Mind Games

by indiepjones46

Summary

A year after going under the ice, Bucky Barnes is pulled from his hibernation by an impatient Steve Rogers and an Inhuman psychiatrist with ties to the Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Steve thinks that he can save Bucky and turn him into a hero, but Bucky knows better. No amount of mind games will undo the carnage of his past, but the Inhuman doctor has some tricks up her sleeve.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own or profit from any Marvel properties. I'm just playing, y'all.

Beta: Just me. Please excuse any little mistakes. I try to go back and edit several times to catch the things I miss.
Notes: I'm new to posting in any of these fandoms, so I hope I don't inadvertently get any details wrong. The idea for this story came to me after I finished binge-watching AoS and rewatching Civil War for the fifth time. I love Bucky's character so much, and it doesn't hurt that Sebastian Stan is seriously hot. At the end of the movie, Bucky says, "I can't trust my mind. So, until they figure out how to get this stuff out of my head, I think going back under is the best thing." That scene sparked an idea in my mind, and then AoS started to bleed over into my imagination until it began to form a story. Who better than a telepath to make that happen? And if I just so happen to get to write sexy times featuring Bucky Barnes, then it's only a bonus. Hope you enjoy the first four chapters, and I will try to post quickly!

******You do not have to watch Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. to enjoy this story. The focus is purely on Bucky, and characters from AoS only show up peripherally.******
“I really appreciate that you’ve agreed to see me on such short notice,” the man said with a sincere earnestness. He sat in the upholstered chair across from her with barely leashed urgency tensing his wide shoulders. “I know that you said you weren’t taking new clients, but I am in desperate need of your help.”

The woman’s expression betrayed no emotion, but her tone was laced with censure when she replied, “Yes, well, I wasn’t exactly given much choice in the matter, was I? When the Inhuman Liaison from S.H.I.E.L.D. calls and says she wants me to take a meeting, then I’m expected to fall in line.”

The thickly-muscled man flinched at the accusation in her tone, and he rushed to assure her, “I’m sorry if I’m making you feel like you don’t have a choice in the matter of helping me, but I promise you that you will be well-compensated for your time and skill.”

The woman’s lips thinned and her dark brown eyes glittered with undisguised hostility, but her tone was carefully controlled when she replied, “If I thought differently, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now. I assume it was Maria Hill that gave you my name and told you what I can do?” When he nodded his head in agreement, she scoffed, “I knew it would only be a matter of time before she tried to drag me into the Sokovia bullshit, and here we are. Apparently, my privacy is no longer a concern and my personal wishes are meaningless now that you need something from me. I will tell you like I’ve told Daisy Johnson and the Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., I have no interest in playing the role of superhero. I am not an Agent, a Hell’s Kitchen vigilante, or an Avenger. I may be an Inhuman, but I am only a psychiatrist, and I very much enjoy living a normal life off the radar.” Her nostrils flared, and her spine straightened, but her legs remained crossed and her arms remained by her sides where they rested leisurely on the arms of her chair. “The only reason I agreed to meet with you is that you refused to sign the Sokovia Accords, too. Well, that and the fact that you’re Captain Freaking America.”

Steve Rogers ducked his head and leaned forward to brace his veined forearms against his knees. “Thank you, Dr. Stoica. I know that what I’m asking of you may not even be possible, but if there’s even a ghost of a chance that you can help my friend, then I will do whatever it takes to make that happen, even if it means standing between you and the Accords.”

Dr. Stoica considered the famous Avenger carefully, but she didn’t even have to try to attempt to crack into his thoughts. Steve Rogers’ mind was not only an open book, it was an audible one, too. His thoughts and emotions washed over her with refreshing honesty and brilliance, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was sincere in his offer. “If I agree to help you, then that is the least of what it will cost in order for me to use my gift on another enhanced individual. The last time I used my abilities on someone not strictly human, I ended up in a coma for two weeks.”

Steve nodded and his eyebrows furrowed with concern. “I understand your reluctance, but my friend is a ticking nuclear bomb that could be launched by anyone who knows the code. You’re the only one who can go inside his head and clip the wires that will disarm that deadly weapon. I’m sure you’ve seen him in the news, but James Buchanan Barnes is more than just the Winter Soldier. He’s my best friend, and he deserves the chance to live his life on his own terms just like you want to do.”

His well-aimed barb struck home, and the young woman’s posture relaxed marginally. “I won’t deny that his case intrigues me, but I am not confident that there’s enough of your friend’s mind left for me to repair. Discounting even that, how am I to trust that Mr. Barnes even wants my
Steve ran an agitated hand through his All-American haircut and sighed heavily. “At this point, we don’t have any other choice. The place where he’s staying right now isn’t stable. The leadership is new, and my friend’s presence there will not remain a secret for long if things go south. Basically, he can’t stay where he is much longer, and he can’t leave until he is no longer a danger to himself or to others.”

Dr. Stoica’s fingertips tapped out an agitated rhythm on the armrest of her chair, but her dark gaze didn’t waver from meeting the superhero’s earnest blue eyes. “Fine, I will agree to meet with Mr. Barnes, but I will make no further promises. In exchange, you will ensure that my name stays off any reports and that S.H.I.E.L.D. stays off my back. I will not be controlled, manipulated, or used by them or their Director. If I determine that your friend can be helped, then we can discuss my fees.”

Steve’s face lit up with a boyish smile and he nodded eagerly. “Of course, Dr. Stoica. I’ll do my best, but I don’t have as many friends as I used to have, especially inside the newly revamped S.H.I.E.L.D. Most of the agents I worked with there are either dead or in hiding. I’ve never even met the new Director, Jeffrey Mace.”

Dr. Stoica tucked a stray brunette curl behind her ear and offered the handsome superhero a patronizing smile. “Come now, Mr. Rogers. We both know that Jeffrey Mace isn’t the one who calls the shots there. All it will take is one phone call from you to the real Director, and all my info will be scrubbed from their databases. Phil Coulson’s hero worship of you borders on the fanatical. He’ll bend over backwards to do anything you ask of him, even if it means breaking international law.”

Steve was both visibly and verbally confused when he replied, “I think you must be mistaken. Agent Coulson is dead. He was killed before the Battle of New York by Loki three years ago.”

The doctor snorted indelicately. “Oh, I may be confused, but not about Phil Coulson. He is indeed alive and mostly well, and he is the real power behind the throne at S.H.I.E.L.D. I happen to know this for a fact, because he was the one that put me in the coma for two weeks after I tried to remove all memories of me from inside his mind. Believe me, I’ve seen enough of his thoughts to know that he will listen to you. Make the phone call and secure my freedom from the Index and the Accords, and I will do my best to cure your friend.”

Steve was thunderstruck by the revelation that Phil Coulson was not only still alive, but also active with the secret agency, but he didn’t let them deter him from his goal. “Of course, doctor. You have my word on it. Now, how soon can you leave?”

Dr. Stoica stood to her feet and brushed away an imaginary speck of lint from her dress skirt. “Just as soon as you make that phone call, Mr. Rogers, I am all yours. Will we be traveling far? I’ll need to make some arrangements.”

Steve joined her in standing and he enveloped her small hand within both of his own for a warm handshake. “There’s no need to do anything other than pack a suitcase and grab your passport. I already have a Quinjet fueled up and waiting on us at a private airfield.” As her eyebrows flew up with surprise, he grinned and added, “Pack for warm weather, Dr. Stoica. We’re headed to the nation of Wakanda.”
Consciousness came to him slowly and languidly like a demonic lover coaxing him seductively back into its hellish embrace. Each time he felt himself floating out of the blessed oblivion of nothingness, he stubbornly sank back into the dark and resisted the devil’s siren song to wake. He wasn’t yet conscious enough to remember why, but he knew that there was nothing good waiting for him behind his closed eyelids. So, he fought against the grating sounds of beeping noises and the murmur of voices talking, and he resisted the sensation of foreign warmth flowing through his veins. He did not want to wake. He did not want to remember.

With determined resolve, he sank back down into his mind, but he did not go far. He didn’t quite make it back into true unconsciousness, and instead, he began to dream. He watched like a spectator as his mind crafted lurid scenarios that he recognized as memory twisted by horror. His heart began beating faster in his chest as he watched himself commit atrocity after violent atrocity. So much pain in his past. So much death. He didn’t know if he knew how to do anything else. He couldn’t remember much about life before Hydra, but he remembered everything that happened after them.

The dreams tormented him, but he refused to leave them by waking. He deserved to relive every fucked up moment of his life as the Winter Soldier, and he forced himself to be an active participant in the reimagining of the day he had fought with Captain America for the first time. He felt every blow that Steve rained down on him, and he relished every time his metal fist plowed into Steve’s jaw. He both wanted Steve to kill him, and he wanted desperately to survive. It was an exquisite nightmare of suffering and adrenaline, and he never wanted it to end.

Like a string yanking behind his bellybutton, his consciousness was pulled away from the battle until he was once more only a spectator. With mild surprise, he realized that he was not alone. There was a shadow standing next to him, but it had no face or recognizable form. He sensed no malice or threat from the shadow, so he ignored it and turned back to watch the violent struggle between the Winter Soldier and Captain America.

“Mr. Barnes, this is only a dream. It’s time to return to wakefulness,” the shadow whispered softly.

The scent of vanilla tickled his nose, and it distracted him from reliving his personal hell. He turned back to the shadow, and it was more solid and dense and had begun to take on the dips and curves of a woman. “No, it’s safer for everyone if I stay here. In fact, it’s not safe for you here, either. You need to leave.”

The shadow blinked out of existence, and he turned back to the scene unfolding in front of him. He watched while Tony Stark learned the truth of his parents’ deaths, and waited with sickening dread for the first blow to fall. With brown eyes shimmering with emotion, Tony Stark raised his iron glove and shot him with a concentrated beam of energy. He slid back into the dream in time to feel the impact of his body crashing into the bunker wall.

Once more, he felt the tug behind his bellybutton, and he was once again on the periphery of his dream. The shadow was back. This time, its tone was distinctly female and filled with mild rebuke. “That hurt, Mr. Barnes. I know that I don’t have your permission to be here, but tossing me out like that is painful for me.”

He studied the shadow with curiosity and he said, “What do you want from me?” Everyone always wanted something from him.
The shadow moved and a slim arm detached to reach out for him, and he did not flinch when the ghostly fingers trailed over him. The darkness flared with sparks where the shadow touched him, and warmth washed over him to remind him that he was so very, very cold. Instinct had him reaching out to pull the shadow closer, but it resisted his pull.

“I only want you to wake, Mr. Barnes,” the shadow murmured with feminine appeal. “After that, you will learn that it’s not what I want from you, but what you need from me.”

He considered the shadow’s words carefully, and could sense no duplicity or ill intent. It was a foreign feeling to him, one that he had only ever felt from Steve, but he had still fought against him. He didn’t want to fight the shadow, though. He wanted to bathe in its heat and let it melt the ice encased around his soul. Maybe the shadow could even burn away the rivers of blood that painted his dreams in scarlet. Somehow, he had a feeling that it could.

“You’ll have to help me wake,” he told the shadow. “I think I’ve been asleep for a long time.” He glanced back at the nightmare scene and they watched as he battled and ran, battled and ran, battled and ran away from the righteous fury of Tony Stark and the bleeding form of Steve Rogers.

The shadow wrapped its arms around his waist and they began to float upward and away from the only person who gave a damn about him, and away from the consequences of his actions. “Yes, you’ve been asleep for longer than most, but not as long as last time,” the shadow explained mysteriously. “Open your eyes for me, and I will tell you all about it.”

He didn’t even have to think about his response. They continued to rise up from the depths of his mind until the nightmare memories were nothing more than hazy waves like the sun glinting off of pavement. With each layer of sleep that peeled away from him, he grew lighter and more alert. His senses sharpened and came back online as neurons ignited and flared behind his eyes, but he wasn’t quite there yet. He hovered beneath the surface of true wakefulness and resisted breaking through to where he knew the light would claim him.

He could feel the presence of the shadow still surrounding him, but its form had burned away under the light glowing against his eyelids. “Just one more minute,” he demanded. “I only want one more minute.”

The presence did not leave, but neither did it pull him from sleep. It waited patiently as he fortified his mental shields in order to prepare for the harsh reality of wakefulness. It didn’t take him more than a few heartbeats to be ready, and he spent the last few seconds bracing himself for whatever fresh hell awaited him in real life.

“Are you ready?” the presence asked him gently.

“I am always ready. I’ve never had any other choice,” he replied. And he let go of the shadow and flew upward.

Bucky blinked against the harsh glare of the low lamplight that assaulted his unprepared pupils, but wakefulness came to him with a clarity that triggered his chemically-altered metabolism. Immediately, his heart began to race as it pushed adrenaline through his system, and it roared through his bloodstream until it burned away every sedative in his body. Like a supercomputer coming online, his body sharpened to laser-focused awareness and he sat up in bed and studied his environment.

All at once, his senses overwhelmed him with information that he instinctively categorized
according to potential threat level. His ears picked up the sounds of beeping monitors at the same time he registered the presence of an IV attached to the crook of his elbow. Without thought, he ripped the needle from his flesh and relished the flash of pain that grounded him further into the present. His nose picked up the scent of crushed vanilla beans at the same moment that his gaze landed on the figure of a woman sitting calmly in a chair adjacent to his hospital bed. They were alone in what appeared to be a medical facility, but he couldn’t recall how he had arrived there.

Bucky focused his attention on the woman and studied her for signs of aggression. He didn’t recognize her face, but he felt like he should know her. She was certainly beautiful with her brunette hair pulled back in a sloppy bun with a few curly tendrils framing her high cheekbones, but her clothes gave him no clue as to her identity. She was wearing a simple flowered sundress without adornment or visible weapons, but Bucky knew from experience that didn’t automatically make her harmless. He was sure that he would have never forgotten such a beautiful woman, but Bucky had long ago stopped trusting his memory. No matter how hard he searched through his fractured memories, though, he could not place her. That meant that she could potentially be an enemy.

He cleared his throat and tried to swallow past the vile desert wasteland residing in his mouth. “Who are you?” he demanded, his voice hoarse and deep with lack of use.

The woman’s lips quirked in a smile, and she replied in familiar tone, “My name is Dr. Danielle Stoica. It’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Barnes.”
Chapter 3

Bucky’s adrenaline surged again as he recognized her voice as that of the shadowy presence that had invaded his mind. He tossed the covers back and swung his legs over the side of the bed and made to stand. Before he could make it all the way to his feet, however, he staggered and collapsed back on the bed as his equilibrium sent him reeling like a drunkard on a bender.

“Whoa, there, Mr. Barnes,” the shadow—no, Dr. Stoica—cautioned him. “There’s no need to go rushing off half-cocked. You’re in a safe place. Do you remember coming to Wakanda with Steve Rogers?”

Bucky furrowed his brow as his last memories began reforming sluggishly. Like pieces of a puzzle that he was reluctant to complete, he remembered arriving in Wakanda with Steve at the invitation of the nation’s king, T’Challa. Bucky definitely remembered him. T’Challa had begun as a worthy opponent, but he had become a cautious ally in the end. When the king had offered the sanctuary of his home country to Bucky during his voluntary cryo-sleep, Bucky had not hesitated to accept. Steve had been against the idea at first, but in the end, Bucky had made the hard decision to remove himself from existence for the safety of others. So long as the Winter Soldier could be summoned by command, Bucky would not be free. He refused to be the source of anymore pain and death, and he would no longer be anyone’s puppet. His life was not worth living if he could not live it on his own terms. He would rather be frozen.

Bucky had no idea how much time had passed as he lay back against his pillow and remembered. Dr. Stoica was a silent and calm presence that somehow worked better than any sedative at slowing the merciless tide of adrenaline that tried to push him into action. It was a chemical response that was part of his programming, but he had gotten better control of it in the months before he went under the ice.

“I remember,” he finally admitted. He coughed and asked, “How long have I been under? Where is Steve?”

Dr. Stoica slowly rose to her feet, and Bucky watched her warily. Out of long practice, he catalogued her appearance and began a mental file on her statistics. Dr. Danielle Stoica was a young woman of perhaps 30 years old, but she carried herself with a maturity and grace that belied her years. “You’ve been in cryo for little over a year. Steve is fine and he’s currently waiting to speak with you in the hallway,” she replied without prevarication. She edged over to table next to his bed and picked up a glass bottle of water, twisted off the cap, and handed it to him. “He brought me here for you.”

Bucky reached out with his right arm, his only arm, and accepted the water gratefully. Unbidden, Bucky’s eyes traveled up and down the woman’s body. She wasn’t tall, but her body was lushly formed beneath her summer dress with generous breasts, narrow waist, and flared hips. She was overtly feminine with soft-looking pale skin that seemed to call out to Bucky with an invitation to touch. He wrenched his gaze away from her to avoid the temptation. He was not good enough to touch her or anyone else. He was not a whole person anymore, not inside or out, and he did not deserve to touch another person without knowing if he would hurt them or not.

He swallowed the water down to the last drop and she retrieved the empty bottle from him without asking. Despite her assurances that everything was fine, Bucky knew better. The only reason he should be awake right now was if Steve had found a cure, and since Bucky knew he wasn’t lucky enough for that option, it had to be because he was in danger. “You shouldn’t have woken me up, doctor. You have no idea what you’re stepping into here. People tend to get hurt if they’re around
me. If you were smart, you would turn around and walk right back out of this room and forget you ever laid eyes on me.”

Bucky began to sit back up, but the doctor placed a firm hand against his shoulder and pushed him back. With brisk efficiency, she pressed two fingers against his jugular and consulted her watch to check his pulse as she replied tartly, “Until you know more about me and what I can do, I suggest you refrain from assuming that I am helpless in the face of danger. I know the risks involved, and I’m willing to pay the price.” Her lips closed, but he heard her say, “It just so happens that I am incredibly smart, and I’m not going anywhere.”

He locked gazes with her and it took him precious seconds to realize that the last sentence hadn’t been said out loud. Her lips had ceased moving, but her voice had projected clearly into Bucky’s mind. His breath hitched and he instinctively pulled away from her touch. “How did you do that?”

She snatched her hand away from him as if scalded, but she schooled her features back into a calm mask. “Have you heard about the emergence of the Inhuman race? They are people with enhanced abilities that occur after being exposed to Terrigen crystals or mist. They have alien DNA that reacts with the compound to change them into something new.”

Bucky absently rubbed the stump of his left arm as he searched his memories from before he had been frozen. “Yes, I remember. There was much controversy about them in the months before the bombing in Vienna.” He looked the woman over with new eyes and asked, “You’re an Inhuman? Is that why I could hear you in my mind?”

She tipped her head in agreement. “Yes, I’m an Inhuman thanks to ingesting the Terrigen through fish oil supplements. My life was as normal and uneventful as it could be, and then in a blink of an eye, it all changed. I changed.” Her hands fisted in the skirt of her dress as she met his gaze and said, “Before Terrigenesis, I was a psychiatrist with a thriving private practice. I have always had an affinity for getting inside of other people’s heads. Now, I can do it literally. I am able to link to other minds, but the effect is drastically heightened with touch.”

It didn’t take Bucky long to put it all together. His chest rumbled with mirthless laughter, and he shook his head with disbelief. “You said Steve brought you here, right?” He didn’t wait for her confirmation before he continued, “He thinks you can go inside my head and fix me, doesn’t he? He wants you to fix mind control with more mind control. He’s delusional if he thinks I’m going to go along with this.”

“She is not a power I take lightly, Mr. Barnes. I don’t seek power over anyone but myself, and I would never willingly harm or control another,” she insisted, but she looked away from him quickly. “I am here because Steve Rogers cares about you, and he believes that I can help free you from outside control. I am being handsomely compensated for my efforts, and I plan to do everything in my power to help you regain full control of yourself. I only want to help you. That can only happen if you let me.”

Bucky allowed himself to consider her offer for all of two seconds before he said, “That’s not going to happen. Thanks for the offer, doc, but I’m going to take a hard pass on that. Can you tell Steve I need to talk to him on your way out?”

Dr. Stoica straightened her dress and brushed away imaginary wrinkles as she replied lightly, “Of course, Mr. Barnes. I’ll send Steve in to explain the situation to you, and then we will have our first session when the Wakandan physician declares you physically stable. I look forward to talking to you again soon.”

Bucky watched her leave with grudging respect for her stubbornness. It didn’t matter that the
Inhuman doctor intrigued him, because she was still going to leave. Bucky would never willingly allow someone else to tinker around in his mind, and that included beautiful psychiatrists with curly brown hair. He would tell Steve to take her away, and he would have the Wakandan doctor put him back under the ice. It was safer for everyone that way. Steve was going to have to accept the fact that there would never be a way to cure him, because Bucky knew he wasn’t sick. He was a monster on a leash, and in the end, the monster would have to be put down.
“No, you’re not going back under the ice again, and that’s final,” Steve Rogers said ten minutes later. “You should have never gone back under to begin with, Buck. You were doing good before you were pulled into the Vienna bombing. If you had only given me a little more time—”

“To do what, Steve?” Bucky cut him off rudely. “Alienate the rest of your friends because of me? Become an outlaw on the run from the U.N.? Steve, you have to let go of the idea that I am still the same guy who grew up with you in Brooklyn, because it’s just not true. I’m a walking weapon just waiting for someone to push the right button in order to activate me. They rebuilt me out of chemicals and metal, wiped my mind a hundred times, and programmed me with certain directives that I even I can’t override. There are only two options left for me. Either I go back under the ice, or I get killed and take a lot of people out with me.”

Bucky could see glimmers of that young, scrawny kid shining through on Steve’s face in the stubborn set of his eyebrows, and he knew that Steve would not budge. Steve said, “I refuse to accept that, not in this day and age of Ultrons, Visions, alien gods, and mutated humans. There is nothing impossible in this universe, and I believe that you can truly be free to become the hero you were always meant to be. It should have been you carrying the shield. Not me.”

Bucky couldn’t meet Steve’s sincere blue eyes. He couldn’t stand seeing the unflinching loyalty and hope shining there. “It was never going to be me, and it never will, Steve,” Bucky replied flatly. He would not give his old friend even a little hope. “You can’t undo what’s been done to me, and I can never be forgiven for the things that I’ve done. I don’t care what this Dr. Stoica thinks she can do by crawling around in my brain, but I’m not going to do it. I’ve had enough of people fucking with my head. I know you’re a certified fucking hero, Captain America, but you can’t save me this time. I don’t want to be saved.”

Steve stood suddenly to his feet and began to pace with agitation across the floor of the small hospital room. “Language,” Steve reminded him wearily as he ran a hand through his short sandy hair. “Don’t put me in this position, please. I don’t want to be like everyone else in your life and give you orders to comply. I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but I will ask you to do it. Heck, I’ll even beg. Just give her a chance, Buck. I’ve talked to some of her clients, and she has done some remarkable things. I just want you to try.”

Bucky flinched under the oppressive weight of Steve’s regard. He didn’t deserve the man’s compassion. He wouldn’t be offering it if he knew even half of the things Bucky had done as the Winter Soldier. “Don’t. Just...don’t,” Bucky stopped him hastily. “I can’t do it, man. It wouldn’t be safe for anyone, but especially for her. You’re putting her life at risk by asking it of either of us. I can’t risk that she will trigger something in me that can’t be stopped.”

Steve’s thickly-muscled legs ate up the short distance between them until he was looming over Bucky’s bed. There was a zealous fire burning through him, and it washed over Bucky as Steve exclaimed, “You are not an animal! There is still a man beneath the metal and mask, and I want to get to know him. I think you do, too.”

Bucky looked away from Steve and studied the beeping heart monitor without seeing anything. “What makes you think this Inhuman can help me? Why are you so willing to trust her?”

Steve collapsed on the bed disturbingly close to Bucky. He wasn’t used to people touching him casually. He had not been allowed the freedom to cultivate relationships of any kind. His handlers had seen affection as a weakness, and connections both emotional and physical had been
discouraged by pain. He’d had no friends, no family, and no kindness. Now, it made him uncomfortable to be even this close to his old friend.

“I trust her, because an old friend of mine trusts her. He works for S.H.I.E.L.D., and he says that Dr. Stoica is a neurosurgeon without the scalpel. She has experience working with people who have been mentally altered, and I think she can help you. We have to try something, Bucky, because we’re running out of time,” Steve confessed.

This was what Bucky had been waiting for, because he knew there had to be another reason that Steve brought him out of the ice. “What do you mean? What’s happening?”

Steve’s eyebrows lowered with worry, but he measured his tone to sound more optimistic. “It may not amount to anything, but there’s been some unrest in Wakanda since T’Challa took the throne. The political climate is unstable right now, and the king can no longer guarantee your safety. He wanted to move you to a more secure location, but I just wanted you back. So, I asked an old contact for advice, and they directed me to Dr. Stoica. She can be trusted, Buck. More importantly, you can trust me.”

It was as he thought; he was no longer safe in Wakanda, though he’d wager it had more to do with Tony Stark finally tracking him down than because of rebellion in the secretive African nation. He had known that he wouldn’t be able to hide anywhere for long. In fact, he hadn’t expected to ever wake up again. He had fully expected to be assassinated in his sleep like the Soldiers in Siberia had been when Zemo had lured them to the Soviet bunker. If it wasn’t Tony Stark, then it would have been any number of powerful people that he had pissed off, hurt, or harmed in some way. He knew he was going under the ice with a target on his forehead, and he had been at peace with it. Now, Steve was changing the rules of the game, and Bucky didn’t like it one bit.

“You got it all wrong,” Bucky said quietly. “It’s not about whether I can trust you or anyone else. It’s about the fact that you can’t trust me. I certainly don’t.”

Steve reached out and gripped Bucky’s left shoulder in his big hand and squeezed. “All I’m asking is that you give her a chance to show you what she can do. If you still don’t feel comfortable after the first session, I’ll send her home.” When Bucky didn’t immediately refuse, Steve took it as confirmation, and said, “Either way, you’re not going back under the ice again. We’re going to figure this out one way or another.”

Bucky shook his head and snorted. Even though it still felt like he was being manipulated into doing something he didn’t want to do, he felt a foreign compunction to make Steve happy. It was disconcerting for Bucky to feel sparks of affection for anyone, but as the fractured memories had started to reform, he had begun to remember more and more of his life before being captured by Hydra. It wasn’t just memories, either. It was old emotions like affection, pride, enjoyment, and comradery that would flicker on like Christmas lights that had been burnt out for years. Being around Steve for even a few days had reignited his brain and his heart to an alarming degree. Steve had reminded him of what it had been like to have a friend, and it scared Bucky to death. That was the real reason why he had gone back under the ice. It was too dangerous to care about someone. Anything Bucky had ever cared about had been used against him as leverage before it had been extinguished forever by his handlers in order to break him. They had succeeded spectacularly. Now, instead of seeing Steve as a target, he was beginning to see Steve as hope. Bucky would not fall for that again.

Reluctantly, Bucky growled, “Fine. I’ll meet with your doctor friend tomorrow morning for one hour, and that’s it. After that, I’m leaving Wakanda with or without you.”

Steve paused at the door and tossed Bucky a familiar, boyish grin. “Sorry, Buck. You’ve already
got other plans tomorrow morning, so you can meet with her in the afternoon.”

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed with agitation. “Funny, I don’t remember making an appointment in the hour since I’ve been awake.”

Steve’s pale blue eyes shone with excitement as he replied, “That’s because I made it for you. Tomorrow, you’re having a consultation to replace your arm. I met the smartest agents at S.H.I.E.L.D. named Fitz and Simmons, and they made a bio-mechanic hand for their boss—“

Bucky felt like he had been punched in the stomach. “No,” he interrupted Steve rudely. “I’m not replacing my arm with that shit again. In fact, the fewer working parts I have, the safer it will be for everyone.”

Steve’s face fell, and Bucky felt a stab of guilt for being the one to make it happen. Steve, ever the dutiful soldier, took up his arms and fought for what he thought was right. “This isn’t the same kind of tech as what you had last time. These scientists have invented realistic prosthetic limbs with synthetic skin and muscle—integrated with tech—that is indistinguishable from a real arm.” He paused, and a look of uncertainty crossed his features. “You can do a lot of good with that arm, too, Buck. You can be a force for good with that arm.”

The stump of Bucky’s left arm gave a twinge of loss, and he spared a moment to consider Steve’s offer. He didn’t know if it was a compulsion driven by his programming or just plain selfishness that made him want to accept. He couldn’t trust anything his mind told him, so he was inclined to refuse outright to be on the safe side. But when he opened his mouth, he rasped, “I’ll meet with your scientists, but I make the decisions on the specs.”

Steve’s face lit up with a blinding smile and he opened the door to slip out of the room. He turned at the door and said, “You won’t regret this, Buck. I have a good feeling about this.”

All Bucky was feeling was dread. He didn’t want any of this. He didn’t know how to live life anymore, and he had lost any faith in finding death. He was too well trained to fall in combat, and his programming forced him into constant survival mode. That meant that he was difficult to kill, and he was incapable of taking his own life. Death was a specter that had haunted him, just out of reach, and denied him escape from his hellish existence for years. If he couldn’t have that, then at least give him the oblivion of ice.

“Yeah,” Bucky lied easily. “Me, too, Steve.”
Bucky suffered stoically through the endless doctors, sharp needles, nosy questions, and invasive physicals for the entirety of the day until the Wakandan physicians were satisfied that he was in good health. He had tried to tell them several times that they were wasting their time, but they had refused to take his word that his body’s chemistry had advanced healing properties. It was well past midnight when Bucky found himself being escorted to a guest room in T’Challa’s compound.

The king’s home was classically appointed with understated luxury mixed with impressive technology. Bucky couldn’t help but appreciate the sheer beauty of his host’s home as he settled into his quarters that evening. He was ready to be alone again after the onslaught of visitors that had included the king of Wakanda himself. T’Challa had not minced words with him. He explained that his kingdom was facing attacks from within even as they defended themselves from outside threats. The situation was stable for the moment, but he could not guarantee that it would stay that way for long. Bucky had admired the sober young king for his blunt honesty, and had assured the Panther that he would be gone within a matter of days.

Bucky swept his room for bugs, and was pleasantly surprised when he didn’t find any. T’Challa had no reason to trust him, and every reason to keep an eye on him under his own roof. Bucky knew that the fearsome young woman that had escorted him to his room had been a guard, and he had been comforted by the measure. He was glad that T’Challa was taking proper precautions in keeping his people safe from Bucky. It was the exact right thing to do, but he was still relieved that there were no hidden eyes and ears on him in the privacy of his room.

During his search, he had found the dresser drawers and closet full of clothes in his size. Once again, he felt a confusing combination of gratitude and obligation to Steve. Bucky did not like owing debts, and so far, he was in the red when it came to Steve Rogers. He selected a pair of black boxer briefs and headed to the adjoined bathroom to attend to his physical needs. The first thing he did was brush his teeth three times until the horrible taste of frostbite left his tongue. Next, he deftly shed his clothing using his one arm, and paused at the toilet to piss away the three bags of IV fluids that the doctors had insisted he receive. After he was through, he gathered a fluffy white towel and regarded the shower quizzically. He had never seen such a large shower with so many nozzles, but he shrugged his shoulders and stepped inside the tiled enclosure that was bigger than most places Bucky had lived for the past fifty years.

It didn’t take him long to figure out the touchpad controls, and he sighed with pleasure as six different streams of searing water pummeled him from all sides. He could almost hear the hiss and pop of melting ice as the scalding jets forced his temperature to rise. It was always like this after coming out of cryo. It didn’t matter that his body temperature was perfectly regulated and normal; he was still teeth-clenching cold down in his core. Each time that his handlers had thawed him out for a mission, it had taken Bucky longer and longer to stop his soul from shivering. The psychic pain of it had throbbed within for days last time, and Bucky had little reason to doubt that it would be any better this time.

After thirty solid minutes of merciless needles of fire, Bucky adjusted the controls until the water merely pounded him instead of stinging him. As he began to wash his hair with the shampoo provided for him, the familiar scent of vanilla beans tickled his nose. Bucky closed his eyes and breathed deep of the addictive sweetness. Like the traitor it was, his mind called up the face of Dr.
Danielle Stoica. His hand slowed in its washing duties as he allowed himself the freedom to study her at length through the lens of his memory.

At first glance, he had not taken the time to appreciate her appearance, but upon closer inspection, he hadn’t been able to help but notice that she was a beautiful woman. Her unruly brown curls had been thrown back in a sloppy bun that had verged on breaking free of its moors to join the tendrils framing her face. Her dark chocolate eyes were framed with long lashes, and her lips were lush and pink with a slight shine from lip balm. When she had stood to her feet, Bucky had estimated her height at only 5 foot 3 inches, but the way she’d carried herself had made her seem much taller. Mostly, Bucky remembered the alluring curves of her breasts and hips, and the more he thought about them, the slower his hand moved across his body.

His hand brushed across his hard cock, and his breath caught in his throat at the jolt of pleasure that shot through him. He couldn’t help but recall the soft warm weight of her fingertips against his throat, and that caused his cock to pulse with impatience. Bucky’s heartrate accelerated as a dark, twisty vision filled his mind with images of the Inhuman woman pinned to the shower wall by his hips. It was the first time he could remember fantasizing about anyone sexually since his capture, and the feelings it stirred in him were both terrifying and thrilling. It wasn’t like he never masturbated over the past fifty years, but it had always been a rote exercise to tend to his needs like eating and sleeping. Climax had been nothing more than releasing pressure from a valve for him, because having sex with another person had been too risky for him. The one and only time that he had gone home with a strange woman from a local bar in Moscow, his handlers had forced him to kill her and dispose of her body in the frigid waters of the Moskva.

Some remnant of rebellion flared in his soul, and Bucky let go of the compulsion to resist temptation. He nurtured the fantasy and reveled in the familiar strangers of lust and pleasure singing through his veins. His hand gripped his cock with purpose, and his palm moved up and down the length on the glide of vanilla soap as he imagined the feel of her body surrounding his own. He could clearly envision how her legs would look wrapped around his waist as he thrust into her heat over and over again, and his body rewarded him by flooding his system with oxytocin. Bucky staggered under the intense wave of arousal that washed through him, and a hoarse curse slipped from his lips. He had forgotten what it was like to desire someone, and the fantasy only pulled him in further until he could feel the press of her nipples against his chest and taste the salt of her skin against his tongue. He wanted to hear her, too. He wanted to hear her say his name.

“God, yes, so good,” she moaned as Bucky plunged deep inside her. “Please, please, God, please,” she chanted as her fingernails dug grooves in his shoulders.

Bucky’s lips sucked the trails of water from the slender column of her neck until he reached her ear. “Not God. James. Call me James,” he commanded her darkly as he continued to fuck her against the wall.

Her voice was breathy and pleading as she whimpered, “James, please, I’m so close!”

Bucky knew her pain. His own body was coiled tight, and the sensation of her pussy squeezing him so sweetly was driving him mad. He would not be able to resist release much longer, so he angled his thrusts until he was stroking across the front wall of her vagina. She stiffened in his arms and a sharp cry escaped her throat, so Bucky continued to concentrate on hitting that spot until her body began to tremble and her sheath tightened painfully around his cock.

“Oh! James, yes!” she cried out until her body stiffened with her climax. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, and her legs pulled him in as deep as he could go as she pulsed and cried his name into his wet shoulder.
His vision blurred with the lightning strike of ecstasy that traveled up his spine, and he had no choice but to let go and freefall into bliss. With each shot of seed that erupted into her core, his muscles clenched and released in an exquisite dance of primal satisfaction and ancient pleasure. His lips found hers for a hard kiss full of teeth and tongue, and she gripped his hair in her fists to hold him to her as the last dregs of their orgasms ebbed and flowed between them. Bucky knew that reality wasn’t far away as he kissed a trail down her neck until he could bury his face there and breathe in the steamy vanilla scent of her slick skin. Her own movements had grown languid as she grew limp and pliant against him, but she made no move to unwind her legs from around his waist.

“I don’t want to leave,” she whispered in his ear as the showerheads washed away their combined scent.

Bucky didn’t want her to leave, either, but he never got what he wanted, so he replied softly, “What was it you said to me earlier? ‘This is only a dream. It’s time to return to wakefulness.’”

She hummed softly before replying, “I so rarely have dreams this nice. I think I’ll indulge myself for a while longer.” Her hips pulled back before she slowly lowered herself down on his still-hard cock, and moaned, “My dream, my rules.”

Bucky grew lost in the rhythm of their bodies for several mindless moments before he realized that something wasn’t quite right. Her words played over and over in his mind until he realized that his fantasy hadn’t ended with orgasm, and he knew that he was still awake in the shower. Part of him didn’t care about the circumstances of his current position between Danielle Stoica’s thighs, but another part of him began to question why she felt so solid and real against him. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t his, and he shouldn’t be here anymore. Still, he didn’t want to hurt her by leaving suddenly, so he gently lowered her feet to the ground.

She looked up into his eyes with her hands hooked behind his neck and offered him a seductive smile from swollen lips, and Bucky felt his stomach flip with unnamed emotion. He couldn’t stay here any longer, but damn, if he didn’t want to go.

“I have to leave now. I don’t want to hurt you this time, so prepare yourself, okay?” Bucky explained to her gently.

She scoffed up at him, her bare breasts quivering until drops of water cascaded down between them. “You’re awful bossy for a dream, James. Fine, if you have to leave, then at least give me a goodbye kiss.”

Who was Bucky to refuse such a request? He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her small body in tight to his own and lowered his lips to meet hers. She returned his passion with equal measure as she ran her hands up and down the slope of his muscled chest. Bucky almost lost his resolve in the heat of her kiss, but he managed to ease away slowly until his skin no longer caressed hers. With their gazes locked together, he pulled away from her sweetness by aching degrees until her visage began to blur.

“Goodbye, James,” her voice echoed in his mind.

He could feel the invisible threads that tied them together begin to unravel as she grew fainter and fainter in his mind. “Sweet dreams, doc.”

Bucky’s eyes flew open and he gasped as reality slammed into him with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. He was leaning against the tile of the shower as his body was pelted with rapidly cooling water from the showerheads. With efficient movement, he hastily finished bathing himself and turned the water off as his mind reeled with theories about what had just happened to him. He
knew it was more than just a fantasy, because he had lost control of it somewhere along the way, but he couldn’t be sure how. He didn’t know enough about her powers to understand the mechanics of it, but he was pretty sure he had somehow infiltrated her dream, and he was also pretty sure that she didn’t know it.

It wasn’t until hours later, when he was finally tucked into bed and on the verge of sleep, that he realized he was no longer cold. In fact, he was truly warm for the first time in years.

Chapter End Notes

**Already working on the next chapter! I would love to hear your thoughts, and I reply to everyone that comments. I enjoy sharing my stories with people, and I look forward to sharing kindness, fun, and sexy times with you all!**
“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Jemma,” the young scientist named Fitz said testily with a Scottish brogue as he ran a digital scanner over the charred stump of Bucky’s mechanical arm. “His previous prosthesis was highly advanced engineering. It would be easier and faster to integrate our tech with what’s already there.”

The other scientist, a young woman with the crisp accent of northern England, shot back, “It doesn’t matter if it’s easier, Fitz. We are not leaving Hydra tech in Mr. Barnes’ body no matter how well it works. The safer course would be to remove his old hardware and replace the entire arm completely.”

Before they could begin bickering again like they had for the past two hours of their consultation, Bucky held his right hand up to silence them. “I agree with Simmons,” he said, his tone brooking no argument from the curly-headed Fitz. “Either we start from scratch, or I walk.”

Fitz backed off quickly, but at least he didn’t turn even paler than his normal skin tone. The first hour that Bucky had spent with the brilliant duo had been extremely grating on his nerves. Every time he had moved, the two of them would flinch, and they had been reluctant to get too close to him. Bucky completely understood why they were afraid of him, but it was impeding the timeline of the mission. His mission was to be fitted for a new arm, and from what he had seen of their prototypes, he wanted one badly. He had finally managed to put them at ease enough to get on with their work, but he had almost immediately regretted it.

Fitz and Simmons were very obviously a couple outside of the lab, too. When they weren’t getting lost in each other’s eyes, they were bickering and debating like an old married couple. It had been quite obvious to Bucky from the first that Fitz’s world revolved around Simmons. Bucky could see the same spark of fanatical devotion when Fitz looked at Simmons that he saw in Steve’s eyes when he was fighting for what was right. For her part, Jemma Simmons appeared to be just as infatuated with Fitz, but her eyes only lit up like that when she was talking about her work. Instead, her eyes softened around the edges and melted every time she looked at the young man, and it made Bucky uncomfortable. There were layers of love between the two scientists, and it made him remember his mother. He could handle torture and electrocution, but he could not handle the pain of remembering his mother.

As Fitz bustled around gathering the tools they’d need for the surgery, Jemma went over her plan with him one more time. She tapped at the screen of her tablet and said, “Right. It should take us approximately two hours to strip away all the debris from your previous prosthesis, but after that, we should be able to have your new arm installed in under half an hour.”

Bucky’s eyebrows winged up his forehead with disbelief. “You can create my new arm with the specs we discussed that quickly? Are the two of you Inhumans, too?”

“I wish,” Fitz muttered darkly under his breath, as Jemma replied lightly, “Of course we’re not Inhumans! We’re something even better...scientists!”
Fitz huffed a long-suffering breath and explained further. “What she means is that we already have the prosthesis made and all we have to do is program it with your specifications. It’s not magic or anything. We’ve been doing this same thing for our boss for the past year, and he goes through a frightening amount of prosthetic hands, believe me.”

Bucky was impressed all over again. He had been vastly underwhelmed by the young lovebirds at first, but the more time he spent with them, the more he trusted them. Still, he was not fool enough to leave things to chance. “And I will be the only one with the passcode to access my programming?”

“Absolutely,” Jemma assured him quickly. “Once the programming is complete, you can input your own passcode, and even we won’t be able to touch it.”

Bucky felt sweet relief flow through his veins, but it was short-lived. Even with the Hydra tech of his arm gone, his mind was still wired to respond to their directives when activated. No amount of technology could heal his mind, and it wouldn’t matter that Bucky controlled his arm, because Hydra controlled everything else.

Still, he gave himself over to their capable hands. As FitzSimmons worked and bickered over his arm, Bucky tuned out and allowed his mind to wander. It didn’t have to go very far to land on the enigma of Dr. Stoica. He had received confirmation from her that their appointment was scheduled for this evening at 7 pm, but the note had been devoid of any language that could be interpreted beyond professional. He couldn’t help but think back on his vivid fantasy in the shower the night before, and still couldn’t shake the idea that his fantasy and her dream had somehow become entangled. He didn’t know if he had unwittingly pulled her consciousness into his thoughts, or if she had ended up there on her own, but either way, he knew that she had been there with him in his head. He had no idea if she even remembered or not, but he intended to find out this evening.

“So, have you met the good Dr. Stoica yet, mate?” Fitz interrupted his thoughts as he uploaded directives to his new prosthesis. “We heard that she was here in Wakanda to work with you.”

Before he could reply, Jemma shivered delicately, but her hands remained steady as she continued to strip away the intricate framework of his old tech. “Better you than me is all I can say about that. I’ve been on the receiving end of her powers before when we were tasked with doing her intake for the Index. She had not been very happy with us for bringing her in for testing and debriefing.”

Bucky perked up at this information and he saw an opportunity to learn more about the mysterious Inhuman. “Yeah, I met the doctor briefly yesterday when I awoke. I was resisting coming out of cryo, and she reached inside my head to help pull me back to consciousness. She explained that she was Inhuman, but that doesn’t really tell me much about her abilities.”

Bucky could see that Fitz was bursting at the seams to talk, and he didn’t have to wait long for the young man to spill. “No one really knows the full extent of what she can do, because anyone who gets too close to her ends up with their memories of her erased. In fact, she tried that with our former Director, Phil Coulson, but it didn’t work out so well for her.”

“Fitz! That’s confidential information!” Simmons chastised her partner. She darted a glance at Bucky’s face before she added, “We shouldn’t be telling Mr. Barnes S.H.I.E.L.D. business.”

Fitz made a rude noise and replied caustically, “All I’m saying is that he deserves to know what he’s getting into, Jemma.” Without waiting for her approval, he continued filling Bucky in on everything he knew about the Inhuman doctor. “Right, so, you know that she is telepathic, yeah?” Bucky nodded, and Fitz continued, “That’s only the surface of what she can do. We know that she can alter memories, create new ones, and repair some neural trauma, but we learned all that from
several of her patients that we interviewed. Dr. Stoica herself is stubbornly resistant to sharing information with us willingly about her powers.”

Jemma harrumphed as she pulled another charred piece of motherboard from his stump. “Yes, well, I was able to get several scans of her brain while she in was in that coma, and the data I recovered was quite fascinating. I—

“Coma?” Bucky cut her off rudely with a question.

“Oh, damn,” Jemma cursed softly before she turned on her partner. “This is all your fault, Fitz! Now you’ve made me break confidentiality, too!”

The young man rolled his eyes and protested, “Dr. Stoica isn’t your patient and she’s not an agent, Jem. Besides, it’s all a moot point anyway. Coulson gave the orders to scrub her data from our archives, so there’s no more records to keep confidential anymore.”

Bucky could see the wheels turning behind Simmons’ pretty hazel eyes as she weighed the truth of his words. Finally, she nodded her head sharply in agreement, and turned to face Bucky once more. Her expression took on a decidedly excited glow and she leaned in closer to him as if she were sharing secrets. “He’s right, you know. Before we left on the QuinJet to come to Wakanda with Mr. Rogers, Coulson gave the orders to purge all our databases of any information relating to Dr. Danielle Stoica. It was quite unusual, especially considering that she was the first verifiable gifted individual with psychic powers that had been entered into the Index. Coulson must have a very good reason for scrubbing her from the S.H.I.E.L.D. registry.”

Bucky’s mind raced with the information he had received so far, but he needed more. “You mentioned something about a coma earlier. How did that happen?”

Fitz, now that he was free to gossip without Simmons’ censure, took over the tale. “Part of our mission at the agency is to identify and register gifted and enhanced individuals on the Index to determine what threat level they pose to the public. We’ve been kept quite busy with the emergence of the Inhuman race into the spotlight, thanks to the Terrigen contamination in the ocean. Dr. Stoica came up on our radar about a year ago, but when our Inhuman Liaison, Daisy Johnson, went to talk to her, she came back with no memory of her mission.”

“That was when Coulson stepped in,” Jemma took up his tale. “We aren’t exactly sure what happened between the two of them, but when Coulson returned to base, he had her with him and she was unconscious. The only thing he would tell us was that Dr. Stoica had tried to remove any memory of herself from his mind, but something went terribly wrong. She was in that coma for two weeks before she woke up.”

“And she was none too pleased about being at S.H.I.E.L.D., believe me,” Fitz stepped in seamlessly. “She was completely hostile at first, but Daisy was able to talk her down. It took a lot of negotiation with her before we were allowed to examine and interview her for the Index. By the time she left our custody, though, we still didn’t have much more information about her gifts, and she made it known that any attempt to force her to use her powers would be met with disastrous consequences. She had made it very clear that she only wished to be left alone.”

Jemma hummed distractedly under her breath in agreement. Her gaze was focused on the last bit of circuitry, and her narrow hands wielded her tools with efficient confidence. Still, she was able to reply, “Of course, it was no mystery to us what was happening when we heard that she was here with you. It doesn’t take a PhD to see that there was a deal made somewhere along the way. The order to scrub her information from the Index and her agreeing to use her powers on you have to be connected. Why else would she take such a dangerous case?” It took her a moment to realize what
she said, and her cheeks flushed with pink. “Oh, I didn’t mean...I wasn’t trying to imply—“

“You don’t have to imply anything. It’s the truth and everyone knows it,” Bucky replied without heat. “I think you’re right. Dr. Stoica strikes me as a very intelligent and secretive person, so her payoff would have to be greater than the potential risk. She told me herself that she is being ‘compensated handsomely’ for taking my case. What’s worth more than your freedom?”

Fitz stood to his feet and stretched his arms back over his head and groaned. “That’s what we think, too. Either way, I wouldn’t be fussed about it, mate. I’ve seen what she can accomplish with her patients, and it’s nothing short of miraculous. She has a real shot at being able to help you, so who cares why she’s doing it?”

Bucky didn’t answer his naïve question, but he already knew the answer. Everyone had a price and an agenda, and until Bucky knew what hers was, he couldn’t afford to trust her. Especially not with his mind. He needed to know more about her, and all her digital details had just been scrubbed. There was only one other way he would be able to find out the answers to his questions. He was going to have to get them himself.
Chapter 7

At 6:45 pm, Bucky found himself in a curious position. He stood in front of the wardrobe with a thick, white towel draped low on his waist and could not decide what to wear. It was an unusual conundrum for him, and he couldn’t fathom why in the world it should matter which clothes he chose to wear to his appointment with Dr. Stoica. Everything he picked up, though, he automatically put it back down as somehow wrong. He could not pull off wearing chinos and a polo shirt like Steve, and it was too hot to wear a hoodie or leather. None of these clothes felt right to him, and it made him unaccountably angry.

“Fuck it,” he snarled as he reached out with his new arm to grab a pair of dark wash jeans and a plain black tee shirt.

With quick, efficient movements, Bucky dressed himself and turned to look in the mirror. He blinked with surprise at the stranger looking back at him from the reflection. It wasn’t the fact that he had two arms again that surprised him; it was the fact that it looked so real. With just a thought, Bucky lifted his new prosthesis and marveled all over again at how realistic the skin, tendons, hair, and muscle looked and felt. No one could look at him and see the monster anymore, but Bucky knew that it was still there lurking beneath the surface. This new arm may not be made of metal, but it was still just as deadly. His specifications had seen to that along with the genius of FitzSimmons.

Bucky nervously ran a hand through his damp locks and winced at how tight the material of his shirt pulled across his chest. In the days he had spent with Steve before coming to Wakanda, he had teased his old friend about wearing painted-on tee shirts, and it appeared that Steve was getting his revenge. Every shirt in Bucky’s room was a size too small that emphasized his muscle mass in a way that made him uncomfortable. He didn’t like to advertise himself at all. In fact, he preferred to go unnoticed. It was easier to accomplish missions when people didn’t pay attention to you.

Ten minutes later, he arrived at the private sitting room designated for their use by their gracious host. He rapped on the door lightly with his knuckles, and when her voice called out for him to enter, he opened the door and strode into the room. Immediately, his eyes began scanning their surroundings and he noted each avenue of escape and calculated how many steps it would take him to reach each of them. His gaze ran over the figure of Dr. Stoica, but he didn’t allow himself to linger on her until he had memorized each corner of the room.

“Mr. Barnes, thank you for agreeing-” she began to say, but Bucky cut her off with sharp look and upraised hand.

She obligingly fell silent and watched him curiously as he brought his left arm up and held his palm out to the room. With just a thought, he turned on the program that would detect wireless signals in the immediate area. He slowly paced along the perimeter of the room until an alarm sounded when he drew close to where the doctor was sitting quietly in her chair. His eyes flew to hers, and he stalked toward her with purpose as the alarm grew louder. Her calm demeanor cracked, and her eyes grew round as he towered over her. Without a word, Bucky snatched the small statuette of a black panther sitting on the table by her chair and crushed it in his left fist.

Dr. Stoica jumped in her seat, and a curse slipped past her lips. “Why did you do that?” she asked, her tone both incredulous and curious at the same time.

Bucky opened his hand and sifted through the plaster to find the destroyed bug and showed it to her. “I don’t like being spied on, doc. It makes me cranky.”
Her expression morphed to one of outrage as she exclaimed, “We were being bugged? I would have never agreed to such a thing. Who would have done this?”

Strangely, he could tell that she was telling the truth. He sent a jolt of electricity through the recording device for good measure before he tossed it back on the table for the perpetrators to find later. “Take your pick, doc. Could be Steve or T’Challa, could be S.H.I.E.L.D., or any number of other interested parties.” Now that Bucky was positive that they were truly alone, he took his seat in the chair situated a few feet in front of her and said, “Where were we?”

Bucky took a moment to enjoy the unsettled look on her face after his little display. It served her right after she had done the same thing to him yesterday, and he was strangely pleased that he could put a crack in her calm and professional façade. If he wanted to know more about the good doctor, he was going to have to get inside her head, too. He wanted to know what made her tick and learn exactly how her power worked.

She recovered her composure quickly, though, and straightened her spine. Bucky couldn’t help but appreciate the way her sleeveless white blouse pulled across her breasts with the action. In fact, he appreciated everything about the way Dr. Stoica looked tonight. In a drastic reversal from her casual summer dress from the day before, she was dressed in a fitted black skirt, silk blouse, and three inch heels. Her brunette curls were still pulled away from her face, but the bun was tighter and her lovely brown eyes were hidden behind a pair of square-framed glasses. She was still beautiful, but now she was also a challenge.

“Uh, yes, I was thanking you for agreeing to meet with me, Mr. Barnes. I understand why you may be reluctant to work with me,” she began again, her tone crisp and without emotion.

Bucky could still hear the echoes of her voice in his mind as she had called out his name during the throes of orgasm, and he wanted to see if she remembered, too. “I’m only here because Steve asked me. I owe him.” He paused to allow her false confidence to settle before he continued, “As long as we’re both here, though, I hardly think it’s fitting that you keep calling me ‘Mr. Barnes.’ It seems kind of impersonal for such an intimate relationship, don’t you think?”

Dr. Stoica blinked rapidly behind her glasses and stammered, “Oh, I, uh, suppose you may be right. Would you prefer I call you ‘Bucky’ instead?”

He almost smiled at the faint undertone of hope in her voice, but he managed to resist. He arched an eyebrow and replied softly, “Not Bucky. James. Call me James.”

Her nostrils flared at the familiar words, but she did not give him the satisfaction of admitting she remembered their shared dream. She smoothed a non-existent wrinkle from her skirt and replied evenly, “Very well, James. Before we get started, I wanted to explain to you what you can expect from our session. I usually like to meet with a client several times for talk therapy before I proceed to make a connection to their mind, but as you know, our time is short.”

Bucky tipped his head thoughtfully and asked, “You can’t read my mind right now?”

Her eyebrows lifted, and her words were reluctant when she answered, “If I really wanted to, yes, I could read your surface thoughts right now. However, I choose not to open my mind like that often. Not only do I usually hear something I’d rather not, but it is unethical and incredibly rude to listen in on private conversations without permission.” She shot a contemptuous look at the destroyed bug sitting on the table by her elbow.

Bucky couldn’t suppress the smirk that twisted his lips as he said, “Did you ask Phil Coulson or Daisy Johnson for permission before you altered their memories of you?”
He knew he had hit a sore spot when the color drained from her cheeks. “That was different. They weren’t coming to me for help. They were coming to try to take away my freedom. Do you ask for permission before you defend yourself?”

Bucky didn’t bother to answer her question, because they both already knew the answer. Instead, he pressed forward with his questions. “What happened between you and Phil Coulson that put you in a coma?”

She swallowed hard, and Bucky’s mouth watered in a Pavlovian response as he studied the graceful arch of her neck. “That’s none of your concern, Mr. Barnes. We’re here to discuss you and how I can help free you from Hydra mind control.”

Bucky leaned back in his cushioned chair and casually propped his foot on his knee. “James,” he reminded her without mercy. “I think I have every right to know if you plan to poke around in my head, Danielle.”

She shot him a stern look from over the lenses of her glasses and snapped, “That’s Dr. Stoica to you, and I can assure you that what happened with Agent Coulson will not happen with you. His brain chemistry had been altered by the addition of alien blood, and I wasn’t as careful as I should have been when I tried to remove his memories of me. He was able to recognize and break my link to his mind, and the resulting backlash sent me into a coma. As long as you do not fight me, we will both come away unscathed.”

Bucky doubted her assertion, but he didn’t press her for more. “Okay, Danielle,” he said with a cocky grin. “How do we do this?”

He could tell that he had thrown her off her game once more, and she scrambled to catch up to him. “Well, uh, what I would like to propose is that I do a brief, initial scan of your mental landscape so I can get an idea of what we’re working with and then proceed from there.”

Bucky was intrigued. “What do you see when you link to someone else’s mind? Is it just a jumble of memories? How does your power work?”

Danielle reached up to take her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. He wasn’t sure she would answer him, but she surprised him yet again. “I don’t like to discuss my gifts, because it tends to frighten people, but I have a feeling that nothing much scares you. It’s difficult to explain, but I’ll do my best. Yes, I can see memories and sense emotions, but I can also see the neural pathways that create, store, and recall those senses.” Warming to her topic, she continued, “Think of the human brain as an intricate spider web of connecting strings. Every thread is a pathway and delivery system for the commands that your brain sends out to your body. I am able to not only see each thread, but I can touch and manipulate them, too. I can heal broken threads, Mr. Barnes. I can put the puzzle back together.”

Bucky’s mouth went dry as the ramifications of what she had revealed ripped through him. The kind of power this woman could wield was literally mind-boggling. “James,” Bucky insisted. “No wonder you don’t want anyone in power to know about you. You would either be hunted to extinction by someone like me, or you would be controlled by someone with an agenda. That kind of ability could topple nations in the wrong hands.”

He could see the fear flickering behind the inky depths of her eyes, but her voice was unwavering when she replied, “I just want to be left alone to live my life. I respect the gift I was given, and I fully comprehend how dangerous it would be in the hands of others. I’ve gotten very good at hiding in the past two years. Very few people know that I am an Inhuman, and even fewer know the full scope of my powers, and I intend to keep it that way. I am a healer, James. I refuse to be a
Bucky felt a stirring of admiration in his chest for her stance. She seemed sincere in her beliefs, but he knew better than to trust her so easily. He regarded her for long moments and she grew increasingly agitated. He knew it was probably wrong to make uncomfortable on purpose, but he couldn’t help himself. Her cheeks were flushed a dusky rose and her dark eyes glittered with part defiance/part fear. She was just so pretty to look at that he never wanted to stop.

Finally, he blinked slowly and asked, “Will I be able to read your mind while we’re connected?”

She jerked as if shot, but she composed herself quickly. “No. The link has only ever gone one way.”

There’s a first time for everything, Bucky thought to himself. Out loud, he said, “Why should I trust you?”

Her gaze met his without flinching and she replied, “For the same reason I’m trusting you. We need each other to get what we both want most, James. Freedom from outside control.”

Bucky’s lips quirked at the corner and he drawled, “When do we start?”
Chapter 8

Danielle took a deep breath and let it out slowly before she responded. “We can start whenever you are ready. In order for me to do a more effective scan, I will need to touch you. I have found that it is most effective when I place my fingers here,” she paused to indicate the area between her eyebrows. “Some cultures refer to this as your ‘third eye’ chakra. I’m not prone to spiritual belief, but it is easier for me to connect there.”

Bucky was starting to like the sound of this. She would have to be close to him in order to do the scan, and he found himself anticipating the scent of vanilla in his nose and the warm touch of her fingertips. With that thought in mind, he sat up in his chair and warned her, “You’re not going to like what you see, doc.”

Danielle stood to her feet and slowly closed the distance between them. “I rarely do.”

Bucky could feel his heart begin to race as she stopped just out of reach. Even with her heels on, she was still only a few inches taller than Bucky was sitting in the chair. He spread his legs wider in invitation and said, “What do I need to do?”

Danielle edged her way forward until she stood between his knees. “Close your eyes,” she commanded, her voice husky and low.

Bucky complied immediately. Having her close to him without being able to touch her was playing havoc with his system. Adrenaline surged and crashed and his senses heightened until he was hyperaware of the woman standing so close to him. He could hear the pounding of her heart beating slightly faster than his own, smell the crushed vanilla bean of her shampoo, and feel the wash of her peppermint breath across his cheek. He could feel the rest of his body responding to her, but he was powerless to make it stop. “Now what?” Bucky rasped.

Her tone was soothing and seductive when she murmured, “Now, I want you to empty your mind. Imagine yourself in a large white room. There’s nothing there but white. Do you see it?”

Bucky did as she asked and was surprised at how easy it was to concentrate with her voice in his ear. “Yes,” he breathed.

He sensed her moving, but he was still surprised when her fingertips pressed between his eyebrows. “Now, imagine a door. I’m right on the other side of it, but you have to open the door and let me in.”

As if she had summoned it for him, a large red door appeared in his room of white, and he walked over to it. He placed his hand on the doorknob and paused.

“I won’t hurt you, James,” she whispered softly.

“I can’t promise the same,” Bucky replied, and he opened the door and flung it wide.

*He was no longer in the white room with the red door and he was no longer alone. He was sitting on the stoop of an apartment building in Brooklyn. He felt like he should remember this place. The shadow was back, but this time he could see her as she looked in reality. Danielle Stoica sat next to him on the concrete steps as the sounds of a busy New York neighborhood carried on around them.*
“How did we get here? I should know this place, but I can’t remember why,” he confessed to her.

Danielle looked all around them before she answered, “You brought us here because you feel safe here. I can see the broken connections in the memories that are preventing you from remembering. Some of them are burned beyond repair, but I think I can heal some of it, if you want me to.”

“Will it hurt?” Bucky asked.

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation.

“Do it.”

Danielle closed her eyes and raised her hands like a conductor. Her fingertips began to dance across the air and she plucked at invisible strings that flared with orange light each time she touched them. Bucky waited for the pain to hit him, and when the last flare of orange faded away, he doubled over as the memories washed through him with savage echoes of joy, grief, happiness, and loss. He was unmoored from the present as faces and names flooded him with snapshots of his early life. He could see his Ma cooking spaghetti as she fussed at them to finish their homework and to wash their hands before dinner. He could see his three sisters fighting over whose turn it was to choose the radio station. He could see his Pop collapse in his chair with exhaustion after a full day on the construction site. He could see himself and a scrawny Steve Rogers sitting on the same stoop as they talked about which girl they should ask to the dance. So many people and memories were crowded into that little walkup apartment, but it had been home. It had been safe and warm and full of love.

It was too much. It was not enough.

“This was your home growing up,” her voice pierced the chaos in his mind. “I can see the whole picture now.”

She grounded him with a hand on his arm and pulled him back to the steps where they had been sitting. Bucky glanced over at her and she appeared to be a little more solid in form. “Yes. We lived on the second floor in apartment 2B. I was the oldest of four kids, and Ma and Pop were there, too. We were poor, but most everybody in our neighborhood was at the time. We were happy enough, though. Ma was strict, but she loved us.”

Danielle’s eyes were unfocused, but she was clearly seeing something. “I can see her in your memories. She was beautiful, James. You look a lot like her.”

Another wave of pain nearly sent him reeling again as he realized, “They’re all gone. Even my little sisters are likely dead or on the verge of it. I hope they never knew the truth about me. I hope they believed that I died during combat in the war.”

Danielle stood to her feet and she reached her hand out toward him. “There will be time for grieving and questions, James. For now, we have to go.”

Bucky stared at her hand, but he didn’t take it. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay here. I want to remember them more.”

Danielle reached out into thin air and plucked a glowing orange thread. “The threads of memory connected to this place are strong now. You can come back anytime you want, but we have to move on now. I need to see everything. I need you to take me to where the Winter Soldier was created.”

Bucky recoiled from her and shook his head. “No. It’s dangerous there. It’s dark and twisted and painful. Let’s stay here. It’s safe here.”
“I can’t help you if you won’t let me,” she reminded him gently. “I need you to take me there so I can see what’s been done to you. Please, James.”

She held her hand out again, and this time, Bucky took it.

Visions of past horrors blurred before them until they came to a stop. Bucky dropped her hand and looked around the familiar room. It was dimly lit and smelled of dank mildew. There was a chair in the center of the room, and Bucky was strapped into it as two other people spoke in hushed whispers. He was younger then, and his hair was still cropped from his time in the military. He had brought them to the beginning.

As the two men studied and debated over Bucky’s memory self, Danielle slowly walked around the scene. She wasn’t looking at Bucky strapped down into the chair with his left shoulder wrapped in bloody bandages, and she wasn’t paying attention to the two Russian scientists who were debating the merits of keeping him alive. Instead, she was gazing around her with unfocused eyes while periodically reaching out to touch empty air before hastily jerking her fingers back to safety.

“This one has lasted longer than the others. He is a good candidate for the program,” one shadowy scientist said to the other. “Commence with reprogramming.”

Bucky knew what was going to happen next even before one of the men jammed a rubber mouth guard between his teeth and fitted electric nodes to his temples. He didn’t want to watch, but he couldn’t seem to look away as the ECT machine began to charge with a high-pitched squeal. He didn’t want Danielle to see this, though. She shouldn’t have to suffer, too.

As soon as he thought it, he realized that he was embracing the shadowy form of Danielle Stoica. She was wrapped in his arms with her face hidden in the crook of his neck, and her slender arms encircled his waist. “Don’t look,” he rumbled into her brown curls. “Please don’t look.”

Danielle pulled back from him, but she didn’t leave the shelter of his embrace. She looked up into his face, and he saw that she was crying. Large crystalline tears spilled over her cheeks with an unearthly glow, and their source was the desolate wasteland of suffering he saw reflected in her eyes. The sight sent his adrenaline surging, because anything that put that look on her face should be hunted down and killed. Bucky could do that for her. He was experienced at delivering death.

“It’s too late,” she sobbed. “I’ve seen everything they’ve done to you. I’ve seen it all.”

He cupped her cheek in his left hand, and said, “You know the truth. You’ve seen the things I’ve done as the Winter Soldier. I’m a monster.” Before his eyes, the hand that cradled her jaw turned silver and metallic, and he snatched it away from her face before stepping away from her.

“Ready the first charge,” the scientist ordered the other.

Danielle spun on her feet until she was facing the memory, and Bucky had no time to react before they loosed the first volley. With eerily synchronous movements, Danielle and Memory Bucky stiffened and seized, and then they both began to scream. He was frozen in place with horror as he watched Danielle suffer the same torture he had all those years ago. Her body seized and released, and ragged screams ripped from her throat. The scent of charred flesh filled his senses.

He had to get her away from this place. He needed to take her anywhere else other than here. With no more than a thought, Danielle’s hand was in his, and they were standing in the memory of his bedroom at the Wakandan palace. Her visage was faded and shadowy, but at least she was no longer in pain.
“I should have never agreed to this,” he told her by way of apology. “It’s too dangerous.” His tone was full of anger, but it was aimed at himself.

“I’m okay, James,” she said, her voice weak and scratchy. “It was only phantom pain; just the memory of it. I had to see it for myself.”

“Yeah?” he scoffed, bitterness coating his tongue. “What’s the diagnosis, doc? Can you cure me?”

Her shoulders sagged and her form faded to translucence as she replied, “No. There’s no healing the damage they did to your neural pathways, but I may be able to sever the ones that bind you to their control.”

Bucky reared back in shock. He had not expected anything beyond “no.” He had not really believed that she could help him at all, but now she was saying that she could give him his freedom. She was offering him a solution and hope, but she was acting like it was a death sentence.

He reached out and grabbed ahold of her arm, and her form solidified in his grasp. “Why does it sound like that’s a bad thing? Isn’t that the goal?”

She wouldn’t meet his gaze, and he could sense that she was hiding something from him. “Yes, but I had hoped it would be a matter of healing instead of rending. They are two very different solutions with vastly different consequences.”

Bucky couldn’t pretend to understand what she meant by that, but before he could ask more questions, she said, “Where are we? This looks like the king’s palace.”

If she were trying to distract him, it worked. “It is. This is my room.”

She began to scan their surroundings, and her eyebrows wrinkled with confusion. “Why does this look familiar?” She walked past him and approached the adjoining bathroom. “Is that the shower I hear running?”

Bucky knew what she would see when she walked inside that memory. He was half-tempted to grab her and pull them anywhere else, but the other half wanted her to see it. He followed behind her until she came to a stop several feet from the glass doors of the walk-in shower. The air was steamy and thick with humidity, but there was no obscuring the sight of two people having sex against the tiled wall.

He was so engrossed in watching the memory that he almost didn’t hear Danielle when she said, “How do you know about this? This is my memory of a dream I had last night. You shouldn’t be able to reverse the connection.”

Bucky moved in behind her until they were separated by only a thought. “I’m not so sure I did, doc. You see, this is the memory of a fantasy I had last night while I was in this very shower. Somewhere along the way, though, it turned into something else. I don’t think I was really alone the shower last night. I think you were there with me.”

Danielle’s hands flew up to cover her mouth, but he still heard her say, “I hijacked your mind while I was asleep! Oh, my God. I swear, I thought it was just a dream!”

Bucky couldn’t take his eyes off of their dream selves, and he could feel the echoes of their passion pounding through him. “You didn’t hijack anything. If anything, I think I’m the one that pulled you in. It was my fantasy first, and it remained that way until the end.”
Danielle grew quiet as they watched their memory selves shatter into climax. She shivered as if she were reliving it, too, and her voice was strained when she said suddenly, “I’m getting tired, James. It’s time for me to leave. Take me to the white room.”

Bucky paused just a heartbeat more before he did as she asked and imagined the blinding white room with the red door. No sooner had they arrived than Danielle pulled away from him and began to walk toward the door. He watched her go with a combination of relief and regret, but he would not stop her.

Her hand rested against the gold doorknob and she looked over her shoulder at him one final time. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“You shouldn’t thank me for that. You should hate me for it,” he told her bluntly.

She turned the knob in her hand, and walked through it. The door closed behind her, and she was gone.
Chapter 9

Bucky opened his eyes to see Danielle still standing between his legs, but her eyes were closed and her fingertips were massaging her temples. Her skin tone was pallid and her mouth was pinched tight with pain. He could see the strain of her physical suffering in the rigid set of her shoulders and in the slow, measured breaths that strained the buttons of her blouse with each inhale. His memory called up a similar picture, and it was both foreign and familiar. It was familiar, because his Ma used to look the same way when she suffered migraines. It was foreign, because Danielle had just helped him to remember.

The only difference was that his Ma’s nose had never started to bleed like Danielle’s was now.

Bucky surged to his feet just in time to catch Danielle as she began to sway backward, and he seamlessly spun her around and sat her down in his chair. Thankfully, she hadn’t passed out, and was already pinching her nose between her finger and thumb.

Bucky used his left hand to rip away the right sleeve of his tee shirt, folded it into a clean square, and began to mop up the scarlet trail winding its way down her chin. “What happened?” he snapped, his words coming out harsher than intended.

Her voice sounded weak and nasally when she rasped, “It’s nothing, James. I swear I’ll be fine in just a few minutes. Just lower your voice, please.” She released her fingers and dabbed at her nostril. “See? It’s already stopped.”

Bucky’s jaw clenched around the words that wanted to scream across his tongue. He wouldn’t hurt her any more than he already had. “Don’t tell me this is nothing, doc,” he hissed in a low tone. “Your pupils are pinpoints, your salivary glands are flooding from nausea, and your skin is the color of oatmeal. You’re having a migraine right now, because of what happened in my head.”

Danielle gently pried the cloth from his hand and waved him off negligently. “I told you, it will pass. This happens sometimes when I work with patients that intensely. I just need some rest, and I’ll be right as rain.”

Bucky wasn’t satisfied in the least by her answer. “You need a doctor and some pain medication. Let’s go. I’m taking you to the medical ward.”

Her lips pulled down in a frown and she shot him a glare through the slits of her eyes. “Absolutely not. I just need to lay down for a bit, and I’ll be okay. I am not going to the medical ward.”

Bucky’s nostrils flared and his fingers curled into fists. He needed to do something to help her. She was in pain because of him, and now he needed to fix it. Mind made up, he bent at the waist and hooked one arm behind her knees and the other behind her back, and picked her up into his arms. She shrieked with surprise, but her arms still wound tight around his neck and she tucked in close to his chest.

“James! What the hell are you doing?” she asked incredulously as Bucky strode toward the door of the sitting room.

Bucky shifted her weight long enough to turn the handle and paused at the door to glance at her lovely face. “You said you needed to lay down, so I’m taking you to your room. Right or left?”

She struggled a bit, but he only held her closer. She made an impatient noise in her chest, and exclaimed, “This is ridiculous and incredibly unprofessional! I can walk on my own, so put me
down, James! What if someone sees us?"

Bucky couldn’t begin to imagine why she thought he cared about any of that. “Right or left?” he asked again with a pointed, raised eyebrow.

She huffed an indignant breath and muttered, “Left.”

Bucky turned to his left and began to walk down the long hallway of the king’s home. He tried not to think about how warm and solid she felt snuggled against him, or about how her curls were slipping out of its bun to caress his neck. He definitely shouldn’t be thinking about how close his fingertips were to the curve of her breast. He had no right to be thinking about her that way, especially since it was his fault that she was in pain.

It took only a few moments for her body grow pliant against him and for her head to rest on his shoulder. Holding her this way evoked a tightness in his chest. He wasn’t sure what to label the emotion that swelled and crowded out all other thoughts from his head except for her. Even though she was no longer linked to him, he could still feel her there, and he wanted more.

They garnered a few startled looks from passersby, but no one stopped them or asked questions. Danielle was quiet with the exception of whispered directions, and Bucky carried out his mission until they were standing at her door. Without waiting for permission, he twisted the knob and opened the door before striding inside.

“I think it’s safe to put me down now,” she said, her tone mild.

She made a token effort to free herself, but he did not release her. He scanned the room for the layout, and headed unerringly for the queen size bed. “That’s not the mission, doc. You said you needed to lay down, so that’s what you’re going to do.”

He was relieved when he heard her exasperated chuckle and felt her head shake against his shoulder. “Thank you for helping me, but it wasn’t necessary. I can take care of myself, you know. I’ve been doing it for many years.”

Bucky was reluctant to release her and lose her warmth and softness, but nevertheless, he bent and gently placed Danielle on the bed with her head cushioned by a pillow. With deft movements, he released the clip in her hair and placed it gingerly on the bedside table. “My Ma used to say the same thing when Pop would put her to bed during one of her headaches. I just remembered that for the first time about five minutes ago. You did that for me.” He paused and their gazes locked. He could see traces of dried blood speckling her lips and streaking her chin. He reached in with his right thumb and tried to wipe away the stain on her bottom lip. “I paid you back by making you bleed.”

Her hand came up and captured his, but she moved it until he was cupping her face in his palm. Her eyes softened like chocolate under the sun, but her fingers were cold where they held him captive against her cheek. “That wasn’t your fault, James. This has happened before, and I was well-aware that it may happen again. Please don’t blame yourself for this, because I knew the consequences before I did it.”

Bucky’s thumb rasped against the soft curve of her cheek with extreme gentleness, but inside, he was a seething cauldron of rage. How dare she harm herself knowingly for him? He was not worth her suffering. She should have told him.

“If you had told me that to begin with, this would have never happened. I wouldn’t have allowed it,” he growled, his tone belying the careful way he touched her.
Her smile was wobbly, and her breath hitched before she replied breathily, “I know. That’s why I didn’t tell you. My power, my rules.”

Reluctantly, Bucky pulled his hand away from her hold and he straightened up to put distance between them. He shouldn’t be touching her like that. He shouldn’t be touching her at all. Still, he busied himself by pulling her shoes off one at a time before placing them neatly on the floor. It took all his self-control not to rip them to shreds in his hands. He wanted to hurt something or have something hurt him. He didn’t know how to release the terrible anger that boiled up inside him. He had hurt her, and that was unforgiveable. Just another sin to add to the mountain.

To give himself time to recoup his control, he walked into the adjoined bathroom in search of a washcloth. He located one on the stack of clean towels and took it to the sink to wet it in cool water. He paused to study the assorted bottles, brushes, and hair adornments littering the sink, and the sight pulled him back to the small bathroom he had shared with his parents and three sisters. Though the shape and names of the products were different, it still reminded him of growing up with his little sisters. Though they had annoyed him to no end, he had still loved them and protected them. That had been his job as their big brother.

He shook away the remembrances, but they didn’t leave him. Danielle had said the threads to his memories of his home were strong now, and he could feel them patiently waiting to be recalled. She had made sure of it.

He squeezed the excess water from the cloth and returned to her side. In his absence, she had dimmed the lights and propped herself up to a reclining position. He glowered at her and snapped, “That isn’t laying down.”

Sher nervously pushed her wayward curls behind her ear, and replied defensively, “I am laying down. Stop scowling at me.” She accepted the damp washcloth from him, and used it to wipe off the last traces of dried blood from her face. “I’m already feeling much better. I told you the effects wouldn’t last long.”

Bucky knew he was still frowning, but he couldn’t help himself. Nothing about this situation made him happy. “That cloth was supposed to go over your eyes. That’s what Ma always did, and she said it helped.”

Danielle tossed the used rag to the floor, and settled back into the pillows with a sigh of relief. “Thank you for that, but the headache is mostly gone now. In fact, I feel well enough to talk about everything that happened when we were linked.”

Bucky didn’t want to talk. He wanted to hit something that would hit him back. He had too much pressure building up inside his head, and he needed it to stop. Maybe Steve would be up for some friendly sparring. “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. You wouldn’t want to hear what I have to say about it. You need to rest, and I need to leave.”

He made it halfway to the door before her voice reached out with threads of silk to stop him in his tracks. “Please, James. Don’t walk away. Just...please stay?”

He dropped his head, and his hair swung forward to hide his face in shame. What was wrong with him? Was he so broken inside that he was incapable of doing the right thing? Did he even know what the right thing was anymore? He needed to go away because he hurt her, but she was asking him to stay. It made no sense to him, and he didn’t know which way to go that wouldn’t be the wrong decision. Did he leave to keep her safe, or did he stay to make her happy?

In the end, he knew he didn’t have a choice. Not really. He wanted her too badly to resist the
opportunity to be near her. Now that he had held her in his arms and felt her breath against his neck, he knew he would never be able to sate his voracious appetite for more. It wasn’t just the fact that he was skin-starved for touch or the fact that he wanted to make his fantasy a reality. It was that he felt close to her. She was familiar to him in a way that nothing else had felt in the past fifty years. She had healed something inside of him that he had thought lost forever, and she brought out emotions in him that he forgot even existed. He was like a junkie that had to have another fix, so he turned on his heel, and walked back to her side.

A look of relief washed over her expression, and Bucky felt like a heel for it. She offered him a warm smile, and gestured toward a chair against the wall. “Grab a seat, James. I would offer you more comfortable accommodations, but I think I’ve broken enough doctor/patient rules for one night.”

Bucky did as she asked, and pulled the chair close to her side of the bed so they were only separated by a few feet. He sat in the chair and leaned forward to brace his arms on his knees to help disguise how tight his jeans were fitting at the moment. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m not your patient anymore, doc. You’re fired. Thank you for your services, but they won’t be needed anymore.” He paused to let that sink in before he said, “Good talk.” He started to stand to his feet to leave once more, but he didn’t make it to his feet before she stopped him with just a look.

Danielle rolled until she was propped on her side and pulled a slender arm up under her head. She regarded him with amusement dancing around the corners of her eyes and replied, “You can’t fire me. I don’t work for you; I work for Steve Rogers. He’s already paid me in full by having me scrubbed from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s databases, and I mean to finish the job.” Her expression sobered and she grew serious as she added, “But, you’re right about one thing. You’re not my patient, James. This isn’t just a job for me anymore; it’s personal. I saw the threads that tie you to their commands. I can’t walk away when I know I can help you. I want you to be free of them.”

Bucky’s heart kicked in his chest, and he reached up to rub at it as he said, “Look, I can never repay you for what you gave me by restoring some of my memories, but it’s just not worth the cost. I have a feeling that it would cost you a lot if you tried to go back to that place in my mind. It’s not going to happen. I’ll find another way.”

Danielle pushed herself up until she was braced on her arm and her brunette curls tumbled down to caress her shoulders. Bucky’s fingertips itched to touch their silky texture again, but he resisted the urge to reach out to her. “There is no other way. The things they did to you changed the rules of psychology. Even with years of intense psychotherapy, your mind will have no choice but to respond if someone activates those ten threads. I’m the only one that can find them and destroy them.”

Bucky’s gaze darted up to meet hers for the first time, and his stomach clenched with instinctive fear. “Ten threads. It takes ten commands to initiate the Winter Soldier.”

Danielle nodded. “I know. It’s not a coincidence. That’s what I’m trying to tell you, James. I know I can do it. I can cut the strings that tie you to them.”

A tidal wave of yearning washed over him, and he almost demanded that she do it now, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something she wasn’t telling him. Her honesty to this point had been almost jarring in its candor, but that didn’t mean that she was telling him everything. He couldn’t take the chance that she might hurt herself again while helping him. That was simply out of the question.

“Thanks for the offer, doc, but I’m gonna pass,” he said with a mirthless smile. “Now that we’ve settled that, what else would you like to talk about? I vote we talk about what happened between us
in my shower last night.”

He knew it was a dirty trick, but it worked. Her creamy complexion turned rosy and she looked up at the ceiling to avoid his heavy gaze. “Uh, yeah, about that,” she stammered, clearly nervous. “I’m sorry that I infiltrated your mind, James. I’ve never lost control of my power like that when I’ve been asleep before, but I will make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Strangely, Bucky was enjoying her discomfiture, and he couldn’t resist the impulse to get a reaction out of her. “That’s a shame, because I enjoyed the hell out of it. I’m pretty sure you did, too.” She shot him a withering glare, but it only made him bolder. “You even said you didn’t want to leave.”

She ducked her gaze again and her voice was strained when she said, “I didn’t realize that I was using my powers, but that’s no excuse for intruding on your private thoughts.”

Bucky could feel his body responding to her with renewed intensity, and he couldn’t help but wonder what she would do if he joined her on that bed. “I was very... focused on thinking about you at the time, so it’s more than possible that I was the one that pulled you into my fantasy. You were asleep and your guards were down. However it happened, I’m not sorry about it. It was the best shower of my life.”

Her face flushed pink once more and she seemed flustered as she answered, “Still, it shouldn’t have happened. I’m your doctor, and what I did was not at all appropriate. I don’t get physically or emotionally attached to my patients. It’s not healthy for them, and it’s definitely not ethical for me.”

Bucky gave in to the insistent, nagging voice of temptation in his ear, and stood to his feet before closing the distance between them. She looked up at him as he loomed over her, and he was dumbstruck by her beauty. She had an ethereal glow about her, even in the dim light of the room, that drew him in like a sinner to church. He wanted to bathe in her radiance and allow it to burn away the dark, cold places inside of him. He had only known her for a day, but she had made him feel alive for the first time in his memory.

He reached out to cup her neck in his hand, and her curls grew tangled around his fingers. He leaned in slowly, giving her time to stop him, as he murmured, “Like I said, you’re not my doctor.” And he leaned in to claim her lips with his own.
Chapter 10

Bucky had expected her to stop him or to put up some token of resistance, but she did neither. Instead, she lifted her face to meet his and her eyes drifted closed as he savored the first brush of their lips. Almost immediately, it wasn’t enough for him, but he resisted the urge to take too much from her. He only wanted a taste, a tactile memory, which he could remember after he left Wakanda the next day. He knew he would never see Danielle again after this night, and he was selfish enough to steal one, perfect kiss from her before he disappeared.

Her hands wound tight in the fabric of his tee shirt and she pulled him deeper before parting her lips in invitation. He couldn’t resist the opportunity to explore the new territory afforded him, and he dipped inside of her mouth to tease and brush against her tongue. Her breath stuttered and mixed with his own before she returned his advance with equal fervor. Bucky’s body felt strung tight with desperate desire that drove every thought out of his mind but her. All he could think about was the sting of her teeth nipping his lip and the sound of the needy moans getting caught in her throat.

“More, more, more...” whispered through his mind on a vanilla-scented breeze, and Bucky answered her call. He gently laid her back on the bed, but this time, he followed her down until his chest brushed across hers as he drank from the wellspring of life between her swollen lips. “I want, I want, I want...” pulsed through his mind, but he couldn’t tell if it was his thoughts or hers. He could feel her consciousness hovering on the other side of the red door, only the merest whispers coming through, but he didn’t open it. He wanted to savor the truth of her spearmint-laced tongue and the visceral bite of her fingernails digging into his shoulders. He’d had the fantasy. He wanted the reality.

The siren song of her skin drew him away from her lips, and he kissed a path down the long slope of her neck as Danielle panted for breath and arched up into his chest. “James,” she gasped on a moan. “God, we can’t do this.”

Logically, he understood, and even respected, her objections about ethical complications with her job, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. Not when her breasts were pushing against his chest and his cock was pushing against his zipper. He pulled his lips from her pulse and rasped, “Tell me to leave and I will.”

A tortured whine escaped her lips, and her head tossed from side to side on the pillow. “You’re not making this easy for me.”

Bucky ran his nose up the length of her throat, and his head spun with drunkenness off the scent of her hair. “Don’t expect an apology,” he warned her darkly before slipping back to her lips to steal another kiss.

Her arms clutched him tight and his muscles strained from the effort of holding himself back from devouring her whole. He had never wanted anything in his life as much as he wanted her right now, and that scared the hell out of him, but not enough to stop. “I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared...” ghosted through his mind like an echo, but he knew it wasn’t his thought. No sooner had that registered in his mind, he was pulling away from her. He wouldn’t let his fear stop him, but her fear was a different story. Especially when she was afraid of him.

Her hands left him reluctantly as he slowly backed away from her warmth and stood to his feet. Her eyelids fluttered open, and confusion colored her tone when she said, “James? What’s wrong?”

Bucky swallowed thickly around the ball of regret in his throat and croaked, “I’m what’s wrong. I
was wrong to allow you into my head, because it can only bring you death. The longer I’m with you, the bigger the target gets on your forehead, and I’m not looking for more blood on my hands. So, I’m going to leave.”

He forced himself to turn away from the stricken expression on her face. He ignored the sound of her bare feet hitting the hardwood floor as she pursued him, but this time, there was no turning back. His hand rested on the doorknob, but her hand grasped his bicep to stop him. “Fight or flight, James. I’m a psychiatrist; I’m trained to recognize it. Why are you running from me?”

Bucky didn’t want to answer that question. He wanted to be someone else for her, someone who didn’t know what it felt like to choke the life out of another person. His hands were too covered in blood to ever be able to touch her without staining her scarlet. It was better for both of them if he left now before he could contaminate her life further.

“I’m not running; I’m leaving. I told Steve yesterday that I would meet with you for one hour and then I was leaving Wakanda with him or without him the next morning. I haven’t changed my mind about that,” he said, his words hard and unforgiving. “You need to pack your bags and get some rest, Dr. Stoica. You’re job here is done.”

She dropped her hand from his arm, and he immediately missed the firm weight of her fingertips. “I know you think you’re protecting me, James, but this isn’t the way to do it. Pushing me away isn’t the answer. This isn’t the time to run. This is the time to fight, but this time, fight for yourself. You deserve free will, and you deserve a chance at life, and that chance is standing right here in front of you. Stay and fight for it.”

He wanted to. God, he wanted to, but she was too much temptation for him to resist for long. She made him feel too much, and that was dangerous for everyone. “Think of this as me making it easy for you. You’re not my doctor, and I’m not your patient. Forget you met me and that I even exist, and I’ll do the same. Go live free, doc. You earned it.”

Before she could say a word, and before he could change his mind, he opened the door and walked away.
Chapter 11

By the time Bucky made it back to his room, it was well past midnight. He had lost all concept of time during his appointment with Danielle, and he was surprised that so many hours had passed since he’d first walked into that room. When she had linked to his mind, time had lost all meaning for him, so they could have been in his head for five minutes or for five hours, and he wouldn’t have known the difference.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Bucky began to plan. He couldn’t stop to think about the hurt expression on Danielle’s face when he had left, and he couldn’t take the time to regret that he would never see her again. He had a new mission now, and that was all he needed to focus on. There was no time to waste in putting as much distance between him and Danielle Stoica as possible, so Bucky decided to leave immediately. To that end, he threw open closet doors and searched through the dressers until he found a leather duffel bag. It only took him five minutes to stuff it full of clothes and toiletries from the bathroom. He didn’t require much in the way of personal goods, and he had become accustomed to getting by with much less in his bug-out bag. Anything else he would need, he could acquire it later.

He paused only long enough to change his shirt, but he couldn’t bring himself to leave it behind. He brought the material to his nose and breathed deep, and he could still detect the traces of her vanilla scent against the shoulder where she had laid her head. Without allowing himself to think about why, he stuffed the shirt down in the bag, zipped it up, and fit the strap over his shoulder. The only things he needed now were weapons and a ride.

The hallways of the king’s compound were eerily quiet and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up with alarm. His instincts were screaming at him that something was wrong, but he couldn’t pinpoint why. He rounded the corner to head toward Steve’s bedroom, but his attention was arrested by the sight of T’Challa’s female bodyguards, the Dora Milaje, sprinting for the throne room while armed to the teeth.

“Hey!” he called out to one of the warriors who was issuing commands in a language he didn’t understand. “What’s happening?”

Her dark eyes pinned him with a furious glare, and she spat, “We are under attack. Word has spread to the rebels about your presence here, and they are using that as an excuse to storm the king’s compound. Our people do not trust the presence of outsiders within our borders, and our king has brought in many these past few days.”

Bucky wasn’t surprised about the turn of events, but he had no time to waste on small talk. “Where can I find weapons?”

Her eyes lingered on his left arm and she said, “The armory is locked down, and you do not have clearance to access it.” Without another word, she spun on her heel and ran after the other Doras to defend her king.
Bucky didn’t even blink at her less than trusting attitude. He would find his own weapons, but first, he needed to find Steve. He sprinted down the next corridor, but he didn’t make it far before a loud *BOOM* shook the foundations of the building. He knew what that sound meant, and he began to run as his system flooded with adrenaline. The rebels had blown an opening to the compound, and they would be streaming inside in order to find him. He knew that T’Challa and the Dora Milaje would have an easier time restoring the peace if he disappeared, and he did not want to repay his host by causing more problems by killing his people, even if they were rebels.

The sounds of people yelling, fighting, and firing weapons filled his ears as he rounded another corner, and his gaze took in the chaos of the king’s once-tranquil home. Rebels streamed through a jagged hole in the wall, and Bucky could see T’Challa facing off with the rebel leader as his warriors fought against the armed combatants that swarmed inside the compound to overwhelm them by sheer numbers. He was torn about what he should do. He didn’t know if he should stay and fight with his ally, or if he should continue to run.

The decision was taken out of his hands as a shout went up from the rebels, and a contingent of them headed straight for him. With just a thought, he brought his left hand up, and a round, florescent-blue shield made of energy formed around his forearm in time to deflect the bullets they fired at him. His programming kicked in, and he dispatched the four assailants in short order.

“Buck!” he heard Steve’s voice call out to him, and turned to see the man running toward him with concern pulling his eyebrows into a V. “What’s happening?”

Bucky used the energy shield to block a fresh attack from another rebel before tossing the man through the opposite wall and met Steve halfway to call out, “Rebels are attacking the compound. They’re looking for us. We need to leave.”

Steve’s eyes tracked over the scene, but he shook his head. “No, we should stay and fight. T’Challa could use our help. Nice shield, by the way. I told you that it would look good on you.”

Bucky disengaged his shield program with a thought. “That was a little gift from FitzSimmons. They called it ‘The Coulson Special.’” Bucky explained with unfamiliar embarrassment. He cleared his throat and turned serious. “This isn’t our fight, Steve, and I don’t think T’Challa would thank us for harming his people, even if they are rebels. He and the Dora Milaje are more than capable of quashing the uprising, and the best way we can help is by leaving.”

He already knew that Steve would not listen, because he could see that flare of righteous stubbornness lighting up his blue eyes as they raked over the duffel bag at Bucky’s feet. “I’m not leaving when I can help. Looks like you were already on your way out, though, so feel free to take the QuinJet. It’s in the hangar at the back of the compound. I’ll meet up with you in a few days when things calm down.”

A sour feeling stirred in Bucky’s chest, and he wondered if this was what guilt felt like. He couldn’t remember, but he could tell that Steve was disappointed in him. There was nothing he could do about that now, so bent down to retrieve several weapons off the fallen rebels and his duffel bag. He paused to offer Steve a firm handshake, and said, “You’ll find the Jet, but you won’t find me. It’s better for everyone that way. Take care of Dr. Stoica and get her home safe.”

Before Steve could reply, Bucky turned and strode away in the opposite direction toward the back of the compound where he hoped to escape unnoticed. He should have known that his plan wouldn’t work. He encountered several rebels as he darted through rooms and corridors, and he had a sinking feeling as he imagined Danielle unknowingly leaving her room and running into them.
As if thinking of her summoned her presence, his mind exploded with the sound of her voice screaming, “JAMES!”

Bucky stumbled from the ringing pain of her panicked fear resounding inside his head, but he caught himself and began to run toward her room. His stomach sank with a mixture of sick dread and rage when he turned the corner of her corridor to see her bedroom door standing open. He didn’t pause as he raced into the room, but when he saw what was waiting for him, he rocked to a sudden stop and stared with confusion.

Danielle was on her feet, but her face was streaked with tears and her hair was a wild tangle of brown curls that did nothing to disguise the ripped strap of her tank top or the purpling, fingertip-shaped bruises on her upper arms. She looked so innocent and afraid standing there in her pajama shorts and bare feet, but the Wakandan rebel was the one sprawled out on the floor at her feet with blood trickling out of his nose and ears, and his eyes were wide open and unseeing.

Bucky scanned the room for further threats, but found none. “Are you okay, doc? Did he hurt you?” he snapped. He kept his eyes trained on the rebel and prayed that he would move so that he would have an excuse to kill him for putting his hands on her.

Her body was trembling with shock, and her eyes were wide and unblinking as tears continued to roll down her face. “N-not really. H-he wanted to do terrible things to me, James. I s-s-saw them in his mind.”

Bucky’s vision hazed over with red, and he pulled the long-handled knife from his belt and stalked over to the downed rebel. She blinked rapidly, and seemed to come back to herself as she intercepted his progress toward the downed man and stopped him with a hand to his chest. “He won’t harm anyone else, James. He’s dead.”

Her face lost all color at her pronouncement, and she clapped a hand over her mouth and ran for the bathroom. He could hear her vomiting, but he did not spare time to check on her. Instead, he strode over to the downed rebel and plunged the blade of his stolen knife through his heart until the handle broke through his ribs and the point was buried in the hardwood floor beneath him. It gave Bucky little satisfaction, but he would have no doubt that the man would ever hurt her again.

He couldn’t leave her here like this, not with the compound still under siege. He had no choice but to either take her with him, or stay and protect her. He could hear her running the water and spitting toothpaste into the sink, but he could also hear the shouts of more rebels as they drew closer to the room, so their time was running out. Without pausing to consider the consequences, he grabbed Danielle’s hand and pulled her with him out the door and began to run.

Her bare feet slapped against the tile as she raced after him, and her voice was breathless as she asked, “What’s happening, James? Why are we under attack?”

Bucky stopped at a connecting hallway and used his right arm to pin her to the wall beside him as he peered around the corner. When he saw no signs of rebels ahead, he grabbed her hand again and continued forward. “Civil unrest,” Bucky replied shortly. “The locals aren’t happy about outsiders coming to Wakanda.”

There was no more time to talk as they burst through another door only to be confronted by a group of three rebels. Bucky’s energy shield burst forth from his prosthetic arm, and he dropped her hand in order to rush forward as he snarled, “Stay behind me!”

The rebels rushed him with fierce battle cries, but they were only armed with knives. The first rebel fell beneath the crushing blow of his shield, and the second one advanced on him only to scream
with pain as Bucky ruthlessly crushed the wrist wielding a wicked blade before he knocked him out with a right hook to his chin. The third rebel was able to land a well-placed slice across his abdomen, but he didn’t even feel it as he picked the man up by his throat to toss him across the room where he landed with a sickening thud.

He didn’t wait around for more of them to appear, and he led Danielle unerringly toward the exit waiting for them in the next room. Peering through windows, he could see the large hangar located across a wide expanse of open ground that was teeming with battling Wakandans. There was no other way forward than through, but he had a plan.

Turning to the frightened young woman behind him, he said, “If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to duck, you duck. You do exactly what I say when I say it. Got it?”

Danielle nodded with wide eyes, and that was good enough. He eased the door open and pulled her behind him as they darted between shadows until they reached the last of the cover before open ground. Bucky’s gaze tracked over the darkened landscape until he spied what he was looking for. Several of the rebels were riding ATVs, and he waited until one of them passed close to their position before he sprinted out into the night. As he ran, he swiped up a discarded staff prized by the Doras and swung it at the rebel’s chest. The momentum knocked the man off his seat, and the ATV sputtered to a stop.

Looking over his shoulder, he called out, “Let’s go!”

Without hesitation, Danielle’s bare feet hit the grass as she ran toward him. He didn’t wait for her to climb on the seat, and instead picked up by the waist and deposited her in front before he swung his leg over to take the seat behind her and revved the engine. He knew she couldn’t be comfortable with him crowding into her and encasing her inside his arms, but he couldn’t take the chance that she could be hit from behind.

The four-wheeler took off like a shot, and Bucky weaved through the battling throngs of people as he raced them toward the hangar. It wasn’t long, though, before several more ATVs were in hot pursuit of them. Placing his mouth next to her ear, he ordered, “Take over the controls, and no matter what happens, don’t stop until we reach that building.”

Without question, her small hands latched on to the handle bars, and Bucky let go. He reached into the waistband of his jeans and retrieved the gun he had stashed there and began to fire behind him with precision borne of long practice. The ATV closest to them exploded as a bullet found the gas tank, and the wreckage took out one more. He took out the tires of two others before the final one came to his senses and veered away from them. He knew it was only a brief reprieve, but he hoped it would be enough to get them to safety.

The hangar loomed up in front of them, and Bucky took over the controls once more to steer them into the shadows of the far left side. He brought the vehicle to a stop and hopped off to approach the metal siding and punched a hole through it with his left fist before tearing and bending it to create a door. He could hear reinforcements getting closer, and he grabbed Danielle’s hand and ushered her inside the darkened interior.

“Will we be safe in here?” she whispered, but her voice still echoed through the empty building.

Bucky headed unerringly for the familiar shape of Steve’s QuinJet, and opened the hatch. “Nowhere is safe for us in Wakanda right now, doc,” he answered distractedly. “That’s why we’re leaving.”

He closed the door behind them and ushered her to the front of the jet. He wasted no time in
securing her in the co-pilot’s seat before he sat behind the controls and began flipping switches. The engine purred to life, and he plotted a course for one of his safe houses that he kept scattered across the globe. The jet lifted off the ground a few feet, and Bucky paused to strap himself into his own seat. “Hang on tight. We’re going to have to make our own opening,” he warned her as he initiated takeoff.

“What?!” she squawked before the jet shot upward and straight through the hangar’s metal ceiling. Her scream was cut short by the deafening crash of rending metal, but Bucky was too busy running diagnostics to comfort her.

The jet hovered for several seconds, and Bucky looked out over the king’s compound. He could see that Steve and the Dora Milaje had the rebels well under control, and the sour feeling in his chest eased. Steve would be okay. He was a soldier and a survivor. Just like Bucky.

As the jet took off on quicksilver winds, Bucky’s fingers flew across the sensors as he disabled all communications and engaged the cloaking tech. They would be untraceable until such time as Bucky wanted to be found. For now, though, he needed to get Danielle to somewhere safe. Fifteen minutes later, they were well on their way out of Wakandan airspace and headed to Switzerland. He had a place in the country about half an hour’s drive west of Zurich. It was close to a village where he could get clothes and food for them both.

With a sigh of relief, he engaged auto-pilot and finally allowed himself to check on his passenger. Danielle looked like a fallen angel with her riotous curls and wild brown eyes that stared through the windshield at nothing. The broken strap of her tank top had fallen, allowing the rounded curve of her breast to peek out from beneath the tattered lavender material, and her arms were stained with drying blood. His heart kicked into overdrive, and he released his harness and surged to his feet. He buried his fingers in the curls that framed her face and tilted her head up as he scanned her for signs of wounds.

He searched her gaze for clues, but all he could see was a terrible emptiness. The lights were on, but no one was home. Fear clawed at his guts and his voice was rough when he said, “Doc? Come back to me. We’re in the skies and everything is fine. It’s safe to come back now.”

Danielle blinked slowly and she said, “Fight or flight, James. You fought for me.”

Bucky sucked in a sharp breath and it stuttered back out on a laugh. “Yeah, but I ran, too. I’ve become something of an expert at both over the years. You did some fighting yourself tonight. You have blood all over you. Where did you get hurt?”

Her voice sounded dreamy and slurred when she replied, “I didn’t fight. I killed.” Her gaze dropped from his and landed on his stomach before she added, “This isn’t my blood, James. It’s yours.”
Chapter 12

Bucky glanced down and realized that she was right. There was a deep slash across his stomach and his shirt was tacky with blood. He must have gotten it all over her when they had been on the ATV. As if the wound were just waiting to be recognized, it pulsed and sent razors of pain flooding through his receptors. He hissed as he raised his arms to pull the ruined shirt over his head, and he balled it up and pressed it against the still-seeping cut.

“Fuck, I don’t remember that happening,” Bucky admitted. “Are you sure you’re not hurt, though?”

Danielle couldn’t seem to make her gaze travel past his chest as she replied dreamily, “I’m not bleeding, if that’s what you’re asking. I think I might be in shock, though.”

Bucky could have told her that. He could see the signs clearly in her ashen complexion, blown pupils, and rapid pulse. She needed to lay down and she needed to be warm. He used one arm to recline her seat and deploy the footrest until she was looking up at him with her hair spilling across the headrest. “I think you are, too. Hang tight for a minute, doc. I’m going to go grab a few things and I'll be right back. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

She smiled and began to shiver. Her voice trembled, but he could see the spark of awareness in her eyes flare to life as she replied, “Doing what you say has kept me alive so far tonight, so I’ll be right here when you get back.”

Bucky shook his head ruefully as he made his way to the hold of the jet. Bucky knew this plane had been used steadily during Avengers missions, so it made sense that it would be well-stocked for situations just like theirs. In the first locker he opened, he found a stack of folded hoodies, and he snatched the first two on top. He didn’t even care that it had the logo for Stark Industries screenprinted across the front. It would keep her warm. It only took him opening two more compartments before he found the impressive first aid kit, bottles of water, and a thick, woolen blanket. With his arms full of supplies, he made his way back to cockpit.

Danielle watched him with detached curiosity as Bucky pulled the sweatshirt out and handed it to her. “Can you put this on, or do you want some help?”

She struggled to sit up, but she swayed right back down and closed her eyes. “Woo, got a little dizzy there for a second.”

Without waiting for further confirmation, Bucky gently lifted her head and worked the XL hoodie carefully downward until she was able to thrust her arms into the sleeves. By the time he was done, she was covered down to her thighs in navy blue material. She sighed happily and snuggled into the warmth as he turned away to grab the blanket.

As he tucked the blanket around her legs, he heard her chuckle dryly before she said, “Stark Industries? James, did we just steal Iron Man’s jet?”

Bucky forced himself to take his eyes off of her and busied himself with opening the huge tackle box full of medical supplies. It worked to distract him from thinking about how intimate it had felt to clothe her. The kit was fully stocked with tape, sutures, antiseptics, injections, and bandages of all sizes. It was like Christmas morning for someone in his line of work. This medical kit had to be the handiwork of the archer. He was the only one of Steve’s teammates that was practical enough to think ahead and prepare for the worst.
He tore open an antiseptic wipe and began to clean the knife wound on his stomach. “Technically? No. Legally, yes. This jet belongs to the Avengers, but they haven’t asked for it back yet, so Steve kept it. I don’t think he’s realized that Stark only let him keep it so he could keep tabs on Steve. He always has believed and expected the best of people.”

Danielle’s voice was barely a whisper when she replied, “We know better, though, don’t we?”

Bucky attached the last butterfly bandage across the cut and pressed a clean gauze pad over the wound. He wrapped an ace bandage around his waist to keep it stable as he replied, “Yeah, I guess we do.” He paused to pull the other sweatshirt over his head before he continued cautiously, “Do you want to tell me what happened with that rebel?”

“No,” she said simply without hesitation. “But I will anyway. I had just finished getting ready for bed when I heard a loud boom and felt the house shake. I ran to the window to look out, but I couldn’t see anything. At first, I was too scared to open my door and check it out, but then I heard someone running down the hall. I opened my door to see who it was, but he saw me, too. He forced his way inside and grabbed me. I couldn’t understand what he was saying, so I used my gift on him. He had plans for me, James. Vile, terrible, evil plans that he had already performed on other women. So, I severed the threads. All of them.”

Bucky’s breath escaped with an audible whoosh. He wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. Danielle had literally killed someone with just a thought. Based on the vomiting and shock, he would guess it was the first time that had ever happened. “It was self-defense, doc. He was going to kill you.”

Danielle seemed to shrink even further inside the large sweatshirt, and it made Bucky’s chest hurt. “No, it wasn’t, James. I could have just knocked him out cold or put him to sleep. I’ve done it before. I chose to kill him, and I used my power to do it.”

Bucky had no idea how to handle this situation. Personally, he saw nothing wrong with killing the rebel, except for the fact that he wasn’t the one to do it. “If you hadn’t done it, I would have if I had gotten there first.”

Her wandering gaze landed on him and she blinked slowly before saying, “I know.”

Bucky couldn’t hold her gaze. It was too much like looking into his own soul. “I heard you yell for me. In my head.”

“That’s impossible,” she replied softly. “I can’t project myself into another mind without touch. I can hear surface thoughts of others within a few feet, but I can’t link to them without physical contact.”

Bucky shrugged as he twisted the cap off a water bottle and handed it to her. “I know what I heard, doc. You called out to me. That’s how I knew you were in trouble.”

Danielle was quiet for several long moments. He wished that he could borrow her power long enough to see what was going on in her head. Her eyebrows were pulled down with trouble, and her teeth worried at her bottom lip. He waited to see if she would explain, but he was soon disappointed.

“Where are we going?” she asked, clearly marking their previous topic closed.

He sat back in his seat and opened his own bottle of water. He would let it go for now, but he would pin her down for an explanation later. “Switzerland. I own a house in the countryside there. I’ll send Steve the coordinates, and he can pick you up and take you home. I’ll make sure he
brings your bags, too.”

Danielle struggled to a sitting position, and she was fully present. “What about you? You’re coming with us, aren’t you?”

Bucky turned away from her and busied himself with checking the controls. “No. That wouldn’t be a good idea. There are too many people looking for me, and I don’t want them finding you.”

“Oh,” she said softly. “Will you stay with me until he arrives?”

Bucky closed his eyes and wrestled with what was left of his conscience. It would be smarter for him and better for her if he got her settled in the house and then leave before sending Steve the coordinates. She would be perfectly safe in the house alone for the few days it would take for Steve to arrive and see her home safely. That would give Bucky adequate time to disappear. The best way to keep her safe was to stay far away from her.

The only problem was that he didn’t want to leave her. He wanted to be near her and touch her and talk to her. He wanted to hear her whisper in his mind as she moaned his name, and he wanted to know what she tasted like between her legs. He wanted to know more about her and if she had little sisters, too. He wanted to feel her calm presence in his mind again, because it was only time he felt at peace. He craved everything about her, but if he stayed with her, he could end up hurting her again, one way or another.

“I’ll stay until I know he’s in the air,” he compromised with himself. “I won’t leave you stranded and alone in a foreign country without a passport.”

The relief in her voice made Bucky wince. “Thank you, James. I don’t speak Swiss German, and I’m not exactly dressed for public view.”

“Don’t thank me for anything. I’m the reason you’re in this mess. Steve should have never brought you to Wakanda to begin with,” Bucky said, his tone hard and angry. He wanted to blame his old friend for putting her in danger, but he knew the blame lie solely with himself.

“I’m not sorry he did,” she murmured sleepily. “I would have never met you otherwise.” Her voice was weaker and Bucky could hear the exhaustion pulling her down.

Bucky dimmed the cockpit lights and settled himself in for flight. She needed to rest, and Bucky needed to not think about being alone with her. “Get some rest, doc. We’ll land in a few hours. I’ll wake you when we get close.”

He finally looked back at her when she didn’t respond after a few silent moments. Her long, dark eyelashes were curled against her cheeks, her lips were slightly parted, and her breaths were deep and even. Her skin was flushed with warmth, and her body was limp with pure exhaustion. She was beautiful.

Bucky couldn’t resist the temptation to reach out and run his finger along the curve of her cheek just so he could feel the silk of her skin. She was everything that he was not, and she fascinated him. She was soft and kind and innocent, while he was hard and brutal and jaded. Even though it felt like he tainted her each time he touched her, he couldn’t seem to stop. He only wanted more.

Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away and turned back to the controls. She needed to rest, and Bucky needed to leave her alone.
Chapter 13

Several hours later, they arrived at his safe house nestled in the remote countryside of Switzerland. He hadn’t made use of the location in over five years, so there was no telling what he would find when they went inside. As long as his contact had kept up her part of the bargain, it should at least be clean and warm.

He gathered up the duffel bag he’d found stashed in another locker that held women’s clothing and shoes. He could only guess they belonged to Romanov. There was too much black leather and there were too many weapons in there for it to belong to the witch.

He woke Danielle gently and helped her out of the jet and into the chilly, early morning air. Even with the blanket around her shoulders, she began to shiver as she looked around them with interest shining in her sleepy eyes while he engaged the cloaking remotely from the interface in his left arm.

“It’s beautiful here,” she said, appreciation evident in her tone. “I’ve never been to Switzerland before.”

Without thinking too much about it, Bucky bent and scooped her up into his arms. It was early October, and the temperature was too cold for her to walk across the grass barefoot. She settled her arms around his neck without protest, but she did not rest her head. She was too busy studying their surroundings.

He was studying their environment, too, but he was scanning for danger. Thankfully, the cabin was only a short hike from their current position. “I didn’t spend much time here, but I got to know a few of the locals. The people in the neighboring village are polite, but not too curious. There isn’t much there in the way of shopping, but the residents are friendly.”

He approached the house cautiously, but he sensed no signs of life. He placed her carefully on her feet before dropping the duffel off his shoulder when they reached the back door, and used the programming in his hand to scan for wireless signals. He never set up a safe house with communications devices. They were too easy to trace.

He sighed with relief when his scan came up empty, and bent down to retrieve the key from beneath the potted plant by the back door. He used the key to unlock the door, and swung it wide in invitation. “Let’s get you inside, doc. It’s too cold out here for you.”

Danielle stepped past him eagerly and walked inside with bold curiosity. Bucky followed behind her before closing and locking the door, and he watched her as she wandered further into the little cabin to find the kitchen. She turned on the tap in the sink and exclaimed, “The electricity and water are both running. Does someone live here when you’re not?”

Bucky walked the perimeter of the room and checked for signs of tampering, but everything appeared to be as he left it. “No, the bills are paid electronically through an anonymous account, and I pay a woman from the nearby village to come out here and check on things once a month. She thinks I’m a wealthy businessman from Zurich with a country house.”

Danielle dropped the blanket and draped it over a kitchen chair as she continued to explore. Bucky couldn’t seem to rip his eyes away from the long expanse of naked legs that peeked out from beneath the hem of her sweatshirt, and he couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like to have them wrapped around his waist in more than just his imagination.
He shook the rogue thoughts from his head and cleared his throat. “There’s a bathroom down the hall, and some clothes in this bag. Why don’t you get cleaned up and take a nap, and I’ll head to the village to get some food.”

Danielle had already wandered down the hallway, but she reappeared quickly. “I don’t want to sleep. I want to go with you. I’ll never have another chance to experience Switzerland again, and I don’t want to miss this. Can I go with you? Please?”

Bucky was torn. It would be safer and easier to leave her behind while also giving him the opportunity to distance himself from her. On the other hand, he couldn’t seem to bring himself to tell her no. He didn’t want to be the one to dim the light of excitement shining in her pretty brown eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been that eager to do anything other than spend time with her, and he wanted to make her happy. He’d already scared her, harmed her, and endangered her. He owed her some happiness.

Bucky sighed and ran a hand through his chin-length hair. “Yeah, it should be safe enough, I suppose, as long as we go to a bigger city. The village is too small and you will attract attention there. We can blend in and buy you some clothes in Wettingen.”

Her face lit up with a smile for the first time, and the sight stole the breath from his lungs. Just when he thought she couldn’t be any more beautiful, she had to go and smile. “Give me half an hour and I’ll be ready to go!”

Bucky watched her retreat until she disappeared behind the bathroom door with the bag. When he heard the pipes groan with running water, he made his way to the bedroom where he hurriedly changed into clean clothes left in the dresser. Inside the closet, behind heavy boxes, he located the wall safe and entered the code to get inside it. He retrieved his fake Swiss identification papers, a thousand Swiss francs, two throwing knives, and a loaded handgun. He popped the magazine, checked for rust, and engaged the safety before tucking it into his waistband beneath his shirt.

He could hear the water in the shower turning off, so he headed outside to give her some privacy and to check on transportation. In the small, detached garage, he found the non-descript silver Audi sedan that he had purchased during his last stay. The woman he paid to check on the house was also supposed to drive the car each month and keep it fueled with gas, and he hoped that she had done as good a job with it as she had with house. Bucky slid behind the wheel and retrieved the key from beneath the visor. The car purred to life without incident, and he pulled it out of the garage and behind the house. He definitely owed the village woman a bonus.

When he went back inside, he found Danielle sitting on the couch as she stuffed tissues into the toes of a pair of black boots. She was wearing dark wash jeans, a fitted black tee shirt, and a leather jacket that had seen better days. In fact, he was pretty sure that he could spot several bullet holes in the left arm sleeve. Her dripping wet curls were pulled back from her face and pinned in a haphazard bun, and her face was shiny and devoid of makeup. She finished lacing the boots and stood to her feet, and Bucky had to swallow the pool of saliva in his mouth.

“I hope whoever owns these clothes won’t mind me borrowing them,” she said as she ran her hands down over her hips to smooth the denim. “Whoever she is, she has bigger feet than me and an impressive set of breasts. I didn’t even try to stuff the bra to make it fit.”

Bucky choked and coughed out a bark that sounded suspiciously like laughter. He bit back the comment that her breasts were impressive, too, but he somehow didn’t think it would be appropriate, especially since he could clearly see the points of her nipples through the tight material of her shirt. “She’s a friend of Steve’s, so I’m sure she won’t mind,” he replied diplomatically as he wrenched his gaze away from her chest.
After locking the back door and settling Danielle in the front seat, Bucky pulled away from the house and headed in the direction of Wettingen. Even though it would only take approximately half an hour to get there, he found himself taking detours so that Danielle could exclaim over the small villages, pastures full of livestock, and ask him questions about local customs. Bucky didn’t have the heart to tell her that he actually knew very little about Switzerland beyond the language. He’d only spent enough time in the country to purchase a safe house and assassinate a banking president in Zurich on orders of his handlers.

By the time they reached the small city, the sun was shining brightly in a cloudless blue sky, but the temperatures were still cool enough to warrant a jacket. Bucky parked the car, and they walked down the main street where he knew there to be several restaurants and clothing stores. Danielle was alight with excitement, and he found his own mood lifting in relation as she peppered him with questions, asked for translations, and pointed at shops she wished to investigate. Since his own stomach was growling with complaint, he steered her toward a small café that he knew to have excellent burgers. She was delighted when she learned that their server spoke English, but he wasn’t delighted at the look of interest in the young man’s eyes as they lingered on her breasts.

After lunch, they continued their stroll until they came to a boutique that sold women’s clothes. Bucky peeled off several hundred francs and insisted she purchase whatever she needed, and she thanked him by pulling him down to her level for a brief kiss on the lips. As she made her way inside the boutique, Bucky cursed himself for not bringing more money. He would buy out the entire town if it meant she would kiss him again.

An hour later, she emerged from the shop with several bags, and they continued on their way. They made a few more stops at a shoe store, chocolatier, and drug store before they were forced back to the car to deposit her shopping bags. They drove to the market where they finished up their shopping by buying enough groceries to last for several days in case Steve was tardy in arriving. It was an odd experience for him to perform such domestic chores with someone else. He had been alone for a very long time.

By the time they were on the way back to the cabin, the sun was beginning to set. Danielle was uncharacteristically quiet in the passenger seat next to him, and she was gazing out of the window with a pensive expression. It was a drastic change from the bubbly, happy mood she had been in during their shopping, and he was at a loss over what could have triggered the change.

He cleared his throat and said, “You know, I don’t have an Inhuman power that lets me read other people’s minds, so you’ll have to tell me the old fashioned way.”

Danielle gifted him a weak smile and shook her head dismissively. “It’s nothing, James. I had such a wonderful time today that I almost forgot …everything else.”

Bucky turned down the long, winding road that led to the cabin and replied carefully, “I’m sorry about last night. If I had made Steve put you back on the plane first thing, you wouldn’t have been forced to kill that rebel.”

She reached up to idly tuck a stray curl behind her ear, and her tone was matter-of-fact as she said, “I told you, James. No one forced me to kill him. I chose to do it, and I have to live with the consequences of my actions. You can’t shoulder the blame or protect me from this. This isn’t your sin to claim.”

Bucky parked the car behind the cabin and killed the engine before turning to face her. “What if it is? You killed someone for the first time mere hours after seeing inside my head. Would you have reacted differently if you hadn’t?”
She paused to consider the idea before she shook her head. “No, I think I would have still killed him. I saw their faces in his memories, James. I saw what he did to all of them, and I wanted him to die for it.”

Bucky’s tone was hard and unforgiving as he replied, “Like you said last night. He’ll never hurt anyone again.”

Without waiting for a reply, he opened the door and exited the car. He was afraid to say anything else, because he was so close to asking her why she hadn’t done the same thing to him. Bucky had killed hundreds of people over the past fifty years. Danielle had seen it all in that dark corner of his mind, but she still seemed to trust him. It made no sense to Bucky, but he was too afraid of her answer to ask.

Thankfully, she followed him, and they brought the shopping bags inside. As Danielle unpacked the sacks of groceries, Bucky carried her purchases back to the only bedroom and deposited them on the bed. He was sorely tempted to peek into one of them when a scrap of amethyst silk edged in black lace spilled out of the top, but he managed to resist.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pressed the heel of his palm against the aching hardness of his cock. He had been in a near-constant state of hardness because of her for two solid days, but he didn’t dare let himself do anything about it. He couldn’t take the chance that he would somehow suck her back into his fantasies, because the things he was thinking about her were illegal in at least a dozen countries. He almost felt as if he were a teenager again back in Brooklyn. All he could think about since he met her was how he could get her naked. The only thing holding him back was that he knew it wasn’t a good idea, but he was having difficulty remembering why.

Bucky grabbed a fresh change of clothes from the dresser and headed for the bathroom. While Danielle was busy with her purchases, he could catch a quick shower to wash off the dried blood and sweat from the previous 24 hours and brush his teeth. She had mentioned something about making a stew for dinner, so hopefully that would keep her too busy to come looking for him.

Just as he was about to shut the bathroom door behind him, she called out, “We should take a look at that knife wound after your shower. I want to check it for infection.”

Bucky paused as he considered how to reply. He should tell her that the serum Hydra injected him with caused him to hyper-regenerate and that he never caught illnesses or infections. He should tell her that the wound was already closed and covered with a pink scar, so there was no need for her to worry. He should do everything in his power to stay away from her so he wouldn’t be tempted to touch her.

He called back, “Yeah, okay. Give me ten minutes.”
Bucky wasn’t bold enough to walk out of the bathroom in just a towel, so he pulled on a pair of black boxer briefs and a faded pair of blue jeans, but left his shirt off. He brushed his teeth and ran a comb through his hair before he opened the door and headed for the kitchen.

Danielle was pulling boxes of bandages and medical tape out of a bag from the drug store, and without looking up, said distractedly, “I wasn’t sure what you would need in the way of first aid, so I picked up a little of everything.”

Bucky came to a stop a few feet away from her, and she finally looked up at him. She froze in place with her eyes glued to his chest, and her lips were parted as if the words were balanced on the tip of her tongue. She blinked several times and took a deep breath and said on the exhale, “Oh, wow. That’s amazing. Just like I remembered it.”

Bucky looked down at his stomach. The gash was nothing more than a pale pink line in his skin. “No, I’m pretty sure it was open and bleeding the last time you saw it.”

“What?” she said confused. “Oh! The wound! No, that’s not what I remembered at all. How did that heal so quickly?”

He was confused by her reaction, but he answered her honestly. He owed her at least that. “It’s part of my genetic programming now. What’s the point of a super soldier if he’s always in the hospital recuperating? That’s how I can go into cryogenes and come back out without dying. I don’t catch diseases, and I’m never sick. My cells heal and regenerate at an accelerated speed. Most of the time, I don’t even bother with stitches.”

She walked toward him and reached out with her fingertips to trace along the seam of his scar. “That’s amazing,” she breathed with awe. “It’s almost completely healed after less than 24 hours.”

Bucky’s skin pebbled beneath her touch, and his cock strained against the tight confines of his pants. He knew he shouldn’t have tempted himself this way, but it was a sinful torture to feel her fingers on his skin, and he was just masochist enough to endure it.

His voice was rough when he replied, “The scar will be completely gone by morning, but I will never forget it. I remember every single one of them.”

Her fingers spread wide against his ribs until her palm was flush against him. She swayed in closer to his body and her hand began to trail across his abdomen in slow motion as if she were reading braille. “So much pain in your life, James. I could feel it when we were linked, you know. But later, when we were in my room, I also felt your passion, and it was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It scared me, because I was feeling the same thing for you.”

Bucky’s breath hitched in his throat as her hand trailed higher to explore the muscle of his pec. She was pushing the boundaries of his control, and she didn’t know it. “I could hear you in my head
like whispers,” he confessed as he edged in closer to her body until they were touching from hip to shoulder. “You were scared of me. You should be scared of me.”

Both her hands began to roam freely across the terrain of his chest, and her eyes were glued to their journey. “I’m not afraid of you, James. You would never hurt me,” she replied with conviction. “I was scared because I wanted to have sex with you, but I have no idea what my powers will do to you. I haven’t had sex since Terrigenesis over two years ago. I wasn’t afraid of you. I was afraid for you.”

Bucky closed his eyes against dizziness as all his blood rushed south. She was killing him. If she said “sex” one more time, he was going to lose it. “You’re afraid of your power,” he managed to translate. Somewhere along the way, his hands had found a grip on her hips, and he used his leverage to pull her against the ache behind his zipper. “I’m not afraid of you, either. You had every opportunity to mess with my mind, but all you did was heal it. You would never hurt me,” he parroted back to her.

Her hands snaked behind his neck, and she exerted pressure on it until he lowered his head toward hers. When their mouths were mere inches away from each other, she breathed, “But it’s inevitable that we will end up hurting each other anyway.”

Their lips met with a hunger that rivaled the other for prominence. Bucky was done holding back, he was done being a martyr, and he was done denying himself something he wanted. He ran his palms down the slope of her hips until they were curved beneath her thighs, and he picked her up. Her legs hooked around his waist, and he began to stride toward the bedroom as she left a trail of light bite-marks up his neck.

He made it to the bed and cleared a path for them to land. Her hands were all over his skin, and she scraped her fingernails lightly over his back as he thrust against the denim-clad cradle of her thighs. “Look inside my head,” he commanded roughly. “I want you see what I’m thinking right now. If you don’t want that, you need to let me know fast.”

Bucky threw wide the red door inside his mind, and he felt her breeze through it. He watched her eyes as they unfocused, and they began to move as if she were reading a book. He could feel her searching inside his brain, so he showed her what he planned to do to her. Her breath caught, and her chest strained at the material of her shirt with her breaths. Her pupils dilated, her cheeks flushed, and her hips rolled up against his weight pinning her to the bed as she played a welcome voyeur to his thoughts.

“Yes!” she gasped as Bucky showed her vivid images of them entwined. “I want all of that!”

That was all he needed to hear.

He felt like a starving man that’s been presented with a feast; he knew he would not be able to savor the ambrosia before him. He was too hungry for her, too starved to be polite. He had denied himself heaven for fifty years, but now he had his very own angel. He wanted to consume her in a single bite.

He moaned into her neck as her legs wrapped around his hips to crush him against her. “I don’t think I can be gentle right now,” he admitted roughly.

She raked her nails down his back and strained toward him as she rasped, “I don’t want gentle.”

Bucky cursed as he pulled away from her, even though he knew it was necessary to achieve his goal. He gripped the neck of her tee shirt between two fists, and ripped it straight down the middle.
She sucked in a surprised gasp, and it caused her bare breasts to arch up toward him. Her nipples were dusky pink and hardened to tips, and Bucky’s mouth began to water at the thought of tasting them.

There was no time, though. Danielle’s fingers were impatient and uncoordinated against the button of his jeans as she muttered, “Get them off, get them off, get them off!”

Bucky was more than happy to oblige her, but he felt the same way about her pants. He was not above using his superior strength to get what he wanted when he knew she wanted the same. Ruthlessly, he gathered up her wrists in his left hand and held them away from his body. “You first.”

Danielle’s eyes were heavy-lidded and they glowed with eerie golden light as her breasts swayed with her breaths. She bit her bottom lip and raked it over her teeth as he heard her whisper in his mind, “Together.”

Bucky released her wrists, and they immediately began to attack their own pants. Danielle bucked beneath him in her struggle to shimmy out of her jeans as he scrambled backward to gain his feet. He stripped his jeans and boxer briefs down his legs in seconds flat. He crawled back on the bed, and grabbed ahold of her pant legs and ripped them off of her. The only thing remaining was a scrap of black silk bound by lace threads that hugged the contour of her lush hips. That single piece of cloth stopped him in his tracks with a sense of awe.

“James?” her voice questioned him with uncertainty.

Bucky didn’t answer. Instead, he reached out a single finger to trace the path of the lace from her hipbone all the way down the slope of her abdomen where he curled his finger beneath the lace in order to test the elastic. Her stomach turned concave as a helpless cry escaped her lips and she whispered, “Please.”

Without hesitation, he wrapped his fingers into the flimsy fabric, and wrenched them away from her. They parted from her like smoke, and Bucky wasted no time moving in. Her arms rose up to receive him as he sank back into her soft body for a long, dirty kiss. Her legs wrapped around his waist once more, and she pulled them together until his cock was nestled against the hot, slick opening at her center.

He closed his eyes and grappled for control as her body undulated against him, because he was so close to the edge already and he wanted this to be good for her. He didn’t want to scare her with his need, but it continued to build and swell inside of him like a violent tornado. There were so many things he wanted to do to her, but there was no time. He had to have her now.

“You know what they did to me, right? You saw it in my head?” he rasped against her ear. He already knew the answer to that, but he needed her to confirm it.

Her arms held him tighter, and her feet hooked around his calves to pull him in closer. “I know you can’t get me pregnant, James,” she replied huskily. “So what are you waiting for?”

He shifted his hips until the head of his cock was surrounded by moist heat. He pushed inside of her with one, clean stroke and moaned, “You.”

His ears rang with her cries as she dug her fingernails into the muscles of his back. His vision dimmed with sensory overload as his system flooded with equal parts adrenaline and oxytocin. It was a heady cocktail that filled him with the dangerous desire to mark her in the most primal way. He pulled his hips back and sank into her heat again, and he thought he would go crazy from the
feeling of her squeezing him so tight. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he growled as his hips grinded against hers.

She gripped his jaw in her hand and forced him to look her in the face. He could see her power glowing in the golden depths of her eyes, and he felt the weight of it bearing down on his mind as she projected, “You won’t.”

Bucky let go of everything but her. His instincts took over, and he pounded into her with hard, punishing thrusts. The red door inside his mind blew wide open, and he could feel her pleasure crashing through him like a tidal wave. He couldn’t tell if her cries for more were in his head or said out loud, but it didn’t matter. He wanted more of her, too. Her consciousness filled his mind as he filled her body until they were entwined completely, and he felt whole for the first time in his life.

He could feel the brief sting of her nails scoring his back as he slammed his hips into her over and over again, and he buried his hands in her brown curls to hold her captive for his kiss. He wanted to devour her like an animal, and ruin her for anyone else. He wanted to stake his claim and kill anyone who dared get too close her, because she was his. No one else would touch her, no one else would ever feel the tight grip of her pussy but him, and he would make them bleed if they tried.

“Yours, yours, yours,” she chanted in his mind as her hips rose up to meet each thrust. He could feel the building tide of her climax swirling in his head, and it mixed with his own desire to ratchet him higher. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t form the words to tell her how she made him feel, so he showed her. He gathered his passion, his yearning, and his thirst for her, and he shoved it through the open door in his mind. Her body arched against him and she stiffened in his arms with a wordless cry as he poured himself into the open connection between their minds and bodies. Her eyes flared with golden light and she detonated in his arms with her release.

Her climax rang like a gong and sent vibrations of her ecstasy resounding through his mind as his own release was ripped from him with violent surges of pleasure. He closed his eyes tight and buried his face in the curve of her jaw as his mind grappled with the confusing mixture of their combined orgasm. There was no rest or recuperation for him, because as soon as his body clenched and released inside of her, she squeezed and pulled more from within him. It was a vicious, intoxicating cycle that swept through them for what seemed like eternity before she finally grew limp beneath him.

Bucky’s head spun with dizziness, and he felt drunk as he kissed a sloppy path along her neck. He tasted the salt of her sweat mixed with the sweetness of her skin, and he could feel his cock hardening again where it was still nestled inside her body. The urgency was gone, but his hunger was not sated.

His voice was rough and scratchy as he mumbled, “You okay, doc?”

Her hands drifted like lazy butterflies across the muscles of his back and her legs splayed open on the bed with abandon. She hummed lazily in his ear and murmured, “You know I am.”

She was right. He could still feel her in his mind, and she radiated through him with warmth, contentment, and exhaustion. Reluctantly, he pulled out of her body and shifted his weight off her until he was able to lie next to her on the bed. She rolled to her side and snuggled back against him and threw her leg over his hip, and his arms gathered her in close. There was no more need for words between them. There was only room for the touch of their skin and the connection of their minds.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

**More sex, because that's how I roll.**

It was hours later, and the bedroom was lit only by the glow of the half moon. Bucky lay in the dark, wide awake, as he ran his hand along the curves of Danielle’s body. She had fallen asleep within minutes of curling into him, but he didn’t mind. He knew she had to be exhausted after all that she had been through in the past few days, and she had only gotten a few hours’ sleep on the QuinJet. He had noticed the dark circles under her eyes earlier as they shopped, and he was glad that she was getting some rest. He tended to forget that most humans, and even Inhumans, had physical limitations that he didn’t. Bucky didn’t need to sleep more than a few hours a night, and had once gone a full week without sleeping at all. He sometimes forgot that part of his former life, but Danielle had forced him to remember it. She was so fragile compared to him, and he constantly felt like he was going to break her.

He’d tried many times over the past several hours to get up and leave her alone to sleep, but he couldn’t seem to convince his body to obey him. He didn’t want to lose out on one second of time when he could be touching her, because he knew his time with her was short. Her skin was soft and warm, and she smelled like his favorite body wash and sex. He couldn’t get enough of inhaling the scent of her hair, and he liked the feel of her body moving against his as she shifted around in her sleep. She had never rolled away from him, though. Each time she had moved, Bucky had prepared himself to let go of her, but she would always find a way to touch him when she settled. He had enjoyed each position she had ended up in, too. At one point, she had ended up draped across his chest with her breasts in full view, and he had been able to study them for a full hour before she had shifted again.

Now, she was on her left side, and her back was plastered along Bucky’s front. He shifted against the cushion of her ass and hissed at the sensation of his cock moving along the curved valley. Even after the longest orgasm of his life, his cock had never softened, and his body ached from the pressure of it. All he could think about was the hot, wet center of her and how he wanted to run his fingers through her folds and taste the essence of her flavor on his tongue. He could be patient, though. Until she woke up again, Bucky would be more than content to limit himself to her leg or stomach. Just having her pressed against him was more than enough to keep him occupied while she rested.

Danielle hummed in her throat and arched her back until her ass grinded against his length. "James," he heard her whisper in his head. "Want you."

Bucky sucked in a surprised breath. As soon as she had fallen asleep earlier, her mind had withdrawn from him. It didn’t feel so empty inside when she was there.

Her voice inside his head had been a breath of a whisper, but he knew he heard it. “Are you awake?” he murmured quietly next to her ear.

Bucky’s heart began to hammer inside his chest, and his cock grew impossibly harder. “You need to sleep first,” he reminded her quietly, but his whisper still echoed in the dark, quiet room.

She moaned in her chest as she pulled her top knee towards her chest. This action relieved the pressure of her ass pressing against his cock, but it also revealed her pussy to him. “Sleep later. Want you.”

Bucky ran his palm over the crest of her hip and down the length of her thigh. “When you wake up, I’ll be right here,” he promised her softly.

“I am awake, James,” she said out loud, her voice scratchy and slurred with sleep. “It was just easier to talk without moving my lips.” She stretched and groaned loudly next to him before she added silently, “I’d rather save my energy for better things.”

Bucky ran his lips down the slope of her shoulder and whispered, “Better things, huh?” His fingers found the slippery opening to her body, and he allowed his fingertips to explore her folds. “What’s better than a good night’s sleep?”

Her breath caught in her throat, and she tilted her hips into his touch. “This,” she replied in his mind. She gasped and then moaned out loud when Bucky found her clit and began to gently massage it with his fingertip. “Definitely this,” she seconded herself out loud with a sigh.

That was all the proof he needed that she was indeed awake. He sank two fingers inside her, and she cried out even as she thrust back against them. God, he loved the feel of her pussy clamping down on his fingers, but he needed more. He rolled her to her back and leaned in to capture the tip of one breast between his teeth and used his grip to guide her nipple into his mouth. Her fingers burrowed into the hanging locks of his hair and she held him to her as he sucked and pulled at her breast.

His fingers were soaked where they plunged in and out of her body, and his cock pulsed angrily with jealousy. He nipped and lathed at her breast before switching the other to see how it compared to the first. “Yes, yes, yes!” rang in his head as he swirled circles around her clit with his thumb. He could feel her body winding tighter as she moved her hips in time with his fingers, and she moaned when he refused to move faster.

“You have to say it out loud,” some demon within him commanded. “Tell me what you want.”

Her eyelids cracked open and she met his gaze in the moonlit dark. He felt her withdraw to the edges of his mind, and she said softly, “I have been dreaming about it for hours. I want you, James. Just you.”

The breath left his lungs in a rush, and he swooped in to recapture it from her lips. Danielle’s hands gripped the muscles in his back as he covered her with his body and settled his hips between her thighs. The head of his cock slid unerringly down to her opening, and he pushed inside of her with ease. He breathed a curse into the pillow beneath her ear at the feel of her gripping and squeezing him. He didn’t think he would ever be immune to this feeling again.

Though the urgency to claim her had faded, the desire to touch her had not waned. His body moved against hers with slow, languorous thrusts as he bit and licked down the column of her throat. Soft, ragged moans issued from her throat as she gripped his ass to pull him into her harder, and her mind whispered words of encouragement and exhortations to move harder and faster. For once, Bucky didn’t want to hurry to complete the mission. He wanted to take his time and savor the journey. He wanted to feel each inch of her sheath pulsing around him and pulling him in deeper. He wanted to imprint this moment in his memory to recall later when he was once again
Danielle’s legs twined around his, and she used her leverage to pull him in tight to her body. Her hands trailed up and down his back as she whispered harshly, “Stop thinking about leaving, James. I’m right here, right now.”

Bucky closed his eyes and groaned at the truth of her words. He hadn’t meant for her to see that. He didn’t want her to think about their inevitable parting, too. He gently closed the door between their minds to keep her from seeing his thoughts and kissed her deep to let her know that he was there, too. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stay with her, but he could give her now.

He wanted to watch her come apart in his arms, so he gently eased his chest away from her hold to brace himself on his arms. He looked down into her face as he continued the torturous, slow glide of his cock in and out of her tight body. She rolled her hips up to meet him each time, and her chest rose and fell with her breaths as she ran one hand down the muscled slope of his chest. “You’re so beautiful,” Bucky confessed raggedly as her fingers trailed down his abdomen to stop at the place where they joined. He could feel her fingertips moving between them, and her sheath clenched around him almost painfully as she cried out with desire.

“James, please,” she panted with urgency. “I’m so close!”

Bucky couldn’t deny her anything, especially pleasure. He thrust deep inside her as her fingertips swirled against her clit, and he was mesmerized by the sight of her head thrown back with her eyes closed tight and the sounds bubbling up from her throat as she chased her release. His own climax buzzed beneath his skin with impatience, but he held back. He wanted to watch her first.

With a sharp cry, her body bowed off the bed, and her pussy clamped down on him with velvet shackles as she flew apart beneath him. She was glorious with her wealth of brunette curls spread around her head like a halo and her breasts flushed and swollen from his attentions, and Bucky thought he had never seen anything so gorgeous in his life. As she continued to whimper and tremble around him, Bucky let himself go. He plunged deep inside of her and released himself with a harsh groan of agonizing bliss. Danielle pulled him back down into her arms and held him tight as he emptied himself with deep, pulsing thrusts as if he could bury himself inside of her and stay there forever.

Eventually, Bucky remembered to move and relieve the pressure of his weight from her smaller, softer body. He collapsed on his back, and Danielle rolled into his side to rest her head on his left shoulder. Her hand landed on his chest over his heart, and he was sure she could feel it pounding against her palm, but she didn’t move it.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he apologized softly.

She hummed in her throat and settled the curves of her body against his side. “You didn’t wake me up. I wanted to quit dreaming about you so I could have the real thing.”

Bucky’s heart kicked at her words. How could she want him when she knew his deepest, darkest secrets? She had seen every twisted path of his soul, yet she still wanted him. He didn’t understand, couldn’t comprehend why she was still with him. What was it about him that she thought was redeemable?

He needed to know more about her to try to figure it out. “Who are you, doc? Tell me about your life.”

She sighed deeply, and her breath sent goosebumps skittering across his chest. “There’s not much
to tell, really. I live in a small apartment in Manhattan, and I have a private office there where I meet with my patients. Other than that, I try to keep a low profile.”

“What about family or friends?” he asked. He had a feeling there was more to her life than she was telling him.

Her fingernails traced designs in his skin for silent moments before she replied quietly, “My dad died when I was young, and my mother lives in a small town in New Hampshire. She’s happy there and has a full life with my older sister and her family.”

Bucky could hear the pain in her tone mixed with longing. “What aren’t you telling me, doc?”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest before she finally replied, “Because of the nature of my gift, I have to hide. It’s not just S.H.I.E.L.D. or government agencies that would love to get their hands on my powers, either. There are other people out there who are afraid of Inhumans to the point of hunting us down and killing us. They’re called The Watchdogs, and their numbers are growing.”

Bucky didn’t like the sound of that at all, and he had a bad feeling about where her story was headed. “What do they have to do with your family?” he asked gruffly.

He could feel her swallow thickly against him before she explained, “Before I moved to New York about a year ago, I lived in Indianapolis with my mother. She has early onset Alzheimer’s, and we lived together in a house there. Unfortunately, a disgruntled former patient found out about what I can do, and told the hate group about me. They burned my house to the ground and almost took my mother with it.”

Bucky’s left hand flexed into a fist at the small of her back, and his jaw clenched with rage. “How did you get away from them?”

Danielle struggled to a sitting position, and Bucky immediately missed her warmth. “I took the insurance money and I ran. I moved Mom to New Hampshire to live with my sister, and left most of the money for her care. Before I left, I erased their memories of me. It wasn’t difficult to do with Mom, because the disease was already decaying the threads in her mind. None of them remember me now. Not my sister, her husband, or my two nephews. It’s better this way. Safer for everyone.”

Bucky pushed himself up until he was sitting next to her. “What about the former patient and The Watchdogs that tried to kill you? Where are they now?”

Danielle’s pale shoulders gleamed in the light of the moon as she shrugged. “Right where I left them, I suppose, but they don’t remember me, either. I made sure of it before I left.”

Bucky reached out to cup her jaw in his hand and tilted her gaze up to meet his. “Who remembers you, doc? Who is there each day for you?”

Her cheek turned into his hand, and she closed her eyes against his searching gaze. “I get along fine on my own, James. Just like you do.”

He didn’t like it. It wasn’t right. She was too beautiful and too special to be alone, but he also knew that he was the wrong one for the job. He was too damaged and broken, and she deserved to live a normal life with someone who could give her peace and stability. Someone who could give her a family again.

Bucky leaned in and kissed her softly before pulling back enough to murmur, “That doesn’t mean you should have to.” Before she could offer a reply, he closed the subject. “Come on, doc. I hear your stomach growling. Let’s go fix something to eat, and get you back to bed. I know you’re still
tired."

She offered him a small smile and nodded before she left him behind to make use of the bathroom. Bucky pulled his jeans up his legs, but his mind was not on his task. Instead, he was busy thinking about how he could get to Indianapolis without being detected by Tony Stark. He had another mission to accomplish, and some dogs to put down.
Chapter 16

It was 4 a.m. in the morning, and the breeze was blissfully cool against Bucky’s overheated skin as he let himself out of the cabin with stealthy silence. Danielle was sleeping soundly in the bed after food, shower, and more sex finally wore her out. He had waited until she was breathing deeply before easing out of the bed and getting dressed. He knew the only way she would truly rest was if he weren’t in the bed with her. He also knew that he needed to contact Steve and talk to him. He needed to get Danielle home, and then he needed to get far away from her. Her life was hard enough without him there to fuck it up even worse.

Inside the QuinJet, Bucky sat in the pilot’s chair and began powering on the systems. LCDs glowed green in the dark, but the communications panel lit up like a fireworks display. His eyebrows lowered with consternation as alarms began to blare and a series of messages flashed across the screen. He tapped on one of them, and a voice message began to play.

“Buck, you have to get out of there. If you’re listening to this message, then that means that you turned on the GPS tracker, too. Tony knows you’re out of the ice, Buck. He was in Wakanda today, and he found out everything. He’s looking for you, and he knows you have the jet.”

Before he could listen to another one, he powered the plane down and jumped to his feet. By his estimation, he had less than two hours to disappear. Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem, but he wouldn’t be going alone this time. He couldn’t leave Danielle here for Tony Stark to find. He wasn’t afraid of Stark hurting her; he was afraid of him coveting her. Tony Stark had a knack for collecting powerful people, and he wouldn’t be able to resist the allure of Danielle’s power over the mind. Tony would find a way to study her and use her abilities “for the greater good.” Danielle wouldn’t be free. Bucky would be damned if he was going to let that happen to her.

He breezed into the house and headed directly for the bedroom. He hated to disturb her again, but there was no other choice. He leaned in and brushed her cheek lightly with his thumb. “Hey, doc?” She startled a bit, but her eyelids blinked opened. “I hate to do this to you, but we have to leave.”

She struggled to push herself up on her elbow and her voice was slurred as she said, “Leave? Why?”

Bucky could feel the seconds ticking by like pinpricks to his skin. They needed to move, but he didn’t want to scare her, either. “There was a message from Steve. Tony Stark knows I have the jet, and he’s looking for me. His suit flies faster than the QuinJet, and I just sent him a GPS coordinate for this cabin.”

She blinked rapidly as she processed this information before she breathed, “Oh, shit. We have to leave.”

She scrambled off the bed, sending blankets flying, and rushed around grabbing shopping bags and pulling out clothes with the tags still attached. As if they had done it a thousand times before, he and Danielle rushed around to pack clothes and toiletries. Without turning the lights on, Bucky made his way unerringly to the closet and punched in the code for his safe. He emptied it of cash and weapons and stuffed them into the cloth suitcase at his feet as Danielle carried bags to the back door. In less than fifteen minutes, they finished loading their things in the trunk of his car and they were on their way.

As Bucky pulled onto the road that would take them southwest, Danielle finally spoke. “You could have left me there, you know. I could have erased his memories of me with one touch.”
He pressed the gas pedal to the floor and sped down the highway. “I don’t think your power will work through that thick metal suit he wears, and I don’t know if he will be coming alone. I’m not going to risk exposing you to Tony Stark or any of the other Avengers. Life as you know it would end if they found out what you can do.”

Danielle looked out the passenger window at the pre-dawn landscape wistfully and said quietly, “I’m pretty sure that ship has already sailed.”

Bucky cursed a blue streak in his head. She was right, damn it. Her life had changed irrevocably as soon as Steve had recruited her to help him. Now, she was on the run in a foreign country without identification, and she was in the company of a wanted assassin. Just when he thought he couldn’t fuck up her life any more, he ended up dragging her further into danger.

“I don’t have to be in your head to know what you’re thinking, James,” she said, turning to look at him. “This isn’t your fault. I chose to go to Wakanda, and I chose to stay when you told me to leave. You’ve done nothing but protect me and keep me safe.”

Bucky’s jaw clenched and the steering wheel groaned and cracked beneath his prosthetic hand. “I’ve done nothing but put you in more danger. That ends today.”

“What do you mean? What do you plan to do?” she asked, her tone worried and cautious.

Bucky refused to look at her as he answered, “I’m taking you to Bern. There’s a U.S. embassy in the city, and they will help you get your passport back and put you on a plane to New York.”

She was silent for a long moment before she replied, “You’re going to run again, aren’t you? You’re going to leave without severing your ties to Hydra.”

He didn’t answer her. He didn’t have to, because she already knew the score. Instead, he said gruffly, “It will take about two hours to get there. Try to get some more sleep.”

“I’m not tired,” she snapped, her tone ripe with temper. “I’d rather talk about the fact that you are choosing to walk away from m-” she bit the word off before it could pass her teeth, took a deep breath, and finished, “Freedom. I can help you, James. I know I can do it. I may not be able to heal the damage they did to you, but I can keep it from happening again.”

Bucky wanted free will more than anything else in his long life, but his instincts were screaming at him not to do it. He didn’t know why it gave him a bad feeling, but he had learned to trust those instincts the hard way. Right now, they were warning him that this was a very bad idea.

Bucky shook his head and said, “I already told you I’m taking a pass on that, doc. I haven’t changed my mind about it.”

“I know about the Red Book, James,” she replied, her tone hard and blunt. “It’s still out there, and you have no idea who has it.”

Bucky’s stomach plunged to his feet. How could he forget that she had seen everything in his memories? That book held the code to activating his programming, and he hadn’t seen it since that awful day in the Siberian bunker. There was a very short list of people who could have it in their possession, and it was Bucky’s number one mission to find that book. If he could erase the code from existence, he would be free. More importantly, he wouldn’t have to put Danielle at risk. She had never mentioned anything beyond nebulous consequences, but Bucky knew she was hiding something from him. There were pieces of a puzzle floating around in his mind, but he couldn’t put the picture together yet. He had a bad feeling he wouldn’t like the end result.
“Not yet, I don’t, but I will,” he snapped, his own temper flaring to match hers. “I’m not running, doc. I’m fighting. This is my problem, and no one else’s. I’ll fix it on my own.”

Her temper snapped and she growled, “You can’t fix this, James! Even if you destroy the book, the commands will still be intact in your head. Are you willing to risk that they weren’t recorded elsewhere in Hydra’s records? Anyone with the right instructions will be able to command you. The only way to end outside control of your mind is from within it, and I am the only one who can do it.”

Bucky weaved in and out of the light early morning traffic, and replied darkly, “The only thing you’re doing is going back home. I can fix this myself by destroying the book.”

“And anyone who may have read it?” she added. “Will you destroy them, too? How much more blood has to be spilled to buy your freedom, James? I can end it all, and that will render the code words meaningless. Why won’t you let me help you?”

Before he could answer her, the car rocked with the force of the wind and a flash of light zoomed past them. Bucky cursed and stomped on the brake as his eyes landed on the gleaming red and gold suit of Iron Man coming to a stop in the middle of the road ahead of them. Danielle grabbed ahold of his arm and her nails dug furrows into his skin as they watched Stark raise one palm that whined with charge and emitted a bright light.

“It’s over, Barnes,” Tony Stark’s voice carried across the open road between them. “Let the hostage go, and come with me peacefully. Or, better yet, don’t.”

Bucky had two choices. He could try to outrun Tony Stark again, but that would be next to impossible to do. There was no way the car could outpace the propulsion of his suit, and Danielle could get hurt in the crossfire. His only other option was to turn himself in to Stark and hope that Danielle would be able to escape unscathed. In the end, he knew there was really only one choice to make.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t the first one to act. With decisive movements, Danielle released her seatbelt and threw open the car door. She was gone before he could process it, and he watched with horror as she began to sprint across the highway straight for danger. “Help!” she screamed, real terror in her voice. “Please, help me!”

Tony’s hand remained steady where it was aimed at Bucky, but he turned his head to watch her running approach. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” Stark asked, his voice tinny from the speakers in his suit.

Danielle didn’t stop until she was able to throw herself in his metal arms as she sobbed, “Please, take me home. I’m so afraid!”

Bucky’s stomach dropped to his shoes. He had no idea what was going through her head to put herself in the middle of the standoff. Tony Stark, however, seemed perfectly at ease as his metal arm encircled her waist. The golden plates of his visor retracted until his face was visible for the first time, and he looked down into Danielle’s tear-filled eyes. “Don’t worry, ma’am. I’ll protect you from him. Just stand to the side, and I’ll take him into custody first.”

That was when Bucky knew what she had planned. Sure enough, she reached up to cradle the billionaire’s jaw in her palm, and her dark brown eyes began to glow with an otherworldly light. “My hero,” she breathed.

Tony’s eyes flew wide open and his mouth parted on an aborted yell. His arms fell down to his
sides, and he weaved on his feet, but Danielle did not let him go even when he fell to his knees. She followed Stark all the way down to the ground until the man was laying in the middle of the road with his eyes shut and his body limp. Bucky jumped out of the car and ran over to where Danielle was standing back up to her feet and brushing road dust from the seat of her pants.

“What did you do?” he asked her, his tone harsh and angry. “You could have been killed!”

Danielle was trembling and her voice was shaky when she replied, “He wouldn’t have hurt me, James, but he would have hurt you. All I did was knock him out cold. He should wake up within a few hours, and we can be long gone by then.”

Bucky glanced around at the roadway where they were stopped, and knew that they wouldn’t be lucky to avoid traffic for long. Using his left hand, he gripped Stark by the neck of his suit and hauled him none-too-gently to the side of the road. He settled Tony safely in the ditch full of tall grass, and made his way back to where Danielle was hugging herself and shaking. He wrapped his arm around her waist and hurriedly escorted her back to the car and settled her inside once more. He revved the engine on the car, and took off with the squeal of tires to put as much distance between them and Iron Man as humanly possible.

Bucky’s anger and helplessness flared and he spat, “That was foolish and dangerous what you just did back there, doc. You have no idea what that man is capable of doing.”

Her hand shook as she reached up to smooth back her flyaway curls. “No more foolish than giving yourself over to him to protect me,” she replied without heat. “And, you’re wrong, James. I have every idea what Tony Stark is capable of, because I saw it in his head.”

Bucky exited the highway and began to seek out smaller roads that wound through the countryside. “What did you see?”

Her breath expelled with force as she replied, “He has the Red Book, James. Tony Stark has the code to your programming.”
Two hours later, they were in the heart of Zurich. There was no point in taking Danielle to the embassy now that Tony Stark had seen her face. It would take next to no time at all for his cutting-edge systems to identify her. Tony was a proud man, and he would not stop until he found the woman that knocked him out with just a touch. Bucky wasn’t going to make it that easy for him to find her.

She had wanted to talk about what he was going to do about Tony Stark, but he had refused to engage her. She had done too much already and risked everything to help him, but it had to end now. He wouldn’t allow her to get dragged any further into the shit storm of his life. She had already lost too much by being near him, and he couldn’t bear the thought of her blood on his hands. He knew it was only a matter of time before luck ran out and she was seriously injured. Whether by his enemies or his own hand, she would eventually get hurt, and it would be his fault.

Twenty minutes after driving away from Stark, they found a decent-sized village, and they ditched the car. Thanks to his bag of cash, it had been simple to purchase another one from a village local, and Danielle had gone inside the villager’s head to remove her memories of them. Hopefully, that would slow down Stark enough to let them escape. From there, he had headed straight for Zurich where one of his old Hydra contacts would be able to procure what they needed to leave the country.

“Who lives here?” Danielle asked him curiously as they stood outside an apartment door in downtown Zurich.

Bucky shifted the duffle bag to his left hand, and rang the buzzer two times, paused for a second, and then rang it once more. He repeated the pattern again as he replied, “Five years ago, I was sent to do a job in Zurich. This is the guy that crafted my identity, and now he’s going to make you one, too.”

The door swung open and a man snapped, “What do you want? It’s barely 8 a.m., and I’m leaving for work.” Bucky waited for the light of recognition in the man’s eyes, and it didn’t take long. “YOU!” he spat, his lips pulling down into a snarl. “You nearly got me arrested the last time I saw you. Go away.”

He tried to slam the door in their faces, but Bucky easily pried it back open and pushed his way inside the apartment with Danielle trailing after him. “Good to see you, too, Lukas. I got a job for you.”

Lukas popped his head in the hall and looked both ways to make sure they weren’t followed before he slammed the door and whirled on him. “No! I don’t work with Hydra anymore. Not after your little stunt almost got me thrown in jail. You killed my boss, you asshole. When the police couldn’t find you, they turned their attention on the bank employees, and I failed the polygraph.”
Bucky couldn’t care less about his troubles. He had his own to tend to. “Yet, here you stand a free man. I need you to make some documents for her. She needs identification and a passport, and they need to pass inspection. You have two hours.”

Lukas’ face turned purple and he exploded, “What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand? I’m not doing it, and you need to take your girlfriend somewhere else.”

Before Bucky could reply, he heard Danielle clearly in his head saying, “My turn.”

Danielle stepped forward and thrust her hand at the man, and he obligingly took it for a shake. Without letting it go, she said mildly, “Do you mind if we switch to English? My Swiss German is terrible.” Her dark brown eyes began to softly glow with power, and without waiting for him to reply, she continued, “I gather that you're not happy we're here, but I also know that you have the materials to do the job. Now, we are more than willing to pay you for your time, but ours is very short. Let me be blunt, sir. Either you do the job now, or I will be more than happy to tell your wife about the affair you’ve been having with your pretty blonde coworker. In fact, your wife is due to be home from her shift at the hospital any minute now, isn’t she?”

Lukas’ face drained of color. “How do you know about that? Why are your eyes glowing?” he asked, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. He tried to wrest his hand away from hers, but she held fast.

Bucky grinned at the smug look on Danielle’s face as she replied, “I know a lot of things about you, Lukas. I know about the embezzling you’ve been doing at the bank, too. You are a very sneaky guy, and sneaky guys need money. Will you be taking ours, or will I be making a call to your new boss?”

Lukas frowned and finally managed to free his hand from hers, but he nodded his head sharply. “Fine. I’ll call in sick to work and make your fucking papers. After this, I never want to see your faces again. Got it?”

Bucky tossed the duffel bag of money at his feet and said, “Bring the documents to Hotel Bristol in two hours. There’s a bonus in it for you if you can do it faster.”

Lukas hefted the bag in his hand, and Bucky could see the gleam of greed sparkling in his eyes. “Two hours is pushing it. These things take time.”

Danielle thanked him politely before excusing herself to the restroom. Lukas would have to take her picture, and she wanted to “fix” herself up. Bucky didn’t understand what she meant by that, because he thought she already looked gorgeous with her glowing skin and unruly brown curls. Still, she wasn’t gone long, and they were able to get the pictures taken in short order. After one last politely-worded threat from Danielle, they left the building.

Bucky hailed a taxi and helped Danielle inside and gave the cabbie the name of their hotel. He hated the idea of being in public where facial recognition could pick them up. Even though he felt like a sitting duck, he had booked them a room at the Hotel Bristol. It was safer to stay behind a locked door than to pass their time on the streets.

As the taxi wended its way through traffic, Bucky leaned in to whisper, “I think you scared him more than my gun would have.”

She gifted him with a smile before leaning in to claim his lips for a quick kiss. “I know you’re right.”
Ten minutes later, they were behind a locked door in their hotel room. Bucky methodically checked the room for surveillance, while Danielle collapsed across the king-sized bed. “So, what’s going to happen after we get my fake papers?”

Bucky finished loading the Glock 43 and popped the magazine back in place. “We head for Munich. I have a lot more resources there, and I can contact Steve. He’ll be able to get you back home and keep Stark off your back.”

Bucky bent down by the bed to wedge the gun beneath the mattress, and she reached out to grab his arm. He froze in place as she snared him with her soft, brown eyes. “Why are you so determined to get rid of me, James?”

Bucky’s heart lurched in his chest and then it began to gallop as it pumped adrenaline into his system. She had that effect on him with just one touch. His voice was gravelly as he answered, “Because I want you to be safe. That will only happen if I stay far away from you.”

Her fingers trailed up his bicep until they bypassed the barrier of his short sleeve. “I don’t need a knight in shining armor, James. I am more than capable of rescuing myself. Stop pushing me away, because I know you don’t want to.”

There was no point in talking about it, because he wasn’t going to change his mind. She was going home, and he was going to complete his missions. He didn’t want to spend the little time he had left with her on useless words. He would rather use this time for other things. Bucky stood to his feet slowly and looked down at where she was laying on the bed. Her breasts were molded beneath soft lavender cashmere, and her legs were partially spread open in invitation. It was one that he had no intention of refusing.

Bucky grasped the hem of his shirt and stripped it off over his head and tossed it to the floor before he divested himself of his boots and socks. Without asking permission, he bent at the waist and unzipped the ankle boots on Danielle’s feet next and pulled them off followed by her socks. “We have less than two hours before we have to run again. You want to spend that time arguing, or do you want to spend that time in more pleasurable ways?”

Her pupils dilated and her breaths came faster as she stared at his chest. “You took your shirt off on purpose to distract me, didn’t you?” she accused him without heat.

He settled his knees on the bed and worked his way up between her legs until was looming over her. He smirked down at her and asked, “Is it working?”

She sighed audibly and reached out her hand to trail downward across his abs. “Almost. I bet it would work even better if you took everything else off.”

Bucky reached down and popped the button on his jeans to relieve the pressure against his painfully swollen cock. “Only if you do, too.”

His hands burrowed beneath the hem of her shirt, and he dragged it up her sides along with his palms. She lifted her shoulders obligingly to help him liberate her from the material, and she reached behind her back to release the clasp on her bra. “I’m not letting you get your hands on this bra. It’s the only one I have left.”

Bucky leaned in and ran the tip of his nose between the valley of her breasts. His breath gusted hotly across a nipple, and it puckered obligingly. “That’s a shame, because I think you look better without one.”
He pulled her nipple deep into his mouth to suck and nip at it with his teeth, and she moaned as she arched her hips toward him. “You’re too far away,” she complained, breathily. “Too many clothes.”

Bucky released her breast reluctantly and kissed and licked his way down her taut stomach. His fingers slipped beneath the waistband of her jeans, and he thumbed open the button. “I can take care of that.”

He made short work of pulling the denim, along with the sinful amethyst silk panties that did little to cover her sex, down her legs. He stood at the end of the bed and looked down on the beautiful, naked angel spread out before him, and his mouth watered. Without waiting for permission, he gripped her ankles and pulled her down the bed until her ass was perched at the edge.

Her hair fanned out around her head and her hand moved down her body to gingerly cover the soft, downy thatch of curls between her legs. “James, you don’t have to...” she trailed off, her cheeks flushed with color.

Bucky dropped to his knees in supplication, and prepared to worship at her altar. He scooped her thighs up in his hands and draped her knees across his wide shoulders as he replied, “I’ve wanted to taste you for days.”

“Oh,” she replied softly before she gasped at the feel of his fingers parting her folds. She buried her fingers in the hair at his temple, and her eyes met his down the length of her body, and she whispered, “I’ve thought about tasting you, too.”

Bucky groaned and closed his eyes against the vivid picture that she thrust into his head of her taking his cock in her mouth. His abdomen clenched with phantom pleasure, and his jeans felt uncomfortably tight where they bound his swollen flesh. He licked and sucked a mark into the soft flesh of her inner thigh, and rasped, “Now who’s distracting who?”

“Don’t expect me to apologize,” she threw his earlier words back at him as he ran his fingers through the slick opening.

Her scent was doing more to distract him than even her imagination. He hummed with appreciation as he burrowed his nose into her center and licked a path through her folds. Her essence burst across his tongue with hints of tang, salt, and sweet that mixed together in a perfect melody that made him want more. He couldn’t remember many of the women he’d had sex with before Hydra, but he remembered that he liked to do this. He didn’t think any of them had ever tasted like liquid sex and dark desire like Danielle, though.

He closed his eyes as he explored her, and he could feel her hovering behind the red door in his mind. Without thought, he threw the door wide, and her consciousness streamed inside of him. He could feel the weight of her emotions bearing down on him, and he used them as his guide to please her. Her fingernails scratched at his scalp as he began to drink from her earnest, and she moved her hips against his mouth as she streamed a chorus of exclamations and demands straight into his head. Out loud, she moaned his name, over and over, as he thrust two fingers deep in her channel. Her back bowed off the bed with a cry when he captured her clit between his lips and swirled it with his tongue as his fingers stroked in and out of her on the glide of her arousal.

“Want you, want you, want you,” cycled through his head, followed by, “Please, please, please,” and it made him dizzy with blood loss. He knew she was close to toppling over into orgasm, and he was desperate to taste it. He curled his fingers toward the front of her vagina and massaged his fingertips there as he lathed her clit with his tongue. Her legs began to quiver where they rested on his shoulders, and she keened as he ripped her loose from her moorings and sent her flying into
release. Bucky groaned against her flesh at the feel of her sheath pulsing around his fingers with each aftershock of her climax, and he barely kept from coming himself as the waves of her ecstasy resounded through his mind. He eased the pressure of his fingers and gentled the caress of his tongue as she slowly floated back down to herself until she stopped him altogether with a soft tug at his hair.

Bucky leaned back on his knees and ran his right hand down over his mouth and chin as he admired his handiwork. Danielle looked thoroughly debauched with her flushed cheeks, unfocused gaze, bare breasts, and open legs where her pussy gleamed with wetness. All he could think about was burying his cock inside of her and emptying himself deep. He wanted her to fuck her hard so that she would never forget him, even after the physical soreness of her body faded and he disappeared.

“Do it,” she whispered, her voice pulling him from the crazed fog of lust clouding his mind. “I want you to take me, James.”

She rolled to her stomach and pulled her knees up to brace against the edge of the bed. She bowed her back and raised her ass as she grabbed fistfuls of the bedding. Bucky’s cock strained against the confining tightness of his zipper, and he reached down to rid himself of his jeans and underwear. As he stood to his feet, the material pooled around his ankles, and he stepped out of them and into the cradle of Danielle’s body. He ran his palms over the round, smooth curve of her ass and he pressed his cock against the swollen tissues of her sex.

“I don’t trust myself not to hurt you,” he confessed as his prosthetic left hand found a handhold on her hipbone.

She rolled her hips against him until the head of his cock nudged inside her and gasped, “Give me something to remember.”

He pushed inside of her with one firm thrust, and her cries were muffled by the bedspread as he pulled her back onto his length until he could go no further. He bit off a curse and did it all over again just to feel her slick sheath squeeze him impossibly tight. He wanted to slow down and enjoy the amazing view of her pussy swallowing him over and over again, but his body wouldn’t allow him the luxury. His hips moved of their own volition, and the sound of their impact against her ass rang throughout the room as he fucked her hard and deep.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Danielle chanted into the bed as her knuckles turned white in their grip on the blankets. Her whole body rocked with each thrust of his cock, but Bucky’s grip on her hipbones did not allow her go far before he pulled her back. In his mind, she crooned, “Yours, yours, yours...only yours.”

Bucky snarled and plunged deep until she cried out his name. She was driving him crazy with her body, her words, and her mind. He couldn’t think, couldn’t slow down, because she felt too good. The noises ripping from her throat fed the frenzy of his hips, and he could feel his release clawing its way to the surface. With a final push, his climax claimed him and he poured himself out inside of her as his body was wracked with wave after wave of agonizing ecstasy. Danielle pushed back against him and shuddered with soft cries as her sheath spasmed around him with her own climax, and it only made Bucky’s abs clench harder.

It took several minutes for them to quit trembling, and Bucky finally eased himself away from her body. She moaned at his retreat, but he knew she couldn’t be comfortable in that position for long. He really wanted to crawl in that bed with her and enjoy the feel of her skin against his own, but they didn’t have the luxury of time. Without even thinking about it, he scooped her up into his arms. She shrieked with surprise, but quickly began to laugh as he walked toward the bathroom.
“A little warning would be nice next time,” she teased him lightly as he set her down in front of the shower.

Bucky leaned in and turned the knobs until the water was warm enough not to burn her, and replied, “If there’s time.”

He knew as soon as the words left his lips that it was the wrong thing to say. Her smile faded and the light behind her eyes dimmed. She dropped her gaze and stepped past him to enter the shower as she said softly, “It always comes down to that with us, doesn’t it? A time limit.”

Bucky didn’t reply as he stepped in behind her and closed the curtain. He gathered her dripping body into his arms and maneuvered until she was beneath the warm spray, and murmured, “I can give you now. It has to be enough. For both of us.”
Chapter 18

It was well past dark by the time they made it to Munich. Bucky took no chances that they would be followed, and dragged Danielle from train to train that zigzagged across Germany before finally they finally disembarked in the heart of Munich. He could tell that she was exhausted, but he knew that she would get little rest where they were headed. He couldn’t afford to expose them by staying in another hotel, and his previous safe houses likely weren’t so safe anymore. Munich had been one of the largest havens for Hydra operatives over the years, but it had been largely picked clean by S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers over the past few years. At least, they thought they had found everything, but Bucky knew better. There was one place in Munich that not even Hydra knew about, and that was where they were headed.

Danielle trotted after him, a large duffle bag hanging from her shoulder, as he led them out into the bustling hive of Munich. He’d spent many years in the city over the course of his life, and it felt more like home to him than Brooklyn. He vastly preferred it to Moscow. There were very bad memories of Moscow, but Munich was familiar. It felt more like his home territory than anywhere else.

It only took Bucky half an hour to procure transportation, and they were soon entering the seedier side of the city. Danielle looked around her with avid curiosity and fear as they passed dilapidated homes, abandoned businesses, and shadowy people darting between buildings. “This place seems familiar from your memories, but I can’t place it,” she said out loud as Bucky pulled the car behind a condemned gas station and killed the lights.

The cement block building was dark and silent, and the windows were boarded shut along with the door. The entire building was covered in graffiti, and there was an air of neglect about the place. He had purchased it during that sweet year of freedom after Hydra had crumbled and after he had begun to remember Steve. He’d bought this piece of shit real estate under a false identity, and had stored his cache of weapons and money inside it along with all the pieces of blackmail material he had collected over the years about his previous handlers. This building hid everything of value that Bucky owned, and he would need every last bit of it in order to take down Tony Stark.

“Are you sure it’s safe to go in there?” Danielle whispered at his elbow as he chambered a round in his Glock.

“Safer than most places right now, but we won’t be here for long. I just need to grab a few things and then we’ll leave the city,” he explained shortly as they made their way through the tall weeds growing through the cracks in the asphalt.

There was no running electricity or water in the building, and the locals knew better than to fuck with the place, but he was still surprised that the boards were still in position and it appeared undisturbed. Accessing the programming in his arm, he scanned for transmitters inside the building, and was satisfied when nothing showed up. Bucky easily wrenched away the planks boarded across the back entrance with his left hand and broke the locks on the door. He shoved the heavy wooden door open and stepped into the inky depths of the empty storeroom.

Danielle was quiet as Bucky worked his way by memory through the storeroom until he found the door to the interior of the gas station. Before he turned the knob, though, her hand landed on his elbow, and she whispered, “James, something feels wrong. I don’t like it here.”

Bucky paused and replied quietly, “Stay here, and I’ll check it out first. I’ll come get you when it’s all clear.”
Her fingernails bit into elbow, and her breath steamed up his tee shirt where she crowded into his side as she whispered, “Hurry, please. I don’t like the dark.”

Bucky pulled his gun and eased into the echoing storefront. Empty shelves stood like silent sentinels and cooler doors hung open like gaping mouths without teeth as he slowly walked the perimeter toward where he had buried his stash beneath two feet of concrete. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and his skin crawled with foreboding, but he had to get to his cache. After purchasing Danielle’s new identity and paying for transportation, he was out of funds. In order to get Danielle to safety, he would need to access the cash inside his vault. He would just have to take care of whatever fresh hell awaited him inside.

When he rounded the corner and approached the janitor’s closet, he paused. The door was standing wide open, and he knew for a fact that he had closed it and had rigged an explosive before he left the last time. Someone had been inside. Someone who had the technology to disarm an explosive. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a light flickered to life behind him and illuminated the dark storefront with a brilliant glow.

Bucky spun and raised the gun in his left hand, but before he could shoot, the intruder shot first. It wasn’t a bullet or a beam of energy that hit him, though. It was an electromagnetic pulse beam, and his prosthetic arm went dead and collapsed to his side. The gun clattered to the floor from his useless fingers, and Bucky knew better than to try to retrieve it.

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” a familiar mocking voice called out to him. Tony Stark strolled forward until he stood in the circle of light cast by the spotlight aimed right at Bucky. “I made a few changes of my own, though, especially to that janitor’s closet. By the way, the United Nations Foundation thanks you for your generous contribution to their cause. I’m sure they’ll put those two million euros to better use than you.”

Bucky prayed that Danielle stayed quiet and wouldn’t follow him inside. He should have listened to her. Hell, he should have listened to his own instincts, but he was so focused on getting what he needed to keep her safe that he ended up placing her directly into danger. Again.

“How did you find this place? It wasn’t on Hydra’s books,” Bucky asked as he eased his way between Stark and the door to the stockroom. He needed to buy time for Danielle to escape.

Tony looked entirely too smug standing there dressed in jeans and long-sleeved Black Sabbath tee shirt. His right hand was covered in an iron glove that glowed in the palm where it was pointed directly at Bucky’s chest, but his posture was relaxed and his tone was full of sarcastic confidence. “I’ve had over a year to track down everything about you, Barnes. I found this little treasure trove about three months ago. I had a feeling you would end up placing her directly into danger. Again.

“How did you find this place? It wasn’t on Hydra’s books,” Bucky asked as he eased his way between Stark and the door to the stockroom. He needed to buy time for Danielle to escape.

Tony’s expression melted into severe lines of pain as he growled, “I want revenge. I want you dead, but I’ll settle for a cage. And I want mission reports. All of them.”

Bucky’s chest heaved as panic began to claw up his throat. His voice was full of gravel when he spat, “You don’t understand what you’re playing with, Stark. You have no idea what you will unleash if you use that book to summon the Winter Soldier.”

Tony’s laughter was mockery of humor as he replied, “I’ve read every page of that book and scoured through every file left behind in that bunker in Siberia. I know more about you than you know about yourself. I won’t stop until I know the name of every person you killed, every mother
and father that you assassinated, and every name of every person who ever commanded you. I want everything.”

From the shadows behind him, a new voice called out, “At what cost, Mr. Stark?”

Bucky cursed as Danielle stepped forward into the light, and he moved until he hid her from Tony’s line of sight. “What are you doing?” he hissed over his shoulder. “Take the car and get out of here. Now!”

“Dr. Danielle Stoica, I presume?” Tony drawled. “I was hoping I would run into you again, but I’m sure you’ll understand if I don’t offer you a handshake.”

As if he hadn’t even spoken, Danielle stepped from behind Bucky and moved around him until she had a clear line of sight to Stark. “I know what you are planning to do, Mr. Stark, and I implore you to reconsider. If you initiate the code words, you are effectively creating a slave without the choice to resist. That would make you no better than the dozens of Hydra agents that used him as a killing machine. Torturing him won’t bring your parents back.”

The muscle in Tony’s jaw clenched and his dark eyes turned hard. “You’re one to talk about taking away choices, doctor. Once I finally managed to identify you, F.R.I.D.A.Y. had a hell of time tracking down information about you. She did manage to locate your family in New Hampshire, though. Imagine my surprise when your sister had no idea who you are and insisted that she was an only child. Did you give them a choice when you wiped their memories of your existence?”

Danielle sucked in a shocked breath and choked, "Leave them alone. They've done nothing wrong, and they have no memory of me in order to keep them safe."

Bucky strode forward and snarled, “Don’t talk to her, don’t look at her, and don’t even think about her. She has nothing to do with this. This is between you and me.”

Tony offered him a smirk and replied, “She placed herself in the middle when she used her abilities to prevent me from taking you into custody by order of the United Nations. Under the Sokovia Accords, any enhanced individual who obstructs lawful actions by those acting within the bounds of the law are to be arrested. Dr. Stoica will be evaluated for threat level, and a recommendation for her sentencing will be decided upon by the U.N. subcommittee.”

Bucky’s vision turned red with fury and he charged toward the smug bastard that dared to threaten his…Danielle. He didn’t make it two steps before thick bands of steel flew through the air to wrap around his ankles and pin his arms to his sides. He fell to the concrete floor, and his head cracked against the tile. Danielle screamed and rushed toward him, but more of the robotic restraints flew through the air to bind her hands behind her back. She dropped to her knees next to Bucky, and his heart wrenched at the sight of the tears streaming down her face.

“James, don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I’ll find you, and I’ll fix everything,” she promised on a sob as Tony used his metal-gloved hand to haul her gently to her feet.

Bucky struggled uselessly against Stark’s restraints. Without the use of his cybernetic arm, his strength was not enough to break free of them to save her. He had failed her. He may as well have handed her directly over into Stark’s hands, because he had led her straight into a trap.

“I swear to you that if you hurt her, I will erase the last remaining Stark from existence,” Bucky hissed as Stark led her away from him.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Rogers isn’t here to protect you anymore, Barnes, and you’re now
an international prisoner of the U.N. via the Sokovia Accords. I suggest you get comfortable, because we have a lot to talk about,” Tony threw over his shoulder as he exited the storefront with Danielle in tow.
It had been five days since Tony Stark had captured them. Five hellish days of not knowing where Danielle was being kept, or where he was located, either. He didn’t know if they were even on the same continent, much less in the same building, because try as he might, he could not feel her in his head. The last time he had seen her was when Tony’s QuinJet had landed six hours after leaving Munich. He hadn’t been able to talk to her during the flight, because she was sequestered inside a strange metallic pod in the cargo bay. He had never seen anything like it before, because it was painted white and had a small cot inside it. He could clearly see a digital screen where the controls were located, and he could only surmise that it was built especially for holding enhanced individuals like Inhumans. His last glimpse of her had been of her tear-streaked face in the glass window as she screamed his name, but he couldn’t hear a sound. Not with his ears or his mind.

Bucky hadn’t seen much of anyone else for five days, either. He had expected Stark to begin interrogating him immediately, but the egomaniac playboy never made an appearance. Instead, Bucky had been left alone in a small, seamless room made of vibranium. The toilet, sink, and bed frame were made of the same metal and welded to the wall, so the only weapon Bucky would be able to fashion would be out of the foam mattress or pillow. He could make it work in a pinch, but he saw no point in it when they had Danielle as leverage.

Other than the guard that brought him a meal three times a day, Bucky saw no one. Normally, that wouldn’t bother him, because it was all he had known for decades. However, since he met Danielle, he had experienced what it was like to touch someone, to talk to them, and to worry about them. He had forgotten what it was like to care about someone, because he hadn’t even cared about himself much less anyone else in a lifetime. She had changed everything. Danielle had reached inside of him and awakened his humanity, and now he didn’t know how to go back. He didn’t know how to detach himself from feelings and memories anymore. He almost wished he could, because it hurt.

One good thing that had come of his solitude, though, was the opportunity to reboot the systems in his arm. Thanks to the passcodes that FitzSimmons had set up, he was able to bring the cybernetics back online. It didn’t do him much good in this cell, but at least he wasn’t entirely without weapons now. He didn’t know why Tony hadn’t ordered his prosthetic removed, because that would have been the smart thing to do. He could only guess that it would be happening soon enough, but until then, he would not hesitate to use it. He couldn’t allow his guilt over harming Steve’s friend to stop him from escaping and saving Danielle. He would try a less violent method first, but he wasn’t taking the option off the table, either.

It was past midnight on the fifth day of his captivity before Tony broke his silence.

A speaker crackled to life, and Stark’s grating sarcasm cut through the silence. “Can we expect a good rating on Yelp? Our investors would like to know.”

Bucky knew there were eyes on him somewhere in the room, so he held his left hand up in the air with his middle finger extended in greeting. Bucky was remembering how to resist. He was remembering how to rebel. Hydra had eventually burned it out of him, but the memories were coming back to him. Because of her.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Tony quipped. Bucky didn’t bother to reply, because he knew that Stark was running the show, and there was nothing the man loved to do more than hear himself talk. Sure enough, he continued, “Here’s what’s going to happen, Manchurian Candidate. You’re going to tell me everything you know one way or another. How that happens is up to you.”
Bucky stretched his arms wide until his spine cracked like machine gun fire. He stood to his feet, crossed his arms, and said calmly, “I’m willing to make a deal, but not with you. I want to talk to the U.N. subcommittee behind my arrest warrant.”

He wasn’t surprised when the bare western wall of his prison slid away to reveal a transparent panel into the next room. On the other side of the barrier stood Tony Stark. Even dressed in blue jeans and a sweater, the man managed to ooze wealth and charisma. Every hair was in place, his beard was neatly trimmed, and an expensive watch hugged his wrist. He was everything that Bucky was not, but he still couldn’t find it within himself to hate him.

Tony sauntered up the barrier and rapped on it with his knuckles. His voice came through loud and clear as he explained, “I know you fixed your arm, so I thought I would just let you know that this polymer was tested against the strongest force available, and it didn’t even crack. It’s Hulk tested, Hulk approved.”

Bucky didn’t doubt that he was being quite literal. Stark was a brilliant man, and his technology was already light years ahead of anything else being done on the planet. “I’ll try to contain myself,” Bucky replied drily. “Now, about that subcommittee…”

Tony strolled down the length of the barrier as he replied, “You know, there’s a lot of that going around right now. Dr. Stoica said the same thing, too. She’s frustratingly close-mouthed when it comes to you, and has refused to talk to me. She keeps saying that she can’t tell me anything because it’s protected by doctor-patient confidentiality, but she’s willing to testify on your behalf to the U.N.…”

Bucky’s composure cracked, and he dropped his arms to his sides to stalk over to the barrier until he and Stark were nose-to-nose. “Where is she? What have you done with her?”

Tony’s lips curled up at the corner, and he answered, “I knew it. There’s only one kind of ‘doctor’ you’ve been playing with her, and it has nothing to do with her psychology degree.”

Without his volition, his left arm drew back and punched the barrier where Tony’s face smirked at him. The man didn’t even flinch, but Bucky was thrown across the room from the electric volts that coursed through his body. His prosthesis was smoking as he picked himself up off the ground, but it was thankfully still functional.

“I tried to warn you, didn’t I? Maybe I forgot to mention the whole electric shock thing, but from what I hear, you’re used to it by now,” Tony said, a gleeful smile splitting his face.

Bucky grunted against the aches flaring to life in his ribs, but he would not let that stop him from finding out more. “Why does she want to talk to the subcommittee? Where is she now?”

“No need to get your panties in a twist, Barnes. Dr. Stoica is being treated like a valuable guest. Granted, she’s a guest that’s not allowed to leave, but she’s still more comfortable than you. She’s even been allowed visitors. In fact, she spoke with Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross just today,” Tony revealed.

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed with concern. What was she planning? Out loud, he said, “I don’t want her help. In fact, I’d be willing to make a deal with you if you’ll let her go and forget she even exists.”

Tony stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “I’m afraid that ship has already sailed and arrived at port. Her secret is out, and there are certain people who are very interested in the things she can do, and I’m one of them. You keep forgetting that I don’t need your cooperation.
I have everything I need to get the information I want.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes and an idea began to form in his mind. “If that’s the case, then why haven’t you activated my programming yet? You’ve been waiting for a year to get your hands on me, and yet I’ve been here for five days and nothing. I thought for sure that you would be itching to get your hands on the data you found in my safe.”

He knew he hit a nerve when Stark looked away and frowned. “I’ll admit that it was clever to rig your hard drive to erase if anyone tried to access it without your passcode. F.R.I.D.A.Y. has been working on a solution, but it won’t be necessary if you comply.”

Bucky laughed as the truth dawned on him. “The subcommittee won’t give you permission to use the code in the Red Book, will they? Your hands are tied by the Accords that you hold so dear. I’m guessing they told you they couldn’t condone the idea of stripping away my basic human rights. You should know that the real reason they don’t want you activating my programming is because some of them have contracted my services over the years. That information would shine a bad light on the whole system with the Sokovia Accords, wouldn’t it?”

Tony’s jaw clenched, and he spat, “I could still use the code words and get everything I need. This is my prison, after all. It’s only because of Stark Industries that we have the ability to house dangerous enhanced persons like yourself. I can get what I need from you and then wipe the slate clean, and no one would ever know.”

Bucky walked up to the transparent barrier and came to a stop mere inches from where Tony stood. “You would know what you’d done. You would have another regret to add to your list, and every time you look Steve Rogers in the eyes, you would have to lie to him. Can you do that, Stark? Would it be worth it to you?”

“No!” he hissed, his dark chocolate eyes burning with rage. “You killed my mother, and I want to know the names of every person involved that ordered my parents’ deaths. I will do whatever it takes to make sure they pay, including you. Especially you.”

Bucky nodded in understanding. “I get it, and I don’t even blame you for it. The problem with your plan is that your hands are tied by the very laws you helped create. I know that there are some very powerful people surrounding you that don’t want me to divulge their secrets. In fact, I bet they ordered you to turn me over to them, didn’t they?”

Tony’s expression cleared and he shrugged negligently. “I’ve managed to put them off so far, but they’re beginning to get a little testy about it. Apparently, whatever your Dr. Stoica had to say to Ross has greased the wheels of your case. I’ve been ordered to deliver you to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s headquarters tomorrow.”

Bucky’s stomach plummeted. Danielle was an intelligent woman, and she had already proved that she was willing to sacrifice her own safety to protect him. He had a feeling that she had done so again. “It’s not too late to get what you want, Stark,” Bucky tempted him. “You’re a powerful man with a lot of pull. I bet you can convince the subcommittee to reject whatever deal she made with them. In return, I will willingly submit myself to activation and tell you everything you want to know so long as you agree to release Danielle to Steve’s custody.”

Tony considered him carefully, but Bucky couldn’t read his expression. After several fraught minutes of silence, Stark nodded his head sharply. “I’ll see what I can do, Barnes. In the meantime, I suggest you make yourself comfortable.” He paused to run his gaze over Bucky’s cell with a smirk before adding, “Well, as comfortable as possible inside a tin can.”
Without another word, the vibranium panel slid across the barrier, and Tony disappeared. Bucky’s temper flared, and he hit the wall with his right fist. He felt the bones of his knuckles shatter and pain lanced up his arm. He welcomed the nauseating agony radiating through him, because it was familiar and easier to handle than the fear and uncertainty clawing in his guts. Unfortunately, he knew it wouldn’t distract him for long as his body worked overtime to repair the damage.

He needed to talk to Danielle. He needed to warn her to stay away from the council and Tony Stark. He needed to explain that they would use her and her gift until she had no freedom of her own left. Most of all, he needed to tell her that he was sorry. He was so fucking sorry that she had ever lain eyes on him, because now she was just another casualty of the Winter Soldier.
Chapter 20

Even though he hadn’t slept a wink in five days, it still took Bucky several hours after Stark’s visit to fall asleep. His mind would not allow him to rest, and his body throbbed with pain from the electric shock and broken right hand. He much preferred the pain in his physical body, because it was predictable. He knew how long it took him to heal, and pain brought him clarity and focus. The shit storm inside his head, however, was uncharted territory. He wasn’t sure what to do with the fear, worry, rage, helplessness, and longing that welled up inside of him when he thought about Danielle. He didn’t like it, at all. He would much rather think about what it had felt like to have her hair tangled in his fingers and her body wrapped around his.

Eventually, though, his healing took its toll and demanded he sleep to recuperate. He turned on his side facing the wall, closed his eyes, and thought about her.

The dreams were chaotic at first. Bucky traveled through his youth spent in the tiny apartment in Brooklyn, he suffered through basic camp after enlisting in the army, and he spent time with the Russian Hydra doctors in Moscow. Each dream never lasted for more than a few minutes before he was pulled somewhere else. Eventually, he wound up standing in the yard of his safe house in Switzerland. It was nighttime, and he could see lights on inside the cabin, but it should be empty. He approached the house cautiously, and his left hand flexed into a fist as he prepared himself to fight. When he got to the door, though, it opened before he could touch it.

“I’ve been waiting for you every night for four nights, James. Where have you been?” Danielle asked, her hands on her generous hips with impatience. Her eyebrows were drawn down in pique and her bare foot tapped on the hardwood floor.

Bucky’s breath left his lungs, and he gathered her in his arms to hold her close. He could smell the vanilla of her shampoo and she was wearing pajamas, but all he cared about was that he could touch her once more. Her arms looped around his neck, and she pulled him down to her level to steal a kiss from his lips. He could taste the hint of toothpaste on her tongue, and his body hardened against her.

Eventually, he managed to pull himself away enough to answer her. He held her at arms’ length and looked her over from head to toe, but she looked just as beautiful as ever. “I haven’t been able to sleep. If I had known you would be waiting for me, I would have been here sooner.” He allowed her to lead him inside the cabin before he asked, “Are you alright? Where are they keeping you? Have they mistreated you in any way?”

Danielle released an unladylike snort. “I’m perfectly fine, James. I told you I would be, didn’t I? I also told you I would find you, and here you are. You were the one I was worried about, not me.”

She led him by the hand down the hallway until they arrived in the bedroom. He really, really wanted to make use of it with her right now, but there were more pressing issues at hand. “I haven’t seen or talked to anyone in five days until Stark showed up tonight. He said you wouldn’t talk to him about me, and demanded to speak to the council. He mentioned that you met with Thaddeus Ross today. What did you do, doc?”

Danielle dropped his hand and looked away. She rounded the bed and lay on the blanket with her head on the pillow, and patted the empty spot next her. Bucky answered the invite without hesitation, and he joined her on the bed until they were facing each other eye-to-eye. He searched
for clues in her chocolate depths, but he found no answers. She was an alluring mystery to him, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life trying to solve it.

She reached out a hand and ran her fingers through the hair at his temple and said softly, “Do you remember what else I said to you back in Munich? I told you that I would fix everything. So, that’s what I did.”

Bucky’s heart began punch a hole through his chest, and he reached up to capture her hand in his own. “What. Did. You. Do?”

Her gaze didn’t waver from his, and she tipped her chin up as she replied, “I gave them something they wanted more than you. I gave them me.”

His pounding heart stopped cold in his chest, and he forgot how to breathe. This couldn’t be happening. It was the one thing he had tried to protect her from, and she had walked straight into the devil’s arms. He cupped her jaw in his palm and rasped, “Why? Why would you do something so foolish? You don’t know these people. They will use you and abuse you and get you killed. It won’t matter to them, because all they care about is what you can do for them. That isn’t a life, doc. Believe me, I know.”

She dropped her gaze and turned her cheek into his hand. “There’s a difference here, James. I chose this for myself, and that was never a luxury that you were afforded. I’m not stupid; I know that they will try to manipulate me, but they can’t. I made them an offer, and we negotiated a mutually-beneficial agreement. More importantly, they agreed to my terms.”

Bucky closed his eyes and groaned. “Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like this?”

She snuggled in close to his chest and his arms wound around her to pull her closer. Her voice was muffled against his chest when she replied, “I knew I was in the position of power, James. Both figuratively and literally. I helped them see that by gaining me as an ally, they would reap the benefits of what I can do. In short, I offered to work for them.”

“You signed the Accords,” Bucky bit out. “It was the one thing you cherished. You gave up your freedom. Why would you do that?”

He could feel the scalding wetness of her tears soaking into his tee shirt as she said, “No, James, I didn’t. I have always been free, and I always will be. You...you are a prisoner in every way, and it’s not right. What they did to you was barbaric and wrong, and you deserve to be set free. That was my price for signing the Accords and a contract with the U.N., and they agreed.”

Bucky’s arm reflexively squeezed her tight, but he released her when she squeaked. He didn’t know what to say and couldn’t find the words to describe the pandemonium of emotions roiling around inside of him. It made no sense to him, and he couldn’t wrap his head around why she would do such a thing for him.

Her tone was nervous when she rushed to add, “It’s not as simple as that, of course. They had their own demands, too, but I think they’re fair. It’s not a done deal, James. I can’t sign the contract or the Accords unless you agree to it, too, because you would have to allow me to sever the threads that bind you to the code. That was one of the only mutual points on which we agreed.”

Bucky pulled away from her and rolled to his back. “No. I already told you, I’m not letting you do that. It’s too risky. You got a nosebleed from just being near them last time. What happens if you actually touch them? Do you even know?”
“Yes,” she answered him quietly. “It’s happened to me before, but I wasn’t prepared last time. Phil Coulson has threads just like yours in his mind, but he has entire webs of them. You only have ten single threads.”

“Fuck!” Bucky swore as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. “You tried to sever them when you were retrieving his memories of you. It put you into a coma for two weeks.”

He could feel the nod of her head against the pillow. “That’s true, but like I said, I wasn’t prepared. I know what to do this time, and we’ll have FitzSimmons monitoring us the entire time. If anything goes wrong, they will be right there. Please, James. I’m begging you to let me do this. You would have a shot at a real life for the first time. A real life with someone like me in it.”

Bucky brought his hands to his face and pressed his heels against his eyes. His head was pounding and he couldn’t think. He wanted what she was offering him, but he knew he couldn’t take it. Something would go wrong, and she would end up suffering or dead. That was what happened to people around him, but he had never cared about that before now. Before her. He wasn’t deserving of her in any way, but he had never wanted anything more. Not even his freedom.

“What happens if I say no?” he asked, his tone emotionless.

The bed shook with her quiet sobs, and she choked out, “The subcommittee will find you guilty on all charges and put you back under the ice. This time, there would be no waking up.”

His instinct was to reach out and comfort her, but he knew there was more. “I wasn’t asking about me, doc. What happens to you?”

Her breath stuttered as she inhaled to reply shakily, “I have been assessed as an Omega Level Threat. I’m too dangerous to be allowed loose on the population at large, so I will be moved to a secure facility for further evaluation. If I pass their tests, I will eventually be allowed to go free, but I will be injected with a GPS locator and have to report weekly to a monitor.”

Bucky’s laughter dripped with venom. “Those fucking assholes. Either way I go, you will wind up in a prison or possibly dead. Fuck that. I want the option where you go back to your life. That’s what I want.”

Danielle raised up on her elbow to look down into his face. Her eyes glittered with golden power as she exclaimed, “Don’t you get it? I don’t want to go back to my old life! I wasn’t living; I was existing. All that changed when I met you. I have never felt more alive and more full of hope than I have since the moment I laid eyes on you. I made my choice the moment I saw those memories of your childhood. I choose you, James.”

Bucky reached up and hooked his hand around her neck to pull her down to his chest. He held on to her and allowed himself to imagine for the first time how it would feel to hold her like this anytime he wanted. For that to happen, she would have to sever the threads without possibly falling into a coma or worse. It wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. On the other hand, if he refused, she would be a prisoner. Prisoners didn’t have the same rights as everyone else. He had first-hand experience in learning that for himself.

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her lips before saying, “I need to think about this. When does the offer expire?”

Reluctantly, she drew away from him and sat up in the bed. She wrapped her arms around her waist and said softly, “We are both being moved to S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters tomorrow where we will be questioned by the subcommittee. If you sign the plea agreement and I sign the Accords, we
will proceed with the procedure immediately. The contracts aren’t binding unless it’s a success, and they will test you by speaking the code at its conclusion. If they are satisfied that the bond has been broken, the terms of plea will be enforced.”

Bucky sighed deeply and heaved himself to his feet. He reached over and brushed her bottom lip with his thumb. “You’re asking me to make an impossible choice, doc.”

She gripped his hand and moved it down until his palm was pressed against her heart. “No, James. I’m asking you to choose me.”

Before he could reply, her form began to fade until his hand fell through thin air. She was gone.
Chapter 21

Bucky knew it was time for his field trip to S.H.I.E.L.D. offices when nozzles erupted from the ceiling of his prison and began to spew gas. He didn’t bother to fight the drowsiness that overcame him as he inhaled the mist, and instead lay down on his cot and closed his eyes. There was no point in resisting or fighting against it, because Danielle would be there when he woke up.

He came back to consciousness slowly, and his eyelids blinked rapidly. Everything was white, and it took him a few moments to clear his vision. He sat up in the bed and looked around the room, but his gaze was arrested by the figure of a man leaning casually against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and his legs crossed at the ankle. He was average in every sense of the word from his height to his business suit and receding hairline, all the way down to his wingtip shoes. Bucky had never seen this man before, but he had a feeling that he was important somehow.

“Mr. Barnes, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you from Steve Rogers. Because of the nature of this gathering, Steve couldn’t be here to greet you himself, so he asked me to be here in his stead,” the man said as he straightened up and approached Bucky cautiously.

Bucky looked him up and down and said, “You’re an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.”

The man tipped his head in agreement and his lips quirked with a smile as he held his left hand out for a shake. “Agent Phil Coulson, at your service.”

Bucky grasped the man’s hand to return the greeting, but an electric shock that arced between their palms had them both yanking their hands away in surprise. Coulson shook his hand out and grimaced, and Bucky turned his prosthetic around to see if he could spot the problem.

“Sorry about that,” the agent said as he held his hand up. “It must be time for Fitz to do a tune up.”

Bucky nodded as he remembered what FitzSimmons had told him about their boss’ cybernetic hand. “It happens.” He stood to his feet and stretched as he looked around the room. “This looks like the pod where Stark held Danielle. Is she here, too?”

Coulson clasped his wrists and replied, “Yes, Dr. Stoica is here, and she is already testifying before the subcommittee. It will be your turn shortly, but there is time for you to shower and change clothes first. I took the liberty of choosing your attire and you will find everything you need in the adjoining bathroom. If there’s anything I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Bucky considered for a moment before he asked, “What happened to her when she tried to remove the memories of her from your mind?”

Coulson rubbed at his temple and replied, “I’m not entirely sure, to be honest. I can’t remember much until I woke up and found her unconscious on the floor. I can only guess that she ended up in T.A.H.I.T.I. and the programming kicked her out.”

“Tahiti?” Bucky asked, confused.

Coulson offered him a secretive smile and replied lightly, “It’s a magical place. If there’s nothing else, Mr. Barnes, I suggest you make haste with your ablutions. World leaders aren’t known for their patience.”

Without another word, the agent spun on his heels and exited the holding room through pneumatic doors. Bucky turned and found the doorway to the adjoining bathroom. He was more than happy to
make use of the facilities, especially since Stark’s vibranium cell hadn’t included a shower. The last thing he wanted to do was to greet Danielle when he hadn’t bathed in almost a week. He could give a fuck what the subcommittee thought of him, but he wanted her to see him at his best.

After a long, hot shower, Bucky made use of the toothbrush and toothpaste, and shaved away the week’s growth of beard on his face. There wasn’t much he could do about his hair, so he brushed it back and hoped for the best. Hanging on the wall, he found a garment bag with black dress pants, white button-down shirt, black socks, and shiny black shoes. Bucky rolled his eyes at the typical agent attire, but he dutifully donned the outfit anyway. No sooner than he was dressed than Coulson’s voice came over the speaker in his room and announced that the subcommittee was waiting for him.

Bucky expected a large contingent of guards to escort him to the conference room, but there were only Coulson and a diminutive Asian woman who was dressed in skin-tight leather and armed to the teeth. She introduced herself tersely as Agent Melinda May, but she was not foolish enough to offer her hand. Instead, she tipped her head down the hall and began to stride away without waiting to see if he followed her. They made several turns down different hallways, and passed a laboratory with glass windows where he could see Fitz and Simmons bustling around as they squabbled with each other. Fitz looked up in time to spot him, and a wide smile broke across his face and he waved. Bemused, Bucky lifted his left hand and waved back.

Coulson stopped at a door before leaning forward for a retinal scan. The door clicked open and Bucky preceded him into the room. The room was large, but was mostly empty with the exception of a single table and chair situated in the middle. He wasn’t alone, however. As agents Coulson and May took up positions against a wall, Bucky’s gaze traveled around the room to take in the audience. He spied Stark first. His expression was inscrutable, but his eyes were hard and angry. He saw Natasha Romanov next, and he tipped his head to her in greeting. She offered him a sultry smile and brief wink in return. The next recognizable spectator was the magenta-skinned android, Vision. He looked incongruous with his human clothes clashing with his skin tone, but Bucky knew there was nothing funny about what the man could do. There were three more men standing in a small cluster in the corner as they conferred with each other in hushed whispers. He didn’t recognize any of them, but he would bet that the older man with the air of authority was Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross. Another man was obviously with the U.S. Air Force and held the rank of Brigadier General according to the adornments on his navy blue suitcoat, and his gold-embossed nametag stated his name as “Talbot.” The final man was a complete mystery, but he was dressed in the same attire as Coulson, so he was likely the new Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Tony pushed away from the wall and said, “Take a seat, Barnes. The U.N. subcommittee will be asking you questions, and you’re expected to answer them honestly.”

Bucky pulled out the folding chair and sat down, but he didn’t see anyone else in the room. As if in answer to his unspoken question, the wall directly in front of him flickered to life, and nine faces appeared in separate panels on the screen. There was a mixture of men and women of different races and nationalities, but Bucky recognized one of them. The Prime Minister of Azania was an older black male, and he ran the African country adjacent to Wakanda. He was a cruel and heartless tyrant that had contracted Bucky’s services through Hydra to eliminate a political rival. Bucky had several documents and pictures of him on his hard drive.

The woman in the center of the screen cleared her throat and began. “Mr. Barnes, you have been brought before this committee and accused of multiple international crimes including murder, assault, bombings, espionage, and countless other crimes against humanity that span the course of fifty plus years. We have reviewed the evidence that was retrieved from the Hydra bunker in Siberia, and have heard the testimony of Dr. Danielle Stoica in your defense. We also have before
us a sworn affidavit of support by Captain Steve Rogers, also known by the code name Captain America. You have some very powerful friends, Mr. Barnes,” she commented, her tone thick with a German accent.

Bucky raised a single eyebrow and replied sardonically, “I have powerful enemies, too. It’s hard to tell the difference sometimes.”

He distinctly heard Natasha snort behind him, but he didn’t betray his amusement with a smile. The chairwoman tipped her head to acknowledge his admission before continuing, “We are well aware, Mr. Barnes. However, in light of Dr. Stoica’s testimony and through the gathered evidence available to us, we have found that your actions were not done of your own volition, and were instead perpetrated by the Hydra handlers who commanded you through the use of extreme mind control techniques. In light of this evidence, we have decided to offer you a plea deal.”

“What?!” an outraged shout sounded behind him. Tony strode toward the screens and snapped, “This isn’t what we discussed. You promised me justice if I brought him in. You promised me answers.”

An older woman of Asian descent answered him sharply, “Mr. Stark, I will remind you that you were not invited to speak during this proceeding. You are not a member of this subcommittee, and you are bound by our rulings. That is the agreement you signed with us. Please step back or be removed.”

Bucky watched as Tony struggled to contain himself before he finally spun on his heel and walked back to his position by the wall. Bucky took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He didn’t know what to name the emotion that was buzzing along his skin like marching ants and made his heart race and his palm sweat. His stomach was queasy and his mouth was dry. Was he nervous? He didn’t know. He couldn’t remember what it felt like before the adrenaline pumps had burned away fear. Whatever this feeling was called, he didn’t like it, and he wanted it to stop.

“What are the terms?” Bucky asked clearly as if nothing had just happened.

The German woman in the center of the panel took her glasses off and regarded him seriously. “We are offering you something that you haven’t been given for a very long time, Mr. Barnes. We are offering you a choice. If you sign the plea deal, you will be agreeing to our terms. If you don’t sign the plea, you will be found guilty on all charges and sentenced to death. Do you understand what I am saying to you, Mr. Barnes?”

He got it. Loud and clear. His choice was either servitude to a new master or death. Normally, it would be a no-brainer. He would have chosen death without even thinking twice. Now...now, he was no longer thinking about just himself. He was thinking about Steve and what Bucky’s death would do to him. That would shatter the fragile remains of Steve’s partnership with his team, and Steve needed his team. He was a Captain in every way, and he was born to lead a group of super-powered individuals. He would blame Tony for Bucky’s death, and the Avengers would crumble. Steve would be alone. Again.

More than anything, though, he thought about Danielle. He thought about what would happen to her if he refused to sign, and he thought about what could happen to her if he did. Either way he turned, there was no good option. Danielle had told him to choose her, and that was what he was trying to do, but neither option felt like the right one. He didn’t want to hurt her, and it was bound to happen either way.

“You can choose to live your life as a free man, or you can choose to die as a slave. Fight or flight; those are your options. I’m asking you to fight. Please, James, please sign...” ghosted through his
head on a whisper of wind. Bucky closed his eyes and strained to hear her speak again, but she was gone.

After several tense moments of silence, Bucky opened his eyes and looked directly at the speaker. “Like I said, what are the terms?”
Chapter 22

They had confirmed what Danielle had already told him, plus filled in their conditions. They wanted Bucky to debrief them on every mission he was sent on by Hydra, and in exchange, they would grant him immunity from prosecution. If he failed to divulge every one of them, however, he would be punished under the full weight of the law if it were ever discovered. He would still not be free if he signed, though. He was to be placed on “probation” for a period of ten years where he would be required to join a service and be under almost constant supervision, which meant that he would also have to sign the Sokovia Accords. That explained the presence of both Talbot and the Director. The U.S. military and S.H.I.E.L.D. both would be salivating to get their hands on him. He was the perfect soldier, after all.

All of this, of course, was contingent upon one singular point. He had to pass the test and prove that he was no longer bound by Hydra’s code words. Bucky could not be trusted to remain alive if anyone with the right words could activate his programming. The only way that could happen was if he allowed Danielle to sever them. He hated to risk it, and his stomach was in knots, but she said she could do it. He wanted to trust her and believe that she knew what to do, but something inside of him didn’t like it. In the end, he still didn’t have a choice. Not really. He was unable to deny her anything. She had asked him to sign, so he would sign.

When he gave his answer, the German woman smiled with sincere delight. “Excellent! We will begin your depositions tomorrow morning pending successful completion of the procedure. You will remain a permanent guest of S.H.I.E.L.D. until such time as you choose which service to join.”

Before the ink was even dry, Talbot and the Director descended on him, but Bucky backed away. He didn’t want anything to do with either one of the bureaucratic hierarchies of their respective fields. He was done taking orders from men with titles. He would rather join the Peace Corps than suffer through that hell again. His attention was arrested when a slender arm snaked through his elbow and steered him away from the incoming sales pitch.

Bucky was not immune to the effect of Natasha Romanov’s breast pressed into his arm, but mostly he just wished it was Danielle’s instead. The redhead drawled, “So, I hear you’re looking to join a team. It just so happens that I know a good one that has a few openings.”

He huffed a dry laugh and replied, “Yeah, I’m sure Stark would enjoy that. Actually, he would probably love the opportunity to ‘supervise’ me as he uses me for target practice.”

Natasha patted his arm as she escorted him back to agents Coulson and May. “Just know that the offer is there. It would give you a better opportunity to spend time with your doctor. She’s just signed on to be our team mental health advisor. She may even be able to help Bruce...if we ever find him,” she finished her pitch in a plaintive tone.

Bucky was staggered by this news. Danielle hadn’t mentioned anything other than working for the U.N. He wondered if she knew they were using her to spy on the Avengers for them. He wondered if the Avengers knew it, too. “You can trust her, lisichka,” he called her by the old pet name. After his first encounter with her, he had begun to remember a young redhead named Natasha that he had helped train in the Red Room. She had been a fiery one from the start. “She is a healer, not a fighter. Promise me you will protect her.”
Natasha squeezed his arm as they came to a stop in front of his new handlers. “I won’t have to if you’re there to do it yourself,” she said in a parting shot before she sauntered away.

Bucky watched her go and had to admit that she had a point.

Half an hour later, Bucky found himself pacing nervously in his holding cell. He had told “the powers that be” in no uncertain terms that he wanted to talk to Danielle alone before the procedure. They had agreed to a delay of only one hour, and now more than fifteen minutes of it were gone as he waited for her to show. The sound of the pneumatic doors sliding away had him turning around, and she was there.

His breath left his lungs in a rush. She was simply stunning. Her brunette curls tumbled over her narrow shoulders, and she was dressed in a long-sleeved magenta dress that slid over her curves like silk. On her feet were three inch black heels, but she was still half a foot shorter than him. She regarded him just as carefully as he studied her, and her expression turned uncertain.

“Are you angry with me?” her voice whispered in his head from across the room.

Bucky snapped out of his daze and crossed the empty space between them in a few strides. He tugged her into his embrace and buried his nose in her hair to breathe, “How can you even ask that? None of this was your fault. I should be asking you that question. You wouldn’t be in this position if it wasn’t for me.”

Her hands snaked around his waist and her cheek rested against his heart. “I was selfish. I didn’t want to let you go. I couldn’t bear the thought of you being tortured like that again, and I definitely couldn’t stand the idea of you dead. I just found you.”

Bucky closed his eyes and memorized the places where their bodies touched. “Promise me that you will stop if it’s too much. No matter the consequences. Because if something happens to you in there, no contract is going to prevent me from taking my vengeance.”

She was quiet for a long moment before she replied softly, “I promise that I will do everything in my power to keep us both safe.”

Bucky pulled back and searched her gaze. “Make sure that you do, because we have some unfinished business between us, and I would very much like to spend some time exploring that. No more time limits, doc.”

Her eyes filled with tears and her lips pulled up into a wobbly smile. “I would very much like that, too. No matter where you are stationed, I can find you in your dreams. It will be enough until the next time we see each other.”

Bucky’s heart began to hammer as hope bloomed inside his chest. “I spoke to Natasha. She offered me a spot with the Avengers. It would fulfill the stipulations of my plea agreement, and it would make the Sokovia Accords look like a success if they were able to turn the Winter Soldier into one of the ‘good guys.’”

Danielle’s cheeks flushed with pink and her eyes sparkled as she replied, “What a coincidence. I was just stationed with the Avengers as my first assignment. I’m looking forward to getting to
know her better. Especially since I’m pretty sure I tried on her bra once.”

Bucky couldn’t help but laugh as he pulled her in for a thorough kiss. He wasn’t sure what to label this emotion, either, but it felt like the sun was shining through his chest. He liked this emotion, and he wanted more of it. He wanted more of her.

He pulled away from her eager lips and breathed into her mouth, “Let’s go, doc. Let’s get this over with so we can move on with our lives.”

She laced her fingers inside of his and led him toward the doors. She paused to look over her shoulder at him before she added, “Together.”

Chapter End Notes

**Hang tight, friends! There will be more, but I have to travel this weekend. I'm already working on the next chapter, but it may be Sunday evening (my time) before I will be able to post it. We'll see what happens next when Danielle attempts to sever the bonds!**
“Then, we will attach these nodes to your cranium which will allow us to monitor your brainwaves. The science behind this is fascinating. A colleague of mine, Holden Radcliffe, has perfected the use of this technology to map the brain and—”

Bucky held his hand up to stop the excited verbal diarrhea of scientific nonsense falling from Fitz’s lips. “I get it. It’s science. Why do I need to be sedated, though?” Bucky hated being poked with needles, and he especially hated IVs, but more importantly, he didn’t want to be helpless if something were to happen to Danielle.

Fitz made several more adjustments to the long, slender nodes as he replied, “Not my call, mate. That was decided between Jemma and Dr. Stoica. Dr. Stoica won’t be sedated for obvious reasons, but I wouldn’t worry about it. Jem can wake you immediately in case something goes wrong.”

Bucky glanced across the medical bay to where Danielle was in hushed conference with Jemma as she affixed an IV needle in the crook of her elbow. Danielle reached out and touched the young scientist on the back of the hand, and Jemma’s eyes widened. They were silent for several moments before Danielle removed her hand and Jemma nodded reluctantly. He didn’t like the looks of that at all.

“Fitz, I need you to do something for me,” Bucky said, his eyebrows furrowed with worry.

The young man looked up from his work and his expression was surprised, but pleased. “Of course. Do you need another upgrade on your prosthetic?”

Bucky shook his head in the negative. “No, not at the moment. I need you to promise me that if Dr. Stoica starts exhibiting signs of physical stress, you will terminate the connection. Can this technology of yours do that without hurting her further?”

Fitz considered his answer carefully before replying, “I believe so, but I won’t know for sure until I try it. I don’t think it will be necessary, though. Dr. Stoica is incredibly powerful. Did you know that she was evaluated and labeled as an Omega Level Threat? That’s the same classification as Bruce Banner. That was with only two days of testing. Imagine what she could accomplish given the time to grow her gifts.”

Bucky was well-aware of just how powerful Danielle’s mind was. It was her physical body that he was worried about. “Just promise me, Fitz. If it comes down to saving her or me, you better fucking save her. Treat her like you would if she were Jemma. That’s all I’m asking.”

As if his eyes were magnets, Fitz looked over at Jemma and he swallowed hard. “Yeah, I can do that, mate. I understand you perfectly.”

Satisfied that he had done everything possible to protect her, Bucky lay back on the semi-upright cot and allowed the young Scot to fit the framework of the scanner to his head. It felt like a metal spider hugging him with its glowing blue feet attached to his forehead. Once Fitz was satisfied that he could read the data on his tablet, he hailed Jemma that he was ready to hook up Danielle, too. Jemma helped Danielle step up into place on the cot next to Bucky, and her hand reached out to him until she was able to thread her fingers through his as Jemma attached the IV drip and Fitz adjusted the framework.

He wished they didn’t have to have an audience for this part, too, but he knew better than expect
otherwise. In the glassed-in observatory, he could make out each one of the spectators from his “trial”, and Tony Stark was at the forefront. The man had been conspicuously silent since the councilwoman had called him down, but Bucky knew that didn’t mean that he was giving up. He and Tony would have to have a reckoning soon, but first, he had to get Danielle through this alive.

A few minutes later, both Fitz and Jemma gave them the all-clear to begin. He could feel the sedative burning through his veins, and he could feel himself falling into sleep. Danielle squeezed Bucky’s hand tight and said, “Are you ready, James?”

Bucky could no longer keep his eyes open as he slurred, “No, but that’s never stopped me before.”

“Open the door and let me in,” she murmured.

Bucky pictured the red door in his mind, and he threw it open mere seconds before he fell into unconsciousness.

They were walking through the streets of his childhood home once more, but this time it was different. Bucky felt light and transparent while Danielle was solid and vivid with glowing power. He reached out to touch her, but his hand went right through her.

“Why can’t I touch you?” he asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

Danielle reached out and began to pluck at orange threads, and he could distantly feel new memories form in his subconscious. She was healing broken threads as they traveled, but the sensations all felt muted and insubstantial.

“It’s the effects of the sedation,” she explained distractedly as she led them deeper into his mind. “It allows me greater control over your mind. I believe that the poison threads have their own defense mechanism, and Jemma postulated that sedating you would help me circumnavigate the programming.”

Bucky frowned. He didn’t like the idea of not being able to touch her. What if she was in trouble and needed his help? He was no more than a ghost in his own mind. “I don’t like this, doc. I can’t do anything to help you.”

Danielle’s fingers danced across the threads in his mind as she shored up fading memories and repaired the ones that could be salvaged as they journeyed ever closer to the place where the codes were embedded. “I don’t need your help, James. I need you to trust me. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Bucky floated along beside her and watched her as she worked. She was like a living flame illuminating the midnight of his mind, and she was magnificent. “It’s not me that I’m worried about here, doc.”

She didn’t bother to reply, because they had arrived at their destination. Bucky couldn’t see anything but inky darkness, but Danielle could clearly see everything. She walked around in circles, her head tilting from side to side, as she studied something that only she could see. After an immeasurable amount of time, she finally reached out and gingerly plucked a thread. It glowed a sickly, florescent green in the darkness, and she hissed before dropping it once more.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as she shook her hand out and scowled.

“It was as I suspected,” she replied darkly. “They embedded these codes in your head by poisoning
the threads already in place. They are stronger and imbued with a defense mechanism to prevent you from breaking free. They didn’t count on me, though.”

Without hesitation, she snatched a glowing green thread and ripped it apart with a psionic scream. Bucky was helpless as she fell to her knees and panted for breath as the broken threads in her hands began to smoke and dissolve until they were gone. He rushed to her side, but he was unable to touch her.

“Talk to me, doc,” he ordered, his tone harsh with fear.

Danielle struggled to her feet and she wobbled for a moment until she regained her equilibrium. “I’m fine, James. It wasn’t anything I wasn’t expecting.”

He didn’t think she was fine. Her form had flickered and faded a bit, but she was already moving on to the next one. When she grasped ahold of it, it flared with green rage, and Bucky could see that this one was thicker. Danielle gritted her teeth and a scream of pain filtered through them as she rent the thread in two. It smoked and hissed as it began to dissolve until it, too, was gone. Danielle’s form flickered once more, and her brilliance faded.

Before she could move on to the third, he said, “Stop. This is hurting you, and I want you to stop.”

Danielle pushed the curls out of her face and firmed her stance. “No. I won’t stop until you are free. I can do this. I just need to get a little more creative.”

He watched as she lifted her arm out to her side and a sword materialized in her hand. The blade was three feet long and dancing with hellish flame. She swished it from side to side, leaving light trails that illuminated her armor-clad form. Her eyes glowed golden with power, and she looked like an Asgardian Valkyrie prepared for Ragnarok. He was in awe of her, and he watched as she swung her blade and severed four more of the increasingly thicker poisoned threads.

After the sixth thread vanished with a plume of smoke, Danielle staggered back. The sword dropped from her limp hand, and the blade’s fire faded and went dark. The armor encasing her form disappeared, and he could see through her for the first time.

“She’s crashing, Jem! I’m terminating the framework!” Bucky could distantly hear Fitz’s voice yell. He willed his body to burn away the sedative flooding his veins, but he was still a ghost. “No! Don’t you dare touch that program! Her vitals are stabilizing, and she isn’t done yet!” he heard Jemma yell back at her partner. He wanted to scream at them and tell them to stop her, but he was only a powerless spectator in his own mind.

“Doc, please,” Bucky was not above begging her. “This is killing you. You have to stop. This isn’t worth your life.”

Danielle staggered over and retrieved her sword, but the blade did not light up again. “You are worth it to me, James. Six down, four to go.”

She hefted the sword in both hands and grunted on an upswing. The seventh thread lit up the darkness in his mind and Bucky could see that it was as thick around as his wrist. The sword stopped halfway through it, and Danielle’s form began to seize. He reached out to grab her, but his arms went right through her. With a mighty yell, she wrenched the sword free and swung again. This time, the thread snapped in two, and it hissed and spit as it began to dissolve.

Her form was weaker, and he could hear distant shouts from outside his mind. He prayed that Fitz would prevail, but he had a bad feeling that Danielle had made a deal of her own with Jemma.
Danielle’s arm hung limp at her side, the tip of the sword dripping florescent green liquid, and as she dropped it, it disappeared.

Bucky moved until he stood in front of her and snapped, “Look at me! I am telling you to stop. I won’t let you continue.” With an effort of will, Bucky reached out and grabbed ahold of her. His grip was tenuous, and it took all his will power to hold on to her, but she was stronger than him, even in her weakened state.

Her form flared with golden power, and Bucky found himself yanked back and held fast by glowing orange threads that bound him like sticky spider webs. He struggled against them, but he was held fast. He screamed and raged at her to stop, but she marched forward with determination. She held her hand out once more, and this time, a wickedly sharp axe materialized in her hand. She swung it through the air until it impacted a thread as big as his forearm. The thread flared and spat poison blood before it disappeared with the scent of acrid smoke.

He had never felt so helpless in his life. Not even when he was with Hydra had he ever felt so desperate to be free. Danielle severed the ninth thread before her form flickered out of sight for a brief moment, and Bucky lost his mind. He heard Jemma’s voice from far away say, “Push 1 mg of epinephrine! You, there! Get the crash cart ready!” And then, he heard Fitz’s frantic voice, thick with Scottish brogue, as he said, “We have to stop! He made me promise, Jem! He’ll kill us all if she dies!”

Bucky snarled and fought against his bonds to get to her. Her form was so transparent that he couldn’t even make out the curve of her cheek or the curl of her hair. “Doc, please, I’m begging you. I can’t do this without you, and if you sever that last thread, it could kill you. I’m telling you right now that if you die for me, I won’t be far behind you, and I’m bringing company.”

Her form floated over to him until she was right in front of him, and her hand glided down his cheek. “James, I have lived a good life. I have had the privilege of knowing a family’s love, I have healed the sick, and I have experienced the kind of love that is rare and true. I want that for you. You deserve a chance to live for the first time, and I want you to live well. Promise me you will go on and use your abilities to help others. Turn your pain and suffering around and help those who need it. You are not a monster, James. You are a survivor.”

Bucky’s muscles strained against the orange bonds that held him tight. “You promised me you would stop if it was too much. You have to stop.”

Her form floated backward away from him and her voice was a whisper on the wind. “I promised I would do everything I could to keep us both safe, and I tried. There is only one more thread between you and freedom. I can’t stop now. Not until you are safe.”

His heart was ripping in two, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He watched as Danielle opened her arms wide before throwing them around a thread as thick as a tree trunk. The thread flared with ghastly emerald light, and Danielle’s form lit up with golden flames. His mind echoed with her psionic scream, and his roar of rage only added to the pressure building up inside of him. The thread began to melt and drip its poisonous sludge across Danielle’s flickering form, but she did not let go.

Bucky’s arm turned silver, and he wrenched it free of the fading orange threads binding him. It took precious seconds to free himself from the web, but his form grew more solid with each one that snapped. With a snarl of fury, he ripped the last threads loose and ran over to save her. The thread was almost gone, and by the time he reached her, it melted away into nothing. Danielle’s light went out, and she fell. Bucky dove to catch her, but when he got there, she was gone.
His mind felt empty and alone, and he knew she was no longer with him. He threw his head back and roared with pain, and he could feel the adrenaline finally beginning to pump through his veins. He leapt upward and swam for consciousness, and he broke free.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky came out of sedation with a roar and ripped the framework from his head and snatched the IV from his arm. The medical bay was awash in chaos as Fitz and Jemma, along with several medical aides, worked feverishly over Danielle’s prostrate body. He fought to get loose from the anonymous hands that pulled him away as Jemma counted compressions out loud and Fitz attached sticky pads to Danielle’s chest. He couldn’t see her through the bodies that surrounded her, and he had to get to her.

“Let me go!” he snarled as he pulled against the arms holding him back. “I need to help her. She’s dying because of me, and I can’t lose her!”

Natasha’s visage filled his gaze and she said urgently, “Bucky, there’s nothing you can do for her right now. Let FitzSimmons do their job. They are pulling out all the stops on resuscitating your doctor. You will only get in the way and prevent them from saving her.”

He continued to struggle against the person holding him back, but their grip did not falter. His attention was arrested when he heard Jemma call out, “No pulse! Set the charge to 150 Joules!” He could hear the familiar whine of the AED as it charged before Fitz cried, “Clear!” Danielle’s body arced off the cot, and Jemma once again began compressions as the AED announced there was still no pulse. A medical aide stood ready by Danielle’s head with a valve mask and would push breaths between compressions, but she still didn’t open her eyes or respond.

Bucky’s throat swelled closed with agony, and bitter hot tears spilled over from his eyes as he jerked against his captor. “You don’t understand, I can bring her back. I can make her come back to me. Please, you have to let me go. She promised me she would be safe!”

Bucky was shocked into submission when a voice he didn’t expect answered from behind him. “I will let you go, but you can’t go over there. Not yet. You can’t help her right now, Barnes. Let the professionals do their jobs,” Tony Stark’s voice filtered into his ears without animosity.

Bucky relaxed in the billionaire’s grip and forced himself to calm. “I’m good, Stark. Just let me go. Please.”

Stark’s metal gloves released his arms, and Bucky brought his hands up to his face to rub his leaking eyes. Natasha’s fingernails bit into the skin of his shoulder as Jemma cried, “Set charge at 250 Joules!” The AED whined for two seconds before Fitz yelled, “Clear!” Bucky flinched at the sound of Danielle’s body jerking with the electric shock coursing through her heart. A sickening moment of silence followed before Jemma announced there was still no pulse before starting chest compressions once more.

“Please, please, please,” Bucky heard someone chanting with desperation. It took him a moment to realize it was his own voice. “Please, you can’t leave. You have to fight. I fought for you, now you have to do the same. Come on, doc. Don’t run away from me.”

His shoulders shook beneath the comforting stroke of Natasha’s hand, and another, harder grip held him steady. Tony’s voice cracked like a whip through the chaos as he snapped, “Simmons, charge it to maximum, and try again.”
She nodded frantically, and pressed the buttons on the AED until it shrieked with an alarm. “CLEAR!” she shouted a fraction of second before Danielle’s body bowed off the table with stomach-churning violence. “Pulse detected,” an automated voice announced coolly. Bucky’s knees gave way, but he did not hit the ground. He was held up on both sides by Natasha and Stark.

“Get yourself together,” the redhead told him kindly as she staggered under his weight. “They got her back, and you’re heavy as fuck.”

Bucky managed to regain his feet and pushed away the hands that tried to help him. “I need to see her. If I touch her, I can find her again. I can bring her back.”

They didn’t try to stop him as he shoved his way through the gathering crowd surrounding his reason for breathing. A hovering nurse in black scrubs scrambled out of the way when Bucky snarled, “Move!” and he edged in close enough to find her hand. He gripped her limp fingers inside his own, and shivered at the icy temperature of her skin. Simmons was rushing around madly as she pushed medications into her IV drip and Fitz began attaching monitors and sticky nodes to every available patch of bare skin, but Bucky would not be moved. He needed to touch her. If he opened the red door in his mind, he would be able to find her and bring her back.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the white room with the red door. He visualized opening the door wide and waited for her to breeze in and bathe him with her light. But nothing happened. There was a terrible, empty nothingness on the other side of that door, and she was nowhere to be found. A strangled sob passed his lips, and he begged silently, “Please come back to me. I will never be free without you. I am chained to your soul, and I never want to be set free from you. I can’t do this without you.”

“Mr. Barnes?” Jemma’s cultured voice cut in timidly several minutes later. Bucky opened his eyes and met her teary gaze. “I’m so sorry, but we’ve done all we could to revive her. Dr. Stoica’s vitals have stabilized, but we aren’t picking up any brain waves on the framework.”

Bucky swallowed thickly past the lump in his throat and croaked, “But she’s breathing on her own, and her heart is beating normally. That means that she’ll recover, right?”

Jemma and Fitz shared a loaded glance before she replied carefully, “I can’t guarantee that, Mr. Barnes.” She picked up a tablet from the table and began tapping at the screen. She turned it to face him, and he saw a 3D graphic of a brain that was lit up with a rainbow of fireworks that flared and faded before being replaced with new ones. Jemma continued, “This image was taken during her evaluation as she used her powers. Dr. Stoica’s brain activity is off the charts. Even Fitz can’t get an accurate reading on her, because her mind works differently than ours, but every reading we’ve gotten from her has looked just like this.”

Bucky struggled to follow what she was saying to him, but his scattered thoughts wouldn’t follow. “What does that have to do with anything?”

A lone tear slid down the young woman’s cheek as she pressed a few more buttons before turning it back around to face him. He saw the same 3D image of a brain, but this time, it was dark. There were no bursts of red, yellow, orange, and blue. There was only darkness. “This is her current reading on the framework. There has been no activity recorded since resuscitation. It’s like she just disappeared.”

Bucky’s head spun with dizziness as Jemma confirmed what he had felt through the red door in his mind. Danielle’s body still remained, but everything that made her alive was gone. His worst fear had been realized; he had killed the one he loved the most. He brought her limp hand to his lips and kissed the cold tips of her fingers. He wouldn’t let her go. He would order Fitz to hook him up to
the framework, and he would hunt her down and bring her back or die trying.

“Pardon me, but perhaps I may be of some assistance?” a polite, English accent cut into the fraught scene.

Bucky looked up and his gaze landed on the shockingly maroon-colored skin of the android, Vision. His head was tilted to the side as he studied Danielle’s lifeless body, and the vibranium accents that lined his head gleamed beneath the harsh lights of the med bay. He squeezed Danielle’s fingers reflexively as he rasped, “If you can help her, do it. Otherwise, leave.”

Vision’s tone held no malice when he replied, “I don’t know if it will help, but I have a theory. I observed her during the two days of her evaluation, and I have found that Dr. Stoica’s gift resonates on the same frequency as this.” He paused to tap the glowing yellow gem embedded in the center of his forehead. “This is an Infinity Stone called the Mind Gem. I have not begun to understand the powers it holds, but perhaps it can jolt her mind much as the defibrillator shocked her heart back into rhythm.”

Before Bucky could reply, Simmons cut in. “Mr. Barnes, I have to advise you against that course. I can tell you from experience that it is never wise to touch an alien artifact. Vision is not bound by the restrictions of the human body, but Danielle is made of flesh and blood. If something goes wrong, she will not survive it.”

Bucky wrestled with what to do, but ultimately, he followed his instincts. He had ignored them time and time again when it came to Danielle, but he was done with that now. “She’s not surviving now. You said it yourself. She’s disappeared, but I refuse to believe that she’s gone.” Turning to face the newest Avenger, he said, “Do it.”

Vision tipped his head in agreement, and calmly approached Danielle’s bed. He picked up her unresisting hand and separated her first two fingers and brought them to his forehead. He held her fingers a breath away from the glowing Mind Gem and said, “Are you sure you wish to proceed?”

Bucky wanted to scream at the delay, wanted to rip things apart with his bare hands as every second passed like sandpaper against his skin. “Yes,” he growled through clenched teeth.

“Very well,” Vision replied lightly before he pressed Danielle’s fingertips against the gem.

The Infinity Stone burst into brilliant light that illuminated every corner of the room. People looked away and shielded their eyes, but Bucky refused to take his gaze off of Danielle. Her lifeless brown curls began to float around her head, and her body lifted from the bed to hover several inches off the surface as the light from the gem bathed her in an otherworldly glow. Danielle’s eyes flew open, and golden power spilled over her cheeks.

Without opening her mouth, Danielle’s voice echoed throughout the room, and people grabbed their heads and cried out as she blasted them with these words. **“THE MAD TITAN, LOVER OF LADY DEATH, GATHERS HIS FORCES AND SEARCHES FOR THE STONES OF INFINITE POWER. HE SEEKS TO DESTROY AND GAIN POWER OVER THE UNIVERSE. HE IS COMING. HE IS COMING FOR YOU ALL.”**

The Mind Gem’s light dimmed, and Danielle fell back to the bed. Her eyes were once again closed, and Vision dropped her hand to stagger away from her as he rubbed at his forehead. Bucky gathered her hand and brought it to his lips as the room rang with a chorus of groans and complaints about the psychic backlash rebounding inside their heads, but he had no time to spare on them.
“Doc, I know you’re in there. Open those pretty eyes for me. I need you here with me,” he entreated her out loud and inside his head.

His breath arrested in his lungs as her eyelids began to flutter until she opened them enough to squint at him. She pulled her hand from his grip and brought it up to shield her eyes as she moaned, “My head is splitting open. Did you get the license plate of the bus that hit me, James?”

Bucky half laughed/half sobbed as he gathered her in his arms and pulled her to his chest. He didn’t care about the wires and leads attached to her. He only cared that she came back. He buried his nose in her curls, and he could feel tears rolling down his cheeks to soak into her skin. “Don’t you ever do that to me again, do you hear me?” he demanded raggedly. “Don’t you dare try to leave me behind again.”

She rubbed her cheek against the fabric of his shirt and replied quietly, “We did it, James. You are finally free.”

He lay her back on the bed gently at Jemma’s insistence, but he did not let her go. As the scientists bustled around checking her readings, he reached up to brush his knuckles down the curve of her cheek. “I didn’t do a damn thing. It was all you, doc. I have never seen anything as fearless and brave as what you did in there. You may be a healer, but you are also a warrior. I am in awe of your strength.”

“Nonsense, James. I only did what needed to be done.” Danielle closed her eyes against the pen light that Jemma insisted on flashing into her eyes. “Simmons, I wouldn’t say no to some of that lovely pain medicine in my IV. It feels like my brain is trying to claw its way out of my skull.”

As Jemma drew the medication into a syringe, Fitz muttered, “Draw some up for the rest of us while you’re at it, Jem. Dr. Stoica’s voice is still ringing in my head.”

Danielle cracked her eye open and said, “What are you talking about, Fitz? I can’t concentrate enough to use my power right now. It hurts too much.”

Bucky refused to move away as Natasha, Tony, and Vision crowded around her. Vision’s voice was pitched low in deference to the pain etched clearly on Danielle’s face and said, “Dr. Stoica, who is ‘The Mad Titan’? Did you see his face? When will he be coming for the Infinity Stones?”

Bucky could see the confusion clouding her eyes as the pain medication began to take effect. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Vision. What is a ‘Mad Titan’?”

“She doesn’t remember,” Tony announced with certainty. He laid his hand gently on Danielle’s shoulder and added, “I think we should let her get some rest. She’s been through a hell of a beating. We’ll check on you soon, doctor. I’m glad you’re back with us.”

Natasha squeezed Bucky’s arm one last time, and she and her teammates left the room. Bucky refused to leave her, so Fitz brought him a chair and situated it close to the bed. Danielle’s eyes were closed, but Bucky could feel her consciousness hovering on the edges of his mind. She wasn’t going anywhere. She was safe.

Fitz lingered at his elbow and ran a hand through his unruly blonde curls as he stammered, “Listen, mate, about what happened…I tried. I wanted to terminate the program, but Jemma wouldn’t let me. She said-“

Bucky held his hand up to stop the nervous chattering. “I already know what happened. Danielle is a stubborn woman, and she convinced Simmons to keep the link intact until she was done. It’s not
your fault.”

Fitz released a gusty sigh and said, “So, you’re not going to kill me, right? Or Jemma? Because that would really put a crimp in our weekend plans.”

Bucky chuckled and clapped the young man on the back until he stumbled. “Nah, not this time. Besides, I have a few more ideas for upgrades to my arm. I’m going to need them if I’m joining the Avengers.”

Fitz’s face lit up with a grin, and he bustled away to find the medicine cabinet and some aspirin. Bucky held Danielle’s hand between both of his own until the heat warmed her flesh. He would not leave her side until she recovered. The council would just have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

**The end is nigh! More soon!**
Danielle slept all through the night without waking once, but Bucky wasn’t worried. As he’d sat next to her bed and held her hand, he would catch flickers of images that he knew to be her dreams. Some of them were nightmares that would send her heart rate monitor beeping. He saw a Wakandan rebel attacking her and then he saw the man on the floor, dead. He saw faces of people he didn’t recognize, but the resemblance indicated family even though they looked upon her without recognition. Briefly, a large purple alien dressed in golden armor flashed through her mind, but disappeared before he could study it further. He also saw himself being dragged away in chains by Tony Stark as blood trickled down his face from the scalp wound.

Sometimes, her dreams would change, and he caught glimpses of her life. In every dream, there was happiness and laughter. That all changed after she dreamed about breaking free of the Terrigenesis cocoon. There were no more smiles or happiness to be found after that; there were tears, pain, and heartbreak only… until she met him. He was able to see himself from her point of view. His favorite dream so far had been of him drinking from between her thighs. That had caused him to think inappropriate thoughts until Danielle’s heart monitor had begun to alarm and summoned a nurse. Bucky almost didn’t recognize himself through her eyes. He didn’t look like a monster or a freak. He looked like a superhero. She looked at him like he was someone who was worthy of her trust and her life.

It was jarring for him each time an image would float through the open doorway in his mind, but he refused to close it. He never wanted to be cut off from her again. He had almost lost her not once, but twice, and that was two times too many. As soon as the med bay had cleared, and he was alone with Danielle asleep in the bed next to him, he had closed his eyes and envisioned the white room in his head. The red door had appeared, and Bucky had gripped it in his hands and wrenched the door clean off the hinges. There would never be a barrier between them again.

Unfortunately, the council didn’t feel it necessary to wait long at all. He had only been given four hours reprieve in deference to his insistence on staying with Danielle, but the subcommittee would not be deterred. The next day, Bucky reluctantly left Danielle’s bedside after he ensured she ate every bite of her lunch, and followed Coulson back to the conference room. He didn’t care that he hadn’t slept in over 24 hours, or that he was still wearing the same clothes as the day before. Nothing else mattered to Bucky now that he knew that Danielle was going to recover.

When they arrived at the conference room, he wasn’t surprised to see the same audience, but the atmosphere was vastly different. There was a sense of anticipation in the air, and people spoke to him directly. Even Stark nodded his head at him as Natasha demanded an update on Danielle’s condition. Vison stopped him and inquired if Danielle had said anything more about the “Mad Titan,” but Bucky could give him no news on that score. Danielle was just as clueless about the meaning of her message as the rest of them.

The subcommittee panel lit up with the nine faces of his judges. The Chairwoman called the session to order, and proceeded to summarily explain the situation. “We have been informed that the procedure was a success, but experienced some complications with Dr. Stoica. The committee is relieved to hear of her improvement.”

Bucky bit his tongue to keep himself from biting her head off. Danielle had sacrificed too much for him to screw it up now. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he replied, “Yes, Dr. Stoica
was successful in severing the ties, but at great cost to her own life. She nearly died in the process.”

Nine separate heads bobbed up and down and made sympathetic noises. The German ambassador replied, “That is excellent news, Mr. Barnes. We will now proceed directly to the recitation of the code. The subcommittee has voted, and it was decided that the Hydra code would be spoken by Vision.”

Bucky was really fucking tired of taking orders. He had total autonomy now, and he planned to use it. “No,” he said clearly. He paused as every head in the room snapped to attention. He offered the councilor an insincere smile and continued, “I believe the honor should go to Stark. He’s been waiting for this day for a long time.”

His smile turned genuine when Tony’s sarcastic humor cut in. “He’s right, you know. I had to hire a Russian linguist to help me get the pronunciation down pat. It would be a shame to waste all that effort.”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you, Mr. Stark?” the Asian ambassador scolded him. “You are not recognized-“

“Stark,” Bucky interrupted her rudely. “Say the words.”

The room grew silent with expectation, and Tony stepped out into the center of the room next to Bucky. With his tone pitched low, he said, “You sure about this?”

Bucky nodded without looking away from him. “I’ve got something I want to tell you. One way or another.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, and replied loudly for everyone to hear, “You heard the man. Let’s get this show on the road.” The tension in the room went through the roof, and Bucky could practically feel the electricity in the air. Stark opened his lips, and with perfect dialect and pronunciation, he said, “Zhelaniye. Rzhavyy. Semnadtsat’. Rassvet. Pech’. Devyat’. Dobroserdechnyy. Vozrashcheniye na rodinu. Odin.” He paused before the final word, but Bucky only raised an impatient eyebrow. With a smirk twisting his lips, Stark finished, “Gruzovoy vagon.”

Bucky’s lips curled in a slow smile, and he said clearly, “Go fuck yourself, Stark. I’m not in the mood to comply today.”

Natasha broke composure and whooped as the room erupted into excited chatter. He only had eyes for Stark, though, and he was surprised to see a small smile tug at the corner of Tony’s lips. “You still owe me answers, Barnes. That hasn’t changed.”

Bucky nodded as the spectators continued to talk over them with excited buzz. Voice pitched low, Bucky replied, “You’ll have them. I need my hard drive back first, but you will know the names of every person that ordered your parents’ deaths.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Tony assured him as he backed away to resume his place against the wall.

The Chairwoman called the room to order and insisted on proceeding with the deposition. He could see the Prime Minister of Azania begin to sweat as Bucky began rattling off the names of his handlers and victims. Bucky had no intention of outing the man before the subcommittee, though. He planned to use that connection to keep his own tabs on the U.N., and he would use his leverage against the PM to protect Danielle. He didn’t trust the politicians to keep her best interest in mind, so he would pressure the Azanian councilman to keep Bucky in the loop.
It was almost six hours later before the Chairwoman called a halt to the proceedings for the day. “Mr. Barnes, before we adjourn for the day, I would like to present you with some options. This committee has been approached by no less than ten different agencies from around the world that are interested in recruiting your services. Three of their representatives are in the room now and wish to offer you a place with them. Brigadier General Glenn Talbot with the U.S. Air Force is present,” she announced. Bucky glanced to the side and saw Talbot snap to attention. “Jeffrey Mace, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. has also requested permission to recruit you.” Bucky glanced at the clean-cut, suited man from the day before, and the man tipped his head to Bucky. “And finally, surprisingly, we have received an offer from the Avengers to take over your probation.”

Bucky had planned to pursue that avenue anyway, but he was still shocked that the offer was made. He glanced behind him to catch Natasha’s thumbs up, Vision’s polite nod, and Stark’s inscrutable smirk. He didn’t care what other militaries and security firms had petitioned for his services, because he wasn’t interested in any of them that would take him away from Danielle. He wanted to keep her close.

Bucky cleared his throat and replied evenly, “All due respect to the Brigadier General and Director, but I have no desire to submit myself to such regimented control again. I would rather be a part of a team with equal rights between members. I will accept the offer from the Avengers, but I request to remain here at S.H.I.E.L.D. until such time as Dr. Stoica has fully recovered.”

Talbot looked angry and Mace looked disappointed, but the Chairwoman only nodded politely as she made notes. “Permission granted. The committee will reconvene tomorrow at exactly 8 am to continue your depositions. Congratulations, Mr. Barnes. Welcome to the Sokovia Accords.”

As the meeting came to a close, everyone filtered out the room save Natasha. Bucky submitted to her enthusiastic hug before he asked, “What happened to Stark? He wanted my blood just 24 hours ago, and now he’s willing to take me into the fold.”

Natasha looped her arm through his and walked with him toward the medical wing. “Oh, he’s not thrilled about the idea, believe me, but he was outvoted. However, I think he’s starting to see you as human after yesterday, and not just a killing machine. Watching the experience between you and Dr. Stoica yesterday changed everything. It opened a lot of eyes, and not just Tony’s.”

Bucky hummed noncommittally. He didn’t want to talk about his feelings for Danielle with anyone other Danielle. “I still have a feeling he’ll try to use me for target practice, but I think I can hold up against him.”

They came to a stop at the med bay door, and Natasha gifted him with a seductive smile. “That’s what we’re counting on. Without Rogers here to keep him check, Tony’s been impossible to deal with lately. We’re counting on you to balance the scales, Barnes.”

Bucky leaned in and pressed a kiss to both her cheeks as he replied, “Don’t hold your breath, lisichka. I may be more trouble than I’m worth.”

Natasha glanced into the room where they could see Danielle chatting with Simmons. The redhead smiled secretively and said, “Oh, I don’t know. I think there’s someone who thinks you’re worth everything.”

Chapter End Notes
**Waaah! Only one more chapter left, and I'm sad!**
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

**Steve demanded some screen time, so here's a precious moment between our favorite heroes.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week later, Bucky was getting dressed after a shower. Simmons had finally declared Danielle fit for duty, and they were both being released into Natasha’s custody later in the day, and he couldn’t wait. He tucked the too-tight tee shirt into his jeans, and mused that he would have to get used to them since Danielle had mentioned that she liked the way they looked on him.

Once it was back to business as normal at S.H.I.E.L.D., and all the depositions had been completed, Coulson had relaxed his security detail. He was given free reign of the facility, but only as long as he kept the special lanyard around his neck that had been assigned to him by an Agent Koenig. He was a funny little guy, but quite the stickler for protocol. Bucky had been forced to sit through a three hour lecture about proper lanyard etiquette and safety policies before he had finally been allowed to leave. Agent Koenig had mentioned he had brothers that worked for the agency, too. Bucky just hoped they were nothing like this Koenig.

Before he could grab his bag and make his way to the medical bay, the computerized system announced that he had a visitor. He assumed it would be one of the many agents that he had come to be friendly with like Mack. They had spent many a midnight hour together while Danielle slept drawing plans for weapons that Bucky would need for his new job, and he had grown to respect the quiet, intelligent man. It could even be the bubbly Inhuman, Daisy Johnson. She possessed a certain charisma and effervescence that caught Bucky off-guard each time he encountered her. She had a habit of boldly asking nosy, intrusive questions about his relationship with Danielle, and he always ended up blurtting out things he had no intention of telling her. He still wasn’t quite sure if he liked her or not.

When the door opened, however, it wasn’t an agent at all. It was Steve.

Orange threads began to glow in his mind, and all the memories of his friendship with Steve Rogers that Danielle had repaired burst into life. He saw them sneaking into Yankee Stadium when they were 16 years old and eating peanuts as they watched the game. He saw them doing their homework and Steve correcting all the mistakes for him. He saw them eating dinner while his Ma fussed at Steve for being so scrawny. She had always tried to fatten him up, and had claimed it as her life’s work to mother Steve whether he liked it or not. Steve had loved it. He saw them sneaking a smoke as they walked through the neighborhood at midnight the night Bucky had lost his virginity. He used to tell Steve everything. They used to be brothers.

Steve was hesitant as he entered Bucky’s room. Bucky didn’t know why until he heard a whisper in his mind saying, “He’s afraid of losing you again.” It was like a lightbulb going off in his head, and he resolved to put his old friend at ease. Without pausing to think about it too much, Bucky walked over to Steve, and pulled him into a bone-cracking hug. Steve stiffened for only a second before he returned the clasp with his own hug that literally cracked Bucky’s bones.

“Ow, asshole!” Bucky complained, holding his ribs. “I know I heal fast, but that shit still hurts.”
Steve’s laughter was bright and joyous as he chided him by saying, “Language, Buck. How are you doing, man? You’re looking good.”

Bucky smoothed his palm down over the fitted black cotton layering his abs and said, “It’s the tight shirt, isn’t it? I think I’m finally starting to understand your motivation.”

Steve grinned and shot back, “I may be Captain Fucking America, but I’m not stupid.”

Bucky’s laughter sounded like rusty hinges, but it was getting easier to do each time he tried it. It happened a lot when he talked to Danielle. He clapped Steve on the shoulder and replied, “I’m doing better than I deserve, man. Doc is getting discharged today, so we’re headed to New York.” His smile faded, and he added, “Wish you could come, too.”

Steve’s expression sobered, and he looked down at the ground. “Yeah, Buck. Me, too. I’ll still be seeing you around though. Brooklyn isn’t too far away from your new digs.”

Bucky ran a nervous hand through his hair. He was torn about what to do. He just started remembering how much this man meant to him, and he wanted to figure out how to be a friend again. He just didn’t know how.

“Tell him that you’ll be there for him,” a phantom voice echoed in his mind. It was the perfect solution.

“Listen, Steve. I just want you to know that a piece of paper is not going to stop me from having your back. Anytime you need my help, anytime you have people to save, or hell, anytime you want to grab a slice, call me. You’ll always know where to find me now, you know what I’m saying?” Bucky asked, hoping he was making himself clear.

Steve’s sky blue eyes watered, but he smiled as he said, “Yeah, I get what you’re saying. It won’t be necessary, though. I won’t risk you losing this chance. Ten years is a blink of an eye for us. Soon, you’ll be free to make your own choices again.”

Bucky studied Steve carefully, but at the same time, he concentrated on Danielle. He wanted both of them to hear this. “I already made the only choice that matters. I chose Danielle. Every decision after that will always be made with that one simple truth in mind. I also choose you, Steve. I will always have your back.”

Steve ducked his head and rubbed his neck. “Thanks, Buck. That means a lot. I, uh, actually stopped by to see how Dr. Stoica was doing before I came here. She’s an amazing person. Is it just me, or do her eyes start to glow at weird times?”

Bucky laughed as he grabbed the strap of his duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. “She is weird, but she grows on you.” He ignored the indignant shout ringing through his head, and added, “She’s going to be living at the Avengers compound for now, but she will still travel to Manhattan to see her patients throughout the week.”

“Really?” Steve drawled, his eyebrows climbing his forehead. “So, will she be sharing that room with someone else?”

Bucky snorted. “Only on the nights I manage to sneak into her room. If I know Stark, he’ll go out of his way to ensure Danielle and I don’t get time alone together just to piss me off. He thinks because he owns the facility that he’s the one in charge. I’m about to disabuse him of that notion.”

Steve laughed as they walked out of the room together and easily fell into step with the same rhythm. “Give him a chance, Buck. Tony has his flaws like any of us, but he really is a good guy. He tries to do the right thing, but he loses his focus sometimes.”
Bucky was doubtful, but if Steve said to give Tony a chance, then Bucky would give Tony a chance. One.

As they reached the doors of the medical bay, they exchanged another hug, but this time without the bone-cracking. Bucky said, “Don’t be a stranger, Steve. They all miss you. They didn’t stop caring about you when you left the team.”

He offered Bucky a sad smile, and replied, “I miss them, too. Tell Nat to stay out of my room. She keeps sneaking in there to plant porno mags, and keeps trying to sign me up for something called ‘Tinder.’” Steve shivered dramatically and laughed in order to lighten the mood.

After exchanging cell numbers, they said their goodbyes, but this time, Bucky knew it was only for now.

Chapter End Notes

**Okay, so I lied. I wasn’t expecting to write this chapter, but Steve is cute and I can’t tell him no. So, next chapter is the last one. I think.**
Bucky didn’t see Danielle for three whole days. Of course, with the open link between their minds, she was never more than a thought away, but it wasn’t nearly enough for him. As he expected, Tony Stark went out of his way to keep Bucky too busy with training sessions and unnecessary paperwork to hunt her down, but he also didn’t try too hard. He had wanted to give her some space to settle into her new life, and establish a routine before barging in on her. At least, that’s what he told himself. But on the evening of the third day, he received a summons he couldn’t ignore.

Danielle was taking a shower, and Bucky knew it because she was sending him vivid images of her water-slicked skin. “You could join me, you know,” she whispered in his mind.

Bucky managed to resist for all of ten minutes before he made his way through the maze of hallways in the huge facility until he finally located Danielle’s room.

He stopped abruptly at the sight of her door cracked open, and his adrenaline began to pump through his veins. Before he could go charging inside to rescue her from danger, however, a ghostly voice whispered in his mind, “Are you going to come in or not? I’ve been waiting for you.”

Bucky relaxed immediately and a grin split across his face as he eased through the door before shutting and locking it behind him. When he looked up, his heart stopped and his mouth went dry. Danielle was standing in front of a large picture window, and her silhouette was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun. Her back was to him, and his gaze drank in the dips and curves of her mostly nude body. She was wrapped in a too-small towel that gave him a teasing glimpse of the luscious cheeks of her ass, and Bucky’s cock took notice with a vengeance. Her dark curls spilled over her narrow shoulders, and the droplets of water that still dotted her skin refracted with gold and pink light streaming through the window.

She was gorgeous, brilliant, and powerful, and she was all his.

She turned and looked at him over her shoulder, and she smiled. “Took you long enough,” she quipped lightly. “I thought for sure you would have been able to slip away sooner.”

“It’s been a busy few days,” he rasped. He paused to swallow the flood of saliva that pooled in his mouth, and added, “It won’t happen again. Three days is long enough to give Stark a chance, but I’m done being nice. I’m sure Steve will understand.”

Bucky’s feet began to move without thought, and he closed the distance between them. His fingers twitched with the desire to touch her, but when she turned to face him, he dropped his hand. As if it were a bullseye, his eyes landed on the fading, palm-shaped bruise on her chest. It looked so wrong nestled between the valley of her breasts that were pushed up perfectly by the cinched terrycloth. Her skin should never be blemished by pain.

Danielle reached out and snatched his hand. She brought his palm to her breast, and his fingers instinctively curled around the soft weight of it. “Stop thinking about it, James. It’s over, and it
won’t happen again. I’m in perfect health, and no bones were broken during CPR. It’s just a bruise, and it’s healing. Simmons explained all this to you before we left.”

Bucky remembered vividly. Simmons had delivered an unedited version of Danielle’s condition before they had boarded the plane with Natasha. Thankfully, there didn’t seem to be any damage to Danielle’s heart, and the young scientist had run every test available, and a few that were invented by Fitz himself. Her brain scans were something altogether different. Her powers had magnified significantly, and Fitz’s framework had crashed three separate times when he had tried to map her brain. Exposure to the Mind Gem had seemingly boosted her already impressive abilities, and it had been an entertaining week in the med bay as Bucky had watched her test them out on unsuspecting agents.

The only lasting injuries she had sustained were the burn marks from the AED pads, and the discolored bruise on her sternum. They were constant, visible reminders to him of what he had almost lost, and of how fragile her body was compared to his. “I know, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

Danielle stepped into his body and molded her form against him. She rested her head on his chest, and his arms snaked around her to hold her close as her hands began pulling the tee shirt from the waist of his jeans. “Simmons also told you that I was cleared for sexual activity. Is that the real reason you stayed away from me for three days? You’re not going to hurt me. Not having you touch me is what’s hurting me.”

Bucky’s arms tightened around her waist, and he buried his nose in her damp hair. She smelled like crushed vanilla beans, and it took him back to the first time he laid eyes on her. It seemed like a lifetime ago. It was a lifetime ago. He shivered when her cool hands found the overheated flesh of his lower back, and his cock pulsed where it was trapped between their bodies. It had been torture to see her in that hospital bed, and not just on his heart. He was thirsty for the taste of her lips, hungry for the lush curves of her body, and ravenous for the feel of her pussy clamped around him. It was true. He had stayed away from her on purpose, because he was afraid of losing control and hurting her again. He couldn’t bear the thought of her in pain.

“She said ‘limited’ sexual activities. I don’t know what that means,” he confessed bluntly. “I didn’t want to take the chance of hurting you.”

Danielle pulled back from his arms and summarily unraveled the towel so it would drop to the floor at her feet. She grabbed his hands and placed them on her hips and replied tartly, “It just means that we should be careful, that’s all. As long as we don’t put pressure on my chest, I think we’ll be just fine. I definitely don’t mind being on top.”

Bucky released a ragged breath and finally allowed his hands to trail over her skin. He brushed the back of knuckles across the beaded tip of one breast and said, “Yeah, I can be careful, and I would definitely not mind watching you riding me.”

With a cheshire smile, she led him by the hand toward her bed. In a throwback to the first time they had sex, she purred, “So, what are you waiting for?”

Bucky peeled his shirt off and tossed it to the side before hastily doffing his boots and socks as Danielle sat on the bed watching him avidly. When he moved to open his jeans, though, she stopped him. “Oh, no you don’t. I’ve been waiting forever to do this.”

Bucky’s stomach clenched with a desperate desire as she thumbed the button and lowered the zipper. Bucky warned, “I don’t know how much I can take, doc.” She replied by pushing his pants down his legs.
His jeans and boxer briefs fell to his feet, and he raked them back hastily. There were officially no more barriers between them. Danielle’s fingers trailed boldly over his aching cock, and she lowered her lips toward the head until he could feel the heat of her breath washing over him. He felt her consciousness breeze through the open doorway in his mind, and she said, “That’s okay. I’ll know.”

Bucky groaned a curse as she took him into her mouth to bathe him in liquid heat. He stumbled with blood loss as it all rushed south, but her hand on his hip steadied him. She teased and tormented him with her tongue as he combed his fingers through her unruly curls. Each time he thought he was close to coming, though, she backed away and moved her attention elsewhere until he thought he would lose his mind. After the fourth time of her bringing him to the edge and backing away, he’d had enough.

He extricated himself from her grip and struggled to catch his breath. He closed his eyes against the sight of Danielle’s lips swollen and shiny from her attentions, and reached for his self-control. He had been thinking about this for days, and he had so many plans for her. He wanted to spend hours hearing her cry his name as he sated his thirst between her thighs, but he was too far gone for that now. She had made sure of it.

Danielle stood to her feet and wrapped her arms around his waist. She looked up into his eyes and whispered, “You can do that next time, because we have that now. No time limits, James.”

God, he loved her.

The realization struck him like lightning from Thor’s hammer, and he felt like an idiot for not figuring it out sooner. He loved Danielle, and what’s more, she loved him. He couldn’t fathom why she did, but he knew it with a certainty. Why had it taken so long for him to recognize it? And, why hadn’t she said anything about it to him? They had spent hours alone together, talking, during her week-long stay in the med bay, and she never once said anything about love.

Her voice filtered through his mind to answer his unspoken question. “I knew you would realize it on your own. I wanted to give you the opportunity to choose for yourself how you felt about me. I started falling in love with you before you were even awake. The very first time my mind touched yours, I knew you were going to break my heart. The second time, when I saw the poisoned threads, I knew I was going to break yours.”

Bucky cupped her face between his palms and leaned in to steal one, perfect kiss. “You didn’t break me, doc. You healed me. You taught me how to be human again. How could I not love you for that?” He paused when spied a lone tear trickling down her cheek. That was not the reaction he had been hoping for. “I won’t say it again if it’s going to make you cry. I’m going on record as saying that I hate it when you cry, especially if I’m the one that caused it.”

Her laugh was watery, but she pulled him down for a more intense, thorough kiss. Her hands snaked up around his neck, and her body molded to his with a sinful caress. “You are worthy of love, James. I will never stop trying to show you just how much I love you.”

Bucky’s soul lit up with golden flames, and he felt reborn in the light of her love. Their kiss turned heated, and he reached down to pick her up by her thighs. She broke away from his lips to squeal with surprise, but Bucky was on a mission. He walked them around the bed and eased down on it until he was lying on his back, and Danielle was sitting astride his hips. His hands smoothed up and down the length of her thighs as she rubbed her slick center across his aching cock. Without further prompting, she lifted herself to her knees, reached between her legs, and positioned him at the opening to her body.
Bucky held his breath, but Danielle released hers as she sank down over his length until their bodies were flush against each other. She threw her head back and moaned, and her fingernails bit into the clenched muscles of his abdomen. “God, I could do this for hours,” she murmured as her hips swiveled and moved against him.

Bucky hissed, and his hands gripped the soft flesh of her hips so he could thrust up inside her even deeper. “I’m so glad to hear you say that, because I may never let you out of this bed again.”

Her laughter was sultry and teasing, but the way she began to ride him was no joke. Her sheath was tight and slick, and the heat was driving him crazy as she rose up and fell back down on his cock over and over and over again. Bucky could feel their combined passion cycling back and forth between their minds, each feeding the other, until they were both panting and straining toward release. He wished this moment could last forever, but Danielle had taken him to brink too many times for him to last. He wanted her go with him when he fell, so pressed the pad of his thumb against her clit. Each time she rose and fell on him, his thumb slid across her clit with firm pressure until her rhythm began to falter.

“James, yes! Oh! Right there!” she cried out as he pressed and rubbed against her as he fucked her deep.

Her back bowed, and her breasts jutted out invitingly as she stiffened above him. He felt the moment her body fractured into release with starbursts of ecstasy exploding inside his head, and he barely kept from following her over the edge. He wanted to hold on just a few seconds longer so he could drink in the sight of her petite body trembling and contracting around him. She was so beautiful with the pink flush of desire spreading up her stomach and breasts, and the sounds pouring from her throat made his head spin. He gripped her hips on both sides once more, and used his leverage to push and pull her wet, swollen heat up and down his cock. He thrust deep inside of her once, twice, three times and came with a shout buried as far as he could reach. Her pussy milked him and drew out every last drop of his climax until they were both panting for breath and shaking.

When she began to sway on top of him, he reached up to lift her off of him and lay her down on the bed next to him. She snuggled into the warmth of his chest, and his arms held her close. They lay there together in the darkening room, and the only sound was the beating of their hearts and the passage of their breaths. Inside Bucky’s head, however, he could feel her presence.

Her voice whispered in his mind, “You know, I’m pretty sure that Tony can’t stop you if you wanted to move into my room with me.”

Without opening his mouth, he replied, “I kinda hope he does so I have an excuse to punch that smirk off his face. You sure you want me underfoot all the time like that?”

Danielle leaned up and pressed a soft, clinging kiss to his lips as she replied, “I think I just proved that I like you underneath me. I want all of you, James. Body, heart, mind, and soul. You belong to me, and I belong to you.”

Bucky rolled her to her back and settled himself between her legs. His still hard cock slid back inside her heat, and he returned her kiss as he held himself up and away from her chest. She gasped into his mouth as he thrust deep, and he replied, “I will never let you go again. Fight or flight, doc. Whichever one we choose, we will do it together.”
Wah! It's the end! I have really enjoyed writing this story and sharing it with all of you. My sincere and heartfelt thanks go out to all of you who have left kudos and comments. You guys have been so supportive and kind, and I can't thank you enough. I wish each and every one of you peace, love, happiness, and kindness. Y'all rock my world.

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