bright summer sun. “Secretary of State Ross,” he said brusquely. The man didn’t so much as offer to shake T’Challa’s hand, and Nakia wondered again at the abysmal protocol failures of whomever was advising Ross. “And you are King T’Challa of course.”

“Of course,” T’Challa said with a slight edge to the words. “Shall we adjourn to somewhere more comfortable?”

“Please,” Ross told him shortly. “You couldn’t have scheduled this meeting for earlier?”

“I could not,” T’Challa said coolly. “The conference room is this way.”

“What, you’re not taking us to our hotel first?” Ross demanded.

Okoye stiffened at his tone, as did her fellow warriors. Ross was oblivious. “It is…your decision,” T’Challa said, and Nakia saw his hand flex slightly in the exact motion that extended the claws in his panther suit. “If you would prefer to rest first, we can have our meeting later.”

Ross shrugged. “Not sure how anyone can do business in this heat.”

“We have prepared rooms for you,” he said, “then. Cendisa will show you the way.”

***

Nakia retreated to her office, blissfully cool and shaded from the midday sun. Cendisa had sent a quick report; Ross and his entourage were settled and---not surprisingly---had attempted to use the computer almost immediately. Now, as Nakia watched on her own display, the sites Ross (and it was Ross---use of the computer required his fingerprint, as Cendisa had instructed him) formed in the air above her head.

He was attempting---after a few stumbling Google searches---to access the national address directory, and Nakia almost laughed. Surely the man must wonder why it was so helpfully in English? Shuri, with one of Nakia’s aides, had done wonders there too---the site Ross accessed looked just like the real one. A green light flashed on her kimoyo bracelet; the listening devices Cendisa had planted on Ross (more specifically, on his luggage) were live and receiving sound.

“They’re here. And we’ll find them,” Ross was saying. “Got two cells at the Raft just waiting for them.”

Nakia held her breath. She needed Ross to say exactly who he was looking for. If it was only Dr. Banner---well, that would be a shame, but Wakanda had no jurisdiction over Dr. Banner. However, Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers were Wakandan citizens.

“How you want us take them down, Boss?” one of the men---probably one of the enhanced bodyguards---asked. “Super soldiers ain’t gonna come easy unless you’ve got some heavy weaponry.”

“You’ll kidnap them tonight, when they’re sleeping.” Ross paused. “We have some tranquilizers that were designed to work on the Hulk. They should work on the super soldiers too.” He made a derisive sound. “Captain America and the Winter Soldier thought they could hide here. I wonder if
Nakia rolled her eyes. Ross clearly was that brand of man who thought everyone around him was stupid. There was a faint tapping, and the website switched to one of the false pages Shuri had created, showing the purported address of an S. Grant. Shuri had rightly argued that it was too obvious, but Nakia had reminded her that Ross had given money to a known terrorist organization with open ties to Hydra. The Servants of the Skull had first hired a deranged assassin who then blew himself up in Lagos, and then hired yet another deranged assassin to badly impersonate the Winter Soldier. Neither of the plans had been known for their cleverness. And Ross—as their own intelligence analysis on him had concluded—was in the habit of underestimating Steve Rogers, thinking him a useless relic from a long-gone time.

Ross was laughing. “I can’t believe he used S. Grant to rent the place. Did he think we wouldn’t find him?”

“Seems too easy,” another bodyguard said.

“Captain Rogers shouldn’t have been defrosted,” Ross said. “He was much more use to us as a corpse. The ‘greatest strategic mind of his generation’? Bah. I’ve met West Point cadets with more sense.” He breathed out slowly, a satisfied man convinced his plans were coming to fruition. “At least he’ll be of some use when we keep him and the Winter Soldier for experimentation on the Raft.”

T’Challa walked in the room and sat beside her. “Do we have them?” he asked, his attention on the holographic trail of every screen Ross looked at.

“Yes,” Nakia murmured. “I will call them and tell them to be ready for a visit late tonight.”

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The rural safe house on the very outskirts of Birin Zana had the added benefit of looking exactly like what Secretary Ross doubtless expected: a small thatched hut with a couple of chickens clucking in the dirt courtyard. It looked poor, humble, downtrodden. “They have tranquilizers,” Nakia had advised them. “If we’d confiscated them, they would have known we were onto them.”

Barnes and Rogers traded uneasy glances. “Only one kind of tranquilizer works on me, and that was courtesy of Hydra, ma’am,” Bucky said quietly. “If they have that—”

“Dr. Lindelwa is already standing by with the counteragent,” Nakia told him. “We will not let them harm either of you.”

“Begging your pardon,” Rogers said. “But you may have to, so it looks real.”

Nakia gazed at the two men on the holographic screen and reminded herself they had fought wars in places she could scarcely name, decades before her birth. “All right. But we won’t allow any permanent risk to either of you. That is not our way.”

Barnes’ gaze softened and Nakia began to understand why Shuri liked him so much. “Of course, ma’am, but just saying—if we get knocked around a bit, it’s fine. Just so you have what you need to detain him.”

“I am sorry,” Nakia told them, “that you’re even in this position. I know you’d planned to retire.”

Rogers’ fist clenched, and she had an idea of what he must have looked like seventy or a hundred years before—a man burning up from the inside, righteous and brave and furious. “Some fights are
worth it. And this is a good one, for our last.”

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Nakia took her position with the Dora stationed in the fields around the hut. The Dora had exchanged their red and gold armor for the dark, monotone night armor reminiscent, in some ways, of the black panther suit. Thanks to Shuri’s inventiveness, it blocked all infrared, eliminated most sound, and essentially rendered the wearer invisible. Nakia found the armor eerie—though she knew, intellectually, that she was in the fields with several members of the Dora Milaje, she could neither see nor hear them unless they spoke above a certain volume.

“They are coming,” Okoye hissed in her ear, a murmured vocalization just loud enough for the listening device Nakia wore behind her left ear to pick up the sound. It was no louder than the slight breeze that ruffled the edges of the leaves.

Ross and his men had hired a flitter of some kind—and Nakia knew Ross would be there, even though his combat days were long over. The man’s ego would want the captain and the Winter Soldier to see his face, to know they were beaten and just who had captured them. So when the flitter touched down just beyond the beaten path leading up to the hut, Nakia wasn’t surprised to find Ross, still dressed in his suit, getting out first.

The man is a buffoon, she thought—his white shirt made a perfect target, and clearly he’d never heard of stealth. To ears enhanced as hers were, as Rogers and Barnes were, every sound he made, every twig broken or rock scattered, was as loud as the report of a gun. And the men with him, the three enhanced men, were no quieter. If they’d had the serum, they hadn’t had the training to use their abilities properly, Nakia mused.

The inside of the hut was dark. Rogers and Barnes had staged it so it would look like they were asleep inside the one bed; Ross would have forgotten, if he’d ever known, that neither of them needed light to see, that they didn’t sleep deeply when they slept, if they slept at all. No, Ross would enter the hut and see exactly what he’d expected to see, and nothing more.

The hut didn’t have a proper door; the opening was covered with a loose curtain of rushes as Ross and his men stopped inside and circled the bed in the center. Nakia observed the scene in miniature courtesy of the camera mounted inside and transmitting to one of her kimoyo beads. It would make fine evidence for later. “Now!” Ross shouted and a very few things happened all at once. Barnes pinned one man to the wall of the hut with his knife while Rogers took out a second with a right cross. That left the third man with his tranquilizer gun, and Ross himself, still standing.

“Throw down your weapons,” Ross was saying, “and I won’t have him shoot you.” His gaze fixed on Barnes. “You know what this tranquilizer does.”

“I know what it did. I know what it was used for,” Barnes replied, voice low and deadly. “Why are you here?”

“I’m taking you both into custody,” Ross announced. “You, Captain Rogers, are under arrest for the attempted murder of Colonel James Rhodes and as for you, soldat—I don’t have time to list all your crimes.” His voice was hard and commanding, the voice of a man used to having his orders obeyed. “Stand down.”

It wasn’t until Okoye’s voice spoke, harder than granite, that Nakia even realized she’d entered the hut. “Stand down yourself, General. You’re bound by the laws of Wakanda to stand down now under my orders and my authority.” Nakia didn’t have to look at the video to know Okoye’s spear was pointed directly at the general.
The other Dora surrounded the hut. Nakia entered with them at her back and spared neither the man still pinned against the wall nor the one unconscious on the floor the slightest glance. “Secretary Ross, you are under arrest as an accessory to the murder of King T’Chaka, the murder of Wakandan citizens as a result of the bombing in Lagos, and for the attempted kidnapping and assault of Captain Steve Rogers and Sergeant James Barnes. And a few other charges you’ll doubtless hear about when you’re arraigned.”

Ross looked distinctly unimpressed. “Who do you think you are? You can’t do anything to me—my country won’t let me stay in this third-world shithole.”

Nakia tapped one of her kimoyo beads, activating the hut’s large holographic screen. “As for your country...well, I think you’ll find they have other matters to concern themselves with.” An image flashed on the screen, of people being lead out of Congress in handcuffs, of a gathered crowd shouting and jeering, of a nation watching as its leaders were finally held accountable for years of graft and corruption. “Your president and vice president were taken into custody at dawn. The Speaker of the House has been sworn in as president. I think you’ll find she…has a vastly different viewpoint on you. And your crimes.” She tapped another bead on her kimoyo bracelet. “Oh, look, it’s the news of your arrest, followed by the evidence we used to arrest you. Not all of it, of course.”

“These men are American citizens,” Ross tried again. “And so am I. You can’t---”

Barnes let out a low raspy chuckle. “I think you’ll find, Secretary, that they absolutely can.”

“They are not only American citizens, but citizens of Wakanda,” Nakia went on. “Such a shame we have no extradition treaty with your country. But being a shit-hole…” she shrugged. “It hasn’t been on our list of priorities. Feel free to address it with our courts, assuming you have the time. As far as your status, we will let your consulate know you’ve been taken into custody and provide them with a full list of the charges against you.”

Ross stared at Barnes and Rogers. “You, you’d turn traitor against your own country?”

“Which country would that be?” Rogers asked, and his tone was a touch too even for his calm to be real. “The one that’s had me and my friends on Interpol’s watch list for the last few months? The one that threw those same friends into the Raft without so much as a hearing or an attorney? The one that wanted Bucky arrested in Leipzig without an attorney? The one that issued a kill order for America’s longest POW? Which country would that be, Secretary Ross?”

There was a glint of metal; Barnes’ hand resting on Rogers’ hip, gathering him close. Before Ross could say another word, Okoye stepped behind him and neatly pinned his arms behind his back. “I will remind you just once that our laws are not yours. Quiet, or you will be made to be quiet.”

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Nakia crossed the palace grounds again just after dawn. Ross and his men had been taken into custody, and the US consulate notified both of their charges and that Wakanda would not be extraditing them to the US or anywhere else to stand trial. It was much as she had predicted; the new president had her hands full, and counted herself well quit of Ross. Arrests were taking place all over the globe as the membership of the Servants of the Skull was revealed. Finally, it seemed one last wing of Hydra was close to being extinguished.

There was a small fountain in the courtyard outside her rooms. She and T’Challa had first kissed there, in what seemed another life—they had been so young then. She was not at all surprised to see him there, waiting for her. “It is done?” he asked.
“Yes. You will need to give a press conference this afternoon, but the new president doesn’t particularly want Ross back. She does, however, want assurances that his trial will be fair.”

“Of course,” T’Challa replied. “I will contact her this evening and discuss it with her.” He gazed at her and suddenly, he was the boy she’d once known, long-legged and gangly, uncertain and shy. But even then, he had loved her as none had before or since. It was simple, immutable, the earth under her feet and the sky above her head. “Nakia, my Chosen, what is it?”

“Kiss me,” she said.

And he did.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Comments are welcome and keep me writing. ;-)

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