Summary

In the aftermath of Civil War, Steve and Bucky and the other fugitive Avengers face a painful past and an uncertain future, while T'Challa assumes the throne of Wakanda and decides his country's place in the world and his own place in the Avengers' world. Ch. 42: With Bucky incoherent from Zemo's new attempt at triggering him, the Avengers made the mistake of letting a telepath into the room and Tony struggles to help a distraught Wanda as the attack reveals more than even Zemo and the remnants of Hydra could have predicted!

Notes

**Author's Notes:** Of all the times to start posting a post-Civil War, pre-Infinity War story, right? This fic has been sitting on my hard drive since summer 2016! I almost didn't post it since it's already been thoroughly jossed by the teasers for Black Panther and Infinity War, not to mention the prelude comics, but oh well. This is my take on the interim between Civil War and Infinity War, although I don't attempt to tackle the events of Black Panther directly, this fic will heavily feature Wakanda and T'Challa's POV.

**Canon Note:** Naturally, this is a major AU from Black Panther. It draws from the comics material that T'Challa and his sister Shuri are half-siblings. T'Challa's mother, N'Yami died in childbirth, and his sister Shuri and brother Jakarra are T'Chaka's children by his second wife, Ramonda, and only a few years younger than T'Challa. I drew from as much comic material about Wakanda as possible, but missed the mark on the MCU canon in a lot of ways, primarily that I imagined the outside world knew more about Wakanda's technological power in general.
One

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky emerge from the bunker in Siberia and receive a surprising offer of aid and shelter, and T'Challa chooses a side.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One

SIBERIA

Steve's mind was sluggish, and keeping himself and Bucky moving in the direction of the jet was taking far too much of his concentration. Concussion, probably, even through his helmet and the protection the serum had given his bones. Bucky was worse; he could barely keep his feet under him.

"C'mon...hang on, just gotta...get us onto the jet and the auto-pilot set..." Steve mumbled. "Then we'll get all this taken care of." *Except where can we go now? What hospital can I take him to?*

As the blast doors creaked open, Steve looked behind them, imagining Tony in pursuit with Steve's shield, or maybe a liberated gun. There was no movement from the way they'd come.

"Steve - " Bucky recoiled, nearly pulling them both off their feet. Steve turned, struggling to steady them, and froze: there were two jets out on the snowy ground. The second was neither a Quinjet nor US military, and emerging from its cabin was T'Challa. Bucky pulled against Steve's hold.

"No...Steve, no, just go, go..."

"I'm not leaving you," Steve said, and eased Bucky to the ground. Ignoring the warning voice in the back of his mind that he couldn't put up much of a fight, he waited to meet T'Challa. *Over my dead body, literally, your highness.*

But even as Steve blinked in the blowing snow and swayed pathetically, T'Challa held up his hands. "Captain, I'm not going to hurt your friend. I heard everything. Zemo is secure, and he'll answer for what he did."

Steve just stared for several moments, trying to process it. "You..."

T'Challa squinted past him at the doors. "Is Stark alive?"

*You mean did I kill him? "No - I mean, yeah," Steve breathed. Relief seeped like amber over his brain, slowing him down even further. "He's - his suit is shot, it won't fly now..." Can't leave Tony here stranded...can't leave Bucky...can't let Tony near Bucky...can't let Bucky near Zemo. He felt like he was spinning in one of the little snow-devils that whirled across the landscape on the edges of his vision. "He's alive. He might - need a doctor."*

"Steve..." Bucky pleaded as T'Challa came closer.
Steve didn't think he was swaying that badly, but T'Challa caught him. "All of you need doctors. Barnes!" As with Tony, Bucky wouldn't stand down, though he was being far less successful at standing up now than earlier. "I will...not...hurt you, or your captain. I'm going to help you."

"Tony'll follow us," Steve said, struggling to think straight. "Anywhere we go, he'll come after Bucky." Where the hell could Steve take Bucky that he'd be safe?

"I know," said T'Challa. "Revenge has consumed him as it did me." He helped Steve kneel at Bucky's side. Bucky flinched away when T'Challa tried to look him over, so the Wakandan king stepped back. "Stark didn't know I was following him, and we'll keep it that way for now. I'll take you to Wakanda. Stark won't think to look there."

He and Steve both jumped as Bucky sagged to the side - and passed out, dead limp in Steve's arms. Steve held onto him and looked around in despair. Under ordinary circumstances, he could carry Bucky without a problem, but now...the snow was reviving Steve a little, but not enough.

"Why would you protect him? Yeah, Vienna was Zemo, but if you heard... you know what Hydra made Bucky do." Desperate and short on options as Steve was, he wouldn't bring Bucky into enemy hands without a fight.

T'Challa straightened and loomed over Steve. "I have wronged you and your friend by trying to mete out punishment by my own hand, without concern for the entire truth. I won't make that mistake again, and I now owe you both a debt. I swear upon my father's grave, Captain, if you accept my protection, you'll come to no harm that is in my power to prevent."

It was just words. And yet... *I always put faith in people, individuals. Not governments.* And it sounded like something Thor would say. Meeting T'Challa's eyes, Steve slowly nodded. "Okay."

Something beeped. T'Challa looked down at a device on his wrist and aimed it at the building. "Stark is moving, if slowly. We'll leave your jet and Zemo for him." He hauled Bucky over his shoulder and pulled Steve to his feet with his free hand. "Come."

The Wakandan jet's cabin was more cramped than a Quinjet, but there were fold-down beds to secure a prone passenger and plenty of medical supplies. Steve secured Bucky and connected the vitals monitors, and got him on IV fluids. He was worried about Bucky going into shock, but the readings showed he was stable. As Steve tried to figure out what to do for the sparking mess of wires and torn metal that remained of his arm, Bucky came around, moaning.


Bucky blinked and cast glassy eyes around the cabin. "You... b'lieve him?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. He heard Zemo confess and admitted he was wrong about Vienna. He'll help us because of that." Bucky still flinched as T'Challa came aboard, and Steve looked up as he passed towards the cockpit. "Can Tony make it to the Quinjet alone? If not...I'll have to go back for him."

Whatever Tony had tried to do, whatever he might still do, Steve wouldn't leave him here to die.

T'Challa beckoned Steve to the cockpit, where a screen connected to the jet's controls showed an infrared image of the inside of the base with Tony moving, slowly but steadily, back down the stairs to the doors. They'd entered from different directions, but Tony's suit would have picked up the Quinjet. "I've secured Zemo in your jet," said T'Challa. "He'll assume one of your friends came for you."

Steve's blood ran cold - for the god-knew-how-many-times today. "The others...my team in Leipzig,
what happened? Was anyone hurt?"

T'Challa sighed and motioned Steve to sit while he prepared to take off. "Rhodes was hit by friendly fire from the Vision. He was severely injured, but he's alive. Romanoff escaped. Maximoff, Lang, Barton, and Wilson were imprisoned at the supermaximum penitentiary in the North Atlantic."

"The Raft." Thank God Steve was sitting down. That thing had been designed for the Hulk and/or Thor ten years ago - hell, Tony suspected it had been designed for himself in case SHIELD couldn't get Iron Man under control. Steve knew its layout and facilities, but... "I don't even know where it actually is."

T'Challa looked over his shoulder once they were above the clouds and gave Steve a thin, droll smile. "I do. I followed Stark there, and from there, followed him here." He gave Steve a more dubious look. "You must recover if you intend to rescue your friends."

"How far is it?" Steve asked without thinking.

"We can be there in fourteen hours. As to your time to recover, you must tell me."

Steve closed his eyes and rubbed them hard, leaning back against the seat. His worst injury was maybe some cracked ribs and burns from Tony's repulsor shot to the chest. He was already feeling less woozy from the head blows. "I don't like waiting too long. I don't know what Tony'll do once he reports what happened, or how he'll report it. He may take it out on them."

"Then rest. It's heavily armed, staffed by forty guards in rotating shifts and ten support staff, including five who monitor the security systems. Your Secretary Ross was there when Stark arrived yesterday."

"The guards and the weapons shouldn't be a problem if I can get inside." Mindful of T'Challa's declaration of a debt, Steve didn't want to call it in a way that would put T'Challa squarely in the spotlight of aiding international fugitives. Wakanda was an advanced country with powerful resources, he'd read (and observed from its king) but the combined forces of the UN weren't a test Steve wanted to provoke. "I won't ask you to help me, not on that. The US government wouldn't take kindly to a foreign leader aiding directly in a breach like this."

T'Challa's eyes glinted with...*something*, proud and powerful, making Steve think again about Thor. T'Challa didn't smile, but seemed almost casual as he turned back to the plane's controls. "Don't concern yourself, Captain. Your government will not know I was involved."

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**THE NORTH PACIFIC**

While Rogers and Barnes slept, T'Challa took an evasive route from Siberia towards the North Atlantic. A few hours into the flight, he noticed that Barnes was awake again. "We're flying to the Raft to free the Captain's friends. You should rest. From there, I'll take you to Wakanda. You'll be safe."

Barnes didn't answer, just stared at T'Challa in the dim light. There was a resignation in his eyes that T'Challa recognized, very like his expression in the mobile cell in Berlin. _He knew no one but Rogers would believe his story. He was prepared to be put to death for a crime he didn't commit._

"*What about a lawyer?*" Rogers had said.

Everett Ross had laughed at that. At the time, T'Challa had been smug. Now he was ashamed.
"All men and women have rights in every good society," his father and his teachers had taught him. "We may not name and number them in the same way as the Americans, the Europeans, or the Asians, but decent men have no choice but to defend them, even for the vilest people."

Wakanda's justice would be deemed harsh by the West, but no man or woman charged with a crime would be punished without the chance to defend themselves, or at least explain themselves. In his grief and rage for his king and father, T'Challa had forgotten that. Barnes was still an American citizen. Americans provided lawyers to their citizens as a matter of right - anyone who spent time in America or around Americans knew that. That even Barnes' own people would disregard such a sacred thing should have troubled T'Challa before. It hadn't.

*I am king now, and in my first act as king, I let myself be manipulated by Zemo just as he intended for the Avengers. I must do better.*

Rogers asked few questions as they crossed the North Pole and flew south towards the Raft, though T'Challa could tell that he wanted to. Even as enemies, T'Challa had sensed that Rogers was an honorable man, but even the closest allies weren't privy to all of Wakanda's secrets. Stark had never realized how closely T'Challa could track Iron Man; the Quinjets' stealth technology had evaded him, but following Stark to Siberia had been easy. (Iron Man tracking was something of a shared hobby among the boys and girls in the Wakandan technology school.) Rogers and Stark also would not know how easily vibranium-based circuitry and non-binary code could breach even their most heavily encrypted computer systems.

As the hours passed, Rogers did show a remarkable recovery from his injuries. He awoke more alert and ate well, tending to his own and Barnes' wounds with murmured reassurances to his friend. Barnes was not so well off. Rogers firmly refused Barnes' weak suggestions that he accompany Rogers into the Raft to rescue the Avengers, and Barnes gave in with little argument.

Only with Rogers awake at Barnes' side did T'Challa set the autopilot and venture closer. "You may still be suffering from shock," he observed. Barnes was pale and sweaty, in visible pain, and unable to sit up. Some of the wires from his arm still sparked. "You're stable for now, but you need medical attention. We'll go directly to Wakanda from the Raft. From there, I'll see to it that your people have safe passage wherever they wish to go."

Barnes focused a confused, bleary gaze on Rogers. "How're you - get in the Raft? 's submerged unless y'have clearance."

"I will handle that," said T'Challa.

Rogers looked at Barnes. "You've been held in there?"

Barnes shook his head. "Got in. Twice, for...oh God." He trailed off and closed his eyes.

Rogers looked at T'Challa and visibly braced himself. T'Challa shook his head. "I know what the Winter Soldier was and what he did. I won't break my oath. After you've both recovered, decide then how to face the past."

"Thank you," Rogers said roughly. He kept a hand on Barnes' good shoulder as T'Challa returned to the cockpit. When T'Challa checked the feed from the camera in the cabin, Barnes had relaxed and was holding Rogers' hand with his good one. Rogers' free hand was pressing a cloth to his friend's face.

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**THE NORTH ATLANTIC**
Steve restrained himself from asking questions on the approach to the Raft, such as how T'Challa was accessing communications traffic between Tony Stark and the UN, let alone how T'Challa gained control of the Raft's systems and convinced it that the Secretary of State had returned.

To Steve's intense relief, Tony hadn't advanced any warnings about his and Bucky's escape, and didn't seem to harbor any suspicions about T'Challa's involvement. Tony took the Quinjet and Zemo directly to Berlin, and no security alerts were given to the Raft.

As they arrived, the giant submarine surfaced below them. "They think this is Ross's helicopter," said T'Challa. "I have control of their internal monitors. By the time they have visual contact, it will be too late. This will be simple; there are only four prisoners. I'm shutting down all internal security measures in one minute."

"I'll get into position." Rogers slipped to the back of the cabin. Barnes murmured a protest, and the Captain answered, "It'll be all right, Buck. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Only after Rogers had left the plane did T'Challa add, "If he is not back, then I will go after him." Barnes looked briefly up at the cockpit, then turned his gaze back to the hatch with an expression T'Challa had never seen on this man in all that had happened over the past few days: anguish.

There was no need for T'Challa to intervene, because Rogers made good on his promise to Barnes, and returned with ninety seconds to spare - quite impressive. He was accompanied by Barton, Wilson, and Lang, as well as Wanda Maximoff still enveloped in a straitjacket and electric restraint collar. T'Challa left the pilot's seat with an electronic key and tablet to see to her before they sealed the plane's hatch.

The four fugitive Avengers stared at T'Challa. "Oo-kay," said Barton slowly.

"Obviously we've missed a few developments since the airport," said Lang.

T'Challa focused on the collar. It was linked to the Raft's security, but better to have it off her - and off the plane - in case there were failsafes triggered to detonate or sedate her if she moved beyond range. "You have, but we should wait until after departure to explain. I will not hurt you," he added to the dazed young woman.

"Were they sedating her?" Steve asked, working on the straightjacket.

"N-no," Maximoff said, blinking at T'Challa. "It just...hurts."

"One moment." With a click, the collar's deactivation codes fell into place, and it opened. T'Challa and Steve hissed in unison, imagining the girl's energy erupting from the shock, but although she sagged into Barton's arms, no red power appeared. T'Challa tossed the collar out onto the landing pad and slapped the controls to close the hatch, then slid past his guests to return to the cockpit.

"Strap in. Satellites will have begun searching as soon as they lost the transponder. We're leaving fast."

"Jesus!" Behind him, Wilson had discovered Barnes. "What the hell happened?!"

Rogers' quiet answer silenced the group. "Tony."

There was not a sound in the cabin as T'Challa raised them safely out of the Raft into the sunlight. He entered a final set of commands into the prison's hacked security systems. The Raft's internal security and sensors remained down, with all recording and memory storage devices continually wiping themselves. In an hour, the Raft's transponder would reactivate, and those inside would have reestablish communications. Its life support was untouched and fully operational.
Silence was still thick in the jet as his six guests stared mutely at the floors, the walls, and each other. T’Challa was keenly aware of its cause as he programmed an evasive course for Wakanda: he was returning home to his kingdom, and his people would be waiting for him. But he was returning without his father, and that knowledge sent renewed lances of pain, grief, and rage through his heart.

Behind him, his six guests were going into exile, hunted by their own people, torn from family and denounced by friends. Wakanda would give them sanctuary and comfort - not that they could be sure of that yet - but it would not be home for any of them.

Thanks to the actions of Helmut Zemo, life would never be the same for any of them.

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** T’Challa brings the fugitives to the safety of Wakanda, but must finally face what he's been putting off - his family, and the beginning of a long grieving process for the loss of his father. The Avengers who've escaped the Raft learn what happened between Steve and Tony, and all contemplate where their choices have led them.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**
Chapter Summary

T'Challa brings his guests to Wakanda and reunites with his brother and sister - and begins the hard process of formally (and internally) mourning his father.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming! Original character guide at the end of the chapter. When T'Challa and other characters are switching back and forth from English to Wakandan, I italicize the Wakandan. If they're just talking to each other, assume it's Wakandan.

Canon Notes: This chapter marks the beginning of my delve into Wakanda and T'Challa's family. Most of my research comes from Wikipedia and blog articles about how to appropriately portray African culture and characters, but if you feel I'm handling it wrong, please tell me! I used the comics as a guide wherever possible, and place Wakanda in East Africa on the intersection of South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, and headcanon that Wakanda has some (but not all) cultural and religious traditions in common with them. I pictured Shuri and Jakarra as only a few years younger than T'Challa, to the point that all three were contenders for the succession during the Wakandan tournament to become Black Panther, which took place about 20 years earlier when T'Chaka became too old for physical fighting and needed to name an heir to the throne.

Chapter Two

GREENLAND

They didn't manage a nonstop flight to Wakanda. Steve was worried about Wanda, either that the shock collar or something she wouldn't talk about had done more damage than just stressed her out.

She was shaky and tense and wouldn't eat, and finally admitted, "The power was...building up. I can't let it go or I'll lose it. It could damage the plane."

"Then we will land before Wakanda," said T'Challa. "I'm changing course. A remote part of Greenland will suffice."

"Let me off before you land," Wanda said, eyes closed. "Keep a wide distance until it's over."

Clint began, "Someone should stay with you - "

"- no. I want no one nearby, at least several miles in any direction," she hissed. "I don't...know what will happen. It's never been suppressed like that."
"I'll give you a communicator," said T'Challa. "She can call when she believes it is safe."

Once they were hovering over a barren flatland over two hundred miles from any settlements, Wanda hopped off the ramp and waved them off. "Nobody's made a constipation joke; I'm so proud of us," said Scott. Steve and the other men shot him looks ranging from disbelief to disgust. "Okay, I'm proud of you."

They flew ten miles away, then T'Challa called her. "We're ten miles directly to your east. Do you think that's enough?"

"Yeah," she answered breathlessly. "Thanks."

Thirty seconds later, a massive ball of her red energy erupted into the sky like a mushroom cloud. T'Challa growled something and wrestled with the controls as the plane swayed, even on the ground. "That was an EMP. If we'd been closer, we might not be able to take off again."

Fortunately, Bucky wasn't suffering from the delay in getting him to a doctor. Like Steve, he was healing on his own, able to sit up now and more alert, if still in obvious pain. Steve gave way for Clint and Scott to look over T'Challa's shoulders at the Wakandan jet's instruments. "The transponder and the phone signal are both down...wait - right there, there she is," said Clint. "She's up and moving. Let's head towards her, slowly."

"I've never seen systems configured like this!" said Scott.

"That stands to reason; you're the first westerners to travel in our military craft," said T'Challa. "I must ask you not to take pictures."

His tone was completely deadpan, but Clint and Scott grinned. "My days of spying for the US are very, very over," Clint replied. "And it's not as if I had a camera on the Raft." He gestured to the screens. "There, she's waving. She's good."

"There was some strange degradation in the components of that collar," T'Challa said, hovering the plane across the grassland. "She may have been trying to free herself, or her power may simply refuse to be contained. A blast like that could have disabled and sunk the Raft."

Clint gauged Wanda's position as they approached, then slipped back to Steve. "I don't know if she'll say," he said reluctantly. "But some of the guards may have hurt her. There weren't any females; they spoon fed her, had to, y'know, help her with the toilet, everything. She put up a fight once - they hit her a few times before one of the senior guards put a stop to it."

That possibility had buzzed around in Steve's mind since the minute he'd found Wanda slumped on the bench of her cell in that straight jacket, staring at the wall. She'd barely reacted when he opened the door. Sons of bitches.

T'Challa landed them and lowered the hatch so Wanda could come back aboard. She already looked much better. "How you feeling?" asked Sam.

"I don't think I have to worry that my skin will fly off now," she said, and sighed deeply. "And I'm hungry."

They dug into the provisions stowed in the cabin, and T'Challa even brought them a box from the cockpit. "Here. My private 'stash'. Help yourselves."

"So what does royalty stash in the junk food drawer?" asked Scott.
Apparently several varieties of candy and dried fruit, most of it labeled in languages Steve couldn't begin to translate, along with..."Walker's shortbread?"

"I went to Oxford."

Clint would have devoured T'Challa's entire supply of candied coffee beans, but Steve took the bag away from him to save the rest for T'Challa. Sam was being...strangely solicitous of Bucky, helping him with the water bottle and trying to tempt him to eat more.

He saw Steve watching him and dropped his eyes. "Listen, Cap... I told Stark about Siberia."

Steve frowned, puzzled. "When?"

"When he came to the Raft, after. Dammit," Sam bent over his knees before sitting up and looking at Steve, continuing desperately, "I swear, I thought he was backing down! He promised he'd go alone and as a friend. I'd never have told him if I thought he'd try to take Bucky out!"

"Oh..." Steve still felt as if his mind was moving too slow to track everything.

Bucky cleared it up. "It's not your fault," he said quietly, between sips of water. "Not this." He gestured with his head to his mangled arm. "Stark declared a truce - at first. Then he found out...it was me that - his parents." He kept his eyes fixed on the bottle. "It was me."

No one made a sound. Clint shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose, leaning forward in his seat. Scott sat motionless with a dried peach halfway to his mouth. Wanda's eyes were full, and Sam was staring at Bucky with some combination of confusion and suspicion on his face.

Steve took a deep breath and began bringing them up to speed. "It was Helmut Zemo. He bombed the UN in Vienna and triggered Bucky all to get his hands on the report from the 'mission' Hydra sent him on in 1991. It was Tony's parents. There was a video from the street. Tony... when he came, it was to help us. He kept his word to Sam, but when he saw... Zemo wanted revenge for his family in Sokovia." Wanda flinched hard and put her face into her hands. Clint sat up and rubbed her shoulders, avoiding everyone's eyes. "He said something about - if you attack from outside, it doesn't work, but make us tear ourselves apart from the inside, we're truly dead. I guess it worked. The end of the Avengers."

T'Challa walked back to them from the cockpit, silhouetted against the sunlight streaming through the canopy windows. "Is it?" Steve looked at him in surprise. "Have the Avengers surrendered to Zemo?"

A pulse of some strange energy went through Steve's chest at that, bursting out of him with a small noise - he realized it was a laugh. It wasn't exactly happy or humorous. "Maybe that's not how I'd put it. But you saw what Tony and I did to each other. How the hell would the Avengers exist after that?"

T'Challa shrugged and leaned against the wall. "Perhaps you and Stark can't forgive each other. But I see six Avengers here. In the beginning, in New York, there were only five."

"Net gain," muttered Clint, and he burst into laughter that sounded almost as painful as Steve's felt.

"Five and a half, maybe." To Steve's surprised pleasure, Bucky smiled, the closest to real humor of any of them so far in this weird conversation. "Assuming you really want an ex-Winter Soldier."

Wanda wasn't able to see the funny side. "They took me, ex-Hydra, after everything I did by choice. You're a saint compared to me, Barnes."
"C'mon, kid," said Clint. "We've talked about this. Every one of us has done more of our share of fucking up - well, maybe not his highness over there."

"I nearly killed an innocent man," said T'Challa calmly.

"I'm not innocent," Bucky retorted.

"You were innocent of my father's death, and when you told me in Leipzig, I ignored you. I fell all too easily for Zemo's deception, and played the role he wanted me to play." T'Challa gestured with the broadest smile Steve had seen from him. "We've all 'fucked up.' Clint is right."

Steve wasn't quite sure what sly joke was in those statements - but they were directed to Clint, and Clint got them, because he erupted into laughter again, this time as if it really was funny. Scott, Bucky, and Wanda just exchanged blank looks. "You got a name, or is it His Highness, First of His Name, King of black cats and dragons and exploding arrows?" Clint asked.

"My name is T'Challa, when we're not in a formal setting. And yes, I am the first of my name. Wakandan royalty are more creative with names than the Europeans." T'Challa shook his head and returned his attention to Steve. "The United Nations believes I've returned to Wakanda already, though I continue to demand trial and justice against Zemo for my father's death. Tony Stark arrived safely in New York. He reported Zemo's confession and your escape, but he's refused every demand by Secretary Ross for information on your possible location. Or the location of Agent Romanoff and the rest of you."

"Is there any word on Rhodes?" asked Sam.

"Only rumor that his back was broken. Paralysis is likely."

Sam bent over again. "You did everything you could, man," said Clint. "I saw you go after him."

"Shouldn't've happened."

"None of this should have happened. Every one of us on this plane should have done something different, something more," said T'Challa. "Your captain told Stark, no one can change what already was done. Stark was unable to listen, but I am."

"Is that why you helped us?" asked Wanda.

He nodded. "You have amnesty in Wakanda for as long as you need it. If you wish to return to your homes, I'll do what I can to help you."

Steve couldn't help looking at Scott and Clint. Unsurprisingly, they had very similar looks on their places, some mix of hope and dismay. Can they go home? Is it safe for their kids at home? If not, is there somewhere we can take them that they'll be safe?

Wanda looked absently toward the back of the cabin. "There is no home for me."

Scott reached past Clint to give her a pat on the knee. "Sokovia has bigger things to worry about than immigration. I doubt they'd even notice you joining in the relief efforts."

"Oh, they would definitely notice." She leaned back and shut her eyes. "Didn't you hear? There were so many press releases and statements after Ultron, I thought the whole world must know: 'Wanda Maximoff betrayed her country for Hydra, and helped bring about greater destruction than every war in our history combined. In recognition for her role in the final defense, we will not demand her extradition, but if she ever returns to Sokovia, she will be tried and punished as an"
"Accessory to mass murder and terrorism." She opened her eyes and gave Scott a wan, bitter smile. "There were many of us, who believed Baron Strucker and what he said, that the Avengers were no better than Tony Stark, and every government whose troops brought his weapons down on us. We used to graffiti the walls with their effigies. My brother and I weren't the only ones who volunteered for the enhancement project, just the only ones to survive. We had supporters then. Now the Avengers are heroes to Sokovia, but I'm burned in effigy. My face is everywhere. The International Criminal Court is still deciding whether my actions fall within their jurisdiction for war crimes."

Steve leaned forward. "A couple of fourteen-year-olds in a war zone swallowing a powerful man's lies is nowhere near the kind of malice that makes a crime against humanity. Yeah, it's true: there's blood on your hands, and none of us can deny that. But most of us have our share."

But Wanda looked at T'Challa. "Your country won't want me there. Not after Lagos."

"Wanda, come on! That was my blunder, not yours!" Steve exclaimed. He looked hurriedly at T'Challa. "And I was the one in command. If anyone's to blame for the fatalities in that hotel, it's me."

T'Challa raised a hand. "I hadn't forgotten Lagos when I gave you sanctuary. Yes, some of my people may object. If they do, I will hear them. Contrary to what the Americans say, kings are not all tyrants." Steve grinned sheepishly. He was known to be rather standoffish with the few non-symbolic monarchs he encountered. "But I've given you sanctuary, and no one in Wakanda will undo that. Anyone who tries will answer for it."

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**BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA**

In an abundance of caution, T'Challa didn't speak of his passengers on the calls ahead of his return. All his guests would need accommodation, decent food, and medical attention, but none of them were in such distress that it was worth risking secrecy. Wanda Maximoff was anxious and fidgety, and despite the entreaties of her friends to try to sleep, she couldn't. She did reassure them all that there was no further danger of an eruption of her power. "I'll just be glad for some air once we land."

"I can arrange that," T'Challa told her. Even when he and his father had been grieving and angry over the deaths of their emissaries in Lagos, they'd both noted with pity how very young the enhanced woman was.

"*We will seek accountability and oversight for the Avengers,*" T'Chaka had said. "*But turning one or two individuals into scapegoats will accomplish nothing.*"

Captain Rogers was correct in his assessment of the situation; as leader of the team, he was responsible for any errors committed by those under his command or harm that resulted to bystanders. It was true that some of the families of the victims wouldn't be pleased to find those very Avengers whose battle had killed their loved ones being sheltered now by the king himself. In some ways, now that Zemo's responsibility for Vienna was made public, James Barnes would be the least controversial of T'Challa's guests.

For the time being, controversy could be mitigated by informing as few people as possible. T'Challa brought the jet in to the airstrip that adjoined Birnin Zana's medical research center, the most secure compound in the country. He shooed the curious Lang and Barton out of the cockpit, not that he blamed them for wanting a look around. There would be time later for that.

"*The tribal council and delegates were expecting you to arrive at the palace airstrip, my king,*" said the air traffic controller. "*Princess Shuri asks if you wish them to meet you.*"
"No, there is urgent business that I must conclude before the formalities begin," T'Challa replied. "Send Dr. Kelile and Dr. Dahab to meet me, as well as Ministers Jelani and Subira. I must discuss these recent events with them."

Strictly speaking, if the king wanted only four waiting for him on the landing strip, there should only be four standing apart from the Dora Milaje. But for the royal family, things were not always quite so strict, and T'Challa had no plan to deviate from his father's pattern of slightly loosening protocol so that they could all remember to be a family as well as leaders of a nation.

So it didn't trouble him when he saw five awaiting him beside the runway in front of the entire retinue of Dora Milaje. His younger sister Shuri had joined them. The two doctors and the two councilors, ministers of diplomacy and security, stood on either side and just behind her, and she led them in bowing as T'Challa emerged from the plane. "My king, your people welcome you home and await your commands. Your father's council, ministers, and all citizens of our sacred soil present themselves to your service."

T'Challa bowed in response. "Our nation has suffered a grievous loss of its king, and we shall mourn and honor him as the great man and father that he was. I return ready and able to carry out my duties, and rely upon the loyalty and honor of the men and women who advised our father so ably." He straightened and for a brief instant, his sister met his eyes, and her formal pose slipped, reflecting the grief and anger he carried within himself. Then she started, glancing past him at open hatch of the plane. One of his passengers must be visible. He switched to English and raised his voice. "The terrible events that took our king from us have led to my first act as king. I have given the amnesty of Wakanda to six guests." He turned and beckoned to them.

Captain America came first. One of the doctors caught her breath, and T'Challa managed not to smile as even his sister's eyes widened. Despite being no longer garbed in his colorful suit and bearing his shield, Steven Rogers was still an impressive figure. He was also the subject of much discussion everywhere, including Wakanda in the past few days. Even the Dora Milaje were not immune, but all of them quickly shifted their focus from surprise to scanning the stranger for possible threats.

"None of us are armed," said Rogers, speaking for the benefit of the watchers.

Wilson and Lang assisted Barnes down the ramp, and behind them came Barton with an arm around Wanda Maximoff. T'Challa let the witnesses digest the presence of the Avengers, then addressed them all again in English. He'd chosen these two doctors and these two ministers not only for the relevance of their leadership positions, but also for their fluency in foreign languages. "As king of Wakanda, I have granted asylum on our soil to Steven Rogers, James Barnes, Samuel Wilson, Clinton Barton, Wanda Maximoff, and Scott Lang. They have the protection and shelter of the royal house." This he directed to the Dora Milaje, who bowed acknowledgment. "Their presence in Wakanda shall not be disclosed to any foreigner, or discussed unless it concerns their safety and comfort. I will hear anyone who wishes to speak on this - after their injuries have been treated." He beckoned to the doctors.

Dr. Kelile nodded to him and stepped towards the foreign guests. "Welcome. I am Dr. Kelile, senior physician of Birnin Zana Medical Research Center. Please come with me." Dr. Dahab was more of an engineer, but he had designed many robotic and electronic medical aids. From the way he was staring at Barnes' mangled arm, no doubt he knew why T'Challa had sent for him.

T'Challa trailed after them with Shuri and his ministers. "There will be objections, my king," Minister Subira told him quietly in Wakandan.

"I know. As I said, I will hear them. The truth of Barnes's innocence should be known here by now, and the innocence of his defenders. Only those who must know of their presence should know."
"The council?" asked Subira.

"Yes. Those in the palace enclosure will know, since that's where my guests will stay once they've been released by the doctors."

Ahead of them, the diminutive Dr. Kelile was briskly directing her staff, calling in the ones who spoke English to work directly with the patients. To T'Challa's amusement, the tall Americans were exchanging startled looks as she darted around them like a dragonfly.

Rogers stayed at his friend's side; Barnes looked dazed amid all the movement. Dr. Dahab made his way through the medics and asked cautiously, "May I examine your arm?"

Barnes stared at him. Dahab was a tall man, T'Chaka's age, wearing wire-rimmed glasses and the stereotypical "nerd" manner of speech and dress that was unmistakable in almost every culture. After a moment, Barnes nodded, but as soon as he flinched, Dahab withdrew his hands. Dr. Kelile stepped closer. "What can you tell us about it? Is it wired directly into your nerves?"

"I don't know," Barnes said. He nodded to Dahab to continue, but gripped Rogers' hand. "I don't remember - getting damaged - like this before."

Barnes grew pale and sweaty as Dr. Dahab and an assistant tried to probe for a way to remove the damaged areas. "We must try to do something for the pain," said Kelile. "Do you respond to painkillers?"

"Dunno. For maintenance, they just - strapped me down."

"Well, we are not doing that," Kelile huffed. Rogers grinned at her. "I would like to do a full detail scan."

"Doctor, Miss Maximoff is also being scanned," said one of the assistants.

"'s okay, I can wait," muttered Barnes, closing his eyes and leaning against Rogers.

Just T'Challa was becoming satisfied that the transition was going smoothly, Maximoff screamed, and activity in the secure wing halted. T'Challa hurried to the scanner rooms.

"Wanda, whoa, hey, hey, easy!" Past the heads of his startled medics, T'Challa saw the enhanced woman scrambling out of imaging scanner, electrodes flying off her face and crashing headlong into Barton.

The medics babbled apologies and grew still more flustered when they saw the king watching. Maximoff clung to Barton and choked out apologies of her own. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean - sorry, I can't - can't breathe - "

"Everyone, step back, please, give her room!" Dr. Kelile ordered, and T'Challa retreated with the bystanders. After a few moments, two of the staff ushered Maximoff and Barton down to the outer doors. "They'll take her to get some air outside," she told the anxious Avengers. "We have a mobile scanner for patients who cannot tolerate small spaces. Sergeant Barnes, are you ready?"

"I guess panic attacks are a different animal if you're as enhanced as she is," mused Lang.

"She said it wasn't a panic attack," said Rogers.

Wilson shook his head. "It may only be she's never had one before. But she's never been stuck in a straitjacket and shock collar before either." Dr. Kelile turned around, looking appalled. "Not all of
"us," he clarified. "Just her."

Dr. Kelile pursed her lips, looking from her tablet to Barnes, who fortunately was enduring the claustrophobic scanner calmly. "How old is Miss Maximoff?"

"Twenty-one," answered Rogers. From next to the scanner operators, Dr. Dahab turned around in dismay, and T'Challa had no doubt that many of the medics and staff were doing the same math in their heads. *Reports were that Baron Strucker was engaged in his experimentation on humans in Sokovia as early as 2007, even before Iron Man appeared. Maximoff confessed that she and her brother joined him in 2009, seeking an opportunity to challenge Stark. They would've been very young.*

He cast a look around the surrounding rooms. A nurse was bandaging Wilson's ribs, and two others were assembling the mobile scanner for Maximoff. Lang and Rogers remained in the doorway of the scanner room, looking after Barnes. Near the triage center's doorway, Shuri and the ministers were restless.

T'Challa stepped back to Rogers and Lang. "I must go. There's a great deal of business waiting for a new king. Dr. Kelile will see that you are all treated for your injuries and made comfortable. Once she releases you, you'll be my guests at the palace."

"Thank you, your highness." There was intense emotion in Rogers' voice. "Thank you. I don't know anywhere else in the world that I could've taken them."

"You're under my protection now. Rest, Captain. You're among friends."

To T’Challa's amusement, Lang bowed as he stepped away. Rogers didn't go quite so far, but inclined his head about as deeply as a man could without bowing outright. Returning to his sister, T'Challa saw the faint twitch of her lips.

Once they were in the corridor, they slipped back into their own language. "Even the great Captain America pays tribute," said Shuri. "Impressive. You're starting well."

"Does that mean you'll give me a year before trying to overthrow me?"

She feigned outrage. "What common adventurer do you think I am? A new king should have at least five years. Earlier is just bad manners."

"I'm alarmed that you've researched the etiquette."

Shuri chuckled, while the ministers and Dora Milaje pretended to be deaf to the conversation. Once they stepped back outside onto the airstrip where the royal shuttle awaited, all humor left both of them. For here they were, son and daughter of T'Chaka, on their way back to the palace where their father's body lay until burial. T'Challa's recognition by the tribal councils and their people as king would be a grand event - the last for a year while Wakanda mourned.

He found himself staring at the city below. It was so small compared to the massive skyscrapers and sprawling streets of other nations, but intimately familiar and comforting every time he returned home. Until now, anyway.

"You were only away nine days. Did you expect it to change?" Shuri asked.

In front of the shuttle, the elegant wood and metal construction of the royal palace, residence of the kings and seat of government floated into view through a veil of fog. T'Challa and Shuri and their siblings had been born here, raised and educated, trained and served in the king's government all
their lives.

"No," he said. "I didn't expect it. But it has changed." He lowered his eyes from the window. "Is he there?"

It was a few breaths before Shuri answered. "Yes."

T'Chaka would lie in state in the throne room until his funeral procession to the temple, then to the Chieftains' Tomb where he would be interred with his father and grandfather.

Minister Subira spoke up. "Thousands have come to the city already, your highnesses, awaiting the opening of the palace to pay their respects. Your father was a great king and father to us all. There is no one who does not grieve with you."

T'Challa nodded to her. She the eldest of all in the Wakandan government, old enough to be T'Chaka's mother, but a formidable woman, former Chieftainess of her tribe until she stepped aside for her oldest daughter and came to serve as a minister of domestic and international diplomacy. Since T'Chaka's mother had died young, many Wakandans regarded Subira as queen mother in all but name. That role had only grown after the death of T'Challa's mother and the desertion by Shuri and Jakarra's mother. Subira had watched two sons precede her to the grave. Losing T'Chaka would be a bitter blow to her as well.

While T'Challa had been chasing an innocent man throughout Europe, obsessed with killing Barnes with his own hands, no doubt Subira and his siblings had been consoling the Wakandan people, making preparations for the king's funeral and maintaining Wakanda's position in the chaotic aftermath within the United Nations.

Minister Jelani had not always seen eye-to-eye with T'Chaka and Subira, but he and T'Challa got on well. They were close in age and had known each other since childhood, had become men of Wakanda and trained as warriors together. Jelani was the third son of his tribe's chieftain, pragmatic, clever, and fiercely loyal. His wife was a priestess of Bast, and they were parents to a small population explosion - no less than nine healthy children, the eldest of whom was a trainee with the Dora Milaje. Hence he was an easy choice to be among the first who would learn of the Avengers' amnesty.

The smooth black roads of the city bustled with people and far more cars than usual. Within the city, most traveled on foot or took the street shuttles during their daily lives. Most of the cars belonged to people who lived in smaller villages and towns outside Birnin Zana.

They flew over the palace roofs and descended to the helipad on the grounds, into the view of an assembled throng of hundreds. Within the palace enclosure itself, all of the ministers, the tribal council, and the Dora Milaje were waiting to receive their new king, along with every other prominent Wakandan who could gain entry. T'Challa would be surrounded by people from now on, for the rest of his life. T'Challa rubbed the Panther's ring on his finger. It was symbol of leadership a powerful tribe centuries ago, and now of the kingship.

He had always known he would remove it from his father's hand one day, but never imagined it would be the way it had been: choking on dust and smoke in the shattered rubble of a foreign building, cradling T'Chaka's broken body in his arms.

His sister's hand came into his view, touching his own. He and their brother Jakarra used to tease her when they were younger; Shuri had been far taller than many girls, and had big hands and feet. It had been cruel of them, as they came to realize after growing up, but Shuri rarely admitting being hurt. At the time, she'd sneered, "My hands will be stronger to wear the Panther's ring than either of
Almost twenty years ago, in the contest to become the king's formal heir and the next Black Panther, T'Challa had faced challengers from throughout the country, including several cousins and both of his siblings. Shuri was the one who had come closest to besting him.

A few fools had made the mistake of suggesting that Shuri had chosen to let T'Challa win the contest, only to be soundly reprimanded for the slander. That was a notion that would bring dishonor to sister and brother - that she would be weak-willed enough to fail to give her opponent the full test of her strength and skill, and that T'Challa was not, in fact, the one most worthy to serve as Wakanda's protector and future king.

When the shuttle landed, Shuri and the ministers exited first, taking their place among the retinue waiting to receive T'Challa. T'Challa stepped to the ground before his kneeling people, first among them, Shuri and Jakarra. Behind his brother and sister were his cousins and other extended family. Beside them were the tribal council, the heads of nearly every town and village in the country, and the high priests and priestesses, and the Dora Milaje.

The priests and priestesses intoned the ancient blessings upon the kingdom and its king and lit the traditional torches whose sacred flames would burn all year, honoring the passing of the late king and the anointing of the new one. T'Challa wasn't sure whether he believed all the tenets of faith, (to the point where T'Chaka had scolded him that skepticism wasn't the same as wisdom), but he recognized the importance of tradition and belief. Many Wakandans did believe, and at times like this of ancient ceremony and invocation, omens would be watched, and thoughts would turn towards what future was indicated.

The smoke from the torches in the priestesses' hands rose straight up, undiluted by the wind. A good omen. A shroud of fog still hung low over the city, but behind the statue of the Great Panther who faced the south route by which most foreigners entered the country, the sun had broken through. Also a good omen.

Fog was an omen of sorrow and troubled hearts. (As teenagers, T'Challa and his siblings had sneered, "Fog is an omen of high humidity and temperature differentials." They'd been scolded for that too.)

The priests explained the fog that often shrouded Birnin Zana as "merely the reflection of what lives in the hearts of men in the present. Our present is often sorrow."

Speaking of which, T'Challa passed through his subjects and entered the palace alone. It was empty. As king, it was for him to decide when to reopen the doors.

As a little boy, the formal state rooms and halls of the palace had seemed huge and intimidating. With each passing year, he grew larger, and those parts of the palace seemed less so. By age twenty, he'd been able to stand in those rooms with full intention that he would earn the succession, the mantle of Black Panther, and preside over the palace one day. At twenty-six, he'd defeated every warrior in Wakanda to secure his claim.

Now, in the utter silence, his footsteps echoing on the dark granite floors, he felt like a little boy again, lost and shaken by the sheer scale of the responsibilities that came with ruling over his father's palace, his country, and his people. They were all T'Challa's now.

His feet carried him to the throne room, the one room in the complex where he was not alone.

T'Chaka lay there, arrayed in state upon an ebony bier between the idols of Bast and Sekhmet,
clothed in the traditional garb of the king. In a few days, T'Challa would return from interring his father in the chieftains' tomb, and be attired the same way for his coronation.

Once the doors were reopened, a steady stream of mourners be admitted to pay their respects, and it would continue until the funeral procession carried T'Chaka to the temple, and then to his body's eternal resting place.

This was the last time T'Challa would ever be alone with him again.

He crossed the room in a rush and put a hand on his father's - and felt a stab of some terrible combination of revulsion, disappointment, sorrow, and shame. T'Chaka's hand was cold and waxy, nothing like what T'Challa remembered. Of course, he'd been embalmed already to lie in state. It was necessary. A body was only a vessel; the soul had flown away days ago. Maybe T'Chaka's spirit had already departed into eternity and paradise. Maybe mortal faith was wrong and there was nothing after, and all that had made T'Chaka alive had simply vanished. Maybe, as the devout believed, T'Chaka waited patiently in the invisible world beside his funeral bier until the priests finished the rites that would release his soul to Bast and Sekhmet.

T'Challa had no idea what he truly believed about the immortal world, or if it even existed. Surely a king and warrior should be more certain.

But maybe his father could still hear him, if not with human ears.

His throat caught painfully as he drew breath to speak. "I remember... you telling me that only idiots lack doubt. Only simpletons don't bother asking questions, and only madmen think they have the answers to all the questions. If I had known...in Vienna, that the words you spoke to me would be the last, I would have listened more closely. I would have said so much more to you." He moved his hand to the finely-woven cloak, decorated with the colors and symbols of every tribe in Wakanda, blessed by the priests to invoke the wisdom of all ancestors passed on.

Despite the coolness of the throne room, it felt warm. T'Challa smiled, even as the hitching of his breath grew deeper. In the burned, bloody aftermath of the bomb, still holding his father's body in his arms, he'd shifted so quickly from tears to rage. Within an hour, the face of the bomber had been identified, and with that face had come a name, and T'Challa's rage had turned to blood lust. He'd forgotten to mourn T'Chaka, and thought only of making the murderer pay.

"I'm sorry, Father. It was too easy, to think of nothing but revenge. I suppose I wanted to put off mourning for you. Hatred was easier to feel than grief." His throat closed again, and he stroked the cloth with his thumb. Even now, it's easier to be angry than to miss you. He gave up on trying to wipe tears from his face. What did it matter when no one was here to see them - except maybe his father? Are you here, watching me? Are you pleased with the choices I've made as king so far, or have I already let you down?

King or warrior, no man was omnipotent, his father would say. "You will make mistakes. You'll have regrets, as I do. No emotion should consume you, and guilt and despair can be as destructive as hubris or fear."

"The mind and the heart, hopes and fears are weights and counterweights that will pull you in many different directions," one of the high priests who tutored the king's children always said. "Live in between them, and that is the way you will find the straightest path."

In front of his people, all of them grieving for T'Chaka, T'Challa would be expected to show strength. There was no shame in grief, but it would fall to him to be reassuring during such a time of pain. He couldn't reveal the despair he felt in his heart at being without his father. But here, alone, he
could admit it and release it.

*I wonder if that's why this tradition exists,* he thought, and a smile tugged at his face even as tears still flowed. *Maybe hidden underneath all the ceremony and grand symbolism of the king's welcome is just a history of men who need one last moment alone to remember what it feels like to be a boy, to need the reassurance of his father.*

The painful tightness of his throat eased, and he laughed quietly. Closing his eyes, he could imagine T'Chaka laughing with him, patting his shoulder. The day T'Challa had won the mantle of the Black Panther, his father had sat beside him before the ceremony. *"You've earned your place as my heir and as your country's defender. One day I'll see you stand before your people as king. I'm king now, but I've never forgotten that I'm also a father. You'll be exalted, but a part of me will always see my boy. Don't be afraid to be a father, or a son, or a brother. No one is too high and mighty for his family."*

"I wish you'd lived to see me," he told T'Chaka. "Just long enough to say goodbye. Just long enough to see my king and my father one last time before you go on into eternity." He stepped back, wiped his eyes, and bowed low before his father's bier. "May all you believed of death and what comes after be true. Let Bast and Sekhmet carry you into a universe of peace and joy. No one deserved it more than you. I will always be your boy. And I promise, Father. I'll never forget you, or stop trying to make you proud."

He bent forward and kissed T'Chaka's forehead. Then he left the throne room for the outer doors. First, he granted entry to Shuri and Jakarra. "Each of us should have a few moments alone with our father. If you wish me to leave you, I will."

His brother and sister both dropped their formal stances the moment the door closed behind them. "That's not necessary," Shuri murmured. "We've had time to see him alone." She held out her hands, and each of her brothers took one. "Let's take this moment to say goodbye together. That would make him happy."

Jakarra smirked. "Maybe we should begin poking each other in the ribs and shifting from foot to foot. Just for old time's sake. He loved it so much when we misbehaved."

Laughter bubbled out of T'Challa, and Shuri outright giggled. If there was something harsh and painful behind that sound, well, it was no matter. That pain was behind all their voices, in the back of the minds of all three of T'Challa's children, for the same reason. No one else would judge them even if there had been an audience.

"We could get away with so much more now," said Shuri. "Before we could blame you because you are the elder brother and should be the best behaved. Now you're the king!" Jakarra chortled as T'Challa sputtered in mock-outrage, but then Shuri had to let go of T'Challa's hand and discreetly wipe her eyes. The moment of humor had been all too fleeting, and they were standing in front of their father's body again. "They told us... he didn't suffer?"

T'Challa swallowed hard before answering. "No. It..." His voice failed, and he had to catch his breath to find it again. They had a right to know, especially if the medics hadn't explained. Or even if the medics had explained, they still had a right to hear it from T'Challa, who had been there and seen T'Chaka first. "It was over... very fast. Seconds. I crawled to him as soon as the bomb went off. By the time... he was already gone, when I reached him." *The last thing I saw as the bomb went off was his eyes. He barely had time to look confused by my shouts. Maybe he didn't feel it at all.* "They wouldn't let me stay with him. Once the investigation began, they forced me to leave him." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I wish I'd fought them harder. Maybe I wouldn't have begun thinking
only of revenge then. My place was here, not on a hunt."

"Yes." Shuri never held back from speaking up when she thought someone was wrong (especially when that someone was her brother). But she added, "Even so, I can't say I would have acted differently, if I'd been there."

"Nor I," Jakarra agreed. He gave a wry smile. "I'm very curious to know how half of the Avengers became our guests, but that can wait. Our father has waited long enough for his people to pay their final respects."

T'Challa nodded, and left them while he returned to the doors. It would be impossible for even the three of them taking turns to preside through the entire time T'Chaka lay in state. The people of Wakanda would be freely admitted at all hours of day and night to view his body until the funeral in five days. The lines were already forming below the palace walls when T'Challa admitted the remainder of his family: cousins, aunts and uncles, anyone who had a relationship by blood or marriage. There was no rule for this, but he felt that it was the right thing to do.

He stood with his siblings and let the men, women, and children of T'Chaka's extended family lay a hand on his bier, murmur a prayer, or shed a few tears. This routine would be repeated by nearly everyone who entered between now and the funeral, but this would be their family's private vigil.

Once they had all had the chance to release their grief - as much release as could be had - T'Challa returned to the outer doors and opened them wide. The palace guards would handle the pace and number of visitors admitted, so he returned to the throne room and took up a spot at the foot of the dais.

It was poor taste to sit on the throne before being formally crowned, and terribly bad luck to do it while the late king’s body lay in state. Even without those factors, T'Challa wasn't ready to be on the throne yet.

"You don't have to stay," Minister Subira told him. "The king's body must be in state for visitors until the funeral; you can't preside for five days without rest."

"I know," he said. "But I want to stay for a little while."

So when the first of the people of Wakanda filed quietly into the throne room to pay tribute to their late king, they saw the new king standing by. Few spoke other than to murmur a greeting or a condolence, but T'Challa thought they would be reassured.

It seemed like the right way to begin.

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

Coming Soon: The medics struggle to treat a badly injured supersoldier without medications, Wanda has the solution, and Clint and Scott ponder the fate of their families on the other side of the world. T'Challa begins the awkward - and painful - process of letting some of his councilors know that the same Avengers responsible for the Lagos disaster are now in Wakanda.
Original Character Guide

Note: Based on both the canon and my research, I'm assuming Wakandans don't use family names, so are addressed only by their given name, except in the highest formality or family records when the father's name would be added as a second name.

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Dahab: Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)

Minister Subira: Wakanda's senior minister of domestic and international diplomacy, former chieftainess of a Wakandan tribe closely allied with T'Chaka's government. Mid-80s, oldest councilor to the Wakandan throne. Widowed, mother of her tribe's current chieftainess.

Minister Jelani: Another minister of diplomacy, son of a tribal chief who sometimes opposed T'Chaka's policies. T'Challa's age (40ish), married with 9 children.
Chapter Summary

The medics struggle to treat Bucky's injuries without medications while Clint and Scott ponder the fate of their families on the other side of the world. T'Challa begins the awkward - and painful - process of letting his advisers know that the same Avengers responsible for the Lagos disaster are now in Wakanda.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming!
Original character guide at the end of the chapter, though I try to use canon characters wherever possible.

Canon Notes: This fic follows the comic canon that Wakanda has involved itself in international politics in the past, particularly the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, but gradually withdrew and isolated itself entirely until recently, with outreach missions like the one in Lagos in Civil War.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Three

BIRNIN ZANA RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA

By the time the Wakandan medics completed their body scans of Wanda, using a small drone that moved around her rather than making her ride through the scanner tube, the Wakandan mechanics seemed to have worked out a treatment/repair plan for Bucky Barnes's mangled arm. Clint and Scott stayed with Wanda, but Clint hovered in the doorway so he could keep one eye on the action with the rest of the team.

The problem was that trimming or removing the frayed wires and melted panels was just as painful for Bucky as if his arm were flesh and blood. Bucky tried to hide his reactions, but didn't always succeed, and told the mechanics to just keep working.

When he asked for something to bite down on, the little Wakandan doctor, Steve, and Sam freaked out in unison and everybody started arguing.

"This is not a base for Hydra! We don't torture our patients!"
"You don't really have much choice; anesthetic doesn't work on me."
"C'mon, man, we don't know that!"
"Steve's right, I doubt Hydra ever tested any painkillers on you."
White-faced and sweaty, Bucky still shot Sam a withering look. "Sure, pump me full of mind-altering substances; that'll end well. You'd do better to just have Steve club me."

The little medic, Dr. Kelile, spat something in Wakandan that Clint couldn't begin to translate, but he had a feeling he could guess the gist of it - and suddenly at his elbow, Wanda tittered. As she slipped past, released by the diagnosticians, Clint and Scott trailed after her to join the tableau in the big treatment room.

For someone who had undoubtedly been Wakanda's Public Enemy Number One forty-eight hours ago, Bucky seemed to have endeared himself to the hospital staff. The medics and the technicians were practically in a tug-of-war over him. As best Clint could tell, the poor ex-Winter Soldier just wanted to take a nap. Steve didn't look much better. Clint knew from experience that there was only so long a man could go with strain, stress, and injuries building up until it all got to be too much.

Supersoldiers might have a longer shelf life, but Clint doubted either of them could go on forever.

Several medics were muttering over chemical formulas that Clint couldn't begin to recognize, while Dr. Dahab was trying to delicately pick away at the damaged arm, and Bucky was trying and failing to act like every touch of the tweezers wasn't agony. Steve and Sam looked ready to tackle the mechanics if that pint-sized Dr. Kelile didn't do it first.

Wanda slipped through the group and silenced them all: "I think I can help."

The medics faltered, exchanging doubtful looks, and Steve frowned. Bucky blinked at her and said weakly, "You really wanna risk messing 'round with my head?"

"It's not 'messing around' just to make you not notice pain," Wanda said. She raised her eyebrows, waiting for permission. Clint got the feeling that Bucky wanted to refuse, but was simply hurting too damn bad to turn down an offer of relief. After a long hesitation, he nodded, shuddering. Wanda stepped closer. "Close your eyes a moment."

Every Wakandan in the vicinity held their breath, as did Steve and Sam. Wanda raised a hand to Bucky's temple and brushed her fingertips across his hairline, trailing the faint red glow of her power. Bucky betrayed no reaction at all, but Wanda nodded to Dr. Dahab. The mechanic cautiously touched Bucky's arm, and this time, he didn't flinch. Surer of himself, Dr. Dahab began examining the damaged wires, and Bucky's breathing didn't even change. "Can you feel that?"

"No," Bucky breathed, and didn't open his eyes. "'s numb. 's good." Steve beamed at Wanda.

"Work quickly," Dr. Kelile admonished, but the technicians needed no further prompting, and moved in to start snipping and tugging at the tattered metal remains. She moved closer to Wanda. "How long can you hold this?"

"A while," she said, eyes on Bucky. "It's not much."

"You kidding?" Bucky murmured. Steve moved closer to the bedside, slipping his shoulder under Bucky's flesh arm. "I'd started to forget what it was like not to hurt."

Sam and Scott winced in dismay when the techs pried some of the half-melted and warped plating free of the flesh it was anchored to, forcing them to stop until the medics could staunch the blood. Dr. Dahab examined what remained and said, "The rest should be simpler. You will be more comfortable lying down."
Bucky was in a trancelike state when he opened his eyes, not focusing on anything as Steve and the doctors helped him lie down. Wanda stepped up next to his head, her fingertips still trailing red light across his forehead, and he relaxed completely, closing his eyes again with a sigh. "Thank you," he whispered.

Steve kept a hand on Bucky's as he fell asleep, his pain soothed away by Wanda when a roomful of medics with an arsenal of drugs had failed. Even when the torn wires in his arm were cauterized and sent sparks flying, he didn't so much as twitch.

It was full dark and fewer of the medics were on duty when King T'Challa returned. Sam and Scott were in danger of nodding off while standing up, and Dr. Kelile and her remaining staff were trying to coax them into bed. Clint's own head felt pretty damn heavy by then, but he didn't want to go to sleep until Wanda had finished serving as Bucky's anesthesiologist.

"How are my guests?" the king asked Dr. Kelile in English.

"They will all recover," she said. "I'm confident that we can develop a painkiller for Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers that their metabolism will not neutralize, though Miss Maximoff is kindly taking care of Sergeant Barnes for the time being."

Wanda glanced up and gave T'Challa a shy nod, but then Bucky started awake. Everyone jumped, especially Steve, fearing he'd lash out, but Bucky just groggily shook his head. "'s okay," he mumbled. "I r'member." He shut his eyes again.

Steve looked dismayed, and Dr. Dahab spoke up. "Once we have neutralized the sensors that are sending feedback into his nerves, he will be much more comfortable." He gestured to the screen displaying the damaged metal arm and all its inner workings behind the hospital bed. "Its designers took great care to provide full sensory input and dexterity, but it's clear they cared nothing for the pain he would experience when it was damaged. As far as his brain is concerned, a flesh and blood arm has been severed."

Dr. Kelile nodded. "The trauma response is the same. A man who was not enhanced would never have survived the arm's installation, let alone this."

Wanda glanced up and met Clint's eyes. She quickly looked down again. File that for future reference, Clint thought. Where's Nat when I need her? Now Wanda shot him a glare. Hey, you get to cheat by peeking into people's heads. Don't blame Nat and me for doing it the old-fashioned way.

After another hour, Sam and Scott admitted defeat and let the staff usher them off to bed.

It was three more hours before the techs finished tinkering with the arm and made satisfied noises at the readings coming from its circuitry. Bucky blinked awake without alarm and peered at the screen. "The sensory transmitters have been disabled," said Dr. Dahab. "How are you feeling, Sergeant Barnes?"

As Wanda cautiously removed her hand from his temples, Bucky squinted at what remained of his arm. "It's...not hurting. It's numb at the shoulder. Thanks," he added to Wanda. She smiled at him.

Dr. Kelile stepped in. "Now, please, I must insist that the rest of you sleep. You won't heal if you're exhausted."

Steve looked like he'd protest, but Bucky gave him a light shove. "I'm fine now. Go on."

When Steve murmured to the medics, "I need to be nearby," Bucky shot him a look of exasperation that made Clint grin. Still, Dr. Kelile was willing to give Steve a bed there in the exam room, so
peace was restored, and Bucky closed his eyes.

Clint was glad to be ushered to a private room, but walked with Wanda and the orderlies to hers first. "You gonna be okay?"

"We have given all of you recovery rooms with large windows," said a young man who seemed to have been assigned to Wanda, ushering her to the one at the end of the hall. "For Miss Maximoff, the largest." He beckoned Wanda into a room more suited to a luxury hotel than a hospital, in Clint's experience. It was one hell of an improvement on where they'd spent the past week. Wanda smiled in relief as the orderly showed her how to adjust the temperature or lower the screens to obscure or clear the windows. "If you require anything to eat or drink, or anything else, you may call for us at any time."

"Thank you," Wanda said, with feeling. She gave Clint a small nod, so he felt okay being led off to his own room.

Scott was next door to Wanda and came out to his doorway as Clint passed, looking rumpled like he'd actually managed to sleep a few hours. "Bucky's okay?"

"Yeah, they finally got the arm disconnected from his nervous system so it didn't feel like he was getting operated on without anesthetic. They're still at it, but he's asleep. Cap's with him." Clint yawned and thanked the orderly who directed him to his own room, as comfortable-looking as Wanda's. But he stared at the bed for a few minutes before wandering back to the doorway. Sure enough, Scott's door was open. "You got some sleep?"

"Yeah, a couple hours." Scott gave him a wan smile and gestured to the big window in his room. "They've got some tech that lets sound in while maintaining the temperature inside, keeping bugs out." Venturing in, Clint listened to the soft noises of a sleeping rainforest. Scott sat at the little writing desk, where he'd started filling a page on a notepad. All Clint needed was to see the greeting:

Dear Cassie...

"She has a thing about jungles," Scott explained. He stared at the letter as if he could beam it into his kid's head. "I guess I thought if I could send her a letter, tell her all about it, she'd feel better if I don't see her again for years."

"I get that, man. Believe me." Clint knew Scott did. Thanks to Tony's big mouth in the Raft, Scott and Sam knew about Laura and the kids, and it was all too likely that Fuckerbolt Ross and his minions knew too. Clint could only hope Nat would be able to keep an eye on them until he was able to establish a cover and stealth transport back home. "You're new to the whole fugitive thing. Describing where you're living undercover is a bad idea."

Scott sighed. "Yeah, I know. And I don't think I could get FedEx to deliver this either. Maybe someday, though."

Clint nodded. "Don't use names. You can fill those in later, even hers. Write down details you don't want to forget, but we won't forget our kids' names."

"Good point." Scott tore off the top part of the page with the greeting and leaned into the bathroom to toss it into the toilet. Excellent, he had some covert instincts. Shutting the door to the bathroom, he sighed again. "I guess my phone and my wallet with her pictures are sitting in a room somewhere on the Raft."

"One of the hardest parts of my job was not even being able to carry them. Pictures." Scott looked
astonished, which didn't surprise Clint. "I was a SHIELD agent, covert operations in places like Iraq, 
Russia, Venezuela, you name it, going up against some of the most violent criminal elements on the 
planet - up to and including alien invaders. Job like that means powerful and vicious enemies. No 
way in hell I'd risk anybody ever imagining I even had a family."

Scott stared at him. Clint wasn't expecting the guy to come up with any answer or any 
understanding, let alone say anything that could actually get under his skin. The sad part was that he 
knew Scott wasn't actually trying to get under his skin, but his question somehow hit Clint in the 
chest like a punch:

"Was it worth it?"

Debriefings by angry supervisors, interrogations by hostiles, even questions from Loki hadn't put the 
weight on Clint's heart the way this one did. He stood there stupidly and tried to understand why. 
Hell, it wasn't even the first time he'd heard a question like this, from the few people who knew 
about Laura and his children. The answer had always been yes. Hell, Laura would have always said 
yes. They'd both believed in what he was doing and who he was doing it for, first SHIELD and then 
the Avengers. He'd been on the right side, fighting for the good guys, and the risk and sacrifices his 
family had to make were part of it. He'd believed that, Laura had believed that, and each of them had 
been able to bolster the other when either of them started to doubt it, or when Lila and Cooper started 
to doubt it. Even after SHIELD fell and Hydra was revealed, they'd still believed, and when Nate 
was on his way, they'd thought they could explain it to Nate just like they did for Lila and Cooper. 
He'd always had an answer...

...maybe now the answer had changed, at least to the point where he was no longer sure of it.

After a long, heavy silence, it was just too much energy to decide whether he needed to maintain a 
cover. So he just told Scott the truth.

"I don't know. Before we found out about Hydra, before the goddamn Sokovia Accords and all 
this...I would've said yes. Now... I don't know."

Was it worth my wife having to pretend to be a single mom in public, my kids having to go to school 
under false names? Is it worth disappointing them again and again when I promise to be there, take 
them somewhere, and not show up because I had to get extracted for an emergency mission? Was it 
worth all that when in the end I just wind up in hiding from my own government in some tiny African 
kingdom on the other side of the planet with no idea when or if I'll ever get to go home?

If he were home, he could ask Laura. Years ago, he had promised himself that if she ever asked him 
point-blank to leave that "job," and do something less dangerous, he'd do it. There had been plenty 
of times that he'd expected her to ask, but in the end, she hadn't. He'd told himself that she wanted 
reassurance, not more questions, but that hadn't been the only reason. Selfishly, he hadn't ever asked 
her point-blank if she wanted him to change careers, at least not at moments when he knew she was 
hurting.

I wonder what you think now. Maybe it's just as well I can't hear the answer - no. Won't think that, 
ever think that.

He and Scott had nothing else to talk about, and in the end, Clint wandered back to his room in 
silence. The orderlies watched him from their work station across the hall, but they didn't pester him 
to sleep, and he shut the door to let them think that's what he was doing. He did need to get some 
rest. It'd been a while.

But it wasn't right; this room was too nice, too luxurious for a guy who'd left his wife and children
alone for months on end for most of his children's lifetimes and rewarded them all for it by becoming an international fugitive. Could Laura sleep tonight? Was Nate fussing with only her and maybe Cooper to look after him? Was Lila having nightmares? Did the kids know this time why Dad had run off and not come home? Were they mad? Were they scared? Could they sleep?

In the end, he pulled the blanket off the bed and slept on the floor.

T'Challa couldn't be reasonably expected to stand on ceremony next to T'Chaka's body through every waking hour until the funeral. Even a widow or mother would not be expected to publicly mourn to that degree, and for the succeeding king, there was simply too much to do.

Unsurprisingly, the first points of contention of T'Challa's reign were how (or whether) Wakanda should proceed onto the international stage after their first two attempts at doing so had ended in such utter disaster and heartbreak. The next was the subject of Wakanda's first grant of asylum to Westerners.

He was pleased by the fact that no rumors leaked out of the hospital ahead of him, which gave him time to pull aside the person among the delegates who would be most unsettled by the news, so that he could tell her privately. Minister Abrihet's tribe wasn't the most powerful in Wakanda, but they'd gained influence among those young people who spearheaded the good will outreach effort in the wake of Sokovia.

And they had paid dearly for it. Abrihet's twenty-five-year-old son had died in the Lagos explosion. Her daughter had lingered for several days, long enough for Abrihet and T'Chaka to visit her and the other victims in the Nigerian hospital with a team of Wakandan medics. They'd hoped to buy enough time to evacuate her home to their own facilities, but she had died in her mother's arms as T'Challa and T'Chaka watched.

She had been only twenty, but brave in her final moments, and begged T'Chaka and her mother not to abandon the effort to join the international community. Despite her heartbreak, Abrihet had promised, as had T'Chaka, and now Abrihet still spoke out in favor of loosening Wakanda's border restrictions and taking part in international relations.

However, she had been bitterly angry at the Avengers, and T'Challa knew better than to think that her feelings had changed in only a few weeks. A mother would barely notice a few weeks that had passed by since losing both of her children.

He would have to declare his decision on amnesty to his council and ministers. The least he could do was forewarn Abrihet before making an announcement that would undoubtedly bring her pain. "This is not entirely proper, but I feel that you should know before I address the entire council. I have granted amnesty to several of the Avengers, as well as James Barnes."

Abrihet took a few moments to process that. He wasn't quite certain how she would react. Like most chieftains who ruled in their own right, like T'Challa himself, she'd been trained from the cradle to lead, to control her emotions, and to think for the good of her people first. But a mother who had seen her children die violently so recently might lose even the strongest control, just as a son who'd lost his father had done. He wouldn't blame her for being shocked, or even enraged.

Like T'Challa, Abrihet had had practice in the past few weeks at hiding the feeling of being utterly overwhelmed. She schooled her face to blankness as he watched, and when she spoke, her voice was nearly level. Nearly.

"My king, I... I understand and applaud that you would give amnesty to James Barnes. He was
innocent of the bombing and King T'Chaka's murder." She seemed to be reminding herself of that as she briefly looked into the distance. "The others...there are six missing since Zemo was captured." He braced himself as she did the calculation, comparing the identities of the Avengers who'd gone rogue against the ones who'd been present in Lagos. Her eyes hardened as she looked at him. "So they're all here? Maximoff, Captain America? Now they're here in Wakanda?"

T'Challa nodded. He considered reminding her that said Avengers were under royal protection and anyone who tried to gainsay that would face consequences, but held back. Of course, Abrihet was angry. Being angry didn't mean that she would forget the laws of the land or her role as chieftain and councilor, first example to her people and all of Wakanda. He wouldn't insult her by jumping to conclusions about her intentions - as he'd so recently done with Barnes.

As he hoped, she held to her position while still acknowledging his. "It is the king's prerogative to grant amnesty. I'll do nothing to offend any guest of your house." She straightened her shoulders and finished, "But I do question the wisdom of it, and the necessity."

"I think it's better that those questions be aired before the council, openly," he said. She seemed surprised, and dare he hope it, pleased, despite her unhappiness about the subject? "This won't be up for public debate, but the council must be informed of my guests' presence and the reasons for secrecy. I will hear anyone who has concerns or protests." Abrihet relaxed, letting him see her sadness again underneath the cloak of a tribal leader. "I simply thought it would be unkind to make you learn of this in public."

She smiled and closed her eyes. "Thank you, my king." When she opened them again, her expression was far too knowing. She didn't know T'Challa very well, hardly at all outside formal events prior to the Lagos tragedy.

So he said what he suspected she was thinking. "You and I have both been forced to mourn in front of our people's eyes. That's a role we both accepted, but it doesn't make the pain any less."

"My mother died in protests against apartheid, far from home in 1983," Abrihet mused. "She believed in what she was doing, fighting against injustice even on foreign soil. I was so angry after her murder, I was glad when our king withdrew from those efforts. When apartheid ended, we were all glad, but I thought that was proof: the rest of the world would get by without us sticking our necks out." She gave a bitter, watery smile. "And in the end, both of my children who'd never known their grandmother came to believe what she had believed, that we had no right to isolate ourselves from our neighbors, especially the African nations." T'Challa cautiously stepped closer and put a hand on her shoulder. "I let grief and anger drive me to desert my mother's dream. I won't do the same with my children's, or our late king's. Whatever I feel in my heart towards the Avengers, I won't forget that."

That evening, even though no other tribal chief or minister in Wakanda had suffered as deeply or personally from the events with the Avengers as Abrihet had done, not all of T'Challa's council took the news of the amnesty with such grace.

"Outrageous!"

"My king, this is insanity!"

"How 
dare 
they set foot in Wakanda!"

Shuri scowled at the last detractor. "The Avengers 'dare' because they received the king's invitation. Don't forget that."
Minister Zuri rose, and unlike the bombastic ones, waited for T’Challa to acknowledge him before speaking. "There is no question that it is the king's prerogative to grant the amnesty of Wakanda. But in light of the great international controversy surrounding the Avengers - to say nothing of the threat inherent in many of them - should your council not have taken part in such a far-reaching choice?"

"I have no intention of acting without discussion in council - when such discussions are feasible. Yes, to grant amnesty to these people poses a number of complications, even threats, but there was no means of presenting the question to the council under the circumstances. Helmut Zemo had just been apprehended, and only then did I hear his confession and realize that the wrong man had been hunted down. Zemo's entire aim was to avenge himself without regard for the lives he took in the process - all to destroy the Avengers. Even after Zemo was exposed, James Barnes had no safe haven left and was gravely injured, as was Captain America. Their allies had been imprisoned for defending them. If I had deserted them then, it would have furthered Zemo's aim - the same aim that killed forth people, including my father in Vienna, and injured hundreds more."

Several of the chieftains and ministers nodded. Minister Abrihet stood up. "It was right to grant amnesty to Barnes. He was innocent, and we all called for his blood." She was polite enough not to say that T’Challa had actively sought Barnes' blood, though it loomed unspoken over all of them. The Black Panther had been seen by many cameras during the conflict. "Yes, the man who was once the Winter Soldier is dangerous, but our honor demands we make amends to him."

"But he still must answer for the crimes of the Winter Soldier," protested one of the other ministers. "Even exonerated of the Vienna bombing, he's one of the most wanted terrorists in the world!"

"The Winter Soldier was a terrorist," Minister Subira corrected them. "James Barnes was an innocent prisoner, brutalized beyond all imagination. As soon as he was free of their hold, he retreated to a completely inoffensive life, until Helmut Zemo made a pawn of him again."

"What has he said about it?" asked Abrihet. "What are his intentions now that he's here?"

Everyone looked at T’Challa. "I haven’t had the chance to discuss it with him," the king admitted. "He was gravely injured in the fighting. He's still recovering and has spent most of the past two days unconscious."

Even those on the council who feared Barnes or simply opposed granting amnesty to such a controversial foreigner exchanged dismayed glances, and seemed to be restraining themselves from asking the obvious question: had T’Challa been the one to inflict those injuries? T’Challa considered setting them straight, but decided against it. The conflict between the Avengers, engineered by Zemo, wasn't a detail that was necessary, and revealing it would, again, further Zemo's goals. T’Challa was done being a player in the man's sorrowful, bloody game.

He went on, "All of our guests are still receiving medical care. Once the doctors are satisfied that they have sufficiently recovered, rest assured that I'll immediately discuss with them the implications of their presence here - and what restrictions and precautions they must observe for it to continue."

"Meaning they'll not be hunting down bank robbers abroad and then rushing back to hide behind our borders?" Abrihet muttered, then winced and murmured an apology.

"It's a fair point, my king," said Zuri. "I will not ask that you withdraw protection already given, but we can't have Avengers using our soil as their new base. If they wish to be our guests, they must be mere mortals like the rest of us, not continuing to incite new violence."

"But what happens the first time there is an international crisis?" protested Shuri. "We'd be fools to think that the end of the Avengers is the end of threats by criminals and terrorists who may use
enhanced powers to their gain - or that such groups would leave Wakanda in peace even if we did withdraw from all that my father tried to accomplish."

"Iron Man is still active, and has the blessing of the United Nations," said someone. "Let the ones who signed the Sokovia Accords deal with crises, and Wakanda is protected by its own warriors just as it always has been."

"Will Captain America be content with that?" asked Abrihet.

"If not, I'll revisit it," said T'Challa.

"What about Maximoff?"

"She answers to Captain America," Shuri pointed out.

"None of them answer to anyone, and that's the problem!" exploded W'Kabi. "My king, I must protest their presence here. It's an insult to the Wakandans they slaughtered."

"A bomber killed our people!" snapped Shuri. "You lose sight of the actual criminals in your rush to blame the Avengers for trying to protect the innocent!"

"Maximoff's stupidity is the reason that bomb exploded outside the seventh floor of the Grand Hotel instead of on the ground!"

"So should we wish the bomb had exploded on the ground and killed every man, woman, and child within a fifty-foot radius?" Zuri asked. "That would have spared our people in the hotel."

Uncomfortable silence fell as many of them tried not to look at Abrihet. T'Challa stood up. "Enough. This particular debate was already concluded before Vienna. We sought accountability from the Avengers, and the solution was their abidance by the Sokovia Accords. We did not - and will not - put them in the place of the murderers for convenience or visibility. Wakanda's government does not make use of scapegoats."

Many nodded, and T'Challa silently noted the ones who did not, or who scowled at their feet. One of the other chieftains rose. "There is still the matter of the families of the Lagos victims, my king. How visible will the Avengers be? How will our citizens feel at seeing the very combatants responsible for the death of their sons and daughters at the funeral of our king, who fell victim to the conflict the Avengers started?"

"They did not - "

T'Challa held up a hand to silence his sister. It seemed her admiration for the Avengers and their work was undampened by the events in Vienna and Germany. Before he could answer, Abrihet rose, and he let her speak. "My king, you kindly advised me of your decision to shelter the Avengers in private. I would propose that the other families of those who died in Lagos be granted the same courtesy."

T'Challa didn't need to think about that long. "I will. And as with you, if they wish to protest my decision, I will hear them. Apart from them, I don't intend to make the Avengers' presence in Wakanda publicly known. That's a restriction my guests will have to accept - but by that same token, Wakanda's people must accept it. Anyone who reveals their presence to foreigners, particularly those hunting my guests, will answer for it."

Even most of those who'd been sour at accepting his decision on amnesty looked appalled at the idea of such treason. T'Challa made very careful note at those who still avoided his eyes, considering the
possibility that perhaps the thought had occurred to a few. At their stations around the circle, the Dora Milaje were marking those as well.

The remainder of the discussion centered on preparations for T'Chaka's funeral and how the affairs of Wakanda were to be managed while the country observed the customary year of mourning. The logistics weren't terribly complicated, since many festivals and celebrations had already been canceled amid the mourning for the Lagos victims.

More meetings would be taking place in Geneva and New York City over the next few months as the United Nations and signers of the Sokovia Accords digested the fallout from Vienna and the schism among the Avengers. T'Challa would attend along with a delegation of his councilors. He tapped Minister Jelani - with a wry apology for pulling him away from his colicky youngest child for so many days - and directed the council to choose the other three.

By the time the day's business was over, he decided that some things didn't change - whether king or crown prince, he always felt completely exhausted at the end of a council session.

He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but there was still too much to do. And Jakarra and Shuri were lingering, suggesting they still had something to say. T'Challa rubbed his eyes and motioned to them to get on with it.

"Are you planning to have the Avengers at the funeral?" asked Jakarra bluntly.

T'Challa frowned to himself. "I...hadn't thought about it. Everyone physically capable of being there will be there, and they may wish to be, out of respect."

Even Shuri looked reluctant. "You know I agree with your choice to give them shelter. But there's still a large faction on the council who disfavor ending the old policies of isolation - and they overlap with another large faction who disfavor the Avengers in particular. It won't be easy to maintain secrecy about the Avengers' presence here if they're visible at our father's funeral - and many will wonder what influence they now have over the new king."

Jakarra agreed with her. "Even those of us who favor ending the isolationist policies don't necessarily think foreigners should have free access to our most solemn ceremonies. The state funeral of our king is for Wakandans, not spectators. I'm sure none of the Avengers would mean any disrespect. From what I've seen of them, they might be relieved not to be under so many eyes."

T'Challa pondered that for some time. He decided to put off his decision until his meeting with the families of the Lagos victims. He had them assembled privately in a secluded room of the palace and told them what he had told Arbrihet. Then he waited.

Unsurprising for a large group of people, reactions varied. The teenaged brother of one of the victims blurted out, "How could you?!" only to get a hiss of reproof from his grandmother. Several turned away, either to hide their rage or so that the king wouldn't see them cry. Most were silent, their grief still too overwhelming to process new information.

Apart from T'Challa, only the Dora Milaje would bear witness to this conversation. A few of the guards shifted on the edge of T'Challa's vision, watching his guests carefully. It was their job to consider the worst-case scenario, that in the madness of grief and anger, even a child or an old woman might explode in violence towards the king.

That didn't happen. Even those who were clearly angry either contained themselves or were sternly called to order by their relatives. T'Challa waited until he thought (or hoped) that the initial shock had passed, and said, "I've called you here so that you could learn of this in private, and also to hear
anything you wish to say on the matter. The presence of these six foreigners is not to be shared with others outside this room, but you have the right to speak to me if you wish to do so."

The bereaved families exchanged glances. A grandmother, her back bent by age and sorrow, pulled herself up a little on her cane and said, "It would be very wrong to ask the king to withdraw a promise of amnesty, whatever we feel."

"Nonetheless, if you wish to protest, you must feel free to do so," T'Challa said. "I will hear you without any displeasure. I'm well aware that my decision will have caused you renewed pain."

A young woman who had lost her mother, as well as the use of her right leg for a very long time, stood up with the help of her younger sister. "Then I protest, my king. With all respect," she added. "The Avengers are vigilantes, no better than the countries who demand control of our mineral deposits to 'protect them.' They weren't invited to Lagos, Johannesburg, or Sokovia or any other country they've invaded in their personal war, and people like us pay for it."

Several others rose to their feet, voicing their agreement. All kept their tempers, T'Challa was pleased to see, even those who thought that T'Chaka should have demanded the Avengers' arrest after Lagos.

But there was another faction within the families of the Lagos victims: those who did not hold the Avengers responsible, or even if they did, had already elected to forgive them. The same argument that had broken out among his councilors, T'Challa heard again among the victims' families. "The Avengers didn't set that bomb. Young Wanda Maximoff was trying to stop it. We shouldn't be blaming her or Captain America for an accident that occurred when they were trying to save lives. Even the greatest enhanced aren't omnipotent gods," said one father.

"I agree," said another. "The terrorists are to blame for the bombing, not the Avengers."

"The Avengers had no right to be there, and it's because of them that not one of the attackers is here to be brought to justice!" another shot back.

"Would you prefer that they'd lived to carry out their theft of weapons and launch their attack on other innocent people? How many men and women died before the Avengers moved in?"

"Lawful authorities have to explain themselves when their actions cost innocent lives; the Avengers shouldn't be exempt!" one of the protestors said. "I don't want to see them anywhere, let alone in Wakanda."

"Will we have to see them?" someone asked T'Challa. The arguing group fell silent and looked at him.

T'Challa hesitated only for a moment. "No. I've granted them amnesty, but within certain boundaries. For the sake of secrecy, they won't be wandering the country freely - but by that same token, I will deal severely with anyone who interferes with them," he added. Again, he marked those who avoided his eyes and counted on the Dora Milaje to do the same. "There is no reason that you are likely to see them."

At that moment, inside his head, he made his decision that it would be for the best if the Avengers were not present - or even in evidence - during T'Chaka's funeral. He would tell them tonight.

But then someone asked, "What if we do wish to see them?" T'Challa blinked. It was the father who had advocated on the Avengers' behalf. He cast a defiant look at the bitter ones and said, "To thank them. To assure them that there are those of us who are glad of what they've done and do not blame them for the acts of criminals."
Some of the families scowled, finding him pompous, but a few others nodded. T'Challa said carefully, "It is...possible that a meeting may be arranged."

"Then I want to see them too," the teenaged boy said, lifting his chin. There could be no doubt of the sort of things he would say to the Avengers, given an opportunity.

Before they could all fall to arguing, T'Challa broke back in. "I will consider requests to meet the Avengers, but none will be granted unless they consent, and I am certain that those who receive permission are prepared to abide by the confidentiality I impose."

He ended the meeting with some relief - and promptly felt guilty for being relieved. Everyone in that meeting had lost loved ones in Nigeria; a few had been maimed by the bomb and weren't fully recovered. He'd granted amnesty to Captain America and his team knowing that it would be regarded by some of these victims as a slap in the face. It was his duty to face their unhappiness.

He forced himself to pass through the throne room and endure at least a few minutes of greeting the mourners for T'Chaka, accepting their murmured condolences and blessings for T'Challa's reign. Then he escaped to the royal apartments.

He heard piano playing from the music room. It was Shuri, on the concert grand that had once belonged to T'Challa's mother. T'Chaka had loved music and collected instruments and written music from all over the world. Foreign musicians had been most likely to be invited to cross Wakanda's borders up until the post-Sokovia shift in policy.

Shuri finished her song and sat back on the mahogany bench, eyes damp. "I couldn't bring myself to play since he died. I knew I must make myself do it before we lay him in the temple."

T'Challa went to put a hand on her shoulder, and she covered it with her own. "He'd be the first to remind us that grief can take time."

"I know. But I wanted to do it now. Just in case." She gave him a weak smile.

T'Challa couldn't be sure what he believed. He and Shuri were alike in that respect. If they were to accept as literal truth the teachings of the priests and priestesses, then their father's soul lingered near his mortal body, patiently waiting for the rites that would free him into the arms of Bast and Sekhmet. A few weeks was an acceptable time, but to wait very long was to risk angering the soul and being haunted by a frustrated ghost.

T'Challa was not inclined to think that his father's soul would suddenly turn vengeful if for some reason burial of his body had been delayed; although T'Challa and Shuri might well get angry themselves. On the other hand...

He slid onto the piano bench next to his sister. He'd never been very musical, not beyond his tutors cajoling him through lessons along with his siblings. But a little of it had stuck, and on occasion, they'd amused themselves and their father with the few childish ditties they remembered how to play in duet. Shuri grinned at him, sensing his aim.

"Just in case."

Could ghosts laugh? T'Chaka had laughed whenever they did this - especially when T'Challa flubbed even the simple, clunky melody of his part. He and Shuri had done it when they knew the king was unhappy, just to cheer him up.

"Perhaps if he's unhappy where he is now, we can make him smile again. T'Challa was as clumsy with the piano keys as ever, flubbing notes left and right, and soon he and Shuri were laughing so
hard that she was flubbing her own part. Hearing them laugh could always make T'Chaka laugh too.

*Just in case.*

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Helmut Zemo is brought before the world to stand trial, but his goal to destroy the Avengers remains - and he hasn't given up. Zemo's next move leaves Bucky increasingly desperate and our heroes with decreasing options to protect him.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Dahab: Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)

Minister Subira: Wakanda's senior minister of domestic and international diplomacy, former chieftainess of a Wakandan tribe closely allied with T'Chaka's government. Mid-80s, oldest councilor to the Wakandan throne. Widowed, mother of her tribe's current chieftainess.

Minister Jelani: Another minister of diplomacy, son of a tribal chief who sometimes opposed T'Chaka's policies. T'Challa's age (40ish), married with 9 children.

Minister Abrihet: Chieftainess of a minor tribe who serves on Wakanda's royal council, mid-60's, whose young adult children advocated for the Lagos outreach program only to be killed by the bomb at the beginning of Civil War.
Chapter Summary

Helmut Zemo is brought before the world to stand trial, but his goal to destroy the Avengers remains - and he hasn't given up. Zemo's next move leaves Bucky increasingly desperate and our heroes with decreasing options to protect him.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming! I've now seen Black Panther, and have to laugh at how very off the mark I was on much of the canon - but I'm delighted by some of the relationships that I accurately predicted! This fic remains AU, of course.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Four

Forty-eight hours had passed since arriving in Wakanda, and Wanda had slept for almost half of that. She felt guilty - more guilty than she always felt, anyway - for being so standoffish towards the Wakandans. Words felt stuck in her throat, and it only got worse when she sensed their curiosity, especially the way their doubts about her faded away. They all knew what she'd done in Lagos. At first they were alarmed, disturbed by her presence here, but almost at once, that started to fade.

She's younger than she looked on the videos from Lagos, she could hear them think. She was hurt by her time in prison. She is claustrophobic, haunted, scared.

So the doctors and their staff were less scared of her. That should have made her happy, but it didn't. I have no right to be here. But I've got nowhere else to go. Other than back to a cell, anyway.

Wanda didn't ask for anything, but the orderlies brought her meals anyway. The food was wonderful, and someone paid attention to what she liked. They told her the way to the terrace exits so that she could go outside and stand in the open air and listen to birds and monkeys and the soft buzz of insects, the hiss of rain and wind in the trees.

At Avengers Compound, once she had realized that Vision wouldn't let her leave, she hadn't gone outside. The compound was full of walking and running trails, under the trees or across the grass, along a creek...but it had felt like a mockery when she wasn't even allowed to go to the store.

Wanda doubted very much that she would be permitted to go to the store in Wakanda even if she'd wanted to - but for some reason, it didn't sting as much here as it had back at the compound.

At least here, people are honest. Honesty shouldn't matter so much to her when she could see in a person's head what the truth was. Yet for some reason, it mattered to her more.

The medics and staff of the hospital in Wakanda were wary of Wanda, but she was their patient until
Dr. Kelile released her, and even those who harbored bad feelings about Wanda's role in the deaths in Lagos made the conscious choice that they wouldn't let those feelings interfere with their duties. Wanda respected that. She admired it. People in the US, even some of those who worked in and around the Avengers Compound and Stark Industries had often not been willing to set their feelings aside. They avoided Wanda or constantly watched her, searching for treachery they felt was inevitable.

Was it right for Wanda to feel bitter about the Americans? After all, she had never managed not to cringe inwardly when she looked at Tony Stark, even after she'd looked inside of him and saw a hell that even the most vicious human being should never have experienced. Stark was many things, but he wasn't vicious. Even if he had been, he hadn't deserved what the Ten Rings had done to him, or the Chitauri, or the Mandarin.

_Stark didn't deserve what I did to his mind either. None of them deserved it. I'm the one who turned the Hulk on Johannesburg and helped Ultron gain his foothold in Sokovia. What right do I have to be bitter that now people are afraid of me?_

She was jolted out of her musings an exclamation: "Miss Maximoff, are you trying to give yourself a cold?!"

Ridiculous how she could hear people thinking, yet it was still possible to sneak up on her. Wanda turned to see Dr. Kelile, standing with her hands on her hips like an irritated parent. Some people's "mind voices" didn't match their physical image, but others did - Dr. Kelile was one. Her mind buzzed and zipped like a swarm of bees, sharp and fast and impatient and hard to follow - not unlike Tony Stark's. But Dr. Kelile had a concern for other people that Stark would never let on. Wanda had to smile. "I thought that was a myth."

She'd been standing in the rain for ten minutes. It felt nice. Dr. Kelile beckoned imperiously at her, and she obeyed. "Getting soaked to the bone and not properly regulating body temperature can decrease immune response even in warm climates. You're also worrying your friends." The _tone_ of her mental voice changed before her spoken voice did. "If you want to know, Helmut Zemo is appearing before the German courts this afternoon. It will be broadcast live."

Wanda froze, oblivious to the orderly holding out a towel. "Do Steve and Bucky know?"

Dr. Kelile nodded. "They're going to watch. They thought you should know too, but couldn't find you."

Wanda changed into dry clothes and dried her hair in a rush, and hurried into the big meeting room in the research wing of the hospital where the rest of the team - and, it appeared, every Wakandan in the building who wasn't on duty - had gathered in front of a screen that covered most of the wall, showing a news report from Berlin. Nearly everyone wore identical scowls, and nearly every mind simmered with identical anger.

The only person here in the room who didn't seethe with rage at the prisoner on the screen was Bucky Barnes.

"They say he has attempted suicide twice," said a technician who worked with Dr. Dahab on Bucky's arm.

"He's broken," agreed another medic, Dr. Damaris. She had introduced herself as a doctor, but Wanda knew Dr. Damaris was actually a psychologist, brought in to discreetly keep an eye on the guests' mental states. She and Wanda had exchanged a few knowing, sheepish smiles, but Wanda hadn't told. In the Wakandans' shoes, she would probably have wanted someone to do that too. "So
much bloodshed to achieve one aim. He failed, and even if he had succeeded, in the end he is left with what he always had: nothing. The family he wanted to avenge is still gone."

From the first glance at Zemo, shackled hand and foot and bound in a bulletproof vest, Wanda thought their assessment looked accurate. His face was swollen and tremulous, eyes red and puffy from prolonged tears. He seemed disinterested in anything but docily obeyed the instructions of his guards as they led him into the courtroom packed with journalists.

*Stark's bombs killed our parents, so Pietro and I went searching for ways to make him pay. In the end we fell in with Strucker and destroyed our own country...and Pietro. That killed Zemo's family, so he went searching for ways to make the Avengers pay, and destroyed the UN summit, King T'Chaka, and all those people in Vienna. The wheel of revenge never stops turning.*

She didn't pay much attention to the formalities of the court and Zemo's mumbled responses; she was too busy watching everyone's reactions. Then the camera panned to the small group of spectators who were not press, and everyone caught their breath: Tony Stark was there.

Stark was watching Zemo with the same hot, bitter glare that many of his (former) fellow Avengers were casting at the screen here in Wakanda. The red and gold Iron Man gauntlets shone faintly on his wrist over the sleeves of his suit jacket. Wanda wondered if he was there of his own choice or by the command of the United Nations. Either way, she felt a little better knowing he was undoubtedly a heartbeat away from being fully suited up, and knew many of those around her felt the same.

Zemo seemed confused to the point that she wondered if maybe his handlers had drugged him. When directed to enter a plea, he wavered. "I...do not understand."

"What the hell is this? Some kind of trick?" muttered Scott.

"I don't like it," said Sam. The man at Zemo's side began arguing with the prosecutor who tried to press the prisoner to explain himself, and Sam added sourly, "Oh, so he gets a lawyer."

Then some of the reporters began shouting questions, which distracted the judge into admonishing them, and Zemo looked over at them as if just noticing them for the first time. "Uh-uh," said Clint, shifting restlessly. "This is calculated. *Fuck*, Stark, you better be on your toes."

Steve shot him an anxious look. "I don't suppose there's any chance Nat is up there?"

"No idea, man. I hope so, but it may be too hot."

More and more reporters were pointing their microphones towards Zemo, ignoring the guards who were trying to herd them back and let the proceeding go on, and Wanda could feel hearts pounding around her as Zemo, with a near-tearfulness that even she suspected was feign, began to speak:

"*Zhelaniye.*

*Longing.*

"*Rzhavyy.*

*Rusted.*

"What the -" "NO!" Bucky lurched back as if the words were each carried by a bullet, clapping a hand over his right ear and frantically diving for the exit. "No, turn it off, TURN IT OFF!"
"What is it?!
"What the hell - 
"Barnes!
"Get help!

"Pech'."

Diving for the doors past confused Wakandans and Steve, Bucky plowed headlong into Wanda. He
could have scrambled right over her, but instead his eyes locked on hers. "Shut me down - shut me
down!" he demanded, wild-eyed, clutching her shoulder.

She heard it; his mind was screaming at her. These words, they were weapons to take his will and his
mind away from him, into the hands of anyone who knew them - make it stop, please, help me,
HELP ME -

Wanda hurled a blast of her power at the screen, and it shattered black to shouts of alarm, but the
speakers weren't visible to her, and the words could still be heard.

"Dobroserdechnyy."

Benign.

"Vozvrashcheniye na rodinu."

Homecoming.

Wanda grabbed the sides of Bucky's face and plunged into his mind with her power, looking for the
way to silence those words - there was another word, another, he couldn't say it but he would know
it, it would -

"Turn it off, someone, turn the sound off!!" Clint was shouting.

There were shouts and crashes somewhere - was it there or was it here - it didn't matter, Bucky was
desperate - Please please please say it help me please say it say it - the word lit up in his mind like a
neon sign that had caught fire, and she knew it:

"SPUTNIK!" she shouted.

Bucky dropped, collapsing into her arms like a marionette with its strings cut. He was heavy; she
instinctively tried to hold him up, but his weight dragged her almost flat to the floor, and she lay there
tangled with him, panting, her heart hammering with her fear and his fear and Steve's fear and
everyone else's confusion and shock and fearfearfear...

"Quiet, all of you, quiet!" It was Dr. Kelile, taking control, herding the hospital workers and medics
to one side like a flock of geese.

Silence sank down again like clouds of dust after a fallen building, and everyone looked on and
waited for what would come next. Steve shoved past the others and knelt at Bucky's side, fingers
under his chin. "What the hell was that?" whispered Scott.

It was Dr. Damaris, the Wakandan psychologist, who answered. "A conditioned verbal trigger
sequence." Almost everyone in the room exchanged blank looks, so she explained, "Spoken words,
trained - probably beaten into the man, to turn him from James Barnes into the Winter Soldier, so that
he would obey any command given to him."

A buzzer on the wall made everyone jump, and Dr. Kelile hurried to answer it. The frantic voice on the other end spoke only Wakandan, as did Dr. Kelile in answering him, but Wanda could pick up the gist of it without knowing a word of their language.

It was King T'Challa. He'd seen the broadcast and realized what Zemo was up to. Dr. Kelile told him that Barnes had panicked, but Miss Maximoff had done something to render him unconscious - and blown out the conference room screen.

Wanda winced, but Kelile looked at her and smiled. Steve kept his fingers on Bucky's pulse, but hesitated to wake him up. "Who wakes up now?" he asked Wanda, helping her pull herself into a sitting position with his free hand. "Bucky or the Soldier?"

"It...won't be the Soldier," Wanda said slowly. "The words...they didn't finish, and I canceled them."

"How did you know the word?" Sam asked. Scott started to repeat it, but Sam elbowed him. "Don't say it."

"Bucky knows it. He can't speak it, but he knows it. He knew I could read him. He showed me, remembered it. It makes him sleep, wherever he is, whatever he's doing. It's their shut-down code." She stared down at Bucky. His hand lay slack against hers where it had fallen after he released his grip. He'd have held onto her if he could have, for any anchor against the flood of otherness that threatened to overwhelm him when he heard those words, but everything fell away when she spoke the shutdown word, and there'd been only silence and darkness.

"I had strings, but now I'm free..." Ultron had used to sing that stupid Pinocchio song in Sokovia, as he built more and more of himself, bragging about his liberation from Stark's control. "There are no strings on me."

There were still strings on Bucky, embedded deep inside his mind over decades of torment. He was terrified of them. All it took were the right words, and anyone could pick those strings up and make him dance to their tune - and slaughter whoever they wanted. Hydra had done it to turn him on Tony Stark's parents, and Zemo had done it again to get his hands on the tape and tear the Avengers apart. All because Bucky Barnes wasn't strong enough -

Wanda flinched. Steve looked at her, and she almost blurted it out: He blames himself. He thinks he should have been able to stop them. But she swallowed it. Who was she to speak for Bucky if he didn't want what was inside his mind shared with anyone else, even Steve? He'd already had so many choices taken away.

Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris ordered most of the bystanders out of the room as Bucky began to twitch and murmur. Before he had come around, however, King T'Challa arrived, accompanied by his bodyguards. "Stark subdued Zemo," he told Steve. "We cut the satellite feed when we realized what was happening, but Zemo continued to speak unconnected words until Stark gagged him. The entire video is available freely on the Internet."

"Did Zemo give any commands?" asked Clint.

"No. It's unclear whether he had spoken all the trigger words." T'Challa held up a small sheet of paper. "I have the English translations of the words here. They were in Russian. No doubt journalists all over the world are now trying to decipher their meaning, and many will reach the right conclusion."
Steve closed his eyes and bent over, resting his hand on Bucky's good shoulder. "Oh my god. Zemo's not done. He knows you were involved and that we escaped. He's gonna keep pushing us and Tony together, hoping we'll kill each other."

"That's exactly my theory." T'Challa gazed around the room, taking in the upset chairs and tables and the blackened wall behind the shattered screen. He looked at Wanda, and she tried not to cringe like a child.

"I'm...sorry about that. I panicked."

To her intense relief, he smiled. "No apology is necessary. You might have saved lives." He gestured to Bucky. "How is he?"

"He's starting to wake. I don't know...all I could see was that there was another word that would make him sleep. He wanted me to use it; he showed me."

T'Challa motioned his guards and the doctors back as Bucky tossed his head. Steve nudged Wanda back, and Sam and Clint tugged her to her feet. "I heard the word - your word," said Clint. "You think it'll work again if he flips out?"

"I don't know," she said.

To the relief of them all, it wasn't necessary. Bucky's eyes fluttered open and focused on Steve at once, recognizing him. "Steve. What happened to Zemo?"

"Tony took him down. Are you okay?"

"I..." Bucky looked around. "I think so." He caught Wanda's gaze, and slowly pulled himself into a sitting position with his one hand. "I heard... some of the words, not all of them. It takes all of them."

"Only eight of the words were broadcast here in Wakanda," said T'Challa. "Then we killed the connection. I have a list - don't worry, I'm not going to repeat them," he added wryly as Bucky recoiled.

Dr. Damaris said, "It might help to know whether the entire sequence has been announced to a roomful of reporters. Do you know how many there are, Sergeant Barnes? How many are necessary?"

Bucky's gaze grew distant as he tried to come up with the answer in vain. When he tried to focus his thoughts on the words, they flew away, impossible to catch or even see long enough to identify. He didn't know them until he heard them. Frustrated, he looked at Wanda. She raised a hand, and he nodded, letting her search for him. The conditioning was meant to thwart him from fighting it, not a stranger examining his mind. His captors had never imagined that he would encounter a telepath. Wanda could read it.


T'Challa looked at the sheet in his hand and sighed. "Well, this is an exciting new twist," growled Clint. "Bastard."

Steve put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not your fault, Buck."

Bucky patted his hand in response, but something coalesced in his mind that was cold and resigned. When he asked T'Challa quietly, "Can I talk to you alone?" Wanda realized what it was.
She blurted out, "No!" in chorus with T'Challa's guards.

T'Challa started to call the guards to order, then turned back to Wanda in confusion, and everyone looked equally lost. All except Bucky, who kept his eyes on the floor. "That's cheating," he murmured, without rancor.

"That's not the answer," she shot back. Everyone else exchanged baffled glances. This was unfair of her, it was true, but she didn't care. She wouldn't let Bucky do what he was hoping to do, and if that meant revealing Bucky's private thought... "I won't let you commit suicide."

"What?!" Steve's horror and anguish slammed into her, followed in rapid succession by the shock and sorrow of everyone else in the room, even T'Challa and his guards.

"Whoa, whoa, dude, okay, massive overreaction!" exclaimed Scott, holding up his hands. "Yeah, this mind control thing is scary as hell, but come on!"

If Bucky could have felt what Wanda could feel from the hearts of his friends, she doubted he could have held to his resolve. But he couldn't, and dug in, deliberately not looking at Steve as he focused on T'Challa. "You need to kill me."

Steve was breathing hard, trying to keep his emotions under control. "Buck...Bucky, no. No. Wanda's right, that's not - that can't - "

T'Challa stared. His mind was a king's, concerned with the safety of his people in the face of such a rapidly-growing threat from a human weapon, but for the most part, his thoughts just shimmered with pity. Now he could see the man, not the weapon, and imagine all too well the helplessness, the despair of being captive to ten spoken words and anyone callous enough to speak them.

Dr. Kelile inserted herself back into the fray, eyes flashing. "My king, this is a hospital, a place of healing. Every man and woman who works here swore an oath to be healers of all. This can never be permitted."

"Everyone...knows," Bucky ground out. He pulled away and shut his eyes when Steve tried to physically tug him closer, refusing to even look at his friend, lest his resolve weaken. "The whole goddamn world knows the sequence now. How long can you really keep them out of your country? All it takes is one, and you already know what happens then. You know how many people I killed in Berlin? Your people'd be the first ones in harm's way - I can't stop it! The only way to end the Winter Soldier is to end me!"

"Uh-uh!" said Sam, and turned to T'Challa. "No way in hell should anybody be considering that; if it's too hot for you anymore, we can leave! Nobody better be considering putting him down like an animal! There's other options than murder!"

T'Challa opened his mouth to answer, but Bucky rounded on Sam. "Haven't you all lost enough on account of me already?" Sam looked baffled, and Bucky gestured with his head at the others, still avoiding eye contact with Steve for even a second. "He needs to get out of here - he can't babysit me the rest of his life! He has all of you - "

"FUCK Steve!" Sam exploded. Bucky blinked, and Scott and Clint winced, but Sam went on, "Who the hell's talking about Steve - you have value all on your own, man, Steve or no Steve! And you don't deserve to die just because some deranged whackjob looking for vengeance decided to turn you into a pawn!"

Steve was as surprised as Bucky was to hear that from Sam, but unlike Bucky, Steve was glad of it.
"It's only a matter of time," Bucky insisted. He finally looked at Steve, but he cringed at his friend's stricken face. "Now or later. One day you'll have to do it because it's the only option left. Maybe let me go on my own terms."

Steve's answer was very quiet and low, but it seemed to come from the marrow of his bones: "No."

"You can't save me."

"Don't tell me to stop trying. I won't do it."

"This isn't just Steve," said Sam.

"Damn right it isn't," Clint agreed. "You're panicking, Barnes. Look, nobody blames you for that, but this isn't a solution - do you want to do Zemo's work for him?"

Bucky hesitated, and T'Challa stepped in. "I won't consider it, so you no longer need to. I will not condone the killing of an innocent man - or allow it on my soil." He shot a quick look at the doctors. "Nor will I permit your patient to leave if they're merely intent on ending their own life."

Everyone let their breath out, but Bucky bristled. "So now I'm your prisoner instead of the UN's."

"For Chrissakes, Buck!" Steve snapped, and Bucky surged to his feet. The bodyguards all stepped around T'Challa, but Bucky stumbled off balance and would have fallen if Steve hadn't caught him.

He stopped struggling when it was obvious that Steve wouldn't let go, but just looked past him at T'Challa, hopeless. "They'll come for me," he whispered. "They don't even have to come here, all they need is a replay device. They'll turn me on all of you."

"They will not," T'Challa replied steadily. "I will not let them. Nor will your friends."

"Damn right," said Sam.

Dr. Damaris added, "Your mind will not be under their control forever. All procedures can be undone, even psychiatric ones." Bucky faltered, and hope and despair flew through his head. "Zemo was eager to show the Avengers that he can still get to you, but he has revealed an important clue of Hydra's operations. Yes, your enemies will be eager to use it, but there are other scientists in the world who will be just as eager to find ways to neutralize it. We have many here. We need only time."

"So do they," muttered Bucky, but the fight had gone out of him. He shook Steve off and glowered at the bodyguards when one of them tried to bar the door. "Can I go back to my room, or do you want to stick me in a cell again?"

T'Challa motioned to let him pass, and Bucky stalked out. Wanda held out a hand to stop Steve from following him. "Please, let him go. He won't hurt himself. I can see." Steve's frustration and pain battered her, but after a long, bleak look at the door, he relented, turning away to rub his eyes.

"You okay, Cap?" asked Clint.

Steve made a soft, painful noise. "You're kidding, right?"

"Yeah, fair enough."

T'Challa looked at Wanda. "I know it's impolite to ask anyone to read another's mind without permission, but can you be certain he won't harm himself?" Wanda nodded. "Then apart from
assuring that, we should all let your friend be, Captain. We can't give him very much of the freedom he wants."

"Being dead's not free," Steve said.

"I agree. But we all know that at a man's darkest hour, it may seem that way." T'Challa smirked. "In Siberia, Zemo attempted to shoot himself after he confessed again to me. I stopped him. He had no right to seek freedom without answering for my father. He believes he's still in control. We will prove him wrong."

"My king, all of Wakanda is eager to see Zemo pay for King T'Chaka's death," said Dr. Damaris. "But I would urge you and the Avengers to be very careful. If Zemo realizes that his power over the Avengers themselves is failing, he will strike at any target to cause any one of you pain - Sergeant Barnes is only the first of those targets. Do not assume those trigger words are all that Zemo knows."

"Goddammit." Sam started to pace. "What else could he know about us apart from Bucky?" He shot a look at Clint and Scott, and both men went pale. Scott sank into a chair, while Clint stayed utterly still, staring at nothing.

Wanda knew what Sam was thinking of, but even without telepathy, Steve reached the right conclusion. "Oh my god. I'd been assuming...he targeted Bucky as the most notorious, the most controversial thing about us. But Bucky and - and - 1991, the connection to Tony wasn't in those Hydra records that Nat dumped. If it was, it would've made the news all around the world. So how did Zemo know?"

"Sokovia was a Soviet territory until the dissolution in 1991," said Wanda. "Zemo is too young to have served them directly, but he might have known where records were kept."

"Damn, I wish you'd been around in Berlin to get a peek into Zemo's head," said Sam.

"You can bet good money Zemo would've gone out of his way to make sure that didn't happen," Clint said. He kept on standing completely still, but addressed T'Challa. "I know you don't want word getting out that we're here – and I completely agree on that point. I don't suppose you've got a burner phone."

"Burner phone?" asked Steve.

"Untraceable cell phones. I don't have to say where we are, but I need to get in touch with Romanoff. Or leave, if it's too much of a problem. Every one of us has - people, information that Zemo would love to get his hands on, and for all we know, he did. I can't, I…" Clint trailed off for a second, then shook his head. "I need to warn them."

"We can obtain them easily, as many as you need," said T'Challa. He motioned the doctors out and beckoned Clint to sit down at one of the conference tables. "How will you get the phone to Romanoff?"

"We have drop points on every continent - and I mean every continent. After SHIELD fell, we rearranged our whole system for going off the grid. If she doesn't know where I am, she'll be checking them - and even if she does know we're here, she'll be checking. We have a signal too, if you've got a satellite transmitter, or a way to hack one."

T'Challa smirked. "We have both. I doubt I need to tell you my concerns: that all indication of your presence here must be withheld."

"Believe me, your highness, I've been doing this a long time. I don't want that getting out any more
"I do believe you. So I will help you. I've learned a great deal about you, Agent Barton, and Agent Romanoff. Although it's necessary to keep your presence here secret apart from what's necessary to treat your injuries and keep you safe, you're not prisoners, and I have no wish for Zemo to have any other targets for his revenge. What about the ones who supported Stark? Zemo could also target them."

"Oh, hell. That spiderweb kid - he was a kid. Really young, really inexperienced," said Sam. "You can bet he's all over YouTube now. Rhodey's down for the count, and Stark's friends have been targeted before."

Steve was only half-listening. "I don't understand," he muttered. "Zemo decided to take down the Avengers because of collateral damage from one of our fights. Bucky's not an Avenger and neither are...anybody's families - why make more?"

"You don't understand revenge, Captain," said T'Challa, without hesitating. "Such things no longer matter to him. He told me the battle in Sokovia killed his father, his wife, his infant son." Steve and Wanda flinched at the same time. "He thought nothing of all the fathers, wives and sons in Vienna, or of the wife and children of the UN psychologist. Blood lust is all that remains."

Clint nodded. "Listen...don't tell Bucky this, but what I said earlier was wrong: Zemo doesn't want Bucky dead. It's the same as the reason for the bomb in Vienna - he needs Bucky alive, and he wants lawful authorities to find him. He wants you and Tony back together with Bucky in the middle again, and he'll keep engineering that as long as he can. The world knows now how far you'll go to protect Bucky, but anybody who really did their research - and we can bet Zemo did - they know just from reading about you back in your day. He wants to break you. He wants to break all of us."

"He won't," Steve said quietly. He didn't look at any of them. "He wanted the Avengers to stop, well, he's got that. I'm not Captain America anymore. That shield doesn't belong to me. All he's managed to do is break Bucky."

Wanda spoke up. "It isn't that simple." Steve perked up; she looked around, and Clint got the message, jerking his head at Sam and Scott as he left the room. T'Challa even sent the Dora Milaje away, though he stayed himself.

"We'll try to respect his privacy, but my doctors are concerned that he's suicidal."

Wanda sighed. "Not suicidal. I don't...think he'd harm himself. I don't know everything inside everyone's head," she added defensively. "I don't want to."

"Neither would I," said Steve. "But...what he said earlier..."

Wanda looked away, wishing she could pretend that she didn't know what Steve was talking about. "Even if I couldn't read what he feels...I'd understand how he feels. He's afraid, but also tired - tired of being afraid. The world is full of people who hate and fear him, and he fears himself on top of all of it. All it takes are words, and with one hand, he couldn't even cover his ears today. There's no emotion worse than helplessness, and never knowing when it will end."

Pity and worry shone in T'Challa, but Steve's distress was like an overload of mental sound, buffeting her mental senses. She wanted to back away and run out of the room just to muffle it.

To her surprise, T'Challa asked, "Would it ease your mind if your room is separate from the others?" Steve started and a new wave of dismay hit her as he realized what T'Challa was getting at.
She smiled weakly. "Ordinary walls are enough for this." She tapped her head. "But thank you. You've already been very generous with us."

"You're under my protection, and I promised to protect you against harm. That doesn't only include external harm. No doubt your suffering would also please Zemo - but thwarting him isn't the reason I offered." T'Challa stood. "It was the right thing to do. You should speak to one of our doctors. They may not have a way to physically treat all ills, but those who treat mental health in Wakanda are bound by the same honor code as in the West." He didn't say Dr. Damaris's name aloud, but thought it at Wanda with a sly smile.

"I'll...think about it."

"That's all I suggest." T'Challa turned to Steve. "Captain, there is one other thing that I meant to speak to you about - before Zemo appeared in the media. My father's funeral will take place tomorrow at the palace and the temple. I've decided that for the sake of discretion, and protection of all involved, that you and your friends should remain here at the hospital. I wanted you to know that I mean no insult."

Steve smiled weakly. "No insult taken, your highness. I can understand the reasons for wanting us to keep a low profile, and, well, we're controversial in Wakanda. There's no escaping that."

He stood up, and the three of them left the room, but as T'Challa rejoined his bodyguards, Steve turned and hurried back past Wanda. "Your highness? I..." He stopped, actually intimidated by the Dora Milaje, which amused T'Challa and Wanda. "After everything that happened, all you'd done for us, I hadn't had the chance to say this: I'm so sorry for your loss. For your father."

In Wanda's mind's eye, T'Challa and the Wakandans around him glowed with emotion. But the guards were on duty, and T'Challa was king, needing to maintain his dignity, so he hid it - most of it. "Thank you, Captain. I've made sure that all of Wakanda knows you and the Avengers were not to blame for his death."

Steve swallowed hard. "I'm still sorry. He deserved better."

"Yes. Everyone unfortunate enough to cross Zemo's path did."

Wanda spoke up softly. "So did their families."

T'Challa nodded. "Thank you. We will talk again soon."

Wanda went outside. After hours in a conference room full of frightened people, the walls were closing in again. Bucky was in his room, unwilling to leave it or turn on the television. Steve would hover in the hallway until he got up the courage to knock or gave up for the night.

Clint would eke out secret messages to Natasha without even knowing where she was, and he and Scott would toss and turn all night, knowing their families were halfway around the world, out of reach of their protection. Sam would worry about his own family and the rest of them on top of it.

There was no emotion worse than helplessness.

To Be Continued...
Coming Soon: The Avengers write letters home (including a certain letter from Steve to Tony) and T'Challa's medical staff come up with the solution to keep Bucky protected from exposure to the trigger words while they work on getting Hydra out of his mind.

PLEASE don’t forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Dahab: Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Steve writes The Letter to Tony, the other fugitive Avengers send letters to their own families, and T'Challa's medical staff come up with the solution to keep Bucky protected from the now-public trigger words while they work on getting Hydra out of his mind.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback (and your patience, as work heated up this week and I wasn't able to update at all!) Here follows another gapfiller chapter covering my imaginings of what went through Steve's mind as he wrote his letter to Tony - and what led Bucky to the after-credit's scene in Civil War.

Canon Notes: There's some debate in fandom as to whether Bucky was telling the truth when he told Tony "I remember all of them." This fic assumes he was telling the truth and he remembers everyone he was forced to kill - but that many other memories of his life are missing. Also, as a reminder, Shuri in this fic is in her late 20s, early 30s, and a contender to be T'Challa's successor as Black Panther (I wrote this long before we knew she'd be 16 and a tech whiz in the movie.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

Steve spent the day of King T'Chaka's funeral trying to write a letter. He went through periods of utter blankness, staring at the notepad and willing the words he wanted to say to find their way out of the confused morass of thoughts and feelings in his brain. Then he scribbled like a madman, spewing anger and hurt and remorse and shame and hope and despair into an incoherent mess that was ridiculous and unfair and didn't even make any sense when he read it back to himself, so he knew it wouldn't when anyone else read it.

Let alone Tony.

I'm sorry I'm not sorry I was wrong I was right you were right you were wrong you betrayed me I betrayed you we were both wrong we were both right I don't know what's right or wrong anymore.

I just don't want it to end in Siberia. Maybe it's truly over, maybe we can never work together again, but I don't want it to end like that.

Maybe Tony wouldn't care what Steve Rogers wanted.

Maybe he would.

He had to get Clint to explain how a burner phone worked once a messenger from the king arrived with a box full of them. "Manufactured in China, purchased in Russia, programmed with American
numbers. Our couriers will discreetly deliver them to foreign soil with reliable mail and delivery services to send them wherever you want them to go.

When Steve liberated a pair, nobody asked where he wanted to send his.

Sam rapped on Steve's door afterward and stood in the doorway, shaking his head. "Tell me you're not trying to shoulder all the blame for this."

Steve stared at the half-used-up notepad with the latest draft of nonsensical babbling, and couldn't deny that this particular version seemed to have a lot more apologizing than originally intended. "I don't want to leave it the way…" A snort of bitter laughter escaped him. "The way I left it."

"You were right about the Accords. You were right about Bucky. The fact that Stark found some new beef to hold against him - "

" – 'new beef'? Sam, they were his parents!" Steve exclaimed, leaping to his feet. To his mortification, his breath seized and for a few seconds, he couldn't talk. After a humiliating silence, he managed to grind out between his teeth, "I knew Hydra murdered them and I didn't tell him. Zola told us."

"Zola? How?"

"In the bunker in New Jersey – the night before we came to you in DC. It was all a big, grand, staged confession of Hydra's plot; he was stalling to give them time to locate us and launch a missile."

Sam scrubbed his face with his hand and leaned against the wall. "So that was the night you almost got killed and showed up on my doorstep. Man, you had shit on your mind – the next day you found out the Winter Soldier was Bucky!"

"I knew, Sam! It's not like I forgot. Yeah, for the next few days we were…occupied." Sam let out a loud scoff at the understatement. "But after that, I still remembered. I could've told him. I didn't."

Sam lost some of his irritation and looked Steve in the eyes. "Okay. So why didn't you?"

Steve couldn't meet his eyes for long. "Cowardice. Tony and I – you know we didn't see eye to eye on a lot, but he's still – he was still my friend. I didn't want to hurt him." He sighed and amended it, "At least, that's what I told myself to talk myself out of it, everytime I started to think I should. That I was protecting him from feeling like…like I felt when I saw Bucky there, said his name and had him look at me like I was nuts and he'd never heard the name Bucky before, down in the guts, completely empty. It was bullshit, and I knew it even when I thought it. I was a coward. I thought the SHIELD-Hydra records might say it somewhere and I'd be spared having to tell him, but it never came up. And the more time went by, the more I knew how he'd feel when he realized I'd known all this time and hadn't told him, so I talked myself out of it even more." He ripped the latest draft off the notepad with more violence than necessary. "And in the end, I gave Zemo just the ammunition he needed. There was a tape. A videotape of Tony's parents, that night. Of Bucky… the Winter Soldier."

"My God. Yeah…okay, yeah, an apology is... yeah. Warranted for that." Steve had to laugh. It was weird that he could still laugh after all that, but the act of laughing could be so full of pain. Hell, he hadn't known it was possible to laugh from sheer shame.

"I keep replaying that day, in Siberia, I mean. The thing is... when he saw the video, Tony didn't just go crazy." Steve sighed. "Not that I'd really be able to blame him if he had. But he didn't. He asked me if I knew."
"Aw, fuck. Did you tell him?"

Steve shook his head and dropped his face into his hands, nearly tipping the desk with the weight on his elbows. "I said I didn't know it was him. That's when he lost it. He went for me – he left me and went for Bucky. I had to stop him. I tried. He didn't listen. B – the Winter Soldier killed his mom. He wasn't gonna stop. He blew Bucky's arm off and kept coming. We tore each other apart. I broke his arc reactor with my shield to stop him." Feeling wetness under his hands, Steve hurriedly wiped his face. He finished roughly, "He said I didn't deserve the shield. Howard made it. I knew he was right. So I left."

"God." Sam sighed. "Man. When I saw you on the plane, I knew it was bad, just not... anything like that."

"I knew," Steve murmured. "In the back of my mind...yeah, I knew. If I didn't tell him, someone with an agenda would, someone who wouldn't even try to be kind. But I still didn't do it, and that's exactly what happened. The worst possible way anyone could...find out something like that. All because I didn't want to face him, see him...after DC, you and Nat and Hill, you kept me together even when I couldn't think about anything else. Tony deserved that much, and I wasn't willing...hell, I thought about getting Rhodey, getting Pepper. They could help. I still didn't do it."

Sam was silent for a long time. Finally, he concluded, "Yeah, you fucked up." Steve couldn't look at him. He wanted to move, go anywhere, do anything other than hear this, but he made himself stay where he was. He deserved this, and Sam wouldn't mince words with him. Unlike me with Tony.

"He's never gonna forgive me for that, is he?"

"That part's up to him. This isn't the vet guy talking, y'know – my mom's the one who taught me everything I know about apologies and how forgiveness is supposed to work. Forgiveness doesn't belong to you, it belongs to the person you hurt. It's up to them, and they don't owe you anything...but that doesn't mean you shouldn't apologize."

Steve nodded and took a few deep breaths. "That's what I keep telling myself now. He may not ever want to hear from me, but...I still owe it to him, to tell him this much. It all gets tangled up when I try to write it down – with the Accords, with Bucky, with Wanda, until it's a mess and even I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Hm. Yeah, the rest isn't so simple. The thing is – all the stuff that happened in the past few weeks, it doesn't change the part you fucked up starting back in 2014, when you found out and never told him. If you mix in the stuff where he was wrong, that's cheating. It's not scorekeeping where you tally up who's right more often."

"Yeah." Steve crumbled up all the old drafts and tossed them into the trash. "It felt wrong, I just couldn't put my finger on why. Maybe it's lack of moral fiber."

Sam chuckled. "I really doubt that. More likely it's back in your old days, big guys like us weren't supposed to apologize, so even if we wanted to, we didn't know how. Hell, half the world still thinks like that."

Steve smiled, and it was a little less painful. "I miss the Internet already. I could google 'how to apologize.'"

Sam laughed more easily. "Just don't ask me how I know so well, and I'll tell you. Four steps: express remorse, admit responsibility, make amends, promise not to do it again."
Steve dutifully wrote them down. "I don't suppose you'd read it over for me when it's done?"

"Hell, no, man, I draw the line at being your editor!"

Steve laughed out loud, and Sam grinned, broad and toothy and unreserved. "I know, I know. It needs to come from me. Only me. God." The humor passed by, and he felt empty again. "Sam… thank you." Now Sam crossed the few steps from the foyer and gave Steve a rough clap on the shoulder. It spoke volumes. "I've managed to alienate Tony and Bucky in the space of a week. Thanks for…everything."

Sam patted him. "Don't include Bucky in the same category as Tony. Yeah, he's upset – anybody would be, but stopping him from giving up and letting himself get killed doesn't warrant apologies. And that's the VA man talking." He gave Steve one last pat before letting him go. "I'll let you get on with it."

Steve gazed at the door after Sam closed it. Then he wandered to the window with the notepad in his hand, alternating between staring out at the trees and staring down at the four steps Sam had laid out for him. Ask for forgiveness wasn't one of them.

If Tony had known Bucky was the Winter Soldier, could Steve have forgiven him?

"I didn't know it was him."

… Zola was taunting me about the Winter Soldier as much as about Hydra. I just didn't realize it then.

I should've realized it after. The Winter Soldier was an assassin. He'd have had other "missions" over seventy years. I should've realized there was a reason Zola showed me Howard and his wife's "accident." I should've realized…

… I didn't want to realize.

Steve went back to the desk and tore off the page with the steps, setting it to one side. Then he started writing again.

The hospital operated on skeleton crews, with anyone who had the opportunity to be absent off for King T'Chaka's funeral. Sam and the others did their best not to bother anyone, and let them focus on mourning their king, even the ones whose jobs required them to do it from a distance.

After talking with Steve, Sam sat in his own room for awhile and wound up composing letters of his own, for his mom, sister, and brother.

I won't blame you for being pissed at me for the mess I've gotten myself into, especially if the government decides to mix you up in it. I pray to God they won't do that, but just like with everything else in our lives, I can't guarantee it. You know that I'm on the outs with Tony Stark, but I don't believe he'd take it out on anybody's families. So if there's trouble, call the emergency number for Stark Industries, or that lawyer in New York I told you about, Matt Murdoch.

I know you're probably thinking that I got in over my head, and I probably did, but the truth is, if I could do it again, I'd make the same choices. I still believe in the choices I made and the guys I chose to support. I know that's not a lot of consolation when you've got no idea what's happened to me or whether you'll have to deal with retaliation, but I wanted you to know that. Nobody made me choose the side I did. Remember that, okay?
Love you always.

Sam.

He wasn't surprised to learn that his teammates had all had the same ideas. One of T'Challa's aides brought a pile of FedEx boxes and envelopes at the request of Clint. "Our couriers will take your messages to the United States and send them discreetly from there. You must not give any indication of where you are."

Sam expected one of the Wakandan security officers to insist on reading the letters, but they didn't. It was Clint who gently told Scott, "Not to intrude, but why don't you let me take a look at that. There's things that we say unconsciously that the wrong pair of eyes might get clues from."

Scott hesitated only a second before sliding his letter across the table. Clint perused it with dispassionate eyes, then nodded. "Good job. You've got some good instincts."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm getting used to being a habitual offender," Scott said, uncharacteristically morose.

Sam didn't wait to be asked before letting Clint scan his own, and Clint gave him a thumbs-up with no other comment. Clint did raise his eyebrows when he realized Steve's only letter was for Tony. Steve didn't hand it over for inspection, and although the Wakandans looked alarmed, Clint nodded to them, so they let it pass.

As they all scribbled addresses onto the package labels, Scott regained a little of his usual humor at Steve's scrawled handwriting. "Looks like 'Tony Stank.'"

Steve smiled. "I doubt anyone's going to think there's a 'Tony Stank' living at Avengers Compound."

He sealed the small box and stared at it for a long time before sliding it across the table to the Wakandan couriers. "Wanda?"

"Outside," said Clint. "I asked her if she had anything she wanted to send out. She said no. Bucky's in his room."

"I know." Steve stared at the table. "The nurse says he's eating. He let Wanda in a few hours ago, for a little while."

"Give him a little time," said Scott. "What happened yesterday'd make anybody want to hide for a few weeks."

"I know." Steve forced a weak smile. "Dr. Damaris said the same. I'm glad he's talking to Wanda."

He looked at his box as if he was thinking about changing his mind and taking it back, until the Wakandan couriers took it and the other packages away. "I'm really sorry."

"What for?" demanded Scott.

"For dragging you all into this. It was selfish."

Clint and Scott exchanged incredulous looks, and Clint drawled, "So you're saying that if it had been any of us who'd gotten brainwashed and hunted down, you wouldn't have stood by us?" Steve looked up, startled, and Clint rolled his eyes. "Yeah, none of us have ever seen you go to bat for anybody except Bucky Barnes. Ever."

"Hill told me you totally didn't defend Wanda and her brother getting enhanced to protect their country," said Sam. "Especially not when they were still on Strucker's side."
"You *totally* didn't warn me we were going outside the law before the fight at the airport," added Scott.

Their jabs worked, and got a more genuine smile out of Steve. Sam went on, "Hawk's the one who's read all the letters, and I'll bet good money we all told our families the same thing: don't blame you. We're all grown-ups. We knew what we were getting into, and it was our decision."

"I made my choice too," said Wanda, leaning against the entry to the corridor that led to their rooms. Sam jumped. She still had a (creepy) knack for slipping in and out of rooms unnoticed until she wanted to be noticed. "You all call me 'kid,' but I'm capable of making decisions for myself. If I hadn't already wanted to do this, I could have told Clint no when he came to the compound. I refused to sign the Accords because I thought they were wrong, even though they could have protected me." She came to join them at the table. "You didn't force me into anything."

Steve smiled. Every damn one of them looked exhausted. Sam had a feeling he'd look the same in the mirror tonight. "Thanks," Steve told them as a group. "Even so...I'm sorry for how it turned out."

"Aren't we all," said Sam.

The next day, T'Challa came to the hospital looking a little run-down himself. Accompanying him was the elegant woman who'd met him when he first brought the Avengers to Wakanda. Sam hadn't had the chance to figure out who she was then, as exhausted and battered as he'd been, now he considered the way she carried herself and the deferential way the hospital staff treated her along with the king, and made a private bet.

"This is my sister, Princess Shuri, daughter of T'Chaka."

"Yes."

"She has wished to meet the Avengers, but there wasn't time until now."

"Your highness. It's an honor," said Steve.

She didn't bear much resemblance to T'Challa, at least not that Sam could see. Something in her bearing reminded him of those fierce female bodyguards, but her hair was long and elaborately braided. And there was a playful quirk to her smile, something sly in the way she looked from T'Challa to the Avengers that made Sam take a guess that she was a little sister. She seemed like someone who had given T'Challa hell his entire life and had no intention of stopping whether he was king or not.

"Before she completely monopolizes you, Captain, I must speak with your friend."

Steve cringed a little. "He's, er, in his room." Bucky hadn't come out since that disastrous broadcast.

Sam trailed after T'Challa, Steve, and the bodyguards to Bucky's room, as worried about Steve as he was about Bucky. Behind them, Wanda quietly forestalled Clint and Scott from following, and Princess Shuri stayed with them, initiating small talk.

There was no answer to Steve's knocks, and his call of "Bucky? It's Steve," got a curt answer:

"Leave me alone."

Seeing the Dora Milaje looking ready to open the door whether Bucky liked it or not, Steve said hastily, "King T'Challa's here. He needs to talk to you."

Sam gritted his teeth. No way would a confrontation between the bodyguards and Bucky end well. Fortunately, T'Challa motioned for the guards to wait, and after a long pause, Bucky said, "Give me
a few minutes."

When Bucky emerged, he looked like hell, and didn't appear to have slept in the past three days. Dr. Kelile looked ready to give him a tongue-lashing. T'Challa held up a hand to forestall her and beckoned them all to the nearest conference room. The Dora Milaje eyed Sam, but T'Challa didn't stop him from following.

"As we expected," T'Challa said reluctantly, "it hasn't escaped many journalists that the words Zemo spoke are very significant. They're being repeated around the world, even by children here in Wakanda."

Oh, fuck. If T'Challa had changed his mind about indulging Bucky's suicidal request, they were all screwed. The blood drained from Steve's face, but before he or Bucky could say anything, T'Challa went on, "We will not permit an innocent man to be put to death for Zemo's crimes, Sergeant Barnes. The answer is to defeat Hydra's hold over your mind."

Steve opened his mouth, and Sam kicked him under the table. Let the guy speak for himself. Steve glared at Sam, but took the hint. Bucky stared at the table, exhausted and not the least bit encouraged. "You could do that? How?"

"Conditioning is written into human consciousness," said Dr. Kelile. "It can be unwritten. We're collecting all the data that can be found about the methods of Hydra and the former Soviet Union. It's only a matter of time." Bucky looked up, skepticism plain on his face. Steve sighed, but Kelile went on, undeterred. "The answer is also not for you to lock yourself away in terror and despair during that time. This is harming yourself."

"What d'you suggest I do, then?" Bucky muttered, faintly sarcastic. "If I could go deaf by choice, I would - I tried that once." Steve flinched, and Sam's stomach lurchered. Fuck. Don't want to know, so incredibly don't want to know... "You think I'm trying to hurt myself? I can't let my guard down. Every time I ever have, they've taken me back. All it takes are the words."

"I know," Kelile said. "That's a horrific fate for any man or woman to imagine." Bucky didn't deny it. When Kelile paused, looking at T'Challa, Bucky finally looked up. Only after he met her eyes did she go on. "I hesitate to call this a 'solution' in the interim, because it's still a burden you should not have to take on. But it will ensure that you're insulated from enemies without torturing or killing you." Bucky frowned, puzzled, but Steve visibly braced himself. Kelile explained, "We have the capability of placing you in cryogenic stasis."

For the first time in the forty-eight hours since Helmut Fucking Zemo had announced the trigger words on live television, Bucky Barnes no longer looked like all he wanted was a bullet in his head. And for the first time since Steve had vowed to stop him, Bucky looked his best friend in the eyes.

Steve's expression was stricken, but Sam could see him doing the math. Steve didn't want to see Bucky end up back in cryo, but the alternatives - dead or huddled in his room unwilling to communicate with anyone - were worse.

"You're still holding a time bomb, and to break the conditioning, you'd have to build more," said Bucky slowly. "The Winter Soldier program, the Red Room - a lot of that data went to the highest bidders after the USSR fell. Competition to duplicate it, extrapolate from it, it's all still going on."

"We're aware of that," said T'Challa. "We have access to a great deal of that information, and are now actively searching for more."

"You might as well be posting a big sign that says 'the Winter Soldier is here,'" Bucky muttered.
T'Challa stared Bucky down until he looked away. "I'm not worth that risk."

Steve made a noise in the back of his throat, but Sam kicked him again. T'Challa would make more headway with bringing Bucky around that Steve could at this stage. *Let the king talk.* Steve glared at Sam, but relented and kept his mouth shut.

T'Challa was patient in the face of Bucky's anxiety. "You're mistaken, Sergeant Barnes, but if it will ease your mind, I will tell you that you are not the only reason for such actions. We are a wealthy country with resources that many of the world's powers wish to get their hands on. We've been the target of all types of espionage and stealth incursion since before I or even you were born. The metal in our ground is only one of the prizes sought by our enemies. It's necessary for us to keep abreast of developments such as mental conditioning of prisoners. You were dispatched against your own country many times. With half a chance, Hydra and its allies would assault Wakanda. It's partly true that I do this because I owe you a genuine debt. Also to help you is simply the right thing to do. But beyond that, it's a king's duty to his country to remain aware of and fortify us against many threats. This research will happen regardless of the choice you make, because I and all of my advisers are certain that one day, we'll need it to protect our own."

Sam held his breath and waited. Bucky stared at T'Challa. Steve stared at Bucky.

"It's...it's still a risk."

"Yes, it is. But anyone in this room would choose to take that risk rather than allow you to pay the price alone. Your death is not an option. Nor would your death guarantee the safety of your friends. Whatever you choose, we will protect you."

Bucky was silent for a long time, now gazing at the floor. When he finally looked up and met Steve's eyes, Sam knew before he said it. "I'll go back under."

Even T'Challa couldn't resist glancing at Steve for a reaction. To Sam's relief, Steve restrained himself from blurting out any more protests. He just held Bucky's gaze and looked about the saddest that Sam had ever seen.

After, Steve almost retreated to his room. Only awareness of the hypocrisy of it stopped him. He forced himself to go outside instead. It was very humid and warm, with high summer approaching so close to the equator. But in the evening, the breeze picked up and the birds and animals in the rain forest created a cacophony along the footpaths that surrounded the hospital complex.

He would not try to change Bucky's mind. He *would not.* He had no right to force Bucky to live in terror until the Wakandan scientists and/or Wanda figured out how to undo Hydra's damage to Bucky's mind.

*Dr. Kelile and T'Challa care about him. They wouldn't suggest cryo unless they were sure he'd be safe and comfortable. He has so few options left. He has a right to make this choice.*

The footpaths were made of packed soil that somehow didn't kick up dust even when Steve deliberately scuffed his feet. Granted, the climate was so damp that maybe it just wasn't possible for the soil to loosen up. Steve leaned against the carved wooden fence that ran along a large lake, separating the research part of the hospital from the busier buildings. Sometimes he spotted passers-by looking at him from across the lake, but the guards posted nearby didn't seem to have a problem with it.

He watched colorful wading birds fishing along the water's edge and searched for something like
peace until Bucky came down the path after him.

The guards he passed nodded to him, but had no problem with the ex-Winter Soldier being out and about. Steve's throat tightened. Bucky looked good; he'd showered and changed clothes and seemed like a huge weight was off his shoulders. He wove a little on the path - still adjusting to the loss of his metal arm's weight, Steve figured. But for the first time since they'd arrived in Wakanda, he genuinely smiled.

Bucky tried to lean casually against the railing as if about to flirt with a girl, and nearly overbalanced himself; Steve had to catch him. "How's it feel?" Steve asked, indicating the remains of his arm.

"Better than it has in years, actually. I'd gotten used to aching all the time from the weight. That's gone. Dr. Dahab's team is working on a replacement. He says it could be ready in a few months."

"When you come out of being frozen?" Steve murmured, dropping his eyes.

Bucky shifted his weight against the fence to his hip, so he could free his right arm to pat Steve's. "Well...I doubt they'll figure out how to break Hydra's conditioning that fast. They're serious about it. Dr. Kelile's forming a team, putting me through the ringer until the cryo unit's ready."

"How soon?" asked Steve. "How soon do you go under?"

"A couple days."

A couple days, is that all? What, do Wakandans stick people in the deep freeze on a regular basis?

"Steve. Hey." He couldn't look at Bucky anymore. "Let me choose something."

I have no right to stop you. No right. Shut up, Rogers, just shut up, he's right, it's his choice. "Does it hurt?" The words came out against his will, in a pathetic, weak voice. "Going in?"

"No." Bucky stepped closer to him. "It's not, well, not something you do for fun, but compared to everything else, no. Back when...whether it was Hydra or the KGB, going under was a relief. It's when I knew everything would stop hurting." He asked, "When you went into the ice, are you saying it hurt?"

Steve shook his head. "Not really, I guess. It's pretty...foggy, the impact and whatever came after. I'd been knocked around so much I didn't really process anything. I just figured I was dying, and waited for it to happen."

Bucky put his hand on Steve's shoulder. "I don't remember the first time... they did that. Out of what I do remember, that was always the part that was the easiest."

He smiled, brightening almost to how he'd been on the elevator in Siberia, letting himself remember what he could of life before war and serum and captivity. "Somehow I think Dr. Kelile won't even put up with piddling little ice burns before I go under. It won't be bad."

Steve wished he could feel as optimistic - and hated himself for wanting to fight the one thing since Siberia that had made Bucky feel optimistic again. "Yeah, she's pretty conscientious. Good doctor." It really didn't help that Bucky was fixing him with that all-too-knowing look, so familiar, just like after Steve's mom had died. So Steve forced a smile and said, "Don't worry about me."

"I'm getting back into the habit already, punk. Not my fault you can't stay out of trouble when I'm not around."

Steve almost retorted, Hey, I get into the most trouble chasing you into things! But he caught himself.
Back with the Howling Commandos, that would've been funny. It wasn't so funny anymore, and 
Bucky would wonder again whether he was worth it.

To his surprise, Bucky went on, "I'm glad you had the good sense to join a team instead of always 
running around half-cocked on your own. Avengers may not be Howling Commandos, but they'll 
do."

"That's over with."

"Is it?"

"We're fugitives, Buck," Steve replied. "I doubt T'Challa would take kindly to Avengers training 
when we're not even supposed to be here."

"So don't train as the Avengers. You can give up the shield without giving up who you are..." Bucky 
trailed off, staring into the distance.

Steve pushed himself off the wall. "Buck?" Did he dare touch Bucky now?

Bucky didn't look upset, just puzzled. He frowned, then sighed. "I remember...something. Something 
I said once...I wouldn't follow Captain America, I'd follow...a little guy." He sighed and gave Steve a 
bleak look. "There's still so much stuff I can't remember. It's all in pieces, I remember all of them, all 
those people. Stark's family. The faces, every mission. But I can't remember who all my friends 
were, my family. Other things I should remember, that hasn't come back."

Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulder, above where flesh gave way to the metal remnants of Hydra's 
arm. "You said you'd follow 'that little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from 
a fight.'"

Bucky smiled and looked Steve over. "Yeah. That sounds like what I'd have said. You're still that 
little, dumb guy." Steve grinned. Everything hurt less.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: To prepare for undoing Hydra's conditioning, the Wakandan scientists 
need to see it in action. Our heroes and T'Challa witness the effect of the words on 
Bucky, and say their goodbyes along with Steve as Bucky returns to cryo.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, 
five-foot-one.

Dr. Dahab: Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-
foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical 
purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and 
prelude comics.)
Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

To undo Hydra's conditioning, Wakanda's scientists need to see it in action. Our heroes witness the effects on Bucky up close, and Wanda sees it from inside Bucky's mind.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming!

Canon Notes: This chapter marks the end of the overlap with Civil War, concluding with the after-credit scene of Bucky going into cryo and Steve's conversation with T'Challa. I'm following the comic canon that T'Challa ultimately joins the Avengers - this fic explores how and why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Six

Wanda came into the research center exam room in time to hear Dr. Kelile say, "We need to see how the trigger words affect you, Sergeant Barnes."

Aloud, Bucky didn't say anything, but Wanda felt the wave of sheer terror roll through him. His eyes darted to Steve, and then past Steve to Wanda in the doorway. He knew the doctors were right...but he was afraid of the words. He knew abstractly what they did to his mind, but more terrifying was the vagueness, the otherness of his memories of when those words were spoken, and everything he did while under their control.

Bucky knew it should be done. He knew the Wakandans wouldn't try to harm him - or wield him. What they learned might be valuable.

Steve restrained himself from weighing in. He knew Bucky needed to make the decision on his own.

After a long, painful silence, Bucky gave a curt nod. "What can we do?" Steve asked.

"The king will be here," said Dr. Kelile. "He will want you to be close as well."

Steve opened his mouth to say yes, then caught himself and looked at Bucky. In spite of his distress, Bucky smirked.

It was one of the last times Wanda saw him smile for the next three days.

She stayed as inconspicuously as possible nearby while the medics and psychiatrists questioned Bucky for everything he knew about the trigger words and how they were used. As unpleasant as the questions and the answers were for Bucky, Wanda sensed he preferred that vastly to the prospect of hearing the words spoken. She also sensed she wasn't the only one who realized he was stalling.
It couldn't last.

When they finally decided there was nothing else to learn by word of mouth, Dr. Kelile and the other senior medics led them to a sealed, soundproof bunker several miles away from the city, with King T'Challa, six of his formidable female guards, and all of the available Avengers.

At the urging of Dr. Damaris, Wanda and all the Avengers apart from Steve remained on the opposite side of a wall of two-way mirror along with the medics who were observing. Only T'Challa, his guards, and Steve were permitted to be in the room once the medics finished placing recording devices around the room.

Neither the vibranium-reinforced glass, nor the steel and concrete walls shielded Wanda from the fear and shame coming off Bucky in waves, or the anxiety and pity of the watchers. T'Challa had a dual nature like a more natural version of Bucky and Bruce Banner - only he'd taken on his two selves by choice. T'Challa the king was prepared to see this done to safeguard his people and honor his debt to Bucky. T'Challa the man loathed the necessity of it.

They'd decided T'Challa would say the words. Steve was prepared to do it if Bucky asked, and Bucky knew it, but neither he nor any of the others wanted to put Steve in that position.

In the testing room, once the doctors and monitors were ready, T'Challa told Bucky, "Tell me when you're ready to begin. If you feel you must stop, you must tell me. I will not do this to you against your will."

Bucky swallowed and nodded. After several deep breaths, he focused all his attention on the floor and muttered, "Go."

T'Challa inhaled and began. "Zhelaniye."

It stung Bucky like a hornet. Some of the doctors on the monitors hissed in alarm.

"Rzhavyy."

A hand reached into Bucky's brain.

"Semnadsat'."

The hand began to squeeze. Wanda gasped.

"Rassvet."

Otherness, something was creeping like scalding amber over Bucky's mind. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting with ever-flagging willpower not to shout for it to stop. Wanda bit the edge of her hand to keep her own mouth shut.

"Pech'."

Steve stood rigid. Bucky shuddered. The plan had been not to fight it, to know he was safe, but he was forgetting the plan, and all his instincts screamed against the thing that was rising up and smothering everything that he was. T'Challa's conscience railed against doing this; it was wrong, wrong, wrong - Wanda stifled a sob and took a step back.

"Devyat'."

The guards tensed; Bucky jammed his knuckles against his teeth. *Have to let it can't let it no yes no*
yes stop it finish it can't have to can't can't can't... T'Challa's voice wavered. He didn't want to watch, but felt that he must.

"Dobroserdechnyy."

Wanda couldn't breathe. Bucky couldn't breathe. Steve shifted his weight; every instinct screamed to lunge forward and stop this. Darkness, otherness, was drowning Bucky; his breathing grew more and more ragged.

"Vozvrashcheniye na rodinu."

STEVE - Bucky whirled away, turning his back on Steve and T'Challa - the guards jumped, but Bucky stayed in place, his foundering self still hanging on to what he remembered: they had to do this. Not worth it, he wanted to shout for it to stop, but what if there were still others...and I owe it to Steve...Steve...God...

God had died for James Buchanan Barnes a long time ago. He couldn't even remember when or how. Wanda swallowed a strangled cry and stumbled back without meaning to, both hands clapped over her mouth - don't scream - someone caught her elbow - horror, horror, horror surged like endless echoes against the walls - the doctors gazed at the readings on the screens and horror at what it must feel like - Clint remembered and horror - Scott and Sam imagined and horror - T'Challa inflicted it and horror - hell was crawling and oozing over Bucky's brain and he fought to remember...

"Odin."

Ending...ending, teetering on the precipice, Bucky choked out a groan, but held on, held out...

"Gruzovoy vagon."

Gone.

Something hurt, and Wanda found herself on the floor, clutching Clint's arms as a lifeline against the sucking, drowning tar. Bucky was gone, and she was going...

"Wanda! Wanda! Hey! Come on, you're okay, look at me." Clint tapped her cheeks, and Sam was at her other side, talking in her ear.

But all she could focus on was...him on the other side of the glass. The blank, empty other standing in front of Steve and T'Challa, lowering his hands from his face without any recollection of why he'd been hiding his face to begin with.

The Wakandan doctors whispered to each other, sicken by the sight in the room and what the monitors were showing them. "He's someone else now. That is another man, with no memories, no power of choice, no will. Blessed gods, this is monstrous."

T'Challa and Steve stared at the stranger before them, searching in vain for some recognition in his empty, dead eyes. He only met T'Challa's gaze.

T'Challa stared back, astonished, appalled, and finally glanced over his shoulder toward the mirror glass, at a loss. What to do now? What to say now? "You are...the Winter Soldier?" he asked slowly.

"Gotovy soblyudat'."

Clint muttered to Dr. Damaris, "We need to take her out of here."

"- no," Wanda croaked. She leveraged herself against Clint's bulk to get back to her feet. "No. I need to see." Need to feel it. To understand. That's why we did this. Or else it's for nothing. She swallowed her gorge and made herself concentrate. The mobile scanners in the room could relay electrical signals from Bucky's brain to the doctors, but Wanda could do something else. She could feel it and understand it as even their best neurologists could not. Focus. Study it. Understand it. Help him.

T'Challa glanced at the screen on one wall, where one of the watchers wrote the translation of the Soldier's words. He looked at the Soldier and asked, "Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

Steve was a whirlwind of anguish. In a small voice, he asked, "Bucky?"

*Who the hell is Bucky?* The Soldier didn't say it aloud, but the complete lack of recognition of the name was plain on his face.

Wanda sobbed.

T'Challa swallowed hard and took a deep breath. To ask the question that occurred to him was repugnant, because he knew it would break Steve's heart. But he had to know. He forced himself to gesture towards Steve Rogers. "Do you know this man?"

Everyone watching caught their breath as the Soldier's dead gaze darted at once to Steve, meeting his friend's eyes, searching him...but it was only a few desperate heartbeats before the Soldier answered: "No."

Steve's breath caught. He had known immediately what the Soldier would say, seen it in those empty eyes, but it went through him like one of the Dora Milaje's spears.

"What is your name?"

The Soldier returned his attention to T'Challa without hesitating. "No name."

"What are you called?" Steve breathed.

The Soldier didn't respond. T'Challa swallowed again and ordered, "Answer him."

"Soldat." It was a name. It was a function.

One of the Wakandans quietly spat an obscenity that roughly meant "spawn of the swine of hell." Similar sentiments darted through every mind in Wanda's range - apart from the empty one in the center of it all. *Monsters. Bastards. Scum. Who does this to someone? What does this to someone?*

What now? The plan flitted through T'Challa's and the doctors' dazed minds, stifled by their horror and loathing in a weak parody of the *otherness* that had smothered everything that Bucky Barnes was. An order. The man who had spoken the words to awaken the Soldier had to give him an order.

T'Challa didn't want to do it. It was grotesque. It was a violation of all human decency, to command someone so utterly empty of will and choice. He and Steve could see it in Bucky's eyes. If T'Challa ordered the Soldier to kill everyone in that room, the Soldier wouldn't hesitate.

At a loss for how to proceed in a situation so far beyond the boundaries of humanity, T'Challa
glanced around the room and focused on the leader of his guards. At another time, Wanda might have spared the mental energy to be impressed by their rapport; all of the Dora Milaje caught his aim, and the woman in question, Okoye, gave a barely-perceptible nod. All of them would follow any command he gave, but her consent was important to him now, in such a situation where he faced the result of men robbing another of all shreds of agency.

T'Challa braced himself, then pointed to Okoye. "Without causing injury. Disarm her."

Okoye was one of the best fighters of the Dora Milaje, and in stance and prepared for the attack. It was fortunate for her, because the Soldier sprang into combat so fast that even Clint and Wanda could barely keep track.

The other guards, T'Challa and Steve drew on all their self-control not to lunge into the fray. The Soldier and Okoye were a blur of flying limbs and Okoye's spear that was his objective. Had he been ordered to kill her, she would have had to resort to deadly force, but it hampered both of them, having to try to avoid harming their opponent.

So severely wounded so recently, without an arm, the Soldier was at a severe disadvantage. Had the Soldier possessed his metal arm, he might have challenged her more. She pinned him, but as soon as she loosened her grasp, he went for her again, unhesitating. And again and again, and after several minutes, T'Challa called a halt. "Stop."

The Soldier stopped so fast that he was vulnerable to Okoye's last blow to the solar plexus before she registered her king's command; she straightened and bowed in apology. The Soldier rolled away from her and came up at attention to T'Challa again.

They would have kept going until one of them was down. Everyone knew it, even the Soldier. To him, that was simply reality: compliance.

What now? T'Challa considered the familiar stranger and finally asked, "Do you understand Wakandan?"

"No."

Letting out a breath, T'Challa looked at the nearest camera. There was no point in trying to hide the observers; the Soldier would know, but he clearly wouldn't care. "Do you have enough information?"

Dr. Damaris took a deep breath, and said reluctantly, "My king...he must be given a command that...a rational man would not follow. He must be ordered to do what...his real self would not do."

They all knew what she meant. They'd talked about it before. T'Challa hadn't really forgotten. He was just hoping that it wouldn't be necessary.

T'Challa's eyes glittered. Duty and humanity warred in the Wakandan king, and for a few moments, he now considered refusing. Observations be damned. No decent man would do this, even for a greater good. He looked at Steve, but now Steve tore his anguished eyes away from the Soldier and met T'Challa's bleak gaze. He nodded.

Do it. Like we planned. Do it so we can figure out how to save him.

Bucky had told them not to tell him how they were planning to test him, so that nothing would be at risk of carrying over into the Soldier. But that worry was unfounded, Wanda could have told him. Inside Bucky's mind now, there was just...nothing.
Steve caught T'Challa's eye and nodded again. *Just get it over with.*

T'Challa closed his eyes for a few breaths, until his resolve returned. It might save Bucky's life. It might save other lives. They'd decided before. He couldn't falter now. So he opened his eyes and pointed at Steve. "Cause him pain."

Wanda reeled backwards from the avalanche of revulsion that swept both rooms, but the Soldier was oblivious. He went for Steve and slammed him to the ground. T'Challa barked, "No severe injuries," before he could check himself, even as his mind chanted, *Forgive me forgive me forgive me...*

It wasn't Steve's forgiveness he needed; it was Bucky's. For the Soldier's one hand forced the unresisting Steve face-down, dug into a nerve bundle in his flesh and *twisted* - Steve Rogers was arguably the most enhanced man on Earth, the strongest who could still be recognized as human, but the Soldier knew his work, and a cry of shocked pain burst out of Steve. The Soldier chose nerves that radiated, maximum pain with minimal damage as ordered, and the mission's shouts and groans soon gave way to a scream.

"SHIT!" Sam shouted, palms against the glass.

Steve, trying not to resist, trying to focus through expertly-applied pain, cried out. "Aah...god - damn - it - BUCKY!"

And Wanda felt it. Like the swipe of a nettle across her brain, a *pinch* from deep within, so fast that none of the visual observers saw it, not even T'Challa or the Dora Milaje saw it. But she felt it from Bucky, and the Wakandan medics gasped in unison.

Hearing his name, from Steve's voice, in distress... *someone* reached back through the darkness for the surface.

The Soldier's mind was only the mission, the command he had no power to do anything but obey, but something was prickling like stinging splinters, pushed up from deep inside. "He's there," Wanda rasped.

*Barely.* It faded almost at once. But over the doctors' shoulders, there were lights flashing, and the graphs that represented his brain activity suddenly shifted.

Teeth clenched, growling against the pain, Steve twisted in Bucky's grip just enough to turn his head and meet his eyes..."Buck?"

It stung the Soldier again, sharper and harder. This time, he wavered, and T'Challa saw it. Dr. Kelile gasped, and Sam hissed, "Okay, enough, enough..."

T'Challa wouldn't have heard him, but obviously thought the same. "Enough." The Soldier withdrew his hand...but even as he tried to focus back on his commander, his eyes darted back to Steve, confused, distracted.

It wasn't much, but enough that Wanda felt elation burst to life in the two Wakandan doctors nearby. Dr. Kelile was beaming. "It's not absolute," she breathed. "He's already fighting it."

*We can save him. We can undo this. We can free him. We can end this.*

T'Challa looked at Steve and asked Bucky softly, "Do you know this man?"

The Soldier hesitated. "I...don't..." Confusion, little stings of recognition prickled through his mind as he leaned away, shifting his weight like he might lunge for Steve again...or considering that maybe
he should lunge for the handler instead. *Where am I...what is...who are...*

Wanda sucked in her breath and turned to the doctors. "Stop it now, he might hurt the king!"

Dr. Damaris dove for the microphone. "Sputnik!"

The Soldier dropped so fast that even T'Challa and the Dora Milaje jumped. Steve dove for him and pulled him into his arms, trembling, eyes squeezed shut. "Captain, are you all right?"

Steve actually shook his head, then realized what T'Challa meant and croaked, "Yeah, I mean yeah, 's not that bad, I'll be okay. God...God, Buck."

T'Challa looked toward the glass. "What happened?"

Dr. Damaris eyed the readouts and said, "This suppression of his reason and memory seems to have begun to destabilize. Miss Maximoff feared he might become aggressive towards you."

The medics watching the monitors muttered to each other, and one of them called Dr. Kelile over. "These readings suggest the collapse did not remove the Soldier personality. He may awaken as the Soldier."

"What?" Steve looked up, still cradling Bucky against his chest.

Okoye stepped towards the king. "Then he must remain in the bunker until it can be reversed."

Sam peered over the medics' shoulders at the monitors. "That doesn't make any sense. Last time, in Berlin, he woke up and he was Bucky again."

Steve sighed, tightening his grip on his friend. "On the helicarrier...in DC, when we were fighting...I put him under with a choke hold. When he woke up, he was still the Winter Soldier."

"Maybe," said Clint. "It may take a little more than losing consciousness. You told me he'd crashed a helicopter in Berlin, right? Steve had to pull him out?" Steve nodded, searching Bucky's face as if there was some explanation there. "Cognitive recalibration. Hit him really hard in the head." He shrugged as they all blinked at him. "It worked for me and Erik Selvig. Knock out the Hulk and Bruce Banner wakes up."

Dismay rippled through the medics, but Okoye said, "Until we are certain, he cannot leave this room."

T'Challa shot Steve an apologetic look. "Then make him comfortable. Captain Rogers may stay with him."

"Thanks," Steve murmured.

The medics were still setting up two cots when Bucky stirred, and the Dora Milaje barked an order that sent them all scrambling for the exit. T'Challa left the two medics and rejoined Steve standing over Bucky. Several of the Dora Milaje hissed protests in Wakandan, but he waved them off - though he did acquiesce to Steve's urging that T'Challa stay behind him.

When Bucky opened his eyes, there was no missing it: this was still the Soldier.

And yet...he looked at Steve with the slightest furrowing of his brow, confused, visibly trying to hide that he was trying to place him. "Soldat?" asked T'Challa.

The Soldier's gaze snapped to the king. "*Gotovy soblyudat*."
Steve sighed. Scott looked at Clint. "You said you and the other guy got brainwashed - like this?"

Wanda deliberately avoided looking at Clint, but she felt him shake his head. "Dunno. I doubt it."

To all their surprise, T’Challa tried to be direct about it. "How does your compliance end?"

The Soldier blinked. "I don't understand."

Steve stepped forward. "Your mission. How do we cancel your mission?"

"No current mission." The Soldier frowned.

Wanda leaned toward Dr. Damaris. "He won't know. He doesn't remember anything when he's under their control. Only his training," Dr. Damaris whispered it in Wakandan into T'Challa's earpiece.

"Is this enough for me to try to bring him out of it?" T’Challa asked.

"I believe so, my king. We should try to end it before placing him in stasis."

"All right. Close your eyes and hold still," T’Challa ordered in English. The Soldier obeyed without hesitating, and Steve cringed, but didn't try to stop T’Challa as he stepped forward.

To Wanda's relief, T’Challa took the time to measure exactly where his blow would fall, and his aim to the skull was precise, bringing on the full force of his vibranium-reinforced fist. Bucky dropped as fast as he had at hearing "sputnik," and Steve caught him.

Several medics yelped, and the lines on the monitors pitched down, then up. "I, uh, think that worked," said Scott.

T’Challa bent to help Steve lift Bucky back onto the nearest cot. "He must stay here until we’re certain. Do you wish some food to be brought?"

"No, I'm not hungry, unless..." Steve eased Bucky's head down and looked toward the glass. "You guys okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine, man," said Sam. He looked at Wanda. "You okay?"

She nodded. "May I come in? I think I can help be sure."

T’Challa looked at Okoye, who nodded, and he beckoned. One of the guards outside the room unsealed the door so Wanda could enter. Dr. Damaris trailed after. "You were in some distress during the process."

"I'm all right now," Wanda murmured, kneeling at Bucky's side and putting a hand to his cheek. T’Challa had left a bump on his head, but both Bucky Barnes and the Winter Soldier had experienced worse. It wouldn't leave permanent damage. In his unconscious mind was Bucky again. "It's Bucky," she said, stroking a finger on his temple. She looked up at T’Challa, who nodded and motioned the Dora Milaje back.

"I don't understand," said Steve. "I hit him in the head - probably Sam too - when we fought in Washington. It was over an hour of fighting him until he started to remember, and even then, I hadn't hit him."

"We can't expect all the answers with a single experiment," said Dr. Damaris. "We now have data on this process which I'm quite certain is unmatched anywhere in the world except by Hydra itself."
Sergeant Barnes has asked to be in stasis for the safety of others while we continue to study it, and his wishes should be respected."

"Yeah," Steve muttered roughly. "Yeah, I know." He put a hand on Bucky's good shoulder, the turmoil in his heart making Wanda light-headed.

"I could still read it," she told him. "I think I'll be able to help."

T'Challa returned to the bunker when Barnes came around a few hours later. At first, he didn't remember anything. "D'it work? What happened?"

"Yeah, it worked," said Rogers.

Barnes caught on at once and looked at T'Challa. "What'd I do?"

"Only what I ordered you to do, and for that, I apologize," T'Challa answered.

Barnes swallowed hard, staring hard at his friend. Rogers shook his head. "It's fine, Buck. We had a plan. We stuck to it. You didn't hurt anyone."

"And you started to remember Steve," Maximoff added. Barnes' eyes widened.

"It's true," said Dr. Kelile. "The effect of those triggers on your brain is powerful, but we recorded it. We will determine how to break them."

If Barnes had changed his mind at that point about going into cryostasis, T'Challa would have abided by his choice. He had no doubt that Rogers was hoping Barnes would do just that, but in the end, Rogers held his peace and left the decision to his friend. As much as T'Challa pitied both men for facing such a hell that was in no way their fault or doing, he had to agree that Rogers had made the wise decision to keep silent. Bucky Barnes could be certain of very little about his own mind, and had even fewer choices of how to act on it. Better to let him keep the few choices he did have.

T'Challa surreptitiously stayed nearby during the last day and night before cryostasis was ready, and observed the Avengers.

Barnes mingled with them after seeing the chamber being made ready, his fear diminished by that knowledge. Rogers, on the other hand, was withdrawn and quiet, trying and failing to put a brave face on his distress. Maximoff and Wilson were tag-teaming the pair with distractions; Wilson with Rogers and Maximoff with Barnes, while Barton and Lang stayed at a remove and chatted, pretending they weren't observing from a distance.

T'Challa worked nearby that last evening with Shuri, but stayed within earshot of his guests, and on occasion, looked in on them to find himself making inadvertent eye contact with Barton. The archer smirked. T'Challa smiled, if a bit sheepishly.

"I'm Clint."

"I don't care." Perhaps I should have cared. If I'd learned more about who I was fighting and why, perhaps it wouldn't have come to this.

Barnes was required to stop eating and drinking for twenty-four hours before entering stasis, and the team joined him in solidarity. "They make you do that in Siberia?" asked Barton.

Lang and Rogers winced, but Barnes was untroubled. "I wasn't really aware of it. After missions, it
was...dunno, nothing but IVs. Or I just don't remember."

Dr. Kelile huffed. "Cryostasis has been initiated in emergencies, but if the digestive tract is not clear, revival can be risky, not to mention a painful process. I suppose Hydra cared nothing for such things." Barnes actually smiled at her, but there was a wry, bitter quirk to it that told them all they needed to know.

Much to T'Challa's interest was that Wanda Maximoff seemed to be growing very close to Barnes, and he to her. He spoke Sokovian, and the two of them murmured to each other in the brief moments when the doctors (and Rogers) left Barnes alone.

The morning that the cryo unit was ready, Barnes said a calm farewell to the rest of Rogers' team, and muttered to Wilson, "Keep an eye on him, will you?"

"Been doing that, no plans to stop," Wilson replied. He gave Barnes a small, sly smile, not unlike the ones that T'Challa found himself exchanging with Clint Barton, as if to acknowledge their old conflict and the change in his opinion. Perhaps there had been conflict even among Captain America's followers. "Don't sleep too long. He misses you."

Only Rogers accompanied Barnes into the self-sustained wing. Powered by an uninterruptible source somewhat similar to Stark's arc reactor (only perfected more than twenty years earlier), it housed the stasis units and life support for patients still in long-term care.

A few hours later, T'Challa pulled rank to meet Rogers in the outer waiting area alone. The American was composed and gracious, but something in his manner reminded T'Challa of himself and his siblings as they accepted blessings and condolences for their father. *His friend is not dead, but they're separated again. All because of another man's lust for vengeance.*

"You know, if they find out he's here, they'll come for him," said Rogers.

T'Challa did not need to think long about his answer: "Let them try." T'Challa had no fear of any foreigners trying to take Barnes back by force. Others had tried to take far more from Wakanda by force, with far more to gain from the efforts, and still failed. Wakanda and her people - and her kings - were well-practiced at defending what was under their protection. The great basalt Black Panther loomed over the foggy valley of the capital, reminding all of its power and protection. "The same extends to you, and the rest of your team, so long as you need it."

"And the same risk extends to us being here," Rogers countered.

"I know." T'Challa smiled thinly. "I won't claim that it's mere generosity. My father and forty other innocents were murdered by a man whose aim was to destroy the Avengers. I can't undo anyone's suffering, let alone my own, with vengeance against Zemo, but there is some justice in thwarting his goal. That means the Avengers must survive this."

Now Rogers betrayed dismay and looked away from the window, directly at T'Challa. "I...your highness, every one of us're outlaws now. A hundred seventeen countries, including mine, they voted that we could choose to be under government control or stop altogether. Nobody's going to take kindly to any of us staying in action."

"For now," T'Challa agreed. "But I believe that will change before long. The Accords went unsigned because of Zemo, and I have heard that several nations, including your own, are beginning to question whether they are wise. I agree, and Wakanda is now among those taking a second look in light of these events." Rogers stared, and then dropped his eyes. T'Challa could guess what he was thinking about. "I haven't forgotten Lagos, Captain. Nor have my people. We wanted accountability,
but these last few weeks have exposed some flaws in the model that was developed." He smirked at the understatement, and even Rogers gave a small, weak laugh in response. "I'm not advising that you return immediately to fighting international crime. Only that you not allow your skills to become rusty."

Rogers smiled absently. "You know...a few days ago, after he decided to go into cryo...Bucky said that."

"Then trust his judgment. As it is," T'Challa beckoned him from the window. "The Dora Milaje pride themselves in being prepared to challenge a threat from any corner of the world. They'll be very disappointed if I never give them the opportunity to test themselves against Captain America."

Obediently following him from the room, Rogers smiled more fully.

*To Be Continued...*

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Coming Soon: The fugitive Avengers encounter a Wakandan boy who has something to say about Lagos, and the effect falls hardest on Wanda, who struggles with the toll of her past actions.*

*PLEASE don't forget to review!*

Translation: "*Gotovy soblyudat'.*" – Ready to comply.

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Dahab: Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction.
Chapter Seven

Wanda had been okay with the prospect of Bucky going back into cryo, but Clint and the others quickly noticed that Bucky's absence was hard on her. She was very quiet and withdrawn - moreso than before - like Steve. However, it wasn't until Clint learned that she'd slipped into the life support wing and been seen with her hand on Bucky's cryo unit that he figured out the reason.

Dr. Damaris, the Wakandan headshrinker, and one of the medical doctors gently but firmly ushered Wanda out, but asked her, "Did you hear anything in Sergeant Barnes?"

Wanda shook her head, distracted. "No. He's not dreaming. He's not...there. I can't feel him at all. It's as if he was a corpse - " She stiffened and shot Steve a panicky look, but he just gave her a weak smile and waved as if to say not to worry about it.

"Perhaps we could talk alone," Damaris suggested, and Clint and Steve started to leave, but Wanda grabbed Clint's wrist.

"No! No, I mean, it's all right. They can stay, it doesn't matter." But the appeal in her eyes as she looked from Clint to Steve was unmistakable, and Clint mentally translated that she'd feel better if they stayed.
"Then let us go outside," said Damaris. That, Wanda was okay with. Clint exchanged a look with Steve, and the two of them by mutual agreement stayed on Wanda's left, letting Dr. Damaris walk at Wanda's right and take the lead in the conversation. "Is it bothering you, Sergeant Barnes' condition?"

"Not..." Wanda frowned at the path in front of them, leading down to the lake. "Not his 'condition' - I can't feel it. I can't feel him at all. I got used to sensing him, and now he's missing. It feels strange." She gave Steve an apologetic look. They both were feeling Bucky's absence. "It's...after my brother died, it was similar."

"Did Sergeant Barnes remind you of your brother?"

Wanda looked at Steve again, and he smiled encouragingly at her. She nodded, and he said, "Bucky had a lot of practice, back in our day. He had three little sisters."

"I know. He knows he did, only..." Wanda stopped and shivered, staring at nothing. "He can't remember them."

Steve stiffened. "At all?"

Clint considered trying to pull him back and maneuver him out of the conversation. As much as Cap had his own demons to deal with, Damaris was focused on Wanda's condition, and she wasn't wrong. But Wanda didn't seem to be trying to consciously divert them, so Clint - and Dr. Damaris - held their peace and let her say what she thought was important.

Wanda shook her head and looked at Steve with bleak eyes. "He knows there are still things...missing, in what he remembers. He knows he had sisters. He read all he could find about them, but the past - that hasn't come back, not yet. His mother and father came back to him only a few months ago. He was hoping the rest would follow. I told him I'd help him." Her gaze drifted to the distance again. "Pietro...I felt him die, but I remember how he felt, alive. Sometimes...Bucky feels like Pietro."

She didn't resist Dr. Damaris leading her to sit on the grass near the bridge across the water. Clint and Steve settled themselves at a small remove. "Different people feel differently to you, in your mind's eye?" Damaris asked.

Wanda nodded, a little more at ease. "Yes. Minds are just like people; they're never exactly the same. I think...people who are enhanced, they sound more alike. They're louder. Usually." Steve shot Clint a dismayed look, but Wanda added, "Not so loud that it hurts. Not like that. If I don't want to pay attention, I can tune someone's mind out. But if I'm listening, people who're enhanced, their minds are easier to find. Except Vision. He was - I mean, he is very quiet. I always had to concentrate to read him."

There was a lot more to that, Clint could tell and would have bet his bow (if he still had it) that Damaris sensed that too. Steve might not be anywhere near as good at reading people who weren't Bucky Barnes, but even he was getting vibes of what Wanda wasn't saying aloud.

Clint had high hopes that Wanda would go on and maybe reveal more that the Wakandan psychologist could use to help her, but she stayed silent. After a few moments of politely pretending that he wasn't paying attention, it dawned on Clint that Wanda had frozen up. He caught on at the same moment Damaris did. "Wanda?"

She was staring across the lake...at someone on the opposite bank. Clint's instincts took over, and he sprang to his feet, shoving Wanda toward Steve and pushing Damaris behind him for good measure -
even reaching for a bow that wasn't there. No weapon at all - so he shifted into reaction mode and waited.

Across the water - it was a kid, a teenager, but that didn't mean it wasn't a threat. He was just staring...at Wanda and Steve.

Damaris must have signaled someone, because a dozen guards came sprinting across the grounds to get between them and the stranger. The kid turned and bolted back away from the lake, towards the public hospital building that Clint knew was in that direction, but more guards intercepted him.

"Who is that?!" Steve had Wanda and Damaris completely shielded behind his own body.

One of the guards listened to a report on his earpiece, then gave an order to the rest: "Stand down. The boy is unarmed."

Clint rejoined Wanda and put an arm around her shoulders. "What'd you hear? Can you tell me?"

Wanda didn't - or couldn't - look at any of them, but she did manage to answer: "Lagos."

Steve's breath caught. Dr. Damaris muttered in Wakandan to the guard, who spoke to the guards detaining the boy. They came up with a name: "Tesfaye Demissie."

Damaris sighed. "I thought that might be him. He was not in Lagos; his mother and sister were."

Wanda trembled in Clint's grasp, while Steve went completely still. Clint started to ask, "Were they - " and caught himself.

Steve was about to ask something too, but figured out Clint's fear of going into detail in front of Wanda, and looked away. But Wanda murmured, still without looking up, "His sister is dead. His mother is still being treated for her injuries and will never fully recover."

The guards exchanged alarmed glances. "You can read a man's mind from that distance?" Dr. Damaris hissed something at them in reproof, but Wanda's response brought them all up sharp.

"N-no, not... ordinarily, unless I'm trying. Or they're trying. He was trying."

"What?" Steve blurted.

"He's...been waiting. He knew we were here. He knew I could see into minds. So he's been to see them, everyone still in the hospital. When he saw me, he reached out...he showed me, all their faces, all their bodies. His sister on her way to her tomb. The others at their funerals, their...he wanted me to know. Now I know."

Damaris was the one who had gone very still now, while Steve was looking around for someone to fight off. "I don't understand - you're saying he's enhanced? A telepath like you?"

"Did he hurt you?" asked the lead guard.

"No. He's not a telepath. If you want someone to hear you and they're not looking at you, you shout louder to get their attention. Some people know...if they think at me, I'll hear. Pietro used to do it. Natasha and Vision could do it. And...in the prison, the guards did it."

Clint's stomach lurched. "What about the collar?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"Didn't stop me from hearing, just from casting. I tried not to react, but I think they knew...they didn't want to be seen on the cameras. So they thought at me, all the things they imagined doing to me."
Oh. My. Fucking. God. Clint no longer gave a damn about the Wakandan kid, but would have given anything to get five minutes in a room with any and all of those guards. I knew it. I knew they were doing something to her, the cowardly motherfucking sadists, I fucking knew it!

Steve had gone dead white, his jaw clenched, and something in his eyes that said he was seeing red no less than Clint. The Wakandans were muttering to each other in their own language, but there was no language barrier for Wanda, and she came back to the present with a weak protest of, "No, don't tell the king!"

The lead guard said gently, "You are a guest of the king's house. All people who know you are here also know that you are under King T'Challa's protection. To violate that is a crime."

"But he's only fifteen," Wanda argued.

"King T'Challa will not be unjust. But the boy will be required to answer for harming you."

"He didn't really - "

"Hey," said Clint. "I'm sure the sentiment of going easy on a kid is noble, but it sounds like he meant to hurt you, and those Raft guards sure as hell did."

Wanda looked up at Clint and whispered, "But I did the same thing."

"Huh?"

"For Ultron. To all of you - all except you."

Aw, shit. Dr. Damaris shooed the guards away as Wanda whispered, "Vision was right. They'll never stop being afraid of me now. They'll never stop hating me."

Steve looked appalled. "Vision told you that?"

"When I sprung her from the compound," Clint sighed. "He didn't say anyone would hate you, kid."

"No, but they do. I can feel it. Tesfaye, he hates me. Vision can read the entire Internet. He knows what people say, even if he tries not to let me see."

Dr. Damaris said cautiously, "Vision. He's the purple man with the jewel on his head. An artificial human, it's said." Steve nodded. "He sided with Stark in Berlin."

"He thought the Accords were necessary, to prevent conflict," Steve said, sounding like he was defending Vision.

Clint scoffed. "And he thought locking Wanda up was necessary too, as long as he did it nicely, and reminded her of how scary she is to everybody, knowing how she feels about that."

"Hmph." Dr. Damaris folded her arms. "This Vision is hailed by some as uncorruptable, an objective source of wisdom. But what you describe now suggests that he is as capable as any human of being manipulative and preying upon a person's fear to achieve his ends. That will always be wrong."

To Clint's dismay, Wanda shrugged. "Well, it was my turn."

They were distracted by noise from the building, and Sam and Scott came running down the path towards them. "What the hell happened?! All we heard is somebody took a shot at you, and nobody'd let us out!" Sam exploded, looking them all up and down.
"We're okay," said Clint. "Somebody took a telepathic shot at Wanda."

Wanda started giggling. Scott looked relieved, but Sam picked up on how close to breaking point she was, or maybe just the hysterical tone of her laughter. "Someone did to me what I once did to the Avengers, and without even being enhanced." She gestured vaguely at Dr. Damaris. "She wants to know what I meant, when I said it was my turn: it was. I manipulated them - you," she motioned to Steve. "Captain - I mean Steve, he doesn't want to be captain anymore - he's the only one here..." She giggled harder. "All the others sided with Stark. That can't be a coincidence."

"Oh God, Wanda..." Steve said in despair, but Wanda surged from hysterical laughter to anger.

"Don't tell me it wasn't that bad - I know you still dream about what I made you see!" she snapped, and shoved away from Clint.

Dr. Damaris was the only one of them who didn't freeze up. "So you used your power while under the control of Hydra, just as James Barnes did."

Wanda shook her head, giggling into her hands, though Clint knew he couldn't be the only one who sensed there were more tears now than laughter. He carefully put a hand on her shoulder, and she let him. "I'm not like Bucky. I made choices every time I used my power. He had no malice, he had no will or choice or any way of understanding there was anything to do but comply. I chose to hurt others. They weren't even ready to deploy us; Pietro and I went against the Avengers by choice." She dropped her hands and looked at Damaris as if stripping off a mask. "Ultron wasn't entirely Stark's fault - he was mine too. I made Stark see what he feared...he feared everyone would die and he wouldn't be able to stop it. He wanted to find a way to save the world, something more powerful than him. I saw it. I tortured him, and it was fun, and I let him take the scepter because I knew he'd build something that could destroy himself and the Avengers." She burst back into laughter. "I made a kid with Tony Stark!"

"Hell," muttered Scott.

Steve and Clint eyed each other over Wanda's head. "We've, uh, had this exact conversation with Stark after Ultron got loose, if I remember correctly," said Clint, half to Wanda and half to Damaris. "Nat's not here, so we need someone who can get into heads and calm people down. You better be good, Doc. "He even sort-of..." he gestured with his head at the hysterically (and tearfully) laughing Wanda.

"Hey, sweetheart, take it easy; you believed what Hydra wanted you to believe," Scott protested, holding out a hand.

Wanda swatted it away. "Liar. You didn't trust Stark either. Everyone knew what he was before he was Iron Man. His bombs killed my parents, so I joined Hydra for the chance to kill him. Pietro and me, we thought Iron Man would never be good, because Stark was evil and he would turn on the world just like all his other weapons. So we say yes, we'll be enhanced like Captain America and be strong enough to take him. But then Captain America comes back to life and joins him with the Avengers, well, they must all be just like Stark. Soon they'll take over the world. And when I can see Stark's mind and his fear, I don't care, I think he'll build something bigger with the scepter, something monstrous, and destroy himself. Ultron came to find us, and we think, this is perfect. This is our chance. I get to the Avengers and do it again to them all, because I don't care who gets hurt, as long as I get what I want." She pointed at Clint and Steve and accused, "You see it, you both see it, I'm just like him!"

T'Challa came down the path, but stopped in confusion when Wanda exclaimed, sounding positively deranged, "I'm Tony Stark with tits!"
But to Clint's intense relief, she burst into sobs and collapsed into his arms. He held her and patted her hair and motioned the others just to stand back. Dr. Damaris backed him up silently. *Let her get it out. She's winding down now. She's been feeling like this for a long time.*

T'Challa, bemused, motioned for his bodyguards to wait and came cautiously a little closer. "Sorry," Sam said to him. "Shit gets surreal in this crowd."

Dr. Damaris slipped past them and had a murmured conversation with T'Challa, who nodded and turned to go. Steve faltered, but T'Challa told him, "It is nothing that will not wait."

"No, wait," Wanda croaked and struggled to pull away from Clint, wiping her face.

"She's worried about the kid, your highness," Clint explained shamelessly. "She doesn't want him punished."

T'Challa shook his head. "If you think punishment in Wakanda is all barbarity, you're mistaken. He's not in prison, nor is he going to be flogged or humiliated. Nothing I will impose would raise any objection from Americans, for a boy of his age grieving his family."

Wanda sobbed again, but let Clint hold onto her and leaned against his chest. "So, something like…a stern talking-to and mandatory counseling, maybe community service?" Sam asked.

"Almost exactly. We'll talk more about it later. For now, look after Miss Maximoff." T'Challa motioned to his guards, and they went back up the path.

Wanda dropped all efforts to control herself and cried like she'd never stop. Clint kept patting her back. *It's okay, kid, we've all been there. Just let it out. We won't tell. Well, you know. We won't tell anyone who doesn't need to know.* He had a vague idea of thinking it "at her" the way she'd described, but decided against it. She had enough mental backwash to deal with.

"Should we take her inside?" Steve asked.

Wanda shook her head. "Outside, then," Dr. Damaris agreed. "Take your time. There's no audience. Just your friends. I will go, for now." Sam and Scott exchanged looks, then looked at her and nodded. Steve wavered between following them and staying, and Sam shook his head and gestured toward Wanda: *Stay.*

So Steve stayed, but was clearly at somewhat of a loss. "Can I do anything?" he asked. "You want anything?"

"I want...my brother," Wanda choked out.

*Goddamn it.* Clint concentrated on rubbing her shoulders and shutting his own brain down. He only dared to make eye contact with Steve for a split second, and had to look away, but not before he saw Steve's eyes had gone damp.

Steve settled for patting her back, since he knew there was nothing else he could do.

"It's my fault. Sokovia, Johannesburg, all of it. I deserve it, I know...but I want my brother. I want my brother."

*I know, kiddo. God, I know.*

---

Shuri found T'Challa in the conference room, awaiting a surreptitious report from Dr. Damaris and
Dr. Kelile. "How is she?" he asked the two doctors.

"My king, I'm concerned that Wanda Maximoff is in the early stages of mental breakdown," said Dr. Damaris.

T'Challa rather thought he could have figured that much out for himself, given what he'd witnessed out on the grounds, but Nakia, one of his newest Dora Milaje, went straight for the worst-case scenario. "She is powerful. If she loses control of herself, it poses a threat to everyone around her."

Dr. Kelile bristled. "We are not concerned with such things, only the recovery of our patients. Unless Miss Maximoff loses all sense of reality - which is not a symptom of distress, however severe - she will not begin wielding her power with impunity."

T'Challa motioned Nakia back. "I'm concerned with both possibilities, but we will not assume that she poses an immediate threat without evidence. Yet if there is evidence, you will not withhold it," he added to the two doctors.

To his relief, Dr. Damaris didn't hesitate. "I would never withhold evidence of a threat presented by a patient. But she hasn't shown such a threat. On the contrary: she's displaying disgust for her abilities and the way she used them aggressively in the past, and her fear of them has already been used to manipulate her. If anything, she'll hesitate to wield them even when she herself is threatened."

That was a relief, but on the other hand, T'Challa couldn't help but think of the day's events that might have worsened the young Avenger's condition. "Did Tesfaye's attack today cause this?"

Dr. Kelile looked at Dr. Damaris, who answered slowly, "What he...thought to her' probably increased her distress, but she has shown signs before now. She revealed today that the prison guards also knew how to use her telepathic abilities against her, and fantasized of abusing her when she was in their custody, intending that she would see it just as Tesfaye did. I'm sure that like Tesfaye, they wished her to know that they think she deserves such treatment, and unlike Tesfaye, they are not grieving children."

Shuri spat an obscenity and paced away from the table. Dr. Kelile scowled, and even a few of the Dora Milaje broke their neutral poses just a little. "She can't be discharged in this condition," said Dr. Kelile. "But with her power, I fear that her trauma will only grow from exposure to the distress of others in this hospital."

"The palace contains too many people," Shuri mused. "All too often agitated," she added dryly. "We have more isolated retreats. Perhaps she should be moved."

"Will the Avengers permit being separated from her?" asked Aneka, one of the more experienced Dora Milaje. "Knowing now how she has been abused, they may protest - understandably," she added in a sharp tone that made T'Challa suspect there were peevish looks being cast around behind his back. He'd have to give the Dora Milaje (probably Nakia) reminders about proper decorum even among trusted counselors later.

Fortunately, he'd put the level-headed Ayo on sentry duty, so it was she who stepped into the room bearing a message. "My king, Captain Rogers asks to see you."

T'Challa looked up, startled. "Is Wanda Maximoff with him?"

"No, but she has returned to the research center with your other guests."

Dr. Damaris stood. "With your permission, I'll rejoin her and discuss options." T'Challa nodded, and she left, passing Rogers as he entered.
Rogers looked more uncomfortable than he'd been at any time since arriving here. If American psychological care and military understanding of it was as poor as Dr. Damaris tended to rant, Rogers quite possibly had no idea how to deal with Maximoff's condition.

T'Challa took pity on him. "Leave us," he told the Dora Milaje, and gestured to his sister to let her know that instruction included her. She obeyed with hardly a pout, shooting a warning look at one of the Dora Milaje – probably Nakia – who must have betrayed some indignation. Once they'd gone, he took the lead. "I must apologize for discussing these matters in your absence, Captain, but my doctors have a duty to advise me of any risks to the health of my guests."

Rogers dropped his eyes. "No apology necessary, your highness. I appreciate it a lot – we all do. And I…Wanda wants you to know she's not a danger to herself or anyone else. Her power's under her control, at least, the telekinetic part. She can't always help hearing people. That's part of the problem," he added with a sigh.

Dr. Kelile spoke up. "Would it help her recovery if we were to take her to a less-busy location? One with fewer people, perhaps not a hospital at all?" Rogers frowned thoughtfully.

"There are secure retreats at my disposal, some at a safe distance from the cities and villages, hard to access except by air," T'Challa explained. "If distance is conducive to her recovery, or even if it would simply make her more comfortable, I'll gladly arrange it."

"You've already been incredibly generous," Rogers said quietly. T'Challa wished Dr. Damaris hadn't gone, because maybe she could have confirmed what seemed implicit in the captain's words: that this was all too generous for the undeserving. A surge of deep loathing for Helmut Zemo roared through T'Challa yet again, forcing him to remind himself that he'd renounced pursuit of vengeance.

Instead of revealing those dark thoughts, he kept his voice light. "You're the guest of a king, Captain. Get used to it." It had the desired effect, and Rogers laughed, if wearily.

\textit{His mind is on his friend as well. Who can make decisions easily at times like this? But there was something Rogers seemed to want to say, so T'Challa waited patiently.}

"There is…"

That was as far as he got, because Ayo returned. "My king, Dr. Damaris and Wanda Maximoff ask to see you."

Rogers cringed like a boy caught at mischief. T'Challa raised his eyebrows, but Rogers smiled sheepishly and nodded. T'Challa beckoned to Ayo. "Let them enter."

To the relief of all concerned, Maximoff had calmed from the hysterical tears, though she was visibly anxious. "I'm not losing my mind," she blurted at T'Challa the moment she walked through the door.

T'Challa beckoned her to a chair. "I never thought you were, I assure you. And I had every intention of including you in discussion before any decisions were made. I'm only concerned with your health and safety."

But she wasn't entirely reassured, and shot Rogers such a frantic look that T'Challa realized there had to be more going on. Rogers sighed and seemed to relent. "There was an idea I had, but…Wanda's against it."

"You should not act against her wishes, Captain," said Dr. Damaris.

"I'm not going to."
Seeing (or perhaps sensing) that T'Challa was at a loss, Maximoff explained. "I don't want to see Stark. I don't want him...seeing me, in charge of me again."

"He has access to a lot of resources, Wanda," said Rogers. "Whatever he might...think of me, I don't believe he'd take it out on you, especially not..."

"Not after you tell him everything," Maximoff finished, half indignant, half fearful. "Stark can't keep his mouth shut. He'd tell someone, or go looking to get...to get them. I could never prove it, but that wouldn't stop him."

"We could talk to him," Rogers insisted. "Explain what you want – and don't want. He wouldn't go against your wishes." Maximoff shot him a look of such utter skepticism that T'Challa nearly laughed. As it was, she didn't need to say anything to make Rogers reconsider. "Okay, he probably would. But the point is, he can do things for you that I can't...anymore." Rogers looked down, and T'Challa didn't miss the man's deep shame.

_The welfare of his people was this man's responsibility. To admit he doesn't know how to help her is hard for him._ "Captain, there are few resources at Stark's disposal that I do not also have. Wakanda is small, but we're not backward in our knowledge."

Rogers turned bright red. "I didn't mean - "

"I know you didn't." _Not consciously anyway._ Rogers might be a fair-minded and observant man, but a few days wouldn't be enough to shake a lifetime of American stereotypes about Africa, particularly about a nation as isolated and secretive as Wakanda. T'Challa had to admit privately that he was looking forward to dispelling those, but now wasn't the time. "Still, you're strangers here, and unfamiliar with our resources or our abilities. We may not have let many visitors in, but many of our people have ventured beyond our borders to broaden their educations, not only myself. Dr. Damaris and her staff have credentials from nearly every continent between them, from some of the finest facilities in the world. It was the same with earlier generations. They're able to treat your friend, and Miss Maximoff – with your consent, that is," he added to her.

Maximoff looked from Rogers to Damaris, then nodded to Damaris. "Thank you," she said softly.

"I've told your Captain this, but I will say it again: you are my guest. When I extended my hospitality to you, it always included my protection of your health and safety. It's the hospitality of a king," T'Challa added, only half-joking, but it got a smile from her. "Would you be more comfortable away from the hospital?"

Maximoff shook her head. "It's not like you think, your highness. I'm not just...absorbing thoughts from other people. It can be hard if someone is in...a lot of pain, but I can manage that. It seems to have come with the enhancement," she added bitterly. But she looked from Damaris to Rogers and finished, "I don't need to leave. I don't want to leave. It won't make...this any better."

T'Challa nodded. "As you wish."

Neither Steve nor King T'Challa had made abiding by Wanda's wishes contingent on her being treated by Dr. Damaris, but Wanda knew the thought had occurred to both of them. Better that she accept it voluntarily, even if baring her soul to a stranger was disconcerting.

_It's fair, on top of everything else. None of them can help showing themselves to me._ She would still have rather had Pietro. If he were here, she could feel so much better about where she was or what she was doing.
But there would never be Pietro again. The closest to familiarity that Wanda could get was having
Clint and Steve with her – at least until Bucky was released from cryostasis and could talk with her
again. Dr. Damaris offered to talk in private whenever she wished, but in a way, Wanda thought
Clint and Steve should hear the answers to the questions Damaris intended to ask. It might be useful
to them someday.

So they walked outside – with Wanda well aware that the guards would now intercept any patients
or visitors from the main hospital campus before the Avengers could be seen – and talked.

"What did you mean when you said managing the pain of others came with your enhancement?" Dr.
Damaris asked.

Wanda shrugged. "It doesn't overwhelm me. Some…of the other volunteers, their enhancements
overwhelmed them. Pietro and I were the only ones who survived."

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it again. Wanda had to smile, if bitterly, and cocked her head at
him, letting him know that trying to hold back from a question he wanted to ask was pointless where
she was concerned. He relented and asked, "How many others were subjects?"

She'd always known she would have to tell more of these stories someday. All things considered, it
was actually strange that they'd gone this long, even letting her be part of the Avengers, without
asking. Knowing what she'd done, they'd had a right to ask. They hadn't, even though both she and
they had known they should.

So she didn't hold back now. "There were fifty of us." She managed not to flinch at the pangs of
distress from them. "I think there may have been more in past years, but no one ever spoke of them.
Our 'class' had fifty. They ran tests in small groups. Almost everyone in the first few died in the
process. After Strucker got the scepter in 2013, the success rate improved. Pietro and I were in the
last group. Fifteen survived to show enhancements, but then…it's as if the enhancements themselves
killed them."

"There were others who developed telepathy like you?" Wanda had to admit she was impressed. Dr.
Damaris wasn't really asking a question; she'd just worked it out.

Wanda nodded. "Esma. She was Russian, older than me, stronger too. She volunteered in the first
group after Strucker obtained the scepter. He did…warn us all, that this was new territory, maybe
new risk. None of us were there against our will."

"You looked up to her," Clint observed.

"Yes. She taught us to fight in physical training, while we were waiting. Some of Strucker's men
thought she was more valuable as a trainer and teacher, but she wanted to do it. She wanted to
challenge Stark too. She never said why." Wanda took a deep breath, remembering a lithe girl with
blonde braids who'd seemed every inch the grown woman and warrior that Wanda had wanted to
become, even before the enhancement. To say nothing of the awe and envy among all the recruits
when it appeared that Strucker's experiments had finally succeeded.

"She was the first person to survive for more than a few days, and her power…it was incredible. She
knew every secret in a person's brain the instant she met them. She knew so much, there was no need
to ask any questions. She…carried out three missions and lived nine months. She was Strucker's
pride and joy, the envy of us all. She brought back so much intelligence for them. All she had to do
was pass a target on the street."

"Then it all went wrong. We didn't see it at first. I didn't know until later that it was going wrong as
early as her second mission. The voices, the thoughts, the feelings, they got louder and louder until she couldn't sleep or think. We knew something had gone wrong when we started to hear her screaming. Strucker, he actually cared about us. Especially Esma. He looked after our health and comfort. There was a nuclear bunker below the compound; even putting her there behind concrete walls didn't muffle the noise, so they took her away, deep into the mountains away from people to try to help her. She was gone for weeks, but they said she was improving. Then they brought her back; a jet had passed overhead, over thirty thousand feet up, and she'd started to convulse. They sedated her and tried to reverse the enhancement, but she died of a brain aneurysm in the process. She was twenty-three."

"That was 2014. Strucker told us when she died that anyone who wanted to withdraw could do it. We thought about it, Pietro and I, but we decided to stay. We wanted to honor her sacrifice and use what she'd died to help discover. We thought we were part of a just cause."

But behind it all, we knew this was Hydra. We just decided that Hydra couldn't be as bad as history books made it out if SHIELD and the Avengers were on the side of Tony Stark. We wanted our revenge, and that meant seeing the world any way we wanted that would give us our way. "In our group, there was a boy named Kasim. He was younger than us, so skinny that the doctors almost rejected him. But they - " Oh. She'd almost forgotten this part. She met Steve's eyes before she could catch herself, and it was too late. He'd already seen the parallel. "He and Strucker persuaded the doctors to let him try. They spoke of…of Captain America. They thought that maybe younger, weaker subjects wouldn't be overwhelmed by the enhancements. You were proof of that idea."

Steve didn't break her gaze, but she did when he realized with a surge of grief where this story would go too. "It seemed sound at first. When Kasim came out of the process, he could fly. Really fly, as fast as Iron Man. He was even lighter than before, but he could fly so fast, nothing except automatic targeting could track him. Strucker thought soon he'd be able to surpass even that, but…it destabilized in six weeks. His bones, his flesh…he just dissolved into nothing, like air."

"It was the same with all the others. Most of them died during the process. Of everyone who came out the other side with enhancements, Esma and Kasim were the ones who lived the longest. Until Pietro and me. They wanted to put us through together. When we came out at the end, I knew they'd expected to just watch us die and collect more data. They'd given up on our class. They never knew how it was that we survived. I still don't know. All power has a limit. Maybe mine will kill me when I find the limit, just like Pietro."

"That's not what happened," said Clint quietly, and even though he tried not to think it, the thought reached Wanda's senses anyway: It wasn't a limit in his power that killed him. He didn't know – didn't realize what else to do. With more training, more time, I could've taught him. Could've saved him.

"That's not true either," Wanda whispered. "It wasn't your fault." Ultron killed him, and I killed Ultron. But I helped make Ultron, so that means that I killed my brother.

To Be Continued...
get the chance to put the Avengers’ fighting skills to the test!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T’Challa’s instruction, mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Tesfaye: A 15-year-old boy whose elder sister died in the Lagos attack and whose mother was seriously injured, he blames the Avengers and Wanda Maximoff in particular.
Chapter Summary

The Dora Milaje and Shuri finally get the chance to put the Avengers' fighting skills to the test, but then the Avengers meet T'Challa's advisors...and the families and survivors of the Lagos bomb. In the process, T'Challa uncovers a disturbing new question about Lagos and its aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback and lively discussion! Please keep it coming!

Canon Notes: This story draws from the comics, assuming that the Dora Milaje begin training early in their teens, then join the force around age 20. I also assume Clint, being a very trained martial artist, could take on even a well-conditioned trainee or even more than one, while Sam has less hand-to-hand combat training, and Scott has barely any. I also assumed in this fic that Shuri had previously challenged T'Challa to become the heir and nearly won, so her skills are comparable to his. This fic also follows the comics canon that Ramonda - Shuri and Jakarra's stepmother and T'Challa's stepmother - disappeared while traveling to South Africa in the 1980's and is believed to have abandoned her family for a lover.

MCU Canon Notes: I noticed some strange plot holes surrounding the Lagos disaster in Civil War. A big part of this story is my attempt to plug those holes. Also, this fic tries to be realistic and honest about the perspectives of the families and survivors of Lagos, and portray ALL different potential viewpoints that people might have towards a botched operation that cost lives.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eight

Sam and Clint had found their way to the fitness center in the basement of the medical research complex, open to staff and families or patients who were well enough. Scott was a little skittish, seeing the stares of some of the Wakandans, but once Dr. Kelile gave permission, he started joining them.

Steve never did. "He does push-ups and stuff in his room," said Clint, shaking his head. "I told him about this place, he said no." Sam made a face; Clint nodded at him. Yeah, Cap's not in the best frame of mind right now.

Between missing Bucky and watching Wanda teetering on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Steve had a lot on his mind, and getting reminded about Lagos hadn't helped. I retire for five minutes and it all goes to shit. Wonder how Rhodey is. What were Tony and Vision up to? Where was Nat? Was
she able to look in on Laura and the kids? Had they gotten Clint's letter? Were they mad?

A distraction came in the form of five teenaged girls coming into the gym, led by one of the imposing women that Clint knew were King T'Challa's bodyguards. Her eyes fell on the former Avengers at once, indicating they were being sought out. Clint abandoned the punching bag and Sam the weights, and a moment later, Scott joined them as the Wakandans in the big room looked on curiously.

"Good day, gentlemen," said the woman in the lead. "I am Ayo, combat instructor of the Dora Milaje. These are my charges, still in training." That explained the youth, and the slightly-less-polished demeanor. Under the discipline was still the eager energy of teenaged girls.

"Pleased to meet you," said Clint. "I take it this isn't an official meeting?"

"No, although my king is aware that we are here. The Dora Milaje are charged to defend the king of Wakanda against any threat from any corner of the world, so we must train to take on the best in the world." Ayo gave them a faint smile that might have seemed cool and impersonal to a casual observer, but Clint didn't miss the challenge there. It reminded him of Natasha. "Avengers, we reason, must do the same." She allowed herself a slightly broader smirk. "Will you spar?"

Clint couldn't hold back a grin, especially not from the way the girls were practically bouncing on the balls of their feet. Every Wakandan in the vicinity was now paying rapt, eager attention - except for a few who slipped out of the room. Clint knew they'd be back - with their friends.

He affected a martial arts bow. "I'm afraid I can't claim to be the best of the Avengers at hand-to-hand, or the physically strongest." If anything, Ayo looked even more pleased, and he fought the urge to wink at her.

"Note to self: introduce Nat to you. If she didn't meet you already. I'd sell tickets to that spar. "But I'm all yours."

The trainees were young, but Clint could tell just by looking that they'd been conditioning for a long time. In the US, people would probably be shocked, and worry about a big man with decades of combat experience taking on girls that age. Clint knew better.

All five stepped forward eagerly when Clint came into position in the center of the mat. Ayo summarily pointed to the first, then glared at whoever huffed in disappointment. Clint blithely stretched as his first opponent joined him on the mat. "What's your name?"

"Yonela - sir," she added belatedly, and bowed to him. She couldn't have been more than fifteen.

Clint returned the bow and slipped into ready stance. "Attack," ordered Ayo.

Her attack was a feint - smart, for a strange opponent. It hampered Clint a little, going hand-to-hand against a girl who was all knees and elbows; he was privately afraid he'd break her bones. But the little spitfire was stronger and faster than she looked, and that didn't surprise him. She was also smart, reminding him of Nat; she didn't commit right away and focused on circles and feints at first, drawing him out, learning his style. Once she did launch the offensive, she kept him busy.

Still, she was a kid, and unhappy when Clint pinned her. He took the time to praise her form and strategy, to ease the sting of defeat in front of her peers, and she looked less discouraged leaving the mat. Ayo shot him a keen look. "You are also an instructor?"

Clint shrugged. "I have my moments." He wiped his face on a towel. "Who's next?"

An hour later, gym and adjoining rooms were standing room only, and even King T'Challa's sister had showed up to watch. Clint took down all five at one-on-one, but none of them were
unimpressive, and once he switched it up to two, they really made him work for it. With three, they could overwhelm him.

Sam stepped in next, and despite the kids having been at it for awhile, all five were raring for another round. He beat the youngest girls at one-on-one, but each of the two oldest bested him and could barely contain their glee. He was completely out-matched once they paired up.

All five were pretty tired by the time it was Scott's turn, but he was no match for any of them. "I've been an Avenger just a few weeks, go easy on me!"

Once they'd all worn down and taken stock, they found that their audience had grown to include Steve and Wanda, and even King T'Challa and his current crop of bodyguards.

Ayo inclined her head to Clint, Sam, and Scott. "I will claim the honor of a spar myself against each of you, but later, when you are rested. As senior," she shot the other bodyguards a faint smirk, "I will first seek your captain as opponent."

A murmur of excitement went through the watchers, and though Steve blushed, he must have realized by now that it was coming. He started forward, but then Princess Shuri spoke up. "No. Forgive me, Ayo, but I must claim that right."

If Ayo was miffed, she didn't show it, and there was some camaraderie in the way she yielded the floor for the king's sister. Princess Shuri was almost as tall as Steve, muscled and lithe like the Dora Milaje, and approached him on the mat with a long, measured look. "What I wouldn't give for a smartphone," murmured Sam.

"A conventional camera will do, Airman Wilson," said T'Challa, holding a small device in his hand. His eyes sparkled.

Steve had looked a little unnerved by the idea of taking on Shuri, but seeing onlookers' glee (especially T'Challa's), he relaxed and grinned. Shuri informed him, "If you hold back, I'll be very offended."

"I wouldn't dare offend a princess," Steve replied, but stepped back to let her take the lead.

Shuri of Wakanda didn't bother starting with feints or circles to suss out her opponent. She went straight for Steve in a whirlwind of blows, and even Natasha would've had to think fast to keep up. As it was, she got several hits before Steve rallied and - no doubt as she'd intended - knew there was no need to hold back.

Clint had picked up martial arts from a lot of countries and cultures over the years - damn near every continent - and by the look of it, so had Princess Shuri. Steve Rogers was incredibly fast, incredibly adaptive, and his brute strength was damn near unbeatable by any opponent save Thor and the Hulk. He could take Clint in a hand-to-hand spar with only half-attention.

This Wakandan princess was Cap's equal. Hell, it was starting to look like she'd surpass him - watchers yelped when one of her shots got past Steve's defenses and nailed him in the mouth hard enough to split his lip. She said briskly, "Pardon me," and kept right on coming, driving Steve back.

To Steve's credit, he answered, "No harm done," and kept right on defending.

He took her feet out from under her a few minutes later, but she kicked him in the temple hard enough that Clint saw his teeth rattle, leaving him woozy long enough for her to rally. A few of the younger onlookers shouted with excitement, only to be shushed, as the pair wove on and off the mat, completely oblivious.
When they'd been at it for ten minutes and both had drawn blood, T'Challa stepped in. "Enough. I don't need either of you continuing until you drop. Well done."

Shuri was peeved, but obeyed, and Clint applauded along with the others. "Hate to tell you, Cap, but his highness just saved your ass," Sam informed Steve.

Grinning (and still breathing hard) Steve said, "Yeah, she had me on the ropes - "

Then Steve's good humor vanished. Wanda's breath caught, and Clint could tell Steve was no longer aware of anybody. Oh, shit. Sam caught it too, and he and Clint feigned casualness, strolling over.

"You need something for that fat lip?" asked Sam.

Steve blinked at him, and one of the Dora Milaje offered a warm towel. "Here you go," said Clint, keeping a close eye on his reactions.

Steve wasn't totally out of it; he took it and wiped his face (well, hid his face). In the background, T'Challa and some of the other Wakandans were cheerfully declaring an end to the contests and shooing everyone back to wherever they were supposed to be.

Wanda stayed at Clint's elbow and murmured, "He's all right."

After a few minutes, the gym was cleared except for the team and T'Challa and Shuri. "My apologies," said the princess. They'd successfully hidden Steve's lapse from most of the onlookers, but she looked dismayed.

Steve took a deep breath and looked at the towel in his hands. "It's...nothing. Don't worry." Forcing a smile, he met her eyes and said, "Great spar. Thanks."

"You're a worthy opponent, Captain. I pity the poor fools who think they could challenge you in a true battle."

It sounded like something Thor would say...but if Princess Shuri was trying to compliment Steve out of his funk, it failed spectacularly. Steve was still flushed from the spar, but behind it, he went a little pale.

Damn.

"Thanks," Steve mumbled again, and shuffled out of the room without really seeming to see anyone else.

Avengers and Wakandan royals exchanged long, dismayed stared. "Well, shit," said Scott.

"He'll be all right," said Wanda. "He misses Bucky."

A few hours later, Clint and Sam weren't at all surprised to peek into the secure wing and see Steve sitting next to Bucky's cryo chamber, his palm against the glass. Wanda was with him, and this time, the medics were letting them be.

"You think it's okay for her to be there with him?" Clint mused, imagining Wanda picking up Steve's depression on top of everything else she was dealing with.

"I'm not that much of an expert, but I think so," said Sam. "Probably makes her feel a little better, y'know, useful. They both miss him."
T'Challa was worried about his guests, but he had a country to run. So he put his faith in Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris to see to their needs, and listened closely to Shuri's comments about her visits with them.

For a king came certain routines that T'Challa had been trained from the cradle to deal with: disputes between tribes, matters of infrastructure, the health, safety, and prosperity of all his people. Appeals in criminal matters, brought before him by right for any man or woman who thought their tribe's justice had failed. Diplomacy with lands outside the borders of Wakanda.

The latter had changed dramatically and grown substantially in the last few years, thanks to the same events that had brought the Avengers here. So although T'Challa didn't have the time to speak to his guests as much as he would have personally liked, circumstances guaranteed that they were rarely far from his mind. Many of the concerns surrounding the Avengers and the events that had brought them here were not in any way routine.

The United Nations wished for Wakanda to join them. The countries who had negotiated the Sokovia Accords wished to reschedule the signing and were pressing for an answer as to whether Wakanda would remain part of them. International trade interests, both national and private, wanted to negotiate access to Wakanda's vibranium deposits. There were mutterings among some less diplomatic leaders and less scrupulous business interests that if Wakanda would not open up trade, it would be advisable to become more aggressive.

President Ronald Bunt in the US had made some alarming comments during his campaign, suggesting that if Wakanda wouldn't share, that the American military would simply "go in and take the stuff!" T'Chaka and T'Challa hadn't been terribly worried - the American President was a truly sorry specimen and all bluster - but his attitude reflected a greater shift in international politics towards aggression and disregard of other nations' sovereignty.

A week after he'd last visited his guests himself, Shuri and Dr. Damaris reported that Maximoff's spirits were improving, and the crisis of the previous week seemed to have passed. T'Challa had several decisions to make that would both affect and be affected by his guests, so he chose that moment to bring them to the palace compound.

Very few among his advisers and councilors knew of their arrival - but all those who did found excuses to be in the vicinity and get a peek at the famous foreigners, much to T'Challa and Shuri's private amusement.

A few murmured in surprise and disappointment with what they saw, for these were not the Avengers whose images had dominated the international media since 2012. The group who arrived at the palace was far less colorful - literally. All had been given clothing of their choice by his staff, but every one, even Maximoff, was dressed in somber shades. It was a far cry from the vivid reds, blues, and silvers that the Avengers were known for.

It was ironic, in a way. Had they arrived at a different time, they would have seen a more colorful Wakanda. Everyday fashions among T'Challa's people were vivid and decorative - but mourning for a king had led them all to darker clothing as well, for the traditional three months following their monarch's funeral.

So it seemed that both the Avengers and the people of Wakanda moved under a cloud of sorrow, and all dressed like it.

T'Challa received them initially in the throne room, because he wasn't above reminding any powerful visitor just who was in charge, and also a reminder to his more willful councilors and advisers that he had made the decision to shelter these people as a king. He was amused when Shuri escorted them
in; the eyes of his guests were very wide as they took their lavish surroundings in.

"Captain. Miss Maximoff. Agent Barton. Airman Wilson. Mr. Lang. I welcome you formally to the palace of Wakanda, home of her kings and protectors. You are my honored guests."

To his surprise, in the presence of all the witnesses, Rogers bowed. It was only a slight bow, just enough incline of the upper body to make clear that it was more than a nod, but a bow nonetheless. Rogers' team was as startled as T'Challa, but they followed suit. "Thank you, your highness. You've sheltered us when - probably nobody else in the world would. I can never repay you."

It was a good tone to strike among T'Challa's broader government. He knew that Captain America had been a performer in his early days, but this deference showed an understanding of diplomacy - and the strategic value of humility - that T'Challa hadn't expected.

_Sheltering the Avengers might be easier than I anticipated._ "These here among my councilors and advisers are entrusted with the circumstances of your presence, and my...sixth guest." Rogers gave a neutral nod to the room, but T'Challa didn't miss the assessment in his eyes, examining the men and women who knew of his friend's presence, and considering both the benefits and the risks. "I have made it known, as far as it is safe to do so, that I granted this amnesty in repayment of the debt that I owe you."

Rogers didn't flinch from the harder topic. "Thank you again. But as - former - leader of the Avengers, I owed you a debt that I can never repay, even before the...tragedy in Vienna." He cast a long look around the room at the witnesses. "The accident in Lagos was my responsibility. I said it in the reports, but I never said it out loud, and I should have said it to your country and your people long before now. I should've apologized."

"Thank you, Captain," said T'Challa, inclining his head in acknowledgement. Since Rogers had raised the issue, perhaps it would be best to get it over with...if only Maximoff was not here. He didn't want to distress her again...and she shot him a look that reminded him - too late - that she was a telepath. Well, that made keeping state secrets more complicated. As for matters that concerned her, he decided to take the Captain's approach and just come straight out with it. "The families of the victims in Lagos are aware that you are here. Some of them have asked to meet you. Unfortunately, as young Tesfaye demonstrated, not all of them have friendly intentions. As king, I can limit their actions, but not their feelings."

Rogers stepped back and exchanged anxious glances with Wilson and Barton - but as soon as they turned to Maximoff, she gave them a ferocious glare. "What's to stop him from attacking you again?" Lang said, daring her displeasure.

Maximoff sighed. "He didn't 'attack' me. He thought of things he wanted me to know, knowing that I could see it. That's not an attack any more than speaking angry words within earshot of someone." She looked around at T'Challa's councilors. "It isn't only about who was...in command in Lagos. If the families want to see me, they have the right."

"You didn't commit a crime, Wanda," said Shuri. "None of you did."

T'Challa frowned at his sister - then switched to shooting a warning look at those among the witnesses who grumbled their disagreement. To his relief, Maximoff today was a far cry from the distraught, desperate girl who'd been on the verge of collapse at the hospital, and her emotions were steady. "Maybe not. But I made a mistake and caused an accident that killed innocent people. Their families have a right to speak to me."

She was very young, the victim of horrific trauma - and the perpetrator of terrible crimes. However,
T'Challa didn't consider the accident in Lagos to be one of them, and neither had his father. For all their bitterness, even the angriest of the families recognized that she had not been acting with malice. So there was no real reason to forbid her if she felt able, and to do so would insult her.

"Very well," said T'Challa.

Wilson insisted on joining them in the conference room. "I was part of that mission. I stand by my team."

To keep the pressure off both the Avengers and the bereaved, T'Challa refused Barton and Lang's requests to join them. "It's not a slight against either of you. But you weren't involved, and we are still trying to maintain discretion about the Avengers' presence here. The Lagos families were informed as a courtesy, and given this meeting as a courtesy, but you will serve your friends better to detach from this." *And be there for them when it's over.*

They got the hardest part out of the way first. The rest of the meetings would be held outside in the gardens, where everyone would have some air, but Tesfaye was escorted into the throne room by his grandmother and four guards.

The boy could hardly have looked less threatening; he was all knees and elbows with a soft, round face. He could have gotten away with a lot of mischief if he wanted to play the innocent, but today, his features were hard as he scowled at the floor. *Unrepentant.* His grandmother was also scowling, but at him, not at the three Avengers or the king.

Defiance in the face of his king's displeasure was very unwise, and yet...T'Challa found his eyes straying to his younger brother and sister nearby. After their mother - T'Challa's stepmother - deserted both her husband and her children, Shuri and Jakarra had been unruly for a long time. T'Challa had been angry at them, and frustrated by his father's patience as the pair were dragged out of one mishap or brawl after another.

"*Many lash out when they mourn. Anger is an easy diversion from grief.*"

"*Then why aren't you angry?*" T'Challa had demanded.

His father's gentle face had hardened so suddenly that it startled him. "*I am angry. But I direct it where it belongs, at the one who actually hurt my children and me. Shuri and Jakarra are too young to understand that yet, so their anger flies in every direction. Forgive them for it.*"

T'Challa shook himself back to the present and nodded to the interpreter. "*Tesfaye Demissie, do you understand why you're here?*

"*Yes,*" the boy grumbled. Tesfaye's grandmother thumped him, and he amended it, "*Yes, my king.*"

T'Challa suppressed the urge to sigh. "*Two weeks ago, you expressed a wish to see the Avengers. I told you then that I would consider it, yet you confronted them without my permission. Do you understand that this is a crime, and a great offense to your country's hospitality and reputation?*

The boy trembled, still unwilling - or perhaps unable - to make eye contact with his king. "*She killed Lishan.*"

T'Challa couldn't help looking at Maximoff. She did flinch, but though her eyes brimmed, she didn't look away from Tesfaye or his grandmother. "*Child, do you think that hurting this woman will bring your sister back or heal your mother's wounds?*

Finally, Tesfaye looked up at him. He frowned, then lowered his eyes again. "*No.*"
"And do you feel any better as a result?"

"No," Tesfaye admitted, and dared a glance at the Avengers. He started when he saw their faces, as if he hadn't realized what they looked like.

That was absurd, of course - every man, woman, and child who had lost a loved one in Lagos knew the faces of the Avengers, just as T'Challa had before and after his father died...but in Siberia, when Rogers and Barnes has staggered out of the bunker, it had felt as though he was seeing them for the first time.

Seeing the men, not merely my enemies. He'd thought he respected Rogers, but realized that until that moment, Captain America had been nothing but an obstacle. T'Challa had been civil for diplomacy's sake and nothing more. Even working with Romanoff and Stark, a part of T'Challa had hated them, seeing them all as arrogant adventurers of the same ilk that had caused the Lagos disaster and by extension, T'Chaka's death.

Even when I learned the truth, I planned to kill Zemo, until I came out of the bunker and found him there, waiting, with nothing left to live for once his purpose was achieved. In that hopeless, bitter man, I saw what awaited me if I continued on that path. When Rogers and Barnes had emerged, for the first time, T'Challa had seen the human men, not soulless enemies. Recognizing their pain, and even Zemo's, had made them human again, worthy of compassion, and saved T'Challa's own soul in the process.

If only T'Challa weren't king, he could have opened up to young Tesfaye about all this, to try and make him understand what an empty path it was.

So he said, "I understand that you are grieving for your sister and your mother, as do my guests. And you are only a boy." It was condescending, and Tesfaye bristled, but he'd brought that much onto himself. "So I will not punish you as a man would be punished - but if you ever try to harm any guest of this house again, you will be punished."

Tesfaye's grandmother scowled at him. "It will not happen again, my king. Yes?" She prodded her grandson.

"Yes. I won't do it again."

"Good. But you asked to see them, and from what you did to Wanda Maximoff, it seems you had something you wished to tell them." T'Challa gestured to his guests. "Here they are. Speak."

Tesfaye blinked. No doubt he'd never expected this opportunity, and now had no idea what to do with it. He stared mutely at the three people standing below the throne beside the interpreter. Without their colorful garb, it was harder to connect them with the larger-than-life figures who appeared in battle. These were mere people - tall, imposing people, but entirely human. And even the angriest, most bitter person couldn't miss their sorrow and shame.

It might not be enough. Tesfaye was at a loss, and finally looked back at his grandmother. She looked to T'Challa for permission, and at his nod, asked the trio, "What was it you wished to avenge in Lagos?"

After listening to the interpreter, Rogers answered steadily. "Lagos was not for vengeance. Most of our missions weren't. We were trying to prevent a crime, theft of a...a very dangerous weapon."

Hearing the interpreter's translation, Tesfaye hardened again. "But you failed. You didn't even stop it from going off."
"I didn't," said Maximoff, before Rogers could claim responsibility for everything. "But that wasn't the weapon they tried to steal."

"What they tried to steal would've been worse," added Wilson firmly.

A few of the counselors murmured at that, and even Shuri shifted at T'Challa's left. Jakarra frowned, and T'Challa motioned subtly for restraint, but his ears pricked too. Something didn't add up.

_The report on the incident said that the band was attacking police depots for "weapons." Nothing suggested they were not conventional weapons. Here Rogers speaks of a single weapon, something unconventional. Why this inconsistency? If the affected nations were not told the true nature of the attack, why was it withheld? And by whom?_

But this wasn't the moment. Wilson went on, speaking for his friends. "It was an accident. Yes, we're to blame for not stopping it, and we can't change that. We're deeply sorry for it. You don't have to forgive any of us if you don't want to."

Tesfaye kept glaring at the floor, but he was trembling again, and unmistakably close to breaking down. His grandmother's grip on his shoulders had become a little less hard, but she met the Avengers' eyes. She looked at Wanda again. "You were not trying to hit a building." It wasn't a question.

"No," Tears escaped the girl's eyes, but she held the old woman's gaze. "I didn't...look before I threw it. I should have looked. I tried to smother it but I wasn't strong enough. So I had to throw it away. I thought up would be safe, away from the market. I couldn't hold it until it got high enough - " Her voice choked off, and she stopped and shut her eyes.

"What happened to the weapon they stole?"

"We got it back," said Rogers. His voice was rough, and that was enough to get Tesfaye's attention again. "It's...safe now."

"It." Not "them." Only one weapon. _This was no supply of guns or explosives that was taken, and the omission of that fact may not have been a mere oversight._

Tesfaye's grandmother took a deep breath, as shaky as Maximoff and Rogers. "You were not trying to hurt anyone. You didn't know the danger to the hotel."

"No," Rogers confirmed, very softly.

The old woman looked at the boy and waited. Tears spilled down his face as he suddenly confessed, "They were at the window. They were watching. Lishan was filming because I wanted to see the Avengers." Maximoff rocked back against Rogers, who put a hand on her shoulder, but she wiped her eyes and listened. It was no longer clear whether Tesfaye was railing at her or at himself. "I thought they were safe up there! The Avengers would protect them!"

"We tried," said Rogers. "We always tried. I failed. I'm sorry. You couldn't have known. We didn't know either."

"Why didn't you help them?" Tesfaye blurted wiping at his face to try and hide his tears. "After the bomb, why didn't you Avengers go up and help?"

Now Rogers looked confused. "We...we did. We were there until the search was called off."

T'Challa began to feel strangely cold in the warm throne room. _The Avengers went to the victims' aid_
after the explosion. How is it that none of those images were shared?

Tesfaye's grandmother was oblivious to the surprise and dismay of her king. Tightening her grip on the boy, she whispered, "You went to them?"

"Yes. We wouldn't have left, not after…that." Rogers gestured to Wilson. "Sam, he had a little…drone. He sent it in to help with the search, in spaces nobody could reach to identify…anyone inside. Wanda cleared out the smoke and helped lift some of the debris. Natasha Romanoff and I climbed in and out to get to the survivors with the other crews."

Maximoff looked at T'Challa and frowned. He restrained himself from putting a finger to his lips, but attempted to "think at her" as Tesfaye had done. *Don't speak of this. I'll investigate further.* Getting the message, she put a light hand on Rogers' arm and addressed Tesfaye.

"I understand why you showed me your sister and your mother. Whatever we did or tried to do wasn't enough. I'm sorry I failed to protect them. I wish…I wish I had done more."

Tesfaye stayed where he was, but his grandmother released him and went to the Avengers. She took Wanda's hand in her old, roughened ones. *You must live with this,* she said. *But I will not shame my daughter and granddaughter by hating you. You did not act hatefully. Perhaps foolishly or negligently, but in time, my family will try to forgive you."

Tesfaye didn't seem to share his grandmother's sentiment. He cried silently, still staring at the floor, but T'Challa watched him and hoped that with enough time, as his grandmother said, he would be able to forgive. Or maybe not. In the end, that was Tesfaye's choice and no one else's.

"The other families – those who wished to meet you – are waiting outside," T'Challa told Steve, Wanda, and Sam after dismissing Tesfaye and his grandmother. "If you wish, it can wait until you've had a chance to rest."

Steve and Sam looked at Wanda, and she shook her head. "No. They've waited long enough. I'll be all right." But to Steve's surprise, she raised her eyebrows at T'Challa, and he shook his head.

"Not now. Captain, I must ask you some questions about Lagos, but after." He murmured some instructions to his sister, who slipped away.

The second meeting was no less painful than the first. Not all of the Lagos victims' families had come. T'Challa didn't say, but Steve knew that some of them wanted none of the Avengers and wouldn't see them, given the choice.

As all three of them suspected, not all of the families were as understanding as Tesfaye's grandmother had been. Steve bit his tongue against trying to defend anyone – even Wanda – too much. *We failed. The kid was right. We tried to protect everyone, but we failed, and the families have a right to be angry.* He wished he could direct all that anger onto himself, as the one in charge of the team – not to mention the one who'd had the last chance to prevent Rumlow from setting off that bomb but been too busy getting distracted by simple words – but he knew that wasn't realistic.

But to his surprise, some of the people who came to that meeting waited patiently for their turn to say the same thing. "It was not your fault," said a father in carefully-practiced English. "I need nothing to forgive."

Most had to speak through the interpreter. Steve let himself cheat a little and gauge Wanda's reactions ahead of time. Whenever she braced herself, he and Sam worked out that a tirade was coming and steeled themselves to quietly listen. *Face it. Own it.*
One woman, wife of a victim, exploded at them, ranting through her tears at their stupidity and arrogance while Steve locked his joints and jammed his teeth into the inside of his mouth, until T'Challa and one of his councilors – a mother who'd lost both of her children to the bomb – pulled the grief-crazed woman away when she looked like she'd take a swing at Steve. Her family led her away, shooting bitter glares at Steve over their shoulders.

Another wife, older and calmer than the woman who'd fallen apart, but who also didn't seem to harbor much good will, looked coldly at them. "What are your intentions now? Will you hide in Wakanda forever?"

Steve took a deep breath and tried to think past the roaring in his ears. Wanda shifted a little closer to him. What exactly were they supposed to do now? T'Challa had even hinted that he thought the Avengers should re-assemble, but the idea seemed profane now. We aren't wanted. We aren't welcome. Maybe they're all right. Maybe we were just arrogant and stupid, thinking we could take on all the terrorists of the world ourselves. Maybe we have done more harm than good.

"I…don't know."

The woman crossed her arms. "You have no right to give up."

Steve blinked. "Wait, what?" asked Sam. Several of the other bereaved relatives shot the woman confused looks.

She stood her ground. "You challenged the entire world as the Avengers. You had your reasons. I won't say whether they were right or wrong, because I don't know them. But you made your choice and now face the consequences. You have no right to withdraw from the fights you started. That's the price you pay."

"I thought…we weren't wanted," Steve admitted, disarmed.

"That didn't stop you before." Yeah, fair point. "I do not forgive you. You chose to assume the mantle of protectors. You have no right to desert us now, or ever."

Steve felt Sam shift on his feet, uncomfortable, and moved forward. "Not all of them understood this."

"That means nothing. They still made a choice. Only a coward runs away when he finds consequences he didn't expect."

After she'd said her piece, the group who felt more charitable towards the Avengers spoke up again. "I do forgive," said one mother. "My son believed in you, and I won't betray his faith. But Faraji is right. The world needs the Avengers. You must not desert us now."

T'Challa's guests looked as exhausted and emotionally drained as he felt by the time those interviews were concluded, but he thought it had been the right choice. Rather than let all those unsaid words grind down on the families and the Avengers' unacknowledged presence loom, the grief and the anger and the rebukes were now aired openly. It wouldn't heal all those hurts, but perhaps it would help the process along.

But something new was looming over the king of Wakanda's head, and he wanted answers. So he told Shuri, "I want to see the exact report that we received by the investigators in Nigeria, and any other documents from the international governments. Then our own technicians must mine the information that was not put in those reports. What exactly were these 'Crossbones' terrorists trying to steal, and how is it that there was no mention of the Avengers' participation in the search and
Shuri had already reached the same hypothesis as her brother: "Someone who prepared those reports had an agenda. They wished us to view the Avengers as cavalier about collateral damage, and skewed the information accordingly."

"Who?"

"Anyone who stood to benefit from the passage of the Sokovia Accords. They were already being negotiated before Lagos, but that incident led to over a dozen African nations choosing to sign on, including Wakanda."

Oh no. At first glance, one name popped into T'Challa's head. "Stark. Would he have set his own companions up as scapegoats?"

The man could be ruthless, but the thought was harder to accept than T'Challa would have anticipated. Shuri considered it. "Maybe. Or Rhodes. His loyalty remained split between his friends and his government. In any case, it's too soon to point at anyone. You should speak to Rogers. He mentioned making a report today. Would he have left such important details out?"

"I doubt it. So the question becomes, who received Rogers' report and made the decision to 'edit' it?"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** T'Challa launches a private investigation into the UN's report on the Lagos disaster, which brings him back into contact with Tony Stark, and our heroes ponder the implications of Thaddeus Ross's agenda as they try to set their own.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

Yonela: Dora Milaje trainee, age 16, daughter of Minister Jelani, one of T'Challa's advisers.

President Ronald Bunt: President of the United States, elected on a platform of America First. Likes to Twitter a lot, very aggressive on foreign policy. No, he's not based on anyone. No, really.

Tesfaye: 15-year-old boy whose sister Lishan was killed and whose mother was severely injured in the Lagos bomb, he blames the Avengers and Wanda in particular.

Faraji: Lost her son in the Lagos disaster, she doesn't blame the Avengers and wants them to reunite and continue defending the powerless.
Nine

Chapter Summary

T'Challa launches a private investigation into the UN's report on the Lagos disaster, which brings him back into contact with Tony Stark, and our heroes ponder the implications of Thaddeus Ross's agenda as they try to re-set their own.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming!

Canon Note: In the comics, T'Challa becomes an Avenger. This fic in large part explores what might have motivated T'Challa to go from being a very self-sufficient free agent for Wakanda to joining the team. Also, this story assumes Tony told Steve what he believed to be the truth in Berlin - that if Steve and Wanda signed the Accords, they'd gain the leverage to protect Wanda and Bucky.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine

The private section of the hospital had been luxurious, but the Wakandan royal palace compound put it to shame. Hell, it put the Avengers Compound to shame, and Tony hadn't exactly been understated in his designs. The five Avengers shared a massive guest house – or manor, really - with huge doors that opened onto expanses of gardens surrounding the palace compound. There was a tall, elaborate metal fence around the whole estate, which had to cover close to a hundred acres.

Steve and the team kept their distance from the fence, imagining people outside seeing them and asking questions. Princess Shuri set them straight when they ran into her on a walk in the gardens. "You have nothing to worry about. No one can see you." Seeing their confusion, she laughed. "There's a reflecting field generated by the fence – you don't really think we'd trust the safety of our government to simple wrought iron, do you?" She led the way to the nearest fence and tossed a stone at it – it bounced off what appeared to be thin air.

"A force field!" Scott was fascinated. "Can I touch it?"

"Not for long; it could burn you." She demonstrated by a few taps of her fingertip, and Scott echoed the motion. Steve, Sam, and Wanda were curious enough to follow suit. True to her word, it was uncomfortably hot, but didn't burn on contact, though even someone with Steve's healing factor would have gotten burned if they kept their hand on it for longer than a few seconds. It didn't buzz or vibrate like he expected. It just felt like metal that had gotten uncomfortably warm in the sunlight.

"So we can see through from this side, but it's obscured outside," Sam mused, gazing out at the Wakandans who strolled obliviously down the busy city street without a glance at the fence.
"Yes. Vibranium can generate a number of powerful fields and particles when properly stimulated. How do you think we've shielded ourselves from foreign observation for so long?"

Sam took an assessing look at the grand, elaborate palace buildings and the sophisticated technology visible around the city. "I had been wondering, I gotta admit. Amazing."

Shuri led them along the fence, and dropped the role of tour guide. "It also disrupts recording devices, and this seems a good time. There are some questions my brother and I have about Lagos, which only occurred to us during the…discussions, the other day."

Steve stopped walking and glanced around. There were a few Wakandan guards visible, and some dignitaries up on the palace terraces, but well out of ordinary earshot. Not that he would have had a problem with openly explaining anything the Wakandans wanted to know about Lagos…or so he would have thought. "Of course. I made a report, but I'll tell you anything else you want to know."

"My king – that is, my late king and father – received a report from the American State Department after the events of Lagos. It included statements from Captain America, but I think your report may have been edited. Did you happen to read the documents that were shared with Nigeria and Wakanda?"

Something was making Steve's insides start to churn. "No," he said slowly. "I made it and…gave it to…" Oh God. No, please, no, don't let this be going where I think it's going. "I gave it to Tony Stark. He – his legal department always took care of that kind of thing, and I… never questioned it." I trusted him.

Shuri nodded. "We've obtained the report that was delivered by Stark's personnel to the State Department; it is identical to the one you appear to have authored at Avengers Compound immediately after your return."

"Hey," said Scott. "How'd you get your hands on documents like that? Weren't they secure?"

Shuri smiled, unapologetic. "Does an American criticize another government for gathering intelligence even from secure sources? That seems an act of hypocrisy."

"Ouch," muttered Sam.

"Like every nation, Mr. Lang, Wakanda will use any and all avenues to stay a step ahead of threats. This may mean reaching through channels that are supposed to be closed. We make an effort to be discreet and don't use what we learn merely for gain, but moments like this provide the justification. Your own government turned on you before they ever showed the Accords to you, and used our dead citizens as pawns. We will have an explanation."

Steve felt like an ass, but all he could seem to focus on was: "You mean, it wasn't Tony who changed it. Or Rhodey."

"No. The revisions were made at the State Department. All mention of the identification of Rumlow's targets was removed. The people of Wakanda were left with this impression: that the Avengers intervened against a band of terrorists who attacked a government and police complex for weapons – not a lethal sample of bioagent that could easily slaughter millions if introduced to the population. The report ends with the detonation of the bomb. There is no mention of the search and rescue operation or the Avengers' participation. In fact, there was a concerted effort by parties within the United States government to remove all evidence of your involvement in the rescue efforts from the Internet. Fortunately, such efforts leave traces and can be traced, with the right tools."
Steve felt like a swarm of bees had taken up residence in his brain and under his skin. *Maybe none of what made it into that report is false…but what came out isn't true either. Someone wanted to shut us down or get us under control.*

Sam spoke up. "Y'know, the first time any of us ever heard of the Sokovia Accords was three days before the signing in Vienna. You realize how big that document was? We barely had enough time to read the damn thing, let alone make an informed decision about the power they'd have over us."

"Until now, we didn't know that," said Shuri. "But we've begun to suspect. Helmut Zemo was not the only man playing cruel games with the Avengers – and the people you tried to protect. I – and my brother the king – want to know who is responsible, and we will find out. Wakanda and her people are no one's pawns. But you also have a right to know." She smirked. "Perhaps consider again what others have said. Zemo, your enemies, even your own government have done all in their power to destroy you. Only you can decide whether they succeed or fail."

Clint said, "Well, I'm ready to get off my ass."

"Me too," agreed Wanda.

Steve hesitated. "As soon as we leave Wakanda, we'll have a hundred seventeen countries out for our heads, whether those reports were accurate or not. We can't risk bringing that down on you," he told Shuri.

"I'm not suggesting you race back into the fray against any and all foes," she said dryly. "Iron Man and his team are still in service, as are conventional militaries. Only that the Avengers should be ready for the day you may be needed."

Steve felt the weight of the burner phone in his pocket, and by extension, the promise he'd made to Tony. Clint asked, "How much archery do you do here in Wakanda?"

"It's not an ancestral form of combat, but we've picked it up from past generations of visitors. We can provide a bow that should satisfy you. Our engineers were very interested in your wings from the first time you appeared in public," Shuri added to Sam. "As for your captain's shield - "

" – no," Steve blurted. "No, no shield. I can't carry a shield again."

"Aw, Cap, come on," Sam said. "Stark was out of his mind – understandable, but still."

Steve shook his head. "No, I made a choice." *And even if he was out of his mind, he was right. I didn't deserve it, not after the way I treated him over Howard's murder. I should've told him. I knew, and I didn't tell him. That was the betrayal, not trying to save Bucky. I've used…other weapons before, though I'd rather have something less lethal than a gun,* he amended it.

"Have it your way," said Clint. "Everyone make way for Captain America and his Taser of Freedom!"

All of them broke up laughing. Honestly laughing, for the first time since…everything.

*Hey, Buck. How are you? I guess you'll be glad to know we've started training again. The five of us. T'Challa's heading off to Vienna for a conference about the Accords. He's planning to raise hell about them doctoring the report about Lagos…and he's got some words for Zemo. I miss you. Hope you're okay in there.*

Steve didn't say anything out loud, just rested a hand against the glass of Bucky's cryo chamber. It
was strangely warm, rather than cold. Now that he thought about it, it reminded him of the forcefield that protected the palace.

T'Challa didn't like deception. It was part of the reason that his father used to tease that he hated diplomacy. Dancing around intentions and desires and giving and taking in the endless spin of politics felt deceptive, rather than declaring oneself and one's country openly, without bluffs or feints.

*Wakanda is a sovereign nation. We have no obligation to give anyone part of ourselves. And some parts of ourselves, foreign powers will never have.* By that same token, no foreign nation was obligated to aid Wakanda, but as far as T'Challa was concerned, they'd gotten by perfectly well without foreign interference for centuries. After Sokovia, T'Chaka had softened his stance against involvement in foreign affairs, particularly while trying to determine where other nations stood on the issue of Wakanda.

Now T'Challa would return to Vienna, and if he wished to keep his word to his guests, he would have to engage in more deceit than ever before. He knew how to do it. Being able to lie and bluff and act was a skill essential to a king and leader. He'd been taught that from the cradle. But that didn't mean he had to enjoy it, and he hoped that not enjoying it might mitigate it.

In Vienna, the location for the summit was more secure than the last, with all vehicles heavily searched, and reporters forced to walk some distance with their equipment rather than bring their trucks and vans anywhere near the buildings. Once inside, T'Challa spoke to Tony Stark for the first time since Berlin.

Stark knew that T'Challa had secured Zemo. Now T'Challa needed information – but he also needed to ensure that the billionaire didn't suspect T'Challa of any involvement with Barnes and Rogers' escape.

He and Stark studied each other over the tablets that the hosts distributed. T'Challa scrolled down to the *very* carefully-worded report on the former Avengers. Rogers and Barnes were listed as missing. Interestingly, there was no mention of the other four having escaped from the Raft.

The two men approached each other cautiously, feigning neutral, congenial expressions to hide the turmoil they were both feeling, and pretended that they didn't notice the hundreds of eyes on them among the milling dignitaries, aides, and staff.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Stark," said T'Challa quietly. To Stark's curious expression, he explained, "I secured Zemo, as I'm sure you know, but failed to stay and ensure that you were safe."

Stark shrugged, all casual dismissal. "No worries, your highness. Thanks for letting us have the bastard's ass."

Now the people nearest them were not even pretending to not be listening. T'Challa gave Stark a thin smile. "Perhaps we should speak in private. There are some things I'd like to learn from you."

"Sure. Your place or mine?"

T'Challa managed not to roll his eyes. He accompanied Stark back to his guest office, trusting the man's own technological devices to keep them from being spied on. Once they were inside, he gestured to the tablet with the notes on the Avengers. "Barnes and Rogers." Stark stiffened. "Are they dead?"

It was something of a relief to see the shaken look on Stark's face. However murderous Stark might have felt in the heat of shock, renewed grief, and rage, it seemed that in a calmer moment, the idea of
killing Rogers and Barnes was not appealing to him. "No! No, I didn't. They ran."

T'Challa considered him and chose his next words carefully. "I regret now that I didn't try to help you. Although I would have tried to help all of you, once I understood Zemo's role."

Stark looked away and shrugged again, then began pacing. That seemed to be his fallback reaction to emotionally charged statements. "No guarantee any of us would've accepted. Rogers would've fought if you'd tried to arrest Barnes. Or 'f you'd tried to help them, I'd have gone after you. That'd make for one hell of a diplomatic incident."

"He was innocent of my father's death," said T'Challa, and raised a hand when Stark bristled. "But not yours, I know. I can hardly blame you for your reaction, considering my own."

Stark leaned back against the wall and laughed painfully. It reminded T'Challa of Rogers and his friends on the jet, their laughter so full of bitterness and grief. "How are things in Wakanda?"

"Sorrowful. I have been observing the difficulties with the Accords, but admittedly, the mourning for my father has been something of a distraction."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," Stark muttered. "Did you happen to see Zemo's arraignment?"

"It was brought to my attention. My experts reached the same conclusion as most journalists: Zemo still thinks to trigger the Winter Soldier again." T'Challa eyed Stark. "Either he thinks he can manipulate Barnes into assisting him, or - and I'm afraid this seems more likely - he wants you to find him again. Undoubtedly, Rogers will be with him."

Stark dropped his casual act and met T'Challa's gaze with hard eyes. "I'm not sure if you're warning me not to do it or not."

T'Challa broke the stare-down and went to the window. Over the tops of the buildings, he could just see the one covered in scaffolding where his father and more than forty other innocent people had died at Zemo's hands. "The truth is, I don't know myself what would be wiser. My father and I became pawns in Zemo's game. Barnes remains his pawn. You and Rogers, your supporters call you the backbone of the Avengers, and you're Zemo's targets. Now, as Zemo intended, you lead two factions - I know about the escape of Rogers' friends from prison," he added. "With Zemo in custody, it doesn't directly concern me, but I became part of this because of him. I suppose it would be wrong to merely walk away now that my father's murderer is captured."

"You saying you want to help me? Or help Barnes?" Stark remained against the wall in his casual pose, but his tone of voice and the look in his eyes were anything but casual. "I know what you told Zemo. Barnes didn't kill your father, and you almost killed Barnes. Some guys might think they owe Barnes something."

That was entirely true and dangerously close to reaching details that T'Challa couldn't disclose. "Yes. But I'm well aware of what the Winter Soldier did to your family, and I won't try to stop you from seeking justice." Here he had to swallow his gorge against the hypocrisy, so he went on. "Even so, that's what Zemo is counting on."

Silence was heavy for several moments as the two of them studied each other. Finally, Stark lowered his eyes. "Yeah, I know," he muttered. "Believe me, that's on my mind. Right now Rogers and Barnes have gone to ground. I think Romanoff is probably with them; Rogers couldn't manage to stay off the grid like this on his own, not in this century. I heard from him once. He wrote to me. Untraceable. He said he'd be there, if we need him."
"I'm glad," said T'Challa. Stark eyed him, puzzled. "To repair the Avengers would be to thwart Zemo. That will be justice enough for me. To that end, I've come to you with an offer." He managed not to smirk at the way Stark's eyes widened as he caught on. "Naturally, I cannot devote myself to your missions at all times; I have a country to run. But if the Avengers are ever in need of back-up, you may contact me. It may reassure the Avengers' supporters to know that the Black Panther has joined your ranks."

Stark stared, then his face gradually shifted into a broad, malicious grin. "And our friend Zemo will be absolutely gutted when he finds out."

T'Challa let himself smirk now. "Exactly."

"Diabolical, your highness. I was impressed that your followed me to Siberia; now I downright admire you." Stark made a show of checking his watch. "So you choosing this moment to step back onto the political stage must've had something to do with Zemo's court date this week?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny it," said T'Challa. Stark laughed out loud. "However, there is more, and this does concern Wakanda at large, not merely my father and I. Did you read the report submitted by your State Department on the Lagos incident?"

Stark frowned. "No, but my legal department's got it. They handle the paperwork. Steve, Wanda, Nat, Sam, everybody did a statement. We did that after every mission, even the ones that went well. My people just compiled 'em." He straightened, eyes narrowing. "Why?"

T'Challa likewise abandoned all amusement. "Before the discussions resume about the fate of the Sokovia Accords, I suggest you do read it - closely. I ordered deeper investigations...into incidents involving the Avengers while deciding on whether I would offer my services. Some of what my people discovered is troubling. I know that you favored the Accords. In principle, I still do as well, but when the truth is manipulated to achieve an end, I grow suspicious of that end."

"You and me both, your highness," said Stark.

By the time Tony and Rhodey had examined the reports - and had Friday and Vision go over them for good measure to figure out exactly what edits had been made - they learned that T'Challa had already met with the Nigerian envoy and several other ambassadors from countries whose nationals had perished in Lagos.

Tony joined him in a hurry, since Secretary Ross was due to show up at any minute. "The Nigerian ambassador is obtaining all the raw information gathered by his investigators. But he believes it will corroborate the report made by the Avengers rather than the one circulated by Secretary Ross."

"Ross is no fan of the Avengers. He was spearheading the registration initiative even before Sokovia. The DC incident was a setback for him, but he kept at it without SHIELD's support." Tony scowled. "We needed to be put in check. I knew Ross wanted more than that, but I thought we could handle it, if we conceded on the principle."

He caught T'Challa's dark look. "Many high officials in your government were implicated in the Hydra scandal, but few were ever charged," the king pointed out.

At least there, Tony was reasonably confident of the answer. 'Nah, I thought of that. Ross isn't Hydra. Too patriotic. NSA, Homeland Security and all their semi-legal surveillance efforts, yeah, but not Hydra. I thought he'd be too self-righteous to take a spot on Bunt's cabinet, but the ends really justify the means for him. But the end has to be advancement of America, and Hydra was too
shameless back in its glory days about wanting the Allies' downfall. It's the only thing that'd keep Ross and his type from helping them."

There was no more time to talk then, because Ross had arrived. His speech to the UN was a lot less inspiring than King T'Chaka's had seemed - and Tony half-wished it would end in a similar way. He felt something hard and heavy weighing down on his insides when Ross proclaimed, "No nation can continue to tolerate enhanced individuals rampaging unchecked on its soil. These people must be made to declare themselves and their intentions, and act only when sanctioned by their governments. The Sokovia Accords still represent the best, most transparent, and most effective means of achieving that order. America is calling upon the United Nations and the signing nations of the Accords to identify and register enhanced individuals within their borders as they agreed to do. The signing ceremony, tragically interrupted, was nothing more than a formality. All of you agreed to the spirit of the Accords, and need to work with us to uphold them."

Steve had been so close to signing. Until he found out about Wanda. Don't you get it, Cap? Once you signed, she'd have signed, and we'd be golden! She'd be protected by the Accords. She couldn't go home and she couldn't stay a free agent. Vision and I were trying to help her. Dammit, I was ready to get a top-notch lawyer for Barnes... That train of thought derailed. Yeah, sure, back then he'd been ready to do that. He hadn't liked seeing the poor bastard bolted into a chair like he was Hannibal fucking Lecter, and knew it had to be killing Steve, and he was ready to throw his weight behind getting the skull-fucked superassassin something resembling due process, until...

Yeah. Until.

The applause when Ross finished was...polite. And short. Tony gave exactly three dainty claps before turning his attention to the assistant to Lithuanian ambassador who'd ended up sitting next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ross, thin-lipped and irritated at the lukewarm reception to his passionate sermon.

The Nigerian ambassador was next. "Secretary Ross, the people of Nigeria are very grateful to all the nations who stepped forward with assistance in the aftermath of the Lagos tragedy. However, information has come into our possession which is very troubling. We have learned that the report submitted by our government to the International Criminal Court's investigators was materially altered before being released to the public by the Committee on Enhanced Activities."

A murmur of dismay rippled through the room, and (unlike when Ross had been speaking) everyone was paying rapt attention.

"In particular, the target of the terrorist attack was not disclosed as the Center for Infectious Diseases. What was stolen from that office was not conventional weapons, as the report now seems to imply. It was a concentrated sample of Ebola Sudan, the sample from which the primary vaccine research in Nigeria was being conducted. In the wrong hands, it could have led to an outbreak on a scale never before seen."

The ambassador stared at Ross. "It was decided that these details would not be disclosed to the general public for security reasons. Yet I have now learned that these details were even withheld from those nations who were authorized to receive the classified reports, including those whose citizens died in the attack. Nigeria did not agree to withhold this critical information entirely."

A lot of eyes were on Ross now. The Secretary of State wore an expression of mild dismay as he took notes.

The ambassador gestured to the presentation screen, and a video flickered to life. It was Nat, charging through a crowded, chaotic market on a cell phone video, brawling it out with a handful of thugs who clearly weren't enhanced. Gasps and cries rang out on the video and in the room when
one of the men brandished a vial, unmistakably threatening to drop it.

Tony knew how this one ended, but the other watchers hissed and whispered, then yelped as Wilson's Redwing took the thugs down, and Nat caught the test tube unbroken.

They were still running back through the market when the bomb went off a few hundred meters away.

The screen went dark, and the meeting hall buzzed with whispers and excited chatter. The Nigerian ambassador fixed hard eyes on Ross. "You and your president speak of transparency. A lie by omission is still a lie. This film was taken by a bystander, yet all trace of it has been removed from the Internet along with all other evidence of the true object of this attack. My government is not the only nation whose citizens are forced to ask why."

A lot of eyes fell on T'Challa then. But to Tony's surprise - and some disappointment - he didn't speak.

**International News: Vienna Sokovia Accords Summit Stalls!**

"There was an atmosphere of fear tonight as the special conference on the Sokovia Accords concluded without a formal signing. Proponents of the Accords ask that the previously-committed signatories stand firm, but questions are now being raised about whether the measures go too far in restricting individual freedom and the ability to respond to international threats. Although supporters of the Avengers applauded the revelation of Natasha Romanoff, who thwarted a threat by one of the Lagos terrorists to break a test tube full of concentrated Ebola virus in a crowded market, there is still the overarching despair over the team's reduced numbers. Romanoff herself remains at large and listed as a wanted international fugitive, along with Steve Rogers, Captain America, and Sam Wilson, James Buchanan Barnes, and several others who were seen with them in what superhero enthusiasts now describe as the Avengers Civil War."

"Officially, the Avengers still exist as an organization, now under the auspices of the Sokovia Accords. Its members include billionaire Tony Stark's Iron Man, the enhanced humanoid known as Vision, and United States Air Force Colonel James Rhodes. This is a far cry from the powerful, coordinated group who fought an alien invasion of New York and artificially intelligent robots in Sokovia. Accords supporters blame the Avengers for the high death toll in those and other events, while Avengers supporters argue that if it weren't for the Avengers, the casualties would have been far worse."

"Tomorrow, the victims of Vienna and their families are gathering in the Hague to witness the second court appearance of Helmut Zemo, the confessed bomber of the first Sokovia Accords session."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** T'Challa is face-to-face with Zemo again and announces his own version of revenge with Tony's assistance. But Zemo still has revenge plans in motion for more than just Tony and Steve!
PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Summary

T'Challa is face-to-face with Zemo again and announces his own version of revenge with Tony's assistance. But Zemo still has revenge plans in motion for more than just Tony and Steve.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the feedback! Please keep it coming! As a reminder, we're only a week or so out from the end of Civil War at this stage in the story, and many of our heroes, particularly Tony and Steve, are still very emotional and a little less than reasonable about the conflict, reacting in different less-than-idea ways. Also, my knowledge of the International Criminal Court's procedures comes from Wikipedia, my imagination, and a woefully out-of-date law school course.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Ten

**AVENGERS COMPOUND, NEW YORK**

Rhodey already thought pretty well of T'Challa of Wakanda. Granted, he'd barged into the investigation and pursuit of Barnes with only slightly more subtlety than Tony - and just as much disregard for the Accords and the principles behind them as Steve and his gang. But Rhodey remembered the pictures of the guy over his father's body in Vienna, with his guards and aides practically having to drag him away.

Who could honestly say they wouldn't have gone looking for the bastard responsible in a situation like that? Rhodey was a law-abiding man who still believed in the principles behind the Accords - even if he was really starting to worry about the machinations in their creation - but he wasn't so arrogant as to think he wouldn't have lost his shit if he'd been in T'Challa's shoes.

More impressive was T'Challa's change in position once he'd realized Barnes wasn't behind Vienna - and the fact that he'd turned Zemo over to face legal justice for all of those victims, not just King T'Chaka. The idea of kings in general still existing as more than symbolic figureheads in the twenty-first century still made Rhodey a bit uncomfortable...but he couldn't find much fault with this royal line.

It was another entry in T'Challa's book of virtues when Rhodey saw him on TV at The Hague, politely declining to join the VIPs and going instead to mingle with the bereaved families of the victims.

Royalty, working class, poor as dirt, diplomats, or presidents, it doesn't save anybody from a bomb, Rhodey thought, as T'Challa was filmed embracing a tearful man who'd lost his wife and infant son in the blast. As in Oklahoma City, the bomb hadn't discriminated between the dignitaries...
who were Zemo's target on the upper floors and the day care center on the lower floor. Eleven children had died.

Vision was in The Hague today as well. This would be the first time that any of the victims and families were permitted to speak, or that Zemo would be allowed to address the public, and the officials feared violence from any direction. For a purple dude less than two years old, Vision turned out to be a natural at diplomacy. Maybe it wasn't surprising given that he'd come from Jarvis.

Vision wasn't on duty until Zemo arrived, so he went around introducing himself to the dignitaries (some fascinated, others unnerved) and went to pay his respects to T'Challa and the other families. T'Challa greeted him warmly while the families held back, until a small German girl asked who the purple man was.

The exchange was in German, but Vision spoke it, and translations were whispered by one of the reporters.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Vision, but if you like, you may call me Purple Man."

"Are all the other Avengers dead?"

"Oh hell," muttered Pepper, on the couch next to Rhodey.

Vision could come across annoyingly analytical sometimes, but Tony and Wanda had insisted that he had emotions equivalent to any human's. The evidence had been there before; Rhodey had seen Vision keeping watch over himself and Tony back when Rhodey was still on bed rest with a look of quiet, all-consuming sadness in his eyes.

That look was back, and it was several heartbeats before Vision answered the kid. "No, none of them are dead. They remain my dear friends, and I hope we will be reunited some day."

That caused a stir among the onlookers; some looked startled, while others nodded in agreement. A few paces away, T'Challa was among those who nodded, and he and Vision exchanged a long look as if sharing a secret.

"Do you?" Pepper asked suddenly. "D'you hope they'll get back together?"

Rhodey didn't really have to think about it for very long. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. I believed in the Accords. Rogers needs a day in court. So does Barnes. A lot of days, maybe. They broke the law. But, when it's all said and done...yeah, I hope they will. Tony was better off with them."

Pepper looked at him in surprise. "'Believed in the Accords' - past tense?"

Rhodey sighed. "I started digging after what the Nigerian ambassador said. He's right. Tony confirmed it. I don't like an agenda that makes scapegoats out of people. Parts of the Accords had issues even before we knew about Ross and Lagos. I'm hearing things, about how registration's being enforced...it's got nothing to do with keeping groups like the Avengers in check."

"Yeah. I want to brain Steve Rogers for what he put Tony through - especially not having the guts to tell Tony about his parents years ago. But what's starting to happen under the Accords - the registration round-ups, the lists, mutant kids getting pulled out of school, their parents having to submit to DNA profiling without any rights, it's scary. Things like that aren't supposed to happen here. Tony needs to answer to someone. Too much goes...wrong, when he doesn't. But I don't know if I want it to be Secretary Ross or anybody who represents him."
"You remember Ross and Banner?" Rhodey asked. She nodded. "Tony thinks some of this is still about that. Ross's ramped up the international search, tried to get Tony to provide tech power."

"That much I know. We had to get Legal to go over the Accords and confirm that they don't provide any authority to make a civilian corporation provide support for a military operation," said Pepper. "That's what got me rethinking the Accords. Some of what's in there, it's not about protecting the public, or keeping enhanced operatives in check. It's about control, mass control. It's too close to what Hydra was trying to do, keep everyone in line at the point of a gun, and anyone who disagrees dies or disappears." She smiled wryly. "I also found out Tony's been looking into getting the charges dropped against Rogers and the others."

Rhodey blinked at her, then chuckled. "I didn't know that, but can't say I'm surprised. Actually, no, I take that back - I am surprised. Since when is Tony capable of not announcing shit like that from the rooftop the second he comes up with it?"

Pepper grinned. It made it easier to swallow looking at the miserable rat bastard appearing before the judges again. Tony was clad in full armor, while Vision remained beside King T'Challa, as if the two of them were standing guard over the bereaved families.

This time, Zemo was defiant, sneering at Iron Man to the point that Pepper actually growled. When permitted to speak, he turned to the families, and Rhodey found himself wishing the fucker would try something again.

But he didn't. "I am deeply sorry for the loss of your loved ones. All I wish to say is that because of their sacrifice, they will be the last innocent families destroyed by the Avengers."

Even one of the judges on the panel was scowling, looking like he wouldn't be too sorry if somebody jumped the barricades and beat the shit out of Zemo. "Do any of the victims wish to address the court?"

The next hour was hard to watch. Maimed men and women displayed their injuries. Devastated husbands, wives, parents, and children raged and cried, while Zemo conveyed a sympathy that Rhodey doubted he really felt. T'Challa went last of all. "Vengeance consumed you, until you thought nothing of taking the lives of dozens of men, women, and children. You have seen here the faces of fathers who lost their sons, husbands who lost their wives, and sons who lost their fathers. But it's clear that they mean nothing to you, even though your actions were driven by your own loss. You have deserted them in death and tainted their memory." Zemo just looked steadily at him. "Justice will come soon enough. That is why I delivered you to Stark instead of making you pay with my own hands for the murder of my father." T'Challa shook his head. "It's clear to me that in your eyes, it was worth it. All to destroy the Avengers." He looked at Vision beside him and Iron Man beside Zemo. "You must fail. That is the only justice that you can recognize. Two days ago, I spoke with Tony Stark. The Avengers' numbers are diminished because of what you did, and their ability to respond to threats is reduced. That must change. So I have offered him my services, as a warrior and as a king."

Zemo stiffened, and a murmur rippled through the crowded room. T'Challa's smile was cold. "The Avengers have made mistakes. They have failed to protect everyone. They may be enhanced, but they are mortal. And despite everything you have done, they have not fallen."

Stark raised the mask from his helmet. "I think Thor might be a little disappointed when he finds out he's not the only royalty on the team anymore. And man, I'm moving down on the VIP rank, but them's the breaks. King T'Challa and my legal team are working on getting the charges against my friends dropped or reduced, since the whole thing was based on a hoax." He met the stunned Zemo's eyes. "Hell, I might even hire a lawyer for Barnes."
Zemo broke and lunged at Tony, but Tony snapped his mask back down and held him off with laughable ease, and T'Challa was on him from behind in a flash and pinned him down on the table. Pepper gasped and the onlooker shrieked, but Vision moved to usher everyone back. Tony and T'Challa had Zemo well under control. Guards and Tony hauled Zemo out of the room as applause began to rise, especially from the witnesses.

Once the session was over, people flooded toward T'Challa and Vision, bombarding them with questions. Tony emerged after escorting Zemo's guards to their transportation and joined the victims and their families, the armor folding itself neatly into a wheeled briefcase at his side. The kids among the group were fascinated, and he went in and out of it several times for their amusement.

Next to Rhodey, Pepper murmured, "Every time I think I've got him figured out..."

"I know, right?"

ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

The first deployment of the Avengers after Black Panther joined them seemed to be more of a goodwill mission than anything else, a relief effort for flash flooding in Egypt. It was just the three of them - Vision, Iron Man, and Black Panther - in the field, but Rhodey put in an appearance in his armor coordinating relief efforts. War Machine could still walk just fine, but the doctors didn't want Rhodey flying unless lives depended on it.

It was a zero-fatality event. Secretary Ross and some of the other Accords proponents were eager to declare that this was proof that committee deployment of the Avengers would save lives. There was a lot of damage, and some complaining that Vision and Tony had demolished a couple of buildings to reroute the water flow away from the evacuation shelters, but unlike most Avengers deployments, the underlying disaster couldn't very well be blamed on the team.

Some of the rescues from flooded areas were very close calls, and one of the Egyptian officials complained that Thor would have been useful. "I am sure he would have been," T'Challa agreed. "But like myself, he has responsibilities beyond the Avengers, and cannot be available at all times."

"Have you met him?" asked a reporter.

"I have not, but look forward to doing so."

Note to self, thought Tony as they regrouped at a first responder base. Add car wash capability to the suit. All three of them were filthy. T'Challa had streaks of it all over his suit despite his efforts to brush it off, transforming him into a black and brown tabby cat. Vision's gold cloak was soggy and waterlogged.

War Machine was as shiny as if he'd been spit-polished. Rhodey pulled up the visor of his helmet and grinned broadly at them all. "Shut up," said Tony.

"Earth's muddiest heroes, ladies and gentlemen!" Rhodey announced.

Tony lobbed a mudball at him, but missed. Rhodey waved and swaggered off to a waiting chopper. Yeah, of course, in the suit Tony'd made, Rhodey could still swagger. "See you back home, Stank!"

Tony caught T'Challa smirking at him. He hadn't known the guy had a sense of humor. But rather than join in the ribbing, the Wakandan king remarked, "If it makes you feel any better, I'm sure my people imagined my debut with the Avengers would be a little more dignified."
"They can hardly criticize you for lifting children out of submerged buses," Vision pointed out. Black Panther might not be able to fly, but sometimes he seemed to have been walking on water, and wriggled into spaces too tight for Vision or Iron Man to evacuate trapped civilians.

"Criticize, no, but my sister and brother won't be any more merciful to me than Colonel Rhodes was to you." T'Challa considered the mob of reporters behind the line of military security and shook his head. "I admit, it's a little different to see this world from the Avengers' point of view. The cameras are harder to ignore than I expected." He caught Tony eyeing him and lifted his chin. *Yeah, this guy and Thor'll get along great.* "Before you start crowing, Stark, consider I could suggest you consider the perspective of others as well now and then."

Tony knew that was coming. It had hovered in the air between them, everytime he and T'Challa met since Vienna and The Hague. T'Challa had let Zemo live, even after the bastard confessed, and Tony could practically smell the disapproval for his own plan to avenge his parents as soon as he tracked the Winter Soldier down.

They tabled the conversation until they got to the suite at the Four Seasons and into some clean, dry clothes. T'Challa insisted on purchasing their lodgings for the night. *Another drawback to the new team lineup, I'm no longer the only one with purse strings.* Not to mention that - no offense to Happy - T'Challa's guards were way fucking cooler than Stark Security.

"Have you heard any news of your friends?" T'Challa annoyed Tony by directing the question to Vision, not him.

"We haven't, although that alone suggests certain likely leads," said Vision. "They're together, employing the connections of Barton, Romanoff, and possibly Barnes. Between the three of them, they have skills and resources to evade even the tracking abilities of SHIELD and Mr. Stark."

This was a boring conversation. "Yep. In other words, no news. They've gone to ground and aren't coming back up until they have to," said Tony, pacing along the walls. The last few years had made him leery of windows and exterior walls. "I'm working on getting the charges reduced, or at least a guarantee that they'll get actual due process second time around." He stared at T'Challa. "Barnes is a different story."

"I know that for you, he is."

Jerk, standing there looking all sanctimonious. *If I'd wanted that back on the team, I'd just go find Rogers.* "Yeah, for me and everyone else whose families he murdered. How many assassinations was it? Two hundred? Three hundred? At least Zemo was out of his goddamned mind."

T'Challa bristled. "Zemo was acting on his own behalf, according to his own confession. I heard what Rogers tried to tell you. Barnes was American, a prisoner. There's no telling what they did to him in the decades they had him - "

" - I - don't - care," Tony hissed through his teeth, and advanced on T'Challa. The door opened and one of T'Challa's guards poked her head into the suite, but the king waved her out. A little flicker of bitter humor broke through Tony's haze of anger. "Tell your girls to relax and quit spying on us."

"I employ no more surveillance than you do, and my guards are referred to as the Dora Milaje," T'Challa replied. "I was going to say that if you want to find Rogers and the others, your determination to kill Barnes yourself is counterproductive - and entirely in line with what Zemo wants."

"Have you got any motive other than pissing Zemo off?"
"Yes. Defeating him is part of this, but not all. His manipulations made a fool of me, and I don't intend for that to happen again." T'Challa went to the window. Obviously it didn't bother him. "You suggested in The Hague that you would hire a lawyer for Barnes. Did you not mean that?" He looked at Tony in the reflection and worked it out, much to Tony's annoyance. "Ah. Your intention was to draw Rogers out. That is what Zemo wants. He's still pushed you beyond reason."

"Bullshit. I'd still want the bastard's head even if Zemo'd had nothing to do with it. If Rogers had told me before, and I damn well know why he didn't. He picked a Hydra assassin over everything we'd built."

Vision stepped forward. "I'm afraid you're oversimplifying it, Tony."

"Hey, I didn't ask for your opinion, Purple People Eater."

"But I'll gladly hear it," retorted T'Challa.

Tony scoffed and paced away again, but Vision answered anyway. "Steve Rogers was displaced from his civilization and every friend he ever had, only to be thrown into a world where war and treachery are far more of a long-term reality than they were in the time where he was raised. From his perspective, Bucky Barnes had died only two years before the events in Washington, D.C."

"Yeah, but then he found out his buddy was slaughtering people for Hydra, including my parents, but no big deal!" Tony snapped.

Vision stared at him with those damn piercing eyes. "You don't even believe that yourself, Tony."

"It doesn't matter what I believe," Tony growled. "Bastard needs to answer for it, same as Zemo." He looked at T'Challa and conceded, "Believe it or not, I'm not planning on blowing his head off anymore - not yet, anyway. I'll settle for a federal trial - in the US, though, not The Hague."

T'Challa frowned. "Why not The Hague?"

Vision answered before Tony could. "Because the International Criminal Court does not employ the death penalty, and the federal courts of the United States do."

Tony didn't deny it. T'Challa sighed. "If the man in Hydra's hand had been James Rhodes, rather than James Barnes, you would do what Rogers has done."

Tony glared. "You don't get to come waltzing in here and lecturing me, your highness. Rhodes wouldn't have gotten himself into Hydra's hands in the first place. Barnes is gonna answer for my family and every other family he destroyed, and so's Rogers for choosing him." He stalked towards his room, but not fast enough to avoid hearing what Vision said.

"I'm afraid Tony remains irrational on the subject, as you've undoubtedly discovered."

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**IOWA**

The first external alarm tripped before dawn. Laura Barton figured it was just deer in the woods; they were the usual false alarm triggers. But within five minutes, the second and third went off. That woke her up.

Clint and Nat and Director Fury had warned her: "*These aren't garden-variety motion detectors we're installing around the perimeters. A wild animal or a vagrant might set off one or two in the space of an hour. If three go off, it's no animal. A poacher or a thief looking to steal equipment could*
set off three or four, heading for the farm. If five go off, you've got multiple individuals approaching. Assume the worst."

By the time the fourth went off, she was already getting dressed and pulling guns out of the safe. The fifth buzzer woke the kids.

"Turn on the perimeter network and get the kids inside." Clint and Director Fury had drilled every step into her.

"Lila, Cooper? Up, right now, it's an emergency."

"We're gonna practice with Auntie Nat, okay? This is what you're gonna do in an emergency, and we're gonna practice and practice until we remember it so well we can do it in our sleep." They'd drilled the kids too.

The kids remembered what to do and rolled out of bed, but they were still groggy and sluggish. They were pulling on their clothes when the dead-earnest full-volume alarms went off. Seven or eight perimeter detectors triggered. First internal perimeter alarm triggered. Laura scooped Nate from his crib and left the guns there. Bless Cooper, the buzzer jolted the last of the sleep from him, and he had Nate's bulletproof emergency carrier out even as Laura turned around.

"What to we do, Mommy?" Lila squeaked.

"Just like we practiced with Auntie Nat and Mr. Director, right?" Laura handed the baby case to Lila, turned back for the guns, and met Cooper's eyes, handing the smallest handgun to him. "This is no practice." He hefted it, meeting his mother's eyes with a grave nod. He knew how serious it was.

All the external spotlights came on and more alarms blared. Lila choked back a sob as Laura led them downstairs. "Stay low!"

She slapped the internal defenses online. They were Fury's design, projecting shadows onto the windows of the upper floors like panicky family moving around. There were shouts outside, and the first windows shattered.

Laura kept the kids moving down into the basement. The tunnel was already open, but for a split second, she hesitated.

What if these attackers knew? What if they were waiting?

She'd be sending her children straight into their hands.

Clint and Nat had dug the thing themselves. Only Fury knew about it - so they said.

She had seconds to make up her mind. Run with the kids and seal it, or make her last stand.

*Clint, Nat, you better get this signal*. She kissed Lila and Cooper hard on their foreheads. "Go. Remember the rules. Don't turn around, don't stop for anything. Nate is your responsibility. Go."

"I love you, Mommy!" Lila gasped, but Cooper was already hurrying her into the darkness.

Laura dialed the lock code to the entrance and watched it slide out of sight under the basement bricks. Even echo detectors couldn't pick it up, Clint and Nat had said.

She charged back up the stairs and ducked into the little "nest" near the basement doors. Power was out, but the sun was coming up. Peering through the holes, she watched a full dozen black clad men
Sons of bitches. Clint and Nat and Fury had warned her that one day this might happen. They were ready for it. They assumed it would be Hydra, or one of the many terrorist bands that Clint had helped take down over the years. Hell, after the events of 2014, it might even have been some of Clint's old colleagues from SHIELD - SHIELD in all but name, anyway. Whoever it was, the fact that they'd go after a man's wife and kids said all Laura would ever need to know about whoever might come busting through her door with a gun.

So she might have been shaking, but she sure didn't feel any qualms as she cited the men with her gun and waited with her foot on the full internal defenses trigger.

If the house is empty, they'll start searching. If I draw their fire, they'll focus on me rather than looking for the kids. Bastards.

Tony Stark had helped upgrade the system even more after they'd sheltered the Avengers a year ago. Automatic targeting systems sighted the intruders and identified whether they were authorized to be in the house. At Laura's step on the pedal, they burst out of nooks and crannies in the house and auto-focused on the intruders.

Did you really think Clint Barton would leave his family defenseless?

Keeping her head and torso behind the bulletproof shielding, Laura opened fire.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Natasha comes out of hiding to rescue the Bartons, leaving T'Challa in an awkward position that gets even more awkward when Tony traces her to Wakanda...and figures out who else T'Challa is sheltering.

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Summary

Natasha comes out of hiding to rescue the Bartons, leaving T'Challa in an awkward position that gets even more awkward when Tony traces her to Wakanda...and figures out who else T'Challa is sheltering.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the amazing feedback on these newest chapters!

Canon Note: As mentioned, this fic doesn't directly tackle the events of Black Panther, but I am trying to incorporate some of the attitudes and relationships from MCU Wakanda into this story, and how the Wakandans would react to find a band of rogue Avengers being sheltered on their soil.

Chapter Eleven

The official Avengers were eating breakfast and saying their farewells when an alarm went off on Stark's wrist. T'Challa assumed it was some minor message - until he saw the look on Stark's face. The man stared at his tablet, then shot to his feet. "Vision, we gotta go. Here's your coordinates."

Vision took off without a word, and Stark yanked the case that contained his suit away from the table. "Sorry, your highness, got an emergency!" He pelted out onto the terrace, the suit already forming around him, and launched.

T'Challa was still puzzling over that when Ayo whispered, "An emergency signal has been detected from Iowa, United States, my king. An attack on Clinton Barton's family."

T'Challa stiffened. "To the jet. Now."

They ran.

It was a tense hour of flight at top speed back to Wakanda. At T'Challa's orders, the Avengers weren't permitted to leave the palace. He pulled Barton and the others into a secure room and said grimly, "We've intercepted an emergency signal from Iowa, west of Des Moines."

Barton went dead white, as did Rogers and Maximoff. "Oh Jesus," Wilson whispered.

Barton started for the door, jaw set. "I need a plane."

Lang looked at the others in confusion. "What's in Iowa?"

"Barton - "
"- I need a plane, a chopper, anything. I can't stay here." Barton balled his fists as Okoye and Nakia stepped into his path, but Ayo, listening to the signal on her headset, had news:

"Romanoff is there."

Maximoff gasped, and Barton froze. He looked at her, and at T'Challa's nod, she turned the audio onto the speakers.

"We're moving in. Six intruders outside the house; two dead, four incapacitated. This was a coordinated hit against the residents. More fatalities inside. Taking...two, make that three into custody."

Gunshots made Lang and Maximoff flinch, while Rogers and Wilson and T'Challa clustered around Barton, whose face was utterly blank as he listened.

"Returning fire!"

"Entire building compromised."

Long minutes passed of Romanoff reporting fatalities and injuries in a dispassionate voice, but only of the attackers. Then she announced, "I'm on the third floor, northeast corner. Female civilian down."

Rogers made a strangled noise and stepped away from Barton, his face twisted as if in physical pain. Lang worked out what the situation must mean, and sat down slowly in the nearest chair. Wilson put a cautious hand on Barton's arm as Romanoff finished, "Three more intruders dead in the bedroom. I've found...three juveniles in the closet. One male, one female, one male infant. No survivors. All dead at the scene."

Lang put his head in his hand and actually sobbed, but to T'Challa's complete confusion, Barton looked up at the ceiling and laughed. Wilson stared, but Maximoff wrapped her arms around Barton's chest and smiled, eyes shut in unmistakable...relief.

"Clint?" asked T'Challa carefully. "What does this mean?"

Barton trembled but couldn't speak, so he nudged Maximoff, and she explained: "It's a code." She released him with one hand and wiped her eyes. "Natasha knows - the signal was for Clint - she knows he'll hear her. She's telling him they're safe. Anyone else who hears it - they won't bother to look."

Rogers let out his breath in a gasp of relief, but didn't turn around. Scott jumped up and shoved past the dazed Wilson to envelop Barton in a bear hug. "Thank God, man. Thank God."

"Nat got 'em, she's got 'em," Barton breathed, still looking up as if in prayer. "She needs... we need..."

Maximoff turned to T'Challa, wiping her eyes. "They're compromised. If you could signal her, she has to take them somewhere..."

T'Challa worked out where her scattered thoughts were going. "For Barton's wife and children, I will gladly extend amnesty and protection."

"Romanoff?" asked Nakia.

Romanoff was a different matter, but Barton, leaning heavily on the table with his hand on the
speaker, murmured, "She'll be flying them. We can't trust anybody else. 's only a few people who even knew where the farm was, 'f it's compromised, somebody talked. She's got 'em."

In twenty minutes, the man had gone from a statue of stone to looking as if a slight breeze would tip him over. Even as he leaned on the table, Maximoff and Lang were practically holding him upright.

"I could meet her somewhere," Steve offered softly. "Pick them up, bring them the rest of the way."

A new report from Romanoff silenced them all. "Cleanup teams dispatched from SHIELD." She sounded weary and sad, as an investigator might be who'd found victims too late to save. But Barton's weak smile belied her words. "I'm lifting off for fuel station and reports in five."

"She needs a signal of where to take them," Barton explained, recovering his strength and turning to face T'Challa.

Another voice came over the frequency. "Any indication of the attackers' origin?"

"No admission of who gave the order, but four of the eight survivors are Sokovian nationals. The other four are German, Slovakian, and Ukrainian."


That made up T'Challa's mind. "Patch into the signal," he ordered Ayo. To Barton, he asked, "Are you able to tell her where to go without revealing your location?"

"Yeah. I need...hang on." Barton fumbled for something to write on. "What are our coordinates?"

"You cannot give her our coordinates," protested Nakia, but T'Challa waved her off. Barton knew better.

"'m not. Code's in our heads."

T'Challa nodded and gestured to the Dora Milaje. "Do as he asks."

Okoye obeyed, and Barton needed only a few moments to gaze at the numbers before writing down a completely different set of coordinates. "That's...somewhere in Mongolia," said Wilson, peering over his shoulder.

"Nobody but her knows the cipher. Not even Fury," said Barton. Ayo handed him a radio, and he took a deep breath, then made the call. "Investigator, this is base. We've got another emergency call coming in. Sending you the coordinates now. How's your fuel?"

"I need a refuel, Base, but I can be back in the air in ninety minutes."

"Do you have a location on her jet?" he asked Ayo.

"She'll be in stealth mode," said Rogers, but Ayo shook her head.

"Not to our tracking abilities. But..." Ayo frowned at her tablet. "Her heading is west. It will take her twice as long to reach Wakanda."

"That's the idea. It'll throw off anybody who does manage to get a fix on her," Barton said. He sat down on the floor, rubbing his eyes.

Lang put a hand on his shoulder. "You all right, man?"
"Not by any stretch of the imagination," Barton muttered, and shut his eyes. "Thanks, your highness." His voice grew softer and trembled. "Thank you."

T'Challa motioned the Dora Milaje back to give the man some space, and answered gravely, "You're very welcome."

Rogers still looked frantic. "If Zemo and his allies are making another move, Scott and Sam's families are in danger too."

Wilson now began to pace, while Barton took a deep breath and stood, watching Lang's reaction. Ayo spoke up in Wakandan for the sake of discretion. "The more action we take abroad, the greater our risk of exposure, my king."

"I know," T'Challa murmured. "But I will not allow Zemo to continue targeting innocent people." Switching to English, he said, "I'll contact Stark. He's already aware that I have access to many communications he believed confidential. In the interest of protecting his people from Zemo, he'll overlook how I obtained the information."

He was impressed to find that while there was no way Rogers could have translated Ayo's remarks, he had worked out what was worrying her - or it was already on Rogers' mind. "We can't do this to you, your highness. You're risking too much. It's one thing to harbor people who're helpless, but the rest of us - if we're found here, the entire UN'll come down on you."

T'Challa sighed and tried to smother irritation at the American's notion that he couldn't protect those he'd chosen to shelter. "And do what? Invade? Weaker nations than this have harbored larger and more violent groups than yours, and still, it was deemed not worth the instability for any international coalition to charge onto sovereign soil. The signatories of the Accords will have harsh words for me. There will be negotiations and arguments and threats. I am a head of state, and while I agreed to certain cooperations as part of the Accords, Wakanda is free to withdraw from them at any time. If we violate them, we are subject to economic sanctions - which will have exactly zero impact upon our economy."

Wilson smiled, but stepped up next to Rogers. "I believe you, your highness, but especially if we're gonna reform the Avengers, it's not right for us to hide behind your generosity. That's not how any of us want to operate - and maybe an international coalition wouldn't invade, but secret task forces, enhanced of their own, that's a different thing. Hell, they've got Iron Man. There're other countries that didn't sign the Accords and don't abide by extradition treaties. I was looking into them before it all hit the fan in Vienna - for you," he added, nodding to Maximoff.

T'Challa wondered if perhaps he was taking these fears more personally than he should, and Okoye said quietly, "They mean no offense, my king. Their consideration of our position speaks well of their character. The airman fought in international conflict for years, perhaps in secret operations himself. They don't dismiss your power, only worry for the collateral damage. It is what you and the late king wished of the Avengers after Lagos."

So T'Challa made an effort to squash his miffed pride. "You are all free to choose whether to go or stay. You and your families have amnesty, especially from threats sent by Zemo. No one will be permitted to harm any man, woman, or child in Wakanda under royal protection."

Barton, starting to recover from shock and terror, stood up. "Your highness, I'll take that amnesty for my wife and kids, very gratefully. There're different possible reasons for how their location got compromised enough for Zemo to find them, none of 'em good, but the worst, most likely is that Zemo's got allies even now."
T'Challa nodded. "I thought of that myself."

"When Nat - I mean, Romanoff, when she gets here, we'll talk. Best thing might be for the rest of us to leave," Barton went on, looking at Rogers. "We've got safe houses, places pretty far off the grid where we can regroup for a long stretch. It'll also give us a chance to figure out what the biggest threats still are, and what we can do about them."

Stark was distracted when T'Challa called, and didn't reveal much about the Bartons. "I've got Stark Security on the families of everybody who was ever with the Avengers. Trying to persuade them to relocate."

"Do you require any assistance? Perhaps not from a head of state, but as an eyewitness and son of a victim of Zemo, I might persuade some of the danger his vendetta poses," said T'Challa.

"Depends on how friendly you feel towards Sam Wilson. His sister's gonna relocate her family, but his mom is being stubborn."

T'Challa was relieved that the Avengers were no longer present. "My feelings aren't unfriendly enough towards any of you to wish harm on your families, Stark."

"Yeah, I get that."

"What about the boy you brought to Berlin?"

"He's off the radar so far, but I've got eyes on him."

Barton remained glued to the monitoring equipment, and T'Challa and Shuri gave him leave to be there, though the intelligence officers watched the foreigner in their midst with nervous eyes. But despite the wealth of international surveillance before him, Barton rarely took his own eyes off the signature of the quinjet over the Atlantic Ocean.

Jakarra shot T'Challa a grim look. "The council should be briefed before they arrive. They should know that the situation is likely to escalate soon, and the Avengers' presence here will be known to the Black Widow."

T'Challa managed not to sigh. He had promised to include his councilors in decisions to admit more foreigners to his soil...but this was an emergency. Barton's wife and three children were Zemo's targets, with no safe haven.

Then again, Rogers and Barton had been fully prepared to leave at once and meet Romanoff somewhere outside of Wakanda, to spirit the family to safety. Naturally, not as safe for them as Wakanda. Two people in a room can accomplish more. T'Challa hated politics.

"Convene the council for an emergency meeting," he told Jakarra. "Don't concern yourself, Agent Barton," he added as Barton looked up. "They are still nine hours out."

Reactions among T'Challa's council were...predictable. Shuri was delighted. Minister Jelani and Subira were cautiously approving of T'Challa's decision to give sanctuary to Barton's family, if less pleased to learn that the fugitive Black Widow was their pilot. W'Kabi and M'Shindi were less than pleased.

"My king," Abrihet, mother of the two Lagos victims, stood. "To shelter an innocent wife and children from Zemo is a good thing, but not to invite the foreign conflict between the Avengers. But the Black Widow's loyalties constantly change. She is untrustworthy."
Jakarra, to T'Challa's surprise, admitted reluctantly, "She already knows Barton is here. And despite being a fugitive, she has not been discovered." Shuri looked as surprise as T'Challa felt, but Jakarra shrugged. "She risked capture to rescue the wife and children. She'll be indebted to us if we take them."

"Are the favors of the Black Widow something we should be seeking?" someone muttered.

"If you want to speak, then speak," T'Challa said tightly.

W'Kabi raised his chin at the scowling Shuri. "This is the very invasion that Wakanda has struggled to prevent; Europeans and Americans swarming across our borders, using us as they please."

Shuri rolled her eyes. "Yes, an army of seven and three small children. If Wakanda can't maintain her sanctity against an invasion of this size, perhaps our pride is overgrown."

"That 'army of seven' destroyed an entire nation," said M'Shindi, one of W'Kabi's allies. "Sokovia remains nothing more than a ruined crater because of them."

Abrihet rose. "I support our king in granting sanctuary to an endangered family. White or not, a woman and three children have been forced from their home in terror by the same man who murdered our late king. We would dishonor the memory of T'Chaka to turn our backs and let Zemo continue his campaign." She didn't relinquish the floor, and T'Challa waited. "For the rest of the Avengers, it's different. They should not be allowed to use Wakanda as their base."

"They too were Zemo's targets," Shuri protested. "His first targets. If we turn our backs on them, we're also allowing Zemo to succeed."

"But they're not defenseless," said Abrihet. "We joined in the Sokovia Accords to honor our own people who died in the Avengers' conflict, and our king is now one of those who operates with the Accords' sanction. It's wrong to play both sides."

"I agree," said W'Kabi. "That is the Black Widow's way, not Wakanda's. We should declare ourselves, then hold to the path we've chosen."

Minister Subira said, "But it is for the king to decide what that path will be."

Even those who were less than pleased by the prospect of Natasha Romanoff visiting Wakanda nodded. Only a few seemed disgruntled by that knowledge. T'Challa said slowly, "I will permit Romanoff to escort the family here to safety. When they arrive, I will talk with her and with the other Avengers, and make my decision as to whether we can continue to shelter them."

Perhaps this was simply deferring the problem, and he should have decided in advance how to respond. Two people in a room could make decisions more easily, but faced with so many who would be impacted by the decision, it was far more difficult.

The Wakandan intelligence officials chased Clint out of their operations center only by giving him a datapad that tracked the quinjet's location - despite stealth mode. Clint stalked around the palace gardens tripping over things and fell off the treadmill in the gym because he could never seem to take his eyes off it.

The rest of the team seemed to be doing rotating shifts following Clint around. Steve was there a lot, while Wanda, Sam, and Scott hovered on the edges of Clint's peripheral vision, but they didn't say much to him.
Clint couldn't have said much to them if he wanted to. He let Dr. Kelile foist some food on him, but it could've been tree bark for all the attention he paid to it. He drifted in a hazy world where nothing was in focus except the red dot on a dark map.

Until finally, T'Challa came to see him. "They will land on the airstrip near the hospital. Come."

There were fewer people on the airstrip than Clint remembered from his own arrival in Wakanda; just Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris and T'Challa, and the rest of the team. Well, and two of T'Challa's bodyguards, who scowled when T'Challa motioned them back. He locked up every joint in his body watching the quinjet glide into view and come in for landing.

When the hatch opened, for a few long moments, there was just silence, and Clint's mind wandered through ridiculous but vivid possibilities - a decoy, poison, hostages... and then it was broken by a shriek of "Daddy?!"

Lila. Clint lurched drunkenly forward as a dark-haired blur came tearing down the gangway and would probably have pitched off the edge headfirst if he hadn't caught her, but he did, and he had his arms full of his daughter. "Daddy, Daddy, the bad men came, we remembered, we ran down the tunnel and we took Nate and Auntie Nat picked us up we remembered everything you said..."

Clint murmured nonsense into her hair and peered over the top of her to the figures that appeared on top of the gangway. Nat, ushering Laura - supporting her? - with Cooper in front of them carrying Nate.

Safe. Safe.

Laura'd been crying. Clint stumbled to his feet while keeping Lila under his arm and took a few lurching steps to the edge of the jet gangway, and Laura fell into his free arm. Nat took the baby from Cooper so he could push himself into the group.

"Clint..." Laura choked into his neck.

"'m sorry," he breathed. "'m sorry, 'm so sorry." Sorry I wasn't there, sorry I let this happen, sorry I got you into this, dunno what-all I'm supposed to be sorry, for, I'm just sorry..."

It felt like a long time before he could lift his head. Laura couldn't; she was crying too hard into his neck and trying too hard not to let the kids see her breaking down. Bless Nat, she called in reinforcements, and Clint was dimly aware of Wanda and Steve stepping carefully in to distract the kids. "Hey, remember Aunt Wanda?"

"Hello, dumpling!" Wanda said, and pulled Lila and Cooper to her. "We've been waiting for you."

Dr. Kelile joined them to ask, "Is anyone hurt?"

"Laura?" asked Nat.

"No," Laura croaked, shaking her head. "No, I'm fine."

"She took some glass in her arm," Nat told Dr. Kelile. "I cleaned it out and stitched it up, but it wouldn't hurt to look at it. The kids need clean clothes." Laura's breathing started to slow down from the near-hyperventilation of earlier, but she couldn't quite let go of Clint and slumped in his arms.

"It's okay," he murmured. "It's okay now."

"We went through the tunnel," said Cooper. "Just like we practiced, we went through the tunnel with
Nate and hid until we saw Auntie Nat."

"You were perfect," Nat confirmed. "You got it exactly right. You rescued your baby brother, and you were right where you were supposed to be when Mommy and I found you." Lila broke away from Wanda to wrap herself around Nat's legs. "It's okay now." She looked up from stroking Lila's dirty hair to the approaching T'Challa. "Thank you," she said, and her voice actually went a little rough. "Thank you. I'm sorry for intruding. I won't stay long now that they're safe."

Laura took a few more shaky breaths and straightened up on her own, if still clutching Clint's shirt. "Where are we?"

"You are in Wakanda, Mrs. Barton," said Dr. Kelile. "King T'Challa has granted sanctuary to your family."

Wanda stared at T'Challa, too wrung out to process it all, but Cooper gulped and asked, "'King?"

"Yes," said T'Challa, smiling at him. "I am king of this country."

Cooper just stared, but Lila broke the ice all together by attempting a curtsy - behind T'Challa, even one of the Dora Milaje had to cover her mouth to hide her grin. T'Challa didn't miss a beat, but bowed back to her.

"Come to the hospital," said Dr. Kelile, beckoning to them. "You're safe now."

"Can Auntie Nat come too?" Lila demanded, refusing to relinquish her grip on Nat's leg.

"Of course," said T'Challa without hesitating. Nat pried Lila from around her leg and scooped her up, shooting a wry, tired smile at him. Clint released Cooper so he could get a hand out and touch his baby son, just to make sure Nate was real and not a hallucination. The baby was sound asleep.

Nat coaxed Lila and Cooper to come with her and the nurses to wash up and be examined, and Clint saw Laura's storm coming. "Where the hell were you?!" she exploded, sobbing and pounding on his chest.

"I'm sorry," he choked out. What the hell else could he say? _I left you on another continent - fucking again - and didn't keep Zemo from finding his way to you and did shit-all to help you when the fuckers finally attacked._ "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She wound down before too long and collapsed against Clint's chest, sobbing furiously, not unlike Wanda had a few weeks before. Clint rocked her and fought back the tears stinging his own eyes. He had no business losing it now, not after he'd left her to fend for herself and the kids for all that time.

Steve and Scott wavered anxiously along the wall until Wanda and Sam firmly ushered all the bystanders out. They tiptoed back in along with a medic who wanted to look at Laura's arm - bandaged by Nat, but with dried blood caked on the torn sleeve of her shirt - and Steve started, all shamefaced, "I'm the one you should bl - "

Sam cut him off with an unintelligible growl of warning which made Wanda dissolve into giggles, and even Laura started laughing - albeit with a few tears still escaping. "You've been through an ordeal, but shown tremendous courage," said Dr. Damaris. "Your attackers foolishly believed you were helpless."

"I killed three people," Laura murmured, her eyes going glassy.
Clint helped her sit down. "You were defending yourself and your children," Dr. Damaris said firmly. "They would have shown no mercy."

To Clint's relief, Laura wiped her eyes and sighed, her nerves steadying again. "I know," she said quietly. "I know."

_Zemo's thugs weren't the first fuckers to underestimate you. Probably won't be the last._

---

Steve slipped out of the exam room to look in on the kids. Dr. Kelile had summoned a couple of nurses who obviously had experience with traumatized children, to keep them distracted and calm. When he and Wanda joined them, they were showing Lila and Cooper where Wakanda was on the map. Nathaniel was gurgling happily in a baby swing, and while Lila was entranced by what the Wakandans were saying, Cooper paused every few moments to check on his little brother.

Steve was starting to breathe more easily himself when Ayo, one of the Dora Milaje, slipped into the room. "Captain," she said softly.

Steve gave the kids a little wave of farewell to hide any problems, and hurried after her with Wanda and Natasha at his heels. They found T'Challa looking at a hologram in the conference room.

"Perhaps it means nothing, but Iron Man has changed course. He is now on the same heading as Romanoff's jet."

Princess Shuri hurried into the room, followed by Sam. "Is he capable of tracking your jets in stealth mode?"

"He didn't used to be," Natasha murmured. "But he's been hunting for us. Something could've changed."

"Perhaps you should call him," Ayo suggested to the king.

T'Challa shook his head. "If Stark managed to track them here, he already knows that I've deceived him - if he doesn't already. Better to address it face-to-face, if it comes to that."

"Sorry," said Natasha.

"I knew the risks," T'Challa told him.

"How far away is he?" asked Steve. "We could go. The group of us, if Nat'll give us a lift. He'd probably be more likely to follow us. Or..." he put his hand on the phone in his pocket.

T'Challa watched the blip indicating Iron Man for several moments. Shuri folded her arms. "If he knows, then he will want a word with you. Better to have it here, at the seat of your power."

"Bring Barton's wife and children when he arrives. He won't become aggressive if they're there," suggested one of the Dora Milaje.

T'Challa scowled. "I will not use human shields, Aneka." He held up a hand to forestall another rush of apologies from Steve. "I made my choice and knew the risks. One of the greatest risks was always that Stark would discover us."

Steve took a deep breath and tried not to launch into warnings or pleas on how to react. This was T'Challa's realm and his decision to make on how to react. "What happens now?"

"If Stark trespasses - and he will - he'll be detained. Then we'll talk." T'Challa raised his chin at the
dismay. Steve knew he was failing to hide. "I warned Stark and even those people who are allies in these past days; I'm an Avenger now, but also a king, and the sovereignty and safety of Wakanda will always be my first priority. Our borders are not open, and anyone who crosses them without permission is deemed an intruder."

"He's in his suit," Steve said.

"What do Americans like to say? Captain Obvious?" T'Challa grinned, and Steve had to laugh, if a little weakly. "I didn't say we'd shoot him down and execute him. I said we'd detain him. And we've been aware of Iron Man's capabilities for a long time."

Steve was very aware that although T'Challa was trying to be reassuring, there was a lot that the king of Wakanda was very deliberately not telling him. *I'm not exactly entitled to state secrets.* He had no real choice but to trust T'Challa - and felt like an ass for not trusting him more. The man had taken in the whole fugitive team when half the planet wanted them dead or at least locked up, devoted resources to not just sheltering but actually treating Bucky, and done it all despite some very justified bad feelings among his people. Now he'd let Nat bring Clint's family to Wakanda for safety, and as a result, cover was blown to Tony, but he still hadn't backed down.

*I may not like control being out of my hands, but I owe it to him to let him make the calls. Even where Tony's concerned.* Steve owed it to T'Challa to trust him.

So he bit his tongue when T'Challa quietly informed the rest of the team that Iron Man was on his way. Clint betrayed alarm for a few beats until he managed to hide it again so Laura and the kids wouldn't notice, while Wanda stepped closer to all of them. Scott and Sam scowled, and didn't seemed interested in joining the group that would wait to meet Tony. Nat gently extracted herself from Lila and stood up. "I'll come with you, if that's all right. He may be angrier at me."

"I really doubt that, Nat," said Steve quietly.

T'Challa stopped as soon as they were out of the room and turned around, staring at Steve and Natasha. "I'm aware that you will both have many things you wish to say to Stark. But if you accompany me, you will not speak unless I permit it."

Steve swallowed hard and nodded. "I understand." Nat quietly agreed as well, so T'Challa nodded his permission, and let them follow him to the airfield.

There were only three Dora Milaje visible flanking T'Challa - no one else at all. But Steve knew that the king had something up his sleeve.

His heart pounded so hard he would've thought it was audible as Iron Man rocketed down out of the clouds and came to his usual dramatic landing on the runway before them. His helmet folded itself back off his face, and he looked all of them up and down before focusing on T'Challa with hot, dark eyes. "Your highness."

"Mr. Stark," said T'Challa calmly. "You must be aware that you are trespassing here and crossing my borders illegally."

"Frankly, your highness, I don't give a damn," Tony retorted. Steve managed not to visibly wince. Tony glared at Nat. "The Bartons. Where are they?"

"They're safe," said T'Challa. "They have the amnesty of Wakanda."

Tony took a moment to digest that, making Steve wonder if he'd believed up to now that Laura and the kids were dead. Then, as Steve expected but inwardly feared, Tony's dark eyes met his own. He
stared at Steve for a long time before growling out, "Where is he?"

No need to wonder who "he" was.

Again, Steve clenched his jaw to resist the impulse to speak, and let T'Challa answer for him. "He's also safe."

"I wasn't asking about his health. I asked where."

Tony took a step forward, radiating menace, and Steve felt Nat catch his elbow to keep him from trying to get in front of T'Challa. T'Challa stood his ground, while the Dora Milaje each advanced a step. It was like a dance.

"You've got thirty seconds to tell me where he is, where the rest of Rogers' team is," Tony said. "And I want to see the Bartons."

T'Challa's response was almost casual. "You're in no position to demand anything, Stark, and you have thirty seconds to surrender of your own free will before I'm forced to take you into custody."

"Yeah, no, don't think so." This time Steve did wince as Tony's helmet closed up again, but before he could even bring his repulsors to bear, there was a tremendous **BUZZ** in the air, and Iron Man reacted as if he'd received a massive electric shock. The whole suit vibrated, arms and legs outstretched, and Tony shouted. Steve couldn't help the way he lurched forward, but Nat held onto his arm, and on his other side, one of the Dora Milaje grabbed him too.

The light of the arc reactor died, and Tony's voice, muffled now without the suit's speakers, croaked, "What the **hell**..." then he fell forward and landed facedown with a dull thud.

The Dora Milaje released Steve and walked up to either side of Iron Man, hoisting him up. Tony obviously was unharmed; Steve could hear him exclaiming, "Okay, you've got a few special tricks - aw, come on, really?! Put me down!" as they carted him off.

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Tony Stark and the fugitive Avengers are forced back together with a LOT of things they want to say to each other, and poor T'Challa with some difficult decisions to make.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction, mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

Minister M'Shindi: A tribal leader on T'Challa's council, favors isolationist policies and opposes allowing Avengers into Wakanda.
Minister Subira: Wakanda's senior minister of domestic and international diplomacy, former chieftainess of a Wakandan tribe closely allied with T'Chaka's government. Mid-80s, oldest councilor to the Wakandan throne. Widowed, mother of her tribe's current chieftainess.

Minister Jelani: Another minister of diplomacy, son of a tribal chief who sometimes opposed T'Chaka's policies. T'Challa's age (40ish), married with 9 children.

Minister Abrihet: Chieftainess of a minor tribe who serves on Wakanda's royal council, mid-60's, whose young adult children advocated for the Lagos outreach program only to be killed by the bomb at the beginning of Civil War.
Twelve

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark and the fugitive Avengers are forced back together with a LOT of things they want to say to each other, and poor T'Challa is stuck with some difficult decisions to make.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: The feedback for the last chapter was incredible! Thank you all so much and please keep it coming!

Unreliable Narrator Warning: Our heroes' tempers are running very hot in this chapter, so let me be clear - nothing anybody says to each other (or thinks about each other) should be taken as entirely true. It's been less than two weeks since Leipzig and Siberia, and our heroes are all still on an emotional roller coaster, so there's a lot of grievance-airing and finger-pointing going on in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

Tony was seething. Bad enough that Romanoff had left him thinking for almost a full day that Clint's wife and kids were butchered. Insult to injury was tracking her jet only to find her landing in Wakanda, a direction given to her by Clint.

So all this time, after all this searching, Rogers and his cohorts had been hiding behind T'Challa's skirts. And as for T'Challa, Tony didn't even want to get started - well, okay, he did.

Bastard had stood there in Vienna and acted all concerned and wounded, fucking implying that Tony might have murdered Rogers and Barnes, put on a total act about joining the Avengers and being pro-Accords. And all that time, all that fucking time, he'd been hiding the entire crew here.

And adding injury to insult to injury (which one was he on again?), the suit was completely zapped and unresponsive, leaving Tony stuck while T'Challa's guards pried him out of the thing like a sardine - and they seemed to be laughing at him.

"That's mine," Tony snapped when a couple of Wakandan technicians started making to carry the suit away.

Leaning against the wall of the garage/utility bay/whatever room where they'd brought him, T'Challa yawned. "Apparently I have to repeat myself: you have no power here, Stark, and you're trespassing. If my people want to examine the vehicle that you used to breach our borders, they're free to do so."
Tony growled and moved towards one of them, only to have two of T'Challa's bodyguards clamp their hands down on his shoulders. He rounded on T'Challa, trying (and failing) to shake the guards off. "And you're violating the Accords six ways from Sunday. I oughtta arrest your ass right now."

"With what? The force of your temper? Even if you could, I could also report you for your actions in Siberia. You have no business being angry at me for violating the Accords, Stark. You also disregard them whenever it's convenient." T'Challa smirked at another woman - maybe his head bodyguard - who'd come to join him. "Now are you finished posturing so that we can have a productive conversation?"

"Where. Is. Barnes?"

T'Challa dropped the casual boredom act. "Safe."

"Yeah. Sure. He's safe, right up until Hydra comes to reclaim their favorite hit man, and the first one whose family will get it is you," Tony hissed. He paced away, shaking off the guards (but bitterly aware that if they'd wanted to hang onto him, they probably could've done it.) "I can't believe I fell for your lines! Just another rich warlord playing every side of the game he can, pitting us all against each other."

The woman next to T'Challa snorted. "And Tony Stark knows all about that perspective."

"You may think you're in control now, but it's not gonna last. You can't hold me forever," Tony pointed out. "And it's gonna come out eventually that you're harboring Rogers and Barnes and all the rest of those fugitives, and what then? You're on the carpet for breaching the treaty that you signed, supposedly in good faith. And that's if you're lucky and Barnes and Rogers don't turn on you first."

Damn T'Challa for not looking impressed. "Your judgment is askew, Stark. Perhaps you've been avenging too long, because your presence here is personal, not motivated by any higher concern for the public good or safety."

"Oh, and your motives are pure as driven snow?" Tony shot back. At that extremely inopportune moment, Rogers, Romanoff, and Wilson walked in. "Oh, look who it is, the rebels without a cause."

Wilson folded his arms and turned from Tony to T'Challa. "Sorry to interrupt, your highness, I just wanted to know how Rhodes is."

T'Challa looked at Tony and raised his eyebrows. Tony glared, but everyone just...waited. *Fuck it.* "He's healing," he said tightly. "In good spirits for physical therapy. Helen Cho's working on some new regeneration therapies for nerve cell tissues. It's all theory at the moment, because it'd need vibranium cells." He tilted his head snidely towards T'Challa. "Guess there's not much chance of that now."

"On the contrary," T'Challa replied. "Trade of vibranium for medical purposes was always the channel most freely opened by Wakanda for my father and his father, and I've no plan to change that policy."

Tony shook his head. "Yeah, I guess that's just another way for a king to play god."

The woman at T'Challa's side let out a bark of laughter. "To hear Tony Stark accuse any man of 'playing god' is amazing. How quickly you forget your own history, merchant of death!"

"Shuri!" T'Challa snapped, catching her arm.
Tony sketched the most mocking bow he could manage (what he wouldn't have given for a feathered hat to doff). "Oh, terribly sorry, your majesty, I don't believe we've had the pleasure. Gonna introduce me before sending me to the guillotine?"

"I'm Shuri, daughter of T'Chaka, and you, Tony Stark, are desperately dodging the point," she said. "How is it that whatever shift in policy occurs, Tony Stark declares himself the arbiter of what is right? Once you were a weapons trader who cared nothing for whose hands your creations ended up in -"

"That's not true!" Tony shot back.

"No? Was there another man's name on the missiles that rained down on Sarajevo in 1992? On Afghanistan and Iraq and Libya from 2002 through 2007? Do you not remember the great irony where Russia attempted to disarm the Chechnyans and Albanians, only to discover that they were shooting the exact same make and model of rocket-propelled grenades at each other in 1997? And even now, the surest sign that an aggressor is affiliated with the Ten Rings is that the name of Stark is printed on its bombs."

"That. Wasn't. Me."

Wilson apparently decided concern for Rhodey didn't go very far, and busted out with scornful laughter. "You hear this guy? Everybody in the goddamn world is accountable for their actions except him. He sells weapons to the whole goddamn world right until one of 'em's pointed in his face, then he says he's outta the business...except he's making Iron Man and taking over world peace. Oh, and guess who the enforcer's gonna be? Oh, sorry, your highness, I know you're supposed to be running this show, but cut me some slack. If I have to keep listening to this jackass going all bleeding heart and playing the victim everytime someone calls him out on his bullshit, I might honestly vomit, and I'd hate to ruin your floors when I'm a guest."

T'Challa looked irritated, but Shuri grinned. "Our floors thank you." She nudged her brother. "There's no reason why one of Stark's own victims can't point out his utter hypocrisy."

"Okay, hang on, Wilson is not a 'victim,'" Tony scoffed.

Shuri started to fire back, but Wilson held up a hand, "No, no, he's right for once; that word doesn't really apply to me. Apart from being kicked out of a job as a sop to somebody's guilty conscience, then declared an outlaw because somebody thought we should all just fall into line behind him and fuck whether or not Bucky Barnes was actually innocent in that bombing..." Wilson caught himself and winced, looking at T'Challa and his sister. "Sorry."

Tony's heart and mind raced. "You're no cleaner than me, Wilson, not on the Accords. You were so busy trying to stick it to the man, it took you ten seconds to make up your mind, never mind actually bothering to read the damn things."

"I'd already had my fill of getting deployed like a weapon, Stark. That's exactly what the Accords decided we were, and I was - I thought - a fucking American citizen with a few basic rights to my name. Granted, less than you, what with not being a billionaire, no pockets full of lobbyists and lawyers, and not white, but hey, I could count on a few basics." Wilson advanced on Tony, stopped only by T'Challa stepping between them. "Notice I even bother to give a shit about people whether they chose your side or not. You even bother to ask about Wanda?"

Tony's stomach lurched. The last time he'd seen her had been in that cell on the Raft. She hadn't looked too good. "Where is she?"
"Safe," drawled Shuri. "But not at all recovered. Speaking of people who have looked very closely at your handiwork. I didn't expect to admire her as much as I do. She's a very resilient girl, for one who's suffered so deeply at such a young age. And unlike you, I have seen her admit to the choices she made, and the harm that it caused."

For some weird reason, Tony's eyes were drawn to Rogers, who was very conspicuously (and weirdly) silent through the whole exchange. "I've never denied anything," Tony said tightly.

Why the fuck did he have the feeling that Rogers wanted to contradict that?

"This was never my life."

"We dropped a building on Charlie Spencer while we were busy kicking ass."

"I didn't know about the Ten Rings or any of the rest until Afghanistan," his mouth blurted without his permission.

Wilson huffed and turned away, and Shuri feigned incredulity. "And you think that absolves you? Did you not invent every single one of those weapons?" Tony glared at her, but couldn't come up with an answer. "You have quite a reputation, Tony Stark. What you were doing after the death of your father up until your capture by the Ten Rings is well-known. You loved to build and create. But you had no concern for how your weapons were used, and you were content to let Obediah Stane sell them as he saw fit, never questioning, never looking or caring while you enjoyed the profits and parties. Only when you found yourself on the wrong end of those weapons did you become concerned about the blood being shed."

"And the next time he grew a conscience, he decided he should be the judge of how the Avengers were put in check, never mind that we needed to 'put in check' because of Ultron, which he invented without any input from Cap or anybody else," finished Wilson. "And if we didn't obey, we got locked up. Ohh, but he wanted Cap to trust him. He wanted Cap to fall into line and sign, because Tony fucking Stark knows best!"

Shuri shook her head in mock-dismay. "Indeed. I do now know what the world should fear more, Tony Stark: your indifference or your good intentions."

Tony's jaw was clenched so tight, he was surprised his teeth didn't break. "Enough, Shuri," said T'Challa. He gestured to the Dora Milaje, who came up to flank Tony. "I have work to do and can't spend all day addressing grievances. You will be detained for the time being, while my councilors and I determine what's to be done with you."

"If you do want to report me for violating the Accords while giving shelter to your own comrades, in the end, I can't stop you. But I hope you'll remember to report yourself."

Stark went without a fuss, apart from poisonous looks back at Rogers, Wilson, and Romanoff. T'Challa got the impression that Romanoff was deliberately keeping silent and inconspicuous for the sake of observing everyone else. Rogers, on the other hand, looked as if he wanted to intervene on Stark's behalf, but feared to do it.

T'Challa didn't like the implications of what might be leading such an assertive man to hold back.

The Avengers needed little prompting to rejoin their friends, and T'Challa eyed his sister, who was frowning to herself. "You don't approve?"

"Of detaining Stark? Oh no, I approve entirely of that, ideally until he develops some manners and understands who's boss."
"You and I and several generations of our descendants would be dead before that happened," T'Challa muttered. Then he sighed. "And that's what worries me."

"And me," Shuri agreed. "We can't hold Stark forever, and for him to declare us an enemy will bring about just the kind of complications that opponents of international outreach feared. We can protect our borders and our dependents, but that's not a situation any of our people want to see."

"Exactly. I want to pursue other allies; it will strengthen our position in international commerce and policy. If we're deemed a rogue nation, rather than merely a small, isolated one, others will be wary of engaging with us," said T'Challa. "It'll also distract from the central issues in the trial of Zemo and discredit me." He caught his sister's sly smile. "And you have a strategy in mind already. Out with it."

Shuri leaned against the wall. "I'm thinking of the saying credited first to Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great: 'divide and conquer.'"

"We're not trying to conquer, and I don't want to divide."

"Yes, I know that." Shuri rolled her eyes. "I was going to say we should do the opposite."

"Unite and...what, surrender?"

That got him a thump. "In that context - and in Zemo's accursed soul - the word conquer would be more like destroy. It held no victory for Zemo, but he didn't care."

T'Challa could see where she was going. "So to defeat Zemo and secure our people's interests, it's not conquest we should be seeking. It's alliance."

Shuri nodded. "With Rogers and Stark. Apart from an apocalypse, there's only one way that would be tolerable to both."

"If they reconcile with each other." T'Challa sighed heavily. "So now I must mediate between two white Americans and their assorted followers, all consumed by righteous wrath."

His sister was utterly without sympathy. "And you must not be seen to be doing it, because they're both stubborn enough to resent outside interference. Diplomacy at every turn. That's why you're the king."

T'Challa pointed at her. "Don't smirk too much, or I'll marry you off to one of them." He picked up a pad to review the list his guards transmitted of the personal effects they'd confiscated from Stark. There were a number of problematic items - multiple types of tracking and communications devices with different strengths, frequencies, and disguises, all of which would have to be carefully disabled or deceived. But what caught his eye was a simple flip phone, so woefully out of date (and fashion) that a man like Stark should have shunned it, programmed with only a single number.

T'Challa smiled.

"So Stark's being sent to his room to think about what he's done?" snorted Scott when Sam relayed the afternoon's events to the team. "Betcha the food'll be better than what they gave us."

Wanda didn't react much, though Clint and Sam grinned. She was staring absently out the window, possibly unaware of the worried eyes of the doctors. Nat's eyes were on Steve. He tried to make himself smile at her. "How've you been?"
"Can't complain," she said lightly. "You?"

"I can't complain either."

He knew what she wanted to ask, from the way her eyes kept darting around, obviously searching for one conspicuously absent member of Steve's faction. He wanted to tell her, but..."I can't. Not even Nat. Not without T'Challa's permission, after everything he's risked. He let her come here to keep Laura and Clint's kids safe."

It was strange that Nat didn't ask outright. But she didn't, and Steve didn't volunteer anything. It was several hours before he could slip away to the secure wing to visit Bucky's chamber.

*Hey, Buck. Bit of excitement around here today. Tony followed Nat when she brought Clint's wife and kids to Wakanda. I'm a little worried about how easily T'Challa's people took Iron Man down. It must've been those fields they talk about that vibranium can generate. Everyone is pretty tense. T'Challa detained Tony, and I'm really not sure how that's going to play out. Let alone if I've got any right to say anything."

...I hate feeling like this, Buck. Completely helpless and out of control. I've always been so sure of what's the right thing to do. It used to be fighting for something...what are we supposed to fight for now? And who are we supposed to fight?

With his palm on the glass next to Bucky's head, Steve shut his eyes - and something buzzed in his pocket. Steve jumped and fished it out; it was the burner phone. How could...but Tony was here. Apprehensively, he flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hey, what's a guy gotta do to get a mint on his pillow in this place?"

"Tony?!"

"Were you expecting Santa Claus? You've gotten senile in your old age; you sent me this shitty, outdated flip phone and said to call you."

Steve stood up, only to realize he had no idea where Tony was being held. "I'll ask the king if I can come see you."

"Steve Rogers, ask the lawful authorities for permission to do something? Did I hit your head harder than I thought in Siberia?"

Funny how Tony could mention Siberia outright, and yet be so flippant about it that Steve found himself smiling. "Yeah, well, you should've been careful what you wished for. But I sent you the phone because I didn't think there was much chance of being on the same continent for awhile. We might as well talk face-to-face. Hang on."

One of the palace guards intercepted Steve, which was a little embarrassing, though it stood to reason that Tony and his phone were being monitored. But it turned out T'Challa had already granted permission for Steve to visit Tony, and the guards flew him to a secure compound on the outskirts of the city. It was a collection of tiny stone huts around a big central building, each one self-contained.

To Steve's intense relief, Tony's cell, while not a luxurious guest suite, was in no way lacking in basic necessities or a few comforts.

"There he is, Captain Wakanda!" Tony sang from atop a chair as Steve came in.

If Tony wanted to start off with a joke and pretend they hadn't been tearing each other apart the last
time they were together unprotected, Steve supposed it might break the ice. "Sorry, I forgot my tiara and sash."

_Something_ glinted in Tony's eyes despite the casual way he flopped down into the chair and put his feet up on the small, wooden table. "No shield?"

Steve shook his head and looked awkwardly around the room. It was a good deal bigger than the cells in the Raft or anywhere else that he'd seen prisoners - Hulk cage on the Helicarrier excepted. The windows were high up on the stone walls and so narrow that only Scott – in his suit - could possibly have gotten himself through them. But they let in natural light and air, and the bed and furnishings were clean and serviceable. There was a little bathroom with a toilet, shower, and sink.

"I was glad to hear Rhodey's doing all right."

Tony shrugged. "He never lets stuff get to him for long; lot of practice, being around me. He wrangled me into sticking around when his nephews came to visit last week. There's some motion in his feet, so for forty-five minutes, it was all, 'I got toes, I got toes!' and little kid giggles. I thought I'd have a psychotic episode."

Steve laughed at the mental image, but like so many, it gave him a pang. Rhodey had talked about bringing his nephews to visit the compound. They'd played host out on the grounds now and then to groups of schoolchildren. Those had been good days. Staff and Avengers' families got the extra perk of private guided tours to the non-classified indoor facilities. Rhodey had always said those were good activities; they'd ensure the public trusted the Avengers.

_Just not enough. The Accords were proof of that._

Or maybe Steve was the one being unfair. He put his faith in people, not governments... but why should he demand that a world of strangers put their faith in him, especially after foul-ups like Lagos had cost so many lives?

"_Rogers._"

_Here it comes._ Steve turned and looked Tony dead in the eyes and waited.

Tony dropped all pretense of cautious small talk. "_I. Of all people. I've got a right to know where he is._"

Steve took a long, deep breath. "_No. Of all people, you don't._" That blaze of rage was back in Tony's eyes, the same as Steve had seen in Siberia. But it didn't scare Steve the way that it had then, because this time, Bucky was out of Tony's reach. "_I know you're angry about your parents - _"

"_ - You think?!_" Tony snarled, but Steve went on.

"But it wasn't Bucky Barnes. When Hydra has him under their control, Bucky doesn't exist." No, it wasn't that simple. Otherwise there would've been nothing to remember Steve, when Steve finally did start to get through. "The man you've met isn't the man who killed your parents."

"Okay." Tony crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair. "Let's suppose you're really right, and Barnes really does have a split personality just like Bruce. Okay, for the moment, I'll run with that. Except instead of the Hulk, who can fucking figure out who's the enemy and who's a friend, we've got the deadliest assassin in known history, ready and available for anybody who wants to use him. You done any research into what your BFF's been up to while you were in the ice?"

Steve almost looked away. "Yes," he muttered.
Tony got a little quieter, as if he was trying to show empathy. "Then you've got some idea of how many people are dead because of him."

"It's not because of him - "

"– your denial won't change anything! I get it, Rogers, I fucking get it: he's all you've got left of the good old days, but he's not the guy you knew, and he's slaughtered over a hundred people - "

Steve shoved the table aside and grabbed Tony's arms. "You are the one in denial, Tony! You had access to all that data too, and since Siberia, you've had time to at least look at it. You know what they did to him to turn him into the Winter Soldier, and you're not half the genius everyone thinks if you believe anybody could have stood up to that!"

"Bullshit - "

"Captain." Princess Shuri appeared in the doorway. Steve released Tony and backed off. She smiled at him, then gave Tony a significantly less warm nod, as if to make clear that she was friendly to Steve and not to Tony. "Mr. Stark. A few of King T'Challa's other guests ask for the chance to talk with you. Come with me."

No less than six guards waited outside to escort Steve and Tony to the main building. Steve wasn't sure whether it was a good sign or not that these conversations were going to happen away from the palace in an even more secure location with even more guards than earlier.

It was a hostile group who awaited Tony and Steve; King T'Challa must have given permission for the rest of Steve's team to visit, though he must've also realized this visit wasn't going to be friendly. Steve saw the smirk on Princess Shuri's face and managed not to cringe.

Tony didn't pay much attention to anyone; he just scanned the group, and when he didn't find any sign of Bucky, he turned to Steve with a scowl. "Seriously? The guy doesn't even have the balls to come look me in the eye with an armed escort?"

"Gee, after what you did to him last time, can't imagine why he wouldn't be interested in a heart-to-heart," Sam retorted.

"Oh, yeah, like the Winter fucking Soldier has his feelings hurt when his victims' family want a little accountability."

Steve sighed to himself as Sam surged forward. "Oh, don't you even talk about accountability, Stark! We all know how goddamn much your word is worth, and if Barnes doesn't want to see you, he's got a damn good reason – remember? All the promises you made while I was behind bars, you'd go alone and as a friend. Rogers is gonna need all the help he can get, oh, yeah, you'd changed your mind, you were gonna help 'em, off the record. You remember? I remember! And what'd I find when we got out of the Raft: both of those guys you promised to help had had their faces bashed in and were down to one less arm!"

Tony snarled and shoved away from the guards, though he didn't advance on Sam. "Gee, so sorry I lost my shit after witnessing my parents' murder in technicolor - "

"Yeah, yeah, just like you lost your shit and shot me back in Leipzig!" Sam yanked open his shirt, displaying the stains and burn blisters on his chest that still hadn't fully healed. "Oh, wait, what'd I do? Right – nothing. Just tried to save Rhodey's ass from a shot I didn't even fire, but no, no, poor Stark's not responsible, he lost his shit – again. Then he's off to Siberia, promising, promising, promising me he's gonna make it right after figuring out he fucked up and hunted down the wrong
bomber – again! Oh, and how did all this bullshit start? Tony fucking Stark wanting to make it right after he built the terminators that blew Sokovia off the map. Stand back everyone, Tony fucking Stark's got it under control, he's gonna fix it, all we gotta do is get out of the way, and if we don't, he'll blow us all out of the way, because NOTHING matters more than your fucking feelings!

Clint whistled appreciation and applauded. At his side, Wanda spoke up. "And he pretends now that he's the soul of reason, but the truth is that all he wants is to be sure of where Bucky is, then scheme and promise his way out of here so that he can return and drag him back to the US to be executed. Even now, he's lying to get what he wants, and he doesn't care whether Bucky is innocent or not."

"He's. Not. Innocent." Tony glared past Wanda at Natasha. "So even you're gonna hide him now?"

"I'm not hiding him," she said, sounding bored. "I don't have any idea where he is; I didn't even know Steve and Clint were here until we made contact after the Iowa attack."

"Bullshit. Lying comes as naturally to you as breathing, and you're always two steps ahead of the rest."

"Notice how he's forgotten all about Laura and the kids," sneered Clint.

Tony glowered for a second, but then dropped his eyes before looking at Clint. "Are they okay?"

Clint just stared back, until Steve's instinct to let him decide what to reveal about his family failed in the face of his scruples. Tony hadn't hesitated to tell them about Rhodey. So Steve spoke up. "Yeah. They're safe."

Tony glanced at Steve and deflated a little. "Good."

Clint, on the other hand, glared at Steve. "Don't tell him anything else. My family's not his business."

Steve nodded mutely, conceding the issue. Sam and Nat frowned at him.

"It's funny," said Wanda suddenly. "You were cruelest of all to Steve, but he's the one who wants to think the best of you." Steve blinked, and Tony rolled his eyes. "You're not only after revenge on Bucky. You want revenge on Steve. On all of us."

Tony pointed at her. "Okay, Lizzie Proctor, let's get one thing straight; you of all people don't have any business looking down on me - "

"YOU CALLED ME A WEAPON!" Wanda exploded, and lunged at him. "You told them I was a weapon and tied me up so I couldn't even move! YOU MADE THE COLLAR!"

"Shit!" Sam and Clint forgot their pique at Tony and grabbed her, but she swung around and shoved them away.

"Get off me! Get OFF! I'm not going to use my powers! I DON'T NEED MY POWER, LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Okay, okay, Wanda, easy, I'm sorry, sorry, we overreacted!" Sam insisted, backing off and raising his hands.

Her frenzy had gotten through to Tony where words had failed, and his hands were up too. "Look, Wanda, I turned over the restraint system before you ever left the compound! It was all part of - "

" – What?!" Steve blurted.
Wanda pointed at Tony, teeth bared, eyes wild and wet as she looked at Steve. "See? You were right! He was planning to lock me up all along if I didn't give in to the Accords!"

"Tony," Steve growled. "When did you make that collar?"

"Fuck you, Rogers, I don't answer to any of you."

"Yeah, and neither did the Raft's guards!" Clint shouted.

Tony froze. "What?"

He looked at Wanda, and deflated even as she lunged toward him again and the Wakandan guards grabbed for her. "I'm NOT gonna use my power!" she shrieked at them, then wrenched away and slapped Tony across the face.

The whole scene was surreal, and once again, T'Challa walked in on it. "What's going on?!" Nobody had the chance to answer him, and the whole mess really spoke for itself.

"You never even talked to me!" Wanda hissed, shoving Tony. He'd dropped all efforts at deflection, his eyes darting from her to the rest of the team. Steve could see him putting it all together. "You never told me why, never said how long, you didn't care – now you want to punish Steve for not talking to you, but you never even talked to ME!" She slapped him again.

Tony caught her shoulders and wouldn't let go. "Wanda. Wanda, what happened? I told Ross not to hurt any of you - "

Clint burst into derisive laughter. "Well, somebody give Stark a gold star! He told 'em to be nice when they put the girl in a straightjacket!"

"Shut UP, Barton!" Tony snapped. "Wanda, come on. If they hurt you, I'll have their heads. Talk to me, tell me, it's okay - "

" – it's NOT okay!" Wanda shouted and pounded on his chest. It reminded Steve of Laura Barton. Maybe it reminded Clint too, because he lost his sneer and just watched. Even Nat had dropped her affected pose, and watched the exchange with a clenched jaw, her arms tight around herself as if she was cold.

"I know," Tony blurted. "Shit, I don't – I know, I know, it's not okay. Goddamn it…Wanda, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I never would've – dammit. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Son of a bitch, I'll kill him, I'm sorry. I swear." Wanda wound down the way she had before, and this time, Tony let her go. Steve was unsurprised to see her retreat to Clint, who put an arm around her while she buried her face in her hands, breathing raggedly.

Tony stared at her for a long time, then turned his gaze to Steve, then Sam, Clint, and Scott. "I didn't know. Who else? What'd they do?"

They all looked at each other. Sam sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Not the rest of us. Just her. They messed with her head. No evidence for the cameras."

"So they could call me a liar," Wanda croaked.

"Fuck." Tony squeezed his eyes shut and turned away. "Guys, I…I had no idea."

"You think that makes it okay?" asked Sam coldly.
Tony stared at him, then at Wanda, who was calming down and wiping her eyes. "No. I know it doesn't. Look, whatever the bastards did, I can get you -"

"I don't want anything else from you," Wanda hissed. She smacked Sam's hand off her shoulder, but no longer looked ready to take her fingernails to Tony's face. "Everything you've ever done for any of us comes with strings. The Avengers compound – only if we agree to the Accords, otherwise we're prisoners. Your tech – and your collar in case we step out of line. I'm tired of your help, Stark."

"Miss Maximoff has sanctuary in Wakanda," said T'Challa.

Tony scowled at him. "Oh, and you're the very model of generosity who's so much different from me. How long's it gonna last? And then what's the plan, your highness? Forming your own personal Avengers?"

T'Challa scoffed, but Shuri remarked, "That's an excellent idea. We'll add ears to all your suits." She pointed at each of them in turn. "Iron Panther, Captain Panther, Scarlet Panther, Panther Widow," she tilted her head at Scott for a moment before concluding, "Mini-Panther." Scott laughed, and she eyed Clint and Sam, then shrugged. "Panther bait?"

"Hey!" Clint and Sam chorused, but even T'Challa was grinning.

"It's your fault for being birds," Shuri informed them. She folded her arms and returned her attention to Tony, dropping the good humor. "As for how long Mr. Stark will be a guest of Wakanda, that depends on whether he's a danger to any of our guests."

T'Challa nodded. "You've just heard the harm that Miss Maximoff was exposed to, by the very men tasked with enforcing the Accords."

Tony's hackles went back down, and he sighed. Natasha turned to T'Challa. "As dangerous as Barnes is, I think you and your people know the risks. So I'll keep silent on his presence in Wakanda – and the others'," she added. She looked at Tony. "Stark, I didn't know they were here until Clint told me yesterday. King T'Challa didn't have to shelter anyone, but he's taken a tremendous risk to get them away from Zemo or anybody else who might be gunning for Barnes. The result's the same: they're not unchecked anymore. If this is really about accountability and not your wounded pride, you should be able to accept it."

Tony eyed her. "You really think that's T'Challa's only agenda?"

Nat stared him down. "I think his agenda's no more suspect than any of ours. Hell, maybe less, since he doesn't have half the grievances we all do. I'll trust him that far."

Tony paced away. "Yeah, trust him, never mind that he's got a whole agenda that he never told anybody about."

"Oh my God, Stark, everytime I think I've seen the upper limit of your hypocrisy," Clint breathed.

"I freaked up, Barton!" Tony snapped, rounding on him. "That what you want to hear?! I. Fucked. Up. You were right; you were right about Ultron, I fucked up, and it cost eight thousand lives, including Zemo's family, and by extension, his father's!" He gestured to T'Challa. "What you call hypocrisy, I call learning from my fucking mistakes!"

"Only as long as it suits you," Sam retorted. "And only as long as you get to dictate how all of us learn from your mistakes."
"Fuck you, Wilson."

"Enough," said T'Challa, stepping between them. "This is accomplishing nothing. Miss Romanoff, I will take you at your word that you will keep silent about the presence of the Avengers here - and their families." She nodded. "However, there are other secrets in Wakanda that we prefer to keep from the outside world, even as we try to build stronger international ties. I will speak with you before you leave."

"Your highness, I'm in your debt. The Barton family are the only family I have," she told him. "No one outside the people in this room will ever hear from me that I set foot in Wakanda, let alone who I met or what I saw."

Princess Shuri smiled and looked at her brother. T'Challa studied Natasha for several beats. "Then we have an understanding. I still wish to talk in private before you leave, but for now, perhaps it will ease the Bartons' minds if you join them for a little while. They'll be guests in the palace until we can find a comfortable place for them."

"Thank you. C'mon, Clint," she said, tugging Clint's elbow. "A day in the hospital won't have been enough to calm them down." Sam and Scott trailed after her, and after a long look at Tony, Steve went with them as well.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: T'Challa tries to negotiate peace, but neither Tony nor the other Avengers are letting go of their grievances, and those grievances draw Wakanda further into their conflict!

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Summary

T'Challa tries to negotiate peace, but neither Tony nor the other Avengers are letting go of their grievances, and those grievances draw Wakanda further into their conflict.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Wow, the feedback for this latest chapter was beyond compare! Thank you all for the great civil discussions (especially those who, despite disagreements, kept it civil. If you noticed some reviews deleted, those were the ones who engaged in name calling and threats. Not cool. Not on my comment boards!)

**Canon Note:** Based on my comic research, while the Black Panther himself is the only one who uses the heart-shaped herb, all Wakandans benefit physically and mentally from the presence of vibranium in their environment. This is being noticed by the Avengers in their midst. This fic, like my fic Consequences, merges the MCU and X-Men Movieverse, so mutants are included under the scope of the Accords just as they were in the comics. We won't see as many mutants as we did in Consequences, but they will be here.

**Trigger Warning:** This chapter contains some very angry discussion about the Sokovia Accords including comparing them to the precursors to the Holocaust. Please keep that in mind if that kind of subject upsets you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Thirteen**

The shuttle that had carried Steve and the others to and from the prison had its windows darkened, and felt more like it was flying than driving. Steve hadn't really minded on the ride over alone, but coming back, he really had nowhere to look but at the rest of the team.

Nat studied him. "You know, I did have my suspicions that King T'Challa might be involved back when he turned over Zemo. I just figured that if he was sheltering you, better for me to give Wakanda a wide berth. Couldn't do that and look after the Bartons, but if I'd known about Barnes, I'd have tried to come."

Steve stiffened. "What do you mean?"

Nat frowned, actually hesitant to answer.

"She thinks something must be terribly wrong," said Wanda. "For you to be so sad."

Sam cringed visibly, and Steve cringed inwardly. "It isn't like that. He's safe. He's okay. That's just all I can say."
"Okay." Nat gave him a soft look, reminding him of London after Peggy's funeral. "Hill and her team have secured the site in Siberia. Now that the Bartons are safe, I can start moving and destroying the records -"

She broke off, seeing the way they all reacted. "Don't destroy them," said Clint. "Secure 'em, yeah, but don't destroy them. We're gonna need them." Nat raised her eyebrows, and Clint smiled, but didn't volunteer anything else, and they all rode in slightly-more-comfortable silence to the hospital.

Laura and the kids were gathered in the hospital waiting area when they arrived. "Auntie Nat, come see!" Lila exclaimed, grabbing Nat's hand and nearly pulling her off her feet. "Come see the giant panther!"

Nat must have noticed the statue after arriving, but she gasped appreciatively when Lila led her to the window to point out it out where it loomed over the rainforest. "It's so big!"

"The doctors said we'll fly past it later!"

"Oh boy! You're lucky. Where're you going?"

Lila gulped. "To a palace. King T'Challa has a castle, and we're gonna stay in it."

"Why so nervous?" Nat demanded, lifting the girl up onto her hip for a better view of the panther. "That's exciting."

"Because...he's a king!"

One of T'Challa's ministers, approaching Nat, laughed as he overheard that. "He's a good king, I promise you. Miss Romanoff, I'm Minister Jelani of the Taifa Ngao, King T'Challa's council. I've come to escort the Bartons to the palace, and his highness has given permission for you to accompany them."

Patting Lila's head, Natasha gave him a knowing smile. "Thank you."

"Please come with me. We will give you a little driving tour of Birnin Zana." Steve hesitated, but Minister Jelani subtly beckoned to him, so he went along.

The drive ended up including all of the Avengers-in-exile along with the Bartons. Laura stayed up against Clint's side for the ride, her fingertips on the baby in Clint's arms, still too rattled to really take in the scenery. Lila and Cooper, on the other hand, were fascinated as Minister Jelani narrated for them. "The road below the Great Panther into the city center is the one traditionally used by outsiders. The Great Panther faces them, to remind them that they are entering a realm under his protection."

"What's it made of?" asked Lila.

"Basalt. That's a black rock that came from volcanoes throughout this land, millions of years ago. It's very hard to carve, but then it lasts for millions of years. The Great Panther was carved from a basalt hill thousands of years ago by our ancestors."

"Does he have a name?"

"He does not; we just call him the Great Panther, but he's the image of the god Bast."

Cooper turned around from where he'd been craning his neck over the driver's shoulder, peering at the city skyline ahead. "Isn't Bast a cat god?"
Minister Jelani smiled. "In Egypt, yes. We have a few common gods with Egypt, because thousands of years ago, we had common lands and ancestors. We also worship the god Sekhmet, the great lion. The traditions have changed as our people migrated across the continent. To the Egyptians, Bast and Sekhmet are goddesses, the cat and the lioness. Our Bast and Sekhmet have no sex, and we have fewer gods than the ancient Egyptians."

Lila tore her eyes from the great panther and turned her attention to the city. "Wow. It's...big."

Clint smiled. "Biggest city they've been to is Chicago," he explained.

"Our buildings aren't quite so tall as in Chicago, nor built so close together," Minister Jelani acknowledged. It was true: the tallest looked to only be twenty or thirty stories, but the shapes and structures were far more dramatic, *futuristic* like in the science fiction books Steve still liked to read. Hell, if someone had told him back when he was among the Howlies that he'd go to sleep in 1945 and wake up in 2012, the skyline of Birnin Zana might have been closer to what he'd imagine finding in New York.

The metal and glass sparkled with a clean, clear brilliance unlike any city Steve had visited anywhere else. There was no sign of the rust and dirt and weathering that affected most urban centers. Every building's walls and windows were decorated with intricate art and carvings, in glass and mosaics with rich colors. The closer they came, the more vivid and beautiful the city was.

Cooper eagerly waved as he spotted the passers-by, but nobody seemed to notice. "They can't see you, dumpling," Wanda told him. "The windows on the cars are mirrors on the other side. See?"

They passed a city bus whose windows showed only reflections, apart from the driver.

"Oh. Why can't they see?"

"Because more people walk than drive in the cities. It's distracting," said Minister Jelani. He gestured to where the road widened between the buildings. "And there is the royal palace of Wakanda."

The kids peered up through the front and gasped in unison. Even Laura craned her neck for a look. Two more black stone panthers, seated rather than posed ferociously, were sentries on either side of a glittering entrance of metal, wood and stone that formed elaborate archways for vehicles and pedestrians. Behind it, the sprawling palace complex grew visible, a series of immense mansions and domes of stone, wood, and metal, spiraling up around two massive towers linked by bridges. They reminded Steve of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. From a distance, the rounded roofs of the surrounding buildings looked like they shingled with reeds, but at a closer look, the fibers were metal and stone, different colors and textures, that must have been incredibly complex to create, like a three-dimensional mosaic.

"It doesn't look like a castle," mused Cooper.

Clint and Laura winced, but Minister Jelani grinned, "No, not a castle like you'll find in Europe or Disney World. This is Africa. We build things differently. Wait and see."

"See the fence?" Scott gestured to the ornate metal and vines that rose up nearly to roof height on either side of the entry. "It's like the windows; it hides what's behind it. The palace is a *lot* bigger from the other side."

It was. Even Nat looked impressed as she pulled Lila onto her lap and peered out at the vine-covered walls that went for on and on, surrounding the complex of buildings inside the vibranium fence. A fortress within a fortress, and only inside the stone wall did the gardens become visible. The car carried them down a hill below the tallest tower to the section where the Avengers were housed,
where there were only guards visible outside.

Once out of the car, Lila clung to Laura's side, while Cooper kept slowly spinning in place, taking it all in. "It's...it's...big."

"Of course it's big, it's the royal palace," Minister Jelani said. He turned to Laura, "Mrs. Barton, this guest house is for you and your family. The Avengers share the one down the foot path," he explained, pointing to the nearest. "My family and I live in the complex as well. We thought that once you've settled in, your children might enjoy meeting ours. We have four near their age."

Laura blinked, processing it. Obviously the idea of the kids making friends and having neighbors to socialize with hadn't even occurred to her when they'd had to run from the farm. "I...oh, yeah, that would be wonderful. I didn't realize so many people actually live here."

The Wakandan minister smiled knowingly. "It's necessary for those of us on the king's council to be available at all times, so we all reside in the complex with our families. A perk, you could say. Our children have access to the royal tutors and plenty of room to play. While the presence of the Avengers is a secret except to the council itself and the guards, there has been discussion of inviting foreign visitors and diplomats to Wakanda for some time. We'll invite a cover story along those lines."

Laura let out her breath and finally started to genuinely relax. "Wow, this is...so much more than I thought was possible. Thank you, sir."

"You're safe here, Mrs. Barton. The man who murdered our king as collateral damage in his war on the Avengers sought to do the same to you and your children. We will not allow him to claim any more victims." Minister Jelani nodded to her, then strolled off down the stone path towards his own house.

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T'Challa had his work cut out for him on intra-Avengers diplomacy, but he had other work to do. So he ordered for Stark to be fed and provided with some basic entertainment - a datapad that contained ten thousand e-books and several hundred movies, and left him to calm down for a few days. He also asked Minister Jelani to make some recordings once the young Bartons were recovered enough to meet some of palace children.

Jelani might not have been privy to the entirety of T'Challa and Shuri's plan, but he was no fool, and sent T'Challa some disgustingly adorable videos of the Barton children discovering the delights of the outdoor play area with nearly a dozen other palace denizens under the watchful eyes of their mother and the palace tutors.

Armed with that ammunition, T'Challa summoned Stark to join him for a meal. The man was insightful enough to know that T'Challa was aiming to persuasive, but remarked, "Prison food's a little dull, so I assume I'll get something a little better if I let you get into my head."

With a wry smile, T'Challa beckoned him to the table. "Food and liquor is a time-honored form of bribery."

"Ohh, liquor, man, you're bringing out the big guns. Okay, fire away." Stark made an appreciative face once he sampled the konyagi. "Mm, nice. So? Going to bring me around to your way of seeing the world?"

"In a manner of speaking." T'Challa flicked his tablet toward the screen on the meeting room wall, and Stark found himself watching Lila and Cooper Barton romping with Minister Jelani's children
and several other councilors' offspring. Only Laura Barton was visible among the parents, but she looked comfortable, reclining on mats on the grass talking to a few other adults with her infant son in her arms.

Stark watched silently for a few moments. "Where's the rest of them?"

"Unfortunately, the presence of the Avengers themselves must remain secret for now, so their father and his friends can't join them publicly."

"Still, must raise some eyebrows suddenly having three white kids at your palace."

"Not terribly. Wakanda's government has been toying with the possibility of increasing our international relations for some time. The Bartons will be the first non-African children to stay for any length of time, but they won't be the last. More important, even if Zemo suspects I'm harboring them, we're beyond his reach."

Stark leaned back in his chair, swirling his glass of konyagi. "You're pretty damn confident about that."

T'Challa stared him down. "This country has been the target of every technological power on Earth ever since our vibranium deposits became known - and before that, we were targeted for our gold and our crops and our land. We've become very familiar with defending our borders against foreign invaders, on both the small and large scale. But that isn't what I'm trying to prove to you. I hope proving the extent of Wakanda's strength never becomes a practical necessity."

"What are you trying to prove, then?"

T'Challa answered steadily, "That you and I remain on the same side."

This time, Stark didn't scoff. He looked away for several long moments. "Is all this still about sticking it to Zemo?"

"In part, of course. Avenging my father is hardly contrary to the purpose of the Avengers." Stark chuckled. "But that's not all." T'Challa waited until Stark looked at him again. "I also want answers, not about the Lagos incident itself, but what occurred afterward. Secretary Ross seems to think that no explanations are necessary for doctoring the reports about how Wakanda's citizens were killed and what efforts were made to rescue them. His target was clearly not Wakanda, but the Avengers."

"You really think there's more to it than you and the Nigerians have already exposed?"

"Knowing the truth isn't the same as having it acknowledged, let alone remedied. Ross and his allies are engaged in a bid for power. Rogers' friends, especially Wilson, they think it's a matter of containing enhanced individuals. I think it's not so simple."

Stark frowned, thoughtful. "Really? To hear President Bunt talk, it's as simple as registering threats."

"Your President oversimplifies virtually everything," T'Challa said without thinking. Then he smiled sheepishly. "No offense."

Stark snorted. "Absolutely none taken. Bunt's useless to anyone who isn't willing to stick their nose up his ass. Oh, pardon my coarse language, your royal highness." Somehow he managed a sweeping bow while half-sprawled in his chair.

T'Challa grinned. "I pardon it, since I don't disagree." Now Stark smirked. "But while men like
Ronald Bunt pound their chests and declare stupidly that it's a simple matter of sending troops to Wakanda to obtain our resources for themselves, there's more danger from the ones behind the scenes, who take his simple, nationalistic sentiment and mold them into a stealth goal with no regard for sovereignty."

Stark sat up and met his eyes. "Ross wants Bruce Banner. Hell, in a lot of ways, Bruce was the driving force behind his whole policy push. I don't know where he is, but Ross's pushing a lot of resources behind the search, with 'registration' as the pretense." T'Challa waited. Stark stood up and ambled over to the window, wiggling his fingers at the guards outside. "Banner never had the chance to look at the Accords, let alone sign 'em. Romanoff told me he wouldn't have been on my side."

T'Challa rose. "If there are no longer two sides among the Avengers, that will make things simpler for him."

Stark closed his eyes and laughed. It was the same painful laugh that T'Challa had heard from Rogers, Barnes, and many of the other Avengers since Siberia. "You think it's that simple?"

"Of course not. Only simple men think that way. But Miss Romanoff and I must talk and reach an understanding before she leaves, about what she will do now, and what she's seen of Wakanda. The truth is, that I would welcome her help on...certain matters."

"You're gonna trust Romanoff?"

T'Challa considered the question. In a way, it was the same one that had been raised by W'Kabi in council. Stark had felt the sting of Romanoff's betrayal in Leipzig - as had T'Challa, literally. But Stark hadn't taken her into custody then.

He finally settled on, "I believe she cares for Rogers. And I'm entirely certain that she cares for the Bartons." Stark nodded readily to that. "That's an interest she may be trusted to protect, whatever doubts she - or you - have about Barnes."

Stark scowled at the mention of Barnes, but conceded, "She said something, after the airport, when Rhodey was in treatment. It wasn't about him, it was about Steve. Before that, she thought staying together was more important than how we stayed together."

"Perhaps we can offer her a means of staying together again."

Stark took a long pull of the konyagi and gave it another appreciative look. "Yeah, okay, she might go for it. Maybe Rogers'll go for it. Wilson and Barton, and...whatever his name is, Little Big Dude, they don't have the time of day for me, let alone Wanda...damn." He drained the glass. "And Wanda's not even wrong. Fuck." He met T'Challa's eyes, unguarded at last. "How bad was she?"

T'Challa recalled the Sokovian woman's resistance to informing Stark, and sent her a mental apology. "She was in some distress after escaping the prison. Barton believed the guards might have been harming her, but she denied it. Later, she unfortunately encountered a boy near the hospital who had lost family in Lagos. He thought at her, images of his dead sister. I dealt with him, but she admitted it was similar to what the guards in the prison had done. They didn't abuse her physically, but fantasized in detail about what they imagined doing to her, with the intention that she would see it." Stark shoved away from the table and stood up, pacing along the walls. "I'm telling you against her wishes, so consider that before you leap into action."

Stark rubbed his eyes. "Goddamnit. God damn it." Like an adder striking, his fist lashed out and slammed into the wall; T'Challa winced and stood up, but Stark spun away from it, barely seeming to notice the bruises he'd given his knuckles. "I didn't...fuck...I swear, I didn't mean for...if I'd known,
"I'd never have let them take her."

T'Challa said quietly, "You and I both made errors in judgment, Stark. Even my father and his council erred - we should have conducted our own independent investigation into Lagos before agreeing to the Accords. We allowed ourselves to be manipulated."

Stark stared at the wall - from six inches away. He pressed against it with his abused knuckles, but didn't strike it again. "What about Barnes?"

"Where he is, there is no danger that he will fall under Hydra's control again." T'Challa waited a beat, then amended it. "Rather I should say, no danger that he will fall *victim* to Hydra again."

Stark glowered at him, but after a long, silent stare, he was the one who broke eye contact. "I'm up for all the rest, but I'm not just letting Barnes slide."

T'Challa decided to take what concessions he could get - for now. "Then let's move on with the agreements we do have."

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Wanda couldn't pretend to be pleased that King T'Challa had revealed the activity on the Raft to Stark, but she couldn't really fault his reasons, or the fact that he came to her immediately afterward and apologized. "I would not have violated your privacy if so many lives weren't at stake, and I have admonished Mr. Stark to think before he acts on what I told him."

Hearing "the greater good" as a justification grated on Wanda's nerves; it reminded her too much of Vision. On the other hand, Wanda understood (whether she wanted to or not) what T'Challa's motives were, and couldn't really disagree with them.

So she kept a politely neutral expression when Stark approached her after T'Challa brought him to the private section of the palace. "If those bastards screwed with your head on purpose, they should pay for it. But...look, if you tell me to do nothing, I'll do nothing."

Wanda nodded, coolly acknowledging his apology even if forgiving him wasn't in the cards today. "Do nothing."

To his credit, he accepted her decision without a complaint - hardly even a mental one. "Okay."

And so they reached a *detente*. 

On the other hand, making peace between the Avengers as a group was proving harder than anticipated.

Sam and Clint fumed when T'Challa brought Stark to the palace, but at Steve's urging, they kept quiet. "It's his palace. If he wants to make peace with Tony, he's got the right. He can't hold him prisoner forever." "They'd've held *us* prisoner forever," Clint countered, but at Wanda's urgent look, he let it go.

Between Tony and Steve, there was cool civility - if also tension as thick as the soft, chewy candy the Wakandans made out of honey and crushed fruit. Scott called it pretty putty, and Wanda massaged a ball of it between her fingers while watching Steve, Tony, and Natasha sparring against T'Challa in one of the palace gymnasiums. Suspiciously, Tony got in hits against both Steve and Natasha, which without his armor should've been near-impossible.

When he made a gruff apology after nailing Steve in the mouth, "sorry, didn't do it on purpose,"
Wanda knew he was lying, and knew Steve knew he was lying. Natasha and T'Challa knew it as well, but no one called him out on it.

Things weren't so simple when Sam could no longer hold back the conclusions he'd started to reach after weeks among the Wakandans, and in the company of T'Challa:

"You're enhanced."

Steve and Scott looked at him in surprise. Natasha and Clint, on the other hand, were less so. Tony frowned, thoughtful as he measured up T'Challa's speed and strength in a different light. For all Scott was new to the world of the Avengers and human enhancement, he reached the mostly-right conclusion fairly quickly.

"It's something to do with the vibranium, huh? It's not just technology and suit material - it gives you power with those fields it gives off. Special perk of being king, right?"

T'Challa's lips twitched, but he didn't deny it. However, Sam was scowling. "Nah, it ain't just the king. I've been watching your bodyguards, even those kids playing with the Bartons. There's a lot of physical skill and training going on around here, but that's not all, is it? This whole country's enhanced!"

Steve up until now had been impressed as he worked it out, but at Sam's harsh tone, he frowned. "Why's that a problem?"

"It's a 'problem,' when this guy signed our country and all of us for a treaty that said if you're different, you register and go on a blacklist, and I'll bet good money that there isn't a single goddamn Wakandan on that list, let alone the king," Sam said, staring T'Challa down.

T'Challa lost his amusement and met Sam's gaze steadily. "And this troubles you?"

"That a guy who signed everybody else up to stand up and be counted, registered, labeled, and locked up didn't think that same law should apply to him and his own, yeah, it troubles me!"

"Sam!" Steve hissed.

Tony's flicker of alarm caught Wanda's mental attention, distracting him from his irritation that T'Challa had - again - ignored the Accords.

T'Challa, for his part, was uncowed. "And you're now deeply concerned with enforcement of the Accords?"

"I'm concerned with fucking hypocrisy when the law you signed is getting hundreds, maybe thousands of people pulled off the street and locked up!"

"Sam, shut up!"

Wanda flinched, and Sam whirled, intending to explode at his friend - until he saw Steve's face. Steve's panic wasn't directed at Sam, but at T'Challa.

T'Challa stared at Steve, first in surprise, then irritation as he correctly sussed out the reason for Captain America's uncharacteristic outburst. Steve's expression went from frantic to chagrinned. "I'm sorry," he muttered. Whether to Sam or T'Challa was unclear – maybe both – but he hurriedly walked out of the gym.

Everyone stared after him in uncomfortable silence. Finally, Tony spoke up. "Where's Barnes?"
"Oh, for Chrissakes, Stark - " Clint began, but Tony cut him off.

" – I don't care what he's doing, I want to know what's been done to him!" He pointed at Wanda.
"Tell him." She hesitated, and he glowered. "You didn't care about spilling whatever was in my brain before. What's stopping you now?"

Wanda sighed. "He's telling the truth. He's not asking now because he's after Bucky, he's thinking..."

She was still groping for a diplomatic way to put it when T'Challa decided to make an educated guess. "You're thinking that I must be keeping Barnes hostage for Captain America to silence one of his friends." Everyone looked at him. "That isn't the case. As weary as I am of my place being questioned, I wouldn't take any insult out on a helpless man. Especially not one to whom I'm indebted."

"Where is he?" Stark repeated.

"Safe. Even if our efforts here are in vain and end in bloodshed, he'll be safe." T'Challa folded his arms and eyed Sam. "As to your question, yes, the people of Wakanda have certain physical abilities that put us ahead of the evolutionary curve. The cause of that is at least partly the vibranium source. No one born here chose it, it can't be extracted from our cells, or even observed except by comparison. So why would that be cause for suspicion?"

"You think that's suspicious? Did you even read the Accords before you signed us all up for them?"

"The Accords were for enhanced people, Wilson, not really good athletes," Tony retorted.

"Oh my God!" Sam threw up his hands. "Listen to you two! The fucking Accords didn't differentiate between the cause of anybody's enhancement! Mutants, inhumans, artificially enhanced adults, forcibly enhanced children, doesn't matter, the rule was that EVERYBODY ENHANCED HAS TO FUCKING REGISTER AND WEAR A FUCKING STAR, DO YOU FUCKING GET THAT!?" Sam looked like he wanted to take a swing at both of them – to the point that two of the Dora Milaje stepped quietly into the room. "And if they don't register, and somebody finds out and turns 'em in, straight to Gitmo or the Raft or any other of the UN's fine, luxurious detention centers, no lawyer, no right to trial, no time limit!"

"The Accords had nothing to do with mutants or inhumans, Wilson," T'Challa said.

Sam laughed, loud and scornful. "Your English is great, your highness, but maybe you're not as familiar with how we Americans write laws. You don't have to point at somebody outright for a law to apply to them. Remember, that damn thousand-page document got sprung on us three days before it was gonna be ratified by the UN. But the first thing I looked at was the definitions section. 'Enhanced individuals' was defined by people's abilities and determined by whether or not a person has abilities outside a given range of human capacity – absolutely no limits on how they got those abilities. And there was something in there about, 'whether such enhancement was artificially or naturally induced' – that means MUTANT. It means inhuman. That means kids who were born with it, that means victims like Barnes who were imprisoned and had it forced on them! That means the entire fucking population of Wakanda!"

In Wanda's mind's eye, an aura of something very cold swelled up from within T'Challa until it hung over him like a cloak made of fog. He was angry, offended that Sam would think him such a fool, and that Rogers would think him such a petty tyrant. Maybe the American President might seek legal reprisal for an insulting tweet or a satirical television show, but T'Challa had never done anything to
make Rogers think him capable of that kind of venality. And Sam, like so many Americans, seemed to imagine that an African, even a leader educated in both the East and the West, was incapable of grasping the ramifications of political action…

…and yet, as to the latter…she could feel T'Challa's mental chill as he wondered: was it possible that Sam was right?

So the king tempered his instinctive reaction, and kept his voice low. "If I or my father believed the Accords were targeted so broadly, we would not have signed them."

His self-restraint did have the desired effect of cooling Sam down…a little. Sam took a deep breath before speaking again. "Your media access here's amazing, your highness, and I've been using it. Even if the stated intent wasn't that broad, the execution is. Turn on the news. They're pulling children out of school on suspicion of being enhanced, and they and their families are disappearing. They're raiding genetic privacy organizations on suspicion of hiding enhanced. Every little YouTube nerd who performs a cool stunt for a video now has to worry about getting dragged out of his basement apartment in the middle of the night because somebody decided it wasn't just special effects. It's happening in the US, Europe, Asia, and in countries that didn't even bother with a facsimile of human rights to begin with, it's worse. Now instead of yelling 'witch,' they're yelling 'enhanced' when they stone people to death!" He put his hands up and took an urgent step toward T'Challa. "You say you didn't mean for that to happen, I'll believe you – you don't seem to be a psychotic xenophobe. But a lot of people out there are, and between President Bunt, ISIS, and the Accords, they think they've got a blank check. And this is the result. You oughtta at least be investigating."

T'Challa locked eyes with him, but the wedge of doubt was in the door, and Wanda could feel it. King T'Challa of Wakanda had many demands on his time and attention, and his focus was still on the welfare of his people and what could directly impact them. He looked at Tony. "Do you know anything about this?"

Slowly, reluctantly, Tony nodded. "There's a big faction in the US that doesn't like enhanced, no matter where they got their powers. That group, they're…running pretty much unchecked since the Accords were passed."

"I have been close friends with a mutant for many years," said T'Challa. Sam scoffed, and Wanda winced. "I'll contact her."

"Do that," said Sam.

"What about Rogers?" asked Tony, turning to the others. "What the hell's gotten into him? He should've been right there with Wilson, ranting and raving about freedom and self-determination."

"Yes, he should," said Natasha. She told T'Challa, "I'm afraid there's a lot of truth to what Wilson's told you. The Accords are being implemented indiscriminately and punitively towards any group deemed suspect by those in power – that means more than just enhanced. This is just another turn of the screws against minorities and opponent journalists and academics as far as the Bunt administration is concerned. Secretary Ross must know, but either he doesn't care or he's all too happy to kill fifty birds with one law." She shrugged, feigning indifference. "It's no surprise to me; I'm Russian. I don't put much faith in the good intentions of governments – until, in exceptions such as this, an individual shows he can be trusted," she added, nodding to T'Challa. Then she also looked at Sam, Clint, Scott, and Wanda. "Steve doesn't seem well."

They all looked at Wanda. She gulped. Tony snorted. "You're quick enough to tell everyone what's in my head."
"Hey, you *told* her to," Scott snapped.

"Not the first – was it two times or three?"

Wanda scowled at the wall. "Okay, then I was wrong to do it. I *apologize*, Stark," she added sarcastically. "It's very impolite to eavesdrop on people's brains and gossip about it – except for when they're plotting the murder of my friends." She hissed at him when he would have argued. "Your plan when you first arrived here was all about capturing and killing Bucky. You're not entitled to secrecy for that. The rest…yes, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked about it." She finished as she started for the door, "And I'm not going to talk about what's inside Steve."

"I'll talk to him," said T'Challa.

"Uh, your highness, with all respect, I think he's a little nervous about you right now," said Scott. It was tactless, but utterly candid, and Wanda wasn't the only one in the room glad of it.

T'Challa sighed. "I know he is. And that's why I must talk with him."

*To Be Continued...*
Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Steve and T'Challa have a difficult conversation about Steve's reaction to T'Challa's position, and T'Challa calls an old friend among the X-Men - with painful and frightening results as the true ramifications of the Sokovia Accords sink in.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the amazing feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming! FYI, this fic assumes Civil War took place in 2017, mainly because I thought more than a year had passed after the events of Age of Ultron.

Canon Notes: As a reminder, this fic was fully written before Black Panther came out, so it cherry picks from the comic canon about T'Challa and Wakanda, particularly that T'Challa met Ororo Munroe (Storm of the X-Men) in Kenya during their teens and had a romantic relationship with her that ended when they went their separate ways, but they're still close friends. This fic also assumes Wakanda did a little more dabbling in international affairs than in the movie, primarily by taking in refugees from other African nations, but occasionally involving themselves in upheavals in other African nations such as fighting against apartheid in South Africa. It didn't always end well for them. Also, while Steve is very intelligent and has been educating himself since waking in the 21st century, he doesn't grasp all the nuances of international law and its implementation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fourteen

"Captain Rogers."

Sitting beside Bucky's cryo chamber, Steve managed not to cringe at the sound of T'Challa's voice. "Your highness, I'm sorry. I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

The king of Wakanda sighed. "I believe I do. You were thinking that if Wilson offended me, that I might retaliate against Barnes, or perhaps against the Bartons. That I might change my mind on a whim and turn all of you over to your enemies."

"No!" Steve protested. "No, I'm not that..." Not that what? Not that stupid? Why don't I trust you after everything you've done for us? Not that...is it racism? Could I be racist? Then what the hell was I so afraid of? At a loss, he settled on what he knew - in the rational part of his brain that seemed to have been lost completely to some primitive panic-at-the-drop-of-a-hat instinct these days. "I know you're not that petty, or cruel."

"But you did fear my anger at Sam Wilson for challenging me?"
"Well..." Yes? He finally settled on a complete cop-out: "I don't know."

"Steve." Steve made himself look up at T'Challa. "I'm aware that Americans are uneasy at the thought of a king who is more than a symbolic title. You're taught that such a system is tyranny by definition." Steve couldn't deny it. He just hoped that was all that was bothering him. "Without handing you the entire written history of my father's government, I can't prove our integrity to you other than by my actions. You'd also find our government records very boring. I certainly did."

A bitter, embarrassed laugh escaped Steve. "I'm really sorry, your highness. I know I've got no cause to distrust you, especially not in light of your actions." He put a hand on Bucky's cryo chamber. The smooth warmth of the glass was comforting, in a strange way. "For this and the Bartons...I shouldn't still be questioning you."

T'Challa walked closer. "What I'm trying to say is that you must not be afraid to question me, especially in private. I don't rule by fear, and the thought of that is more distasteful to me than anyone's bad manners. What Sam Wilson said tonight is troubling, and Romanoff and Stark suggest he may be at least partly right. If that's how the Accords are being implemented, then Wakanda did have a part in bringing the injustice about, and I will move to correct it immediately."

"How?" Steve asked in surprise.

T'Challa raised his eyebrows. "Did you watch any of the proceedings in Vienna last month?"

Steve shook his head. "I watched Zemo's trial at The Hague, and what you and Tony said, but not what went on in Vienna before." Why not? I guess I assumed it couldn't be good and I didn't want to know. Good thing Sam had thought it was important to know.

"I'm not the only envoy now having second thoughts - even before Wilson confronted me with such troubling allegations. Secretary Ross urged the delegates to proceed, but there has been no agreement on rescheduling the ratification of the Accords."

Steve sat up as the implications sank in. "That means...wait, does that mean they're not actually law?" He knew how a bill became law in the US, but an international treaty like the Sokovia Accords was a different animal, and he wasn't sure exactly how it worked. He'd thought back at the time of Ross's first visit to the compound that he ought to start getting some crash courses in UN procedures - but then Peggy had died, and...all the rest had happened, leaving no time for background research. Ross had made the Accords seem like a done deal, with the final ratification just a formality. Rhodey certainly seemed to think so when he'd called Steve a criminal for intervening to save Bucky... or had it just been tempers talking?

Was the signing just a formality? Or is America rounding people up and interning them without any real authority? Hell, did it matter? Since when did roundups and internment wait for legal authority?

T'Challa stepped closer, gazing at Bucky's peaceful face in the chamber. Steve envied Bucky. "Most signatory nations passed internal laws to enforce the substance of the Accords, but the treaty itself is not ratified. So technically, there's nothing to stop your country or others from carrying the law out against their citizens - but they have no authority to go outside their borders against citizens of other nations, or even their own if there isn't already an extradition treaty in place. This protects some people, like your friend, for Wakanda allows no extradition without express consent. But if the Accords are being used as a weapon against the innocent, Wakanda will protest and urge our neighbors to do the same." He eyed Steve and smiled. "You were once the witness to such great and terrible upheaval during the second world war. You became Captain America to fight it, or at least that's what the stories say."
Steve smiled dryly. "I'm sure you can guess, it was more complicated than storybooks make it seem. But yeah. The worst is... what the Accords are doing, what Sam is describing... it was the same then. The worst was Germany, but the US was doing it too. The Nazis were the enemy, but a part of what lay underneath - the paranoia, the bigotry, the hate - that was at home too. Anyone Japanese, German, it didn't matter if they were American-born and raised; they were the enemy. And God knows we didn't do much to help the Jews trying to flee Europe. I went into the ice before I ever knew just how horrific it became. Now it's happening again, only we're leading the charge - Muslims, Mexicans, mutants and inhumans. It's like a nightmare."

"Many Americans are accusing President Bunt's administration of bringing about the same regime as the fascists once did."

"They're not wrong," Steve muttered. He'd bitten his tongue through the entire damned 2016 election, at the demand (and occasional pleading) of SHIELD and Tony's publicists. The search for Bucky and the disaster with Ultron had distracted him. Maybe he'd let himself be distracted too easily. "When I was a kid, I saw us go to war to stop the spread of fascism. Now we're the ones bringing it."

"You're not the only one who questions if you were wrong to stay distant. During the world wars, my father and his father considered stepping forward in aid of our neighbors, but they had to defend against so many incursions by the Axis, that they chose to focus on defending our own borders. We gave sanctuary to only a fortunate few refugees who survived the long journey to reach us and were willing to desert their homelands to keep our secret. Some of our historians - even my late father - they look back on that time with dissatisfaction. We could have done more, and we should have done more. That weight will always be on our conscience."

"I guess we have that much in common." At least part of me wanted to die on the Valkyrie rather than go on without Bucky. If I'd lived through it, maybe I could've helped stop...some of what the Nazis did, or what America did. Maybe I could've stopped Hydra before it gained control of everything Peggy and Howard built."

"After we learned the extent of the atrocities in the war, my father and some of his councilors sought a shift in policy towards stronger relationships with other nations, and advocacy for freedom and justice among our neighbors," T'Challa mused. "I only remember it a little; it ended when I was a young child."

"What happened?"

T'Challa's smile had a wry quirk, telling Steve he didn't miss the parallel of the story he was telling. "Some of our efforts ended in disaster. We were blamed for interfering in matters outside Wakanda's jurisdiction. Many of our emissaries were killed; others gave up in defeat. Some thirty years ago, we withdrew from the movement to end apartheid in South Africa, and in the end, they defeated the policy on their own. That seemed proof to my father that foreign political intervention was futile and destructive, so we withdrew until only a few years ago. The rest, you know."

Steve frowned to himself in confusion. "But...didn't you say you went to Oxford?"

"Oh yes. Travel abroad by Wakandans has never been forbidden - well, not in the last few centuries. Our isolationism was an official policy, but our individual citizens have always had the choice of where they will go and with whom they will have contact. For the sons of tribal leaders - and kings - to go abroad is a rite of adulthood. 'To walk about,' it's called. Along with obtaining a degree from Oxford, I spent nearly five years without returning to Wakandan soil. It wasn't easy, but that's the point." T'Challa considered Bucky, then turned back to Steve. "How old were you when you met him?"
"Bucky? Six or seven...I don't entirely remember," Steve admitted. "Within a few months, I think it was just as if he'd been there all my life. We were in school. I got into trouble. Bucky got me out of it."

T'Challa smiled. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me. During the first winter that I was abroad, when I had been gone long enough for the novelty to wear off and I was terribly homesick, I met a girl in Kenya." Steve raised an eyebrow, and T'Challa chuckled. "Ororo. We were both away from home - for different reasons, perhaps not a great distance, but it felt far for both of us. We traveled together for some time. I'm thinking of her now because she's an alpha mutant. It was more than a year before she allowed me to see her power. She was exiled from her people as a suspected witch. To me, she was a goddess."

"Wow. Do you know where she is now?"

"America." Steve's stomach lurched, and he knew the dismay showed on his face. "Yes, exactly. I'm glad Wilson warned me. I'm going to call her. She works with young mutants, and knows many in and outside the U.S. If the situation is as bad as Wilson said, she'll know."

"I hope it's not that bad," Steve said softly. "But Sam's not the type to exaggerate for dramatic effect."

"No, I didn't think so." T'Challa looked at Bucky again. "There's something else I would like you to consider - and do not answer now. Take your time to think." Steve waited, and he finished, "Before I can release Stark, we must be sure that he won't pose a threat, either to my people or my guests. The greatest threat in his mind is this man."

Steve stiffened as he realized T'Challa's meaning. "You...want to tell him."

"And Romanoff. Perhaps even show them. This chamber can't be removed from this room, nor can its power source be disrupted. No one other than you or I could trigger the thawing sequence, and without the assistance of my doctors, it would still be a long process to revive him. All this was with his knowledge and consent - indeed, at his request. Stark was grieving and in shock that day in Siberia, as was I after witnessing my father's death. That doesn't excuse either of us, but I see a chance that he will return to reason just as I did." He glanced at his wrist and stepped back. "You don't have to decide at once. I have work to do, and I must investigate Wilson's warning. Consider it. That's all I ask."

When T'Challa made the video call to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, he already knew in his heart what the answer to his question would probably be. The ramifications of it would be evident all too quickly.

The young operator didn't betray any recognition of him before putting him on hold, but when Ororo Munroe appeared on the screen, she didn't smile. Before today, they had always been very happy to hear from each other again.

"Good day, T'Challa." The chill in her voice was unmistakable.

"Ororo." He gulped and resisted the urge to blurt "are you angry at me?" like an awkward teenager. "Have you been well?"

"Not terribly well at all, no. These last few months have been hard." She softened a very little to say, "I'm very sorry for the loss of your father. I've simply been too busy."

If she no longer trusted T'Challa, of course, she wouldn't say what she'd been busy doing. "Thank
you. I'm sorry that I've been out of touch recently. Even before my father's death, events in Wakanda have kept me very occupied."

"So I've heard."

T'Challa sighed. She wasn't going to make this easy for him. "I've now been told that the situation for mutants in America has become dangerous as a result of the Accords. That wasn't my father's intention, or mine, and I'm trying to learn more about it."

Ororo's eyes narrowed, and he braced himself for her rage, as icy as the world around them when he'd faced her anger in person. "Maybe you should have bothered to learn more about our situation before banning us from existence!" she hissed.

"Is it that bad?"

"Yes, it's that bad!" she snapped. "We can't go out into the field without being fired on from every direction. If a child has a traumatic manifestation, we're lucky to reach them before they receive a bullet to the head or disappear. We've lost fourteen in the past six months, and we only have three bodies!"

The urge to defend himself and his father was powerful, but T'Challa forced it back. He'd called her for information, not to argue either of their positions. "Foreign media is reporting that people are being rounded up en masse. How is it that your school is still able to operate?"

"None of your business." She scowled away from the camera. "I thought you could be trusted not to throw us to the wolves. But you never even thought of what your precious Accords would unleash, did you?"

"I didn't realize they would be used to target mutants, and nor did my father."

"Of course not, because you didn't bother to investigate the manner in which they were written. You're so convinced that you're above concern for foreign politics - especially Western ones - that you simply ignore them until they impact you. If you'd seen half of the committee meetings for passage here and in Britain, you'd have known exactly who the target was!"

So Sam Wilson was right, and this was yet another catastrophic misstep for Wakanda's kings in their first efforts to enter the international stage in decades. "Is it the same outside the US? Detention of children and adults against their will without recourse? Forced genetic testing and physical examinations?"

"In some places that I know of, yes. Russia, France, Spain, Greece, and China are the ones doing it most openly. There are certainly others, and factions pushing for it in the UK, Italy, Brazil, even Canada. There are rumors of outright extermination in Venezuela, Pakistan, and Turkey and parts of the Middle East and Africa. Even the countries that didn't sign the Accords take them as a blank check to do whatever they will with suspected enhanced, and no risk of international displeasure."

Baba, what have we done? "I will make this right, Ororo. I swear it. With all that's in my power, Wakanda will fight to reverse this course. I've joined the Avengers now."

She wasn't impressed. "Yes, under the command of Tony Stark, the Accords' chief enforcer."

"I know that he wouldn't condone genocide any more than I would." T'Challa had to catch himself to keep from revealing too much. "And he's an influential man in the West. The Sokovia Accords were supposed to prevent another disaster like the Ultron attack, not spark a witch hunt."
"Well, they have sparked a witch hunt, T'Challa. I believe what you say of your intentions, but it counts for nothing against the impact. Tony Stark and Wanda Maximoff should've been the ones punished for Ultron, not people who had no choice about being enhanced - or even the ones who did but have never harmed anyone."

"I know." T'Challa took a deep breath and marshaled his scattered thoughts and emotions. "So…I won't ask you to forgive me, because I've no right when my short-sightedness helped cause this atrocity. At least not until I've brought an end to it. But until then, if you or your people are in danger, call me if you need help or shelter. If it's in my power, I'll do it."

She stared at him. "I want to believe you, old friend. But how can I?" That hurt. "I couldn't help but notice that you never registered yourself as enhanced." He managed not to wince. "I almost reported you myself, but only the fact that I will not participate in enforcement of this injustice at all stopped me - however much you might deserve it. President Bunt repeated a junk science report that autism is linked to the X-gene yesterday. Efforts to identify and eliminate carriers are growing again, whether the gene is active or not."

He forced himself to sit still and not look away from her angry eyes. "I know my ignorance isn't an excuse, Ororo." She didn't disagree. "After I've kept my promise, I will find you and beg forgiveness to your face, and your children's, for my part in bringing this about. We must both return to work now."

It was a painful and bitter farewell, and once the screen had gone dark, T'Challa plunged into the international news reports, the briefings that he often neglected to read because he couldn't stand American posturing or the melodrama of Western media. There was the evidence that he'd been too preoccupied to see before now - the complaints of mass human rights violations, in the US, in Europe, Asia, every continent. Children snatched from their parents, adults who displayed any sign of unusual abilities shot dead by semi-official "raids." Family dragged from their loved ones' bedsides in hospitals, parents seized as they tried to pick up their children at school. Teams of officials examining the scanners and X-ray machines at airports, looking for signs, any sign of a difference, that would justify detaining a passenger. Some were merely deported, in countries like America where immigration and so-called "homeland security" officials combined their hunt for enhanced with their targeting of Muslims and undocumented immigrants. Others simply disappeared. Already, reputable human rights organizations warned that tens of thousands of people had been swept up in these nets. The confirmed death toll for suspected enhanced humans was approaching three thousand, and that number would only grow.

T'Challa walked to the necropolis in a daze. Only when he was safely alone beside his father's tomb did he let himself break down in tears. Even that shamed him. What right did he have to weep and cringe when he'd been complicit in a genocide? That is the proper word for this: genocide. Anyone deemed different, no matter the cause, swept up in the net to be isolated and neutralized. Gods have mercy on me. Christians who confessed to a sin could receive absolution from their God. Wakanda's Gods wouldn't be so easily placated, especially not if their mercy was all that the sinner was worried about. A man who had committed a great wrong owed it to the victims of the wrong to make amends.

T'Challa looked like absolute shit when he approached Sam and Steve late the following evening, and Sam didn't need Wanda's power to figure out why. "I've spoken with my friend in America," the king said quietly. "You were right. A wave of violence and oppression is falling on anyone suspected of enhancement, and the Sokovia Accords have provided new legitimacy for it. I can't justify myself to her or to you: my father and I were wrong. We enlisted Wakanda in an act of genocide."
Sam opened his mouth to say that he hadn't meant it like that, then thought better of it. It wasn't an inaccurate term for what was happening around the world, and part of something so much broader especially in the US and Europe. Xenophobia, toxic nationalism, and paranoia were taking hold again, and every vulnerable population was feeling it. If T'Challa was prepared to recognize it and do something about it, that was a good thing.

"I've spent today doing some reading too," said Steve. "I've been thinking...part of this is still the hunt for us. Ross's supporters are saying that we must be somewhere building a new enhanced paramilitary group that'll keep on operating without oversight."

*Oh...fuck, don't you dare, Rogers!*

Rogers dared. "I think...I ought to turn myself in."

_Goddamnit. "Caaaap," _Sam growled, trying to make it sound a little playful (when he really wanted to kick Captain Martyr in the ass.)

At least it got a weak smile out of Steve, but he went on, "That's one area where President Bunt and some of his supporters are fighting with Ross and the Accords supporters: Bunt still likes to throw my name around. All the celebrity media would be on it, and maybe I could help push for people to calm down and stop interning children."

T'Challa pondered it, and sighed. "From what I've seen of American media in the last year, the facts can be twisted into whatever story anyone chooses to tell. Recall what Ross and your State Department did with the accident in Lagos. It was all very subtle deception by omission, and it turned multiple nations against the Avengers. It might be easier than you think for your enemies to make a public villain of you."

"Amen," said Sam, relieved that T'Challa didn't seem keen on the idea. "And the admiration of Ronald Bunt is not a hook that anybody with a brain should be hanging their hat on."

All three of them chuckled bitterly. "I'm going to talk to Stark about this immediately," T'Challa went on. "The 'official' Avengers shouldn't be silent, and I will not be. Wakanda will withdraw all support from the Accords, and that may lead to friction for the Avengers." He gave Steve a questioning look.

Steve stared out into the gardens with that distant, sad expression that told Sam what - or who - he was thinking about. "I think...if Tony feels the way we do about how the Accords are being used, he wouldn't let it pass even if it was his means of apprehending Bucky. I don't know about telling him where, but I think it'll help if we explain Bucky's in cryo by his own choice."

"Not to suggest invading his privacy unless we have to, but if Stark pushes it, maybe we could point out he agreed to cryo only after we had to strong-arm him into taking assisted suicide off the table," said Sam.

T'Challa nodded. "You understand Barnes' wishes best of everyone - except perhaps Miss Maximoff - so I'll defer to you to advise me on what choices he would make. What about Romanoff? I am less concerned that she would reveal Barnes' presence here out of malice...actually, I'm not concerned about that at all," he amended it. "But his being at large does worry her, and even someone as skilled as she is might be subjected to certain pressures to disclose his whereabouts."

Steve needed only a few moments to consider it. "I'm not worried about Nat at all. She's kept far bigger secrets than this, especially once she knows he's in cryo."

"Assuming she hasn't already worked it out," Sam agreed. "If there's one problem Romanoff has, it's
not saying enough. But when it comes down to the wire, she won't give anyone away. Not with Barnes like this."

Clint, Wanda, and Scott had also taken the day to do some research on what was happening in the outside world, and were tentatively on board with Steve and T'Challa's plan of action - sans any proposal of making a human sacrifice out of Steve.

"Steve, seriously, I've been doing this longer than any of you," said Clint. "Taking the fall in front of the public when you didn't do anything wrong never works. Everyone with a brain'll see through it and keep right on yelling for blood, and everyone without a brain'll just move on to crucifying someone else after they're done with you. No one person is gonna be able to fix this mess."

Steve gave in after a disturbingly-short debate. "I need to do something," he muttered.

"So let's do something," said Wanda. "Let's talk to Stark." She smirked at the startled looks Scott and Sam gave her. "He may have agreed with the Accords where the Avengers were concerned, but not what's happening out there to innocent people. We're not the only ones who've been hiding our heads in the sand until Sam forced us to stop - and thank you, by the way," she added to Sam. "You were right. We may have opposed the Accords, but some of us...me, I mean...our actions indirectly led to this. People are being detained because governments imagine me. I have to get off my ass."

"What's to stop 'em from putting you in that collar again?" Scott asked quietly.

Sam held his breath. Wanda looked down, but said, "I don't know. I just have to do something."

To Sam's intense relief, once they filled the others in, even Stark was against Steve throwing himself on the public opinion sword. "Not now. Not like this. If the king of Wakanda's gonna withdraw from the Accords with a big, public condemnation, that needs to be the lead story."

"We will form a coalition," said T'Challa. "Nigeria, Kenya, and most of the other African signatories to the Accords were already having second thoughts after the truth of Lagos was revealed. For us to form a faction in the United Nations has been contemplated for a long time, but always prioritized our domestic concerns. We won't neglect that, but can't afford to overlook the international stage any longer."

"No 'murica first, huh?" muttered Scott. Sam snorted.

To Sam's intense irritation, Stark hemmed and hawed at the idea of repealing the Accords. "Look, the situation with the detentions is bad, but not all of it's verified - "

" - if the words 'fake news' come out of your mouth, Stark, I swear to God," Sam snarled.

"I am NOT Ronald fucking Bunt, got that, Wilson?!"

"I'll concede your grooming is better, but that's all," Sam retorted.

"Sam, c'mon!" Steve protested, at the same time as T'Challa drawled out, "Gentlemen..." and Wanda said, "This isn't helping!"

Natasha stepped towards him. "Stark, you still want the Avengers in check? Fine. We can volunteer to be under UN oversight. But not for the price of putting an entire population of the planet 'in check."

Stark raised his eyebrows at her. "I thought being Russian meant you didn't care about piddling little
human rights."

She folded her arms and stared him down. "I said this doesn't surprise me. I didn't say I thought it was okay, or that we should do nothing about it."

Sam had a feeling Stark's position was more about pride and posturing than what he really felt, but bit his tongue this time. T'Challa pressed, "If it's possible to preserve the Accords while ending the attacks, we can do so. If not, it may be necessary to begin again, and craft a treaty that doesn't allow its members to disregard all human rights."

After a long silence, staring at some distant point on the ground, Stark nodded. Weird how Steve and Stark both did that when they were stressing about something with no simple answer, Sam mused. Then again...maybe not all that weird. Maybe they wouldn't be at each other's throats over everything that's different if they weren't alike in a few ways.

Stark murmured, "I want it to stop. I've got a lot of people working on it behind the scenes. Officially I'm completely off the Stark Industries books so the Accords doesn't extend to the company through me. You know, like Bunt promised to do when he was elected, but didn't."

"Stark Industries is still an American corporation, so they're still subject to the Accords," Scott pointed out.

"Not the way I am personally. I'm an Avenger. I can be ordered to do Ross's dirty work, but a private company and its employees can't. Neither can Stark Relief International. Granted, that isn't stopping Ross from trying, but Pepper's got some of our best legal guys fighting it out. Either we'll win in court or they'll run out of funding trying to make us, because we'll drag that shit out for years. Cap'll die of old age before we ever actually respond to any of their subpoenas, let alone produce any tech for this."

Steve began to smile, an honest-to-God grin, not just that forced good humor ever since all hell had broken loose in Lagos. Sam couldn't help smiling too, just at the sight of it. (Okay, it galled a little that Stark had been the one to draw it out.)

Nat was smiling too, though with a sly quirk. "Have we reached an understanding, your highness?"

"The beginning of one, at least," said T'Challa. He looked at Steve, who nodded. "Stark, I'll return your suit to you if you will agree to two terms: the first is that you don't disclose any of Wakanda's technology, our defenses, or our guests."

Stark studied him. "Want me to take a guess on the second term?"

"That you neither directly nor indirectly attempt to interfere with James Barnes for as long as he is my guest."

Stark didn't look at Steve, and Sam would have bet good money that was deliberate. But Stark did look slowly from T'Challa to Wanda. "Are you that sure that he's no risk to anybody, highness? You really prepared to gamble all this to protect him?"

T'Challa didn't hesitate. "Yes. It isn't a gamble, because I am sure. If Wakanda is penetrated to the degree necessary for Hydra or anyone else to enslave Barnes again, the Winter Soldier will be the least of all of our problems." He looked at Steve again, and in the end, it was Steve who came out with it.

"After Zemo tried to use the words, Bucky was suicidal." Stark stared. Steve took a deep breath and went on, "We wouldn't let him. The doctors came up with the...compromise, I guess you could call
it. He went back into cryo."

Even Natasha blinked, and looked from Steve to T'Challa. After a few beats longer, so did Stark. His low voice was more incredulous than accusing. "You've...got...cryo tech?!

T'Challa smirked. "We do. I doubt we've ever used it in quite this manner before; it's normally for patients in the most critical condition, to suspend them until treatments can be readied. My doctors were not pleased by the options, but the alternative was that he would lock himself away in terror and total isolation, or continue seeking his own death. He was prepared to die rather than lose control of his mind again."

"He was," said Wanda softly. "I was there. I felt it, heard it."

"So..." Stark frowned. "How long?"

"Until we have found the way to break Hydra's conditioning. It took some persuasion. He feared the risk to innocents as long as he is vulnerable to the trigger words."

Nat tilted her head. "That's why you told me not to destroy the material in Siberia. You need it here."

"Yes."

Steve stiffened, but she nodded with a small smile. "Okay. I'll get it to you discreetly, unless you want to send someone back with me."

"Hydra had cryo tech too," said Stark. "How can you be sure they can't get access to him?"

T'Challa smiled coldly. "Because their cryogenic technology was stolen from us, and it was always severely flawed. Why do you think Hydra and the Russians didn't place hundreds of their agents in cryogenic stasis whenever they weren't in use? It would have prevented the many defections that occurred." Nat nodded thoughtfully.

"The serum," said Clint. "Every human being known to have been subject to a cryo attempt has either died or the stasis just didn't take. Hydra's tech only worked at inducing true stasis because Bucky had the serum."

"Exactly. Hydra had cryogenic technology, but they've never overcome the imperfections - deliberately placed by our engineers to prevent espionage, in some cases. They don't have our technology, nor could they use it even if one of their own engineers somehow gained access to Barnes." T'Challa looked hard at Stark. "As you say, I'm gambling with a great deal if I'm less than certain. So I made certain before we even made the offer to him - and he wouldn't accept until we made him certain. An intruder could not even move the chamber, much less bring him out of stasis."

Silence fell as Stark digested it all. After a long time, he finally looked at Steve again. The two men gazed at each other, as if each was waiting for something. Finally, Stark huffed and jerked his head towards Wanda. "Oh, go on, you know you want to. Ask her."

Steve sighed and looked at Wanda. She just nodded.

"Then you agree?"

"Yeah." He sounded a little bitter about it, where Sam stood, but apparently it was enough for Steve. More to Sam's surprise, Steve looked at Wanda, who nodded again, then turned to T'Challa.
"Show them. They'll believe you then."

T'Challa too turned to Wanda, and at her nod, he beckoned. "Then come."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Tony Stark meets Bucky Barnes face-to-face again in the way he least expected, while T'Challa enters the international stage to fight the atrocities under the Sokovia Accords - but meets someone else who has worked out where Steve Rogers is.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

President Ronald Bunt - President of the United States, elected in 2016 on a platform of America First. Likes to Twitter, very aggressive in foreign policy. No, he's not based on anybody. No, seriously. What?
Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark meets Bucky Barnes face-to-face again in the way he least expected, while T'Challa enters the international stage to fight the atrocities under the Sokovia Accords - but encounters someone else who has worked out where Steve Rogers is hidden.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to everyone for the wonderful feedback! Please keep it coming!

Canon Note: Nothing in Civil War suggested Sharon Carter was found out for returning the suits to Steve and Sam, and if you're looking for a fic where she's just a pretty face, this is not that fic. While this fic doesn't outright ship them, their feelings for each other are complicated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen

BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA

So there he was. The guy who'd beaten Tony's dad to death on the street and strangled his mom in their car. Just...leaning there in a glass chamber, eyes closed. Like Han freaking Solo, only more...calm? Peaceful wasn't the word Tony would really use to describe this.

Dunno how Steve can deal with it. The thought slipped out before Tony could check it, and he just managed not to turn and look at Rogers. But his traitorous mind held onto that musing. Must've killed him. Must still be killing him to see his buddy like this. Then it hit him. Aw, fuck me. So this is what's been eating him. This is why he was so scared of pissing T'Challa off. Barnes is completely at their mercy.

Nobody said much of anything. Tony and Nat stared at Barnes in that cold, cold-looking chamber and...took it all in. The Wakandan doctors milled around doing their doctory things. Even doctors in Wakanda wore white coats. Little commonalities like that would usually make Tony smile, but not now, because he kept expecting to see Bruce out of the corner of his eye. Some of them stared at Tony, unmistakably assessing whether he might pose a threat to their patient.

No one from Steve's team said anything, and Tony very determinedly didn't look at them.

It was Natasha who broke the silence in the end. "I take it you have some ideas of how you can break his conditioning?"

A medic who was by far the smallest person in the room but unmistakably the HBIC (even in the presence of T'Challa and those scary/hot bodyguards of his) looked at T'Challa and Steve, then...
answered. "Yes. Our psychologists and neurologists are certain. It is the antithesis of the human psyche to be programmed this way, and such programming has deep weaknesses. It may not feel that way to the victims, but it can be undone. Time is on our side."

Tony couldn't seem to stop staring at the man in the chamber, and was only dimly aware of Natasha, talking to T'Challa and the Wakandan medics behind him. "I think I know what material from the records in Siberia will be most helpful, but before I go back, I should talk with your research team. They may have other items they want me to look for."

"Thanks, Nat," Steve said in a rough, quiet voice.

She answered softly, "It's true, you know. When you see someone under that kind of control...or when you've been under it, it feels impenetrable. If there's a way to defeat it...the implications are huge. I'll help Barnes for you. I'll help them for all of us."

"May we talk, Miss Romanoff?" asked the littlest medic.

"Of course. Steve, Sam, come with me. Clint, you too. There may be other places to look." Tony didn't watch them leave, but saw T'Challa step towards him out of the corner of his eye.

"He's secure here. Until Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris are ready, he'll be safe from interference."

The chamber was fully integrated to the floor and ceiling. There'd be no way for somebody to just disconnect it and cart Barnes off. "All codes can be deciphered," said Tony. "Biometric locks can be fooled."

"Not ours. Perhaps with enough time and determination, you yourself could hack our coding, but I know of few men on Earth who are your equal," said the king. "And we identified the way to prevent fooling of biometric scanners long ago. A fingerprint or retina scan is insufficient. Brain waves and pulse, on the other hand, combine in patterns as unique as DNA."

That piqued Tony's curiosity enough to break the spell that kept him staring at his parents' killer. "You've got biometric scanners that read brainwaves?"

T'Challa smiled. "We do. And they distinguish between the signatures of simple stress of work and the terror of coercion. Even if an intruder could penetrate this far and force a doctor or even myself to begin the process, the system would quietly alert security - and Barnes wouldn't awaken. The vibranium residue that enhances my people also distinguishes us from foreigners to the scanners. There are very few places in Wakanda that an intruder can hide for long without being detected."

Tony sighed. He didn't want to concede this, wanted to poke a few holes in King Pussycat's confidence. Nothing good would come of being that damned cocky.

"Stark. " T'Challa waited until Tony turned and looked him in the eyes. "Barnes is not responsible for your parents' deaths." Tony's eyes felt hot, and the roaring in his ears rose up again, like that day in Siberia. Only...not as loud. He could hear over it now, whether he wanted to or not. "No one could have withstood what was done to him, for the length of time that he was in Hydra's power. I've seen him under the influence of those code words. We tested it to begin the work of undoing it."

Tony ground out through clenched teeth, "It's not okay."

"No. Of course, it's not. Nothing about this is 'okay'. Hydra is an abomination. The suffering they've inflicted is unforgivable." He stepped closer to Tony. "You want justice for your family. I understand that all too well. If you believe this man must answer for them in his own right, then let it wait until he's no longer under Hydra's influence. That's the only way to truly know what was in his own mind
when he acted at their direction."

Tony's jaw hurt. He kept grinding it until pain was shooting through his teeth, fighting not to...not to what? Not to agree? Not to disagree?

*He killed my mom. But they're interning people like animals.*

"*This is internment!*" Steve had fumed.

"*With 500 acres and a media room!*" he'd argued. Vision had been keeping Wanda company.

Those kids getting pulled out of schools, out of hospitals, those parents getting pulled out of immigration and social services lines...*What kind of conditions are those people in, the ones getting yanked off the street? Who's keeping those kids company?*

As if he could hear what Tony was thinking - hell, maybe there was even more to those vibranium-induced enhancements than anyone knew and the Wakandans were telepathic - T'Challa said, "My friend in the US, a mutant, she is a teacher. She's very angry at me for helping bring the Accords about. She works with mutant children, and says that fourteen that she knows of have been taken in the past six months. She's part of a team that began for purposes very like the Avengers, but they can't go out into the field now without being fired on by the authorities."

Damn it. "Okay," Tony muttered. "Okay. As long as he's here in cryo, I'll leave it alone. But you better be right nobody can get to him."

"I need more, Stark. You can't interfere with him while he's in Wakanda, whether in stasis or not. He's under my protection, and when he comes out of stasis, he will be under the treatment of my physicians. Until he leaves Wakanda of his own free will, neither you nor anyone else have any right to him."

"Fine." Tony pointed at T'Challa. "But if you're wrong, and he hurts anyone else, it's on your fucking head, your highness. Remember that."

T'Challa didn't hesitate. "I do. I've known that since I first chose to shelter him. He's a victim, as was my father. As were your father and mother. You and I could not save our parents. There's still a chance to save Barnes, and I will take it, for his own sake and in honor of my father's memory."

Tony turned away from him and the cryo chamber and shrugged. "On your head be it. I want him punished, but as long as he stays in Wakanda, I'll wait, and I won't try to force him out. There's no statute of limitations on murder. Now gimme my suit back. We've got work to do."

"Yes, we do."

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**VIENNA, AUSTRIA**

*In a dramatic blow against one of the Bunt Administration State Department's biggest initiatives, a coalition of African nations have announced that they are withdrawing all support for the Sokovia Accords because of alleged human rights violations being carried out under its terms! South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the kingdom of Wakanda joined in a powerful condemnation of how the Accords are being implemented by many nations, including the United States, and accusing the State Department of negotiating the treaty under false pretenses!*

"*Deception by omission is still deception,*" said King T'Challa of Wakanda. "*The omissions and misrepresentations of the Lagos tragedy were not accidents, but calculated to create a very different*
version of the event and the Avengers' involvement than what actually took place. Even if the report had been accurate, the manner in which the Accords are now being implemented is inexcusable. My country will not endorse an international witch hunt, nor the detention and imprisonment of men, women, and children who have committed no crime, and who are given no means of redress. I call upon every nation who declares itself and its people to be 'free' to condemn in the harshest terms these abuses, and commit, as we have, to ending them."

Embattled U.S. Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross said he's deeply disappointed by the African coalition's decision, but insists that no civil rights violations have occurred in America with respect to the Accords, and that any detentions have been for reasonable suspicion of unlawful behavior. However, when pressed by reporters, he admitted that "unlawful behavior" includes failure to register as enhanced individuals, and that detentions may occur upon "reasonable suspicion" including secondhand reports.

New York criminal defense and civil rights attorney Matthew Murdock says many of the reports of enhanced humans amount to "spectral evidence" comparable to claims in the Salem witch trials. ACLU attorneys have won injunctions and writs of habeus corpus for the release of thirty-two children, removed from schools and held by authorities without access to their parents in California, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. A class action has been filed on behalf of seven of those children, all under age ten, on the basis that the so-called "indications of enhancement" were nothing more than chronic illness, behavioral problems, and in four cases, autism.

Civil rights advocates allege that as many as fifteen thousand individuals in the United States have now been detained without access to lawyers under the Sokovia Accords for suspicion of being enhanced humans. Secretary Ross acknowledged that as written, the Accords apply to all individuals enhanced beyond ordinary human abilities, whether the enhancement was "natural," such as mutants or so-called "inhumans", or artificially induced as most famously the Avengers, Captain America, Wanda Maximoff, and James Buchanan Barnes. Ross maintains that the Accords are necessary to protect domestic and international security from terrorism and vigilante violence.

Multiple media sources have attempted to reach Tony Stark, officially leader of the Avengers, but his press agents say that at the moment, he has no comment.

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**BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA**

"T'Challa got my mom to move. My mom!" Sam marveled a few weeks later. "My stubborn-as-shit mom!"

Laura Barton grinned. "He can be very charming. It might not have been as hard for him as it would've been for you. What about the rest of your family?"

"That was all of them, my mom was the only one holding out. My sister's been dreaming of relocating for years; Stark's money was the boost she'd been waiting for, since God knows her boss was never gonna give her a raise. My nephew's less than happy about changing schools, but he'll get over that eventually."

"Maggie and her boyfriend were less than happy too, but to protect Cassie, they agreed back when Stark told them," said Scott. "I'll say this for Stark, he's thorough. And generous, I guess."

"Yeah, he is," said Steve.

Sam grinned. "So's his highness. Mom wouldn't take Stark's money. She blames him for this - not even just me being a fugitive. She knows what's going on with the Accords and how much Stark
was involved. She wouldn't even talk to him."

"Tony didn't write the Accords," said Steve, annoyingly defending the guy who still barely had the time of day for him. Sam shot him an exasperated look, but this time, Steve held his ground. "Pointing fingers at a scapegoat instead of the responsible party is part of what fueled them getting passed in the first place, Sam. Ross and his allies fooled T'Challa. They fooled Tony too, convinced both of 'em that this was the answer."

"T'Challa had the information hidden from him," Clint countered. "Same as the rest of the African coalition after Lagos. Tony knew your team didn't just blow up a building and then say 'not my problem' - shit, sorry, kid," he said, seeing the way Wanda flinched. "And he damn well knew what Ross's agenda was with regard to Banner, and he's supposed to be Bruce's friend! I get it, man," he huffed, seeing Steve about to protest again. "You want to reunite the team and mend fences. I get it. Hell, I don't blame you. We all fucked up at some point in some way, but Stark...man, he was the one with the most power and the most knowledge, and he still screw us all for the sake of his guilty conscience over Ultron - which was his fuckup, not ours. If we get the chance, if the world needs us again, I'll fight beside him, no problem. Watch his back in combat, warn him of threats, no problem. But outside the team? I can't just brush it all aside and pretend we're buddies."

Steve sighed and leaned back. Sam stared up over the garden walls as if there were answers in the clouds. The sky overhead was robin's egg blue, and it was pleasant outside in one of the enclosed palace gardens. For late September, he would've thought it would still be pretty hot in this part of the world. Who knew, maybe all Wakanda's incredible technology could moderate the air temperature as well.

Stark had been back twice since he and T'Challa had agreed that he wouldn't reveal Bucky or the rest of the team's presence. People knew he had gotten to visit Wakanda, but when questioned, he just blithely commented that the gardens at the guest accommodation were gorgeous, the women were gorgeous, and he really liked the booze. If the US authorities or intelligence were pressing him for details, he hadn't confided in any of them.

For the most part, Steve wasn't giving Sam and Clint a hard time for not wanting to consider Tony a friend any longer, no matter what he did to amend the Accords. They were still fugitives, and in effect, so were their families. And Tony damn well had no business being whiny about any of them holding grudges as far as Sam, not with the way he avoided even talking to Steve.

The "Secret Avengers," as Scott started calling them, still were a secret even from most Wakandans. They stayed only in the parts of the palace and gardens that were restricted, but T'Challa gave them freedom where he could. His people who did know were friendly and accommodating, and Minister Jelani and his family arranged some discreet tours for the team and the Bartons to show them some of the country's sights in cars with tinted windows.

They hadn't seen much of T'Challa over the summer. He was busy running the country or - to all of their glee, even Steve's - raising holy hell in Vienna over the Accords, both how they'd come about and how they were being carried out. Ross was taking a lot of heat, and one time they all had shared a smirk with Stark was when he reported that Stark Industries had so far won every case against Ross and every government entity demanding resources and manpower for their search for suspected enhanced or the fugitive Avengers.

Better yet, President Bunt had tweeted after another shouting match in Vienna that Ross was a good general but a political bumbler. "Well, I agree with half that tweet," snorted Clint. "I don't think he was all that good a general."

"Hell, no," Sam said, with feeling. "I didn't work on any of his campaigns, but I know people who
did. His idea of strategy was throwing as many warm bodies into the field as possible and bitch at them to keep going until they're dead or get where he wants 'em, and it didn't matter how many corpses get piled up. No price too high for the goal, no matter what the goal was. Ever."

A few days later, all of them cheered (even Steve) when Princess Shuri gleefully led them into the media room to see a breaking news report: Embattled Sec. of State Ross to Resign?

Ross wasn't backing down one inch on the Accords. He insisted that they were absolutely necessary to prevent vigilante violence and terrorism by enhanced individuals. "Flaws in the execution don't merit starting from scratch. We can remedy any overreach by federal agents through better training and discipline, if necessary."

"Mr. Secretary, what about the doctoring of the Avengers' reports on Lagos?"

"Those reports were not 'doctored,' they were revised for clarity just like any other final reports issued by this Department. Any omissions of detail were immaterial, and at worst, a minor error - the point was still entirely accurate. The Avengers entered into a situation without authority or oversight, and forty people paid the price with no accountability. Let me remind you that the Sokovia Accords were in progress long before Lagos and named after an even worse tragedy caused entirely by unauthorized actions of the Avengers and other enhanced groups. Even before Sokovia, in light of the deaths tolls in New York and Washington, this Department under my predecessor Secretary was working to establish appropriate supervision of enhanced activities."

Shuri scoffed along with the rest of them. "He refers to the Iron Man hearings in 2010. I was there in America for some of them. All they wanted was control and access to the technology, and they were no more truthful there than Ross's people were about Lagos."

"So is Ross pulled off the UN negotiations for good - I hope?" asked Wanda.

"I'm not sure. Our ambassadors haven't seen him since last week, and my brother arrives in Vienna today. I don't think they'll allow him into a room with T'Challa and the Nigerian President again, not if they can avoid it."

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**VIENNA, AUSTRIA**

T'Challa hid his smugness when the US Representative to the United Nations attended the latest meeting in Vienna, rather than Secretary Ross. All the signs suggested that the ever-fickle President Bunt and his allies had decided Ross was causing them more problems than he solved, and his forced resignation wouldn't be long in coming.

However, the international pressure remained to "find a solution" with the Accords, rather than abandon them. U.S. Senator Robert Kelly's powerful faction obstructed any effort to exclude "natural" enhancements of mutants and inhumans from the Accords, and other groups wanted "technological enhancements" like Stark's suit and Wilson's wings (and T'Challa's suit) more clearly enveloped. A large coalition - supported by no small number of T'Challa's own people - wanted to keep the oversight of the Avengers in place.

The day's negotiations yielded next to nothing in the way of progress from anyone's perspective: nobody seemed willing to budge. Public opinion remained divided on the subject of the Accords, the Avengers, and enhanced people and their place in the world.

The only part of the proceedings that didn't have T'Challa wanting to don his suit and start clawing faces off was when a group of emissaries from the CIA spoke, admonishing the participants to report
any sign of the fugitive Avengers on their soil. He'd known that the manhunt was continuing in the hands of a very determined team, put in place by Ross and his allies, but this was the first time discussion of that activity had returned to the Accords negotiations.

T'Challa was pleased to see that most of the envoys from outside the US had expressions ranging from polite attentiveness to indignation. *You are not entitled to tell sovereign nations what to do on their own soil. After you induced so many of us to join in the Accords through a web of falsehood, you have some gall demanding that we assist in apprehending people regarded as heroes by many in the world.*

Of course, his own thinking had been the opposite not long ago. He still wasn't certain of what the answer was to finding the medium between accountability and total control, but he no longer wanted to see any Avenger (or any other enhanced man or woman) in the hands of Ross's people.

Still, he would have to take great care. Sooner or later, given his own shift in position, someone would begin to suspect that he knew more than he was saying.

He was right.

As the day's proceedings were closing, one of the CIA agents who T'Challa remembered as having been present in Berlin and speaking often with Rogers and Wilson, broke off to approach T'Challa's group, holding a folder. "There was a small amount of material left behind in your guest office in Vienna, your highness. The investigation is closed, so I wanted to return it to you."

"Thank you...Agent Carter, I believe?"

"Yes, sir." She put the folder in Minister Jelani's outstretched hand, but the intense way she looked at T'Challa said this was no mere courtesy. T'Challa took it from Jelani, murmured his farewells to the other envoys, then went casually back to their secure offices.

On the second page of the innocuous paperwork was a note with a set of coordinates and two words, carefully written in the Wakandan alphabet - but spelling out in English:

*About Rogers.*

"Find this place and initiate surveillance."

It was an industrial loading area along the Danube, deserted and damaged by a fire a few months before. T'Challa's team sent in a surveillance drone ahead of him, and once Carter arrived alone, he joined her in his suit.

"Agent Carter."

"Your highness." She had good strategic instincts, meeting him in the shadows where they wouldn't be visible to any other surveillance, and she did spot the drone. Once he waved it back a few meters, she said very quietly, "You have Rogers." T'Challa nodded. "Against his will?"

"No. He's safe and well, free to leave whenever he wishes."

She pondered that, then confessed, "I gave him their suits back, in Berlin. Before the airport."

T'Challa was impressed. "And you were not found out?" She shook her head. Very impressive. "So you're his friend."

"Yes. And I need to ask, off the record, to visit him. In Wakanda, if that's where Barnes and Wilson
are. There's something I need to tell him."

He rather doubted it was a declaration of love, though it was obvious that more than mere conviction of his innocence had driven her to disobey her superiors. There was emotion behind her request. Still, she hadn't broken with her colleagues openly, which meant she still felt some loyalty to the CIA.

With some reluctance, he said, "I'm afraid I cannot permit that, Agent Carter. You serve the American Intelligence, and would be duty-bound to report what you see and learn from your visit to Wakanda. My country is slowly beginning to open to the outside world, but we're unwilling to be subjected to scrutiny of our internal affairs."

"This is entirely personal," she said, betraying some distress. "The CIA would never know I came, and even if they found out, I wouldn't say anything. I...I've learned something, and an investigation's under way that I can't let him find out about on the Internet."

"Perhaps a meeting outside Wakanda could be arranged."

She looked away. "Maybe, but...his friends need to be with him. I don't want him to hear this alone either."

T'Challa gazed at her, then stepped closer. "What is it you want to warn him about?"

They locked eyes, and though he believed the anguish in hers, he didn't relent. He had compromised Wakanda's borders for Romanoff and Stark already when many of his advisers were deeply against it. However painful this was for Carter - and probably Rogers - if it didn't concern life and death, he wouldn't open Wakanda to an active CIA agent.

"If I tell you now..."

"So long as it does not concern the security of my country, I will disclose it to no one, even Rogers, without your permission."

He waited while she considered her options, then visibly steeled herself and spoke, even more quietly than before. What she said made T'Challa's heart plummet. Logically, it was not unexpected if one considered that her grief was not only for herself but for Steve Rogers, but it was still difficult for T'Challa to maintain objectivity. His own grief and rage remained raw, and flared back to life on behalf of others.

"I am...deeply sorry, Ms. Carter," he murmured, dropping her title. "I believe that you would not consciously act as an agent of your government for a task like this, but I must also consider the feelings of my people and my government. I will tell you that yes, his friends are with him. Perhaps a video call? I can arrange an entirely secure signal."

Carter sighed and rubbed her eyes, though no tears had escaped. "I guess...you know, people have tried to access your signals before, and I don't think anyone's succeeded. That'll have to be enough. I'd rather him be anchored somewhere than in the wind when he hears this."

"I agree with you." All that T'Challa had seen of Rogers suggested the man had a cooler head than many - maybe even T'Challa himself. But how he would react to this, T'Challa didn't know him well enough to predict, and it would simply be a kindness to ensure that he was among trusted friends, who would support him...and if necessary, restrain him from rash action. Perhaps many things would be different if Shuri or Jakarra had been with me in the moments after our father died. "Do you have a device that isn't monitored by your employer?"
"I can get a burner tablet." She pulled a notepad from her pocket and wrote down an IP address. "That's my off-grid address. I'll send you the connection that I'm going to use."

"I will be back in Wakanda tomorrow. I'll wait for your signal." T'Challa started to move away, then paused. "I'm very sorry. That must have been terrible news for you as well."

She managed a weak smile, but her eyes were hard. "Thank you, your highness. I've got plans for how to deal with it. I just need to make sure Steve doesn't do anything impulsive."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Sharon warns Steve of what's she's discovered about the machinations behind the Accords, but this time Steve doesn't want to hold the truth back from Tony. And Tony has his own demands, namely what information Natasha is using to exonerate Bucky. Nasty revelations abound to break our heroes' hearts.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction, mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

Minister Jelani: A Wakandan minister of inter-tribal and international diplomacy, son of a tribal chief who sometimes opposed T'Chaka's policies, but supports T'Challa's plans for Wakanda. T'Challa's age (40ish), married with 9 children.

President Ronald Bunt: President of the United States, elected in 2016 on a platform of America First. Likes to Twitter, very aggressive in foreign policy. No, he's not based on anybody. No, seriously. What?
Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Sharon warns Steve of what she's discovered, but this time Steve doesn't want to hold the truth back from Tony. And Tony has his own demands, namely what information Natasha is using to exonerate Bucky. Nasty revelations abound to break our heroes' hearts.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming! This chapter was originally two, but because I wuvs my readers and the discussions have been awesome, here's an extra-long chapter with several big reveals, and some progress in healing the relationships between our heroes. Enjoy!

**Canon Notes:** This chapter explores a LOT of my pet theories that drove this entire fic into existence. I diverge from the MCU by combining Natasha's history with the comics, making her considerably older than she appears. I also draw a little from the comics canon in that the Winter Soldier had a number of mission failures and the trigger words were developed in order to prevent them. However, this fic does assume Howard Stark did not have active knowledge of Hydra's infiltration (rather, as Zola implied, he was a danger to them), and that the 1991 "mission" was intended to kill two birds with one stone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Sixteen**

**BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA…**

T'Challa questioned his choice again and again as he quietly arranged a video conference in the most secure room of the palace. *She cares deeply for him. She would not betray him or risk his safety; she has even defied her superiors to help him. She trusted his judgment when few others did. Perhaps I could have arranged for her silence on our capabilities. I allowed Romanoff to enter, and her allegiance is far more suspect.*

Still, the decision was made. He quietly informed Romanoff and Wilson, saying only, "I am calling Captain Rogers to a video meeting with Sharon Carter. She has told me her news, and it's truly terrible. He'll need friends. Her investigation is in progress, and he must not interfere now."

But Steve Rogers was no fool, and he knew when Okoye led him to the conference room that bad news would follow. He kept his formal pose even after the doors were closed, noting Romanoff and Wilson there waiting too. "Your Highness."

"Captain. While I was in Vienna, I spoke with Agent Sharon Carter. She asked to visit you in private
here. Due to her connections with the CIA, I unfortunately cannot permit that, but arranged this secure conference. She requested that Agent Romanoff and Airman Wilson be with you when she tells you what she has discovered." He activated the video feed, and went to Wilson's side, bitterly aware that he was about to watch a man's heart break.

"Steve?" Agent Carter looked very tired. "Hi."

Rogers was already too agitated to wait. "Sharon, what the hell's happened?! Has someone come after you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Everyone's okay, but... we found out something from...from the past. Steve, listen." Carter put a hand on the camera, where he'd see it. "You need to brace yourself. And... promise me, you won't try to leave Wakanda, not now. I've got an investigation going, and it's at a crucial point, but I couldn't let you see this on the Internet. Once we have our guy, the story is bound to get out."

Next to T'Challa, Wilson held his breath. Rogers took a slow, deep breath before answering. "... okay. I promise. I'll stay – try to stay out of it."

Carter huffed, jaw clenched. "There's no immediate threat, if that's what you're worried about, not to you or any of the Avengers. It's damage done."

"Sharon. You're making me crazy. Just...tell me."

Her eyes filled, though T'Challa had no doubt she was trying with all her strength to keep control. "It...it's about Aunt Peggy. Her death." Steve's breath caught, and Wilson flinched. Carter's voice grew very rough as she forced herself to speak. "It wasn't just... natural old age. She didn't suffer, we're certain of that, she was asleep when it happened, I swear to God, Steve, I put two different medical examiners through the wringer, and they're sure, she didn't feel anything - " She was forced to break off when her breath failed.

Steve remained seated and silent, but his breathing grew ragged, and he began to shake. Veins stood out on his face and neck, and Romanoff and Wilson exchanged frantic looks. T'Challa knew what they were wondering: did they dare touch him at this moment? Yet how could they not try to comfort him? Was there any comfort to be had?

"I'm sorry, Steve," Sharon whispered. "We thought we had her protected. We were all so damn determined that she would die in peace, of old age, we had her in that secured facility all the way to the end. I'm so sorry we failed."

When Steve held out a hand to the screen, it broke the paralysis of his friends, and each put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't...do that to yourself. I know how conscientious you were, she wouldn't want you to..." He stopped and stared at his knees. To T'Challa's immense relief, he reached up and patted his friends' hands, giving them the signal to release him. "Who? Why?"

Carter pulled herself together and quickly wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry, that I can't share. I can't risk it. The first step is getting our hands on the assassin – alive. Then I don't care how long it takes – the piece of shit will roll on whoever gave the order, and I'm going to parade them through the streets of London by their fucking ankles before I put them in the darkest, most festering prison on Earth and take them apart piece by piece until I know the name of every man and woman associated with them – and then I'll do the same to all the rest."

Steve's trembling grew worse, and Romanoff and Wilson stepped closer still to his sides, readying themselves in case he simply leapt from his chair and made for the door. "When...you've got
them…"

"You'll know. God help me, it'll be the most public arrest possible. She spent her whole life defeating them, and they couldn't touch her until she was 95 years old asleep in a nursing home bed." There were no longer tears in Sharon Carter's voice. Now, there was only rage. "I'm sure they thought it would be simple to get away with. They're going to pay, and the whole world is going to watch."

"Zemo?" Steve's voice hardened. "That's the kind of thing he'd do."

"No, we've accounted for all his contacts and movements. She was off his radar – thank God." Carter pressed her palm to the screen. "You promised. This is a murder investigation, not an active threat. She'll be avenged, but it's not a job for the Avengers." She gave a weak, watery smile, but Steve covered her palm with his. "Keep your promise. Stay where you are. Let me do my job this time."

"The CIA does murder investigations?" Steve scoffed, but didn't remove his hand.

"We do when the victim was an international dignitary at a residence facility of other equally high-profile dignitaries. Say it, Steve. Please, let me hear you say it."

Steve sighed and closed his eyes, but his shoulders slumped. "I promise. I won't…do anything."

"Or say anything. You could compromise the whole investigation."

"I won't go looking, but..." he sat up, struck by a thought. "Tony. Does Tony know?" Carter shook her head, and Wilson made a noise of protest, working out where this was going. "He deserves to know. He was close to Peggy too."

"Steve! You promised!"

"I can't – you don't understand, I can't keep him in the dark this time. Let me explain it to him, Sharon. He'll understand. Please."

Carter dropped her chin in frustration. "That's not fair. You can't put a condition in place after the fact."

"It's not a condition," Steve said – but his voice broke. He looked away first. "So much of this is because I didn't…I need to trust him."

Wilson moved, shooting Romanoff an appalled look, but she put up a hand. T'Challa nodded, also raising a hand for silence, and after a moment of visible frustration, Wilson stilled himself. Steve Rogers and Sharon Carter would have to work this out on their own.

At length, Sharon sighed. "Look, I can't very well stop you. You can tell anyone you want, and there's nothing I can do about it."

That struck Steve more than her pleas had, and he shrank in his chair. "I wouldn't…I wouldn't do it lightly. I promise. And I…I'll make sure, okay? I'll talk to him before I tell him, and if he doesn't agree to let it be, I won't tell him. I just…he's got a right to know. Or, at least a right to a chance to know."

Sharon gazed at him for a long time. Finally, she relented. "As always, I'll put that much in your hands and just have to trust your judgment. Just remember there are bigger issues here than you and Stark."
"I know. I won't forget. You've risked so much to help me." He put his hand on the screen again, and she covered it with hers. "Thank you, Sharon."

She looked past him to T'Challa. "Thank you for this, your highness."

T'Challa stepped forward, recognizing they were ready to the conversation to end. "You're most welcome. If I can be of assistance, you may contact me. I'll do what I can." She nodded, and he ended the call.

Steve rubbed his eyes and sat back in his chair, then looked from Romanoff to Wilson to T'Challa and chuckled bitterly. "Yeah, I can see why you wanted reinforcements. Maybe there's a building around here that needs to be renovated; I'll demolish it with my bare hands."

"I'm very sorry, Steve. You and Agent Carter have every right to be angry, but I hope you'll keep your promise to her. She reasoned that you were in Wakanda without being informed by anyone who knows, and she has told no one except myself that she knows this. She has been very loyal to you."

Steve rubbed his eyes. "I need...I need to tell Tony. When's he coming back?"

"I don't know," T'Challa admitted.

He sat up and looked at the screen. "Then could we..."

"Jesus, man, take a breather first!" Wilson protested, but Steve shook his head.

"No. No, I need to. I can't keep this from him too."

On the other side of him, Romanoff winced, and gave T'Challa an appealing look. "You're sure?" T'Challa. Steve nodded. "Very well."

Stark was cheerful towards T'Challa when the video call connected, but his guard went up the moment he saw the others. "What's the big emergency?"

"There's something we've found out. I thought you needed to know." Steve's voice was impressively level. A mask had fallen over him at the same time that Stark had donned his own.

"There's a change." Stark could truly be an ass at times.

Wilson intervened in a scathing voice. "Whether you deserve it or not, he's gonna trust you again, Stark, and God knows, he shouldn't. There's nothing you could do about this investigation except fuck it up, but he's bound and determined not to keep another secret from you, so stick a cork in it!"

"Investigation? About his frozen boyfriend?"

"No, it's not about him!" Wilson snapped. Steve turned towards him, as if to restrain him, but he couldn't seem to pull the concentration together enough to get ahead of Wilson's frayed temper. T'Challa wondered if Stark would notice, but Wilson went on. "For our source to even tell Cap, he had to swear not to interfere, not to say anything, not to risk interfering until the fucker who did this is behind bars. Seriously, Steve, don't tell him anything until he agrees to the same, or you're breaking that promise."

Stark's hackles went down as he grasped that this was a matter entirely separate from his parents' killer. In a low voice, he said, "What're you saying?"
"It has nothing to do with Barnes, or any of the Avengers," Romanoff put in. "Steve had to beg to tell you, just because you'd want to know."

"Okay, fine, I'll forever hold my peace, now what the fuck is it?!" T'Challa forced himself to keep quiet, and waited. Steve looked at his friends. "It's your call," Sam said.

Steve swallowed hard, and turned back to the screen to take a leap of faith for a man who had made it clear he had little for Steve. "It's...about Peggy."

Stark sat entirely still in front of his camera, as if the playback had frozen for several beats. Finally, he blinked. "Carter?" Steve nodded. "What..." Stark was far too intelligent not to already be piecing it together. "Fuck."

Steve was silent for so long that Romanoff finally took over, speaking dispassionately. "It was murder. Sharon Carter worked out Steve's here, and arranged with T'Challa to call him. She didn't want him to find out when they arrest their suspect, but if anybody talks or tries to intervene now, it could blow the whole investigation. There's no way the assassin was working alone, and she's looking for the ringleader. Steve promised her he wouldn't interfere, but he begged her to let him tell you, because you'd want to know, even knowing the risk that you'd decide you know better than everyone else how to play conspiracy-buster."

It had to be a good sign, in a bitterly ironic way, how similar the expression on Stark's face now was to that ugly day in Siberia, in the moments after he'd seen Zemo's video. For T'Challa was sure that Stark could not, even in his lingering anger at Steve Rogers, find a way to blame him for his choices tonight.

He was right. "I won't," Stark muttered, lowering his eyes. "I'll let her do her job. If she thought it was worth the risk to tell him, 'n let him tell me, I'll wait. Tell her if she needs anything, call me."

He abruptly tapped a control, and the screen went dark. "Well, that heartfelt gratitude really touches me," said Sam.

Steve smiled wryly and started to answer, but his voice choked off, and he couldn't. T'Challa politely looked down, and took no offense when Steve left the room without another word. Sam and Romanoff exchanged a long look, then nodded to T'Challa and hurried after him.

T'Challa sat down alone and let his head sink into his hand. Baba, why does it still shock me so much to see that the world is such a cruel place?

Steve said almost nothing to anyone the following day. Clint knew something had gone down, but all Nat and Sam would say was that he'd gotten some painful news. So Clint didn't pry, and though Scott obviously wanted to, he didn't, and nor did the Wakandans even when Steve beat six punching bags clean off their mountings in the gym.

At one point, Clint and Laura were hanging out with Wanda in the kitchen of the Avengers' guest house, making snacks, when Steve came in. Laura and Clint could tell that he wasn't in a good mood, but Wanda's bowl slipped from her hands and hit the floor with a crash. They all jumped, but Steve just looked at her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck for several moments.

Her eyes were wet when she let him go, and if Steve had looked up enough for anyone to see his, Clint would bet his were the same. But he hadn't, just grabbed a bottle of water and fled. "What's..." Laura began.
Clint put a hand on her arm and shook his head. She got the hint and left it alone.

Steve disappeared for the rest of the day, and when Nat returned from her work with Bucky's team, she let slip that he was at the hospital. "With Bucky. Sam and I are taking turns keeping an eye on him."

"I could take a turn," Wanda offered. Nat considered it, then smiled and nodded.

Natasha had arrived back in Wakanda just before King T'Challa had returned from Vienna to set up the call with Sharon Carter. She carried thirty boxes in her jet's hold, and mused that if she wanted to return to a life without conscience and selling her skills to the highest bidder, she could have made billions by selling her cargo.

In Siberia, Argentina, Poland, and China, eleven different Hydra bases deserted at various times in the past century, she'd rooted through dusty storerooms and innocuous-looking file cabinets and expertly-concealed vaults for notebooks, videotapes, and ancient floppy disks. She'd struck the secret homes of agents who'd been off the grid for decades - and found some of them dead, suspiciously recently.

Vasily Karpov's body was still rotting in a flooded interior room of an American house. After ransacking his stash of incriminating material, she'd shifted her search to the old haunts of Sokovia's Echo Scorpion covert intelligence squad.

There were no big surprises. Once Sokovia's government ceased functioning in any meaningful way, Zemo and his men had been left to their own devices. He'd hidden his trail well after Ultron, to the point where a hunter less skilled than Natasha would probably have found only dead ends.

Outside Moscow, she'd found Zemo's final stash before he'd set out for Siberia, and completed her collection of all the information needed to turn a human being into a weapon with no free will.

She insisted on meeting with the Wakandan research team immediately once she landed, and getting those thirty boxes under lock and key before anything else. Luckily, someone clued in to the urgency of the situation and got her straight to Dr. Kelile and the security officers responsible for the Birnin Zana Research Hospital. Once they sealed the material into a bunker outside the city (where they'd reportedly tested the code words on Bucky before he went back into cryo), Nat could breathe a little easier.

After that, she got to work on the material with the Wakandan team, lending them her own experience in the hands of brutal, amoral men.

Natasha had to be impressed by the self-restraint of the Wakandan medics and psychiatrists. Most people would be sickened by many of the documents and videos she recovered from Hydra. Well, it was a fair bet that the Wakandans were sickened by it, but most of them kept impressive professional detachment as they worked through it, and Nat contributed her knowledge of Russian and the inner workings of Hydra and its allies.

For the most part, she let the techs handle converting the old data into digital format and deciding how to splice and sort all the material into formats that would be useful to them, since the medical and neurological team would be handling the strategy for undoing what had been done to Barnes.

But in the process, she had a brainstorm. "Would you mind if I used the material to make a presentation?" she asked the two head doctors.

"A presentation for whom?" asked Dr. Kelile.
"The ICC, the UN. Whichever committee or three have formed to investigate the Winter Soldier or forced enhancement in general. If he's ever going to be safe, even if you're able to break the programming, he needs to be exonerated."

Dr. Damaris, the lead psychologist on the team, raised her eyebrows. "These records could provide powerful proof of his innocence. You would do that for him?"

Nat didn't care to be psychoanalyzed, but on the other hand, her motives were at issue as long as she was allowed in Wakanda. "I don't claim to be that emotionally invested in his freedom for his sake alone, no. But I would do it for Rogers' sake, and in the end, bringing Tony Stark around might save the Avengers."

Dr. Damaris and Dr. Kelile exchanged a long look, then Dr. Kelile nodded. "That is very well."

A few weeks later, when Stark returned...not so much. Natasha was working with records team when he arrived, but he pounced on her as soon as she got back from the bunker. "Really, Romanoff? It's not enough that you stab me in the back in Leipzig, you've gotta do it again before Barnes ever goes on trial?"

Nat rubbed her eyes. Putting together a series of videos that told the story of Barnes' fate was grueling enough without this conversation. "I suppose it's simply not in your DNA to imagine that not everything's about you."

Stark glowered at her. "If it's not at least partly about me, why has whatever montage you're putting together got all the techs looking at me like I've got a terminal disease?"

Well...shit. So someone hadn't managed to maintain a poker face after seeing the subject of some of Natasha's main exhibits. "You made a deal with T'Challa," she warned. "If you go back on that, your reasons won't matter to him, and he's going to get physical."

"I strongly advise you to listen to her, Stark," said T'Challa, materializing in the doorway. Even Natasha jumped. The Black Panther really was like a cat sometimes. Not many people could startle her.

"I made a deal I wouldn't go after Barnes here or try to smoke him out," Tony retorted. "That doesn't mean I'm not gonna have a problem if you try to get him off in absentia without him ever having to answer for what he did!"

And Steve came hurrying in. "What're you talking about?"

Stark opened his mouth, then took in Steve's confusion and - to Nat's complete amazement - caught himself. He looked back at her. "He doesn't know?"

Natasha sighed. Steve stared at her. "Know what?"

T'Challa waded in. "You do know that Ms. Romanoff has been assisting my team in examination of the records she obtained from Hydra." Steve nodded slowly, correctly working out that this wasn't all.

At least it'd had the effect of confusing Tony enough to get him off the ramp up to another meltdown. "Why the hell wouldn't you tell Rogers?"

"For the same reason I didn't tell you. That material is ugly, it's hard to watch, and for both of you, it'd be brutally painful!" she snapped. "I was trying to spare you."
"I...have had...enough...of people trying to 'spare' me, Romanoff," Tony growled. "You've got more evidence about my parents, and I've got a fucking right."

"And I know about the doctors' work, but this is something else," said Steve. "You've got a lot of skills, but parapsychology and neurotherapy probably aren't on the list." Nat couldn't resist giving him a smirk, challenging him on that assumption. "What is it you're making that Tony thinks could exonerate Bucky without putting him through a trial?"

"I doubt it'll be anywhere near as easy as all that. But yes, I've been compiling some of the video records to make it clearer to laypersons how Hydra approached programming him. Some..." she sighed again and amended it, "okay, most of the clips I'm using are about the Starks." Steve swallowed hard, and before Stark could get back to ranting, she pointed at him. "You couldn't stomach half of this stuff, and you are a moron if you continue thinking Barnes is in any way responsible once these records are exposed."

"Fuck you. He had enough brains to plan an ambush and enough awareness to blow out a street camera. He can damn well explain what he was thinking when my dad tried to talk to him!" Steve flinched, and this time, it drew Tony's wrath. "Don't go all bleeding-heart on me again, Rogers, if it'd been Peggy Carter, you wouldn't be falling for any incapacity defense. You want her killer dead more than I do!"

Fuming, Nat shook her head. "Everytime I think you've gone as low as you can go, Stark..."

"Shut up. Well, Rogers? You gonna talk about mitigating circumstances for whoever murdered your best girl?" Stark demanded.

As Nat feared, Steve hesitated a beat too long before saying, "If what'd been done to Bucky was done to...whoever it was, yes."

"Bullshit."

*To hell with trying to be sensitive.* "But we don't know who Peggy's killer is, Stark, and I've got the evidence for Barnes. So put your money where your mouth is," she challenged. "You want to see it? Fine. Your highness, I think the son of two of Hydra's victims needs a little more information on how they trained their assassin."

Tony folded his arms, defiant. "Bring. It."

T'Challa looked dubiously at all three of them, but finally said, "If you insist upon seeing it, Stark, I won't stop you. But Ms. Romanoff is quite correct as to what will happen if you try to break your word."

"I want to see it too," said Steve, and Nat's heart lurched.

"No."

"Nat - "

" - Captain, I know Barnes is your friend, but - "

" - didn't you say before that how we proceed was my call, for Bucky?" Steve demanded. He shot Natasha an irritated look - really unfair, she thought. "Then I should know what's been discovered, and what's being prepared to defend him, and if Stark's gonna get at the videos, I need to know what's in them."
"Steve." She caught his elbow. He glared at her, and she tried to soften him. *I'm trying to help you, you overgrown Boy Scout.* "It'll be very hard on you," she murmured. "I didn't want you to be hurt any more than what's happened to him already has."

He did soften, just not enough. "Natasha, what happened to him happened. It's not about me, and I'm not gonna cover my eyes just because it hurts."

T'Challa insisted on watching it as well, and Nat couldn't very well try to refuse him. But she was glad that a couple of his bodyguards joined them in the bunker screening room. *Since there's a very good possibility that Stark will lose his mind again. Hell, this time Steve might too.*

Romanoff and the technicians had done good work, remastering the decades-old images and sound for clarity. She stayed close to Rogers as the playback began. "When Hydra was formed, it followed Nazi sensibilities about record-keeping and recording: they recorded and saved everything they could point a camera at. So there's far more footage of their work than there is of most shadow groups."

T'Challa ordered the Dora Milaje to wait outside the screening room, and focus surveillance on the viewers, not the recording. There was no reason for the audience to be any larger than necessary in witnessing James Barnes' misery, the plight of his victims, and the pain of the two men who couldn't separate themselves from this story.

T'Challa knew that it was going to be a terrible story.

It began in 1969, footage from a conference room in which suited men were giving reports. Romanoff and the technicians had translated the Russian. *"The Winter Soldier was recaptured at 0600 hours in Amherst, New York after complete mission failure and six months at large. Mission commander, Lieutenant Mosgarovsky, is being questioned for possible sabotage and treason in mission planning."*

Within seconds came the first painful revelation: the target had been Howard Stark. T'Challa saw it coming and couldn't resist turning to look. Tony Stark flinched hard when one of the agents intoned the "mission parameters": a kill strike against Stark, Howard, US.

They soon learned why mission sabotage was suspected: the "mission commander" had chosen the site of the assassination as a Los Angeles movie theater...where Howard Stark was attending a star-studded gala highlighted by a film tribute to Captain America.

Mosgarovsky's torture was filmed too. *"Soldat's file contains warnings to avoid exposure to any references or images of Captain America!"* the interrogating agent thundered as guards electrocuted the bound lieutenant. *"Yet of all public events where the target was expected to be, this was the one you chose! Why, if not to compromise his conditioning?!"*

Mosgarovsky wailed denials, insisting it had been an oversight and the theme of the festival hadn't been known.

The events that had led to the "defection" were dispassionately reported once the lieutenant fell unconscious. The Soldier and two handlers had approached the theater at the time the festival was ending to intercept Stark's driver, only for the Soldier to become distracted by the posters covering the outside walls. Captain America. His iconic uniform and his shield. His face without the uniform. Steve Rogers.

*What must Barnes have felt? What did he first begin to remember?* T'Challa wondered. The Soldier had killed both handlers and fled, forcing Hydra to hunt him for months until he was spotted,
wandering and confused, in Brooklyn. Hydra had run him to the ground a few days later. T'Challa winced at seeing what was inflicted on the mission commander, but there was some reserve to it - the man had been Hydra, and even under torture, proclaimed his full loyalty. Not that it did him any good; the report ended with the man being dragged away to be shot.

Only then was James Barnes dragged into view.

This time it was Rogers who flinched, and T'Challa's heart twisted with pity. Barnes had already been beaten and brutalized within an inch of his life, and he slumped barely conscious in his captors' grasp as they shouted questions and condemnation.

Unlike the captors', Barnes' words needed no translation. He was speaking English, his accent entirely American. "I knew...knew...won't...S-Steve, that was his...Stark...no..."

The routine went on until the guards snapped to attention, dropping their victim to the floor. "He must be fully wiped. There's nothing else to be done." The man never came into view, but Rogers recognized his voice at once.

"Zola."

T'Challa was startled by the sheer hatred that Steve Rogers was capable of betraying. Even Stark turned and looked at him. Romanoff nodded.

The agents fell to arguing while their captive bled and wept at their feet, chanting his friends' names and rubbing his head. He must have been realizing what this "wipe" would entail. Rogers leaned forward as if he wanted to sink into fetal position or leap through the screen to reach Barnes. Romanoff put a hand on his shoulder.

A few of the agents argued against the treatment, but their concern was that loss of his memory would negatively affect his skills. "Muscle memory will remain. He can be efficiently retrained just as he was before."

"And what is to stop him from defecting again after too long out of stasis?"

"A suppression re-trigger must be developed. A means of keeping him focused on his mission in the field. It's just a matter of the correct programming. For now, prepare him for full wipe, and begin duplicating the apparatus at the other major holding bases."


Zola chuckled. "You will, Soldat. You will."

Barnes screamed and struggled as the agents dragged him from the room.


Kill Strike. London, UK. Full stealth. Soldat is ordered to avoid any communication or visual contact with target's face. Strike location vetted, full escort deployment with highest alert, records crew accompanying strike team.

There was a horrid arrogance to a terrorist band who carried cumbersome 1970's videorecording equipment with them to commit murder and mayhem, T'Challa thought dully.

The Soldier, dressed at T'Challa remembered him in the images of Washington, waited at the
window of an empty room, rifle in hand, while his handlers kept watch at the scene outside. It looked to be a high rise building, but the angle was wrong for the men to be watching the ground. The target must have been another building.

At a signal from the watcher, the Soldier readied himself.

"Now!"

With frightening grace and speed, the Soldier slipped into the watcher's place, bringing his rifle to bear on the window, preparing to shoot - then his eyes suddenly widened, and he froze.

"Soldat! Fire!" hissed the handler.

Barnes didn't move, and his expression changed from the intent focus of a predator to the lost panic of a child who found himself alone in the wilderness. He dropped the rifle, backing up, and one of the handlers made the highly foolish decision to try to grab him.

The image tumbled into chaos as whoever held the camera dropped it, but the shouts of the men and the thud of blows remained audible until the clip ended.

The log book came back into view. This time, there was a picture of the target. Steve let out a choked noise and lurched back in his chair, and T'Challa's heart lurched again within him.

The target was Peggy Carter.

*Surviving team reports that target turned to the window during attempted shot. Soldat saw target's face and abandoned mission, killing three escort and one technician. Recaptured nine days later.*

*Program leader reports theories for restraint and containment of assets during missions proceeding.*

Romanoff stopped the replay. Stark didn't object, but Rogers mumbled something unintelligible in protest into his hands. "Steve, why don't you go? You can't do anything for him by watching this."

"No. No. I need to see."

Stark was still staring at the darkened screen as if entranced. "Stark?" T'Challa asked.

Stark blinked and turned, looking with a dazed expression at T'Challa, then turned his gaze to Steve, who was flatly refusing to budge as Romanoff tried to tug him out of his chair. T'Challa thought - or perhaps hoped - that Stark was seeing Rogers and his friend in a different light.

Rogers finally snapped at Romanoff. "I'm fine! Get off me! I'm staying!"

Ridiculous, of course. No one in the room was fine. But Romanoff relented, and at T'Challa's nod, she restarted the video.

1984. A dozen men kept guns at the ready as four more strapped and bolted Barnes into a chair, lowering a metal apparatus over his head. The efficient sadism of its designers left Barnes' face visible, and the naked terror in his eyes struck T'Challa like a blow. He couldn't help turning again to look at Steve, whose jaw was clenched tight as he fought not to react physically.

A voice that T'Challa now recognized as Arnim Zola directed the technicians operating the machine, though Zola's voice had an oddly mechanical timbre to it.

"You must not forget the words, Colonel! This exercise is pointless otherwise."
The colonel, whoever he was, looked sourly towards the camera. "With this many guns, I think it is pointless."

"If Soldat is to be an effective asset, we cannot be forced to rely on handlers maintaining his loyalty at gunpoint. We must have a non-combat trigger ready. You will be grateful, Colonel, when you no longer fear for your life when Soldat is preparing for deployment! Now, continue."

The colonel sighed heavily, but it was a put-upon sigh of an irritated, bored man being forced to get on with a chore he didn't especially like, not of a human being who had any conception of the suffering of another human being within arm's reach. He raised a hand as Barnes hyperventilated, and then:

"Zhelaniye."

One of the technicians pulled a lever, and the machinery's buzzing was drowned out by its victim's screams.

The colonel was oblivious, interested only in his task. The technician, too, paid the captive's agony no mind, but moved his hand to a set of switches, eyes on his superior. The machinery wound down as Barnes' chest heaved with gasping sobs and his screams died down. But it was clearly only the beginning.

Whether it was some aspect of this abominable "training" or simple sadism, T'Challa couldn't guess, but the colonel waited until Barnes was looking at him again before pronouncing the next word. "Rzhavyy."

The devices had a different pitch, and flickers of light were visible, framing Barnes' head as he shrieked and seized.

T'Challa quietly stood and began to pace the room. He understood why Romanoff wanted those who would one day be judging Barnes' guilt to see this horror. He even reminded himself that having taken on the task of freeing Barnes from the conditioning, he too had a duty to know and acknowledge how it had been inflicted in the first place.

But the images and sounds on this tape were enough to make him want to shout for the replay to end, or simply collapse and be ill from the hideousness of it.

All ten words and phrases were recited. With each came a different set of torture from the machinery, new injections of drugs from the intravenous lines connected to Barnes' flesh. The poor man grew less responsive the further his captors went in the sequence. By the final phrase, his eyes were empty, and he'd stopped screaming.

The colonel stopped, examining the small notebook in his hand, then gestured, and the guards lifted the apparatus from Barnes' head. "Are you ready to comply?"

Barnes blinked, sluggish and confused. "Yes."

"Confirm readiness to comply, Soldat."

"Ready to comply."

"Get up."

The Soldier stood, only for his legs to buckle, and he collapsed. Not one of the nearly twenty men in the room moved to catch him.
The colonel turned his face and shot the camera a sour look. "Now what use is he?"

"The West has a saying, Colonel: Rome was not built in a day. This sequence is showing great promise to reinforce his compliance. Now we must simply fine-tune it for combat readiness."

A medic, examining the IV bags, spoke up, "Perhaps adrenaline in the final phase, Doctor?"

They went on talking about practical things like dosages and stimulants. They moved around their prized machinery, resetting switches and calibrating voltages, stepping right over Barnes' crumpled form.

T'Challa let himself press his hand against the wall, just for something real and solid. The next scene, also in 1984, was a conference room, mercifully (or not) with no sign of Barnes. "The loss of another valuable asset should be all the proof you need of how vital this program is," said Zola's voice.

Someone was pacing the floor, but the camera was pointed only at his feet, for some reason. "Even Colonel Karpov agrees now, this automatic reset sequence is showing good results. But it still wasn't enough for him to complete the Stark mission."

Here in the screening room, Tony Stark's breath caught. "That's Alexander Pierce," Steve murmured. "This is the bunker room in Camp Lehigh."

On the screen, an agent still dressed in combat gear made a report. "Soldat did not become aggressive to us this time, sir. The mission failed, but with no casualties to the deployment team."

"And he's safely back in custody and being punished for his failure," added Zola.

"Has he said anything?" asked Pierce. "Is he able to give a mission report?"

"We tried, sir. He keeps repeating, 'I know him.'"

Tony made a noise in his throat. T'Challa went closer to him. "Are you all right?" Tony just nodded.

Pierce stopped moving. "Let's continue with this training program. Moscow reported that one of their last Black Widows has gone rogue and still isn't recaptured. That's a huge blow for them, and a boost to the value of this asset. If we can make this trigger sequence work, defection won't be an issue anymore. But I need you to train him out of facial recognition. We've got to address his past head-on, erase it, make sure that absolutely nothing can distract him."

"I agree, Mister Sec -- sir. The human brain is a dynamic thing, but we have already expanded the limits on how it can be trained and adapted. This is simply a question of how to make sure it adapts to ways suitable for us. His survival instinct must focus him entirely on the here and now, with only his skills and the mission directive in his memory. It can be done."


Tony pulled himself from his chair and paced along the wall, giving T'Challa a vague half-smile as he recognized they were both doing the same thing. "Not the only thing you should've said. That last clip. A Black Widow defected. They're talking about you, aren't they?"

Romanoff didn't turn around and sat completely still in front of the screen, silhouetted in the light. "Yes."
Steve sat back up. "Wait…how can it? You'd have been a kid then."

T'Challa had already worked out the answer, and from Stark's lack of surprise, he must have done the same. But they both waited to hear what she would say. After a long silence, she said, "No, I wasn't. I'm not as old as you. But I'm not thirty-three either."

"Zola said you…" Rogers sighed and dropped his head into his hand. "Hell, why am I thinking he was telling the truth?"

"Parts of it were true." She sighed and put a hand on his. "Most of it, even. In a weird way, you could say I was born in '84. That was when I defected."

T'Challa stepped towards them, thinking to spare all three from more gruesome images. "What remains?"

"'Training,' she answered, with as much hate in her voice as Rogers had expressed for Zola. "Making a useful asset out of a person who used to have friends and family. The Starks. Peggy Carter. Steve Rogers. All of the Howling Commandos. Barnes' sisters, his parents. Everyone whose picture they could get their hands on who'd ever had a connection to James Barnes was on their knees in front of him with a kill order. If he hesitated, they punished him. Then put him through another round of 'calibration' on the machine and the drugs with the trigger words."

"Who's in the costume?" Tony asked roughly.

"Prisoner. There was no shortage of men, women, and children to train their agents with. Slap a facial prosthesis on, and they had an endless supply of memories to kill and resurrect for as many times as necessary until the conditioning took."

"What happened when he refused to kill?" asked T'Challa, though he knew the answer. It would be well for Stark to hear it.

"Punishment. A wipe of his memories. Recalibration, the full sequence of the words and the chair. Drugs. An unrelated mission or two. By now, 1987, he hadn't had a mission failure in three years—and that was the one you heard Pierce talking about before. In 1984, they'd sent him after Howard Stark a second time, and he froze. He still remembered, so this was the solution."

Stark's pacing grew more frantic. "How long? How long until he stopped hesitating?"

Romanoff's voice was dispassionate. It chilled T'Challa to be reminded of the voices of the Hydra technicians, bereft of any distress in the face of an atrocity. "Three to four years. This," she gestured to the screen. "This was near the end. He hesitated, but with enough prompting, he'd make the kill without turning on his handlers. And by prompting, I mean electric shocks, drowning, and breaking his bones."

Stark kicked his chair over. "Tony!" Steve jumped up.

"Y'know, anyone would think she was talking 'bout wrestling stats!" Stark hissed.

T'Challa caught his arm. "It was your demand to see these clips," he reminded Stark. "She warned you they would be horrific and painful, but you were certain! If you've changed your mind, then we can halt the playback and go."

Romanoff turned her head, gazing at Stark with cool eyes, daring him to judge her. "You should know, the last one is the worst. Nobody gets tortured, but you'll learn who's really responsible for what happened in 1991, just in case you haven't already got it through your head, Stark."
He rounded on her, and T’Challa readied himself, as did Steve, but Tony stayed still. The merchant of death and the Black Widow stared each other down, him blazing with rage, her cold and unyielding.

His voice low and hot, Stark said, "Play it."

T’Challa released him, but stayed close. He had little doubt of how all this would end.

December 1991. The video showed no faces, only the surface of the conference room table where a photograph and file on the Winter Soldier were visible. "This is our guy," said Pierce's voice. "He’s our most successful asset, more kills than anyone else."

"Yeah, but this is the guy who also bungled this same mission twice before!"

Stark let out a snarl and grabbed one of the empty chairs, flinging it against the wall. Steve and T’Challa caught him. "Tony!" Steve wrapped him in a bear hug. "Who?"

Breathing heavily, Stark was oblivious to T’Challa waving away the Dora Milaje. "Stane. I know that voice. It's Obadiah Stane."

Romanoff’s coldness was frustrating T’Challa at that point. "Are you really going to tell me you still haven't realized he was neck deep in Hydra support?" she asked.

Steve spoke up for Tony. "You know it's not the same as seeing it, Nat. Is this really necessary?"

"I don't know. Is it?" She looked from Steve to Tony, still emotionless.

Tony shook Steve off. "Play it," he growled.

"It's taken me two damn years to convince Howard that those samples need to be turned over to the Pentagon. If something goes wrong and we don't get them, we may never get another chance!"

"You're in a building with a human supercomputer reincarnated from a Hydra founder, my friend," said Pierce. "One of our primary projects has been correcting the bugs in this asset's software. We've tested him out on Howard for seven years. He won't fail this time. You're right; we need a guaranteed kill. This asset is the one to do it. He doesn't miss, and we've made sure that even if the target's someone he knew back in the old days, he won't hesitate. We put Howard's picture in front of him in the mission packet last night, and he didn't blink."

"I gotta say, that whole memory wiping thing is really unsettling. But just remember, if you're wrong, I get a refund and pain and suffering. Howard's been causing me a lot of stress and asking some really uncomfortable questions."

"The collapse of the USSR has us all on edge, but in the end, it'll work in our favor. How'd you convince him to move the goods?"

Stane laughed. "I told him that if anyone managed to steal the serum packs, they could make five super-assassins!"

Both men laughed. "Poetic. Okay, I'll confirm with the deployment team that he's in position and give the go order, if you're sure you want it to be tonight. Howard's wife is traveling with him, you know."

Tony made a different noise in his throat, like the whine of a frightened child.
On the screen, Stane sighed as if in regret. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. Maria doesn't know a lot of details, but she's loyal to Howard's vision. She'd support Tony taking over at the first opportunity, and the last thing we need is the kid being groomed to his sainted deceased father's ideals and following his father's values."

"Really? I know he's book smart, but it's hard to imagine Junior posing much of a threat."

"Really, buddy. I'm Cool Uncle Obie at the moment, but that won't stick if Maria's still in the picture. Behind our little genius frat boy is a chip off Howard's block. Sometimes...I have to say, I think it's possible Tony may even be smarter than his dad."

"Okay." A hand pushed aside the file to reach for the speaker phone in the center of the table. "This is Command Alpha Pi. Deployment is a go. Sanction and extract. No witnesses."

"Copy that, sir."

The video changed to an overhead camera of the tunnels in Siberia. Four guards aimed their guns at a figure who stepped in with a blast of blowing snow. "Halt!"

T'Challa recognized the voice of the man in the lead as the colonel. "Soldat. Mission report."

The Soldier stepped into the light, proffering a metal suitcase. His eyes were empty, just as they'd become when T'Challa had spoken those ten words. "Mission accomplished. Extraction complete. Witnesses eliminated."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** With the truth behind the Winter Soldier's "training" and the planning of Howard and Maria's murder revealed, Tony and Steve have another meltdown in Wakanda. It ends differently from the one in Siberia.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Damaris: Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.
Seventeen

Chapter Summary

With the truth behind the Winter Soldier's "training" and the planning of Howard and Maria's murder revealed, Tony and Steve have another meltdown in Wakanda. It ends differently from the one in Siberia.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: The feedback and discussion of last chapter has been truly amazing! Thank you all so much and please keep it coming (and thank you also for keeping it MOSTLY civil this time around!)

Canon Notes: The prelude comics for the MCU imply that Hydra and Strucker may have presented themselves as SHIELD when they roped in the Maximoffs, but I hadn't read that when I wrote this. So this fic assumes Wanda and Pietro either knew from the start or realized very early that Strucker was Hydra, but chose to stay out of hatred for Tony Stark. What can I say, I like full-blown redemption arcs, and given the way her background differs from the comics, I think MCU Wanda did need one, and as with all of our heroes, fanfic lets us get far deeper in depth than the movies have time for.

Senator Robert Kelly is a hardline anti-mutant politician from the comics and X-Men movieverse. Senator Ellen Nadeer is an anti-Inhuman politician affiliated with the hate group Watchdogs from Agents of Shield. Graydon Creed appears in the comics, and is the founder of an anti-mutant hate group, the Friends of Humanity. This fic is AU on all of their various fates, because I need them alive and scheming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

Steve heard Tony snarl, and tried to grab for him as he lunged at Natasha. She sidestepped his furious blows while deflecting his punches with one hand and just looked at him, unrepentant. "You wanted to see it, now you've seen it."

"Bitch!" Tony roared.

"Tony, stop it!" Steve bellowed, the horror and nausea in his throat forced back down by the more urgent issue of stopping another rampage. "This isn't gonna change anything!"

"Fuck you, Rogers! Get off me! Get OFF!"

"STARK!" T'Challa joined them from Tony's other side, and the two of them wrestled him against the wall. With no suit, it was a fight Tony couldn't win. He struggled insensibly for several minutes until finally sagging in their grasp, breathing hard, teeth bared, shooting murderous looks at each of
The Dora Milaje burst in, but T'Challa barked an order at them in Wakandan. All but Okoye left again, and T'Challa switched to English. "Mr. Stark will be staying for a little while. Secure his suit."

Tony roared and swung at him. "You lying sack of shit!"

T'Challa caught his wrists with no more exertion than Natasha, shoved Steve aside, and slammed Tony back against the wall. "Hey! Come on!" Steve yelled, but Nat moved up next to him and caught his arm to keep him from intervening physically.

"You are not flying away in this state, Stark," T'Challa said, nose-to-nose with Tony. "I said I would trust you to keep your word, but I'm not a fool. Your judgment is compromised at this moment, so you will remain grounded until you've calmed yourself." He lessened his grip a fraction and softened his stance – a little. "Better that than for you to act rashly – again – and force us all past the point of no return."

This time, when Tony wrenched away, T'Challa let him go, but he promptly blundered into Steve. "Tony. C'mon," Steve said softly, trying to be gentle about it. Tony's eyes when he turned were far too familiar, burning with rage and hurt as they'd been in Siberia. "We all got in over our heads tonight. She warned us; we made a choice. It's both of our faults."

Tony shook against Steve's outstretched arm, but he didn't retreat – or attack – like before. "Come back to the palace," T'Challa said. "Rest. Those three men have all paid with their lives, and Hydra will continue to pay for what they've done. Seek justice, not vengeance."

Tony glowered at him. "Whatever happened to you wanting to be an Avenger?"

T'Challa half-smiled. "I am still. I speak for the rest of your friends as much as for myself – and for you. Siberia gave you no peace, Tony, and if you'd succeeded in killing James Barnes that day, it would have been still worse. The truth would still have come to light, and you would have destroyed yourself, Captain Rogers, and any hope for the Avengers. You would have given Zemo what he wanted, and even he would have found himself still hopeless. Don't let it happen now."

Tony's breathing grew ragged. "You seriously think it's possible to rest after this?"

"Then come to the gym," Steve blurted. "We'll go a few rounds. Fifty rounds, 'till we drop. I'm not sleeping tonight either."

When Tony sagged, staring at the floor, Steve didn't think the storm had passed so easily. More likely that had just been the first squall.

When they got back to the palace and into the gym, Steve knew it was coming. Tony's eyes flashed as they met on the sparring mat, and he came at Steve with a volley of blows that weren't pulled at all. Steve did pull his punches, but even without the suit, Tony was fast enough to keep him moving on instinct, evading and counter-striking and dodging – and that was perfect. No time to think. At least, not much time to think. Steve went on the offensive, pulling his own punches, but aiming to keep Tony's brain busy, anything, anything but on that tape and Howard's face and Bucky's screams. But defense wasn't enough and Tony kept attacking, his strikes growing frenzied and forcing Steve to retreat.

Finally, a hook slipped past Steve's defenses and clipped his jaw, making him stumble, and Tony all but tackled him. "You satisfied now, Rogers?" Tony hissed. Startled, Steve faltered, and got another fist to the face. A blow from Tony without his armor wouldn't bruise for long, but it still hurt. "Well?
Y'got what you wanted, you satisfied now?"

Steve's temper frayed, and he shoved Tony off balance and to the mat. "Go to hell, Stark. None of this is *satisfying*, and believe it or not, you're not the only one who lost people to those bastards!"

"My parents!"

"It WASN'T HIM!" Steve roared and slammed Tony to the floor. Tony grunted in pain, and Steve retreated, fearing he'd hurt Tony again if they didn't quit. "You KNOW it wasn't him; they PLANNED IT! Goddammit, Stark, you think I'm *satisfied*?! My best friend had his arm ripped off and his brain torn apart all so he could forget everything he ever knew and murder whoever they wanted him to murder, and they fucking *trained* him to kill Howard – Howard was my friend too! You know it, you said it, you hated him for it, and you were right, he made me what I am! All that, everything he did for me, and I failed him! I failed him, and he's dead because of it!"

Tony had stopped fighting, but the words cascaded out of Steve. "Now I know what they did but it's not enough to save Bucky, Bucky's frozen or has to live in fear for the rest of his life that their *training* will turn him back into Hydra's monster, and NONE of it had to happen, all those deaths, all those people, could've prevented it if I'D – JUST – GONE – BACK FOR HIM!"

Steve's chest seized up, his voice choked off, and he didn't understand why, he still needed to say, needed to shout, or strike out or something – but it reduced to helpless bursts, gasps…sobs. Steve huddled on his hands and knees, hunched toward the gym floor next to Tony, who slowly pulled himself into sitting position and stared with an unreadable expression as Steve rambled on, his voice ragged and broken. "I left him – Tony, I left him, my best friend – left him to rot in a canyon, and they found him, they made him – I flew off to die, and I left them to undo everything, everything Howard and Peggy built, everything we believed, and Bucky – Bucky…"

It rose up and tore through the last of his control, and he bent nearly double, heaving out sobs from the marrow of his bones. "I'm sorry, Tony – I'm sorry…it was my fault! I left him an' I gave up. I didn' look back, I just went on to die, an' I didn't…"

He started at the feel of a hand on his back. Tony had moved closer without him realizing it. When he looked up, no longer caring enough to be ashamed that anyone would see him like this, Tony's dark eyes were…different. The flames had gone out. It was almost as if Tony was no longer thinking that all he wanted was to rip Bucky to shreds. "Your perspective, Rogers, kinda warped. You…two, three weeks out of the ice, you were back fighting the good fight. I hated you for it, y'know."

"Princess, last summer, what she said. It's true." Replacing the anger and hate in Tony's eyes was something quieter, but no less painful, and it was finally enough to pull Steve out of the cyclone because he just wanted Tony to not look like this. "It is," Tony repeated, as if he was answering a denial that Steve hadn't said aloud. "I tinkered – seventeen years, tinkered with toys and partied when I could've taken control. Obie ran things and I was fine with that. I didn't care. At least you didn't have to be captured and held hostage for three months before you started caring and trying to do the right thing. And…'s not like I was much better as one of the good guys." He was quieter, his voice strangely calm and level, but Steve watched with strange fascination as tears escaped his eyes and fell, no matter how many times he wiped them away. "Obie – Stane had the measure of me. Charlie Spencer's mom, she had the measure of me. Guess in a lot of ways I've never changed."

Steve was tired. Too tired to even try to say anything other than the truth. "She didn't understand, Tony. It's true of all of us, not just you. Or at least you and me both. We always go forward, 'cause that's all we know how to do, and we know better than to try and look at the wreckage we leave
behind. Sokovia, Lagos...DC, New York...we try and we try, and there's just...death everywhere. Even when we win. Especially when we win."

They stared at each other, disarmed, disarmed, stripped bare, and broken on the ground, half a world away from home.

Then the gym door opened and broke the spell; Steve and Tony recoiled in panic, too exhausted and drained to collect their scattered thoughts – only to see Wanda come in, her face wet and eyes red. "Will you two please stop feeling so damned loud?!"

And they broke. Steve just collapsed, falling off his hands and knees to sprawl on the floor face down, and when he looked to the side, he saw Tony lying on his back, and they were both gasping for breath as they laughed and cried at the same time. On the edge of his vision, he saw Wanda, kneeling next to them, face in her hands as she giggled and sobbed and hiccupped.

Eventually, it was Tony who pulled himself back to his knees first and pulled Wanda into a hug. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm so sorry. For everything. Ever. I'm so fucking sorry."

"Will you two please stop feeling so damned loud?!"

She clung to him, to Steve's surprise. They'd been civil before Lagos, but he was pretty sure she'd never let Tony hug her, or that Tony would have tried before. "I know. I know that now. Me too. You and me...all of us...we've got it wrong so many times. Even when we get it right, we get it wrong."

"We've all fucked up," he said, grinning weakly at Tony's mock-astonished expression. "Lagos was me, not you. I should've smelled a trap. All Rumlow had to do to compromise me was say his name, and he knew it."

"You keep trying to take that away from me, and you can't," she said. "Not in the victims' eyes. Not in mine either. Everyone saw: I had the last chance to stop it. I failed." She looked at Tony, "We've met some of them. The victims who were hurt. The families of the dead." Tony grimaced, but she shook her head. "It was...strange. A few forgive us, but most don't, yet...even the ones who don't, some of them say we have no right to disband the Avengers."

Tony frowned, and Steve nodded confirmation. "We took this on, protecting everyone we can even when we aren't wanted. Some of the families said we don't have a right to give it up and retire." He sighed. "I wish I could say it was a sense of duty that always has me sticking my nose where I'm not wanted. Maybe it's just arrogance."

"I don't think so," said Wanda. "Not for either of you. Anymore," she amended it when Tony snorted. "You've tried to turn away, even when people tell you to turn away, but in the end, you couldn't. Maybe the families understand it better than we did: none of us have the right to give up what we chose to take on. Least of all me."

"Wanda, come on - " Steve began.

"I was Hydra," she hissed. "Stop trying to excuse it. Pietro and I were young, yes, but we knew what Hydra was, and we didn't care! All we wanted was to hurt Tony Stark. Even when I saw..." she stopped and swallowed hard. "...when I saw inside you, at Strucker's base, I knew you weren't the man you'd been when my parents died, but I didn't stop. I still wanted to destroy you, so I hurt you. Then Ultron came to us, and we never thought about who else might be hurt in the process. By
the time we knew it was out of control, it was too late."

"You lost your brother, kid," said Tony.

She looked down. "Lots of people lost brothers. Sisters, children, parents. I owe them more. I owe
the world more. You were right about me. I'm a weapon of mass destruction."

"No. " Tony surged towards her and grabbed her shoulders. "Listen to me. That was a fucked-up
thing to say, I didn't mean it, and you need to never think it. You're a person, Maximoff, not a thing.
All that - look, everything I said, everything I did...goddamn it. It wasn't even about you. I was trying
to put pressure on him to give in." He gestured with his head towards Steve. "Fuck. I told myself it
was okay; Vision was keeping you company, the compound was nice, so holding you there without
a word to you okay. It wasn't. Wanda, I fucking took you hostage!"

"I know," she sighed. "I know. And...no, that's not okay, but I know you were afraid of me.
That's...I've no right to have a problem with that. Not after what I did to your minds. Did Vision tell
you what I told him?" Tony shook his head. "I said that I can't control other people's fear, only my
own." She sighed and pulled away from Tony, drawing her knees up to her chest. "I tried hiding,
letting you and Vision keep me away from the outside world. That was wrong. I took on this power
to hurt people. I have to use it to help now."

"That's all we can do," said Steve. "We can't bring anybody back or undo any damage. Maybe this is
the only price we can begin to pay: just keeping saving as many people as you can. I saw your team
in Alexandria. You did great." Tony shrugged. "Aw, come on, Tony, modesty's not a good look for
you." Wanda giggled, and they all grinned. "Maybe it wasn't an alien invasion or a coup d'etat, but
people would've died in that flood if you, Vision, and T'Challa hadn't been there. We need to own
when we make mistakes, but you can own when you do get it right."

Tony sprawled back on the floor for a full body stretch. "About Washington...Ross was full of shit, y'know. You didn't cause that death toll, Hydra did. Your team's the reason it wasn't a thousand
times worse." He groaned as several of his bones made alarming popping noises. "Damn. We need
to be put in check." Steve winced, but Tony finished slowly, "We needed to be put in check, but this
wasn't it. I was focused on us. The Accords weren't about us, were they?"

"I don't know. Maybe they were," said Steve. "At least to some people, they were. But to someone
else who took part in writing them, they were meant for something bigger, whole populations
condemned for the actions of six people. Even if the Avengers were as bad as Ross said, forcing
thousands or millions of mutants and inhumans to register or be imprisoned isn't the answer."

"Robert Kelly," said Tony without hesitating. "He's a Senator, authored the Mutant Registration Act.
It's failed to pass on its own - so far - but he folded a lot of the provisions into the enacting legislation
of the Accords. He and Ellen Nadeer – the anti-Inhuman Senator who pals around with the
Watchdogs – and Graydon Creed - the bigoted shit who founded Friends of Humanity - they're the
ones leading the faction arguing the Accords don't go far enough, and mass detention oughtta be
the first step."

"Jesus God," Steve muttered. "Are they more than splinter groups?"

"For now, no; Friends of Humanity is mostly a splinter group. But Ronald Bunt's following for
president started as a 'splinter group,' so I wouldn't want to rest on that. Wilson's right. We need to
get into the fray again. We made a mistake..." Tony sighed and shook his head. "I made a mistake,
pushing you to stay out of Campaign 2016. Maybe we couldn't have prevented Bunt from winning
the election, but we'd have been a voice, letting people know a platform based on xenophobia and
misogyny's not okay."
Steve nodded, and added, "It's not all on you, Tony. If I'd really wanted to throw down a gauntlet to Ronald Bunt and his ilk, I'd have done it no matter what you and the publicists said. When have I ever let something like that stop me?" Tony and Wanda chuckled. "I bowed out. After Ultron, training up the new team, searching for - for Bucky, Peggy's health declining, I just...didn't want another fight. So I looked the other way and told myself it was out of my hands."

"You can't save everyone, especially not from themselves," said Wanda.

"No. But I've been dodging any situation that I can't punch my way out of, as Nat put it." Steve pulled himself to his feet, grimacing as every one of his muscles protested. Even the serum didn't render him immune to stiffening up. Wanda and Tony followed suit, and the three of them wandered out into the gardens. "We can't deploy from Wakanda - not the unofficial Avengers. It's not fair to T'Challa, or the rest of his people. They've taken a huge risk to shelter us. We have to go somewhere else." He smiled and raised a hand before Tony could open his mouth. "Don't, Tony. It's not fair to you either. You bankrolled us enough, and so has T'Challa. It's time I figured out how to lead a team without putting the burden on a backer."

Tony snorted. "That's the Depression talking, Rogers. It's not a 'burden' to me, and I doubt it's a burden on his majesty - not a financial one, at any rate. I'm a billionaire, and so is he. We operate on a scale you can't wrap your mind around, and it's money well spent."

"Still, I'm not just talking about the financial burden. If we can't find a way to operate in the light of day, that's my problem to solve," Steve insisted.

Tony heaved a melodramatic sigh. "Cap, seriously. You're still looking at the world in black and white. Declarations of principle are all fine and good, but there're limits. You go running off without support, you're risking your team and everyone you're trying to help."

Steve stared at him, then looked down. "I've got money. Even my little fraction-of-a-percent of all the licensing revenue and seventy years of Army back pay added up. "I should be bankrolling us, not you."

"You can't. You're a fugitive. Your accounts are all frozen."

Damn it. Steve couldn't look up. In other words, apart from telling everyone who to punch and when, I'm absolutely useless. Wanda put a hand on his arm, and he winced.

"Sorry," she let go and said. "I told you: you think and feel loud. I know it's impolite to listen, but you're wrong."

Tony settled on a carved wooden lounger and gazed up at them. "I'm no telepath, but I can hazard a guess what you're thinking, and if it's that you're the only one responsible in any way for the team, that's bullshit. I went into this with my eyes open, and so did T'Challa. Both of us took less on faith than you did."

Steve sat in the chair nearest him and stared out at the darkened gardens. "It feels wrong. I mean - you're right, you're both right, but...this feels wrong. I don't like not having a solution."

"We'll find one," said Wanda. "We'll find one together."

None of them felt like going back to their rooms, so in the end, the three of them lapsed into a comfortable silence - for the first time in a long time - out there in the sitting area of the gardens. Eventually, exhausted and distracted from the horrors they'd seen in Hydra's videos, even Steve and Tony's restless, active minds succumbed to the warm air and the soft sounds of the sleeping
landscapes, and drifted into darkness. They lulled Wanda along with them.

But a few hours later, tension and terror crowded into her dreams and wrapped themselves around her throat. She awoke, gasping, to the sound of Tony's ragged, frantic breathing and the roar of monsters imagined and remembered in his mind.

"S-Stark?" she croaked.

_Falling...light and fire...blood...he fell, he saw her fall...he couldn't breathe...gunshots...reaching for the suit...reaching..._

"Tony!" she gasped, and Steve lurched awake on the other side of her.

Sleep held Tony paralyzed, leaving unable to do more than twitch and gasp, but when she grabbed his hand, it broke the spell, and he whirled into action. Wanda just managed to get her hand up to deflect his fist, but he still knocked her onto the terrace, and Steve scrambled to their sides.

"Hey, Tony - Wanda, what's - Tony, wake up!"

Tony's mouth came unhinged, and he let out an inarticulate yell, struggling against Steve, but overbalancing Steve Rogers even by surprise was impossible. Wanda sat back on the stones, her weight on her scuffed palms as she was carried along with the tide of frenzied emotions. Steve's bulk, strong and warm, turned into an anchor, and Tony grabbed on instinctively, coming back to reality in lurches of sensation and memory until his eyes opened, then focused, and he understood his surroundings.

"Wha - wha's..."

"Tony, it's okay, it's okay, you had a nightmare," said Steve.

Tony blinked, panting as he struggled to make sense of the words. Around the edge of the garden wall, a figure appeared silhouetted against the dim lights. "Captain? Is everything well?" asked a palace guard.

"Yes," called Steve, not releasing his grip on Tony. "Just a bad dream, sorry. We're okay."

The guard vanished, and Tony mumbled, "Sorry." He blinked sleep-fogged eyes at Wanda. "'re you okay? Did I hit you?"

"No," she assured him. "I just lost my balance. It's all right."

Tony scrambled free of Steve and stood up. "Guess I'll go back to my room so I don't wake up the whole palace. G'night." He hurried off down the terrace towards his own guest quarters.

Steve and Wanda looked at each other, then Wanda went after Tony. Steve started to follow, but she shook her head urgently at him. After a few faltering steps, he relented and turned back.

"Tony!" She caught up with him on the terrace to his own suite, in a guest house separate from the Avengers'. (Undoubtedly chosen by T'Challa in case they couldn't all work out their differences.)

Tony paused in the doorway, his shoulders hunched and looking everywhere but her. "I'm good, kid, it's okay. It happens. You okay? You sure I didn't hurt you? I'm shit at slumber parties; I kick."

"You didn't hurt me; I ducked in time," she said dryly. "But I wanted to offer, if you want, I could stop the bad dreams tonight - "
It was only an offer, but Tony recoiled as if she'd brandished a hot iron at his face. " - No! No, no, don't!"

" - I won't!" she protested, backing away. "It was just a suggestion!"

Tony sagged against the wall, breathing heavily. "Shit. I'm...I'm sorry, kid. It's nothing against you - not really, I mean..." They both knew he was lying. Wanda tried not to let it show on her face. "I just...I just don't want my head messed with. Even in a nice way," he added, trying in vain to soften it. "It's not really your fault."  I flip out too easy. I flip out and get people killed. Can't lose control of my head again. "Even without, y'know, powers, I'm too easy to manipulate. That's the takeaway from all this. I can deal with nightmares. Hell, I should deal with 'em."

"No," Wanda whispered. He wanted to pull away. He was embarrassed at being seen so weak. But she didn't want him to go on feeling like that. "That's not fair. What I did in Sokovia, you didn't deserve it. No one deserved it. I saw...Afghanistan, what they did to you. It wasn't until later that I could admit it. You didn't deserve that. The evilest person in the world wouldn't have deserved it. Maybe they deserve court, trial, jail, those things, but not what I did. Nobody deserves it, ever. I didn't understand that until it was too late."

Tony scrubbed his face and patted her shoulder with his free hand. "You figured it out sooner than I did, kid. You're sweet to offer, but I need to keep a grip on my head and everything that's in it, even the shitstorm. While I'm trying to sort out the whole shitstorm out there," he gestured vaguely around them. "I need to know it's me in control of what's in here." He gestured to his head.

Wanda supposed she couldn't argue with that. "It is your choice. I'll never do anything to your mind against your will, or anybody else's ever again, unless it's life and death. I decided that after Sokovia. I just want to use it...for something that makes people feel better."

He smiled wearily. "Even me, huh?"

She didn't know why, but the question made her throat get painfully tight. "Especially you."

He patted her again. "'f I ever change my mind, I'll let you know - if you don't know ahead of me, anyway. Go back to bed. I'll be fine."

She knew it wasn't true, and so did he, but he wanted to pretend it could be. So she left him to go inside. Coming back down the terrace towards the Avengers' residence, she spotted another dark figure who was no palace guard, and jumped a mile before she managed to place the familiar form in her mental senses: Natasha.

Wanda wasn't sure what to say, so she didn't say anything. For some reason, when Natasha said softly, "That was kind of you," it stung.

Wanda didn't answer, just hurried down the terrace without saying anything to Steve, and kept going until she was back in her room.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: The Secret Avengers go into action against another terrorist group's
attempt on biological weapons. This mission goes better than Lagos...until Steve Rogers begins showing symptoms of infection. Our heroes face a scenario none of them imagined.

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

The Secret Avengers go into action against another terrorist group's attempt on biological weapons. This mission goes better than Lagos...until Steve Rogers begins showing symptoms of infection.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: The feedback and discussion for the last chapter was amazing! Thank you all so much, and please keep it coming! This chapter is one of the few drawn on my own history for material - I was a humble intern in Washington, DC in the fall of 2001, and so witnessed not only 9/11, but the subsequent anthrax attacks. I learned more about bioterrorism than most sane people would ever want to know (okay, I was also a weirdo who finds it interesting). Oh, and reminder: stress and fear can stir up conflict, or worsen it when it already exists. That doesn't mean things people say or think are right, if you haven't figured out by now that everybody is an unreliable narrator in my fic and the more upset they are, the less reliable.

Canon Notes: Monica Rappaccini is a Marvel Comics villain, though like most others, I'm using a very vague facsimile of her comics history. All you really need to know about her is she's a biochemist who heads Advanced Idea Mechanics ("A.I.M.") one of the comics villain organizations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen

GENEVA

Throughout autumn and winter, T'Challa, Tony Stark, and the fugitive Avengers quietly planned their return. With the help of Romanoff and Barton, the team mapped out those safe havens that remained uncompromised by the changing political climate, and created their own map of the world - identifying those nations that would be most (and least) forgiving of unauthorized Avengers action on their soil.

Back in the US, Tony Stark put his team of policy experts on a project to map out the contingencies that would warrant Avengers' entry on foreign soil without waiting for permission. He reported to T'Challa that although Colonel Rhodes knew of the activity and was more than intelligent enough to guess the reasons, Rhodes made no objection.

The "Secret Avengers" made their debut while T'Challa was in Geneva, attending another session of negotiations on the Sokovia Accords.

A group with suspected ties to Crossbones' organization decided to take another run at biological
warfare - and managed to blast their way into an Indian top-security research complex that held viable samples of smallpox.

Local authorities simply panicked and blurted out the true nature of the emergency on live television.

By lucky coincidence (T'Challa hoped), India was another major power who had decided against the Sokovia Accords, and whose government had expressed cautious approval of the Avengers entering their soil without waiting for "clearance by committee," as one senior official scornfully put it.

When the news broke, T'Challa quietly sent a signal to his sister and brother at home. Provide them with any transportation they need, if they wish to deploy. The choice is theirs, but they're far closer than Stark's team or me.

Within ten minutes, Shuri answered: They're going. Romanoff was in China when it began. She'll arrive ahead of them and begin reconnaissance.

A standoff had already begun, as the local military did manage to disable the attackers' helicopters, and the terrorists retaliated by taking a nearby building full of medical students as hostages. They then threatened to unleash at least one of the virus samples in a rockets, which they demonstrated by launching one full of chlorine gas into the city. It struck a runway an industrial area near the water and killed a relatively small number of workers (though such relativity felt obscene to T'Challa). The terrorists promised that the next one would be launched into a residential or commercial zone.

T'Challa was halfway to the airport ahead of a fleet of paparazzi when the Indian ambassador desperately called. "Please, your highness, don't take off! They're watching the coverage, and have sworn that if they don't see you stay in Geneva, they will execute fifty hostages within the hour!"

T'Challa cursed and stopped the motorcade. "Where's Stark?"

"He's claiming to be in his mansion in the Hamptons, but the video is certainly fake," said Ayo. "A hologram, I think. Very lifelike."

Within minutes, he had a message from Stark. "Vision and I are on the way over there. Can you chase your tail in front of the paparazzi for this one? They need at least one of us visible in real time."

T'Challa sighed. "Very well." He got out of the car in front of an army of reporters and announced, "I've informed the envoy from India that Wakanda's prayers are with them for a peaceful end to this crisis." Ugh, I sound like an American. "As it appears this is not an occasion for Avengers deployment, I will remain in Geneva."

He stood around in public view within the UN compound, answering babbled questions about how the situation might be resolved with banal, cautious answers, and waited.

For sixteen hours, there was no news, just an ever-swelling presence of Indian and American military at the perimeter in Mumbai, and a desperate evacuation of the surrounding city. The media could report little more than "Mumbai Smallpox Standoff Continues." (and the blather of President Bunt that if he were allowed to be in charge, it would already be over.)

T'Challa made himself visible, pretending to talk to Tony Stark on his phone when he knew a reporter could see him, and consulting in groups about nonsense with some of the UN representatives. Other times he just let himself gaze at the television screens reporting the scene with a concerned expression that was entirely un-feigned.

There were little puffs of smoke and soot constantly rising from the crowded urban scene - steam
from vents and air conditioners in the hot climate, smoke from machinery and exhaust from vehicles. In the bright sunlight of the second day of the crisis, many colors and lights flashed over the stricken buildings in mere tricks of reflection.

But when there was a flash of red mist above the walkways between the research facility and the building where the students hostages were being held, T'Challa almost broke character with a smile. Most of the reporters didn't even notice it, and fewer still grasped its significance.

When the terrorists launched another rocket, Wanda Maximoff finally revealed herself in the best possible way. Eyewitnesses shrieked in horror as the weapon arced over the skyline - only to halt in midair in a ball of red mist.

"SCARLET WITCH!" bellowed half the reporters and diplomats in unison. A small object broke away from the rocket and exploded in midair - the detonator - and the payload spiraled down to land directly in front of one of the containment teams.

"The Avengers, the Avengers are here!" cried a local reporter. 

"Surprise, T'Challa, remember, you're very surprised." T'Challa schooled his features into astonishment as two dark-clad figures burst out of the hostages' building, directing a flood of frightened men and women towards the perimeter.

It was only moments before the cameras were able to zoom in on them, one large and one small, and despite the entirely-black clothing and facial hair, the watchers swiftly recognized one of the saviors. "It's CAPTAIN AMERICA!"

Despite her dyed hair, they likewise identified Black Widow in a matter of seconds.

Steve Rogers had gone into combat without a shield, but had liberated a bulletproof glass pane from somewhere and was using it to good effect. He and Romanoff ran interference between the fleeing hostages and the terrorists. Soon Maximoff and Barton were visible, on the offensive alongside Iron Man and the Vision. The reporters cried out the Avengers' titles with the same elated excitement.

"Our intelligence is that three samples of viable virus were stored at the site," T'Challa's internal sources updated him. "One has been delivered to the containment teams from an unknown source. Two are still unaccounted for."

The troops at the site fell easily into following the instructions of Steve Rogers, fugitive or not, and they soon had opened a corridor back into the complex. A frenzied headcount by reporters and officers at the scene said that most if not all of the students were accounted for, and within the hour, several teams of troops moved in.

Maximoff worked purely on containment, snatching the attackers' large ordnance the moment it was fired and driving it away from the targets. Some, she managed to deactivate and hand unexploded over to the troops. Those that she couldn't contain, she directed into the sea to detonate underwater - and none went anywhere near the shipping traffic.

A smaller ball of her mist dropped into the hands of another mysterious flyer - quickly identified as Falcon, who carried it to the containment crews and admonished them not to drop it.

"One virus sample remains unaccounted for," T'Challa's intelligence reported. He let himself smile.

Weapons fire erupted from an upper floor of the research building with gouts of smoke, then several terrorists burst onto the roof armed with a rocket launcher. Troops on the ground fired back, but a
sheet of red light blasted across the aggressors, deflecting shots...and in the time it took to breathe, the four dropped to the ground. A dark figure with long brown hair slipped through them, and another seemed to materialize out of thin air. T'Challa wondered if Lang would make himself enormous again, but apparently he decided against it.

They waited where they stood until Vision flew to meet them, and Maximoff put something in Vision's hand. What they said to each other, T'Challa couldn't guess, but Vision peeled away and raced to meet the containment troops. “Here is the last sample,” he told them. The crew needed no urging to seal the vial in heavier vessels.

The two figures on the roof moved over the four fallen men, securing them with almost no struggle, then they slipped inside. In a few moments, only Vision and Iron Man remained visible. Iron Man flew over to the military command post. "All hostiles down. We've got fourteen personnel in the quarantine - they may have been exposed to some of the less secure samples, but all your big nasties bugs are contained. Nine civilian fatalities in the initial attack. The bodies are separated out downstairs."

"Mr. Stark, what about the fugitives?" shouted an American officer.

Iron Man turned around, and if T'Challa didn't know better, he would have thought the eyes on the mask changed shape. "Fugitives? What fugitives? You mean the terrorists, right? The guys who just tried to steal infectious disease samples for bioweapons? We got 'em all."

Nearly everyone there in the Geneva conference room burst out laughing. T'Challa let himself laugh along. For form's sake, he took a few questions. "Your highness, are you sorry not to be there?" a reporter asked.

"Of course, I'm sorry that I could not be of assistance, but I am very proud of Mr. Stark and Vision's work in ending this crisis. We should also acknowledge the brave men and women who stood on the front lines to challenge this act of terror, at horrible risk, and pray that their casualties were light."

Of course, everyone knew the question was coming: "What are your thoughts about the six fugitive Avengers taking part in this operation?"

T'Challa had had time to consider his answer. "As Wakanda is no longer a party to the Sokovia Accords, it is not my concern which Avengers were involved. I think the outcome of this operation speaks for itself."

KARAKORAM MOUNTAINS, PAKISTAN

The Secret Avengers mixed up their trails out of Mumbai, taking advantage of the crowds who'd fled the city center and were now safely returning home after all of the terrorists were confirmed dead or in custody. Two days later, they rendezvoused at one of Clint's old safehouses to bask in the dramatic shift of public opinion back in their favor.

"And THAT, boys and girls, is how you do public relations!" bellowed Scott.

"Please tell me I didn't pick up bubonic plague, please tell me I didn't pick up bubonic plague," muttered Sam, dusting himself off.

Natasha snorted. "If there was any chance of that, I'd have drop-kicked you off the plane over K2."

Scott grinned at Sam's mock-wounded expression. "Lang, give me a hand with the secure comm. I
haven't been here in a while and the weather tends to knock the equipment around."

It took a few hours to get the ground equipment up and a fix on the second team. But the signal from Clint brought celebrations to an abrupt halt. "Nat, I made a clean extraction for Wanda and Steve, but we've stopped in the foothills."

Sam and Scott froze, staring at each other, as Nat stared at the comm. "Aw, fuck," Scott muttered.

Nat came out with it. "Someone's showing symptoms?"

"Yeah. Steve is."

For a few moments, all three of them were at a loss for words, just trying to wrap their minds around it. Finally, "Repeat that, Hawkeye," Nat murmured.

There was no chance of atmospheric interference garbling the message. They heard Clint sigh. "I said Rogers is showing symptoms. I think it's anthrax; at least one sample was broken in the containment building, and he spent the most time in there. He's got a minor cut that's turned into a lesion, and now he's running a fever."

Sam spun away from the speaker and started rooting through the medical supplies while Nat and Scott stayed at the comm. "What about you and Wanda? Any symptoms?" she asked.

"Negative."

"Well, we've got Cipro," Sam reported. "Anthrax isn't contagious person-to-person."

"Natural anthrax isn't," Natasha corrected him. "I don't believe for one second that naturally-occurring anthrax could infect Steve Rogers long enough to show symptoms."

Sam's jaw clenched along with his fists. "Shit!"

"Okay, we need to change plans. Option one: they stay where they are, use the survival gear and create quarantine until Steve recovers." She didn't suggest any possible outcome other than Steve recovering. She couldn't even think it.

"Ah-ah, no," said Sam. "Even natural anthrax can survive in nature for decades. Outdoors is the worst place for him to be. Eventually some trekker or mountaineer'll come through there."

"Right." Nat fixed both men with a hard gaze. "Option two is that they come here, and all of us quarantine ourselves and hope to hell whatever strain he has doesn't transmit human to human, because if he's showing symptoms with the serum, it'll probably kill all of us."

"Oh my God." Scott sat down. He and Sam stared at each other.

"Stand by, Clint," said Nat. She knew what she would choose, but Sam and Scott deserved their own votes.

Sam didn't take long. "Bring him here. It'll be a safer quarantine. You and Scott get going before they arrive. I did triage and field treatment with chemical weapons exposure."

Scott paced over to the window. Nat stayed quiet and let him puzzle it out. His expression when he turned back to them was bleak. "I was in that containment room too. Fully suited up, yeah, but I was in there, and all six of us were in contact with Cap before we split up. We should all stay. If there's any chance we got exposed or that it transmits person-to-person, we all need to be in quarantine."
Natasha nodded. If Scott hadn't figured it out, she'd have had to introduce that conclusion. "So we're agreed, guys?" They nodded. "Okay. Clint, copy?"

"Standing by."

"At this point, all of us need to quarantine ourselves until we know what kind of strain of bacillus could affect Steve. Bring him to the safehouse. I'm going to call Stark."

"Copy that, Nat – forget it, Rogers, not an option! Both of you, strap in. We're on our way, ETA three hours."

Sam kicked the wall as hard as he could. "SHIT!"

"Don't compromise containment, man," muttered Scott.

Nat pointed to the attic door. "There's plenty of plastic sheeting stored upstairs. You two get to work." Only when they'd gone did she let herself lean over the small kitchen table and take several deep breaths. Then she got to work bouncing another signal around the planet. "Come on, Stark, pick up."

"Good morning, you have reached Prince Albert in a can!"

"Shut up, Stark, there's no time! We've got a medical emergency and a bigger public health emergency."

Stark dropped the jokes. "Fuck me, it was too easy. Okay, who's got smallpox?"

Nat snorted bitterly. If I believed in a God, I guess I'd be thanking him for small mercies. "Not smallpox. At least one tube of anthrax bacilli was broken, and one of the team has symptoms of cutaneous exposure, but that's not all. It has to be weaponized and rendered virulent beyond any naturally-occurring contagion, Stark. Steve is sick."

Tony's reaction was…very similar to Sam and Scott's. Long silence, followed by, "...fuck...me...dead. Aw, shit. Okay...okay...what about the others? Friday's running down everything we've got on every known strain and who the biochemists are that might have been working on this. I doubt an ordinary dose of Cipro'll be enough to treat Rogers."

"We've got enough stored in this safe house for two standard courses. So far nobody else is showing symptoms. Keep our coordinates secure, Stark, and don't come here yourself. If that bacteria is capable of human transmission, we may all be exposed."

"The suit can handle anthrax. Unless the anthrax bacteria's completely changed shape and size, the filters'll catch it, and if need be, I can go on contained oxygen for forty-eight hours. There's also Vision. Bacteria and viruses don't even respond to his cells; the vibranium binding throws 'em off. He should be incapable of infection or carrying."

Vibranium. "What about T'Challa? Their medicine is way ahead of us in a lot of respects, and they use vibranium."

"I'll call him. Damn, where's Thor when we need him?"

Nat scowled out the window. "If someone has managed to weaponized anthrax bacillus to infect a human supersoldier, I'd worry that we could cause an epidemic on Asgard." She shook her head and made herself focus on the subject at hand past the roaring in her ears and the churning of her stomach. Not symptoms of any infection, just simple human panic. "I'll give you our coordinates,
Stark, but speaking of plague, you know what'll happen if anyone decides now's the time to apprehend us."

"Nobody'll find you. Vision and I'll come alone with whatever supplies we think we need."

Three hours later on the dot, Hawkeye's chopper cruised low in the thin mountain air into the secluded valley that sheltered the safe house. Nat tried to bully and/or wheedle Sam and Scott into keeping their distance, but Sam brushed her off. "No chance we don't all get exposed if this thing can be transmitted. Let me look at him."

As Clint landed, Nat's heart was hammering so damn hard, she could barely hear over it.

Wanda was the first out, pale-faced and red-eyed, but a few moments' glance said it was just anxiety, not illness. Nat's stomach lurched with some combination of relief and desperation as Steve climbed out after her under his own power. He met Nat's eyes, and she steeled herself not to change her expression. Sam went walking out to meet them, though Steve hesitated until Clint had powered down and came out of the pilot's seat to join them.

"I appreciate the reception, but it's a really bad idea," Steve said. He just sounded exhausted.

"Whatever, man, we're all under quarantine," said Sam. "C'mon, let's get you inside."

Nat caught Clint's elbow. "What's his condition?" she asked in a low voice.

"The cut on his chin started bothering him just over twenty-four hours out. We were in the air when I realized it should've started healing by then. Eight hours ago, the lesion showed up. Fever developed in the past four hours. I tried the anti-pyretic in the chopper medikit, but it hasn't made a difference. His lungs are good, no nausea so far, but what the fuck kind of bacteria could even give him a fever?"

"That's the ten billion dollar question," Nat growled. "And whatever it is, we can't be sure that human-to-human contact won't transmit it even if natural anthrax isn't transmissible that way. I called Stark. He and Vision are going to get with T'Challa and figure out how we can treat a supersoldier – if at all. Then they'll bring medical supplies."

Clint nodded. "So we hunker down and hope to God nobody finds us now."

Nat tapped the gun at her hip. "We keep intruders away by force. Deadly force if necessary."

"Agreed." She didn't tell any of the others. Sam would understand, but it'd be a burden to him, and Wanda and Scott might not be able to understand. Better not to burden any of them with it unless it became necessary.

By the time they got inside, Sam, Scott, and Wanda had already shoved Steve bodily into a chair and were heating up water in the fireplace. There was no power, only battery lanterns, the propane stove, and the fireplace to heat water. Luckily, the fuel and firewood stash was large and there were plenty of batteries. "Y'know, this place seemed charmingly rustic when we first got here," Scott remarked, panting over the old-fashioned well pump.

Sam chuckled. Wanda didn't. Clint slipped past Nat and gently nudged Wanda. "Hey," he murmured. "Just gotta keep it together, 'kay?" Wanda nodded, but her eyes were red and wet.

Sam and Scott kept up a cheerful demeanor that Natasha and Clint went along with for the others' sake. "Stage one of decontamination's not gonna be fun, people, and we're all learn way more about
each other than we wanted," Sam announced.

Clint heaved a dramatic sigh. "Please tell me we've still got civvies stored in here?"

"Yeah, but they're sealed up, and we don't want to get into 'em until we've decontaminated what we're wearing. Ergo..." Sam grinned at Steve, who groaned. "Show us some skin, Captain America!"

"You poisoned me just to get my clothes off, didn't you?" Steve huffed, but started shucking his clothes.

"Okay, hang on." Clint dug through the medical supplies and handed around surgical masks. "Put these on first, and tape the edges. It's not a guarantee by any stretch, but it's better than nothing. Just in case there's spores floating around."

The whole process was cumbersome and stressful for Scott, Wanda, and Steve. Nat, Clint, and Sam had gone through it before, so they took on the job of keeping the other three's spirits up. They taped their faces into surgical masks, then stripped Steve first with only a few lewd comments – they spent more effort teasing Scott and Wanda for blushing – and dumped all his clothes into a bucket of bleach solution.

Luckily, any safehouse established for Natasha Romanoff and/or Clint Barton came with abundant supplies to decontaminate and a reasonable medical stock. After consulting with Tony, who in turn consulted with T'Challa and whoever he'd recruited at Stark Industries, they started Steve on a double-dose of Cipro, and Sam and Nat shoved Steve into the bathtub and scrubbed his skin and hair within an inch of his life.

Then they wrapped him in blankets and packed him into bed while the rest of them went through the same treatment. "Let's be real," said Sam softly once Steve fell asleep. "If he's expelling anthrax spores that can be transmitted, we're all dead men walking."

"Stark's bringing testing equipment. There's nothing we can do about it now," said Nat. "The best we can hope for is that this strain, whatever the hell it's mutated into, still acts like anthrax even if it's more powerful. If not, well, we'll all be part of a really interesting med student's dissertation someday."

Once the rest of them had bleached their clothes and divided up what was in storage – everything fit tight on Steve, as usual – Wanda sat at Steve's bedside, drying her hair and wiping his face. Clint and Scott commandeered the table to write letters to their kids, and Nat hovered over the comm.

Stark called back the next morning. "Yep, the Mumbai Biomedical Research Institute hosted a Dr. Monica Rappaccini up until six weeks ago when she lost her privileges for failing to properly document her manipulation of Category A bioagents without express authorization. She was working on both anthrax and smallpox at the time the board of directors caught on."

"What do we know about the anthrax strain that was released in the building?"

"It didn't aerosolize, thank God, so only direct skin exposure or close proximity inhalation should've infected anybody. Rogers has a cut, that's self-explanatory. You guys are probably clear. The sample storage and labs had sophisticated filtration and air decontamination systems with no sign of tampering or damage from the attack. Rappaccini was focused entirely on increasing the effects on the infected patient, not transmissibility."

Clint leaned over the table. "Stark, you know if word of this ever gets out..."
"Yeah, I know. Vision is at the site supervising the cleanup. So far it looks like those were the only
specimens that Rappaccini handled. The smallpox virus was undamaged, and the anthrax sample
looks like it was broken by accident. But Rappaccini probably backed up her data. There're a couple
possible organizations she could be affiliated with, most likely A.I.M." After a long pause, Stark
asked, "How's Rogers?"

Clint swallowed. "Cipro's having no effect so far, but it's still early. All of our symptom-treating
drugs aren't doing any good either; his fever's rising slowly, lethargy, no appetite, that kind of thing.
His vitals are okay."

Over the next twenty-four hours, Steve didn't crash, but he slowly went downhill. Wanda, Sam, and
Nat refused to leave his side except to pore over the data that Stark sent them. T'Challa had a team
working on a supersoldier-caliber antibiotic in Wakanda, and Stark had another team on it in the US.

Steve was weakening, and nobody knew what to do. Steve didn't weaken, not like this. Through
objective eyes, Clint could say he didn't look any worse than an ordinary guy who came down with
the flu. Bleary eyes, pale and sweaty, pink cheeks, the usual fever symptoms, but goddamnit, this
was Steve fucking Rogers. This wasn't supposed to happen!

Even Nat was scared.

None of them showed any symptoms, and if it was infectious, Clint and Wanda should've picked it
up and dropped dead pretty damn fast. So that was some good news. The only good news.

After another day, Stark showed up, fully-suited, with a kit so sophisticated and unfamiliar that Clint
had no doubt it was Wakandan design. "This'll digitize the readings from his blood and transmit them
straight to the Wakandan lab. You been taking samples?"

"Every two hours," said Nat.

"Okay, let's do this." Only after drops were liberated from the sample tubes and transmitted to
Wakanda did Stark turn towards the bedroom. "How's he doing?"

"He was asleep," said Sam, still as wary of Stark as Clint felt.

But Wanda appeared in the doorway. "He's awake. He'll want to see you."

It was weird, seeing Iron Man go clunking through a tiny doorway to stand over a bed, but Stark
managed it. "Hey, Cap. How you feeling?"

The answer was pure Steve. "Just fine. Lemme suit up; let's go a few rounds." They all forced
chuckles. Steve blinked fever-bright eyes at them. "Tony...did anybody else get exposed?"

The hesitation gave him away even with an Iron Poker Face. "Yeah," Stark admitted. "There was a
doctor and three technicians in the lab when the raid hit. The thugs pulled the masks of every civilian
in the place. From the security tapes, the sample tube broke when the thugs were going after the
hottest bioagents. Those four inhaled it."

"How bad are they?"

Stark hesitated again. Damn it, thought Clint.

"They didn't make it." Steve closed his eyes. "The five attackers who handled the samples all ended
up with skin exposure too. One died in the fighting, the other four died in the past day." Steve didn't
look encouraged. Stark stepped as close as he could in the confines of the room. "Hey. You got all
the hostages out and the worst injury was a broken arm. No civilian died in the fighting after you moved in, and none of the first responders died." He pointed at Wanda. "They launched seventeen rockets, and nine of ’em had sample tubes just shoved into the back for shits and giggles. All but three were retrieved unbroken."

Wanda stiffened. "What about the ones I put into the water?"

"Already checked that. They saved the really good stuff, hoping they could get it out. Brucellosis, staph, even ricin, drowning it in saltwater's gonna render it inert quick before a human has a chance to get into contact with it. Oh, and the investigators found the ricin still in the facility, so never mind. They narrowed it down to three or four candidates that might've hit the water, and all of ’em wouldn't be a threat. Short of tossing ’em into a handy vat of bleach, you did exactly the right thing. Haven't you turned the TV on? India's vowing to give you amnesty if you ever want it."

Wanda's smile was shaky. "I'm gonna be okay," Steve insisted. It would've been more convincing if he didn't sound even weaker than he looked. "Believe me, I've lived through worse without the serum. When he wakes up, Bucky can tell you all about it…" he caught himself, and grimaced. "Sorry, Tony."

"Don't worry about it. I'm heading back to Wakanda. Whatever they develop, I'll bring at Mach 2. T'Challa's medics are sure they can develop something, it's just a question of what drug works best at what strength. There're other labs looking at this strain too, in case it pops up again, but only T'Challa's team and mine know we're dealing with the serum. We all agreed it's better to keep it that way."

"God, yeah. Tony, what if it's not just the serum? What if it's enhancement, and people like Friends of Humanity got their hands on it?" Steve breathed.

"Right. So we need to debunk that theory, and find Rappaccini and get her off the street. She's more of an anti-Western civilization radical than a Friends of Humanity purity nut, but that's not a friendship we need anyone forming." Tony started for the door, then looked back at Wanda. "Hey. Vision said to tell you that you should be proud. You did great."

Wanda's eyes got large and round. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, and in the end, Stark left without her ever working up to give him a message for Vision.

Clint exchanged a long look with the others, but decided against prompting her.

After another day, they were all teetering on the edge of meltdown.

Steve's fever spiked in the predawn gloom, and he woke Wanda up with his restless twitching. "Oh God – Sam! Clint!" Her panicked voice woke the rest of them up.

Sam untangled himself from his designated pile of blankets on the floor and found Steve completely out of it, heat radiating off his face. "Fuck. Okay, nobody panic." *Self absolutely included in that instruction.* "Let's get his temperature. What'd Stark say about his likely tolerance levels?"

"Lethal body temperature for an unenhanced human is 108, but all the evidence is that he'd survive higher," said Nat, sounding wide awake and completely unruffled. The former might have been true, but Sam knew better now than to believe the latter, not where Steve Rogers was concerned. "That's one theory that was never tested."

"He's at 107.9. He is *not* doing this," Sam muttered. "You hear me, Cap? Out of all the ways to go, you are *not* going out like this. Don't you dare give up on us."
He really should've seen it coming. Steve squinted up at them and honed in on Scott and Clint. "Bucky?" he breathed.

Both men stepped back and Nat stepped forward while Sam was still trying to decide what to say. "Bucky's not here, Steve," she murmured, stroking back his sweaty hair. "Bucky's safe. He just needs you to get better so we can get you back to him."

"N-Natasha? Where..." Steve's eyes fluttered. He couldn't keep track of what was going on. "Bucky...Howard, no..."

Nat bit her lip. "Call Stark," she ordered Clint over her shoulder. "Tell him we need something now."

"I'm on it."

"Bucky, please...no..."

Wanda stood behind Nat, shifting from foot to foot, biting a fingernail. Sam started to try reassuring her, then stopped. No use. This was bad, they all knew it, and so Wanda knew it. Worse was Steve not having any idea where he was or what was going on anymore.

Clint stuck his head back in. "Guys, Stark's already on his way. They think they've got the antibiotic and serum-strength fever reducer. ETA six hours."

Sam scowled at the thermometer. "I don't like his temperature being this high, supersoldier or not." By now any ordinary human have crashed. If Steve's temperature rose any more, they might not be able to bring him back. He peered out the window. "No snow in sight. Damn."

"No snow, but it's cold and windy," said Nat. "Let's get him out there."

"Okay." Keep your head, man, keep your fucking head. "Clint, Tic-Tac, gimme a hand."

"I could try my gear," Scott offered as they attempted to figure out the best way to shift Steve's bulk without hurting him or giving themselves hernias.

"Not while he's in this condition," said Nat. "Move over, I'll help you."

"No," said Wanda, stepping closer. "I can."

"You sure we should be manipulating his molecules right now?" asked Scott.

"It's not manipulating anything!" she snapped. "Weight makes no difference to me; I'm just lifting him, now go on!"

Steve murmured in confusion, but it was easy for Sam, Clint, and Scott to steer him once Wanda shifted his body on a cloud of shimmering red. Nat stayed next to his head and whispered reassurances, patting his cheeks. They carried him out into the open below the house, where the wind scoured the ground and was cold enough to make them all shiver. Scott spread blankets on the ground, and Wanda eased him down.

Out here, with his own fingers aching already from the chill - somewhere around thirty degrees, Sam guessed - Steve's skin felt hotter than ever. "Let's get his clothes off. Sponge him off, make it quicker for his temperature to go down."

Steve started shivering and whimpering within minutes. "Damn it," Sam muttered, trying not to
instinctively rub his hands to warm them up. "I'm sorry, man, I'm so sorry. I know this sucks."

Steve's eyes flew open, and he lunged as if to get out of bed. "Whoa! Hey, Cap, easy!" exclaimed Scott, diving to catch him from the other side.

If Steve had been at full strength, Sam and Scott would've gone flying without needing wings, but he was too weak, too shaky, and just gave them bruises. "Buck - Bucky, grab - grab my hand, Bucky - "

*Shit.* Sam planted his weight to keep the delirious supersoldier in place and tried to mentally float away. On Steve's other side, Scott shot Sam a dismal look. Romanoff was the only one of them who didn't flinch, but started sponging frigid water over Steve's neck, face, and torso, which would force his temperature down but also make him more miserable.

Steve shivered so hard Sam could barely hang onto him, and cried out for Bucky through chattering teeth. Sam and Scott and Clint held onto him until their muscles cramped up and muttered vows to do unspeakable things to that sick biochemist who'd brought this about.

Finally, Wanda couldn't take any more of watching Steve reaching for a friend only he could see. "I can help him."

"No, wait!" Clint released Steve and grabbed her. "I know, it's hell seeing him like this, but we don't want to mess around with his brain."

"I *won't* hurt him!" Wanda half-snarled, half-sobbed. "I feel how it works! The dreams...they're just his imagination. I can change that without affecting his brain; I can make him see reality again!"

Nat didn't pause from sponging Steve down, but she rubbed his cheek with her free hand. "Let her do it. Nobody's ever had physical symptoms other than confusion." She glanced up at Wanda. "Do it if you're *sure* you won't affect his brain."

Sam looked at her. Wanda swallowed hard, but nodded. "It doesn't work - like they're thinking, He still has a fever, the fever is making his mind wander in memories. I can push the right things to see and feel to the front, so he knows where he is again. And so he isn't afraid."

Clint let Wanda go, and Sam dropped his protests. Nat leaned away from Steve's clammy, sweaty face so Wanda could touch him gently, her red power shimmering across his forehead. Steve's incoherent murmurs trailed off, and he blinked, looking at nothing.

When his eyes focused, he whispered, "...Sam?"

Sam's throat tightened up and all he could do was grin. "Hey," said Nat softly, pausing her ministrations. "Welcome back."

A massive shudder took him, making them all winced, but he wasn't fighting anymore, and Sam and Scott could ease up. "Wh-what - the - hell - "

"Sorry, Steve," Sam said, He had to resist the urge to rub Steve's arms to ease his shivers, but settled for patting his shoulder. "You spiked a high fever, and Stark's still hours out. We needed to get your temperature down fast and didn't have an ice bath handy. How're you feeling?"


"You were delirious," said Wanda. "I've made it stop, until Stark gets here with treatment. You still have a high fever."
Steve's shudders were painful to watch. The wind was biting cold from Sam's perspective, and he was dry and fully clothed with a jacket. "Try to hang in there. Help's on the way." \textit{And it damn well better work, or I'll take a crowbar to Stark's armor.}

With Steve lucid, they were back to more typical Cap stoicism: trying to deny how miserable he was. But though the frigid wind and cold water did do the trick of bringing the fever down to 104, his body stubbornly refused to cool any further, so Nat insisted they stay where they were. She caught his hand when he tried to rub at the dark gash on his chin. "Don't touch it."

"Does it hurt?" asked Scott.

"N-not really. Itches." Steve tried to squirm away from Nat and her wet cloths and blinked at them all, still groggy and now freezing his ass off.

"Try not to think about it," Scott urged.

Steve rubbed his eyes and peered at Wanda. "What were you doing?"

"Keeping the dreams back," she said. "You were hallucinating. I couldn't bring the fever down – at least, I didn't try something like that – but I could control what you saw."

"Oh." Steve looked apprehensively around, as if expecting ghosts to rise up from the ground or his companions to suddenly sprout extra heads. "So…d-did I…am I still…"

"You're temperature's still high, but you're not in the danger zone anymore – and by danger zone, I mean that if you didn't have the serum, you'd have brain damage," said Nat. "There's a reason I'm making you sit out here and shiver."

He cracked a weak smile at that. "Did I…what was I doing?"

Everyone avoided his eyes so fast, Sam imagined them all blurting out, \textit{not it!}

Of course, Stark had to stick his ironclad foot in his mouth the minute he arrived. "Wooooo, what's this!? Everybody waiting out in the cold for my entrance? Cap, your pecs have never been \textit{perkier}! Sorry I missed the chance to soothe your fevered brow - "

If Wanda hadn't telekineticked the metal pack off his chest, Sam would've just started pulling. "Shut up, Stark, and give us the medicine! We've been out here for hours trying to keep his fever down!"

"Aw. So did I miss the delirious declarations of love for his old army buddy?"

Clint picked up a rock and pegged Stark in the head with it while Nat pulled the case open, muttering obscenities as she read the instructions for the syringes. Before Sam could come up with his own mode of assault, Steve salvaged the moment by being seized by another bout of uncontrollable shivering.

"Thank God, they've given us a supersoldier-strength antipyretic along with the antibiotic," Nat muttered, pointedly ignoring Stark. "Give me your arm, then let's get you back inside. Scott, Wanda, go get the fireplace going and every blanket in the house. Almost over…there, Sam, give me a hand." She ducked under Steve's right arm, and Sam needed no prompting to take the left. Between the two of them, they got Steve to his feet – if very shaky.

Cap was too out of it to even be embarrassed at being walked back into the house in his underwear in front of Iron Man. Stark scrounged up a few scruples to finally shut the hell up and didn't deliver any commentary. Maybe seeing Steve so unsteady on his feet got the asshole's attention.
They carried the mattress off one of the beds into the kitchen and put it right in front of the fireplace, then eased Steve down onto it and covered him with blankets. Wanda pulled warm air out of the fireplace and turned it into a bubble of heat over the mattress. Steve finally stopped shivering and fell asleep within a few minutes with Nat stroking his hair.

Sam sat on the floor beside them with the portable vitals monitor in his lap, watching the fever drop. Stark stayed in the doorway. "T'Challa's sent a plane after me. They should get here by morning. Just to be safe, they want you all to stay in quarantine 'till Cap recovers, but they've got a place set up for you, a little more spacious than this."

Clint leaned in the bedroom doorway. "Don't suppose you've got any leads on the mad scientist?"

"Vision thinks he does. She wasn't acting alone – if the whole 'two choppers and six armored personnel carriers full of commandoes' thing wasn't enough to clue us all in. The Avengers've been ordered not to move on it without a report to the committee. The official Avengers, that is."

"Well, maybe you haven't noticed, but the unofficial Avengers were quarantined and nearly lost Captain America," said Nat. "So we're not going to be able to do your dirty work for you when you suddenly decide to toe the line."

Stark straightened. "It was a good op, Romanoff. I'm glad you were there, is that really a shock to hear? I'm glad you were all there, and you kicked ass. All of you. Way to go. American and European pollsters may have a hard time predicting election outcomes, but everything not associated with the 2016 election is still pretty accurate: public opinion was leaning towards you before the Accords, now it's solidly towards you. People trust Captain America's team more than any government committee."

"Whatever happened to 'we need to be put in check and I don't care how'?" Sam muttered.

"Wilson - "

" – Enough, Stark," Clint snapped stepping around the makeshift bed. "Thanks for the meds delivery. We appreciate it. I dunno if he'd have made it. But like Nat said, even if we wanted to run errands for you, we couldn't, what with the whole super-virulent weaponized anthrax taking out our team leader. Cap needs to recover, and until he does, he needs people watching his back and making sure he rests. He had a great guy watching his back, but somebody blew the poor bastard's arm off."

Iron Man stood there, helmet firmly in place, giving no hint of what the man inside was thinking. Actually, Sam mused, there probably was a hint: that Stark wasn't bitching and moaning and making a lot of sarcastic, defensive remarks in response. Wanda gave Sam a light nudge and a wry smile when he looked at her. So that's a yes.

He made himself speak up as Stark started to turn away. "Thanks."

Iron Man half-turned back. "Did you really think I'd have let him die?"

Sam didn't have to think long. "You don't want me to answer that, Stark. You really don't."

Iron Man stood there for a few moments longer, then clunked out of the house. At the sound of his rockets, Steve shifted and murmured, "Tony? Tony…wait…"

To Be Continued…
**Coming Soon:** The fugitive Avengers reconsider hostilities as they return to Wakanda and get the news of the Accords' latest enforcements as Steve recovers - and our heroes get the news that T'Challa's medics have a plan to treat Bucky.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**
Chapter Summary

The fugitive Avengers reconsider hostilities as they return to Wakanda and get the news of the Accords' latest enforcements as Steve recovers - and our heroes get the news that T'Challa's medics have a plan to treat Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to everyone for the awesome reviews and discussion! Please keep it coming! Obviously, this fic doesn't follow Consequences, my fic last summer in which Peter Parker suffered a much more brutal treatment at the hands of the Accords' enforcers. However, the choices Tony has made after Peter's capture will be very similar. Here we just see them from a distance.

Canon Notes: This chapter references the comic canon that T'Challa is the half-brother of Shuri and Jakarra. His mother was N'Yami, who died shortly after his birth of an autoimmune disease. Ramonda is Shuri and Jakarra's mother, a South African who apparently deserted her family when her children were young. More on that to follow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen

KARAKORAM MOUNTAINS, PAKISTAN

Steve was sound asleep when a small, nondescript-looking cargo plane flew into their secluded valley - and belied its shabby, nothing-to-see-here appearance with incredible vertical landing next to the house. The Wakandans weren't messing around. The pilots and medics on board were in full hazmat gear, but Clint couldn't blame them.

"Good day, Avengers. I am Dr. Nomuula. King T'Challa has sent us to conduct you safely to a secure medical facility. Our minister of health and public safety has ordered that you remain isolated from the population for at least four weeks, but we will see to it that you will be comfortable and receive the best possible treatment."

"Believe me, we're grateful," said Clint. "So far Captain Rogers is the only one who showed signs of infection, and he's already improving." He led them into the house, then hovered in the doorway, since it was just too damn crowded, and Sam, Nat, and Wanda simply refused to leave Steve's side.

"Steve?" Nat said gently, rubbing his cheek. "C'mon, rise and shine. Time to get you somewhere with central heating."

The medic patiently maneuvered the small space in her cumbersome suit, checking Steve's vitals and downloading the data from the portable kit that Stark had brought ahead. "You are responding very
well to the emergency treatment, Captain. Once we arrive, you will simply need rest and observation."

Groggy, Steve still managed a weak smile. "Thanks." He put a lot of weight on Sam and Clint to get to his feet. The fever was dropping, but not gone, and he was lethargic, struggling to focus just on the act of walking with his friends' help.

Nat paused on the ramp. "A few of us should stay and do a thorough clean-up."

"That won't be necessary, Ms. Romanoff. Another team followed us. Once you are evacuated, they will take care of sterilizing this site," said Dr. Nomuula. Clint finished securing Steve in a seat next to Sam, then slipped closer to Nat and the doctor in time to hear her say softly, "His highness and Mr. Stark are taking the threat posed by this bioagent very seriously. Once we arrive and make Captain Rogers comfortable, they will want to speak to you by video."

Nat shot Clint a grim look. "Two possibilities here: either Dr. Rappaccini inadvertently created a bioagent powerful and virulent enough to overcome the supersoldier serum, or that's what she was aiming for all along."

"It's not my place to reveal what king wishes to discuss, but in either case, the ramifications are serious," Dr. Nomuula agreed. She glanced back at Steve, who was trying and failing to stay awake next to Wanda. "The flight will be close to twelve hours. Try to get some rest."

By the time they reached cruising altitude, Steve had drifted off and was sliding onto Wanda's shoulder. She blushed when Sam and Scott grinned at her, then waved them off and cautiously shifted Steve's torso into her lap with a pillow on her other side for his head. "What I wouldn't give for a camera," Clint whispered, and Nat rolled her eyes. Sam started to aim his phone at them, but Wanda pointed at him in an unmistakable threat, so he grinned and put it away.

After a while of gazing out the plane windows at the mountains, Wanda murmured, "We shouldn't have..."

"Hm?" Clint turned his attention back to her.

"When Stark was there." She sighed and said reluctantly, "We shouldn't have done that. It wasn't his fault. If Steve had been awake, he wouldn't have liked it."

Clint would have scoffed, if Sam hadn't shot him a resigned look. Yeah, okay, it was possible they'd all unloaded their stress over Steve onto the wrong guy. Stark might have been a complicit asshole in the Accords, but he'd supported them completely in Mumbai, and hadn't moved an inch to turn them in, then he'd rushed the medical supplies from Wakanda to save Steve.

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm just so sick of his mouth - but he was the one who had to take a cheap shot at Barnes, again."

"Aw, Sam, I don't think Bucky knew you cared," said Nat dryly, leaning over the back of Sam's chair. Sam glowered at her, and Wanda and Clint grinned. "As much as I hate to admit it, Wanda's right. If nothing else, we need to ease off Stark for Steve's sake." Clint puffed out his cheeks as he blew out his breath, but nodded the way Cooper did when he couldn't escape parental logic. Nat's smirk said she recognized it. Like father like son.

NORTHEASTERN WAKANDA

With a grudging accord established, the rest of the flight was peaceful, and they arrived at a building
in Wakanda that was also in an isolated valley surrounded by mountains. These mountains were covered in lush vegetation and not nearly as tall and forbidding as the massive gray peaks of the Karakoram. And the isolation building was yet another state-of-the-art Wakandan medical center.

Only Dr. Nomuula and her two assistants kept any contact with the team. There were more medics on the base, but they all stayed in a separated lab visible through thick glass walls and talked to their boss and patients via speakers. "The laboratory is only accessible via the external airlock," Dr. Nomuula explained. "After my assistants and I have completed decontamination, we will join our team there."

Steve had slept through almost the entire flight, and was still feverish when they arrived, but they didn't see any reason not to talk to T'Challa and Stark and find out what was going on in the outside world.

T'Challa called them on the video screen in the exam room while Dr. Nomuula was still running tests on Steve. "I'm very relieved to see you all safely back. Captain, how are you feeling?"

Steve smiled wearily. "Not at my best, I admit, but a lot better than I was a day ago, thanks to your medics." The screen suddenly split, and Tony Stark popped up in the penthouse of the tower. "I guess it's too much to hope for that this virus was exclusive to supersoldiers?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't appear that way, although there is some good news: the chatter that my intelligence and Vision have seen suggests the terrorists are unaware of this angle."

Stark nodded. "Looks like Rappaccini's goal was to target the healthy and strong - more with military in mind than enhanced. We've got confirmation now that a tenth person at the site was infected - well, eleventh, counting Cap. It was a maintenance worker, age sixty-four, on the cusp of a sweet retirement in a few months. He got sick, but didn't develop the catastrophic fever that killed the others, and all the others were under age thirty-five and healthy."

"That's the kind of thing that kills in the worst influenza epidemics, like 1918," Sam mused. "The younger and healthier you are, the stronger your immune system, the more violently your body reacts to a powerful infection."

"Exactly," said T'Challa. "Some journalists are growing concerned that there has been no statement from the Secret Avengers, and are developing the right theory. I apologize, Agent Barton, but to misdirect them, we leaked to certain media outlets that you were the one infected - but that you were recovering, and I reassured your wife and children myself that you aren't in danger."

"No apology necessary, your highness, I've played a red herring before," said Clint. "Speaking of red herrings, keep an eye on other disease research centers in countries that have ever sniffed around bioweapons. If Rappaccini is gone that far to ground, she's got help, and even if they didn't get what they wanted this time, they'll try again."

"Vision and I are on it. Unofficially, since the committee says this is a conventional threat and doesn't need Avengers' attention," said Tony, scowling. Then he perked up. "Oh, but here's another tidbit of good news - guess who resigned as Secretary of State the day before yesterday?"

"All right!" Scott and Sam applauded, and all the rest of them grinned.

"I've still gotta deal with Senator Kelly, Senator Nadeer, Graydon Creed, and a very anti-Avengers committee, but the Mumbai op won you back a lot of public support. The Indian parliament is having a special meeting later this week, and they're pushing special bills to express - lemme see... 'the formal and heartfelt gratitude of the Indian people to the Avengers,' and a formal..."
declaration of amnesty for all of you."

Sam leaned back. "What does the home front say to that?"

"Welll...President Bunt suggested he's in contact with you and he's the one who sent you."

Inarticulate exclamations of disgust were all any of them could seem to come up with in response to that.

"Maybe I should call him," said Steve, with a sly smile.

T'Challa grinned. "It's your decision, but I should warn you that he has since tweeted that you've deserted your country and possibly have a sex tape."

Dr. Nomuula had been politely pretending not to listen, but she broke then with a chortle that her hazmat suit speakers picked up. Stark affected a wounded expression. "Really, Cap, you have a sex tape? I'm shocked, Captain America, shocked, devastated, and disappointed...that you didn't share it with me."

It must have been the fever. Steve affected complete innocence and answered blithely, "That's because you're in it, Tony."

Even T'Challa burst out laughing, and Clint, Sam, and Natasha all yelped variations on, "Oh, shit, he's delirious again," and put their hands on Steve's forehead from three different directions. Tony did a fish impersonation.

Steve brushed them all away with a smirk that would make Stark look modest, but it had the effect of purging a lot of the tension of the past few days. "Steve, that is a side of you I don't recall from the history books," T'Challa remarked, wiping his eyes. "Returning to serious matters, my public health ministers want you all to be quarantined until there have been no symptoms for several weeks - in an abundance of caution. We'll keep you informed of developments, but take the time to rest. Clint, you will have an open frequency to voice or video call your family at the palace."

"Thanks, your highness," Clint said, with feeling.

"- wait," said Steve, losing his humor. "With Ross out, is the US still enforcing the Accords...the way they were?"

Stark grimaced, and T'Challa sighed. "Yeah, in every way that matters," Stark admitted. "Public protests against enforcement are growing, and so is the legal price of enforcement. Pepper and I had Stark Relief International put together a task force to get lawyers for detainees and their families, and the ACLU is getting volunteers visiting schools to do writs for those kids like they did during the travel bans. But even without Ross, there are plenty of other bigoted dirtbags happy to lead the charge, including Bunt."

"And does anyone really think Thunderbolt Ross has just packed up and left? Gone into honorable retirement?" asked Nat. Stark shook his head. "Stark, keep an eye open for Banner. He may not be on the grid enough to know everything that's happened. If someone tries to take him by surprise, it won't end well for anyone."

"I know. Vision and I are searching, and we've got facial recognition scans running." Stark glanced at T'Challa and said, "His highness is right; get some rest." Then he vanished.

"He always does that," Sam muttered.
Dr. Nomuula put all six of them through a battery of tests to determine if they'd even been exposed to any of the infectious diseases in the Mumbai facility. She released Steve first, and Sam went with him to pick him out a room (and possibly tuck him into bed).

"He's already out," Sam said, coming back as Clint endured skin scrapings. "In better spirits, but damn, not up to full strength by a long shot." He looked around. "And does anyone think there were a few things T'Ch - I mean, the king left out?"

Clint nodded, but Nat said, "Yeah, but I'm pretty sure it's mainly that he didn't want anything on Steve's mind. Seeing Steve like that was a shock for everyone." She turned to Dr. Nomuula. "You're certain the worst is over?"

"I am," said the doctor. "The concentration of bacilli in his blood reduced with every test since the treatment was administered twenty-four hours ago, and the symptom treatment brought his immune system under control. He will be fully recovered in a matter of days, but we'll continue to administer the antibiotic for a week."

"D'you get anthrax in Wakanda?" asked Scott.

Sam shot him a mortified look, but Dr. Nomuula smiled. "Of course. Animal-borne diseases travel easily in fertile regions, and some of our farmers have cattle. There have been no human cases for decades, but we're not so arrogant as to think it was wiped out. Mr. Stark's researchers and ours have developed the same theory: this strain's danger comes from the strength of the immune system it encounters. It's harder than most other microbes, and a strong body fights that much harder to destroy it. Hence the extreme fever. Captain Rogers isn't 'immune' to infection as a result of the serum; his system is merely far more powerful than most human pathogens normally encounter, and they're eliminated before he ever has a chance to develop symptoms. My king says that you've observed some of the physical gifts the people of this country received from the vibranium deposits. Among those is a very powerful immune system."

"God, someone find that mad scientist and blow her head off before she does this again," Sam muttered, pacing away. "You know why the 1918 influenza killed so many people in the military."

"Exactly. And most men and women who have survived physical enhancement have strong, adaptive systems. If the disease hasn't yet been tailored to target enhanced humans, that could still be done."

Steve decided a couple of days later that he had to have broken some kind of world record as the most fussied-over patient in the history of the convalescence. The other five on his team had clean bills of health and hadn't even been exposed to any pathogens in Mumbai. Once that was confirmed, everyone had time on their hands while Steve was ordered to take it easy on pain of one or more Avengers sitting on him.

The truth was, for the first few days, he was tired enough not to argue…and that alone made everyone worry about him still more.

Being feverish and weak certainly brought back memories. It was strange, not to have cold sweat and lethargy accompanied by a desperate struggle to breathe and his heart hammering its way out of his chest – and the blurry sight of Bucky and Steve's mother at his bedside, pleading with him not to give up.

There was a screen that would connect to nearly any satellite or streaming broadcast in the world, and a tablet with access to millions of books and movies…but Steve was thoroughly miffed when he
realized that somebody had decided he shouldn't get access to anything "upsetting" – which in these days meant "anything remotely relevant to current events."

"Look, man, there's really nothing new," said Clint. "Same shit, different day. Take a few days off the information overload and recuperate! You can't have had time to catch up on real 21st century culture with all the shit we've had to deal with since you came out of the ice!"

Steve refused to admit that he doubted he'd make it through a movie without falling asleep. "Can you at least tell me if we know who was behind that raid?" It was unfair of him, but he focused that question on Nat.

She looked at the others and threw up her hands. "Stark and T'Challa are ninety percent sure it was A.I.M. Any number of splinter organizations have the motive, but not the patience or the brain power to try to build a bioweapon from the ground up, and this went beyond 'let's grab some smallpox.' Surveillance videos from the lab shows the attackers were targeting the most dangerous samples, and they panicked when they broke Rappaccini's anthrax specimen."

"Thanks, Nat," said Steve, giving her his most winning smile.

She snorted. "In other news, Stark had to bail his little spider kid out of detention yesterday."

"Nat!" protested Scott. "I thought we weren't telling him that!"

"He'll find out later and pout – the kid's fine, Steve," she said, interrupting Steve before he could draw breath to blurt out frantic questions. "He got picked up at his high school by a sentinel task force – that's the Bun administration's brilliant new name for their enhanced hunting squads: the sentinels." She scowled. "One of the other kids called his guardian and his guardian knew he had some sort of connection with Stark, thank God. She called Tony, and he bullied and bribed his way into the detention center while they were still processing the kid, insisting they'd submitted his registration paperwork and someone in the bureaucracy lost it."

Steve shut his eyes. I knew that kid was young. High school, Tony, really?! "How old is he?"

Natasha exchanged a look with the others, and Steve glared at her, so she sighed. "He's sixteen."

She couldn't have doubted Steve would do the math. "So, nearly a year ago, Tony brought a fifteen-year-old with next to no combat experience to apprehend Captain America and his band of rogue Avengers, along with the suspected-of-recent-mass-murder Winter Soldier."

"In a nutshell, yeah," said Sam. "Most of this didn't get into the media, but T'Challa got the details and ripped Stark a new one. Kid's name is Peter Parker. He's an orphan, his aunt's his guardian, and you can bet she didn't sign a permission slip for him to gallivant off to Leipzig to brawl with a bunch of suspected terrorists. Now his alter ego is one the list of the official Avengers."

Steve groaned. "Damn it, Tony."

Wanda leaned into the doorway. "He won't appreciate if you don't mention what Stark is doing as a result." Steve looked up. "Stark has gone public against the Accords, based on what he 'happened to see' at the detention center. Over four hundred minor children were in the upstate New York location alone, and even more adults. He's now confirming the worst of the rumors that your president insisted were 'fake news' and pouring money into the repeal campaigns. He said that he was prepared for the Avengers to answer to authorities, but this shouldn't be allowed to happen in any country, let alone America. Even President Bunt tweeting cheap sexual metaphors at Beyonce didn't get the headlines back."
"Well, Buzzfeed's calling it the battle of the billionaires," said Sam.

"What about Peter?" Steve demanded. "He's just a kid...from Queens - I mean, I could tell in Leipzig, he had no idea what he'd stepped into! What'd they do to him?"

"Spider kid was never in any real danger, man," said Sam. "He's American, white, middle class, and has a billionaire backer. Four hours in the detention center was probably scary, but he was always getting out - hell, they didn't even make him get the physical exam."

"...physical...exam?" Steve repeated.

Everyone avoided Steve's eyes. Nat sighed. "It's what the US authorities came up with for implementing the Accords at home. It's not in the law on the books, it's a policy - unpublished, of course. When a suspected enhanced is detained, they're required to undergo a full physical examination and blood workup, X-rays, CAT scans, to 'identify the nature of any physical enhancement and catalog the level of threat.' It takes at least a day. Detainees who pass a background check can be released if they accept a subpoena that mandates having a private doctor complete the exam within forty-eight hours - at their own expense. If they don't pass, especially if they're immigrants or have any kind of criminal record, or the detaining agents thinks there's 'likelihood of non-compliance' - "

"Translation: anybody other than a well-dressed white person," growled Scott.

"Exactly. Immigrants, minorities, Muslims, anybody else that the detaining agents don't like or who can't afford to get a private doctor to clear them a space on their schedule, they stay in detention until the government-appointed physicians get to them, and the waiting list is weeks long. After, ICE or local police are waiting to take them into custody when they get out of detention."


"And that assumes the examination finds no enhancement," Clint added. "If it finds something, you're already committing a crime by existing while enhanced and not having registered. They leave the detention center in a military van, and nobody sees them again."

Steve felt distinctly unwell, and doubted it had anything to do with anthrax.

"All T'Challa knows is that Tony's got something in the works," said Wanda. "He's very angry about what he saw when he went to release Peter." Steve looked at her in surprise, sensing more sympathy for Tony than Wanda usually showed. She smiled. "There, we've told you all the developments. So will you rest now?"

He mock-pouted. "I am resting! I'm lying down!" Everyone scoffed, and Sam commandeered the TV remote to pick something non-news related to watch. The group finally settled on Chopped, but much to Steve's embarrassment, he fell asleep again before the first dessert round.

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

T'Challa astonished all concerned - including himself - by embracing Steve Rogers when the Avengers disembarked the helicopter on the palace landing pad. "I'm very happy to see you recovered, my friend."

Steve blushed and mumbled that it was nothing and everyone was fussing too much, and his fellow Avengers rolled their eyes.
"I don't wish to keep Agent Barton from his family," said T'Challa. "But Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris have some developments they wish to discuss with you, and thought your friends should be with you.

It didn't surprise T'Challa to see all six Avengers tense, expecting bad news, but then Wanda's eyes widened, and she tried - and failed - not to look excited. Steve glanced at her, and his eyes widened in turn. "That's cheating," Shuri said lightly.

"Sorry." Wanda didn't sound sorry.

Clint undoubtedly wanted to reunite with his family, but said, "I can stay for a few minutes, otherwise the curiosity'll kill me."

Strange how gratified T'Challa felt at having correctly anticipated his guests' feelings. "It would be best if all discussion took place together now, in private, since that remains a matter of utmost security."

Once in a conference room, he let Dr. Kelile take the lead. "We believe that we have developed a viable plan to reverse the conditioning inflicted on Sergeant Barnes," she said.

No one in the room pretended they weren't closely watching Steve for his reaction, but he'd schooled his face to cautious neutrality. Behind him, Wanda Maximoff's eyes brightened, and although T'Challa had no doubt she was excited by the prospect of healing Barnes, he wondered if she was reacting to the emotions Steve refused to show, but must be feeling.

Steve's first question and concern wasn't surprising: "Will it hurt him?"

Dr. Kelile was only a little miffed. "Of course not. That would not be considered a viable plan, and I wouldn't permit any procedure to cause pain to the patient, let alone to the degree that was he was subjected to by Hydra. There will be stresses involved, knowing the trauma in his history, but the procedures themselves won't be physically painful." She nodded to Wanda. "I believe Miss Maximoff could be helpful in relieving the emotional distress, if you're willing, that is."

Wanda answered without hesitating: "Of course."

"Sergeant Barnes was conditioned for years to react physically and mentally to hearing a series of trigger words. Our research and the documents that Ms. Romanoff provided show that this was accomplished by a combination of physical abuse, drugs, and electric stimulus applied directly to his brain. This was done in stages, to force him into a level of consciousness and suggestibility that grew in reaction to each word. The words are the weakness of this treatment; we will - humanely - use medication and stimulus to eliminate his reaction to hearing the words."

"You can apply electrical stimulus to the brain painlessly?" asked Clint.

"Yes," Dr. Kelile said firmly. "Our methods have been applied to repair damage to the brain from head wounds and neurological disorders, without pain or harm to the patients. Vibranium generates fields and currents that can be manipulated without the catastrophic damage of conventional Western devices."

Steve said nothing and lowered his eyes from Dr. Kelile to look at the ground. T'Challa could imagine his conflict. Here was the chance to free his friend, but it involved technologies and methods that were impossible to test, and what could be the consequences if the effort failed?

The rest of the secret Avengers were pondering that same conundrum. "Ordinarily - no offense intended, docs - I'd be saying we need a second, third, and fourth opinion and a crap-ton of peer
"It might be possible to get our hands on some of the theoretical research into neurosurgical methods and treatments for brain trauma," said Romanoff slowly. "It wouldn't necessarily be legal, but another problem is that I know of three people likely to be able to help us obtain data like that. One of them was Baron Strucker, and the other two are subject to Sokovia Accords...and, well," she looked reluctantly at Steve. "They also may not feel inclined to help Barnes even if they are still friendly to the rest of us."

"Tony and Vision," Steve sighed. He closed his eyes, and T'Challa mused that he still seemed terribly tired. He'd hoped the weeks of quarantine would at least give his friend the chance to rest. Steve opened his eyes again and looked at Kelile and Damaris. "It's not that I don't trust you. You've done more than enough to prove you care about Bucky's well-being."

"This is a heavy decision," Dr. Damaris acknowledged. "And it's one you shouldn't feel pressured to make immediately. We've carefully written our plan for treatment and shared it with those specialists in Wakanda who are cleared by security to have access to data regarding Sergeant Barnes. We'll make it available to you and any of your team that you wish. The ultimate decision will lie with Sergeant Barnes when he's revived, but he entrusted you to decide when the time was right to revive him."

"Thank you," Steve said quietly. "I'll...I'll think about it, and let you know."

Dr. Damaris nodded and backed away. After a moment's hesitation, Dr. Kelile followed her. Although Wanda and Sam looked poised to follow Steve when he wandered outside, Natasha and Clint waylaid them, to let their friend be alone for awhile with his thoughts.

T'Challa returned to his duties, but quietly arranged for reports on his guests' activities. As he half-feared, Steve isolated himself from his friends among the Avengers and the palace residents for nearly two days.

In the end, while T'Challa was still pondering whether it was too much of a liberty to approach Steve, Romanoff took matters into her own hands.

Jakarra gleefully sent a message to T'Challa when Romanoff and Ayo decided that the time had arrived for the one-on-one match they'd silently promised one another back in Berlin. They were kind enough to stall so that anyone who wanted to watch could assemble in the gymnasium. Preoccupied as he was, even Steve wasn't about to miss that, and T'Challa had no doubt that Romanoff had timed her friendly challenge deliberately for that very purpose.

To T'Challa's utter delight, and the Avengers' astonishment, Ayo pinned Romanoff. Romanoff took the defeat with mostly good grace, and peered around the room in search of the next opponent to challenge. She chose Aneka, impressing T'Challa by identifying just from observation which of the Dora Milaje was renowned as the finest in combat. When Aneka attempted to demure on the grounds that Natasha had not had sufficient time to recover from the bout with Ayo, Natasha took offense.

Shuri intervened. "If Miss Romanoff feels able to begin another round, don't insult her judgment."

Aneka inclined her head and gave in. "As my king's guest wishes, then." She was among the most reserved of the Dora Milaje. T'Challa knew her well enough to sense the vibe of "on your head be
it," in her acquiescence, but most of the onlookers didn't.

But Romanoff had a few gambits still undiscovered: this time, she bested Aneka. A few of the younger Dora Milaje hissed in protest; Romanoff used ploys in combat that some warriors deemed dishonorable. Yet combined with Romanoff’s tremendous skill, those ploys won her the match, and it was indeed entertaining. Ayo watched her with thoughtful eyes, occasionally murmuring with Okoye. Like T’Challa and Shuri, the Dora Milaje preferred to face an opponent with directness.

*But we would all do well to remember that many of our opponents will employ deception without shame,* T’Challa mused, smiling to himself.

It was indeed entertaining. Shuri demanded the next bout, and though Romanoff must have been beginning to tire, she didn't hesitate to accept the challenge. When T’Challa stole a glance at the Avengers, he was pleased to find Steve grinning openly. Shuri won, but not without suffering far more hits than usual.

"I must teach some of your methods to my charges," said Ayo when the round came to a halt. The five trainees began clamoring for their turn, but Ayo denied them. "Another day. That was the third round."

The girls were disappointed, until Natasha paused from toweling her face and suggested, "Let them have a turn against her," and gestured to Maximoff.

The younger Avenger blinked, then protested, "I've seen them fight. I'm no match even for the trainees at hand-to-hand."

"But you are with your powers," Romanoff pointed out.

The trainees nearly squealed. T’Challa kept a neutral expression when Ayo looked at him, so she smiled and agreed, "Some day, we may be called upon to defend our king against an enhanced attacker. It's worth a friendly challenge."

"Is it safe?" asked one of the onlookers.

Though she blushed, Wanda was firm in her answer. "If I use only telekinesis, yes, it's safe. I can't...the mental illusions, I haven't practiced with those, not in combat. It would be dangerous."

Ayo was brisk enough to draw the conversation past the awkwardness. "Then let us be challenged by what you can use. Choose your opponent."

Steve was still grinning, and nodded when Wanda looked to him for permission. T’Challa could no longer hold back his own grin when she turned to the trainees, only a few years younger than she. "All of them."

A murmur of excitement rippled through the room. "You all might want to stand back," advised Barton.

The audience crowded as far against the walls as they could, leaving ample space around the mat. Wanda Maximoff positioned herself in the center and allowed the five initiates to surround her. "Attack," ordered Ayo.

The three youngest girls charged at once, only to be halted by a shimmering red veil in the air that held them back as surely as any stone wall. Shuri made an impressed noise next to T’Challa, and Ayo looked approving as the eldest pair separated and circled, hoping to find a blind spot from which to charge. But although they got closer than their companions, Wanda evaded them and soon
had all five squirming in vain in the grasp of her power with little effort.

Grinning, she released them and explained, "We would need more space than we have in this room to show you properly how to get past my defenses."

"So it can be done?" asked Nakia.

Some of the onlookers were uncomfortable at the discussion, but despite Nakia's zeal in seeking weaknesses, Wanda let her trust in T'Challa's people be known. "Yes, it can be done. I'll show you."

T'Challa located Steve in the gardens later that evening, after most visitors to the palace had left for the day. The good mood from the sparring match had left him, and he looked tired and weighed down. T'Challa had no doubt of the cause.

Steve gave T'Challa a weak smile. "I swear, I don't usually take this long to make decisions."

"This isn't a combat decision to be made by a commander," T'Challa replied. "To choose the course for the welfare of a single loved one may not have the far-reaching consequences we weigh as leaders, but it reaches far deeper into our hearts."

"Have you ever had to decide for someone else like this? Not as - not as a leader but just one person?" asked Steve.

T'Challa shook his head. "Fortunately, no. Some day I might have expected to make decisions on behalf of one of my family, if they were incapable of doing so, but it hasn't happened yet."

He almost mentioned his mother, then decided against it. T'Chaka had explained to his oldest son the terrible chain of events that had led to N'Yami's death, admitting the grief and guilt that plagued him. T'Chaka had thought his decisions when birth complications arose would save both his wife and his son, but even the Wakandan medics, with all their skills, had failed. So T'Challa had never known his mother.

No, that's definitely not a story that Steve should hear now. The possibility that Dr. Kelile's plan would fail was in the open, undoubtedly weighing on Steve's mind already.

Steve sighed and rubbed his nose. "It's easy, making decisions on behalf of a team, even when there's risk involved. Cause I'll share in that risk and be there with them. I...I know your doctors know what they're doing, and wouldn't be cavalier about danger to him. I just wonder if by saying yes, I'll just be seizing the first chance to get him back - for me, not for him. That'd be wrong."

"Of course," said T'Challa. "I think that's true of anyone in your position. I doubt he expects you to be entirely objective. That would mean ignoring your history, and your friendship." He knew he shouldn't probe or push, but curiosity got the better of him. "What risk concerns you the most about the procedure?"

Steve wouldn't look at him. It was several moments before he answered. "The truth is, it's not the procedure itself I'm worried about. Even if it fails, and Hydra's still in his head, he could go back under. I...I keep imagining what happens next if it succeeds. He can't stay in Wakanda forever."

"He can," T'Challa corrected him. "If he wishes to." That got Steve's attention, but it didn't seem to reassure him much. T'Challa went on gently, "Perhaps you're thinking too far ahead. If the procedure succeeds, the decisions afterwards will rest with your friend."

Steve flinched and turned more fully away. T'Challa politely didn't comment on it. If Barnes was in
Wakanda in cryo, then he was protected. Once out of cryo, he would be less so. T'Challa couldn't blame Steve for wishing there was a way to shield his friend from the world that had already taken so much.

"I found it very hard to stay behind in Geneva, during the Mumbai crisis. Until now, I've always been free to act as I see fit. Sometimes as part of a team, but in command on those occasions. My people expect to see me at the vanguard, as a warrior and a king. I was prepared to operate as an equal among the Avengers, but not for a situation where I could not join a mission."

"That can happen," said Steve. "I hate it too. Always did, even back with the Howlies - Howling Commandos. Sometimes a stealth entry meant I couldn't take the lead. But back then there wasn't an army of Internet reporters waiting to call everyone who held back a coward."

T'Challa chuckled bitterly. "Yes, they had a great deal to say about my absence from Mumbai, despite knowing of the threat made to the hostages." Most of the worst commentators had been American, including President Bunt, but Steve didn't need to know that. "There are many films of you with your Commandos from the war. It seems as if you always had a film crew with you."

"When they were around, it felt like it, yeah. The Army let me go into combat, but they weren't about to give up the propaganda. But we didn't let the crew film us when we planned anything stealthy, and back then, at least you always knew when somebody was filming. The equipment wasn't easy to hide, and you had to carry the tapes around by hand. Not like now. Information moves instantly; it gets away from you and scattered to the wind before you even know somebody got it."

In the end, there was no real debate among the Secret Avengers or their Wakandan benefactors as to what choice Steve would make. Hell, there wasn't even much debate over whether there was any choice other than what Steve chose: to wake Bucky up and explain the doctors' treatment plan.

"I am in no way shape or form an expert, and I haven't stayed in a Holiday Inn Express since 2013," Sam said more than once. "But it looks like a good plan. Most important of all, it'll be Bucky's choice to make once he's out of cryo."

The big complication wound up arriving in the form of Tony Stark, who sussed out all too quickly what was in the works. He had the good sense to be somewhat polite when he told T'Challa, "I want to see."

The king studied the billionaire genius playboy philanthropist for several long moments, as the onlooking Avengers (plus Princess Shuri) all tried to melt into the scenery and pretend they weren't eagerly awaiting the response.

T'Challa answered slowly. "I will be there, as will my Dora Milaje. There have been...incidents, in the past, where patients newly awakened from stasis became violent due to confusion."

"Then you'll want my armor."

Natasha was surprised - and worried - that Steve didn't speak up. But T'Challa did, decisively: "No." He raised a hand when Tony started to argue. "I will allow your presence as a witness, but not your interference. If there are any difficulties, my people will handle them." He cast a warning gaze around the remaining Avengers for good measure. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Sam, all too willingly. But he gestured with his head at Steve and raised his eyebrows at T'Challa.

The king got the message. "Captain, you must also allow my doctors to decide what steps to take..."
during the initial recovery process. Bringing a patient out of stasis can be...unpredictable, but they are experienced."

Finally, Steve dared to cautiously challenge T'Challa. "I'm sure they know what they're doing, but Bucky's almost as enhanced as I am. If he were to panic, I'd be the one capable of getting him under control."

"I know. I will be in armor, but you will intervene only at Dr. Kelile's instruction."

The supersoldier and the king locked eyes. Natasha found her own eyes drawn towards Sam, and she caught the faint quirk of his lips. It was ironic, that the most notorious and deadly assassin in history now had these two men, icons of virtue and valor, butting heads over who should take the lead role as his protector.

For Steve, well, it went without saying what kind of emotions drove his motives in all things Bucky Barnes, but while T'Challa wasn't Thor, Nat got the sense that he took his promises very seriously. He might not have made a big, melodramatic oath like Thor might (or, hell, maybe he had - Nat hadn't been there), but anyone who tried to mess with Barnes would have Black Panther's vibranium claws in their face.

Nat told herself that as a result, it wasn't so much a cause for concern when Steve relented. "Okay. We're on your soil, and your doctors are the ones in charge. I'll follow your lead."

T'Challa relaxed at once. "He'll be fine, Steve. Cryogenic stasis recovery is an unsettling process, even for patients who have no experience with it. I won't insult your intelligence by saying a man with your friend's history won't be disoriented and frightened when he first awakens. That's natural. But my medical staff are prepared for it, and they understand your friend's strength. They'll let us know if they need assistance restraining him until he is fully lucid."

Steve nodded slowly. "Okay. Agreed."

*To Be Continued...*

**Chapter End Notes**

*Coming Soon:* Bucky is back...sort-of. T'Challa's medical team revives him, but recovery from stasis is a different animal for someone who's suffered the kind of abuse that Bucky has. Our heroes face more than a few scares in the process.

*PLEASE don't forget to review!*

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Nomuula:** Wakandan infectious disease expert, leading the team to study and treat the weaponized anthrax that infected Steve. Mid-50s.

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has
studied both at home and abroad.
Chapter Summary

Bucky is back...sort-of. T'Challa's medical team revives him, but recovery from stasis is a different animal for someone who's suffered the kind of abuse that Bucky has. Our heroes face more than a few scares in the process.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming! A big part of this fic now begins - my headcanon on the process of reviving Bucky and undoing Hydra's programming of his mind. The MCU seems to have just handwaved it, but since when do I pass up the chance to stretch out the angst?

**Canon Note:** It seems quite clear from the movies that Sam has PTSD too, but it hasn't gotten much discussion since *The Winter Soldier*. His history in this chapter is just a theory of mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Chapter Twenty**

**BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA**

The life support ward was far more crowded than the medical staff might have liked, and although T'Challa questioned himself that maybe this hadn't been the best choice, he decided to hold to it.

Despite the group's size, they stayed well out of the way, close to the main corridor entry to avoid impeding the doctors. Rogers stood at the front of the group beside T'Challa, so his view of the stasis chamber was clear, blocked only by the doctors as they worked.

Behind T'Challa were Shuri, Stark, and the remaining Secret Avengers in a small cluster, flanked by three of the Dora Milaje.

The room was tense at first. Stark arrived in civilian clothing, as promised, but Okoye refused to grant him entry until he turned over all devices that could call his suit to him. He bristled at them while the Avengers bristled at him, but T'Challa backed his guards up. "If it becomes necessary, we'll return them to you."

After a few minutes of posturing and glowering, Stark relented.

Now here they all were. Dr. Kelile's team flatly ignored the onlookers, and the tension gradually eased as the first hour of the process proved anticlimactic. Even Stark relaxed somewhat, while only Rogers remained strictly at attention, his gaze fixed on his friend's still form inside the stasis chamber as the frost began to fade from its walls.
After ninety minutes, the chamber was filled with mist, and as a muted hum rose from the equipment, Maximoff gasped softly. Steve and T'Challa turned to look at her, but she just gave Steve a small smile. "I feel him," she whispered. Steve swallowed hard and forced a smile back. T'Challa refrained from trying to reassure him.

He also restrained himself from looking at Stark, but noticed Ayo and Shuri keeping a close eye on Stark as two of Dr. Kelile's staff began entering commands to the chamber. But whatever Stark expected to happen, even the opening of the chamber went without incident.

Barnes remained as still as death as the case slid open, and the hydraulics gently rotated until the bed was horizontal. Dr. Kelile and her assistants maneuvered around the supine man, placing IV lines and scanning him with their instruments.

It was another twenty minutes before Barnes gave any visible sign of life. One of the doctors opened his eyelids, and when she removed her hand, he was looking at her, blinking in the dimmed lights. Next to T'Challa, Steve caught his breath and took a reflexive step forward. Before T'Challa had to put out a hand, Wanda spoke up. "He's not really awake, not yet. He won't recognize anything."

All seemed to be going well - at first. Barnes looked at nothing with dull, half-open eyes and didn't resist the doctors' ministrations. Wanda murmured reassurances to Steve: "He's all right. He's not in any pain, just...groggy. He's still half-dreaming."

Until one of the medics moved a scanner close to the side of his head, and Barnes caught sight of it. Wanda gasped, and Barnes flinched away, his expression changing all at once from half-conscious passivity to utter terror. "Sergeant Barnes, you're all right," said Dr. Kelile, and beckoned Steve closer.

Steve crossed the space to Bucky's side in a flash. Dr. Kelile, despite the extreme difference in size and weight, maneuvered Steve over to his friend's left side, while the doctors continued working over the IV lines and monitors on his intact right arm. Steve bent towards Bucky's head, cautiously touching him.

"Buck? Hey, it's me. It's Steve. You're okay, you hear me? Just relax."

Bucky's chest heaved, and T'Challa allowed himself a glance back to ensure Stark was staying still. He was, but the squeal of an alarm on the monitors made them all jump.

"Bucky! Buck, look at me!"

At first, it looked as if Barnes was just struggling blindly, trying to instinctively pull away from Steve. But his back began to arch as he jerked his head, and T'Challa's heart leapt to his throat: This was not mere fear or undirected aggression. Barnes was seizing.

"Get back!" Dr. Kelile snapped at Steve, and when he froze, T'Challa pulled him away.

There was no tracking the doctors' words for anyone who didn't speak Wakandan, but Dr. Kelile was a near-blur moving around Barnes, adjusting the devices around his head and barking orders at the doctors adding to the medication lines. T'Challa kept Steve back by the arm, and felt the American's muscles rigid and trembling.

On the bed, Bucky Barnes twitched and arched helplessly, his eyes rolled back and fluttering, his muscles clenched in a way not dissimilar from his friend's.

This shouldn't happen. Brain activity and stimulation were closely controlled for a patient awakening
from stasis, the doctors had assured T’Challa - but this man had gone through the process far more than any patient in Wakanda's history.

*My doctors aren't infallible. They can't foresee everything. But how do I explain that to Steve if I've failed to save the one man I swore to repay?*

T’Challa's mind raced in time with the activity in front of him, but he said nothing because there was nothing to say. Not to his doctors and not to Steve. Both men who'd vowed to protect James Barnes were helpless to do anything but watch.

T’Challa soothed his own distress by shifting his attention to the onlookers, ensuring that neither Steve nor any of his friends would try to intervene. Clint and Sam had moved closer to Wanda and Stark, but while Wanda looked anguished, she stayed still. Stark's eyes were as dark and intense as ever, his entire body clenched - much like Steve's at T'Challa's side.

In reality, the seizure must have lasted less than one minute, but it seemed to go on for eternity as Bucky's body jerked and arched, his muscles contracting and twitching, his throat making painful sounds over his ragged breathing. But finally, he sucked in a deep gasp of air, let it out, and relaxed, and the doctors relaxed in sync with him. That told T'Challa it was over.

Dr. Kelile kept a scanner under Bucky's ear as his head sank to the side, eyes closed. She looked up at Steve. "He will be all right, Captain."

As T'Challa loosened his grasp, Steve shuddered and made a faint noise in his throat. T'Challa politely pretended not to notice.

But when Steve would have returned to his friend's side, Dr. Kelile held up a hand and shook her head. T'Challa put a hand on his shoulder and gently tugged him back. "Let them work." Steve didn't struggle.

Barnes moaned and tossed his head, but didn't struggle, or at least not enough that a firm hand of one of the doctors on his arm couldn't keep the IV lines in place. His eyes fluttered open, and he squinted in confusion at the movement around him. A few of the medics faltered, but Barnes didn't lash out. On the contrary: when Dr. Kelile leaned towards him, he flinched.

"James, I know you're confused right now. Try to be calm. I am a doctor, and I will not hurt you."

Bucky shivered and shut his eyes. There was a noise of dismay from Wanda, then Barnes murmured. "Barnes...Sergeant...3-2-5-5-7-0-3-8..."

The rest was drowned out by the noise Steve made, some combination of pain and anguish, and to T'Challa's right, nearly every Avenger recoiled. Sam Wilson took a halting step back, then whirled and left the room. Scott and Shuri looked at each other, and by some mutual, silent accord, they both went after Sam.

Wanda had her hands over her mouth, Clint had both hands on her shoulders, and even Stark looked shaken. Only Romanoff betrayed no distress as Bucky's face went blank. But it wasn't the blank unawareness of the Winter Soldier. This was the blankness of a prisoner, aware of his helplessness and retreating into the dubious shelter of passivity as he murmured his name, rank, and service number in a steady, hopeless chant.

"Bucky," Steve whispered.

Dr. Kelile muttered at her staff to hurry up. Barnes didn't struggle, though the only restraint was the light strap that had secured him in the upright chamber. He lay, limp and dull-eyed, repeating the
same words and numbers over and over.

That seemed to last even longer than the seizure.

At last, Dr. Kelile stepped back from the monitors and nodded to Steve. T'Challa released him, and he surged back to Bucky's side. "Buck," he whispered, leaning close to his friend's face. "Bucky, hey, look at me. It's me, it's Steve, I'm here!"

Bucky blinked at him, trailing off mid-word. He stared up at Steve, but T'Challa couldn't tell whether Bucky recognized his friend or not. Steve cupped his face with big, gentle hands, stroking Bucky's temples with his thumbs. "It's okay. Bucky, it's Steve. It's me."

Bucky didn't answer. He didn't seem to know how. But he didn't start chanting his rank and service number again. Steve looked up at the medics for advice, and Dr. Damaris leaned in. "Just keep talking to him, Captain. He's very disoriented."

"And very tired," added Dr. Kelile, without looking up from her equipment. "Cryogenic stasis is not sleep. He'll need plenty of rest before anything else, now that we've completed the revival process."

Bucky shivered and flinched away from her. "Hey," Steve crooned, going back to rubbing his face. "It's all right, Buck. It's Steve, I'm here. You're okay."

Bucky squinted at him, brow furrowing, and he finally slurred, "S-steve?"


Bucky made a soft noise as he rubbed his cheek against Steve's hand, and his eyes drooped closed again. "Is this...it's okay, isn't it, if he just wants to sleep?"

"It is now," said Dr. Kelile, straightening up from the equipment with a satisfied nod. "His vitals have stabilized, and brain activity is within normal parameters." She considered her patient, and mused, "I planned to transfer him to a recovery room where he would be more comfortable, but I don't wish to wake him."

Steve kept a hand lightly on his friend's head as he straightened. "I could carry him."

Dr. Kelile's staff looked from Steve to her, and she nodded, and beckoned to two of her medics to carry the IV rig. With more ease than T'Challa would have expected, even for a supersoldier to heft the weight of such a large man (T'Challa had done so himself once - Barnes was heavy!), Steve slid his arms under his friend's back and knees and lifted him to his chest. Barnes didn't stir, but rested his head instinctively against Steve's shoulder, almost as if he knew.

The Secret Avengers said nothing, just watched Steve with soft eyes as he passed. (Well, Stark insisted on commenting, "Oh, Cap, bridal style, really?" Steve shot him a droll look and didn't reply.)

The staff led Steve to the nearest of the spacious recovery rooms, with a far more comfortable bed, and assisted him in easing his friend down and settling him and his monitors and IV lines. Bucky sighed as Steve tucked blankets around him. It was enough to make T'Challa smile. Steve sat down on the left side of the bed and calmly watched the medics work.

"Let him sleep as long as he wishes," Dr. Kelile instructed. "His body will know when he's fully recovered from stasis."

"Thank you," Steve said softly, not taking his eyes off his friend.

T'Challa lingered for a few minutes longer, but it was clear that nothing short of the apocalypse
would draw Steve out of that room, so he left to question the doctors instead. "What caused the seizure?"

Dr. Kelile's lips thinned, and she studied her tablet before answering. "I'm not certain yet. I suspect the brain damage that he sustained at the hands of Hydra for so many years, possibly as part of the stasis or revival process. Physically, he reanimated very rapidly, but parts of his brain were less quick to reactivate. It will take some analysis to be sure."

Back in the main ward, the other Avengers had not followed, although Clint and Romanoff were flanking Wanda in a way that suggested she'd tried. Stark, to T'Challa's relief, showed no sign of aggression. "How is he?" asked Shuri in English.

"Sleeping comfortably, as best the doctors can tell. Steve is with him. Dr. Kelile has ordered that he not be disturbed." T'Challa realized Wilson was still missing. "They expect he'll need to sleep for some time, to recover. I suggest we all return to the palace."

"Except Captain Rogers?" asked Shuri slyly.

T'Challa managed not to roll his eyes. "Yes, except Captain Rogers. He may stay with his friend."

Stark wasn't really paying attention, just staring down the corridor where Steve had carried Bucky. But when Ayo prompted, "Mr. Stark?", he shook his head and followed the rest of his friends without saying anything.

Once they'd gone, T'Challa asked Shuri, "Is Wilson well?"

"I didn't realize," she mused. "The work he once did for the American military, and until he joined Rogers, it brought him into contact with former prisoners. Hearing words like that again, so suddenly, it unsettled him."

ROYAL PALACE, BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

"How you doin'?" Clint dared to ask Sam once he and Scott joined them in the gardens.

Sam shrugged and gave him a weary smile. "Meh."

"Yeah, I get you." Oh yeah, Clint got it. Sam sprawled out on a lounge chair, gazing up at the sky. Clint waited.

"You realize...the service number, that's from World War fucking II."

"Yeah."

"How many decades did that poor bastard spend saying it, 'till he forgot it along with his name and his rank?"

"It's hard to know," said Nat, slipping between them to claim the other lounge chair that Clint had been about to sit on, dammit! "In between everything Hydra did to him, memories left and came back. He went into cryo, then back out. They wiped his mind one way and then another. There's no way to know what'll be on the surface at any given moment."

"I know," said Sam, without looking at her. "I only went on three prisoner rescue missions. We got our guys back, every time. You'd think I'd be prouder of that."

"Bad?" Clint asked.
Sam nodded. "Sometimes it took 'em hours to realize we weren't hallucinations and they really were going home. Other times it took weeks. Even after they did believe it, they never knew when they'd wake up back there again. Sleeping wasn't actually the worst part, they used to tell me at the VA. It was waking up. Hell, I heard more name, rank, service number in the VA than I ever did in the field. Their voices stay with you...same as the ones from the missions."

"I know," said Clint. Oh yeah, Clint knew. He and Nat had done their share of prisoner rescue. The worst outcome wasn't always finding a captive dead.

"I don't regret getting back in," Sam muttered, not really talking to anyone in particular. "It was the right choice."

"The right choice doesn't come without a price," Clint said. Nat looked at him wordlessly. He'd once said something similar to her, after she made the right choice, and was wondering why she should make it again. A few paces away, Wanda leaned against a tree and pretended not to be listening. *Sometimes it comes with a really fucking big price,* he thought. Without looking up, Wanda nodded.

"Airman Wilson?" Coming down the terrace, Princess Shuri chuckled when Clint, Sam and Scott scrambled to their feet. "Please, there's no need to be formal outside of a formal meeting. Relax." Clint did, but Sam stayed on his feet, looking chagrined. Clint had seen Shuri follow when Sam had retreated from the life support wing. It wasn't easy for a guy to deal with weakness like that being witnessed by a near-stranger.

Since it was Sam she wanted to see, Clint and Nat exchanged a knowing look, then Nat surreptitiously tugged Scott's sleeve to urge him away too. It was only polite - but Clint could read lips from a distance, and used that skill now, because he wasn't *that* polite.

"I've taken the liberty of checking on your family, if you'll forgive the intrusion," Shuri told Sam. His eyes widened, and he swallowed hard before nodding. "They're all accounted for and comfortable. Your mother has - with the persuasion of her daughter and brother - accepted the new identity we proposed, and is beginning to enjoy activities in her new community. Your sister's family are settling into their new residence, and your nephew is earning excellent grades in his new school. We'll have some messages from them to forward to you shortly."

For a few moments, Sam didn't - or couldn't - answer, but finally he took a deep breath and murmured, "Thank you."

"If you wish, I can also arrange a video call to either of their houses. Your sister and your mother have both made clear that you may contact them at any time of the day or night."

Sam's chin jerked up, and he met her eyes. But slowly, he smiled, almost in spite of himself, and Shuri led him back into the palace without another word.

Wanda ambled over to Clint's side, and he nodded. *Sometimes you just need to talk to family.*

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**BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA**

Bucky's sleep seemed almost peaceful - most of the time. Steve stayed in a chair next to the bed, until a couple of orderlies slipped in carrying a cot, which they made up to the left of the bed, and Dr. Kelile leaned through the door to give Steve a *very* pointed look. Steve had to smile and raised his hands in silent surrender. *Yes, ma'am.*

For the first day, Bucky didn't move...at all. It made Steve nervous, seeing him so completely still,
but Dr. Kelile whispered reassurances and showed him the readouts on the monitors. "He is weak and sleeping heavily, but his brain activity is now increasing as it should after stasis revival. He will become more responsive to stimuli as he grows stronger. When he does awaken, stay close and in physical contact, so he can focus on you."

Steve couldn't claim to understand much of the readouts - what with them being in Wakandan - but the lines on the graphs showed a slow, steady increase that seemed to bear out what Dr. Kelile said. And when Steve gave in to anxiety and leaned close, he could hear Bucky's slow, deep breathing. It sounded just the same as when they'd bunked together in Brooklyn or shared a tent in France. Despite everything, somehow that one sound hadn't changed.

Bucky's heartbeat was slower than it'd ever been, but it was even when Steve leaned his ear close to Bucky's chest. He managed to hold back from touching, imagining Bucky dreaming of far more hostile hands. The last thing Steve wanted was to be the cause of Hydra terrorizing Bucky any more, even in his sleep.

Steve didn't sleep well the first night, and the medics knew it, so an orderly brought him a small round gadget. "It is connected to the monitors. If there is a sudden change in the patient's condition, it will buzz to awaken you." Clutching the buzzer in his hand, Steve finally slept.

Far later in the morning than Steve usually rose, the buzzer went off gently in his palm, like a phone set to silence. Steve lurched upright on the cot in time to see Bucky move. It wasn't much. Bucky's eyes remained tightly closed, but he shifted, just a little, towards the left, shifting some of his weight onto what remained of his metal shoulder. His lips parted in a barely-audible sigh.

Steve waited, flat-out holding his breath, but Bucky stilled again, his cheek now turned against the pillow towards Steve.

In Brooklyn and in Europe, Bucky'd had an uncanny sense for when Steve was restless. He'd be lying on his side, apparently sound asleep, but then his eyes would open and glitter in the darkness, and without having to see, Steve would know he was smiling. "Go to sleep, punk," he'd whisper.

When Steve had been sick, his memories were foggy, but he had many images of Bucky at his bedside, gently rubbing his hand or his chest to help him breathe, putting compresses on Steve's face when he had a fever. "I'm right here, pal. Everything's okay. You just rest."

So he whispered, "I'm here, Buck. You're safe. You just rest."

For a few moments, there was nothing to suggest Bucky'd heard him. But then, Bucky quietly sighed again.

During the night, a soft whimper woke Steve even before the buzzer went off. He sat up and found Bucky twitching, as if trying to squirm away from something in his sleep. His fingers were digging into the bedclothes, and the lines jumping on the monitors said he was in at least a little distress. Nightmare. Steve cautiously touched his friend's face. "Buck - "

Bucky's eyes snapped open and he let out a wordless cry, half-challenge, half-terror, and he swung wildly. Steve caught his arm as an alarm went off on the equipment, to keep Bucky from slugging Steve or the IV rig. "Buck! Bucky, hey! Hey! Easy, it's okay! Look at me!"

Two orderlies came rushing in, but Steve held out his free arm to warn them off while trying to wrap the other around Bucky. Absolutely nothing good would come of letting them get within arm's reach until Bucky realized where he was.
For a few painful seconds, Bucky struggled blindly, eyes unfocused and recognizing nothing. Steve held on and leaned in until they were nose to nose. "Bucky, come on, look at me. It's me, it's Steve. You're okay." Once he was satisfied that the two orderlies were wise enough to keep their distance, he raised his free hand to Bucky's face and chanted in a low, gentle voice, "It's okay, it's okay. It's Steve, Buck. It's me."

Bucky trembled and Steve held on, waiting...until finally, his friend's eyes focused on him. Bucky blinked. "You know me?" Steve asked.

Bucky swallowed hard and whispered, "Steve?"

"Hey." Steve smoothed back the dark hair. Bucky closed his eyes. "It's me. It's Steve; I've got you."

"Steve," Bucky sighed deeply and rubbed his cheek against Steve's hand. "Where...where am..."

Steve kept up rubbing Bucky's face and stroking his hair. "We're in Wakanda. You're safe; it'll come back to you. Just relax and let me take care of you." This time, Bucky understood him, and when Dr. Kelile came in, he didn't panic, though he did shrink against Steve as he blinked heavy eyes at her, trying to concentrate.

"Sergeant Barnes, I am Dr. Kelile. You don't remember right now, but we have met before, and you have given me permission to treat you. All I wish to do is examine your monitors and ensure that you are in good health."

Bucky stared at her, then looked at Steve. At Steve's encouraging nod, he nodded as well. Dr. Kelile moved slowly, focusing on the equipment rather than Bucky (though Steve knew if she just wanted the readings, she wouldn't have had to come into the room), and once she'd gone, Bucky looked back at Steve. "Wha' happened?"

"You...you went back into cryo," Steve said carefully. "You wanted to, 'cause you said you couldn't trust your mind. You asked to stay under until we found a way to get Hydra out of your head."

He was hoping for some reaction to that, but Bucky was still too groggy to make the connection: that if he was awake, it means that they had found something. But he just closed his eyes again and drifted off.

The next time he woke up, Bucky was calm, and more important, he remembered. "How're you feeling?" Steve asked, once Bucky'd focused his eyes.


"Weird?" Steve asked with a grin as he held a glass of water to Bucky's lips.

Bucky waited until he'd had enough water to ease his thirst before explaining, "This...'s not like I remember. Didn't ever really remember after, they always wiped me, and...the words. Right away after cryo." He trailed off and didn't look at Steve or say anything else, though he cooperated with the medics' examination. Steve kept a hand on him whenever it was possible.

After the medics had finished and left, Bucky asked, "How long's it been?"

"Just shy of a year. You went under in June last year. It's May now."

"Oh. That's all?" Bucky closed his eyes. For a few minutes, Steve thought he'd gone back to sleep, but he finally murmured without opening them, "Your team, 're they all okay?"
"Yeah. We had, uh, a scare with Clint's family." Bucky opened his eyes, and Steve patted him. "They're safe now. T'Challa took them in." Steve veered away from the subject of Natasha. For reasons he couldn't quite pinpoint, he didn't want Bucky to have to think about it just yet. Or maybe he himself just didn't want to talk about that with Bucky just yet. Still holding back what my friends have a right to know. "We moved Sam and Scott's families. Well, I should say, Tony and T'Challa moved them. I haven't been much use protecting them."

Bucky squeezed Steve's hand and closed his eyes again. "Can't protect everyone," he murmured. Steve could see him drifting off again and smiled.

"I can try."

"I know. Y'always will, y'stubborn..." Bucky's head sank as Steve rubbed gentle circles on his chest.

A few hours later, Sam appeared in the doorway. Steve put down the tablet he'd been reading and got up, stretching before joining Sam a few paces outside the room. "I had to arm-wrestle the princess and sign away my firstborn to get visiting rights," Sam said. Steve chuckled. "How's he doing?"

"Tired. Very, very tired. But he remembered where he was and what was going on today, even if he still can't stay awake more than an hour," said Steve. "How're the others?"

"Wanda's fretting. I give it twenty-four hours more before she storms the place. I think she picked it up when he came out of cryo, how scared he was."

Steve scrubbed his face. It was scratchy; he hadn't shaved since the morning they first brought Bucky out of cryo. If the medics didn't insist on it, he probably wouldn't be showering or sleeping or eating either. "He's had some nightmares, but nothing like...at first. When he thought he was back in Zola's hands, just like in Azzano. "He'll be okay." He has to be. I won't stop until he's okay. "How're the others?"

"We're good. It's a holiday in town - festival for the end of an ancient civil war, they said - so Minister Jenali and his family took the Bartons out to their retreat in the mountains. The rest of us watched parades and fireworks through the forcefield. I guess some traditions are universal - except flaming kites are a thing in Wakanda."

Steve wasn't entirely distracted from peeking over his shoulder to make sure Bucky hadn't moved, but waxed curiosity. "How does that work?"

Sam shrugged. "Not entirely sure. It might be more like mini hot air balloons covered in sparklers; Stark understood it. Most of the rest of us just pretended we did when they explained it."

Steve chuckled. "God knows, I've had to do that sometimes, and I like to consider myself of reasonable intelligence."

"Right? So, yeah, we're good. Just been waiting for news. Scott and I've both been in touch with home, and everyone's doing well."

There wasn't a lot left to say. But when Steve returned Bucky's room, Sam lingered in the doorway, just casually keeping watch for awhile. Eventually, Sam ambled in past Steve and parked himself on Steve's cot with his own tablet. He put earbuds on to play music without disturbing Bucky, but might not have realized that Steve's enhanced hearing was more than enough to make out what was coming through them.

A few hours later, Bucky stirred. Sam froze, but Steve motioned for him to wait. With Steve between
them, as groggy as Bucky was, even if he woke up disoriented, he wouldn't pose a danger to Sam. However, Bucky woke calm, and gazed around the room, seeking Steve, and looking only a little surprised to find Sam here as well.

Sam had pulled out an earbud, and music wafted softly out: It was Marvin Gaye, *Trouble Man*.

Bucky smiled and closed his eyes again.

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

*Coming Soon:* Our heroes reunite with Bucky - even Tony, from a distance. The medics explain their plan for destroying Hydra's programming, but Bucky also has to overcome his own fear, and Tony takes a step that nobody expects.

*Original Character Guide*

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.
Chapter Summary

Our heroes reunite with Bucky - even Tony, from a distance. The medics explain their plan for destroying Hydra's programming, but Bucky also has to overcome his own fear, and Tony takes a step that nobody expects.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks as always for the great feedback and discussion! This fic envisions a more complicated treatment procedure than the hand-wavy one we got from our favorite Wakandan genius princess in Black Panther. All of our heroes are forced to slow down and do something hard thinking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-One

ROYAL PALACE, BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

By all reports, it was nearly a week before Barnes was fully alert.

"That doesn't make any sense," said Tony. "Hydra wouldn't wait a week for their gunman to be capable of deployment."

The Wakandans all frowned - evidently even T'Challa and his princess sister were now the Winter Soldier's biggest fans - but it was Natasha answered sarcastically, "No, Stark, they didn't. They dragged him out of cryo, pumped him full of adrenaline and ran electricity into his brain. It was very efficient, took just a few hours."

Now everyone was glaring at Tony, as if it hadn't been a natural question.

"May I see him now?" asked Wanda.

T'Challa nodded. "Yes, Dr. Kelile is - at last - satisfied that he's recovered from stasis enough for visitors." Then he gave Tony a look. "She tells me that Sergeant Barnes' recovery was different from most patients, and she doesn't believe this is merely due to the serum. The opposite should be true; he should have recovered more quickly. Hydra's crudeness with the technology and their complete disregard for his health and safety caused lasting physical and mental damage."

There is... absolutely nothing I can say to that.

In the end, the entire rest of the team went scampering off to welcome Barnes back to the land of the living, and Tony trailed after them. That earned him an escort of T'Challa and his hot bodyguards, but T'Challa didn't stop him.
Somebody must have warned Barnes that Tony and Natasha were in Wakanda, because Barnes didn't freak out at the sight of them, though he did stare. Wanda distracted him with a fierce hug, talking a mile a minute in Sokovian as if Barnes had become some kind of stand-in for her dead brother. Hm. The more Tony watched their interactions, the more he wondered if that wasn't exactly what'd happened. Barnes accepted her embrace with a warm smile and didn't look the least bit alarmed, and for several minutes nobody in the room could follow their conversation. (Except maybe Romanoff. Tony still wasn't sure how many languages she knew.)

It was warm handshakes for T'Challa, Barton, and Lang - and a weird, sort-of sly half-grin for Wilson. Tony had no idea what that was about. Then Barnes met Tony's eyes, and awkwarest...silence...ever ensued, so Tony just turned and left. He'd seen whatever the hell it was he came to see: his parents' killer alive and well, smiling and welcomed by people Tony had once called friends.

Okay, yeah, it was more complicated than that. But sometimes even Tony Stark's brain got really tired of complicated.

There's this guy who looks even more tired than Rogers, not dressed like last time I saw him and wanted him dead, not like in that video the night he... Now he wore a light shirt with the fabric of a sleeve hanging empty while he patted Wanda's shoulder and talked softly with the team. My team. They were mine once.

That thought should've pissed Tony off. Hell, he wanted it to piss him off, to remind him that this good-looking pseudo-supersoldier being fussed over here in this hospital-cum-luxury-hotel hadn't just taken Tony's parents, he'd also managed to sway damn near everybody Tony'd once trusted.

Tony wanted to burn with rage at that awareness, but...couldn't.

It was all too damn complicated.

Distraction came - at last - in the form of one of the other Wakandan researchers. "Mr. Stark, I am Dr. Dahab. I am a specialist in medical technology research. My king has advised that you are developing technological solutions for Colonel Rhodes' spinal injuries, and asks that I offer our assistance, as our vibranium may be of use to you."

It took Tony a few seconds to process that. "What...uh...yeah!"

Tony would say this for T'Challa of Wakanda...he made up for all the awkwardness by giving Tony a ticket to Candyland.

And the Wakandans had made major strides in treating paralysis due to spinal trauma. "Sadly, even an element as versatile as vibranium can't treat some conditions. Injuries to adults in the bones, cartilage, or nervous systems can have a good prognosis. The process takes longer for children, but they also recover well. However, congenital disorders and defects at birth, we're still struggling to treat."

Tony studied the tiny vibranium implants that would feed new signals through the damaged spinal cord. They looked a little like something from an alien movie that would promptly turn all the patients into bionic zombies. "How much mobility is restored, for adult paraplegics?"

He held his breath.

"All of it."

He let it out. Rhodey...Always in such good spirits when they were up and about, but Tony knew he
missed running and walking without pain, moving without stiffness, being able to bend and stand.

"There is some pain involved early in the process, as the lower nervous system and major muscle groups must re-learn to process the signals," said Dr. Dahab. "The first few weeks can be difficult and require substantial pain medication, but also physical therapy. Since we perfected the implants eighteen years ago, over ninety percent of adult trauma patients have restored all mobility, with pain at a level that does not hamper their daily activities."

_Something_ shot through Tony, some combination of elation, anxiety, and...well, irritation. "You've had this tech for eighteen years, but you haven't used it outside Wakanda?" _Goddamnit, Stark, the stakes are kind of high here, so why can't you keep your big mouth shut for once?_! "I- sorry - I didn't mean -"

Dr. Dahab didn't look _too_ offended. "I'm sure that seems very greedy of us. However, the more the versatility of vibranium is known, the more danger to our borders. You've already seen how stolen vibranium is put to use. Protecting it - and everyone who benefits from it - that isn't easy. Raw vibranium is highly toxic. Do you know how many men and women have died trying to access the mound directly in the past ten years? Over nine hundred, all of them foreigners. The ringleaders and commanders of such intrusions never come in person. They send the poor and the desperate to do their dirty work."

Something pricked Tony's mind: the picture of that Klaue character. "That's why you brand them when you catch them."

"Harsh, I know. Enough terrorists are already interested in vibranium as a resource for weapons. If they knew its use as a bioweapon, the ramifications are even worse. So we move very quietly in introducing its benefits outside our borders. Some foreign experts have been entrusted with its secrets. The most recent is someone you know."

Tony blinked, then frowned to himself as he thought. "Helen Cho."

"Yes. She was known to us before, but the clearance process is a long one. After the events in Seoul and Sokovia, she was among the witnesses who spoke very frankly with our late king without seeking any accommodation for herself. We admire that candor. So we're sharing our work as she is sharing hers; her regeneration technology promises to be groundbreaking even by our standards. We hope it will lead to new breakthroughs when combined with the properties of vibranium."

The implants glowed in the bluish light of their tank. "T'Ch - the king, he'd let you do this for Rhodes?"

"Of course. Colonel Rhodes is an Avenger, as is my king. He has great hopes to distribute vibranium medical technology more widely, if as discretely as possible."

The whole conversation did a lot for Tony's mood - right up until he was about to leave, and spied a diagram on a screen that another group of techs were working on.

It was an arm, a prosthetic arm, meant for someone pretty big and muscular..._oh._

The techs looked over their shoulders and saw Tony staring, and the hisses of alarm as the screen went dark told the tale. "So," Tony murmured, insides churning. "You're making him a new one."

Dahab didn't deny it. "My king feels partly responsible for the loss of the one he had. He wishes to replace it for the same reason my colleagues and I are working to undo Hydra's damage to Sergeant Barnes' brain."
Tony kept staring at the screen and the bemused technicians until he heard the door open behind him. Rather than wait for security to kick him out, he turned and left on his own.

Dr. Kelile allowed Wanda to be there when she explained her treatment plan to Bucky, since Wanda would be part of that treatment. Bucky betrayed very little reaction - optimistic or pessimistic - as he studied the written plan and listened to what Dr. Kelile had to say.

"I'm assuming you wouldn't have brought me out if you didn't think it'll work."

"Precisely." Noticing how he stared at the diagrams of the equipment, she added, "We've gone to great effort to ensure the devices don't resemble the ones employed by Hydra in any way."

Bucky frowned. "You'll need a chair."

"The procedure can be performed in a bed."

"But a bed can't restrain me as well." Bucky looked up as she scowled. "Be realistic. You'll need..." He sighed as she visibly prepared to argue. "You'll need to at least be able to restrain me, if something happens."

"If something happens, I can do that better than any handcuffs," Wanda pointed out. "And without hurting you."

"You don't know that. God only knows what kind of failsafes they buried in me in case their conditioning starts to fail."

Steve thumped him gently. "Their conditioning started failing back on the helicarrier. You tell us. Did you run into any failsafes you haven't already told us about?"

Bucky stared at him. To anyone else, his face would seem blank. Steve wondered if Wanda could sense how scared Bucky was. She shot him a warning look in response. Okay, that answers that question.

"You'll have me," Wanda spoke up softly. "You'll have Steve, in case you...react physically. The doctors will have medications that they've made, to work on your systems, and some of King T'Challa's guards will always be there. You won't hurt anyone."

Bucky didn't take his eyes off Steve. It was almost as if he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words.

"Allow me to show you what we've prepared," Dr. Kelile pressed gently. Bucky nodded.

He seemed to be starting to relax...right until they walked into the room on the highest security upper floor and Bucky set eyes on the bed.

It looked almost nothing like Hydra's chair, though there was a lot of equipment around the bed. There were soft restraints, tucked and stowed carefully around the sides, that made Steve feel queasy. When Bucky brushed past him to study it closer up, Steve felt him trembling.

Bucky put out his hand towards the equipment, touching the device that would slide over his head - then snatched it back as if it burned him. He spun away from it and nearly ran past them. "Let him go," said Dr. Kelile, and the guards opened the doors.

"Steve, wait - " Wanda tried to pull Steve back, but he shook her off. He wouldn't try to stop Bucky,
but Steve wouldn't let him go through this alone. So he trailed after, down the stairs to the main floor, mumbling apologies to anyone who got jostled.

The only time Bucky paused in his flight was as he was rushing for the doors, only to nearly plow into Tony Stark.

Steve froze, heart in his throat, a few feet above them on the stairs as the two men stared at each other in shock. Then Bucky recovered, turned away and all but ran outside into the sun. Tony stared after him. Steve couldn't bring himself to meet Tony's eyes as he followed Bucky, but he sensed Tony watching them.

Bucky finally stumbled to a halt a few yards out onto the hospital lawns, leaning against a tree with his right hand as if it was the only thing that would keep him upright anymore. Steve stopped a few paces away and listened to Bucky's ragged breathing.

When he couldn't stand it anymore, he called softly, "Buck?"

Bucky looked over his shoulder, and Steve's heart lurched again. Terror, anguish, confusion...Bucky looked so much like on the helicarrier. "I can't," Bucky gasped out. "I can't."

"Buck..." Steve approached carefully, hoping Bucky would sense it was just to give him space, rather than any fear of Bucky himself. "Talk to me."

Bucky pushed himself off the tree and stumbled against Steve. Steve carefully pulled him into a hug and eased them both down to sit on the grass. Bucky's face was pressed against his neck. "Steve...I can't, can't, it's too dangerous..."

Steve bit his tongue hard to keep from blurting out denials. No, Buck, you're wrong, it'll be okay, you can do it, It'll work, I promise, promise... Don't make promises you can't keep, Rogers. He rubbed slow circles on Bucky's back, groping around for the right thing to say, and finally settled on, "I'm here. No matter what happens, I'm with you. 'till the end of the line, remember?"

"Remember," Bucky murmured, clinging to Steve like a scared kid.

Steve ran fingers through Bucky's hair and used his free hand to wipe furiously at his eyes. "It's your choice," he said, in a whisper so his voice wouldn't betray him. "They won't force you to do anything; neither will I."

"I dunno, I - can't think..."

"Just breathe. Just breathe, Buck. You don't have to make your mind up now." Steve sensed someone watching them and looked up past Bucky's hair. There was Wanda back on the terrace, but she wasn't looking at Steve and Bucky, she was looking at...Tony. Steve stiffened, and Bucky felt it, but Steve murmured some nonsensical reassurance to stop Bucky from looking around. He made himself relax and kept his fingers in Bucky's hair, patting his head.

Tony stood motionless on the terrace, watching them. A few paces away, Wanda watched Tony, as did a few of the hospital guards. When Tony's eyes met Steve, Steve couldn't guess what he was thinking.

Wanda shamelessly read Stark whenever Bucky was in his line of sight, and once Stark took it in his head to follow Bucky out of the research center, Wanda decided to keep an eye on them both.

It was less than polite for them all to be standing there while Bucky huddled only a few dozen yards
away, being soothed by Steve through a meltdown. But each time Wanda drew breath to snap at Stark to leave them alone, something stopped her, and in turn, she stopped the doctors and the guards who would've intervened.

*Look at him, Stark. He's not a monster. He's a victim. You're too intelligent not to understand, too observant not to see. Face it. He's not the murderer of your parents. He was only the weapon.*

Steve and Bucky stayed outside for the remainder of the day. They didn't go far, and occasionally Steve would look back, marking Stark's position. More than once, he met Stark's eyes and slipped a protective arm around Bucky's shoulders. It was a dual purpose. Wanda didn't need telepathy to work that out: both to steer Bucky away and keep him from noticing the potentially-hostile observer, but also a declaration of intent to Stark. *He won't let you hurt Bucky. We won't let you. Even if you are that deep in denial, if you try to hurt him in any way, we'll all stop you.*

But Stark didn't try to hurt Bucky. He just watched, eyes dark and hooded, brow furrowed as he puzzled.

Wanda didn't want to know what was in Stark's head. But she couldn't always avoid it.

Late in the evening, Bucky had calmed, and he and Steve wandered along the lake that separated most of the research center grounds from the main hospital campus. It was across that lake that Wanda had met young Tesfaye, who'd showed her his memories of his mother and his sister in Lagos.

Stark didn't leave the terrace, but Wanda ambled a little closer to the supersoldiers, and this time Steve looked up and smiled at her. *It's okay. She could join them.*

Bucky smiled when he saw her coming and greeted her in Sokovian. When she answered, Steve made a huff of irritation that they all knew was feigned, and Bucky started talking to her about the weather (still in Sokovian) just to tease him.

Wanda giggled. "*Steve is very tall, isn't he?*"

Bucky blinked, then grinned wickedly. "*Yes, Steve is very tall. Steve is also getting very flustered.*"

"Aw, come on, that's not fair!" Steve exclaimed. "*What're you saying about me?*"

They burst out laughing. "*Never telling,*" Bucky replied in English, thumping him.

Bucky said yes. But he didn't say it because he honestly expected the plan to work.

Not that he thought Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris and their army of specialists were in any way lacking in competence. Bucky just...could bring himself to believe that it could be done. When they wrote it down in layman's terms, they made it sound so simple. He couldn't believe it would be that simple.

Wanda must have known why he said yes. Steve could probably guess it.

*I said yes because there aren't any other options.* It was a problem that Dr. Kelile would almost certainly prevent him from dying in the attempt.

Wanda shot Bucky a *look* the first time those thoughts crossed his mind. He glared at her once he was sure Steve wasn't watching. *Don't you dare say anything to him.* She sighed and lowered her eyes.
Nearly all of them except King T'Challa himself started arguing when Bucky laid out his condition: "You can't do it here in this building; there're too many people. Too many windows. Do it back in that bunker, where I'm less likely to get out if I lose it."

Everyone started arguing at once:

"I cannot put you underground for a process taking weeks, Sergeant Barnes!"

"Buck, c'mon, that's overkill!"

"That's completely inhumane - " Wanda began, but was halted by T'Challa's raised hand.

To Bucky, he asked calmly, "Will you feel safer then?"

Well...shit. Wanda sighed and looked at Steve. Bucky bit his lip, then shifted his gaze from T'Challa to Dr. Kelile and nodded, the entreaty clear. Dr. Kelile sighed too.

"A compromise is possible," said Dr. Damaris. "The procedures themselves will necessarily have to stop for you to rest and eat and recover, along with everyone else involved. The security officers who guard the area are housed close by, and they're free to be outdoors and relax. There are always bungalows available for use."

Dr. Kelile shook her head. "The guards' barracks are hardly appropriate for a guest of the king."

Bucky smiled. "Believe me, they'll be a lot more than I'm used to. I could live with that, so long as it's a long way from civilization."

Dr. Kelile drew breath to argue, but T'Challa interrupted. "Yes." Seeing Steve draw breath, he held up a hand, "Yes, Captain, if you insist on staying with him nearby, you may do so. And Miss Maximoff," he added before Wanda could do more than perk up. Wanda had to grin.

Dr. Kelile huffed faintly. "I do not like to see my patient treated as a prisoner."

Bucky replied, "Until I get Hydra out of my head, I'm a prisoner no matter where I am."

It took several days for Dr. Kelile's team to transfer their equipment to the bunker. In the mean time, the security staff set Steve, Bucky, and Wanda up in one of the vacant barracks residences. T'Challa firmly refused Sam's suggestion of going with them. "This process will be difficult for all involved. Better that some of you remain apart from it."

"He's right," Nat told Sam reluctantly. "Barnes'll feel better with as few witnesses as possible, and Steve won't be able to focus on anything except him. We need to stay out of the way."

Stark watched the preparations in what everyone assumed was just sulky, resentful silence, but while they were still working, he abruptly told the doctors, "Wait. I need to get something."

Sam watched (okay, spied along with Natasha) from a distance when T'Challa confronted Stark on the airstrip. "What're they saying?" he muttered at her.

Nat was silent for a minute, then murmured, "What you'd expect. T'Challa's reminding him that
there'll be consequences if he exposes Bucky."

Stark folded his arms, impatient, and retorted something.

"Stark says he's not going to expose him. There's something in his custody from the Berlin investigation that might be useful. He's going to get it."

T'Challa frowned, studying Stark, and said one word. Sam didn't need Romanoff to read lips for that: "Why?"

Stark looked away and muttered something, and T'Challa let him go. Seeing Sam and Nat, he approached them as Stark flew away. "I attempted to question Stark on his intentions. He says only that he has his reasons."

By the end of the day, Stark was back...and to the complete disbelief of all concerned, he marched up to Dr. Kelile and dropped a backpack at her feet. He walked out again before anybody could muster anything to say.

"That was Bucky's," Sam breathed. "I remember it, in Romania. He tried to take it with him."

When Bucky and Steve arrived, Bucky practically dove for the thing. He pulled it open and started tugging out notebooks, staring at them in shock. Steve was the only one who dared approach him and knelt at his side. "What are these?"

It was several moments before Bucky answered, not taking his eyes off them. "What I remember. Everything that came back. What I didn't want to forget again." As he pushed the books back into the bag and held it to his chest, Sam could see his hand shaking.

What Dr. Kelile and/or Bucky decided to do with the backpack and its contents as they prepped for Bucky's treatment, Sam couldn't guess. Wanda went with them to talk, and this time they kicked Steve out. Steve paced around the waiting area, looking dazed. "You okay, Cap?" Sam asked.

Steve blinked at Sam. "Why...Tony, why did he...?"

"Dunno. Guess that's the million dollar question," Sam admitted.

So Steve hunted Stark down in the tech research section - Stark had been spending a lot of time there, and just waited until Stark emerged. Sam trailed after him, half for moral support, half out of morbid curiosity.

Stark, no surprise, was wary and defensive when Steve finally cornered him. "Why?"

"I can't do the equation unless I have all the variables," Stark replied curtly, and dodged past Steve for the door.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: The first steps of treatment of Bucky's Hydra programming begin, but T'Challa's doctors soon discover that while not a failsafe, Hydra's damage to Bucky's mind and body has far worse-reaching effects. More news from the outside world leave
the Avengers, especially Tony and Steve, reeling.

ORIGINAL CHARACTER GUIDE

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky’s treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

**Dr. Dahab:** Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (looks like his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)
Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

Bucky's treatment begins, but T'Challa's doctors soon discover that Hydra's damage to Bucky's mind and body has far worse-reaching effects than anticipated. Shocking news from the outside world leaves the Avengers, especially Tony and Steve, reeling.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all for the amazing feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Two

BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA

T'Challa didn't bring Bucky to the palace before treatment started at the bunker. Steve tried not to feel resentful of that; T'Challa had his own people's safety to think about, and small as it was, there was always the chance that somebody might repeat trigger words in Bucky's hearing – or that someone might just see him and freak out.

Wanda interceded quietly. "He's also sparing Bucky the embarrassment of having to decline his hospitality. Bucky doesn't want to go anywhere around civilians until Hydra's out of his head."

Yeah, that was a fair point. Steve knew he was in a very bad mindset of sometimes forgetting Bucky was a free agent, trigger words or no trigger words.

The team gathered at the hospital as they had before Bucky went into cryo, to wish him luck. Surprisingly, amid the general well-wishes of Sam and Scott and T'Challa, it was Natasha whose words to Bucky seemed the most reassuring. She didn't shake his hand or embrace him, just told him calmly, "They know what they're doing."

Bucky slowly nodded.

Then the three of them flew off to the hillside bunker where they'd be spending nearly every waking hour for...days? Weeks? It'd taken Hydra years to grind the trigger words into Bucky's brain. One thing even T'Challa's doctors couldn't predict was how long it would take to undo.

T'Challa arrived in the bunker as the doctors were preparing for the first round. "I'm not at liberty to be present for the entire process, although Dr. Kelile will send me regular reports," he explained. "But I feel I should be here for the beginning."

Steve wondered whether to be grateful for the support or worried that T'Challa was that concerned, but Wanda smiled at the king. Bucky didn't look at T'Challa. Once the medics started prepping him,
he'd stopped looking at anyone.

The doctors spoke in gentle voices with their instructions and explanations, and at first they tried asking Bucky if he was all right. Bucky didn't respond at all until it was clear that nobody would proceed without an answer. Then he could only manage a jerky nod.

Nobody could really blame Bucky. Steve's skin was crawling from sheer anxiety, and sometimes Wanda moved like she was seconds away from throwing her arms around Bucky. Steve wouldn't blame her if she did; god knew, Steve wanted to.

When Dr. Kelile asked softly, "Are you ready?" Bucky went stiffly to the bed, looking at nothing, but his jaw was clenched so tight that his veins were standing out.

At the first whir of the machinery moving into position, Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and grabbed the edge of the bed with his one hand. Dr. Kelile shot T'Challa a dismayed look, then beckoned to Steve.

Steve darted forward, and at her nod, he put his hand on Bucky's. "Buck, hey. I'm here."

Bucky's eyes snapped open, and he made a noise, a whimper of near-panic. But then he caught Steve's hand in his and squeezed so hard that any non-enhanced human would've had their bones crushed. Not Steve. He held on and squeezed back. "It's okay," he whispered. "Just look at me. I've got you."

Bucky had never looked so scared. Steve wondered in a haze of desperation if Bucky had ever been so scared. He hyperventilated as the medics murmured pointless reassurances, and Steve wanted to yank him off that table just to stop that fear. But finally, Bucky got his breathing under control, and shut his eyes. "Steve may stay here with you," said Dr. Kelile. "When you're ready, we'll begin with the first word."

A small sob escaped Bucky, and Steve brushed away the tears that squeezed from his eyes. He opened them and met Steve's gaze, and rasped, "Okay. Okay."

The machinery hummed softly, and Dr. Damaris read, "Zhelaniye."

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, but all the horrors Steve imagined, the screams, convulsions, the sizzle of electricity, those didn't follow. After a few moments, Bucky let his breath out and blinked up at Steve. "How do you feel?" Dr. Kelile asked.

Bucky blinked again, frowning to himself. "I...okay...I think..."

"If you feel any pain or distress, you must tell us. We will stop and make adjustments." Bucky gulped and nodded before closing his eyes again.

Steve stroked his thumb along the back of Bucky's hand. When Bucky finally seemed to be calming down, Steve took a deep breath and looked around. He found T'Challa still watching with a hand on Wanda's shoulder. She was chewing on her knuckle to the point that Steve could see it was bleeding. He made himself smile at her.

It was a little like the process Steve had seen in those nightmarish videos; there was no getting around that. Each time Dr. Damaris read one of the words, the pitch of the machine would change, though it was much quieter than whatever the Hydra bastards had used. Bucky's pulse and blood pressure would skyrocket, but then he gradually calmed down again as the agony he remembered didn't strike.
By the third word, his brainwaves were doing...*something* on the monitors that the doctors didn't like, and Dr. Kelile beckoned Wanda over. To Steve's relief, they didn't make him let go of Bucky's hand.

They turned the machinery off, and Wanda stroked her palm across Bucky's scalp, trailing her red power. Bucky sighed and relaxed entirely. The doctors muttered over the monitors until Dr. Kelile held out a hand to Wanda. "There. That is good."

When Wanda removed her hand, Bucky was asleep.

There were no more words that day, and with the doctors having lived up to their promise that the process wouldn't hurt, Bucky never reverted to the desperate, barely-stifled terror of the morning. He drifted in and out, sometimes seeming unaware of his surroundings due to the machinery and whatever drugs the doctors were giving him, but he never let go of Steve's hand.

Eventually, Steve looked back and saw T'Challa leaving. The king smiled and nodded to him in farewell.

It felt like either forever or just a few minutes until the machinery fell silent and the doctors began disconnecting it. "That is enough for the first day," said Dr. Kelile. Bucky blinked awake and squinted drowsily at her. "Take this evening and night to rest and eat. Try to relax, and we will continue tomorrow."

Bucky sat up with Steve's help, looking dazed as he stared around the room. "You feel okay?" Steve prompted.

"I...yeah." Bucky scrubbed at his face and drew a shaky breath. "Yeah, I feel okay." He shot Wanda a weak smile. She came up to his other side, and she and Steve kept Bucky's weight as he shifted off the table to his feet. He was shaky, but he stayed upright between them.

The guards' barracks might not have been much compared to the palace or even the hospital recovery rooms, but they were still nicer than anywhere Steve and Bucky had lived in Brooklyn, or Wanda in Sokovia. The Wakandans who guarded the secret work in the bunkers lived in large houses, four or five together, with small but comfortable bedrooms, kitchens, and living areas. A few of them were outside the nearby buildings when Steve, Wanda, and Bucky arrived, and nodded to them or raised a hand in greeting.

Somebody had stocked the place with food, which was a relief to Steve since it spared them the awkwardness of finding out where to get it. Cooking for themselves hadn't been possible in the hospital, and being waited on was uncomfortable. "Whether you're hungry or not, you need to eat," Wanda informed Bucky, and bustled into the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am," Bucky murmured sarcastically as Steve settled him on the couch. It would be a tight fit for two men their size to share, so he made Bucky comfortable and went to see if he could help Wanda out - and she promptly chased him out of the narrow kitchen with a spatula.

"There's not enough room in here! Go sit with him!"

Steve dodged her swats and scrambled back into the living room to find Bucky curled up on the couch, already fast asleep. Waking him up for dinner would be a hassle, but...oh well. Steve liberated a throw blanket from one of the chairs and covered Bucky, patting his head gently when he murmured in his sleep. "Easy, Buck, it's just me."

He turned some music on low, hoping it'd ease Bucky's mind if he did startle awake, and searched
his tablet for the last book he'd been reading.

Bucky was hard to wake up once Wanda had dinner ready, but at least he knew where he was and didn't panic - or pass out on his plate. Afterward, Steve offered, "Want to see what's on TV, at least till the sun goes down?"

Bucky chuckled wearily. They all knew he wouldn't last long. "Why not."

Steve ceded the couch to Bucky and Wanda, and managed not to grin as Bucky slumped further and further down the cushions. "Funny how the Wakandans are so strict about letting outsiders in, but they have TV and Internet and music coming in from all over the world."

He'd thought Bucky was half-asleep, but Bucky answered, pulling himself up a little straighter. "They're not afraid of the outside world. They're just smart enough to know what outsiders have done to others and might try to do to them, with half a chance. So they let information in, but keep people out."

Wanda nodded and put an arm around Bucky's waist. "He's right. King T'Challa took a leap of faith to shelter us here, a huge one, that many of his people still disagree with. Even among those who don't think he was wrong, some only approve because they reason that it's only a matter of time until an incursion takes place, and better that he make powerful allies."

Well, Steve had thought this wasn't a loaded topic. "Damn. I wish it wasn't such a risk for him."

"In a strange way, having the Bartons here has eased some people's minds. They think at least the Avengers won't become hostile while they're sheltering a wife and children, and it's required in honor of the late king, to save others targeted by Zemo."

Bucky had nodded off on Wanda's shoulder in the few minutes they'd been talking. Steve grinned as Wanda slid him across her lap. "You've done that before."

"Pietro," she admitted, then mock-glared at Steve when he went to take a picture with his tablet. "And you, Captain, so don't get any ideas."

Steve protested, "Aw, come on, I've never fallen asleep on you!"

"On the plane back from Pakistan, you certainly did, just like this!" she retorted, laughing. "And I stopped Sam from taking a picture, so you owe me. Don't you dare tease Bucky."

Steve laughed, but relented, shaking his head. "Okay, okay. You're stuck now until we wake him up to make him go to bed."

Two hours later, when they did manage to wake Bucky up and get him ready for bed while half-asleep, Steve noticed something about the way Wanda was smiling at him, and something lurched in his brain.

Wanda blinked, then shot Steve a look of complete exasperation.

Once Bucky was asleep, she flounced back to the living room, and waited with her arms folded until Steve caught up. "No, to answer your very loud question, I don't have a crush on Bucky."

"Sorry," Steve muttered, grinning sheepishly. "Give me a break, I'm used to this guy having to fend the girls off with a stick - though he usually didn't."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know. And you along with all the others have always assumed it was
only a matter of time before I turned into a drooling schoolgirl over someone on the team."

"Hey, we did not ever put it like that."

She chuckled, but the humor gradually faded, and she broke eye contact with him. "Even if I did, it wouldn't be him. He reminds me too much of Pietro. Sometimes...I think he's exactly what Pietro would have been, if he hadn't..." She trailed off, staring into the distance, then suddenly shrugged. "It's been a long day. I think I'll turn in too."

Steve was tired, but knew he wouldn't be able to sleep yet. He started to wander outside, but the off-duty guards' eyes made him more self-conscious than usual.

*Many of T'Challa's people still disagree with him sheltering us here.*

He forced a smile, gave a small wave of acknowledgement, then went back into the house.

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Time didn't have much meaning for Bucky after the first day, except for when they changed the words.

But the Wakandan medical team had kept their promise: it didn't hurt. Not physically, anyway.

Sometimes it felt like ants were crawling around on the inside of his skull, and he crushed Steve's hand and bit the inside of his mouth until he bled, just from fighting the urge not to claw his skin off. Dr. Kelile kept insisting on stopping when it got that bad, though Bucky tried to choke out a plea to just keep going. It wouldn't ever stop otherwise.

When had he started believing in the possibility that it would stop?

Only Wanda could ease the feeling when it got like this. Her power slipped easily into his brain and brushed the crawling sensation away. Sometimes when she'd done that, he actually fell asleep - okay, almost every time she did that, he fell asleep. Maybe she made him sleep on purpose. Bucky didn't care. It was a relief, to be gently shaken awake by Steve with a whisper that they were done for the day.

They could've made the days twice as long and Bucky wouldn't have noticed.

The fact that the bed was as different as night and day from the chair should've set Bucky's mind at ease. But somehow it made him more anxious.

*It can't possibly be working. It hurt so much before...it'll have to hurt to undo it.*

He tried to remember not to think that around Wanda, but to her credit, though she looked dismayed when she caught him, she never mentioned it aloud.

It didn't hurt...but every day, Bucky felt more tired, more run down, more weighted down. He couldn't concentrate on anything, and Steve and Wanda were on the verge of spoon-feeding him to keep him awake through a meal.

The world was getting dimmer.

*Maybe this is the price I pay.*

Wanda and Steve, naturally, wouldn't stand for that.

"Something's wrong," he was dimly aware of Wanda saying several days in. "He feels completely
"...fine," he tried to mumble at them, but his surroundings faded to black before he knew how they responded. *Just keep going...keep going, it's fine, I want it out, please...please...*

Everything was hazy flashes after that. Steve touching his face, shaking him, trying to get him to focus...the prickle of the IV in his one arm, the tingle of some drug in his veins that was no match for the heaviness that had taken over his blood, his bones, his flesh...the machinery pressed against his head...it should've scared him, it always scared him, but he couldn't muster the energy to do more than mumble and try to pull away...too heavy to pull away...

...there was light, outdoor light, meaning he wasn't in the bunker anymore.

*Wait...wait, please finish...get it out of me...*

---

**BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA**

Tony knew something was up when the remaining Avengers flooded into the Research Center along with King T'Challa. *Something's happened with Barnes. He must've turned on someone.* The thought wasn't exactly smug, more...resigned, but he kept it to himself.

Still, that didn't stop Wilson from snarling when he spotted Tony, "You say one goddamn word, Stark, and I'll make you a patient in this place!"

T'Challa decided for once to rein in someone other than Tony. "You will not," he said in a low voice. "If anyone acts improperly in *my* hospital, I will deal with them." Well, he did shoot Tony a warning look.

Wilson didn't even have the decency to apologize, just turned away from Tony.

The flying shuttle (at which T'Challa still denied Tony a close look, dammit) returning from the bunker disgorged a distraught Wanda, a pale, thin-lipped Steve, and a herd of anxious doctors. No surprise there. But what did surprise Tony was that they brought Barnes in on a stretcher.

"Sedated?" he muttered without thinking.

After a long silent observation, Romanoff answered, "No. Unconscious. Something's gone wrong."

"Jesus," muttered Sam. He threaded through the medics to intercept Steve by the arm, and at that moment, for a few seconds, Tony honestly thought Steve Rogers would break down in tears on the spot. Wanda was close too. Neither of them seemed able to talk, and in the end, Romanoff joined them, and she and Sam maneuvered Steve and Wanda out of the way while the medics got to work.

T'Challa moved to join them, murmuring reassurances that didn't seem to have much effect. Wanda started to cry, and Steve forgot his own distress in trying to calm her as she choked out apologies into her hands.

"What the hell's happened?" whispered Scott.

Watching the activity (and undoubtedly reading lips), Clint said quietly, "Not sure. It was going well, but he was getting weaker, and the medics couldn't figure out why. Today he went unresponsive. I can't follow what the medics are talking about."

The rapid-fire movement in the secure wing looked like any other ER, but with everyone speaking
Wakandan, Tony couldn't get much of it either, though he'd been giving himself a crash course in the language and knew he couldn't be the only one.

Barnes was completely out, but at least it didn't look like the medics were putting him on life support or anything so drastic...and when the hell had Tony started taking *comfort* in the idea of Barnes not dropping dead?

Well, he didn't want to see Wanda fall apart again. She was attached to him, to say nothing of Rogers.

"What're you doing here anyway?" Clint chose that moment to ask, sounding only a little accusing.

Tony stared him down. "Working with the medical technicians on spinal treatment for Rhodey."

Clint blinked, then actually blushed. Tony managed not to smirk.

Tony didn't really need to hang around Wakanda once the latest batch of brainstorming with Dr. Dahab's team was done, but he did anyway, eavesdropping and hovering to find out what was up with Barnes.

Wanda paced and ranted when she wasn't allowed to keep an eye on Steve and Bucky, and her reports to the rest of the team let Tony know what was going on. "They weren't prepared for how much Hydra had conditioned his body along with his brain," she fumed. "Dr. Kelile isn't even sure that Hydra was doing it on purpose! Every time he came out of cryo, they put him in that chair, electrocuted him and pumped him full of stimulants to get his strength up and ready. His body's forgotten how to function without those drugs when his brain is being manipulated."

"Wait, who's manipulating his brain?" asked Scott.

Wanda turned around and met his eyes. "*We* are. Didn't you see? We have to, if we're going to get that programming out of his head."

"Damn. I guess I didn't see. Still, he must understand that."

"Oh, he does," Wanda muttered, turning away again. "He didn't want us to stop, not even when he was almost in a coma."

Sam spoke up so quietly that Tony almost didn't catch it. "You think he still wants to kill himself?"

Wanda shut her eyes and shook her head. "Not exactly. But the doctors, they..." She took several deep breaths before finishing. "They think it was only a matter of time before Hydra killed him, before his brain and body simply gave out from what they were doing to him. Hydra may have even known that. Maybe that's why they tried to make more Winter Soldiers. They didn't care. They would use him until he died."

Tony'd had enough of seeing everyone get all emotional over Winter Soldiers. He slipped out without being noticed (or at least nobody admitted to noticing him), determined to just hop on his plane and get the hell out of this weird-ass country with their fucking spectacular tech and that holier-than-thou king and his badass princess sister and his hot bodyguards. It was all just too much to deal with. Tony had material for Helen Cho to work on regeneration protocols for Rhodey, and that was the only reason he was putting up with all this!

When he got to the airstrip, he found the attendants annoyingly distracted by something on TV. *They won't let people in but they're perfectly fine with our media.* "What happened? Another Kardashian get pregnant?" he asked brusquely.
Everyone just turned and...looked at him. And over their shoulders, Tony saw the breaking news banner on the BBC.

**BRITISH INTELLIGENCE OUTRAGED: SHIELD FOUNDER, WAR HEROINE MARGARET "PEGGY" CARTER WAS MURDERED!**

**FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ARRESTED IN MARYLAND!**

Multiple arrests in U.S. and U.K. as CIA and MI5 allege massive conspiracy associated with former SHIELD operatives and Sokovia Accords drafters!

"Four-star American general and former Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross was arrested two hours ago at the exclusive Grammercy Club in Annapolis, Maryland by American federal officials. Ross is accused of masterminding the murder of one of the United Kingdom's most successful and beloved intelligence operatives, Peggy Carter, co-founder of SHIELD and the Project Rebirth Program during World War II. The first official statement from the arresting panel are that Ross was a direct participant in an international conspiracy to gain control of enhanced operatives groups like the Avengers through the Sokovia Accords treaty.

So far there is only speculation that the murder of Agent Carter was motivated by a desire to gain control of the world's most famous superhero: Captain America. Captain Steve Rogers was one of Carter's pallbearers and visibly emotional at her funeral. However, Rogers and several other former Avengers refused to sign the Sokovia Accords, which under the enacting laws, forced them out of the organization. They and many other enhanced individuals, so-called 'superheroes' are now fugitives for violating the Accords, but have still been seen operating in different parts of the world.

What the murderers hoped to accomplish by killing Peggy Carter is also the subject of speculation at this time. Some suggest it was intended as a distraction, or perhaps a warning to Rogers and his faction.

In any case, this massive conspiracy already began to unravel last year, when eleven African nations withdrew from the Accords based on fraud by the U.S. State Department that induced them to originally join. Nineteen other nations in Europe, Asia, and South America have withdrawn since, and Nigeria has brought a claim in International Criminal Court alleging that the Ross's State Department stole and concealed evidence associated with the Lagos terrorist attack."

Tony had no idea how long he stood there in the middle of the air traffic controller's reception room, staring at the TV screen.

When someone asked, "Mr. Stark?" and touched his arm, Tony jumped a mile. The man stepped back, holding up a hand.

"Wha?!!"

"Mr. Stark?" It was the dispatcher. "Do you still wish to depart now?"

Tony looked back at the screen. His mind felt...mushy. "Do...at the palace, the hospital, do they now about this?"

"Yes. Broadcasts of international news are freely available throughout Wakanda."

Tony turned in a daze and walked back out of the building.

*To Be Continued...*
**Coming Soon:** The shock waves spread from the arrest of Peggy's murderer, hitting Steve and Tony hardest of all. Then Tony finds himself confronting more of the past - namely, Bucky Barnes.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

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Chapter Summary

The shock waves spread from the arrest of Peggy's murderer, hitting Steve and Tony hardest of all. Then Tony finds himself confronting more of the past - namely, Bucky Barnes - and considering the other events leading up to the Civil War in a new light.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all for the amazing feedback for last chapter! Please keep it coming! Obviously, this chapter plays a little fast and loose with how the CIA and federal prosecutors interact over the arrest and questioning of a suspect, but hey, Everett Ross made it clear the usual rules didn't apply with Bucky, so for crimes on the scale of what Thaddeus Ross is accused of, I figured the same.

**Canon Notes:** There's been some discussion among the cast and crew about whether Bucky was telling Tony the truth when he said he remembered "all of them," or whether he was trying to keep the heat off Steve. I'm going with the interpretation that Bucky does remember every kill, though there are still patches in other areas of his memory - more on why that might be in future chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Chapter Twenty-Three**

**BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA**

Back at the research center, the news was playing on almost every screen, and everyone who wasn't busy working was gathered around them, muttering to each other. The Wakandans did double-takes when they saw Tony, then looked from him to the screens and back again, watching for a reaction.

It was all still too new, too confusing for Tony to come up with a reaction. It just kept buzzing around and around in Tony's head like a fly trapped inside his brain.

Ross killed her. Ross. But not himself, he couldn't...he must've ordered it. That's why Sharon Carter didn't want Steve involved. She had a big fish to catch. Fucker. FUCKER. Why, why the hell would he, what the hell could Ross have possibly gained...

She'd died the morning before Ross introduced the Accords to the Avengers. Steve had gotten the news during...the...meeting.

You fucking bastard. What'd you think would happen? That he'd go ballistic right there and you could arrest him? What was murdering Peggy Carter supposed to accomplish?
Ross couldn't have done the deed. He must've ordered it. Somehow Peggy's niece had traced it all the way back to him.

Tony wandered up to the secure wing but found no Avengers in evidence. At a loss, when he spotted one of the orderlies he knew, he gave up and asked. "Where are they?"

"They are...outside, Mr. Stark. They say Captain Rogers...ahm..."

*Uh-oh.* Tony raced downstairs and out onto the terrace.

Outside, near where Rogers and Barnes had sat a few weeks ago, a knot of Avengers had gathered among a cluster of boulders. Tony went slowly towards them. There was no sign of Steve from where Tony stood - which meant Steve was probably down on the ground.

*Fuck.*

Natasha spotted Tony first and came to intercept him with Wanda trailing after. "I take it you heard?" said Nat.

Tony nodded. "He okay?"

Nat shrugged. "You know, the usual. Nothing works off Steve's frustration like ten rounds with a punching bag...except instead of the punching bag, he decided to use rocks."

"Shit. How many fingers did he break?"

"Most of them. They'll be fine in a few hours, but the medics are freaking out that he won't even let them give him a splint." Nat sighed and shook her head, looking off into the distance. "We got played, Stark. D'you see that now? We all got played. The whole thing was a power grab, another grab for Bruce, with the rest of us as a bonus."

*God...fucking...damn it.* "Where the hell is he? Bruce? Where the hell'd he wind up?"

She met his eyes. "I swear, Stark, I don't know. Believe me, I've been looking. For all I know, he flew off to Asgard with Thor. There aren't many places left on this Earth anybody could hide so well for so long."

*What a fucking mess.*

A few of the junior Wakandan medics stood at a remove, wringing their hands and obviously debating whether it was safe to approach. Barton and Lang moved away, and Clint paused to eye Tony, but Nat held up a hand and waved him on.

Wanda followed them. "I'm going to look in on Bucky. He may have heard."

"You think Bucky can help calm Steve down?" asked Scott.

"Maybe. He'll want to."

If Barnes was days out of a coma, he might not be able to get down here unless somebody carried him. Tony looked back at the boulders, at Wilson sitting on one of them, his hand on the shoulder of a hunched figure...then Tony's body ran off without him, and he started walking.

For reasons he couldn't guess, Natasha didn't try to stop him.

More surprising still, neither did Wilson.
Steve was hunched forward, his hands hidden from view, but *fuuuuck* - there was a lot of blood on those stones. Wilson was talking to him, gentle and coaxing. "C'mon, Dr. Kelile's not gonna let you stay out here without letting those looked at."

"They'll heal," Steve mumbled.

"They won't heal right, not the way they are now. Hey - uh-uh, don't you even think about messing with 'em anymore!"

Tony's foot scuffed on the rocks as he moved closer, and Steve looked up.

Steve hadn't been crying, but he looked like absolute shit. White-faced and red-eyed, and *Jesus*, Tony could've gone the rest of his life without a glimpse of Steve's mangled hands.

Tony knelt and carefully put a hand on Steve's shoulder. Steve shut his eyes, and his breathing got ragged. Tony awkwardly patted him. "Sharon made the right call," he said quietly. Steve ducked his head, and the sound he made...Tony'd only heard it once before: in the gym at the palace, the night after watching Hydra's tapes.

*All the shit we've been through, all the times we've fucked up, all the people we've seen die that we couldn't save...I've seen this guy cry exactly twice now, and both times it was here in Wakanda. After everything.*

*All the shit I've done and the only time I ever broke down in front of him was that night.*

Why did that feel like an injustice?

"Bastard's gonna pay."

"You hear what Bunt said?" asked Sam. Tony shook his head. "He's yelling witch hunt and fake news, threatening to pardon Ross if he's convicted."

Tony tightened his grip on Steve's shoulder. "That'll change. It will. Bunt's allegiances change as fast as his tweets. By the time Ross goes to trial, Bunt'll be calling for his head the loudest, assuming Bunt's still in office."

"You know why," Steve croaked. "You know why he killed her. Everyone knows. She didn't know anything, not anymore. No strategic value to her, except to get to somebody else."

"Yeah." *And not me. I cared about her, missed her, but not like you. Not like everyone knew you did. Fuck. The bastard. That stinking rat bastard.* "That's on him. He'll pay." He took a deep breath and said what he'd already worked out. "There's nothing you could've done. He did this before he set foot in the Compound."

Steve shuddered and pressed his face into his forearms, and *Jesus*, his hands! Tony looked up at Sam and nodded, and each of them took one of his arms. Nat moved in closer and tugged gently at Steve's waist. "C'mon, on your feet. We're getting these looked at."

Steve gave up resisting and let them pull him up. One of the Wakandans hissed at the sight of his hands, but she quickly schooled her expression back to calm and beckoned them into the hospital.

Tony hung around while the medics set and splinted Steve's broken bones and bandaged his shredded skin. Steve passively endured the treatment, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Then there was a murmur of alarm from the door, and Tony turned without thinking to see James
fucking Barnes standing there.

Well, standing wasn't quite the word. Barnes looked...like he'd just woken up from a coma. He was leaning heavily on Wanda, his eyes almost as shadowed and sunken as they'd been in those damn Hydra videos. Except the way he was looking at Rogers, so anxious and concerned, Tony hadn't ever seen him look like that on those videos.

Or had he? Maybe I just didn't want to notice.

Barnes didn't even notice Tony. He shuffled past the milling doctors to Steve's bedside, and Steve popped back up like he hadn't been near-catatonic ten minutes earlier. Tony was too far away to hear what they said, but Rogers actually leaned against Barnes while the doctors finished working.

King T'Challa showed up an hour later as the doctors were finishing patching Steve up. Just the presence of Barnes had helped Steve shake it off, and he greeted the king with a sheepish smile and a murmured apology. T'Challa murmured something to him, and Steve hopped off the bed, and gave Barnes a gentle nudge. "Go on, before you drop again. I'll be along."

Barnes grinned and shook Wanda off when she would've tried to escort him. "You don't need to hover, I can make it myself."

She might have pressed the issue, but Romanoff called to her from the huddle with T'Challa, so she gave in.

Tony was clearly not invited to said huddle, and truth be told he wasn't really in the mood. So he ambled out the door, glancing down the hall toward the recovery rooms...and a very, very inadvisable thought occurred to him.

Tony never could resist that kind of thought.

So when Barnes came a lot more slowly down the hall, he found Tony waiting for him.

The Winter Soldier only faltered for a second, then resumed his unsteady advance towards what Tony had guessed was his room. It had a bed and a cot, which meant Rogers couldn't even stand to sleep separate from BFF.

"Just so you know, Wanda's going to storm around the corner behind me in about thirty seconds, so make it quick," said Barnes.

Tony didn't move from his casual lean against the corridor wall. "You yell for help in your brain or something?"

"No, but she hovers, even just with her brain." Barnes steadied himself and looked over his shoulder as, sure enough, Wanda came tearing through the doors like she was trying to stop a murder. Barnes didn't say anything aloud, but she stopped, glaring daggers at Tony.

Tony sighed heavily and raised his hands. "I'm not here to murder the guy, okay? Relax."

She looked at Barnes, who just nodded to her. It took her a few more minutes (or maybe some silent exchange with Barnes inside the guy's head), before she backed off and left, shooting Tony one parting scowl.

Barnes turned and looked at Tony. "Sorry if this is less formal than you'd like." He slipped past Tony to sit down on the bed. "She'll try and keep Steve away for awhile, but I dunno how long that'll hold. Especially not today."
"You're willing to be alone in a room with me?"

"Yes," Barnes answered without hesitating. That was annoyingly like Rogers. "You've got a right."

A right to do what? Kill Barnes? Just beat the shit out of him, choke him for a few minutes, just so he knew how it felt until T'Challa and Steve dragged Tony off? Tony'd dreamed about that a few times, or dreamed about being the one who got to strap the fucker to a gurney for the lethal injection.

If Tony kept up that line of thought, Wanda might kill him with her brain.

"I don't forgive you," he said. He hadn't exactly planned that, it just sort of...came out. Worse was the calm way Barnes nodded, completely accepting and unhurt. "I know you didn't have a choice, but I still don't forgive you."

Barnes dropped Tony's gaze then, though he didn't look surprised or upset. "I get it. I do. And whether it makes any difference to you or not, I'm sorry for your parents. They didn't deserve what I did to them. I'm sorry I didn't stop it. Nobody deserved it. None of 'em."

Now Tony was the one who had to look away. He shrugged, feigning a casualness that neither of them felt. "Some of 'em probably did - "

" - no." The urgency of it made Tony meet Barnes' eyes again. Barnes was more anxious to be believed about this part than he was about anything else. It didn't make any sense. "No, none of them did. None of them ever did."

Tony stared at him, doing the math. "You really do remember all of them?"

Barnes nodded. "At least, I think that's all of them." He glanced at the backpack sitting on the desk by the window. "Did you read them?"

"Yeah."

"All of them?"

"Uh-huh." Yeah, I damn well read every one of them, cover to cover. Say something about it, Barnes, just try and say something...

Barnes didn't challenge Tony for invading his privacy, to Tony's mild disappointment. He just said, "Then you know what I remember. I wrote them all down, each time one came back to me, so I wouldn't forget again."

"Why not?" Barnes turned and frowned at Tony in confusion. Tony said impatiently, "Why'd you not want to forget stuff like that?"

Barnes answered with the same resolute steadiness as before. "I don't want to forget again. I did it to them. They've got a right to be remembered by me. It's all I can give them now."

*Just. Like. Rogers.* Those guys were two complete and total peas in a pod. What a couple of self-righteous terrors they must've been back in World War II.

And Barnes had forgotten all of that on that road in 1991. "He said your name." Barnes nodded. "You didn't know it?"

"No. Not until stuff started coming back, after the Potomac."

"When did you remember them, my mom and dad?" Why the hell was Tony even asking this? What
possible satisfaction would come from it? Like picking a goddamn scab. But he kept waiting for the answer.

It didn't take Barnes long. "Nine months after Washington. I was in Albania, I think...Tirana. There was something on television about the Avengers, bios of some kind. I was looking for Steve, but they talked about you first. They showed a picture of your father, and I - I remembered."

"Just like that?"

Barnes nodded, looking at nothing. "It's always like that. It comes back, and it's just there, all at once. When I remember them, each of those people, those 'missions,' the first time, I'd black out, forget where I am, what I'm doing. Come out of it somewhere else. Dunno how the hell Hydra didn't get their hands on me during the first two years."

"What do you remember about them training you for that 'mission'?" Man, I am really going to regret asking this.

But Barnes blinked and looked up at Tony again. "Training?"

"And before that, the times you tried and failed to take my dad out. What do you remember about that?"

Barnes was as blank-faced as...those videos, sort-of. Except he had no mission to focus on now, just complete confusion. "I don't...remember training for any one mission. Or...you mean they sent me after him before?" Tony nodded. Color drained from Barnes' face, and he shut his eyes.

Oh, fuck. Tony hadn't expected this.

"I don't...I don't remember. I'm sorry. I don't remember that." Barnes sat back and rubbed his temple, like he was trying to force the memories back right there. "There aren't...there's no failed missions, I don't...there should be. I must've failed sometime. I can't remember. 'm sorry."

"That's enough!" Tony nearly jumped through the wall. Wanda was two freaking feet away, glowering at him as she leaned against the wall. "King T'Challa still has Steve distracted, but it won't last much longer, and you've had long enough. So whatever you want to know, whatever you've come to say, her sneer made it clear what she thought of what Tony wanted to say to his parents' killer, "wrap it up, Stark. You don't get to torture him."

"He's not," said Barnes.

"I don't need you to defend me," Tony muttered.

"Too bad." Barnes looked past Tony at Wanda. "Did you see? The stuff he's talking about, special 'training' for...for Howard Stark? Missions I failed, can you see them? Why don't I remember?"

Wanda sighed heavily and shoved off the wall. At Barnes' side, she touched his head with a tenderness that rankled Tony all over again, with her red power framing him like a halo. "I don't see them," she answered. "I can't see why something's missing. I'd need to get into Hydra's heads for that," she added bitterly. "That wasn't Strucker's forte, erasing people's memories. If we ever find one of them, the ones who did this to you, I'll get it from them."

Painfully, was the unspoken implication. Yeah, that was a kind of nice thought, even for Tony Stark, who'd been a recipient of Wanda Maximoff's revenge. He couldn't say he'd lose any sleep over Wanda magically lobotomizing a few Hydra goons, especially the ones who'd set their Soldat on Tony's parents.
"Tony?!" And, time was up, because Steve was coming down the hall. His eyes nearly popped out
of his head when he realized what was going on, and he started walking faster, like he expected
Tony to have bumped his buddy off right there.

Rather than explain himself, Tony turned away.

"Wait!" Barnes actually jumped up and followed Tony to the doorway. "Stark, wait." Tony looked
back, making himself avoid facing Steve or Wanda. Barnes didn't seem to remember either of them
were there. "What'd I do? The training - the stuff you're talking about, what'd I do?"

Holy shit, the masochist actually wanted to know! A part of Tony even wanted to tell him.

But...he couldn't. Not in front of Rogers. Not now. Because Barnes would probably freak out
hearing about that, and Steve didn't need that tonight after the news about Peggy Carter. He needed
his friend.

So Tony looked past Barnes at Wanda and said, "You've seen?" You've seen the videos Rogers and I
saw? She nodded. "Tell him, later." If he really wants to know. Can't imagine he expects any good
news.

"They've got a right to be remembered by me. It's all I can give them now."

Tony walked away in the opposite direction as Steve approached. "Tony?" Tony walked faster and
didn't answer. To his intense relief, Steve didn't try to follow him.

Baltimore Federal Prison, Maryland, USA…

By the time Thunderbolt Ross's silk-stocking, high-rise attorney stormed into the federal detention
facility to liberate his client, Sharon already had her artillery lined up and the targets sited.

She didn't bother to address Ross himself, just spoke directly to Mr. Drake F. Fiero of the law firm of
Wolfram, Thrupp, Funk, P.A. "Your client is going to plead guilty and confess to ordering the
murder of Peggy Carter. He's going to roll on every associate connected to his man at the nursing
home, including every government official in the US and abroad. He's going to provide a detailed
accounting of every communication he made with every individual, up to and including the janitor,
the pizza delivery man, and his Uber drivers. He's going to disclose every action he took from 1997
through the present involved with locating or detaining persons with enhanced abilities - that includes
mutants, inhumans, or individuals artificially enhanced such as Bruce Banner and Steve Rogers, and
those with technological enhancements such as Tony Stark and Sam Wilson. That also includes
efforts to pass policies and legislation or negotiate international treaties such as the Sokovia Accords
or election of, let's say, sympathetic officials, and appointment of all military and civilian personnel
involved."

Ross, seated behind the interrogation table as his lawyer fumed, oozed, "And why would I want to
provide information like that even if it existed, to someone as emotionally compromised as yourself,
Miss Carter?"

Sharon ignored him and went on addressing the lawyer. "For every day he delays, more of my files
are going to be made public. I assure you, they're a very thorough and detailed document of
corruption. Oliver Stone and John Grisham are already salivating. It'll make a great movie before
your client ever gets to trial. Whether he says yes or no, he's going to die a symbol of craven, amoral
demagogues."
"So what possible reason would he have to agree to your terms?" demanded Fiero.

Sharon leaned back and drawled. "Because it's his one chance of not dying in prison. We've already prepared our motion to hold him without bail on the grounds of being a substantial flight risk." She dropped a thick folder on the table. "We've traced his accounts in the Bahamas, in Switzerland, the Philippines, and Chile. We know that Mr. David Porter of London was on his Brazilian company's payroll when he applied for and obtained the nurse position at the nursing home. We know that Miss Olga Nilovitch was the IT technician, also on his payroll, who manipulated the employment schedules of Mr. Porter and other operatives who needed access to your client's 'persons of interest' such as Peggy Carter. She talked, in exchange for immunity. We have the electronic records of her payments for that 'student loan' and those 'game scripts' that she provided to your client's underlings. We have nine of those underlings in protective custody, and they're singing like birds. We know exactly when your client gave the order to kill Peggy Carter and how he agreed to pay Mr. Porter for that 'special assignment' more than four years ago when your client and his colleagues first considered that possibility. The code phrase was 'take a day off and visit the Tower.' Very poetic. The order was delivered by Lieutenant Marcus Mason, stationed in RAF Base Sandhill, to an email address under the name Jodi Herrington."

She dropped another folder. "Using game developers as their front was clever, I'll give you that. Who would've thought that a bunch of white-haired baby boomer generals - and I know there were six of you - would have any connection to fundraising for gamers? Before that it was music videos and dance clubs. Tracing your client's financial activities is a primer in pop culture for the last sixty years. Know who handed us the assorted passwords and account numbers?"

Fiero had lost some of his bravado. "Do tell."

"One Elizabeth Anne Ross." And...Ross stiffened. Sharon relished it. "She stumbled across some items in storage while she was cleaning your client out of her life a dozen years ago. Paper records, financials, ancient stuff from when she was a kid. She figured it must have been hers, because why the hell would her father have documents related to MTV? Maybe one of dad's friends, an old boyfriend. But she's smart. She decided to set it aside. When we came to her, she was happy to turn it all over, and all the dominoes started to fall. They're still falling."

"What did you do to her?" Ross growled.

"Absolutely nothing," Sharon replied. "We barely even had to ask. She didn't want anything in return, no immunity, no leniency - hell, definitely not leniency. She said - how'd she put it - her father was a 'power-lusting, blood-soaked maniac who plays with people's lives and doesn't have a shred of compassion in his heart.' She said she was at our disposal if we needed anything else and that she hoped you died in prison."

With that, Sharon slid the rest of her folders across the table and turned away. "You have twenty-four hours."

"That's not enough time and you know it," Fiero snapped.

"Sure it is. It's very simple: confess to ordering Peggy Carter's murder and agree to cooperate fully with this investigation, or don't. Your client gave the order. We've got every electron that passed between him and our informers all the way to the man who held the pillow in Peggy Carter's nursing home. If we get a confession and no obstruction, your client gets twenty-five years in federal prison for murder, treason, fraud, and corrupting federal officials. If we don't, I'm going to peel your client apart, piece by piece, before the public eye. His daughter is going to appear on Oprah and Larry King and talk radio and describe his activities related to the Abomination attack on Harlem and his obsession with Bruce Banner. Very salacious even before the tabloids get their hands on it."
"President Bunt says my client has his full support."

"Oh, hadn't you seen his latest tweet?" Sharon pulled out her phone. "Two hours ago: 'Disappointed Obama didn't warn me about Thunderso Toss'. I'm pretty sure those were typos, but with President Bunt, we never know. The orange rat is already off your client's ship. All his die-hard supporters will follow him."

Ross shoved her files back and stood up. "My life has been defined by patriotism in a way Ronald Bunt's never has, and certainly not Bruce Banner! More public opinion will be behind me than you think, Miss Carter, with my service record and the number of officers whose lives I've saved!" He pointed at her. "And you aren't going to be involved in this investigation much longer, since you are the one who's obsessed and too close!"

Sharon feigned a delicate yawn. "It won't change the fact that you ordered a ninety-five year old woman smothered in her sleep, and America's patriotic troops will have a hard time not thinking of their grannies and great-aunts back home."

"Putting an old hero out of her misery while she was rotting in a nursing home? Other World War II veterans would beg me to do just that for them!"

"Was that a confession?"

"Call it an alternative perspective. And I notice one inflammatory word that hasn't come out of your mouth: you've got nothing connecting me to Hydra."

Sharon snorted and leaned against the wall. Lucky for Ross she had that table between them. "No, you weren't Hydra. But you still betrayed your country, and orchestrated an oppressive power grab that has come down on millions of innocent people using murder, bribery, and fraud. Every generation of Peggy Carter's children and grandchildren are begging for a crack at you. Those are going to be some devastating interviews, you can bet on that. Your daughter is already in touch with them."

Ross stiffened again. Finally, he broke eye contact. "She never understood what I was trying to accomplish."

"Oh, she understood just fine. It's just that as a human being with a conscience and actual moral fiber, she objected to what you were trying to accomplish," said Sharon coolly. "I haven't met her myself, but no one on this investigation can fathom how a father like you raised a decent daughter. It's a funny old world, isn't it? Funnier still, the way you appealed to Tony Stark's conscience. Even the merchant of death had more humanity than you, and that's what you used to get to him. You understand so much about people, but are capable of such evil."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, another of your employees had an epiphany while we were questioning her. Miriam Sharpe. You remember, she lost her son in Sokovia. That poor kid, Charlie Spencer, such a tragic story."

Ross hedged, "I'm afraid it's escaping me at the moment, though I'm sure it is horrible. And it was the point of the Accords - "

"Strange, Ms. Sharpe said you were very concerned for her after she returned from bereavement leave - even while she was gone. You attended young Charlie's funeral, personally brought her the department's collection proceeds and gave her a very generous meal delivery gift card. You sat down with her for tea twice before she returned to work and looked in on her nearly every day when she
Sharon tapped her chin. "But after your arrest, it started to occur to her that you had an awful lot to say about Tony Stark. His responsibility for Sokovia, for Ultron. How he would never be held responsible in a court of law, so no matter how you personally felt, so deeply, Miriam would never get the chance to stand up and tell Mr. Stark about Charlie. Until you gave her that little travel assignment to MIT, and mentioned that Mr. Stark would be the commencement speaker."

Ross just scowled. "She thanked me profusely both before and after her meeting with Stark. It was the least I could do."

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**Sokovia Victim's Mother: Secretary Ross Manipulated Me To Get To Stark For Him!**

"I'm not sorry for a word I said to Tony Stark," said Miriam Sharpe in an interview with the Washington Post. "The only thing I'm sorry for is that I was foolish enough not to realize Secretary Ross had an agenda. He used me, and for what. The world isn't any safer. Stark still doesn't answer to anyone. All I've learned from this is that Thaddeus Ross and Tony Stark are equals. They both destroy lives and think they can just waltz away."

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**ROYAL PALACE, BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA…**

"She's wrong, Tony," said a voice from the doorway as Tony watched the latest developments broadcast in the palace guesthouse.

He looked over his shoulder in surprise. "What're you doing here? I thought you were glued to Barnes' side."

"He and Wanda kicked me out for awhile," said Steve, ambling closer.

Tony peered at Steve's hands, so Steve pulled them out of his pockets. "One week and not a mark left on you. Yet another reason I want to punch you in your perfect teeth."

"Give me a break; my teeth were the only part of me Project Rebirth didn't need to fix."

They both chuckled, as if all was right with the world. But the world was still broadcasting loud and clear on the TV.

"Military experts and historians are stunned by the spectacular fall from grace by Thaddeus Ross, former four-star general and Secretary of State. Sources within the Justice Department say that he is negotiating a plea deal for the murder of SHIELD founder Peggy Carter and multiple charges of corruption, fraud, illegal human experimentation, and murder."

"So he's finished," Tony said. "He may have managed to get his dirty hands on Peggy, but Peggy's niece is the one who brought him down. Poetic. He underestimated her to the end, never imagined she'd passed on everything she knew. I like Carter - the niece, I mean. To look at her, you wouldn't see her great aunt, but when you get to know her..."

"Yeah," Steve agreed, looking away. "I felt like an idiot when it hit me. She was Peggy's protégé."

He shut his eyes.

Tony muted the TV. "Hope the bastard gets life. You know, I...I've been thinking. " Steve looked back at him. "About Bruce. Romanoff hasn't been able to find a sign of him, and he's not that good at hiding. You think it's possible?"
Steve took a deep breath, visibly marshaling himself to put that possibility into words: "That Bruce is dead?" Tony nodded. "Yeah, I've been thinking about it. I've asked Natasha about her search. After she went off the grid last year after the airport, she searched for him. I think...she hasn't said, but I think she's thinking the same. That it's the only explanation left."

Tony stared out the window at the gardens. "I swore, in Berlin, as soon as we got everything straightened out, I was gonna help find him, make sure he was okay, had resources. He could stay off the grid, retire from the Avengers if he wanted. Ever since there's always been...stuff in the way."

"Yeah."

"The trail went cold over the Indian Ocean. Could be a decade before we find the Quinjet." He sighed and admitted, "I've kind of been putting off searching for it." *Because when we find it...it's over. I shouldn't have just assumed Nat could talk him back.* He dug through the pantry for the bottle of konyagi that T'Challa had given them.

Steve came closer to him, though he shook his head when Tony held up the bottle. "That part wasn't your fault. We all though Bruce was indestructible. Or that if he left, it'd be his own choice."

Tony swirled his glass and took a long pull before answering. "'That part' maybe isn't. *Everything else to do with Ultron...yeah. Even the parts that're Wanda and Pietro's fault, when you go behind that, it's still my fault. I made them as much as Strucker did.*"

"Charlie's mother's wrong. You're the opposite of Ross." Tony blinked. Steve met his gaze steadily. "Yeah, you've screwed up. We all have. You wanted to protect the world when you built Ultron, but not control it. Not the way Ross does."

"You're forgetting that I signed on with Ross," Tony muttered, and stared at the glass.

"Only after he sent Charlie's mother to manipulate you, and - and murdered Peggy to manipulate me."

"*Fuck.*" Tony drained the glass and let it burn its way down, hoping it'd burn the tightness out of his throat. "What the hell was he trying to accomplish? What'd he think you'd do?"

The derangement that'd driven Steve Rogers to go *mano-a-mano* with a bunch of boulders had worn off, leaving just a dull sadness behind. Tony wished he'd flip out and start ripping logs apart again, or something other than this. *You should be looking for ways to rip Ross in half.* But if Steve had felt like that when he got the news, the storm had passed, and Captain fucking America looked so damn...defeated. "They say...I dunno if it's true, there are so many rumors in the news, and I haven't been in touch with Sharon except to tell her how - how...how proud Peggy'd be. What a credit she is. She's got to be under a microscope right now. If people find out she knew where I was, it'd cause her problems."

"Yeah, I get that. But what's the theory on the street? What'd Ross think would happen when you found out about Peggy right in the middle of his pitch to us?"

Steve's eyes finally darkened again, and he stood rigid with his jaw clenched for a few minutes before finally pulling it together enough to answer. "They say...he thought I'd think she approved. That I'd sign without looking too close. I'd be too distracted to care about details. I guess in a way he was right."

Tony pondered that, then pondered what he remembered of that miserable meeting, of Rogers suddenly ducking out of the conversation...completely unlike him, enough to surprise everyone out
of arguing for a few minutes. Nat had gone after him, and Wanda had shaken her head, muttering, "Something's happened."

A little while later, Nat had returned alone. "It's Peggy Carter."

Everyone had blinked, then Rhodey had groaned. "Aww, hell, right now?"

"This morning. She died in her sleep, as peaceful as you could hope for, but he's taking it hard."

They'd all tiptoed around Steve after that, especially when the little obituary started showing up on the news in between all the stories still condemning the Avengers for Lagos. Tony'd tried to be tactful as Steve got ready to head for London. "Rhodey, Romanoff, Vision, and I are signing. Why don't you come meet us after...after you've had some time to think about it?" He hadn't been able to bring himself to say "funeral" outright.

Steve's eyes had been empty. "I have thought about it."

"I'm not signing that thing," Wilson had just had to pipe up. Wanda'd just looked miserable.

They'd all waited for Steve to speak again. "I won't. Not after SHIELD. I'm not a soldier anymore, I won't just go wherever I'm told and stay wherever I'm told without getting to judge things on my own. I learned that the hard way in Washington."

Tony'd been so hopeful that he'd change his mind. He hadn't pressed it at that moment; anyone could see that Steve was too distracted, too shocked to think straight, and Wanda and Sam had glared daggers at the rest of them.

When Nat had decided to go to London, Tony'd thought she might get through. "I'm not going to advocate for the Accords," she'd informed him curtly. Tony hadn't been able to bring himself to argue.

Now he was glad he hadn't tried. Whatever it was Ross had thought Steve Rogers would have done in the shock of his girl's death - his girl only four years ago, dying of old age in a nursing home...what does that do to your reality? - it was a safe bet that Steve hadn't done it.

That was a comforting thought. "I'm glad he read you wrong," Tony said aloud. "I'm glad he underestimated Peggy's niece, and that his daughter's the one who put the finger on him." Steve gave him a weak smile. "Why didn't you have Wakanda build you a new shield?" This really is my week for asking uncomfortable questions. Steve stared at Tony. But the question was out now, so Tony forged ahead. "They must've offered."

After another long, painful silence, Steve said, "They did. I said no."

Hell. "Why?"

Steve shrugged, looking at the TV again. Ross's attorney was leaving a meeting with the federal corruption task force. Until today, he'd bellowed at the media that his client would be exonerated. Today, he'd bellowed at the media that his client would be exonerated. Today, he'd been shouting through the reporters, refusing to talk to them.

Steve finally answered, "It didn't feel right. I guess, I...thought you were right about that much." Tony couldn't help the way he cringed. "I mean, by choosing Bucky...I couldn't keep being Captain America. My government, the signers of the Accords, you, Nat, everyone wanted him dead or locked up. I wouldn't...I couldn't let that happen. Not after what Hydra did to him. So I couldn't keep the shield."
Tony shut his eyes, turned away from the TV, and stepped off the ledge. "I was wrong." He kept his eyes shut so he didn't have to see the look on Steve's face. "I was flipping out, and I was wrong. You do deserve it. You've always deserved it."

That took all the energy Tony had left, so he opened his eyes and left the room in a hurry without looking at Steve again.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Thaddeus Ross faces the music, and as public opinion swings back in favor of the Avengers, our heroes move to take advantage...but leave T'Challa with some disturbing realizations. Rhodey and Vision get proactive on ways to provide Avengers accountability without engaging in genocide, and Tony decides it's time to reassemble the Avengers.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Mr. Drake F. Fiero, Esq.: Thaddeus Ross's attorney of the firm of Wolfram, Thrump, Funk, P.A.

President Ronald Bunt: President of the United States, elected in 2016. Likes to twitter and play golf and shoot his mouth off. No, he's not based on anyone in the Real World. No, really.
Chapter Summary

Thaddeus Ross faces the music, and as public opinion swings back in favor of the Avengers, our heroes move to take advantage...but leave T'Challa with some disturbing realizations. Rhodey and Vision get proactive on providing Avengers accountability without engaging in genocide, and Tony decides it's time to reassemble ALL of the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** The feedback and discussion last chapter was awesome, guys! Please keep it coming! So here follows my last update before this fic is utterly and completely jossed by the arrival of Infinity War. I hope you'll all continue reading and commenting!

**Canon Notes:** As previously mentioned, this fic follows the comic canon that Ramonda was T'Challa's stepmother (his own mother had died shortly after his birth) and Shuri and Jakarra are his half-siblings, and she was a South African believed to have deserted T'Chaka and her children for another man in the 1980s while protesting apartheid in her native country. This was a factor that led T'Chaka to withdraw Wakanda from involvement in foreign affairs. Also, wherever possible, I use Marvel canon (comics or MCU) characters for minor roles, but particularly in my politics-heavy fic, I needed a few generic politicians - so I borrowed them from another canon. Anyone recognize them?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

**BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA**

When Stark abruptly left Wakanda, Clint assumed the reason. "You two get into it again?" he asked Steve.

Steve's answer was sad and quiet, and vaguely puzzled. "No."

A few of them watched the Larry King interview of Betty Ross and Peggy Carter's grandchildren. Steve, Bucky, and Sam didn't watch. "You were in a room with Ross," Scott said to Wanda. "What'd you get from him?"

She sighed. "You mean did I have any inkling that he'd just ordered the murder of Peggy Carter? No, of course not. I was distracted then. It was right after Lagos."

Nat shifted on the couch. "You didn't sense anything from Ross at all?"

"No, I did, but, I wasn't really paying attention." Wanda frowned to herself. "I think...he believes
some of our powers, but not all. I don't think he really believed I could read people. When he came, he was just thinking of what he was talking about. And the future. Some people are like that."

"Ruining lives and never looking back," Clint muttered. Wanda flinched, and he patted her shoulder. "You do look back. We all do. That's the difference."

On the television, Betty Ross was almost incandescent with rage, even more so than Peggy's family. No need to ask what Bruce saw in her. She's a spitfire, but somehow the complete opposite of Ross. Clint restrained himself from mentioning that in front of Nat.

Bruce was still a sore spot for Nat - well, for all of them, but none more than Nat. Clint had his doubts about whether she and Bruce would've made it in the long run, but fuck that, who said it had to be the long run? Clint and Laura had both sown their oats and had a grand passion or three with other people before even meeting each other. It was still fucking shitty when things ended badly, and if things had ended as badly as many of the team were starting to suspect...yeah, Nat would have trouble with that for a long time.

We lost him. He'd gone to ground before after a big operation, but not like this. We thought he and Hulk were indestructible. I guess we were wrong.

Wanda looked at Clint, and her eyes were wet. It wasn't your fault, kid. At least it wasn't all your fault, not by a long shot. We've all fucked up. We live with it by pushing on.

Laura reached around Clint to pat Wanda from the other side of the couch, and Wanda forced a weak smile. The kids were in bed by then - a good thing, because Clint, Laura, and Nat had already had to explain why Captain America had been in love with an old lady. So they'd explained the supersoldier serum that'd kept Steve alive in the ice, and he'd gone to sleep in 1945 and woken up in 2012.

Cooper had been skeptical, suspecting they were pulling his leg, but Lila had said in a soft, stricken voice, "That's so sad. He must have been so lonely."

Of course, there was no way they could tell the kids or even Laura about Bucky.

Only two weeks after being arrested, Ross and the Justice Department cut a deal, and the bastard confessed to ordering Peggy Carter's murder. His statement before the federal court at his sentencing was broadcast around the world.

Clint, Nat, and Scott joined the others back at the hospital in solidarity with Steve, and found T'Challa and Princess Shuri also there, apparently with the same idea. "Where's Bucky?" asked Scott in surprise.

Clint guessed the answer, and Wanda confirmed it: "He won't watch television, especially not live. He's worried someone might say the words or find some other way to trigger him."

"Damn, that rules out...Internet, music, just about everything. That's gotta be boring."

"No, he'll watch a recorded movie or play music if it's been run through the filters here. But something like this," Wanda shook her head. "The world is watching, and it's associated with Captain America. Hydra might view it as an opportunity, or anyone else who wants to control the Winter Soldier."

"Until I saw that guy," muttered Sam, nodding toward the TV, "I'd have thought only Hydra would want to do that."
Steve abruptly stood up. "I don't think Ross's going to say anything that I especially care to hear. I'm going to find Bucky." And he left in a hurry as the rest of the team stared after him.

"Perhaps one of you can tell him later what was said," murmured T'Challa. "In time, he'll want to know."

"Yeah," Clint agreed.

Ross read a statement that was almost entirely devoted to his patriotism and dedication to his country, blah blah blah, being willing to make the hardest choices and take the greatest risks, as Scott and Sam muttered obscenities and even some of the Wakandans around them scoffed. Then Sharon Carter stepped forward. Clint was impressed no end by that woman's balls. That's a girl worthy of the name of Carter.

"Mister Ross," she said coldly, placing just the slightest emphasis on "mister," undoubtedly to remind both him and the viewers that he was stripped of all rank and titles. "Please explain to this Court your reason for ordering your operative in Chesapeake Hills Nursing Home to smother Margaret Carter."

An ugly murmur went through the room, but Ross had been well-prepped. "I truly believed that I was doing a service to a great woman, ending her suffering from Alzheimer's, in such a way that would have an impact for the greater good of everything she held dear."

"And was 'impact' did you think would result?"

"I thought that Agent Carter's passing would serve as a reminder to Captain Steve Rogers of all the people who had spent a lifetime working to make this world safe from terrorist and extra-governmental actors, and - "

"Like the FUCKING Godfather!" someone in the courtroom yelled, and the gallery erupted into shouts, jeers, and the banging of the judge's gavel while bailiffs ran to remove the protestor.

Once order was restored, Sharon gave Ross the very faintest, coldest of smiles. "Please, Mister Ross, continue. How did you intend the murder of Peggy Carter to impact Captain Rogers?"

Ross's jaw was clenched, and he ground out, "I believed it would inspire him to recommit to his country rather than continue to act as a vigilante."

"How did the Sokovia Accords play into that? What was your intention that killing Peggy Carter would induce Captain Rogers to do?"

"I hoped he would recognize that she would have approved - " Once again, he was drowned out by the gallery's derisive roar, and the judge had to restore order. " - Captain Rogers had been acting without any oversight or input from the United States military or government ever since the collapse of SHIELD - which he brought about on his own."

"Funny, I thought I remember that Hydra brought about the collapse of SHIELD by trying to slaughter three million people," Sharon sneered. This time there was a roar of affirmation. Once the gallery fell silent again, she prompted, "So you believed that by ordering Peggy Carter to be smothered in her sleep three days before the signing of the Sokovia Accords, you would be ensuring that Captain Rogers would be too distracted to object to them? Maybe even to read them?"

"No!"

"Then explain yourself if you want the sentencing recommendation, Mister Ross. You ordered the
"killing of Peggy Carter to take place on the morning of Monday, June 12, 2017, correct?"

"Yes."

"In fact, you instructed Elizabeth Morgan of Boolean Limited on June 11, 2017 to order your operative in the nursing home to carry it out - but to wait until the morning of June 12, did you not?"

"Yes."

"You were very specific about the timing. Wasn't it because you were going to meet with the Avengers that very afternoon, and Steve Rogers would receive the news of Peggy Carter's death that same day?"

Ross was silent until the federal judge prompted him. "Yes, I gave instructions on the timing."

"And what did you think Captain Rogers would do once he learned of Peggy Carter's death?"

"I thought he would open his eyes to the importance of -"

She cut him off. "That was not my question, Mister Ross. I didn't ask you what you thought he'd think or what you thought he'd feel. What did you intend that the murder of Peggy Carter would cause Captain Rogers to do?"

Ross was trembling, but more from apoplexy than fear, to Clint's disappointment. Well, at least he looked like he'd lost weight and was a shadow of the imposing figure he'd liked to project. After grinding his jaw for a few moments, he snapped. "Sign. I thought he would sign on."

"So for the sake of causing Steve Rogers to sign onto a law that gave you complete control over his movements and actions, without consideration or the chance to object, you murdered the woman he loved."

Again, Peggy Carter's grandniece was drowned out by the viewers' roars of outrage. The bailiffs and judge gave up trying to extract people one at a time and started clearing the courtroom gallery, who progressed to chanting en masse, "MURDERER! MURDERER!"

The questioning progressed to less emotional subjects - somewhat. Stories of bribes to elevate Ross's associates and fraudulent scandals to remove his enemies, military operations with the purpose of eliminating Ross's opponents rather than actual threats to his country, illegal human experimentation on military officers and civilians, and overall, plenty of collateral damage.

In the end, to pronounce Ross's sentence, the judge had prepared a statement of his own: "Thaddeus Ross, this day is the climax of a dark and shameful chapter in American history. For years you have been lauded as a patriot and defender of this nation. Now we have learned that you are a man without conscience, without scruples, and without true service to any interest other than your own. You have the blood of hundreds on your hands, and you have devastated the lives of thousands. You have tainted the sacred trust that the American people place in their military and their cabinet, and severely damaged our relationships with our most faithful allies. I am horrified, sir. This Court cannot find the words to express its outrage or its disgust. Out of the need to discover all these ugly truths, the Justice Department has allowed you to plead to one count of each charge, rather than the myriad crimes for which you are unmistakably responsible. Many here will say that the craven, cowardly murder of an international war heroine, an emblem of righteousness and justice, is your foulest action. But this Court must disagree. Thaddeus Ross, you are guilty of treason. You have committed treason against this nation and betrayed all that this nation holds sacred. This Court sentences you to a term of twenty-five years in federal penitentiary, and that sentence shall not be
reduced by even one day. You will be ninety-seven at the time of release. Whether you meet the end of your days within prison walls or without, I say this to you, Thaddeus Ross: May God have mercy on your soul, and the American people have granted you more mercy than you deserve."

"A. Fucking. Men," Sam growled. Around them, the Wakandans murmured in approval.

After Ross was led away to spent the remainder of his life in an orange jumpsuit, the scene finally cut to outside the courthouse, and sound roared over the speakers, making nearly everyone jump.

"Holy shit," Scott breathed.

The courthouse was surrounded by protesters, many waving predictable signs like MURDERER and TRAITOR, but there were other signs following a theme that Clint hadn't expected. The first one he noticed was a huge poster in the hands of a group of women in pink hats. It was a picture of Peggy Carter, one of her iconic World War II images, but the caption brought everyone up sharp:

AVENGERS:
AVENGE HER!

And as Clint scanned the crowd, he saw more.

SAVE THE AVENGERS!
BRING BACK OUR SAVIORS
FREE CAP
God Bless Our Superheroes!
I don't trust government, but I trust Cap!
AVENGERS WE LOVE U

"Well, look at that," Clint murmured. "Nice to be appreciated."

"There's a guy dressed as you over on the steps, Clint," said Sam. "See him?"

"Wait, what makes you think he's supposed to be me, the dude's wearing purple and a Mardi Gras mask!" Clint protested.

"He does have a bow and arrow," T'Challa pointed out.

"The girls in the body suits and black cat headbands must be you then," said Shuri. Several hastily-stifled snickers went through the watching Wakandans.

"I see Black Widows and little boys with wings," said Wanda, grinning.

"And I wonder who all those girls in scarlet jackets are pretending to be," Clint added. Wanda did a double-take, but soon picked them out of the crowd.

One of them even had a sign: WE LUV WANDA!

"You do have a fan base, you know," Nat told her as Wanda stared. Nat stood up and turned to King T'Challa. "Well, your highness, thank you for your hospitality, but I think it's time for me to say goodbye, for now."
"Why just now?" asked T'Challa, sounding more curious than suspicious.

Nat nodded towards the screen. "The time's right to introduce a little more important evidence while the world is feeling sympathetic to Avengers again. While they're mopping up from Ross's mess, they may start harboring doubts about the guilt of Bucky Barnes. As Ross himself proved, timing can be a powerful weapon."

T'Challa stared. For a second, Clint thought he was offended, but no, it was...distraction, as if something had just occurred to him. The king's face fell, and he stopped looking at any of them or the demonstration in New York outside the federal courthouse.

T'Challa blinked when the live video caught the roar of familiar repulsors, and the crowd went wild with joy. Iron Man came roaring down over the crowd – and even Clint's heart jumped when he saw what Stark had in his hands:

Captain America's shield.

At Stark's raised hand, the cheering subsided. "I've had this shield sitting all by its lonesome for the past year. I think it's time we gave it back to its rightful owner!"

He had to pause for the roar of approval.

"All we've ever done is try to help people. Look, I'm sorry sometimes we fail to save everyone. So are all the others. But if your idea of peace is dragging people into concentration camps, you're not getting any help from the Avengers! This time, you'll have to lock us all up! I'm not stopping until we're all free again."

"Bring them home!" someone shouted, and it turned into a chant: "BRING THEM HOME! BRING THEM HOME!"

Iron Man mock-saluted. "I hope they're closer than Mars, but I'll get to work. When I find 'em, you'll know." He roared away to crazed cheers and a crowd embracing on the streets of New York like something out of – well, out of World War II. Only people were in costume as more than just Captain America.

"Good thing he had his helmet on," said Nat. "Stark can't bluff worth a damn, but he understands the strategic value of timing too."

"Like Ross did," growled Sam.

King T'Challa was still frowning to himself. He murmured a farewell to the team and quietly left. Princess Shuri gazed after him, then got up and followed.

Wonder what that was about?

"T'Challa?" Shuri pursued her brother out to his shuttle and ducked in after him. "What is it?"

He was silent for several moments, gazing out at the Great Panther as they lifted off for the palace. "I just...something occurred to me."

"What?"

"The strategic value of timing. The way that Ross used it. The way Romanoff will use it; she intends to release her videos about Barnes' torture at this moment when sympathy has returned to the
Avengers. And Stark will push publicly for their safe return home. Revealing information at the right time, declaring themselves at the right time, that's a good thing. But Ross, he used timing for evil ends. Manipulating the news of the Lagos tragedy. Sending a grieving mother to confront Stark. Even committing murder at a particular time."

Shuri leaned forward. "What are you thinking of?"

Her brother's eyes were large and bright with some combination of anger and horror. She'd seen that look captured by cameras in the aftermath of Vienna, when she and Jakarra had realized their father was dead without anyone having to say it. T'Challa was good at maintaining his calm, but when his self-control broke, there was no missing it.

"I'm thinking of thirty years ago. All the events, all the disasters that drove our father to withdraw from the fight against apartheid. And..." he looked at Shuri reluctantly, and her stomach dropped. Her entire body grew cold as it dawned on her where this train of thought had taken him.

"Ramonda."

Her brother's eyes were large and bright with some combination of anger and horror. She'd seen that look captured by cameras in the aftermath of Vienna, when she and Jakarra had realized their father was dead without anyone having to say it. T'Challa was good at maintaining his calm, but when his self-control broke, there was no missing it.

"Ramonda." Shuri and Jakarra's mother. Deserter, traitor, unfaithful... abandoned her husband and her children without...without a trace, just one impersonal message that she would not return...

One impersonal message that could easily have been forged... On top of all the deaths and bitter rebukes from factions throughout Africa, King T'Chaka had at last thrown up his hands in bitter despair and frustration, and withdrawn Wakandan support from the anti-apartheid movement.

The strategic value of timing... "Gods," Shuri whispered. "Blessed Gods...no. No, her guards, someone would have warned him. They all said she'd chosen to leave him." Shuri and Jakarra had been very small when it happened, but eventually, their tutors and palace elders had told them the details.

"Not all of them returned," said T'Challa slowly. "We believed they chose to desert along with her. What if they didn't chose to?"

"That would mean the ones who did return were either lying or deceived, and it would have taken a great deception to make a royal entourage return without their charge." Shuri's mind raced. "I don't know them – who was with her then?"

"I'll find out. It was thirty years ago, but I'll find where they've settled. For now, we'll be very quiet, very subtle. I'll question the ones who are still alive about their experiences representing Wakanda abroad, defending the queen abroad. We'll see what we can learn."

EXPLOSIVE EVIDENCE! THE STRANGE AND TERRIBLE CASE OF JAMES BUCHANAN BARNES!

The Hague receives collection of horrifying videos of Barnes' decades-long captivity in Hydra hands.

Military psychologists and POW experts are flocking to the International Criminal Court to examine a prisoner's path from American hero to Hydra assassin! The ICC’s panel on Barnes elected to make only part of the videos public, citing concerns about the graphic content and the possibility that the information they contain could be used again to torture or indoctrinate other prisoners of war.

The United Nations subcommittee on Hydra's war crimes has been granted access to the videos and documents, and their experts are already indicating their opinion that the videos are genuine, consistent with Hydra's pattern of heavily documenting its treatment of prisoners and human
experimentation subjects.

Committee members made few comments to reporters after the first session to view the classified tapes, but some were in visible emotional distress during the first break, some shaking, a few crying openly.

"Not only is this vital evidence on Hydra's methods, but it's also vital to the case of James Barnes," said Committee member Lord John Marbury, UK. "As horrific as these tapes are, they cast tremendous doubt on Bucky Barnes' guilt in any action he may have been forced to take by Hydra. The level of force used against him and his ability to act or even think for himself is very evident."

All Avengers Now Oppose the Sokovia Accords.

Colonel James Rhodes, aka War Machine/Iron Patriot, along with The Vision, has reversed his position in light of ugly details surrounding Accords' drafting and implementation.

General Dixon Wallace angrily confronted Rhodes and Vision during a joint Congressional hearing on the Sokovia Accords, though Wallace and other Accords supporters stopped short of calling the distinguished Rhodes a traitor.

RHODES: "As a member of the United States Air Force and the panel on Military Industry and Technologies, as well as an Avenger, I can no longer support or condone the Sokovia Accords -"

GEN. WALLACE: " - So now we just let metahumans and inhumans and mutants just run amok, is that what you're saying, Colonel?"

RHODES: "No, that's not what I'm saying, and if you'll let me finish, you might get some answers to your questions."

COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN SENATOR HOWARD STACKHOUSE: "Order! Hold your questions and your comments until the witness is finished with his remarks, please, General."

RHODES: "In the year since the Accords were passed, as many as 300,000 people have been seized and detained, many of them children, with no access to counsel or medical care. As a free nation, we cannot and must not continue this practice. We now know the many moral and ethical violations that went into the crafting of the Sokovia Accords, including falsified records regarding the Lagos attack and other incidents, as well as fraud, bribery, and even murder, all to manipulate and coerce parties to support the Accords. The resulting treaty and its laws are fruit of a deeply poisoned tree. We have to start again."

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "Last year, you stated publicly that you favored oversight of the Avengers and other enhanced individuals, Colonel. Has that changed?"

RHODES: "My position hasn't changed, but I don't think you're clearly describing it, Senator, with all respect. I favor oversight of enhanced international actors, such as the Avengers, people who are actively engaged in law enforcement and first responder activities outside the purview of any government. If a civilian happens to be enhanced but wants to continue living and acting as a law-abiding civilian, there's absolutely no reason they should be under any more government control than any other civilian."

REP. KAREN KROFT: "I agree with Colonel Rhodes that enforcement of the Sokovia Accords have gone way too far, particularly involving children -"

SEN. ROBERT KELLY: " - You say that now, Congressman, but some of these so-called children
possess the ability to level their schoolbuildings - "

REP. ANDREA WYATT: " - Senator, did you seriously just say 'so-called children'?!

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "Order! Congresswoman Kroft had the floor."

REP. KROFT: "As I was saying, Colonel Rhodes, I'm still concerned about the increased number of extra-terrestrial and paranormal technology being employed by terrorist organizations ever since 2011. Wouldn't maintaining restrictions on enhanced humans have a chilling effect against people whose help we may need more than ever?"

RHODES: "If the alternatives are mass detention or mass conscription, Congressman, I'd say America should tolerate neither."

SEN. KELLY: "So what in your wisdom do you think we should do?"

RHODES: "A standardized review of operations conducted by the Avengers and any other enhanced organization, with standard definitions of what constitutes 'enhancement' and the circumstances in which they're permitted to deploy. Input from every nation who's willing to give it, regarding what circumstances they will allow the Avengers and other enhanced groups to cross their borders, what contingencies they will recognize, and an international review panel to evaluate and, if necessary, sanction enhanced operatives."

REP. WYATT: "Like a police civilian review board?"

RHODES: "Preferably with more teeth than the average municipal police review board, Congresswoman, but yes."

REP. WYATT: "Mr. Vision, I'd like to hear from you as well. Are you also reversing your position on the viability of the Sokovia Accords?"

VISION: "Yes, Congresswoman. Having re-evaluated the variables in light of the implementation, the number of civil rights complaints made, and the number of fatalities, I agree with Colonel Rhodes that the Sokovia Accords must be entirely repealed."

SEN. KELLY: "Oh, please, what fatalities aside from those poor police officers who got their heads sliced off - "

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "Order! Senator, the families of those officers are here in the committee room, please don't be flippant about it!"

VISION: "I have been keeping track of the number of bodies removed from detention centers within United States borders and every other nation which publishes this data, as well as the ages of the dead. Since enforcement of the Sokovia Accords began, 4,126 detainees have been officially reported dead in custody. This includes 925 under the age of eighteen. Among those, 538 were under the age of twelve. This is a highly disturbing statistical anomaly, ladies and gentlemen, indicative of widespread abuses and use of excessive force, as well as confinement in highly unsafe conditions."

SEN. KELLY: "How many of our good servicemen and women have died as a result of enhanced and mutants attacking them?"

VISION: "In attempted detentions and questions, 37 police and military officers have been killed. In detention center attacks, another 44 officers have been killed. In any case, Senator, these statistics indicate an unacceptable trend, showing that the current system created by the Sokovia Accords is
simply unsustainable."

[Applause, gallery disruption due to shouting]

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "Order!

RHODES: "You saying the equation has changed?"

VISION: "Yes, it has. The original Sokovia Accords - and I admit, I myself - failed to consider crucial variables. These variables were, primarily, the number of mutants, metahumans, and Inhumans who were enhanced by birth, the number of individuals enhanced against their will or with diminished capacity to understand the ramifications."

SEN. KELLY: "Oh come on, who has 'diminished capacity' to know what being enhanced means?"

VISION: "Children, primarily, Senator."

REP. WYATT: "Do you have numbers of children enhanced against their will or - are you saying by indoctrination of some kind?"

VISION: "Where there is data available, yes. We may safely assume the actual numbers are far larger. I've researched all known enhancements or attempted enhancements of humans. 87% were minors when the process began. Of those that were minors, 53% were under age 15. 32% were under age 12. 19% were under age 5."

REP. KROFT: "Jesus Christ. Mr. Chairman, I move for a full report from this witness on those numbers as soon as possible."

REPS. WYATT and SANTOS: "Seconded."

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "The motion is seconded. All in favor say aye?"

[Mult. committee members voted aye. Full list will be published on cspan.com]

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "All opposed?"

[Sen. Robert Kelly and four other members voted nay. Full list to be published on cspan.com]

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "The ayes have it. The witness will provide a full report on his research to this committee."

VISION: "You will have my report within forty-eight hours."

REP. MATTHEW SANTOS: "Mr. Vision, you testified that your theory was that the increasing number of extra-terrestrial and enhanced activity was due to the formation of the Avengers. Do you maintain that theory?"

VISION: "No, Senator. Based on the data I have shared and the research that I will provide, that theory is disproven."

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "How so?"

VISION: "My initial theory was that the trend of increased enhanced manifestation and activity, particularly hostile attacks, were due to the appearances of Iron Man in 2008, followed by the Avengers in 2012. However, my subsequent research has yielded concerted efforts at human enhancement by more than forty nations since prior to World War I. The first such program to be
attempted by America did not begin until World War II as a direct result of defections by Dr. Abraham Erskine and other scientists who were formerly part of the German and Japanese programs. Thus, even Captain America is the result of a program initiated in reaction to other efforts which failed on foreign soil. This also still does not account for the massive increase in humans with 'natural enhancements' - namely mutants and so-called Inhumans."

REP. SANTOS: "So what's the conclusion?"

VISION: "Humanity is indeed evolving, ironically just in the way that Ultron described, but in his lunacy, could not see. Mutation is an entirely natural development, as are at least a portion of the Inhumans developed within the population. These processes will not stop, and the enhanced human population will continue to grow. This does increase the likelihood that enhanced humans will become involved in conflict, particularly in regions where high numbers of child soldiers are being forced into service."

REP. WYATT: "What are your thoughts on Colonel Rhodes' recommendation of a civilian review panel?"

VISION: "I entirely endorse it. Additionally, having studied every conflict known to involve enhanced humans, I recommend that small teams of enhanced responders, individuals with enhancements of their own, whether technological or natural, are precisely the countermeasure needed to the changing nature of terrorism. They should be supported by responders with experience in handling victims of torture and brainwashing, as well as child soldiers. The civilian panel would determine the relief needed, and also evaluate engagements, and if necessary, sanction responders such as the Avengers for overreach or recklessness. This is the middle ground we seek."

SEN. KELLY: "Well, thanks for that, but if we want the opinion of a freak android, we're really getting desperate - "

SEN. STACKHOUSE: "Senator Kelly - "

REP. SANTOS: "That is not appropriate - "

REP. WYATT: "I'd rather have a dozen witnesses like Vision who can do dispassionate research without an agenda or political posturing!"

"Way to go, Vision," said Sam, as the committee room gallery broke down into chanting Vision's name on the television. He'd never watched so much C-Span as in the past few days.

"I'm surprised there weren't more counter-protestors," Scott mused.

Laura Barton leaned over the back of the couch to accept a beer from Clint. "There probably would've been if those reports about Bucky Barnes hadn't come out earlier this week. My God, that poor man. Poor Steve, has he seen them? It must've broken his heart!"

Clint and Sam exchanged a wry smile over her head. Fortunately, she was watching the TV. "Yeah, I can't pretend he's taken any of it well, but he's seen them," said Sam. "Between that and Peggy Carter, Cap's not had a great month."

This time, Laura did look up at her husband - then at Sam - and comprehension flashed across her eyes. To Sam's surprised relief, she just grinned. "Oh. Well, wherever he is, Bucky Barnes, I mean, I hope he's okay." She winked, and Clint smirked.

_Match made in heaven, you two._ Sam changed the subject. "How're the three littlest Bartons?"
"Very good. Better than I dared to hope for," Laura admitted. "I figured I'd switch their foreign language studies from Spanish and French to Wakandan, but no, the tutor insists they've got the capacity to learn both, and they sure are. If we were back home, they'd each be a grade ahead by now. Everyone's so kind, even though we're the first-ever foreigners to spend any time year."

"Glad to hear it." Sam was glad, though he and the guys knew it wasn't as simple for the Avengers on Wakandan soil. Some of King T'Challa's court still were less than happy about powerful outsiders hanging around, and while they were civil to the Avengers, that was as far as it went. Hell, Sam couldn't even really blame them.

On the other hand, most of the Wakandans that Sam saw on a regular basis were completely welcoming - probably more than the average Americans would be if the situation were reversed. **Okay, definitely more than the average white Americans would be.**

Speaking of which, one of the king's messengers arrived at the door. "Good day, ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Stark and Ms. Romanoff have returned to Wakanda, and King T'Challa asks to meet with all of the Avengers this afternoon."

Laura waved cheerfully and stole Clint's spot on the couch. "Surprised Stark didn't just fly right over here," Clint remarked.

The messenger gave a faint smirk. "Mr. Stark was instructed by King T'Challa that whether in his suit or another vehicle, he will land at the airport as required of all foreign visitors."

"And he actually got Tony fucking Stark to do it?!!" Clint exclaimed. "I'm gonna renounce my US citizenship and swear fealty to King T'Challa if he can get Iron Douchebag to behave."

The messenger grinned outright, and Sam (with some reluctance) jabbed Clint in the ribs. "Drop that line of talk before we get within earshot of Cap. He's under enough stress."

"Yeah, yeah."

"So he wants the Avengers, you think that includes B - " Scott caught himself and looked hastily at the messenger, but she nodded.

"My king has called this meeting in the secure wing of the Medical Research Center, and it does include his...additional guest."

"Mm. *Curiouser and curiouser.* Somehow Sam had a hard time imagining that Stark would've known, let alone asked, that Barnes be present by choice.

AND...Tony fucking Stark proved Sam wrong. His nod to Bucky when the group gathered was cool, if awkward, and it surprised Bucky almost as much as it did everyone else. When Sam recognized the shape and size of the canvas bag Stark was carrying, it all fell into place.

Well, fuck me dead. Even asshole billionaires can learn a few new tricks.

T'Challa, sensing the *very* heightened tension, said delicately, "Mr. Stark asked to see all of you. I saw no reason to refuse his request."

*All of us. Even Barnes.*

Stark was clipped and quiet, but not the way he'd been in any of Sam's memories. "You all saw Vision and Rhodes testify?"
Everyone except Bucky nodded, but undoubtedly Steve had given the highlights to Bucky. Stark turned and pulled Captain America's shield out of the canvas bag. Sam marked the soft intakes of breath and couldn't help the way he looked towards Steve. Steve stared at the shield, then at Tony.

"I want to reassemble. Re-form the Avengers. All of us. Maybe we can't do it publicly yet, but soon. In the mean time, before the next crisis." He held out the shield to Steve.

Steve took it, and the two men stared at each other in what had to be the most awkward, loaded silence in history. Stark finally broke it and pulled a tiny box out of the bag.

"Also found this." He tossed the box to Scott, who caught it with a faint groan of disgust. He looked at Sam. "Your suit's back on lockdown in a military complex, but the set of wings his highness here made for you's pretty damn good, so I figured that'll keep."

Was that as close as Tony Stark would come to admitting T'Challa's tech exceeded his own?

"What'll Vision and Rhodes have to say?" asked Clint.

Stark gestured to the shield and Scott's suit. "They know about this. They know that I know where you are. Neither of 'em's asked. We're closing in on AIM and that psycho smallpox doctor. We'll need backup - good backup. Preferably people with fully-enclosed suits that have air filtration. Or who can evacuate gas quickly or are just flat-out immune to all diseases."


"It now includes myself as well," added T'Challa. "We have the technology. After Mumbai, we added it to my own armor. We may also be able to fit devices for others to avoid contamination."

"I can't go back to being Captain America," Steve said abruptly. Everyone looked at him. He stared at the shield and said, "I mean - not that I'm not grateful, for this, but I can't - not now. Not while..." he hesitated, visibly trying not to refer directly to Bucky.

Bucky in turn huffed irritably. "Sure you can, Rogers, you don't need to hold my hand through the whole damn process. It isn't necessary."

"It will be for me," Wanda pointed out. "I'm taking part in your treatment, so you can't brush me off so easily."

"I wasn't," Bucky protested.

Romanoff butted in, "Until we get ourselves off the wanted posters, it's probably best if the official Avengers handle operations unless it's a genuine emergency - or at least, a bigger emergency than Stark, Rhodey, Vision, and his highness can handle on their own with conventional support."

"What kind of conventional support are you gonna have?" asked Scott doubtfully. "I mean, yeah, Rhodes is untouchable and Vision's getting popular, but Senator Kelly and his chronies are still a big faction, and Ronald Bunt's entire following changes positions like the rest of us change shirts."

"Not every government is as fickle as President Bunt's administration," said T'Challa. "Wakanda, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya are in the process of forming the Lagos Coalition, with a treaty of our own to plan contingencies for attacks too extreme for response by conventional military. Eleven more African nations are in the process of examining our proposals and may sign on - unlike the former Secretary Ross, we will allow them all the time they wish to deliberate and all the information necessary to make an informed decision."
"Your highness, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't know how the hell you're planning to survive international politics with your sanity intact," said Natasha.

Half the people in the room laughed out loud, the other half winced, but T'Challa just leaned back in his chair and smiled. "It does amuse me to surprise you, Ms. Romanoff."

"Oooh!" Clint grinned wickedly and gave T'Challa a thumbs-up.

Steve was the one who made his excuses and fled the meeting at the first opportunity. He didn't take the shield. Bucky hurried after him. "Well, damn, I thought he'd be happier," Stark muttered.

"He's overwhelmed," said Nat, sounding like she was trying to be encouraging (to Stark of all people!) She turned to T'Challa. "How's Barnes?"

"Recovering, and Dr. Kelile will soon agree to resume his treatment," said T'Challa. "He is also overwhelmed. Dr. Dahab has completed a replacement for his arm, but he refuses to allow the arm to be replaced until Hydra's conditioning is removed from his mind. In case it becomes necessary to subdue him." That last bit was made pointedly at Stark.

Would wonders never cease? Stark actually looked down and nodded, unmistakably conceding the point.

**To Be Continued...**

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon: Bucky's treatment resumes, and memories recovered in the process reveal new facts about Helmut Zemo and one of Bucky's other Hydra missions. International public opinion weighs in on the Avengers, and the Wakandans ask Wanda for help on a mission closer to home!**

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

President Ronald Bunt: President of the United States, elected in 2016. Likes to Twitter and play golf and shoot his mouth off. No, he's not based on anyone in the Real World. No, really.
Chapter Summary

Bucky's treatment resumes, and memories recovered in the process reveal new facts about Helmut Zemo and one of the Winter Soldier's first missions. International public opinion weighs in on the Avengers, and the Wakandans ask Wanda for help on a mission closer to home.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Many thanks to everyone for the reviews and discussion! Please keep it coming! This chapter explores some of my theories about Bucky's past as the Soldier and Zemo's motivations.

**Canon Notes:** Obviously, this is now thoroughly and entirely AU from the MCU, as well as Black Panther. As previously mentioned, this fic assumes that Wakanda's vibranium deposits were more broadly known and that attempted thefts like Ulysses Klaue's weren't isolated. I'm also obviously doing different things with the MCU canon characters like W'Kabi since this fic is AU from the Black Panther movie, although more of the movie will be blended in as we go along.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Five

**WAKANDA**

Steve and Wanda returned to the bunker with Bucky a few days later, once Dr. Kelile had given Bucky a clean bill of health and devised a new drug regimen to keep his body from simply shutting down again while treatment went on. To Steve's genuine surprise, Tony didn't push him about the Avengers, but Steve made sure Tony saw that when they departed for the bunker, Steve took the shield with him.

Then it was days in the bunker with Bucky undergoing treatment and evenings catching up on the international news while Bucky slept. Bucky insisted Steve fill him in, though Steve suspected that was just a means of forcing Steve to keep up on current events.

"Rhodey accepted a position on the new Enhanced Deployment Panel," he told Bucky during the first week over dinner (paprikish). "Dr. Jane Foster and that former intern of hers - Darcy Lewis - they got recruited too, as civilians who've been up close and personal with enhanced activities. Darcy's not much older than Wanda, but she got her degree in political science; she's had more to say than most of the others, and a lot of people're listening."

"I'm surprised they haven't excluded Foster for bias, knowing she's involved with Thor."

Wanda chuckled. "Well, they questioned her about it, and she said she's not anymore. And Darcy
Lewis got all sad-faced, so it sounds like they're no longer together."

"Have you heard from the others?"

"Not much; it's only been a few days," said Steve. "There're a lot of countries looking at standing permission or prohibition against the Avenges crossing their borders. Rhodey and Tony said they'll abide by that, and...I think I will." Steve toyed with his food thoughtfully. "Assuming it's not an alien invasion or something huge and global like the Chitauri. So I've talked to Tony about that a little. Some 'statement of assent' where we agree to abide by foreign borders depending on what the individual governments want. I think I could live with that."

"Some places are putting it to a referendum vote," said Wanda. "Ireland, Denmark, and...Costa Rica, I think."

Once Bucky started nodding off, they quit talking about it, since they knew he wouldn't remember anything they said from that point on.

Steve still felt awkward about trying to interact with the off-duty guards in the barracks surrounding theirs, but Wanda was less so and went outside more often. Later, Steve saw her chatting with them. Some were standing at a remove, but others were engaged in animated discussion with her.

Maybe it was her power, but Wanda had picked up the language faster than any other Avengers.

The process of undoing Hydra's web around Bucky's brain was a slow one, but Wanda could see and feel it, to an extent beyond the capabilities of the doctors or even Bucky himself.

When the doctors' vibranium fields, electromagnetic waves and drugs failed, Wanda could reach in and gently tease the roots of the conditioning loose - without hurting or terrorizing Bucky, something Hydra hadn't given a damn about. She had to be careful not to make herself angry while tampering with Bucky's mind. She didn't think it would bleed over into his emotions, but she wasn't about to risk it. Not after what those bastards had already put him through.

Sometimes, despite her caution and gentleness, other things did break loose along with the conditioning. Bucky wanted his memories back and probed at those dark places hoping to find them. Wanda tried to ease the stress, but it didn't always work, especially not when what he remembered was horrific.

Some days they only made it through one word, manipulating Bucky's brainwaves to overcome the conditioned reaction. Other times, they made it through as many as five words. The further they went, the harder it was on him, and the Wakandan doctors wouldn't tolerate putting Bucky into distress.

Wanda knew how much it amazed Bucky that there were doctors in existence who cared about things like this. That broke her heart all over again.

Ten days into the process after the Avengers privately reunited, something tumbled loose in Wanda's mental hands, and Bucky's eyes flew open. At his gasp, Dr. Kelile stopped working. "What is it?"

"I - " Bucky broke off with a gasp, staring into the past. Steve grabbed his hand. "I... re-mem..." He trailed off, but pulled free of Steve and tugged at Wanda's wrist. Look at it and speak for him, he meant. Because he couldn't.

So Wanda looked, and even she couldn't hold back a gasp. "Oh my god."
"What is it?" Steve demanded. "What d'you see?"

That face, that hated face. Murderer. So many people here hated him, with good reason: he'd killed their king so callously along with forty other innocents, and suddenly Bucky remembered him...

"Zemo," she breathed. "Helmut Zemo. Bucky - the Soldier - he knew him. They met before...Zemo was Hydra..."

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It shouldn't have been so shocking, once everyone had a chance to absorb it. Zemo had been a skilled operative in a barely-functioning state; it stood to reason he might have ties to Hydra. But both Avengers and medics reacted to the news with near-panic and summoned the king.

T'Challa and Princess Shuri arrived, but T'Challa gestured for Bucky not to bother trying to struggle to his feet. "Dr. Damaris reports you have recovered a memory of Zemo. Tell me what you remember."

Bucky took a deep breath and forced himself into the new, all-too-vivid recollection. "I had a mission with him and his team in Slovakia and the Czech... I don't...don't remember what year. It wasn't important for me to know things like that," he added bitterly. "There was...something to do with border disputes. I was to work under the direction of Echo Scorpion's commander. It was Helmut Zemo. It must've been...sometime after 2008, because they worried about Iron Man. We took out over twenty targets - eighteen total targets, we only failed to get three. The primary targets were military - statesmen, opposing Sokovia on the border dispute, but some..." 

...some weren't.

Reality drifted away.

"Give the Soldier the dirty work," one of Zemo's men had proposed. "If we must kill women and children, let it be the one who doesn't remember."

"We assign targets for efficiency and no other reason, Varga. If you can't stomach the job, you shouldn't be on this squad." Zemo had said that. "The Soldier takes the targets requiring the most stealth. You haven't been seen in nine years," he'd said to the Soldier. "Maintain that record."

"Understood."

After the sixteenth kill - eight targets, four eyewitnesses, four 'secondary targets' - three wives and one child - most of the team had wanted to declare mission accomplished, due to some announcement that both the Czechs and Slovaks were conceding the border dispute to Sokovia. Zemo...Zemo had insisted that they complete the job to the letter. Every target who could be eliminated, would be eliminated, whether they were a primary target or a secondary target. The warning needed to be well-taken if Sokovia's sovereignty and border was to go unchallenged. They lacked the weaponry and the military force of many other former Soviet states. They needed to make it painfully clear that they could and would still make their enemies cower.

Then there'd been another eleven kills. Most of them were carried out by the Soldier in total stealth. Men, women, children. Two more unlucky eyewitnesses, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time and barely had a split-second to realize that they had witnessed an assassination before the Soldier's bullets had silenced them.

" - cky? Buck, can you hear me?" Big, warm hands cupped his face.

Someone made a whimpering sound nearby, a woman. Wanda. Oh God. She hadn't been present for one of these...memory returns before, not like this. Not one that involved so many kills.
Bucky blinked slowly back into a world that was hazy, unlike the vivid past that had slammed into his brain with so much force. Why did it always, always hit like that, powerful and complete, every sight, every sound, every smell, exploding fully-formed back to life in his brain out of the darkness and ripping him out of the present?

Wanda was crying. "I'm sorry," Bucky whispered. She reached for him, but T'Challa pulled her back. He was worried Bucky might hurt her. Bucky wouldn't. He hadn't meant for her to see. He'd always been afraid of what it'd do to her if she saw, the way he saw them all.

"It's okay," Wanda croaked, and wiped her eyes. "It's okay. I'm okay."

How could she be okay when she'd seen Bucky shoot four children?

"You didn't do it," she said, and her voice grew steadier, more certain. "You didn't. I saw it. You weren't even...there, not really. He told you what to do, and you did it. He knew you had no choice, no mind except for what instructions he gave you. Your...handlers, they must have explained to him. That's how he knew." She looked at Steve and T'Challa. "I think...I think he knew the Winter Soldier was Bucky Barnes. There's something..." she stared into the distance, frowning to herself. "Something in the way Zemo looked at him. Like he knew something more, something he wasn't supposed to know...he even..." She sucked in her breath. "He had a comic book: an old Captain America."

Steve's grip on Bucky tightened. Bucky didn't mind. "He researched me. He said that, in Siberia. Even if he didn't know who the Winter Soldier really was during that...that 'mission' in the past, it wouldn't have taken him long to figure out after Ultron once he started studying me. There were pictures of Bucky and me."

Princess Shuri was pacing along the walls like an agitated cat. T'Challa sat rigid, though when he spoke, his voice was gentle. "What else do you remember that you can tell us?"

"I..." Bucky needed to remember. These people had a right to know. "I – no." He managed to reach past T'Challa's arm and stop Wanda when she would've spoken for him. "I can do it." I need to do it. I'm the one who did it. Wanda sighed but relented, and T'Challa released her to scoot across the floor and take Bucky's hand. "He didn't care about collateral damage, at all. A few of his men had scruples about going after targets' families, their wives and children. Zemo told them off for it, gave them some of those jobs on purpose, to make sure they weren't too weak."

His arm still around Bucky's shoulders, Steve muttered darkly, "Amazing. He didn't care then, and he doesn't care now. He cared exactly once, when it was finally his own family."

"We've learned all we can from Zemo himself, but there are few records and fewer witnesses," said Shuri, dragging her fingernails along the stone wall. "Perhaps we can place some of his companions if we can obtain pictures that Sergeant Barnes might recognize."

Bucky sat up and rubbed his eyes. "There were seven men on the squad, including him. They went by surnames. I think...the names must've been real. They called him Zemo. The youngest was Varga, but they were all fairly close in age. They spoke Sokovian, they were all nationals...wait." After. After there'd been others. Rendezvous in Sokovia. An old castle, a fort...there'd been others. And a man with a monocle...oh, shit. "Strucker," he whispered.


"Zemo knew Strucker. We rendezvoused... my retrieval was from Sokovia. A fortress, an old castle. Hydra, they were operating on Sokovian soil and Zemo knew it. There were...not prisoners, but
there were 'subjects'. They talked about subjects."

"God damn it," Steve growled. "Zemo knew Strucker after 2008, meaning he probably knew about his enhancement experiments. Zemo must've been part of it."

Wanda closed her eyes, but Dr. Damaris stepped forward. "Now we may better understand his motives, my king, for what bitter consolation it is. Baron Strucker's efforts created the Maximoffs' powers and Ultron's, which in turn destroyed Sokovia and Zemo's own family. Rather than face his own guilt and his complicity in Hydra's activities, he fixated instead upon the Avengers. And his character is as lacking in this as it was when he served Hydra, for he cares nothing about innocent lives."

What about my character? Bucky thought. I didn't care either.

"Stop it," Wanda murmured.

He'd remembered the kills before, but only the kills, no context. Not the mission details or the hours and days before and after. Now it seemed parts of that were still coming back. Maybe it'd be good for something.

Bucky was dimly aware of Dr. Kelile ending their work for the day and urging Steve and Wanda to take Bucky home to rest. It wasn't right, just resting after remembering so much of what he'd done...

"Stop it, Bucky!" Wanda snapped. "It wasn't your fault! You weren't aware of anything."

How could she say that? Of course, he'd been aware. Now he could just remember what he'd been aware of...

"Bucky?"

Winter. It was winter. Everyone wrapped in coats and scarves and blankets. It took longer to identify targets. Once...I got it wrong, turned out it wasn't the target. I never even thought about who I'd killed by mistake.

I thought it was a man, but it wasn't - when she fell, I realized it was a woman.

"Target error. Reassessing." Right back to searching for the right target. Someone ran to her in the street. Too far away, couldn't hear, but saw in my scope...an old woman. She was screaming. Mother? Grandmother?

...It was warm, no, hot and dry in direct sunlight on dry grass. No shade except for the shadows of people kneeling in front of him where he sat, semi-aware on the ground. Big, warm hands. Small, cool hands.

Steve. Wanda. Behind them were a few Wakandans, the men and women who lived in the barracks nearby, hovering with concerned expressions, asking questions. Bucky's grasp of the language wasn't great, but he'd picked up some.

"Is he all right?"

"Does he need a doctor?"

"Should we summon help?"

Wanda shook her head, wiping her face with one hand as she turned to answer them in their own
"No, Dr. Kelile knows. This is normal. He's okay."

She was crying. Bucky hated that this made her cry. She shouldn't be the one who had to cry at these memories. Out of everything that's happened in the past four years, every time I've remembered, how is it I've never cried?

He needed to not think like that around her. It just made her cry harder. "Sorry," he slurred, clumsily trying to pat her hand. "It's hard to...control...when this happens."

"Do you want to go inside?" Steve asked. "Or we can stay out here."

"Out here," Wanda answered for him. He vaguely remembered sitting down before they reached the house. The heat felt nice.

The conversation faded to a dull background buzz, like the insects that hummed over the grass and the scrubby bushes. In spite of the summer heat, Bucky shivered. All he could remember was cold wind over his arm between buildings and mountains and blowing snow...

When he blinked back to high summer in central Africa, Romanoff was there, talking to Steve. Wanda was at Bucky's side, rubbing his back. "The ICC and UN are more likely to believe I've been working alone," Romanoff was saying. "So far, the only individuals who've been named as potential defendants are Wanda and Barnes."

"They may still try to charge you, if not with Lagos then with things from...you know, before," Steve said.

"I know. I've been prepared for that possibility for years." Romanoff shrugged. "But the Zemo connection's important. T'Challa doesn't want to wait on releasing that, and I agree with him. Momentum is on our side. We need to not waste it."

Steve sighed. No doubt he knew better than to try to talk Romanoff out of it, but... "I don't like you facing the backlash alone."

Romanoff put a hand on his arm. "You really expect me to believe I'll be alone?" She smiled and kissed his cheek. "You can't be everywhere at once, and I don't want you to be. Get some rest. Be there for him; he needs it." She saw Bucky watching her and gave him an unapologetic smirk. "Well, you do. Do us all a favor and get through this. This guy's a killjoy of epic proportions when you're in trouble, and he gets all the rest of us in trouble."

Bucky had to smile and gave her a mock-salute. A few of the Wakandans laughed. Look, lady, I spent around twenty years trying to keep this guy out of trouble, and all I got was these lousy holes in my brain. Well, that started off funny in his head, but ended less so, so he didn't say it. Judging by the way Wanda first giggled, then winced, she agreed.

A few of the Wakandans left with Romanoff, and the others murmured farewells to her. "They're beginning to like her," Wanda said in Sokovian. "They're glad she'll do this at the request of the king. It will help ensure justice for their late king."

"I guess it'd cause questions if the king himself turned up with this information directly."

"Exactly. Natasha volunteered to deliver it. The king will visit the UN soon after the news breaks and try to further influence the public debate. Most of Zemo's associates are dead, but Natasha will have pictures for you soon."

"That could put more pressure on you," Bucky pointed out. "The criminal investigation into Sokovia
was barely halfway through when the Accords were to be signed.”

"I know. I think...Stark's lawyers told me that I should wait until I was summoned to appear in The Hague, though I gave many statements informally. If they summon me now...I'll decide."

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**IRELAND, DENMARK, COSTA RICA SPECIAL REFERENDUMS: AVENGERS WELCOME HERE!**

Court cases and legislative arguments proceed in over one hundred nations, but those who put the issue in the hands of the population have received a clear message: the general public trusts the Avengers!

Despite heated opposition from certain members of their legislatures and military, Costa Rica, Denmark, and Ireland's polls all yielded more than a 60% majority in favor of granting the Avengers open access to their soil for law enforcement and civil defense.

Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea have issued statements that the Avengers are not permitted to cross their borders without prior consent, although Iran and Venezuela did include a caveat that if their soil is the target of a confirmed extra-terrestrial attack, the Avengers will be requested for aid. The official spokesperson for the Avengers confirmed that the enhanced team will abide by those countries' decision "except in the case of a global crisis of the highest magnitude." This seems to be satisfactory to Iran and Venezuela, although North Korean president has vowed that any enhanced human who crosses its borders without permission will be detained and/or fired upon.

The current official roster of the Avengers includes billionaire Tony Stark's Iron Man, Wakandan King T'Challa's Black Panther, the android known as Vision, and Colonel James Rhodes' War Machine/Iron Patriot.

Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow has now reappeared in the public spotlight in the Hague, where she presented the International Criminal Court with new findings on the history of UN summit bomber Helmut Zemo and his past connections to Hydra that may have led to his murderous impersonation of the Winter Soldier. Romanoff revealed herself to be the source of the anonymous leaks of Hydra records regarding the imprisonment and coercion of James Buchanan Barnes into becoming the Winter Soldier, employing levels of torture and brainwashing that experts previously believed impossible.

The United Nations has ordered an urgent assembly to discuss these developments at the request of Wakandan King T'Challa, and Romanoff has announced that she will "gladly" appear before their subcommittee on the Sokovia Accords to answer questions.

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Steve got the article in an encrypted message from Nat: There, you see? You're not as unique as you think. Millions of others would rather put their faith in people than governments, as long as "people" means you.

Was that possible, that Steve hadn't completely lost the faith of the whole world a year ago?

**Do I even want the faith of the whole world?**

If not, why had he accepted the shield back from Tony?

Bucky wouldn't have rested after that flashback to his "mission" with Zemo if Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris hadn't insisted that they all take a couple of days off. That ended up being the rule each time
another flashback hit, because Bucky would lose all track of the present, and while Wanda tried to hide it, everyone could sense it was affecting her too.

"I don't remember any...new people, that I killed," Bucky explained. "The kills were the first things I started to remember. When the flashbacks hit now, they're other details. Things that happened on the missions. Some planning, but not a lot. I don't think I worked with groups much like I did with Zemo's team."

"It stands to reason," said Dr. Kelile, peering at neurological readings. "If you will forgive me for speaking of such things so coldly. The moment of a – a kill, that is the moment of highest adrenaline, the highest focus for you when you were the Soldier. It was the application of your skills. When you were successful, it may also be that those immediate memories were not something that Hydra wished you to lose, so their assault upon your memory focused on older patterns. As more time has gone by and their work has degraded, you are regaining more details that were lost."

"Yeah, that does make sense," Bucky muttered.

Steve didn't know whether to be pleased or not that Nat's investigations hadn't turned up any living Hydra agents who'd been involved with "handling" Bucky or wiping his memories. Quite a few had been taken out by Zemo - more gruesomely than Steve could have stomached doing personally, but he wasn't terribly sorry for any of them.

T'Challa and his coalition were busy whittling away at the Sokovia Accords' membership as Natasha testified, and even Bucky had trouble keeping a straight face when T'Challa questioned Nat about her investigations.

"Is it a moral failing that I'm not more outraged by how easily she lies to the UN?" Steve mused.

"Aw, come on, punk, you lied your ass off as Captain America," Bucky retorted. "Some things are need-to-know especially when it comes to politicians."

Bucky seemed to be trying to make up for the hell Wanda had to eyewitness inside his mind by making her laugh whenever possible during off-hours. And Steve was frequently the butt of their humor. Into the third week of living in the barracks, Steve thought Wanda had to have heard every embarrassing, undignified, or bizarre story starring himself, both before and after he became Captain America.

They were up to eight words "repatterned" in Bucky's brain, as the neurologists put it, before another big flashback hit and brought the process to a halt. This time Bucky remembered the long preparation process for his highest-profile mission: Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963. President John F. Kennedy.

It was one of Bucky's earliest missions too. Hydra had gambled a great deal on his ability to take Kennedy out. "Oswald was their decoy," he breathed. "But he didn't know that. He was just a malcontent...hell, after, he knew it. His rifle misfired, but he left it where they told him; I switched them. After, they weren't sure if they should send me for Oswald...they argued about it in front of me for hours. Zola..."

He trailed off then and Wanda took over, rubbing his hand. "Zola was on the telephone from SHIELD headquarters. He and others insisted someone else would have to finish Oswald. Another shot from a distance would prove the conspiracy. They had enough people in place to maintain the theory that Oswald acted alone, and they could get a man close enough who couldn't be traced."

One of the older medics asked, "Who was Jack Ruby?"
Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris glared at him, but Wanda held up her hand. "He's...not sure. He was Hydra's...a man like Oswald, Bucky thinks. They never met. They may have had a hold over him. He remembers his mission commander telling the team that Ruby had agreed to finish Oswald. They said..." she frowned, shifting closer to touch Bucky's temple. He closed his eyes and leaned into her hand. "'He knows the stakes. He'll do the job and he won't talk, but he says...if you gotta do me, do me quick, and take care of my kid.'"

Bucky dropped his forehead onto his arm, and Dr. Kelile said, "That is enough. We'll resume when he has recovered, and he will give further information about these memories only if he feels able. We're here to heal him, not to investigate his past."

"Wait," Bucky mumbled, lifting his head as if it weighed a ton. "No, I want to. I can tell. I want to."

"It will wait," Dr. Kelile said firmly. "You've shown no degradation of memories like these once they return. There's no reason to exhaust and distress yourself recounting them all at once, even for attacks as...serious as your president's assassination. You were not responsible then and you are not responsible now."

"You have your notebooks again," added Dr. Damaris. "Write down what you wish to recall, as you have before. But stop to rest."

Bucky carried his current notebook around with him everyone for the next three days, scribbling like mad, and only put it down to eat and sleep - and to do that, it usually took mild threats by Steve and Wanda to tell on him.

Bucky was having a rougher time with these memories than the ones of Zemo. Steve took to sleeping in his room so he could be there when the nightmares started. Sometimes it was bad enough that he let Bucky come down on the couch and write in his notebook for awhile until he calmed down.

"We prepped for weeks," Bucky murmured, staring at the book. "I never - at least I don't think - they ever prepped for so long for a mission than this one. The President, Steve, the President! Did you know he was Catholic? Kennedy?"

"Yeah," Steve admitted. "That was a surprise, when I was doing my catch-up reading, that we'd had a Catholic President. But Buck," he'd said this so many times it was starting to sound hackneyed, but all he could do was hope that one day it would take. "None of that was you. You didn't kill him. You never had a choice or even knew there was one. Oswald may've been a patsy, but he understood more of what was going on than you did."

"Still," Bucky didn't pause his writing. "People have a right to know what really happened. I need...it's not just about feeling guilty. It feels like writing it down gets it...a little out of my head, at least enough so I can remember where I am again." He sighed and put his pen down, looking at Steve at last. "Not like I've got a right to try and dump it out."

"Yeah you do," Steve argued quietly. "You have a right to live and not carry around what Hydra forced on you. They're the ones who need to pay, not you." He sighed and put a hand on Bucky's good shoulder. "I know, I know, you don't believe me."

Bucky laughed bitterly.

A knock on the door distracted them, and they found one of King T'Challa's senior advisors had come. It was W'Kabi, a tribal leader who was obviously a good friend of T'Challa but less than comfortable about the foreigners in their midst. That he'd come out here to see them was odd, but he
addressed them formally, "Good day, gentlemen. I have come to speak with Miss Maximoff on behalf of my king."

Wanda was already trotting down the stairs. "Do you want to speak in private?" she asked, giving Steve and Bucky an apologetic shrug.

Steve was relieved when W'Kabi shook his head. "That is not necessary, provided it will not be spoken of outside this room - even to the other Avengers."

It was T'Challa's call, so Steve didn't need to take too long to decide: "Okay."

W'Kabi explained, "My king remains in New York at the special United Nations session. However - possibly not by coincidence - we have detected a number of intruders crossing our border from South Sudan. These insurrections are rather common, and their goal is our vibranium deposits."

Steve remembered a picture of a brand on a Ulysses Klaue's neck and managed not to cringe. "How do you usually deal with them?"

"Such intruders are detained and deported, and their leaders, when possible, are punished. However, the ringleaders of these groups have learned difficult lessons and rarely try to enter the country themselves. They leave it to the poor and desperate to take the greatest risk of capture or injury," W'Kabi said. "Where possible, we avoid violence or harm to those people, but the same desperation that drove them to smuggling organizations will also drive them to violence when confronted." He nodded to Wanda. "It is this part in which my king asks whether you might be of assistance - and he commands me to be clear that you are not obligated. The choice is yours, and you must make it without fear of his displeasure."

Wanda smiled and nodded. "I understand. He's asking if I can, ah, subdue these people without harming them."

"Exactly, but also only if your presence here can be concealed."

Steve pondered whether W'Kabi was hoping she'd say yes or no. However, Wanda said slowly, "I think so. How many are there?"

"A large group. Three parties have crossed the border, totaling approximately sixty."

"Several miles apart?" Bucky guessed. "They're hoping to overwhelm the defenses of your mines and caches, that maybe one of their teams will get out with the goods while so many of your top people are with the king abroad." W'Kabi nodded. "Or...they're going to wait and then send a stealthier team in while their infantry keeps everyone busy."

"That is also a possibility we have recognized, which is why we must intercept these groups early and as quietly as possible tonight."

Steve shifted - and promptly got Bucky's elbow in his ribs. Yeah, okay. We've reunited the Avengers unofficially, but I'm not the boss of Wanda.

He half-expected her to look to him for advice like she would've done back at the compound. Now, she didn't, just answered W'Kabi calmly. "I can't promise that my power's so completely under control that there's no chance of harm or of my presence here being exposed. But if King T'Challa and you understand that, and you're willing to risk it, I'm happy to help you. You've done so much for us."

If W'Kabi was surprised or displeased by her answer, he didn't show it. "I know that Dr. Kelile will
wish to resume treatment of Sergeant Barnes within a few days. We will have you safely returned no later than this time tomorrow."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Wanda assists against a border attack on Wakanda's vibranium, and Natasha is forced to reveal her own past to the UN, but with an outcome the Avengers' enemies don't expect!

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.
Chapter Summary

Wanda assists Shuri against an attack on Wakanda's vibranium, and Natasha is forced to reveal her own past to the UN, but with an outcome the Avengers' enemies don't expect!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: This chapter contains a scene I actually wrote before Civil War ever came out. Recall the trailer with a voiceover of chanting as our heroes faced off? I thought it sounded like a rallying cry. (Oh, and a few more West Wing characters have cameos in this chapter, along with a Marvel comics villain.)

Canon Notes: As previously mentioned, this fic follows the comic canon that Wakanda is not quite so insular and does allow some immigration from other African nations, and that its vibranium source is more widely known. Also, while Tony sold Avengers Tower in Homecoming, I assume he probably still owns a floor or three so the team can use it for operations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Six

NORTHERN BORDER, WAKANDA

It took Shuri a second look to recognize Wanda Maximoff without her characteristic red garb and her hair back in a tight pony tail. If the border security team was startled by the sight of this white woman in their midst, they quickly hid their reactions when Shuri greeted Wanda warmly. "I thank you for agreeing to assist us in this operation."

"You're very welcome," Wanda replied. "I'll follow your instructions."

And she did. It was a pity that T'Challa and his security had agreed that if Wanda was to participate, she could only do so where her presence would go un-witnessed. That required holding back use of her power until the targets were entirely distracted. Otherwise the operation would have been over far more quickly.

EMP's from the sentries' devices disabled the trucks and jeeps at a distance, but the smugglers leaped from the vehicles and sprinted for the cover of the high grass and jungle. They knew the general direction of the vibranium mines and processing plant, but not much else, Shuri would have guessed.

Wanda accompanied Shuri with the vanguard into the tree-filled canyon where the smugglers were frantically hacking their way through the thick undergrowth. At Shuri's signal, her team threw colorful flash-bang grenades, sending the smugglers staggering in confusion, and with so much glaring light and noise, Wanda's red power could strike unnoticed.
By the time the chaos from the salvo of harmless noisemakers and strobe lights have faded, nearly thirty men and women - some who looked to be teenagers - lay motionless on the ground, having shed no blood but the cuts and bruises they'd gained in their flight. Not one blow had been struck.

It was the same for the rest of the night. A few of the stragglers panicked as they lost contact with the rest of their crew and began shooting at random into the night, forcing Shuri’s snipers to strike them down, but apart from that, the incursion was ended with few injuries. Once the intruders were all subdued and blindfolded, Shuri asked Wanda quietly, "Can you identify their leaders?"

Wanda slipped among the group, considering them, then pointed to two older men before returning to Shuri. "Those two were in charge of the teams, but they didn't order this attack. Those men are still at their base in South Sudan..." She sucked in her breath. "They're all white, and at least...two of them are American. The rest are European and South African."

"Probing our defenses with as many expendable bodies as they can persuade," Shuri concluded. At Wanda's dismayed expression, she chuckled. "We've been repelling incursions like these for a long time. It's nothing new, and in this current political climate, we expected it to increase."

"The bounty has gone up. Just to breach your borders and return alive, the rewards have increased substantially." Wanda looked at Shuri in dismay. "You won't - "

"Of course not," Shuri scoffed. "We're not butchers; you should've sensed that by now."

"Wanda?" Shuri whispered. She put out a hand but hesitated to touch.

Wanda blinked, then shifted towards Shuri. "You offer some sanctuary?" Shuri nodded. "Some of them...they're counting on it. They know, they hope to be granted entry. They've come undercover."

"Present the situation to her and let her choose," Shuri had insisted. "She is young, but she's not a child, and she understands what risks are worth taking. She'll also understand a sincere request with a promise that the choice is entirely hers."

The prisoners were separated out, with the leaders and the pretenders in the first group that would be unceremoniously and immediately expelled from Wakanda's borders. The rest would have their injuries treated and considered for the possibility of amnesty. Even those who were not allowed to stay would not be sent back into the hands of their employer/captors for retaliation. They would have free passage to any border nation they asked.
Not all of the distraught prisoners were performing. Wanda stopped and stared at a skinny, teenaged boy who kept trying to remove his blindfold or unbind his hands, and shouted at the others, agitating the whole group. "He's trying to find his sister. They came together. They're...twins. Orphaned."

All the Wakandans around Wanda exchanged looks. Shuri beckoned to two of the guards at random. "Is his sister here?"

Wanda hurried from one holding area to the next, but finally breathed a sigh of relief, and pointed to a girl among the female prisoners. She wasn't as panicked as her brother, but Shuri could see that she was quietly crying.

"The boy and girl children may be held together," Shuri ordered quietly. "Put them in another room and bring them food."

"That's very generous," Wanda remarked as Shuri's people brought water to the prisoners. "It has surprised me, to find a country as insular as Wakanda with so many naturalized citizens."

Shuri smiled dryly. "Some may take offense that we prefer to take in refugees from our fellow African nations and not from the West - at least until now. Even now, I expect the policy will change little."

"I'm not offended. I of all people know the reasons, and that they're valid."

"Then you know that while I can't promise you a path to citizenship, Wakanda has granted you sanctuary for as long as you wish, and the same for your friends." Shuri led her back to the shuttles that would return her to Birnin Zana. "There was a risk involved in allowing you here, but you've proven my brother's choice a wise one, and gained no small standing among those who know you're here."

Wanda looked delighted. Shuri wondered how it was that this woman who could read minds hadn't realized the esteem in which she was held.

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK CITY

The "reunion" between the official Avengers and the wayward Black Widow in New York was both more cautious and more emotional than it might have been in private. Tony had no doubt that Romanoff had planned it that way.

The only one she embraced was Vision; it was firm handshakes for Rhodey, Tony, and T'Challa, but the press gushed about the "barely withheld tears and guilt and remonstrations" they could supposedly see in everyone's eyes.

Tony managed not to react when one of the UN representatives asked point-black, "Ms. Romanoff, do you know where Captain America and the other missing Avengers are right now?"

"No, sir, I do not," she replied without hesitating.

"Do you know where the Winter Soldier is right now?"

"No, I do not."

"Where did you obtain all those recordings and documents regarding the Winter Soldier program?"

"At the former Hydra red base in the Putoran Mountains, Siberia, where the Winter Soldiers were
held in stasis and most of the program records were kept."

India's representative interrupted. "We're not supposed to be conducting a criminal investigation. Our questions would be better directed towards Ms. Romanoff's status as an Avenger and her willingness to operate under United Nations' authority."

But the American representative, Simon Trask, waved dismissively. "We can consider relevant information, and the fact that Ms. Romanoff may be withholding information from an international criminal investigation while selectively producing some of it is very relevant. I can't help but notice that all she's provided so far pertains to the Winter Soldier, when she herself was a Hydra operative. Surely if she can track down records of the Winter Soldier's training, she can provide some about her own."

Tony winced inwardly. Everyone looked at Natasha, who answered coolly, "Was there a question there?"

"Let me rephrase it if you're not following," Trask drawled. "Do you have access to any videos or records of your own training by Hydra?"

Tony clenched his fists and sent a quick message to Vision. Do a background check on this Simon Trask character. I know he used to be an ambassador and doesn't like mutants, but this suggests he's more along Thaddeus Ross's ideology.

On the witness stand, Nat remained utterly calm. "Let me make the slight correction that I wasn't trained by Hydra. I was trained by the KGB - at least as far as I knew until I defected."

"But you weren't brainwashed or tortured into submission, were you?" Trask pressed. "Is it a problem that you were a participant of your own free will that makes you hesitate to make that information public?"

Natasha didn't even blink. "The phrase 'free will' was foreign to everyone trained by Hydra or the Red Room. But yes, I believe I can provide those records."

Even Tony would've had a hard time keeping it together through those lines of questionings, but Romanoff looked supremely unruffled when they finally adjourned for the day. If he hadn't known her so long, he'd have believed the façade. As soon as they were back in the Compound, she dropped her mask - somewhat - but still looked only tired, where anyone else should've been an emotional wreck.

I acted like I gave no fucks when I was coming apart at the seams. Why shouldn't she? "What're you gonna do?" he asked her.

She shrugged, taking a sip of her drink, but didn't make eye contact with anyone. "Turn over the records. I have them. Maybe it's time. They had enough connections to Hydra; they should've come out awhile ago."

"How bad are they?" asked Rhodey. "For you? I mean, how hard's it going to be for you to watch?"

So Tony wasn't the only one who'd worked out just how good an actor Natasha Romanoff was.

Anyone would've thought she was completely at ease, leaning back in her chair gazing out the window of the Compound at the sunset as she drank. Tony wondered if T'Challa or Vision believed the calm front she was putting up.

"They're bad. But I can watch. I've seen them before, and came to terms with what's in them a long time ago." She quirked her mouth into a faint, cold smile. "There is one thing in them that might..."
shock you all at the end of the day, I guess I ought to warn you."

"What is that?" asked Vision solemnly.

"I'm not actually thirty-four."

Rhodey blinked, Vision looked intrigued, while T’Challa and Nat exchanged weary smiles – and to his astonishment, despite all the agony that had accompanied his own discovery of Natasha Romanoff’s history (among other things), Tony found himself smiling too. He’d bounced off the walls and wisecracked to hide what was going on inside him. If Nat preferred a cool smile and serene demeanor, Tony wasn’t going to stop her.

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**BLACK WIDOW VIDEOS DOCUMENT A CHILD SOLDIER’S HELL!**

**Outrage over Russian silence as red room documents disclosed by survivor Natasha Romanoff!**

Several recesses have been called from the UN Sokovia Accords Panel’s viewing sessions because so many representatives and members of the media became distraught or physically ill! Several representatives have called the Russian government's refusal to comment on the videos as disgusting as the videos themselves!

"The Winter Soldier videos are horrific, but in ways, these are worse, because these were children!" said Congresswoman Andrea Wyatt, one of many US officials who has voluntarily taken on viewing and reading the material in order to advise the American federal government.

Much of the material has been deemed highly classified to prevent Hydra methods and technology from being made public, but the Sokovia Accords Panel released summaries and allowed a handful of journalists to examine some of the written and recorded material for a grim look into the former Soviet Union's Red Room:

Natalia Romanova entered the program at the age of 3 in 1952. That fact alone caused an eruption of questions and denials from the viewers, but Ms. Romanoff confirmed that she was, in fact, born in 1949, and does not believe she has physically aged in over fifty years due to the chemical and physical treatments she underwent in her "training."

In the Red Room, young girls learned ballet by day and murder by night. At first, it appeared to be a game - that the children had to win in order to earn their supper. It was a morbid game, with fake "kills" where the "victim" screamed, begged, and fell, acting genuinely terrified and helpless until being shot, at which point he or she got up and praised the "strong ones" who carried out the order to kill. Girls who hesitated too long or were too distraught were relegated to lower tiers in the program.

Girls barely out of toddlerhood were taught friendship, sportsmanship, and manners by day, and treachery, seduction, and mistrust by night. Their first "exam" - a real kill - was carried out at age six, with the girls believing it was still a game. Those who completed the kill of a prisoner without crying or panicking were advanced to the next level. Those deemed weak were held back. Within two years, the advanced girls were tasked with killing the lower-tier girls in another "practical exam."

Romanoff was eerily calm throughout the viewing of the films and reading of the documents, but UN-appointed psychologists insists that her behavior is all too natural and to be expected from a survivor of this level of indoctrination and torture. When asked if she is enhanced, Romanoff replied, "I think it's likely, but I don't know the nature of the enhancement. Drugs were heavily administered
throughout our puberty and early twenties, and I don't believe I've aged since I was in my mid-twenties."

Secretary General Fitzwallace asked, "Ms. Romanoff, do you remember all of this 'training?'"

Romanoff: "No, I do not. I do have gaps in my memory that have never come back, especially from my teens and early twenties. I remember enough that I defected at the first opportunity, in 1984."

Sec. Gen. Fitzwallace: "After that, what did you do?"

Romanoff: "I operated as a freelance...assassin for hire, I suppose is the simplest way to put it. Until SHIELD offered me sanctuary in 1998."

Rep. Wyatt: "Are you aware of any other survivors of the Black Widow program still in existence?"

Romanoff: No. There were only three 'graduates' still alive at the time I defected, including myself, and less than five in training. Part of...[pause]...part of what led me to defect was discussion that none of the trainees were suitable, and they should all be disposed of and a new class begun."

Rep. Wyatt: "By 'disposed of,' do you mean those girls would be killed?"

Romanoff: "Yes."

Rep. Wyatt: "Who would carry an order like that out?"

Romanoff: "Me. And the other senior Black Widows."

Sec. Gen. Fitzwallace: "How old were those girls, the ones in training?"

Romanoff: "Two were age seven, one was age ten, the fourth was age thirteen."

Sec. Gen. Fitzwallace: "Do you have any idea what happened to them?"

Romanoff: "No."

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

It didn't take much persuasion from Bucky and Wanda to convince Steve to go back to the palace and meet Natasha when she returned from testifying. "We're doing fine. I promise, if anything comes up, we'll call you," Bucky insisted. "Go. Tell her...well, she knows what I'll say."

Steve let them persuade him. He arrived back at the palace guesthouse a little after Natasha, and found her in the private gardens, settled on a pile of cushions underneath a pile of small Bartons. "Captain Steve!" yelled Lila.

"Morning Lila, I was looking for Auntie Nat, but I don't see her!"

"I'm under here!"

Steve looked around in feigned confusion. "What? Where? I don't see her!"

Lila and Cooper draped themselves further over Nat, with Nathaniel giggling and attempting to keep his two-year-old body on top of her head. "She's gone!" Cooper informed her.

Steve shrugged. "Oh well. I'll go look for her inside."
"I'm under - oof!"

"Okay, okay," Laura intervened, laughing, and pulled Nate into her arms. "Let's not smother Auntie Nat while we're trying to hide her. Get up and let her give Captain Steve a hug."

Cooper obeyed, but Lila wrapped herself around Nat's waist and insisted, "Mine!"

Steve fixed her with a mock-evil eye. "Well, I guess I'll just have to hug you both then."

"He'll squish you, you know," Nat informed Lila, and hauled her toward Steve with a growl, and the two of them grunted as Lila shrieked in between them.

Steve seized the moment to give Nat a close look. Her eyes were shadowed and red-rimmed. It reminded him of how she'd looked at the farm after they'd all had their minds tangled up by Wanda and Ultron. He released one arm that was keeping Lila from wriggling free and put his hand to her head, tugging her towards him. Clint came over and rescued Lila, giving Nat and Steve and all-too-knowing smile.

"How you doing?" Steve murmured.

"Okay," she said.

Laura tugged and shooed the kids out. "C'mon, guys, let's give the grown-ups a few minutes to talk."

"Awww," protested Lila and Cooper, and Lila tried to grab Nat's leg, but Nate started to fuss, picking up the tension. That was enough to distract his siblings, and Natasha was able to detach Lila.

"I'll come catch up with you later," Nat promised, and kept an arm around Steve as they went into the house. "Off you go."

Laura ushered the kids further out into the gardens, giving Steve a small wave, and he mouthed, "Thanks," at her. Inside, with the kids gone, he could hold Nat as tight as she'd once done for him in a London church after Peggy's funeral. "How're you really doing?"

She sighed and actually turned her face into his chest. "Been better. Been worse. I'll live."

"That's not much."

"It's enough." Clint was silently pouring drinks, and Nat took one and drained it before they made it to the couch. When they all sat down, Steve and Clint sat on either side of her, rubbing her shoulders and back. "It was time. Maybe past time. Hell, they went easy on me. Like I was a victim."

But you were! Steve saw Clint's warning look and bit it back. Nat wouldn't appreciate it, whether it was true or not. T'Challa had said the same of Bucky, but when Dr. Damaris tried to say it to Bucky, he'd flinched away, shaking his head as if he simply couldn't - or wouldn't - accept it.

Natasha was leaning heavily on Clint, one hand fingering the arrow necklace she wore while her free hand clutched Steve's, when Laura came back in. "Hey. Sorry to interrupt, but there's something going on in the US that I think you all might like to see." She beamed at Nat and Steve.

They were all curious enough to turn the television on to find even the non-American channels covering protest marches in Washington and New York.

"As Natasha Romanoff is on her way back to The Hague to testify before the International Criminal Court, thousands have taken to the streets in support of her as well as the other Avengers! Civil
liberties organizations are using the Black Widow and Winter Soldier videos as proof that the detention and internment of enhanced is a human rights violation that has failed to make the world any safer from terrorist threats!

Below me is the vanguard of the Washington, DC march, carrying the banner 'SAVE THE AVENGERS: Stop the Internment of Enhanced!' Groups within the march have gathered in support of individuals affected by the embattled Sokovia Accords and their favorite superheroes! Some participants in the Women's March have traded in their pink hats for black with red hourglasses to show their support for Natasha Romanoff in light of the brutal childhood she endured at the hands of the KGB and Hydra's so-called Red Room! Others are wearing solid red in support of Wanda Maximoff, who was recruited by Hydra as an orphan along with her twin brother at the age of fourteen! There, that group there is waving signs: #notamonster."

"Remind me to call Wanda," Steve murmured.

"Wonder what all those silver hats with red white and blue shields could possibly be supporting," said Nat, poking him.

Steve chuckled weakly. Sam and Scott hurried into the room, summoned by Laura, and they all silently watched the marchers. It might not have been as big as some of the crowds that had gathered in opposition of Ronald Bunt's outrageous administration...but it was bigger than Steve would have expected.

"Members of Congress involved in the Committee on Enhanced Activity report their phone lines have been jammed by callers supporting the Avengers, especially Natasha Romanoff, in reaction to the horrifying revelations of her childhood and training by the Red Room. Unconfirmed sources from The Hague have hinted that no charges will be brought against Romanoff for any of her actions while under Hydra's control, and there is political pressure from multiple nations arguing that she should receive immunity for anything she did while a fugitive from the KGB."

"Nice," said Sam.

Nat shrugged. "Coulson promised me that in the beginning. I informed on everyone who ever hired me before SHIELD, and most of that went public in the Washington leak. Still," she smiled dryly. "It's nice to be appreciated. And it seems we all are."

"All except Bucky," Steve muttered, then winced. He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

But Natasha elbowed him. "Look again."

Steve frowned at the screen, and Nat pointed to another group bearing signs and banners. For a moment, he couldn't make them out, then the camera zoomed in, and the breath left Steve.

If the reporter hadn't been narrating the scene, he might still not have believed it.

"Also marching today are veterans' rights organizations from around the country, including POW advocates, all in support of James Buchanan Barnes! They're entering the National Mall now behind the banner you see below me: JUSTICE FOR BUCKY BARNES! I see lots of other signs in support of the man known as the Winter Soldier: Free Bucky, and #bringbuckyhome! Opinions about Barnes' guilt have undergone a dramatic shift since other videos made public by Natasha Romanoff showed the extent of the torture and brainwashing Barnes underwent in Hydra's hands!"

"Trinity, what is it the marchers are chanting?"

"Well, let me stop talking, Anderson, and we'll see if our speakers can pick it up!"
All voices on the cameras and in the palace guesthouse went silent.

"United we stand! United we stand! Divided we fall! Divided we fall!"

"No hate, no fear, all enhanced are welcome here!"

“That's a pretty clear message, Anderson. The marchers are referring to the events of 2017 as the Avengers Civil War, and around the US, they're calling for unity both in support of enhanced detainees such as mutants and inhumans, as well as among the Avengers."

"Let me cut to our New York correspondent, Danny Concannon. Danny you're looking down at another large crowd surrounding Avengers Tower. How is the mood there?"

"Anderson, the best way I can describe it is one part hope and one part desperation, as many of the signs below us are appealing directly to Tony Stark to help end the violence against enhanced humans and reunite the Avengers. There's another contingent supporting a lesser-known organization called the X-Men, rumored to be made up of mutants who've been seen operating in the Northeast. They're less well-known than the Avengers, and they've come under police and military fire in several dramatic videos captured since even before the Sokovia Accords were passed. Their supporters argue that their actions have been peaceful and showed the same goal of saving lives as the Avengers, and that they should be treated as heroes.

Okay...hang on, the chanting just changed - oh, and I see why, it looks like Spider-man has shown up on the landing pad of Avengers Tower! We had unconfirmed reports last spring that Spider-man was detained by a sentinel squad despite being properly registered as an enhanced operative under the auspices of the Avengers. Tony Stark spoke publicly in support of him - yeah, there he is, climbing across the Avengers symbol - I have to say, I don't know how he's doing that. But the chanting is now 'No hate, no fear, Spider-man is welcome here!'"

"We still don't have any confirmation to the rumors that Spider-man is actually an American citizen under the age of eighteen - those records were sealed by the Commission and some suggest this was at the demand of Iron Man himself. One reason for sealing records from FOIA requests is that they involve minor children. Whoever he is, he's not very big, but he seems to be having a good time, waving at the - what was that - "

Bangs rang out, the chanting turned to shrieks, and Steve stiffened along with the others as the camera's view lurched.

"I think those were gunshots! People are screaming below me, Spider-man has jumped - no, he's swinging back into the building, but I see several pieces have fallen from the Tower - that's confirmed, I hear police shouting 'shots fired,' can you hear me? Shots fired at Spider-man!"

"Fuck," growled Clint.

"There's Iron Man and there's Vision - two more Avengers have appeared from the Tower and are flying down toward the crowd - police are pushing the crowd back, there is a lot of confusion on the ground! Iron Man is approaching counter-protesters along the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue - they're running, but he's following one man, a white male. Vision just landed in front of the main group and is calling on them to stay calm and stay where they are...here comes Spider-man, it looks like he's okay, he's going along the side of the marchers, motioning at them for calm! I think we've lost our connection to Danny, so we're just going by what we see on Chopper Two - "

" - Anderson, this is Danny, we're okay, we just had a few guns pointed at us by the police, but I think they've calmed down. I'm six stories above ground level and what I see...Iron Man has taken a
counter-protester down and now the police are moving in to cuff the man. I can't hear what he's saying, but it looks like this may be the shooter. The crowd situation looked really bad for a few minutes, like there might be a stampede in the panic, but Vision - he's got a really loud voice when he wants, and people are gradually calming down and following his instructions. Spider-man looks unhurt...he's dropping into the crowd now, it looks like some people fell and may have been trampled...yeah, he's checking up on them."

"Can you see Iron Man and the suspect?"

"Police now have the suspect in cuffs and are taking him, Iron Man is airborne above the marchers...hang on..."

"'Okay, ladies and gentlemen, let me give you all a reminder: New York's not an open carry state, and it sure isn't an open season state," Tony announced, his voice amplified by the suit. "So if you start shooting guns, you're gonna get arrested!'"

Most of the crowd roared its approval, but Steve could now see the counter-protesters along one side, jeering at Tony.

"Yeah, yeah, you guys speechify at me all you want, but keep your hands to yourselves," Tony retorted. "Hey, Underoos, you okay?"

The crowd shifted around Spider-man, and Clint laughed out loud as the speakers picked up multiple voices repeating "Underoos?!

With his mask obscuring his face, Spider-man couldn't reveal an expression, but he threw his arms up and yelled, "Come on, you said you wouldn't call me that in public!" and as laughter rang out, added, "Man, I quit!" and made to stomp off in a huff.

The crowd started chanting "Underoos! Underoos!" as Tony egged them on.

Vision evidently decided to come to Spider-man's defense and said in a light voice, "Perhaps this is a bad time to mention all the Tin Man jokes that can be made at your expense, Mr. Stark."

"WOOOOOO!" A large group of costumed Iron Man enthusiasts promptly started dancing and singing If I Only Had a Brain, which spread like wildfire through the crowd.

Tony started waving his arms above his head and yelled, "Hey, wait a minute, it's heart! HEART! I have PLENTY OF BRAINS!"

"I think I've got whiplash," said Sam.

"I think Pepper's been giving them all public relations training," replied Nat.

"Are she and Tony…" Steve couldn't quite phrase the rest of the question, but Nat gave him a faint smile.

"Hard to say, but she came to say hello while I was staying in the Tower, and that wasn't as awkward as it might have been."

They watched the coverage for the remainder of the day. Senator Kelly, Senator Nadeer, their followers, and President Bunt ranted and raved at press conferences and on Twitter about "mutant and Inhumanriots" taking place, though for some reason, the only violence Steve noticed wasn't by the Avengers' supporters. Police blasted tear gas on marchers in Chicago, and a Black Lives Matter group was attacked by white supremacists along with several reporters in Atlanta as national
guardsmen just watched.

"See why I wasn't gonna leave it up to my government to decide who I get deployed against and when?" muttered Sam. "Hope Rhodes is watching this."

"We all have blind spots," said Natasha. "Rhodey's had to clean up his share of government messes, but he's witnessed far bigger messes caused by Tony."

"So his solution was to put Tony Stark under the control of Ronald Bunt?" Sam scoffed. "Yeah, that'd end well."

"I've read what Rhodey and his team have been writing," said Steve. "This 'review board,' that he and Darcy Lewis are working on. I could live with that. It doesn't give anyone the right to tell us where to go or where not to go, or who the enemy is. We should be prepared to answer for the calls we make, even in the heat of the moment. I'm absolutely okay with that." He scowled, watching a video of a uniformed officer pummeling an already-handcuffed protester. "There's proof enough of what happens when people in power don't answer to anyone."

"Amen to that," Sam agreed. "So we stay out of...what was it, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela?"

"And Libya, Syria, Equatorial Guinea, and Eritrea, unless there's a portal open sending interstellar visitors across the border," said Steve.

"Even then, we might want to make sure E.T. is hostile before paying an uninvited visit," added Clint. "Of course, if the country itself is harboring the aggressor, then we've got some tough choices to make."

"Right. Aliens crossing their borders is one thing, but what about a nuke coming from within their borders?" Sam pointed out.

"Rhodey'll jump at the chance for his share of missile-catching bragging rights," Nat said dismissively. They all chuckled. "Seriously, though, the risk of a threat of that magnitude coming from any of our detractors is pretty slim. Maybe Iran, maybe North Korea, but they'd be more worried about conventional military, and the diplomatic community can decide how to deal with it. A third-party actor getting control of a nuke...most likely the Russians would request our aid privately before they admitted to the Western powers that it'd even happened."

"Yeah, but how do we keep 'em from blaming us when it's over?" asked Scott.

Nat smirked. "Believe me, that part, I could handle. In any case, India, Italy, Argentina, Canada, and Japan's government have given us open access, and Ireland, Costa Rica, and Denmark did it by public referendum. Given the choice between us and a hoard of UN peacekeepers or even half of the so-called relief organizations, most populations would choose us. At least we're not dipping into their disaster funding or trading weapons with Ten Rings."

Steve returned to the barracks that evening to check on Wanda and Bucky. Once Bucky was asleep, Steve showed Wanda the footage of the march that took place in Sokovia.

"A growing movement in Sokovia has called for the exoneration and repatriation of Wanda Maximoff, in light of her age when she was recruited by Hydra and the efforts she has made for international relief as a member of the Avengers!"

"'We do not forget the damage done by Hydra and Ultron in Sokovia,'" said one local stateswoman through a translator. "'But we believe it is more productive that Wanda Maximoff continue to serve
"The Hague is still deliberating on whether charges will be brought against Maximoff for crimes against humanity. The situation is complicated by her disappearance in the wake of the conflict popularly known as the 'Avengers Civil War' in 2017. The International Criminal Court is unable to force her appearance without formally charging her, but currently the panel handling her case feels there is not enough evidence to decide whether charges are warranted. This leaves Maximoff's case in limbo until she reappears."

"I've been thinking," Wanda said softly, and Steve managed not to start talking over her. "When this is over - I mean, when Bucky's recovered...I should go to The Hague." She smiled wearily as Steve clamped his teeth down on his tongue. "Stark kept the Compound outside subpoena jurisdiction, but it was only delaying the inevitable. They have questions. They have a right to get answers."

"Half of them are still looking for a scapegoat," Steve said. *Maybe more than half.*

"I know. But the truth is the truth," she mused. "It's not really up to me or you whether I'm guilty of crimes. That was never really up to us, was it? No matter what we call ourselves. We try to stop things in progress, but it's not our job to decide who gets punished and how much."

Steve sighed. "If that's what you want to do, you know I won't try to stop you. It's entirely your choice. I just..." A noise escaped him almost like a laugh, bitter and ironic. "I guess you can't stop me from worrying. Nobody can."

"I know." Wanda hesitantly reached out and hugged him. After a few awkward beats, they both relaxed and hugged a little harder. "How's Natasha?"

"She's...I think she's okay. Tired, no question. I don't think anything on those videos surprised her, but seeing it...had to be rough. God." Steve let go of Wanda and scrubbed his face. "I thought I was ready to see it, but I wasn't. From the sound of it, every one of those girls except her is dead. They went in there as toddlers."

"A few girls may have survived, but not as Black Widows," Wanda mused. "There were some...some I met who remembered the Red Room, and I saw it again in her mind. Maybe if they thought a girl had potential in some other way, just not as a Black Widow, they would save her."

*God, that opens up another can of nightmare-worms. Do you think she'd know, if I asked her?*

"I will ask her. We're up to nine words with Bucky, but Dr. Kelile will only let us work every other day now. He needs to rest after every session. I'll talk to Natasha tomorrow, before she leaves for The Hague again."

So the next day, Steve stayed at the house with Bucky, though he wanted to go with Wanda and be there for Nat, for the ugly implications of what Wanda might know.

Bucky slept for most of the day except for when Steve woke him up to eat, shower, and get a little exercise (i.e., walk around with most of his weight on Steve) at Dr. Kelile's instructions. He looked tired as all hell, but not like before, as if he might drop and never wake up again. So Steve coaxed him with gentle teasing through his time awake, and Bucky responded with drowsy jokes.

Bucky was awake enough to be startled when Steve told him about the protest marchers supporting Bucky's cause. "Who the hell would march for me?"

"Lot of people," Steve replied. "Veterans of Foreign Wars, Amnesty International, the Coalition for
American POW's, POW-MIA Families Support Network - and those were just the signs I remember seeing on TV in Washington. There's a petition to the White House with over 300,000 individual signatures, and another just by organizations signed by thirty-three different groups. The truth's out, Buck, about you and Nat. Neither one of you had a choice, and people're starting to see that at last."

Bucky looked down at his lunch plate and picked at it. "What about Wanda?"

"There's...more controversy about her, but even people back in Sokovia are starting to speak up for her. A teenaged girl doesn't have the ability to choose freely either, not when Hydra recruiters want her."

"What everyone else wants is a scapegoat, and better me than her."

"Everyone who wants that can go to hell," Steve retorted. "Because they're not getting either one of you as scapegoats."

"What're you gonna do, offer yourself up in our places? That might work for Lagos or DC, but not before that." Bucky looked up when Steve gathered breath to argue. "Steve...Dr. Kelile says me going back under again isn't an option."

Steve blinked. "What?"

Bucky gave up picking at his food and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I can't...if this doesn't work, I can't go back under. She says my system couldn't take it. Coming back out this time almost killed me."

It sank in, turning what Steve had managed to eat into lead in his stomach. "But...we don't know if this isn't going to work. If we can get Hydra out of your head, you won't need to worry about going under again."

"Yeah. If it works. Which we won't know until they've done this go-round with all ten words. It's just...what they're doing, it's not erasing the conditioning. Just cutting the link between the words and...what they made me do. The way I reacted to them. Over time, the reactions'll unravel without the words, but unless we're sure we've found all the words, it'll still be there, like a buried bomb."

"Buck." Steve got up and came around the kitchen table to put a hand on his shoulder. "D'you think there's any reason Dr. Kelile's plan isn't working?"

Bucky was silent for a long time, then admitted, "I don't know. I still feel...things, when I hear the words. But they haven't made it all the way through. If it doesn't work...T'Challa says I can stay in Wakanda, and I'll have to. I can't risk being out anywhere they could get to me."

"It won't be forever," Steve half-vowed. "Even if this doesn't work. Dr. Kelile won't stop trying, and neither will I. Neither will Wanda. We'll get it out of your head; all we need is time."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Tony knows more about Bucky's treatment than he's been letting on, and when Wanda finds out, a confrontation and some painful confrontations ensue with
Steve.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.
Chapter Summary

Tony knows more about Bucky's treatment than he's been letting on, and when Wanda finds out, a confrontation and some painful confessions ensue between her, Tony, and Steve.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Dear readers, my sincerest apologies for the unexpectedly-long wait! Work absolutely slammed me in the past two weeks. To keep updates consistent, I'm going to slow them down and try to update every weekend. Thank you all so much for the feedback. Please keep it coming. Here follows another chapter I've been working up to since the beginning of this fic.

Canon Notes: The MCU's take on Wanda and Pietro frustrated me, because I preferred their history as Romany and Jewish. But as a fanwriter, I like the challenge of reconciling inconsistencies in canons, so this chapter includes another.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA

Tony Stark arrived back at the medical center just before Natasha left for The Hague. Wanda wasn't expecting anything other than a quick "hello" – they were both busy, him with the medical technicians and her with talking to Natasha – but then she caught a whisper of something on Tony's mind:

Tony wasn't only working with the medical technicians on Rhodey's case. He was working on Bucky's too! He saw the look on Wanda's face as she approached and straightened, defensive. "What?" Wanda just stared at him. So he huffed and said, "Look, the docs know. Barnes knows. They're all fine with it."

He was telling the truth. But Wanda couldn't seem to give voice to the questions flying through her mind, so in the end, Tony walked away without her saying anything else.

When Wanda returned to the bunker, she wheedled Steve outside so she could talk to Bucky alone. "Why haven't you told him everything?" she demanded.

"Define everything."

Wanda tried not to get aggravated with people for not sharing what was in their head, but Bucky in particular, she wanted to kick on a regular basis. "What Stark is doing, and why you're allowing it? Dr. Kelile wouldn't take his advice if you didn't agree, and you should be more suspicious of him
than you are! Why don't you care?"

"I need all the help I can get, Wanda."

"That's not the reason. Stark doesn't let go of grudges, and he hasn't, not this one."

Bucky looked away. "If he really meant to hurt me, you'd have caught it. I know you've looked."

Wanda sighed. "No, he's not trying to sabotage the treatment or hurt you, but he's not doing this to help you either!"

"And? So you tell me: why is he, then?" Wanda huffed in frustration. Bucky shrugged. "I'm not a mind-reader, but I'm guessing Stark's helping me for the same reason as Romanoff: for Steve. I'm fine with that. Hell, better than fine. This is all I deserve - "

He caught himself, but not before Wanda rounded on him. "That is not true! Steve's right about many things, but especially about this, and for reasons you and all the others can't even see. He's not blind when it comes to you, Bucky! He never has been. He sees what you are the way nobody else ever did, and he sees a good man who didn't deserve any of what happened, and who never had a chance to stop it." Bucky looked away, and Wanda sighed. She hadn't meant to yell at him. "You're unfair to yourself. We can't convince people who aren't fair to you, but that doesn't mean we won't try, at least with you. Until you see it and stop thinking the way Hydra wants you to think." He flinched, and she put a hand on his arm. "You have a right to question Stark."

"No, I don't."

"Bucky - "

"You can tell Steve about Stark, if it matters that much to you. He'll have more than enough questions," Bucky added dryly. "Just not...not the other things. Not this." Not what I think about it. He looked at her, plaintive and anxious. "C'mon, you know it'll just upset him. I think what I think. It's not gonna change overnight, or maybe ever." If I think I deserve to live with what I did, Dr. Kelile can't very well erase that from my brain when she can barely even untangle me from Hydra.

Wanda sighed. "Okay. I won't tell him that part. I don't - as long as you're not trying to hurt yourself, I won't say what I hear, no matter how wrong you are," she added, and got a weary laugh out of him.

"Have it your way."

But at the first opportunity, Wanda told Steve that Stark was giving input to Bucky's treatment. While Steve didn't completely freak out, he wasn't prepared to just let it sit either.

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**BIRNIN ZANA AIRPORT**

As soon as Stark was due back at Wakanda, Wanda tagged along with Steve to meet him at the airstrip. Steve nearly tackled Stark the minute he came out of his chopper. "Why didn't you tell me you were researching Bucky's conditioning?"

Stark reeled back, then waved absently at the Wakandan techs who were moving his chopper off the landing pad. "Good to see you too, Stevie-man, how's the gang?"

Steve huffed and glared around them for any listeners (other than Wanda). "We're good. But I hear you know more of our progress at the bunker than you've been letting on."
Stark rolled his eyes, and the three of them walked until they were well out of earshot of any bystanders. "I looked at some of the stuff they were doing at the same time I looked at the schematics for his arm, Rogers. I'm not trying to sabotage anything."

Steve looked at Wanda for confirmation, and she nodded, but his suspicion remained. "But why were you looking at the schematics for his arm? You haven't wanted anything to do with him."

Stark opened his mouth to retort...and in Wanda's mind's eye, the sarcastic words he wanted to say flew away from him. It wasn't by any action of hers, though he did shoot her a suspicious look as he struggled to answer Steve. In Steve's mind, suspicion began giving way to confusion and concern.

Tony saw it, and his consternation grew. Wanda held her breath.

"I know it wasn't him." He said it quick and quiet, without looking Steve in the eyes, but the ramifications of the words slammed into Steve and left Wanda feeling light-headed. She made herself breathe again and willed herself to be motionless and invisible. Before Steve could come up with a reply, Tony added, "This doesn't mean I'm forgetting it was him on that tape; I'm never forgetting that. But I can't get real answers without knowing we're talking to the real Barnes. That means getting Hydra out."

Wanda fought the urge to groan. That was not the only reason!

Steve said slowly, "That's what you meant...about giving him back the notebooks. So he could remember." Tony nodded. "There're still things he doesn't remember. He's trying, but it hasn't come back."

"I know. The stuff in those tapes we saw, he doesn't remember any of it except that 'mission' in '91." Tony narrowed his eyes, but not at Steve. "I'm thinking that was deliberate - by Hydra. There's something 'bout that 'training' that they didn't want him to know."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. "He's trying, Tony. He blames himself more than you or anybody else does."

Wanda winced. Steve wasn't wrong, but he wasn't exactly diplomatic about it to someone who'd lost their parents - and now had seen it - at the hands of the Winter Soldier, Hydra's creature with Bucky Barnes' face, Bucky Barnes' hands, Bucky Barnes' eyes...

Tony's thoughts stumbled over that last part, and Wanda felt it. He remembered; the memory of those images were seared into his brain, even though he'd only seen his parents' murder on that one day in Siberia, amid all the other nightmares that'd come down on him in those few hours. But he remembered the Soldier's eyes, when he'd looked around and seen the camera, and walked forward to shoot it out and destroy the evidence...

So that's it. Since that day, Tony had looked at Bucky's eyes many times, searching them when no one was watching. From the moment Dr. Kelile had awakened Bucky from stasis, with each new setback, each recovery, each tiny sliver of hope...Tony had watched from as close as he could get away with. Hell, Bucky had seen Tony looking. He'd never let on to anyone, not even Steve or Wanda.

The eyes of Bucky Barnes were nothing like the eyes of the Winter Soldier. Their face was the same, but the eyes...completely different. That other that lurked in the back of Bucky's mind, that Wanda had seen come to life during those tests in the bunker last year when T'Challa read out the words...it wasn't just evident in the brainwaves and in the actions. It was visible in his eyes.

When Bucky was awake and himself, his eyes were entirely different. His fear, his sorrow, his
shame, his love for Steve, the hope that he could barely allow himself to reach for...all that showed in his eyes. His suffering, his exhaustion... *so that's it.*

Many things, many reasons have driven Tony to bring Steve's shield back to him, to call the former Avengers together and ask, almost formally, to reunite them. Up until then, even as Tony had recognized the evil inherent in the Sokovia Accords, good intentions or not, his sticking point had been the fate of Bucky Barnes.

*Now you can see what even Steve can't understand. You and Bucky have more in common than you ever wanted to admit. You've both been used for evil that you never intended. His was just more direct than yours. You made the weapons, but Bucky was the weapon.*

But Tony couldn't - or wouldn't - go so far as to admit that to Steve. "I'm not doing it for him," he lied to Steve aloud. "If the evidence proves he's innocent, then he's innocent. I'll deal. It's what I do. I want *us* back. If that means putting up with him, fine. Then we need Hydra out of his head. T'Challa's offered to help Rhodey get his legs back. If that means your buddy gets his arm back, fine. I'm not doing it for him."

Steve sensed that this wasn't even close to the whole truth, but he decided not to press any further. So he just answered, "Thank you, Tony."

"Welcome." Tony abruptly walked away.

Steve stared after him, his mind a maelstrom of whirling thoughts, like the lights and noise of a theme park ride. Then it all settled, and he ran after Tony. Wanda stayed where she was (but mentally eavesdropped), and Steve caught up with Tony after only a few paces.

"I'm sorry, Tony."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Sorry it wasn't him or sorry I'm doing this for the team?"

Steve sighed. "No, I meant...what I said in the letter, last year. For not telling you." Now he was the one avoiding Tony's eyes. "I should've said it to your face sooner. I should've told you what Zola told us."

Tony stared. Steve forced himself to meet the other man's eyes, and they studied each other...Tony pondering it, and Steve simply waiting for what, if anything, he'd have to say now that they were talking about it in person.

That letter...Wanda had tried not to know it, for the sake of both their privacy, but the words had echoed on and on in Steve's mind during those first days in Wakanda. He'd worried, that maybe he'd said it wrong or still been unfair to one or both of them. Now it echoed in Tony's mind - because Tony had read it again and again.

Tony still had that burner phone in his pocket. Steve didn't know that.

Funny how alike Tony and Steve were in some ways, from Wanda's mental view. Well, maybe not at all that surprising - didn't people who had just enough things in common and just enough things different clash the hardest?

Tony's mind felt like Steve's had only moments ago - full of thoughts flying in all direction, hard to focus on just one.

Finally, his thoughts stumbled to a halt at recalling something Steve had said in Siberia, when Tony'd been such a blaze of grief and anger he'd barely been able to think. "*I didn't know it was him.*"
"Don't bullshit me, Rogers, did you know?"

"Yes."

So what was it Steve had known? Tony couldn't let a question be, especially not one where the answer would strike so close. "What...was it Zola told you?"

Steve took a deep breath and glanced around. Seeing only Wanda, he told Tony the truth. "That night in Camp Lehigh, when Romanoff and I were on the run from Pierce after Fury's...murder. Zola was stalling so SHIELD could fire a missile off. He told us all about how Hydra had infiltrated SHIELD, and he said...something about how they could arrange accidents, to change history. There was a picture - the headline about Howard's death."

Tony frowned to himself. Did that mean...Steve had been telling the truth in Siberia? "So did you know it was Barnes, or not?"

Steve quickly turned away to hide the look on his face. "He was...not then, I didn't - damn it. Sorry..." He rubbed his eyes, and Wanda swallowed against the lump that tightened her own throat. "Zola talked about - showed us shots of the Winter Soldier, but...I didn't know then. Just that the Soldier'd shot Fury. I didn't know... who he really was."

Tony's stomach lurched. Fuck. "So Zola was fucking with you. Rubbing your nose in it without you even realizing it." Steve nodded. "But you said you did know, in Siberia."

Steve nodded. "By then...I should've figured it out. When Zemo played the tape...I knew what I'd done. I should've told you what I knew...but that'd mean figuring out who'd done it, and...I was afraid to. He'd implied it, Zola, I mean. After everything settled down after D.C., I should've faced it. You had a right to know. I'm sorry."

Now Tony was having trouble looking at Steve. He shrugged to hide his trembling. "No guarantee I'd have handled it any better than Siberia."

"You think? Me just...telling what I'd heard and what I...thought, how you reacted really would've been as bad as Zemo springing that video on you?"

"Yeah, okay, maybe not."

"I'm so sorry. That whole mess in Siberia was my fault."

Tony snorted, but his eyes were wet and his sarcastic voice was a little shaky. "Now you're laying it on a little thick, Rogers."

They both started to laugh, but it was the same sort of laugh they'd shared that night in the palace gymnasium, tinged with tears, grins hiding hurt and guilt at the same time. "I'm sorry for apologizing?" Steve offered, and that did it - they both doubled over, and Tony slapped Steve's back in what was suspiciously close to a hug.

"Where the hell was your sense of humor before?" Tony demanded, dropping onto the grass. Steve echoed him, the two men gazing at the activity down on the airstrip. "I mean, shit, this and the sex tape?"

Steve dropped his head onto his knees as he laughed...mostly laughed, anyway. "Hell, I swear I've got one. Tony, you met me at my worst. I was such a fucking basket case, then riding around on a flying aircraft carrier, chasing aliens who'd stolen the Tesseract that I'd lost everything trying to keep out of the wrong hands."
"And lecturing me about my language - but hey, you just dropped an F-bomb!"

They both started laughing again. "You are never gonna let me forget that; last team I was on, we always had reporters following us around, so we had to act respectable. For fuck's sake, Stark, I was in the USO and the Army! You really think I had virgin ears?"

"I kinda thought you had virgin everything."

Steve's laughter got higher-pitched, and Wanda had to bite the inside of her mouth to keep from giggling at them. "Oh, Stark, there's so much you assume about me. I'm ninety-nine, not dead - Aw, hell."

"What?"

"Y'know...I said almost the exact same thing to Nat...on the way to Camp Lehigh. Weird."

Tony looked befuddled. "Nat was quizzing you about your virginity?!!"

Steve spat as he burst back into laughter, while Tony was half-delighted, half-horrified. "Oh, worse than that, Stark, so much worse than that!"

"Oh, God, how much worse?"

"Nah, okay, not really worse. She just wanted to know where Captain America learned to steal a car."

"You stole a car? You?!!"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told her: Nazi Germany - and we were borrowing - well, the truck got blown up by the missile, so I guess we did steal it. Damn. I need to look the owner up and send them a check." Steve smiled wryly. "Guess I forgot a lot of things after that day."

"Gonna apologize out the wazoo to them too, aren't you? Here comes Captain America with a remorseful soliloquy; they'll love it!"

"You're making me sorrier for every conversation we've ever had, Tony." They both started laughing again, but trailed off more quickly. "I was livid after Ultron, that you hadn't told us, but even then, I knew about Howard and didn't tell you. Even before you gave me the shield back, I realized, I needed to hold myself to what I asked of you. That's why I pushed Sharon to let me tell you about Peggy."

"I know." Tony didn't look up, but put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "I'm grateful. I know what Peggy meant to you." He and Steve finally looked at each other, and Tony shook his head. "Not like you're the only guy on the team guilty of denial. Hell, I know all about that, running away from facing what anybody oughtta be able to figure out." He suddenly turned and looked at Wanda. "You gonna spy on us all day or just join the conversation?"

So Wanda did, walking over to flop on the grass next to them and saying sarcastically, "Oh, no, I've been made from fifty feet away. I thought I was getting good at lurking." Tony snorted; Steve grinned weakly. But Wanda didn't feel like letting Tony dodge where he'd been heading - and she might as well point a few things out. "You're both not the only Avengers guilty of denial. Pietro and I realized we'd signed on with Hydra in a matter of months, but we convinced ourselves our cause was just anyway. Denial's not a deadly sin, but maybe it ought to be."

Steve blinked. "Catholic?"
Wanda rolled her eyes. "Jewish, as if you needed more evidence of just how deep in denial we were. Lucky for us all Dr. Erskine recognized what Hydra was and got away from them."

Tony suddenly looked tired, gazing at his knees. "You were kids. And thanks to my denial of what my dad's old partner was doing with our business, you were orphans. 'Merchant of death' - it was all right in front of my face. Hell, and then there you were in the Raft, in a straitjacket with a collar I'd designed, and I still didn't do anything."

"No," she conceded. "But you didn't make the guards torture me either. You didn't make - whatever his name was - you didn't make him sell weapons to terrorists and Hydra."

He sighed heavily and looked at her, "No, but I turned a blind eye after my parents died."

"Funny, so did I." Both men looked startled, and she shrugged. "Yes, I was a teenager, but Pietro and I had time on our hands for years, with nothing better to do but read and share writings about how Sokovia was being treated and rail against global interference. We knew who Hydra was and what they'd done - to our own ancestors. But they promised us a chance to defend our country and challenge Tony Stark in that terrible new armor suit he'd invented. Some of the elders in the group, protesting against the foreign interests, they warned us against joining Strucker. We didn't listen."

"I had half the civilized world warning me about how my inventions were getting used," Tony countered. "And I was a hell of a long way out of my teens by the time I decided to do something about it."

Steve broke in, "Okay, both of you, stop it. Y'know, Tony had a point earlier about apologizing too much, even if it was mostly making fun of me." Tony puckered his lips at Steve. Wanda had to giggle. "What...what I told you after Lagos...and every time we've talked about stuff like this since this, it still holds. Our only options are to do something or do nothing. We can't ever change the past or bring back people we lost. And maybe..." he took a deep breath. "Maybe people we let down can't forgive us. Someone told me not too long ago, that's not up to us. Whether you get forgive is up to the person you hurt."

Sam. He told you that about Tony when you were writing the letter. She half-hoped Steve would say it, but he didn't. No, then again, that might be emotional blackmail. She knew Tony wasn't ready to forgive Steve for his silence about the murder of his parents, or Bucky for his role in it, however small that role had been.

Tony wasn't thinking about that, though, she suddenly realized. He was thinking that Wanda would never be able to forgive him for the hell he'd rained down on her life, for the path he'd put her on, for the family and freedom he'd taken from her. She couldn't help flinching; he looked up and met her eyes and knew she knew. Shit. "S-Steve?" she croaked. "Can Tony and I...talk alone?"

Steve blinked, but hesitated only a moment before saying, "Sure, okay," and getting up. "I'll see you back at the hospital. Tony...stop by before you go to the palace. Show me what they're working on for Rhodey."

"Will do," Tony murmured, distracted and nervous. As soon as Steve had gone (probably before he was entirely out of earshot), Tony blurted, "Wanda, you don't have to - "

" - I know I don't have to," she interrupted, putting a hand on his knee. "But if I want to, that's up to me, isn't it?"

Tony swallowed hard. It didn't relieve the pressure in his throat, so he swallowed again. Wanda politely looked away, but she couldn't turn off her mental senses that let her feel too much of what he
was feeling.

Tony knew it. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for you to hear."

"I know, and neither of us can help what I can hear." She waited, and he might not have had her power, but he knew she was waiting, so he forced himself to look at her, trembling. "Whatever part you played in the bomb that killed our parents...I forgive you. You didn't deserve what I did to you for it. Even if you had - " Now she had to break off and catch her breath. Tony wiped his eyes with one hand and squeezed her shoulder with the other. "...even...even if you had meant for Pokorny's troops to have those shells - and I doubt you did because he was fighting the Americans at the same time - you still wouldn't have deserved what I did to you in Strucker's base."

"C'mere, kid," Tony rasped, and for the second time in her life, Wanda found herself doing something that she'd never have predicted even a few years ago: hugging Tony Stark. She hid her face in his shoulder and pretended not to notice his hitched breathing. "It's okay. I'm - "

"- don't say you're over it. Not to me."

"Yeah, okay, fair point. Not fair, though; knowing if I'm lying's cheating." He patted her hair, and it was almost like the memory of being held by her father. What a strange thought, to be embracing this man she'd hated so passionately for so long, and arguing with him over whether either of them should forgive the other...and themselves.

"This is SHIELD? This is...not so bad," he'd said as the helicarrier appeared to make a rescue they'd all assumed was impossible. Maybe if he'd seen everything that had come after, if she'd told him all she'd seen and heard and felt and read in Tony Stark...maybe he wouldn't think this was so bad either.

"You gonna tell me you're over your parents?" Tony finally countered.

"Mm-mm." No, he was right; that would be a lie. "I guess I don't have to be over them to forgive you."

She hadn't meant to remind him of Bucky, but the thought flickered through his mind, and she felt him flinch mentally. He pushed it away by returning more willingly to the memory of what Wanda had done to his mind. She didn't want him to feel obligated to reciprocate, and he knew that, and considered whether this was just an effort at reciprocity...Nah. Maybe we could all just stand to let go of a few grudges. "Then I forgive you too." You thought I was a monster, and God knows I didn't give you much reason to think otherwise.

"Stop it! You're as bad as - " - Bucky. Oops. no. " - as Steve!"

"Aw, come on," Tony leaned back from her, seizing on mock-indignation to push all these uncomfortable emotions away. "I am not nearly as melodramatic as Cap!"

Wanda playfully shoved him. "Oh no? He may have jumped out of planes without parachutes, but did I ever see Captain America land with a chorus line and fireworks and background music?!"

"God, I am never gonna live that down - it was a special occasion, and I thought I dying at the time! And you've obviously never watched any of Cap's old USO reels." He deliberately called them to the forefront of his memory so she could see.

Oh...apparently, there had been chorus lines and fireworks and background music for Captain America. "Well, that just means I'm right, and you two are even more alike than I realized."
"Well, we're both probably offended by that idea."

*Not as much as you pretend to be,* she managed not to say aloud. For all Steve and Tony snarked and sniped and squabbled...both of them admired things about the other. Tony was flattered by the comparison, but he didn't want to admit it, and it wasn't so important that she'd cheat again with her power.

He sat with one arm slung around her, trying to find something like peace or closure, but always restless, unable to shed the weight on his conscience even after this. Well, he and Wanda had that much in common with each other. Tony didn't realize that, and he was uneasy, knowing she could pick up where his thoughts wandered.

*It can't be this easy with Steve and Barnes. Even if we tried...even if he asked...he's apologized. Hell, so has Barnes. I know it wasn't really him, but... "I'm sorry," he whispered aloud. I can't forgive them. Either of them.*

Wanda covered his hand with hers. "I know." She wanted to tell him it was okay, but that would be a lie. He wouldn't have a kind word for Bucky, and that angered her even though she knew she had no right to be angry at someone for what they thought or felt. Hell, it didn't even bother Bucky. Wanda had no right to reproach Tony Stark for being bitter towards the man he'd *seen* kill his parents less than two years ago. *How long has it taken me to forgive Stark for his name being on that shell? Twelve years, give or take? What evil did I commit just out of malice for him? What right to I have to tell Stark he should forgive Bucky or Steve?*

None. So she didn't try, no matter how badly she wanted to.

"I won't hurt him." *Even if I want to.* They both winced. "I promise."

"I love him." *Ohhh, that came out wrong!* Tony choked, and Wanda swatted him in the head. "No like that, you really are as bad as Rogers!"

"Well, shit, gimme a break, you're the one who just busted out with the declaration!"

"He's my friend," she amended it, but Tony still cringed. In his memories, she heard an echo, and they both cringed again. "Whether you want to be mine is up to you," she finished. "But don't ask me to choose. I know...what you feel. Whether I want to or not, I know it. But he understands me." *You two have more in common than you'll ever admit. You understand me too.* She didn't say that.

"I won't ask anyone to choose," Tony said. "I know you care about him. And I know it's...complicated. In every possible way," he added dryly, mentally adding on, *including in my own head. That's why I'm helping untangle the guy's brain and fix his arm when by all rights I should be avoiding anything to do with him. Go figure. "I need..." He hadn't meant to start talking out loud again. Eh, whatever, you'll hear me anyway. "I need to keep my brain under control. That's why that night in the gardens - not even that. I trashed the BARF system. Millions down the drain, but there's...somebody could use it on somebody else, to manipulate them. Torture them."

*Like I did to you.* She managed not to flinch. Luckily, he didn't notice.

"I figure he has a right to that much, to know what's going on in his own head, no matter what. And I can't find out the truth until I know who I'm talking to. Hell, even if I do..." He sighed and shrugged at her. *Even if it turns out he was completely robotified, I may still hate his guts. He killed them with his own hands.* "I'm sorry, kid, I can't deal. Guess you're the more mature one."
"I've had a dozen years to learn how to deal, and spent almost half of them working for Hydra because I wanted to hurt you so badly," she countered. "You've known for barely two years. I understand that even if Steve doesn't - Bucky understands!" *Shit, wrong thing to say.*

*Does that mean he'd be okay if I beat his ass once more for posterity - FUCK!* "Sorry, sorry," he grumbled, punching the ground.

She huffed. "You don't have to apologize for what you *think* to me, Stark. It's not your fault I can hear. So long as thinking is all you do, I won't say anything."

Tony hauled himself to his feet and held out a hand to pull her up. "C'mon. I need to get some scans of Rhodey to the medical techs."

She joined him, walking to the medical research center even though they could have gotten a ride from the airstrip. "How is he?"

"Good. Already pretty mobile, but with the implants Dr. Dahab's making, he should get everything back."

"I'm glad. And...how is Vision?"

She felt a rush of consternation from Stark. "He's good. He's, ah, he asks after you every time I come back."

That was odd. "Why didn't you tell me..." She saw the answer even before she finished the question.

"*You sure you don't just want me to tell Wanda, 'hey, by the way, Vision said hi and he hopes you're doing okay?'*"

"*Quite sure, Tony. Wanda has many reasons to think badly of me. I'd prefer not to remind her unless she wants to hear about me. If she asks, tell her then.*"

"I...I didn't realize."

"I told him some of...stuff we all talked about before."

So Vision knew she'd been having breakdowns and attacked Tony with her fingernails at least once. And the things she'd said about what Vision had said to her.

*Vision blames himself, for not telling you I'd had you confined, for what he said when you and Barton ran, for what the guards did. He thinks you won't ever forgive him.*

Tony didn't say it out loud. Wanda was relieved, because it meant she didn't have to answer.

*To Be Continued...*

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Coming Soon: The medical team is ready to test their treatment of Bucky, but Bucky isn't. He needs Tony's help first, and Tony finds his promise to Wanda and Steve put to the test.*
PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Twenty-Eight

WAKANDA…

After another week of Bucky's treatment, they were close. Almost close enough to be ready to put the triggers to the test again. But Bucky balked when Dr. Kelile wanted to eliminate the conditioning associated with "Sputnik."

"We should leave that one in," he insisted. "In case we've missed something, and you ever need to...stop me."

"That word's too common, especially if you're ever planning on being anywhere near public eye again," Wanda told him.

"You're not gonna need it," Steve agreed.

Bucky shot Steve a withering look. "Maybe not, but on the off-chance I am ever able to be in the public eye again, I doubt half the world's armies are going to take your words for it. Unless they know there's a failsafe, the order will still be to shoot me on sight or stick me in a box that runs current through my arm again."

Steve turned away, and Wanda managed not to snap at Bucky. *That was uncalled-for!* Sometimes it felt as if it wasn't enough for Bucky to punish himself; he took it further and punished everyone who cared for him, Steve above all others.

But where Bucky hid behind his shame of himself like a shield, Steve's distress could (eventually) draw him out of it. After an uncomfortable silence in front of Wanda and the doctors, Bucky softened. "Ask Stark. He's the closest to what we'll be up against if I ever get my day in court, everyone who's seen what I was capable of before. There's a reason he's watching, and it's not because he's over it. Nor reason for him to be," Bucky added grimly.
So the following day, King T'Challa arrived with Tony in tow. Tony gave Bucky a patented Stark Smirk and announced, "Sput."

Everyone lunged forward while Bucky jerked away.

"STARK!"

"Tony, no!"

"Hey!"

"Don't!"

"- tering succotash," Tony finished, grinning snidely at T'Challa, having just barely managed to dodge the king's hand attempting to block his mouth.

Steve just let out a furious, inarticulate growl, T'Challa drew breath for what was either a lecture or a threat, but Dr. Kelile pointed at the door and roared, "OUT! I will not allow this behavior towards my patient!"

T'Challa jerked Stark back towards the door, practically - well - sputtering in anger, but Bucky stepped forward. "Wait!"

Everyone hesitated and stared at him. To Wanda's complete disgust, both Tony's sneer and her view into his thoughts said that he'd expected nothing less.

You're well aware that Bucky needs your help, and you intend to have fun with it, to push as far as you possibly can for as long as you can get away with it.

"You promised!" she exploded at him.

Everyone except Tony stared at her in complete confusion – but Tony faltered. "I... I wasn't really gonna do it!" "I didn't hurt him."

"You promised," she hissed. "Do you really think you can just weasel around it by not touching him?"

His mind whirled with defensiveness – and creeping shame. Come on, she knew he wouldn't hurt Bucky, he was just fucking around, they were all making too much of it...right?

Before Tony could come up with a firm answer, T'Challa added a weight to the scale. "Remember that you're my guest, Mr. Stark," he purred in Tony's ear. "If you try anything like that again, you will be my guest no longer."

Tony's eyes darted briefly towards the king, and Wanda managed not to smirk herself as doubt darted through Stark's head. Did that mean that T'Challa would withdraw his promised assistance to Rhody? Would T'Challa be that petty?

If you judge T'Challa by your own base measure, Tony Stark, you will have to assume that he would be, Wanda thought, still fuming. How dare he make light of this after everything they'd said to each other?

To her disappointment, rather than let the standoff go on until Stark was forced to yield, Bucky broke in. "Stark. You know what I'm asking them for, and you know why. If this works, I want to come forward and let the ICC have their day with me, however it goes." Steve failed to hold back a flinch at hearing that. The naked pain on his face was as hard to look at as it was for Wanda to feel it inside
him. Now Tony's eyes darted towards Steve, partly with resentment, but this time also with a sympathy that he didn't want to admit to, even to himself.

All the effort, all the desperation and risk Steve Rogers had gone to, just to keep Bucky Barnes safe, and it was still possible it would all come to nothing, and the raging mobs or even a court of law might still tear his friend apart. As Steve had feared since before bringing Bucky out of cryo, Bucky was choosing to take that on.

And Tony couldn't help noticing the way Bucky avoided Steve's eyes as he went on, "I want Hydra out of my head, but we need a failsafe. In case we've missed something. We could keep that word."

Stark sighed and raised his hands at the medics, and this time, T'Challa let go, though he remained very close and poised to grab Tony again. "The words are the anchors of the conditioning. If you keep one, even a failsafe, you run the risk that the conditioning won't break down. You'd do better to implant something new." That last point, he directed at Dr. Kelile, who drew herself up (all five feet) in offense, but still looked quite intimidating. "Look, Doc, I'm not calling you Hydra. I know you don't torture people, but you couldn't have unwritten his programming without understanding how Hydra wrote it in the first place. A new failsafe might protect your patient better than any promises or even physical restraints, and if it's separate and apart from Hydra's stuff, then Hydra's stuff'll keep breaking down."

Tony Stark could be very persuasive when he was speaking in a rational manner and not acting like a complete bastard, Wanda had to admit. Dr. Kelile sighed and looked reluctantly at T'Challa, who stepped a little further from Stark. "Could this be done without injuring him?" the king asked the doctors.

There was no missing the hope in Bucky's eyes. Dr. Damaris was the one who chose to answer. "Yes. To trigger a reaction of unconsciousness is by far the simplest conditioning possible. In theory, we've known it could be done long before we saw Hydra's work on Sergeant Barnes."

"It's inhumane," Dr. Kelile muttered.

"It's really not, you know," Bucky said.

"Your judgment is clouded, James!" Dr. Kelile snapped, pointing at him. All four men actually jumped back. Steve and Tony, though, were the ones most affected, and from both of their minds, Wanda heard the echo: "Your judgment is askew, Cap!" "You've been brutalized and terrorized for so long that you have no conception of medical ethics or human decency any longer, particularly when it comes to yourself! To 'program' a human being to lose all of his agency and judgment at the sound of a word is an abomination, no matter how well-intentioned the reasons!"

Dr. Damaris stepped towards her, but spoke to Bucky. "I understand that you're frightened." Bucky looked down. "The last time you were free in the world, Zemo employed the entire United Nations in his scheme to hunt you down and bring you under his control again. There is no fate more terrifying. Now freedom feels close again, and it's natural that your fear is growing."

Bucky clutched the edge of the nearest chair and muttered, "Do you know what I did after Zemo got to me? I killed people...again. He told me to escape and meet him in Siberia, and I went after anybody that got in my way." He gestured at Steve, Tony, and T'Challa without looking at them. "Ask them how many people died. I don't even know, not really. I could've killed more. Might've killed all of them. He had to crash a fucking helicopter to stop me. 'f it happens again...I can't...please, I can't just take it on faith!"

T'Challa said quietly, "I understand. The threat Hydra poses to you, along with anyone else who has
access to your triggers, is unique in the world." He looked at Dr. Kelile, whose eyes seemed to almost plead with him.

*No, don't make me do this.*

"Is there a way that it could be done without using Hydra's conditioning, and so that there's no danger of any stranger discovering the world by accident?"

"A sequence, like they used. Different words," said Bucky. "You'd know them. Steve and Wanda and Stark. I could live with that."

Stark opened his mouth to say, *So could I,* but thought better of it and said nothing. Instead, he looked at Wanda and nodded. *Okay.*

"I don't want to do it," said Dr. Kelile.

T'Challa sighed. "I do not think anyone in this room exactly 'wants' to do it." Bucky gave him a wry, but very tired smile.

For all Dr. Kelile was sickened by the necessity, it didn't take her long. Steve didn't like it any more than she did, but he stayed for the whole procedure. Bucky and Wanda picked out the words:

"*Tablitsa.*" Table, in Russian.

"*Swobodza.*" Autonomy, in Sokovian.

"*Sketchbook.*" English.

Those three words were written down nowhere, kept solely inside their heads, three unrelated words in three different languages. After a few days of carefully working them into Bucky's mind, with no more pain or stress than any of the other procedures as far as Steve could tell, Dr. Kelile summoned King T'Challa and Tony. "We are ready to test them."

Steve told the words to Tony. "Memorize them," T'Challa ordered. "And do *not* use them as a joke, Stark, unless you truly want to test my good will."

Tony huffed, but to Steve's surprise, he looked from T'Challa to Wanda and said, "I won't. Relax, I won't do that."

T'Challa read the words as Bucky sat beside Steve on the bench in the bunker interrogation room. "*Tablitsa...swobodza...sketchbook.*"

It worked. Hearing those three words in a row, Bucky slumped into Steve's arms, out like a light, but breathing easily with a steady pulse.

When he awakened twenty minutes later, Bucky smiled at Dr. Kelile and said softly, "Thank you."

For a second, Steve thought the little spitfire of a medic might cry.

With that test done, Wanda searched Barnes' memory for over two hours, practically cuddling him in the process, but she didn't identify any other triggers of any kind buried in his brain. So whatever vague fears Bucky (and Tony) still harbored, it seemed Hydra had placed all their chips on ten phrases that would turn their prisoner into their master assassin, and one word that would knock him out if all else failed.
Ten days later, Tony found himself in the bunker again behind a glass wall. T’Challa was on the other side in his armor, all except the cat-hat of his. Steve was suited up, but also in black. He’d shied away from wearing the old Captain America uniform even now that the shield was back in his hands.

Dr. Damaris held the sheet in her hands with Hydra’s ten trigger words, behind Steve and T’Challa and four of T’Challa’s hot bodyguards.

Wanda and the rest of the Secret Avengers, even Romanoff, stood on the other side of the glass around Tony, along with the doctors monitoring Barnes’ brainwaves.

Now here they were, waiting to see if Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris and all of Wakanda’s resources were enough to cut Hydra’s strings. Tony couldn’t help thinking of Ultron.

Barnes was the only one on the other side of that glass not suited up. The guy was one tall statue of tension and fear. His one arm was wrapped around his stomach, his jaw clenched, his eyes avoiding everyone else’s - even Rogers, who looked more openly desperate. Tony doubted he’d need Wanda’s power to know what Rogers was thinking - or praying: Please let this have worked.

"When you’re ready," Dr. Damaris said.

Barnes swallowed hard, then nodded, a quick, sharp jerk of his head.

"Zhelaniye...Rshavyy...Semnadtsat..." Wanda flinched next to Tony. Oh shit. He could hear people breathing harder, and on the other side of the glass, Barnes was breathing harder.

"...Rassvet...Pech’...Devyat’...Dobroserdechnyy..." Barnes squeezed his eyes shut. Jesus, the guy was fucking terrified. Closer by, Tony could smell sweat and fear. He wanted out of here. He locked his joints, pretended it was his armor, and made himself rigid. "Vozrashcheniye na rodinu...Odin..." Barnes was hyperventilating. T’Challa was shifting his weight forward, ready for...whatever came next. "Gruzovoy vagon."

A noise escaped Wanda at Tony’s right - a sob. Barnes’ eyes snapped open.

Oh god oh god oh fuck...

Someone else near Tony gulped. Nobody moved.

Barnes looked at Dr. Damaris, eyes intense. The sheet trembled in her hands. "Soldat?" she asked warily. "Are you...ready to comply?"

Silence. People breathed raggedly...Barnes was trembling too. Tony couldn’t be sure of what might be going on now, inside of his head...

Barnes drew breath. The Dora Milaje tensed.

And Bucky Barnes smiled as he answered the doctor in a whisper: "Go to hell."

All around Tony, the tension snapped like a rubber band. People gasped, blurted out "yes!" and "thank God" and Wakandan words Tony didn’t know, but on the other side of the glass, as T’Challa grinned, James Buchanan Barnes swayed on his feet and began to sob.

Steve dropped the shield and lunged, pulling his friend into his arms, but it wasn’t enough to keep Barnes from sinking to his knees.
Tony had seen Barnes collapse once before, that day before all this treatment started and Barnes had nearly run Tony over while running out of the hospital. But it hadn't been like this, not shuddering himself apart with sobs that seemed to come from the marrow of his bones. It was giving Tony some kind of cognitive dissonance to see the Winter Soldier cry so hard.

Especially because, when Cap looked up at T'Challa and the medics, this was unmistakably the happiest Tony had ever seen Steve Rogers. He dashed the back of his hand across his own wet face, completely unashamed, and went back to rubbing Barnes' shoulders as he whispered to T'Challa, Kelile, and Damaris, "Thank you. Thank you."

Tony glanced around and kind of wished he hadn't. Not a dry eye in the room except me and the hot bodyguards. Well, maybe Romanoff, but even she was grinning like a proud parent, patting Wanda's shoulders and whispering her congratulations and praise. Well, yeah, fair enough, that was quite a coup Wanda had achieved, taking part in something like this. Too bad Vision wasn't here to see it.

Over Clint's shoulder, Wanda suddenly looked at Tony. He managed a thin smile. "Nice work, kid. See you all later."

He left the bunker. He was pretty sure Rogers and Barnes never even noticed.

In hindsight, the part of Bucky not completely fucking exhausted was a little embarrassed by how completely he'd broken down in front of the king of Wakanda and nearly all of the Avengers, but in the end, it just didn't matter that much.

"It's over," Steve kept whispering to him, rubbing his back.

After finally winding down, Bucky made everyone groan by asking, "Can you...do it one more time? Someone else? Just to be sure?"

But there was laughter too, and Romanoff raised a hand. "I'll give it a go."

"Best Russian pronunciation in the building," Clint agreed. "Can't hurt."

"As you wish," said T'Challa, though neither he nor Steve nor even the guards resumed the tension of the first test.

The words still scared Bucky. There was no getting around that. His insides clenched, his stomach lurched, his throat tightened with each passing one, but...different, because at the end, though she addressed him in Russian just as Karpov used to do, "Dobroye utro, Soldat. U menya yest' missiya dlya vas," he was able to answer.

"Yebat sebya," he retorted.

"Well, that was just rude!" she retorted in English and smirked as everyone started laughing in relief.

Bucky got up as the guards let Wanda into the secure room, and she nearly knocked him off his feet with a fierce hug. "Thank you," he murmured in her ear in Sokovian. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

He looked past her and switched to Wakandan, and repeated it to Dr. Kelile, Dr. Damaris, and King T'Challa, who beamed as they watched. "I never...I couldn't..." Never thought it was possible, couldn't imagine how...or even why... "Thank you."

"It is our honor," said T'Challa. "And our pleasure to see you free."
Free?

He made T'Challa, Steve, and Sam Wilson repeat the words to him again, once more. Just to be sure.

Free.

Part of him wanted to run out into the open and keep running, screaming at the sky. It's over, you fucking pieces of shit, OVER! It's undone, everything you put in me, all those years of your work, all those years of your merciless shit, it's GONE! I'm not yours anymore, I'll never be yours again, fuck you! Now I'm gonna find you all and make you fucking PAY FOR IT!

The other part of him wanted to crawl into the darkest corner of this bunker and not come out for...a long time. Cryo might no longer be an option, but some part of Bucky still wished it was. The world was still...too much. Too many people.

"Perhaps now he'll allow us to give him his left arm," one of the medics was saying over the buzzing in Bucky's ears.

Two arms again, yes...no, wait, no, too much...too risky, too fast...can't...can't...can't...

Steve and Wanda's hands tightened on him, and Dr. Damaris said, "Yes, but first let us allow him to rest. This process has been exhausting, even in success. It will keep. Would you prefer to stay in your accommodations here, or return to the palace with your friends?"

Bucky managed not to hide his face like a scared kid, but was relieved no end when Wanda answered for him. "We'll, ah, stay here a few more days, if it's not an inconvenience."

"It's not at all," T'Challa reassured her. "Come, my friends. The rest of us should return to the palace. It has been a long day."

The rest of the team got the message to give Bucky space, and said their farewells with murmurs of "congratulations" to Bucky and praise and amazement to T'Challa and the two doctors for their work. Bucky was dimly aware of Romanoff saying to Dr. Kelile what he had wanted to say but hadn't been able to articulate: "I never would've believed this was possible, and I know Hydra wouldn't either. You've defeated them on a deeper level than anyone ever has."

I should be the one saying that. Why aren't I saying that? I need to say more, I owe them more, what the hell's wrong with me?

Wanda's fingers ran through his hair, and he flinched. "I won't use my power without asking, you know that," she scolded gently.

It took him a couple of tries to get up and keep his feet under him. The Wakandans politely pretended not to notice how heavily he had to lean on Steve and Wanda just to walk, or how hard he was still shaking.

Why's this happening? It's over, why's this still happening?

"It'll pass," Wanda whispered. "Let's just get you home."

Where's home now? What do I do now?

Walking back to the house was a blur of sky and too-bright sun and trying desperately not to flinch at the sound of other voices or collapse from the weight of...of...what was left.
When they made it to his room, instead of his bed, Bucky just sank to the floor and huddled there, biting his knuckles. Steve held onto him, the source of gravity when the world was spinning of its axis, but when Wanda offered, "I can go and give you some space," Bucky's hand shot out and caught her arm. He didn't even know why, but she just said, "Okay," and sat down on his other side.

Why's this happening now? If it's over, why does it feel like this?

"It happens," she told him, combing her fingertips through his hair. "Often, when everything's over, that's when it happens. When we finally feel safe." There was dry humor in her voice. "I had to see a psychologist just to join the Avengers, so I learned this before I ever came to Wakanda. After Sokovia...for a while, it happened to me. It gets better."

*It happens when we finally feel safe.* Bucky looked up and met Steve's soft eyes. He couldn't see into minds like Wanda, but he knew Steve understood. Bucky could tell. Bucky let himself sink further against Steve side, and released Wanda's hand. "Thanks," he mumbled.

She patted him gently and left them alone.

"Did you ever?" he asked Steve. *Like this, just…crumble? Hide?*

"Mm-hm. Couple of times, actually. I don't think there's any one of us who hasn't, at least once. It's okay, Buck. I've got you." You can feel safe now. You can break now, if you want. You and me, we've both done it before. Back then. Back there. So far away, so long ago...but doesn't feel like it sometimes. You just wander, trying to figure out where you are and what the hell happened.

"There's still so much I don't remember."

Steve sighed. "I wish I could promise you'll get it back - or that you won't. But there's no way to know, if even Wanda and the doctors can't be sure."

"Dunno if I want it back or not."

"Yeah, I don't blame you, pal." Bucky shivered, and Steve pulled him tighter. "But...you remember what I told you on the helicarrier? I'm with you till the end of the line."

"Yeah. I remember...that's when I remembered, when it started to come back. And I...I..." "...couldn't. Not him, never him, what the hell am I doing - his face, did I do that?...Steve? No, what am I doing - wait, no, Steve, can't...hold on, hold on...with you till the end of the line...my name...is...?"

"I'm here. I've got you." When Bucky's eyes focused on him again, Steve went on, "I was remembering too, what you said to me before you said that, back in Brooklyn. I told you I could manage alone, after my mom died."

Bucky nodded. "I...yeah, I remember. I said...you didn't...have to."

"Right." This time, Bucky let Steve pull him up and half-drag him to bed, cover him and crawl in next to him. He remembered a smaller Steve, so tired, so weak from coughing and wheezing, nothing to burn in the stove, and the layers and layers of blankets and quilts that Bucky crawled under to be next to him and help keep him warm. "Neither do you. You made me believe that, and I never forgot it. It's gonna go both ways, all the way to the end of the line." A smaller Steve had grunted and mock-grumbled as Bucky staggered from sheer exhaustion after a long day, too tired to think about going to a dance hall, too tired to sit up at the kitchen table and eat supper, so Steve had hauled him to bed and tucked him in, practically spoon-fed him so he'd have something on his stomach and sat there, the last thing Bucky remembered as he drifted off.
"I r'member now," Bucky murmured. So damn tired and groggy he could barely form words, but this was important. "Didn't...after the river, didn't r'member that right away. Was a while, months. Couldn't...saw you 'n me in the museum and still couldn't...Steve, 'm sorry."

"Shhh. It's okay, Buck. I understand. Now it's gonna get better. Just give it time, and I'm gonna be with you. Let me look after you."

"Di'n't...happen..." Couldn't make the words work anymore, so he gave up. Didn't happen...those two years after the river, didn't happen like this...dunno why...guess I never felt safe before...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Bucky Barnes is free of Hydra's conditioning. Natasha defends the fugitive Avengers before the International Criminal Court, and T'Challa shocks the world when he moves to settle a very old account!

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

*Dobroye utro, Soldat. U menya yest' missiya dlya vas* - (Russian) "Good morning, Soldier, I have a mission for you."

*Yebat sebya* - (Russian) "Go fuck yourself."

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Psychologist/psychiatrist keeping an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and heading the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.
Chapter Summary

Bucky Barnes begins exploring life free of Hydra's conditioning. Natasha defends the fugitive Avengers before the International Criminal Court, and T'Challa shocks the world when he settles an old account.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to everyone for the amazing feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming! On a side note - my apologies to readers awaiting the next chapter of my Pacific Rim fic, Character & Fitness. The latest chapter was not at all to my liking, so it's undergoing a full rewrite. Also, for those who need a visual of Sam and Scott being chased by Bucky's disembodied arm, see the vine that inspired that scene here and on my Tumblr, 3Fluffies!

Canon Notes: This chapter draws heavily from the comic canon for Ramonda's history. Ironically, I wrote most of this material as the driving force behind Wakanda's entry into international politics before the first trailers for Black Panther even came out - so I was very pleased to see Nakia on the trail of human traffickers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

WAKANDA…

Late the following morning, Wanda was still tired. It'd been a rough night, with Bucky awakening himself (and Wanda and Steve) with violent nightmares more than once. Steve had come down to make breakfast and taken it back upstairs for Bucky, and Wanda had a feeling she wasn't going to see much of either of them. She and Steve both felt more wrung dry than triumphant today, and she knew that would hold double for Bucky.

It's not fair, she'd once ranted in those first months after Sokovia. Stark and his lawyers had assured her that she was safe from revenge or even being taken into legal custody within Avengers Compound and as part of their ranks, and the remnants of Sokovia's parliament had ground out the conclusion that they weren't going to prosecute her unless she returned to their soil. Only then had she really broken down, over Pietro, over Hydra, Ultron, the apocalypse she'd nearly brought about, all the death and horror that she had brought about. Why does it feel the worst right when we think it's finally over?

"Because that's the moment that you finally feel safe enough to let go everything you've been holding back," the therapist that Stark paid for had explained. "That's why it's called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Adrenaline keeps us going through a crisis, and keeps us focused when we think we're in danger, even when that lasts for years. When we know the threat is finally gone, often that's when we
There had been times that she’d thought she would never be an Avenger, not with the way she crumbled during hard or scary simulations and balked at using her power in a way that involved any risk at all. *Could hurt someone, could kill someone, already did, so many, can't can't can’t -*

Steve had been so patient with her. So had Natasha and Sam and Vision. Rhodey had been worried, when he'd worked with them, that it was just too much to handle, but he'd been kind about it, even in his thinking when she heard his doubts and he couldn't help it.

Now, the morning after Bucky's deliverance, she curled up on the little couch in front of the television, snoozing through movies and grumbling commentary at Food Network game shows (more fun to do in a group), and occasionally flipped to the international news to see if any new crisis had erupted.

She grinned to herself when a recap of the latest developments in the Thunderbolt Ross Scandal, as it was now known, included a brief shot of Ross in that lovely prison jumpsuit, being escorted from a police van into federal prison, never to be seen again. President Bunt had dodged the issue of whether he might pardon Ross, as he'd hinted early in the scandal, but he'd finally tweeted, "I don't pardon generals who smash old ladies' faces in nursing homes. Thunder Bolt can rot with other traitors like CNN". Of course, the American and international media were rather alarmed by Bunt threatening (again) to imprison journalists, but at least his position regarding Ross seemed pretty clear, if bloody-minded and crude, as usual.

Back before Ultron, when Bunt had just been a reality TV star with a lot of money and a big mouth who dabbled in politics, Wanda and Pietro had snidely compared Tony Stark to him. They'd debated, crowded around a television during long, dull off-hours with off-duty personnel whether Stark or Bunt would make a worse U.S. President. Wanda and Pietro had always sworn the world would be safer with Bunt.

*What a mess we made. I wonder how much of the climate of fear after Sokovia was the reason that Bunt was elected at all.*

Breaking News drew her attention from that bitter, guilty line of thought, and she found herself watching Natasha Romanoff testifying before the investigatory panel of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Wanda hadn't realized Natasha was going back to soon.

"Miss Romanoff, you are aware that this panel is currently discussing a possible case against former Avengers Wanda Maximoff and Steven Grant Rogers?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do you have any knowledge - or let's say - any theories as to their whereabouts at this moment?"

"I do, sir. However, for me to announce them here to the public would be highly irresponsible, both for me and for this panel, because any location of safe harbor for either of those people almost certainly is a safe harbor for other individuals who are not Avengers, who may be refugees and in extreme danger as a result of the inhumane way the Sokovia Accords are being implemented in many nations."

"I agree with Miss Romanoff," said one of the panelists. "Even if we do know their location, unless and until a potential defendant is charged, we have no right to command their presence."

"Let me rephrase. Given that this Court has not currently brought charges against Wanda Maximoff..."
Natasha said slowly, thoughtfully, "I believe there may be avenues of communication that I could try to open, although I would point out that the Court is already availing itself of the most likely means of communicating." She gestured directly at the camera filming her, and as it panned, Wanda could see many more cameras and reporters.

"What about the matter of James Buchanan Barnes?" asked the panelist. Wanda pulled her knees up under her chin. "Should we not also direct that appeal to him? He may not be an Avenger, but Captain America maintained his innocence in the Vienna bombing."

"James Barnes is no longer a suspect in the Vienna bombing, as I understand," Natasha said. "Though I'm afraid I don't know his current whereabouts either, and given that the coalition investigating the Vienna bombing initially gave orders to kill Barnes on sight without any opportunity to defend or exonerate himself, I wouldn't be surprised if he has more reservations about coming forward."

"Miss Romanoff, it is true, is it not, that before Barnes was exonerated from the Vienna attack, you helped him escape?"

"That's not quite how I'd put it, no. I helped Steve Rogers escape in search of the truth and what he believed was an imminent threat to international security. Barnes was with him." Her lips quirked. "There had already been injuries as a result of the orders to simply run Rogers and Barnes to the ground, and if you think Captain America was going to stand idly by when there was a tip that as many as five other Winter Soldiers entirely loyal to Hydra might be unleashed, you do not know the first thing about Steve Rogers."

A ripple of chatter went through the courtroom, even some laughter. "But what about the public threat posed by THE Winter Soldier, Miss Romanoff?" the prosecutor pressed. "Does that not concern you?"

"Of course. But as long as Rogers is with him, it concerns me a lot less. There's no escaping that 'the' Winter Soldier began as a prisoner of war who was Steve Rogers' best friend and a loyal American serviceman. Steve Rogers reached him in Washington through whatever Hydra did to his mind, and the world saw him do it again in Berlin. As it turns out, we now know that the warning they tried to give about who was really behind the Vienna bombing was entirely accurate."

The woman apparently running the panel raised a hand. "In any case, neither the Avengers nor James Barnes are under investigation by this Court for events related to the Vienna bombing. We are also not empowered to order or even ask Miss Romanoff to assist in the apprehension of anyone. Let's simplify this discussion with this statement for the record: The International Criminal Court currently is examining the cases of Wanda Jaelle Maximoff, Steven Grant Rogers, and James Buchanan Barnes. Their direct testimony will greatly influence whether this Court elects to bring charges against them for crimes against humanity or other crimes within the jurisdiction of this Court. We therefore request that they present themselves at the earliest opportunity, and will take all possible action to ensure their safety and access to legal counsel during the examination process."

After a few more questions for Natasha, the panel's session adjourned, but Wanda wasn't really paying attention anymore.

Steve was snoring like a buzz saw late in the afternoon when Bucky came downstairs. He found
Wanda curled up on the couch practicing her Wakandan. "Morning...maybe."

She grinned. "You're just in time for supper, so it's not quite morning anymore." Bucky leaned against the wall while she puttered around figuring out what to fix (that could reheat when Steve finally woke up).

Bucky felt...lighter, now that he'd slept, nightmares notwithstanding. He doubted that last night's breakdown would be the only one in the wake of getting Hydra out of his head, but maybe those episodes would start to lessen as Wanda had implied.

Steve's snores echoed even louder into the kitchen, and Wanda giggled as Bucky shook his head. "I thought that had to be both of you, but I think it's just him."

Bucky grinned. "Nope, that's all him."

"Oh?" she teased. "Are you sure?"

"I don't snore anymore..." Well, actually it got less funny when he thought about it. But he made himself shrug and kept his voice light. "It's something they did. You can't have a stealth assassin who snores. They did a lot of surgery on me over the years." He tried to keep his mind off the list of the surgical shit he knew of that Hydra's done to achieve "optimal performance" or whatever the hell they'd called it, but her eyes widened, and she put her spoon down to come around the counter and hug him. "It's okay, kid. Out of all the shit they left me to deal with, that's nowhere close to the worst."

"That doesn't make it all right," Wanda growled, and to his relief, she wasn't broken up on his behalf this time. She patted him and let go, returning to her cooking. "Bastards. Princess Shuri called earlier today, just to say she's very happy for you. Dr. Dahab says you can come back to the hospital research center any time to have your arm fitted, and you can stay there if you're more comfortable than in the palace."

Bucky pondered it as she brought two plates to the table. "The palace... are there a lot of people?"

Wanda nodded reluctantly. He sighed. "Steve's friends are all there, though."

"They understand. They don't blame you and neither does King T'Challa." They finished eating in comfortable silence, and Steve finally stopped snoring and came down the stairs before they were done.

"I don't suppose you saved me any?"

"A mouthful or two," said Wanda. "It might still be warm."

Steve waved her to stay in her seat and finished, and shuffled into the kitchen, scratching at his rumpled hair. "Aw, hell, it's dinnertime?"

Wanda and Bucky laughed.

BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER...

They did settle on freeing up the bungalow and returning to the medical research center for the fitting of Bucky's arm. Bucky was a little apprehensive when Dr. Dahab remarked that Tony Stark had given some suggestions for the design, though he figured all involved would be smart enough to check, and Stark wouldn't be stupid enough to try outright sabotage. A Wakandan team was also preparing some implants that would hopefully cure War Machine's spinal injuries, so Stark had every
reason in the world to play nice.

The Wakandan arm matched the physique, weight, and muscle structure of Bucky's flesh arm, but the plates and sections were sleeker, and the metal far less reflective and obvious. "The sensory input will be closer to natural nerves, but you will be capable of disabling the input after damage occurs," Dr. Dahab said proudly.

The first stages weren't very pleasant: the surgeons had to remove nearly all of the remnants of the old Hydra arm, including the ones anchored in bone and muscle, for replacement with the vibranium components. But Dr. Kelile's team had come up with plenty of sedatives and painkillers that could handle even supersoldier metabolism, so there was no need for Wanda to reprise her role as Bucky's anesthesiologist. She still stayed close, which made Bucky (and probably everybody else) feel more at ease.

He woke up to the sound of Steve snoring and had just enough presence of mind to smile to himself before drifting off again.

A few days later, Dr. Dahab's team had Bucky in a private room - semi-private, since they let the rest of Steve's friends watch - to work on calibrating the arm. At first it was just Clint and Scott, and Bucky had the feeling they were mostly there for Steve and Wanda. Still, they were friendly and casual with Bucky. "That's kind of creepy," said Scott, eyeing the arm on the stand.

"You may not wish to watch further, then, Mr. Lang," said Dr. Dahab slyly. "Please move your fingers, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky blinked. "What?" But at Dr. Dahab's encouraging nod, he tried...and his fingers did move...on the arm still entirely detached from his body. "What the..."

"Woooooa," Clint leaned forward, fascinated, while Scott leaned away. "That's...awesome!"

"Nahhh, I don't like," said Scott. Wanda just laughed as he backed toward the door.

"Well, if you're gonna wimp out, track down Sam, would you? He's gonna want to see this - if that's okay, that is," Steve amended it, looking at Dr. Dahab.

"Of course, he is welcome to observe," said Dr. Dahab, looking smug. "While we don't currently employ sensory input to his wing pack, the capability does exist. Perhaps upon seeing this, he'll be interested."

"Stark's gonna be chartreuse with envy," breathed Clint. "He's not even close to that level of sensory input in his suits."

"He did express some covetousness, once he saw the extent of the connection we can create," said Dr. Dahab, and nearly all of them laughed at the understatement.

Bucky backed away curiously, but found he could still move the hand. "How far away do I have to be?"

"Quite far before the motion signal degrades. You'll know when it does - you'll feel a numbing and tingling sensation in the limb just as you would if your nervous input to your right hand was affected."

Bucky was soon turning his wrist in the rest, and made Wanda shriek and jump by flipping the arm off its post altogether and discovering that, with a little practice, he could make it crawl on his fingers. "This is like a horror movie," Steve laughed.
Then Bucky heard Wilson's voice outside, and grinned wickedly. Most of the Wakandans began to laugh, but Dr. Kelile just heaved a sigh. "They always want to do that."

"It is a right of passage for patients receiving prosthetic limbs," Dr. Dahab retorted, and the room quieted to stifled snickers and "shh!" among Wakandans and Westerners alike as Sam came in.

"How's it going? Ooh," Sam tilted his head at the arm resting innocently on the table. "Okay, that is a little creepy."

"You think?" Clint remarked, and Dr. Dahab fiddled on his tablet while Dr. Kelile tried and failed to not grin.

Bucky waited until Sam was only half-paying attention, then waggled his fingers. Sam frowned and looked at the hand. "Did that thing just move on its own?"

"Huh?" Bucky said.

Dr. Dahab shrugged, all businesslike. "In the calibration process, spontaneous movement is possible, Airman Wilson."

"Oh, okay."

Once he had his back turned and was talking to Clint and Wanda, Bucky tiptoed (tipfingered?) the arm up behind him and poked him in the hip. Sam turned and jumped a mile. "What the - Rogers?!"

Steve affected innocence that would fool nobody if he'd actually done it. "I didn't do anything!"

"Cap, didn't anybody teach you not to play around with really, damn expensive prostheses?" Sam demanded.

"I'm afraid it's a side effect of men being in the same room as one," said Dr. Kelile. Wanda broke character and started giggling.

Scott peered back into the room just in time for Sam to turn around and see that Bucky's detached hand was now flipping him off. "What the - "

"Oh, they do that sometimes, the sentient limbs. They get their own personality," said Dr. Dahab. Bucky and Steve and Clint both lost it and burst out laughing, and Sam and Scott were still gaping at Dahab when Bucky decided to go for broke.

All conscious awareness Sam Wilson or Scott Lang might have had that they were being played vanished in the face of a disembodied metal arm scuttling like a crab across the table then leaping at them. Both bolted, and debate raged for years over which of them let out the highest-pitch scream.

BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA...

Another international news event brought activity at the research center and the palace to an abrupt halt the next day when the Black Panther was sighted in South Africa. Steve assumed it was an official Avengers action until he got very confused and alarmed calls from Tony.

"What the hell's T'Challa doing?!"

"Wait...you don't know?" Steve croaked.

"Rogers, c'mon, I've got the Enhanced Affairs Committee screaming bloody murder that he's
"Tony, I swear, I didn't know anything about it until it hit the news just now!" Steve insisted. Seeing some of the Wakandans glancing his way, he didn't dare say any more. "I'm sorry, I don't know anything."

"Dammit." Tony hung up.

The Black Panther had back-up. From a distance, they resembled any commandos, clad in black and taking out the compound's defenses, but Steve had seen enough by now of how the Dora Milaje moved. *Why's he doing this alone? What could possibly be worth the international incident?* "What the hell is in there?" he murmured as the rest of the Secret Avengers clustered around him.

"Vibranium?" suggested Scott.

Bucky shook his head, watching the activity on the screen with narrowed eyes. "Not vibranium. They don't take paramilitary action even for theft of their goods. I don't think the question is what is in there. I think the question is who."


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**DEVIL'S PEAK, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA**

The compound of Anton Pretorius was heavily reinforced and defended, possibly the most armed private estate in South Africa, for good reason. Anton Pretorius had many enemies at home and abroad, as one of the wealthiest, most influential men in South African politics. His influence stemmed from the ugliest of motives: his rhetoric was a staple in white supremacist organizations around the world, and motivated some of the vilest attacks on black men, women, and children in and beyond Africa. In recent years, he'd developed quite the following in the so-called "alt-right" of the United States.

No doubt President Bunt would have a thing or two to say about King T'Challa's assault.

T'Challa did not, as the Americans would say, have any fucks to give.

After a careful investigation, he and Shuri and Jakarra as well as Wakanda's best detectives had all come to the same conclusion: Pretorius had stolen from Wakanda. This act would not go unanswered, even thirty years later.

T'Challa didn't even dare formally announce an heir before embarking on his attack, for fear of tipping Pretorius and his sympathizers off. Instead, he gave his written instructions to Shuri and W'Kabi for the great tournament to occur in the even that T'Challa didn't survive, so a new king (or queen) could be bloodlessly chosen.

It was irresponsible to do this. But T'Challa simply could not justify waiting for even a minute longer than absolutely necessary.

Half of the Dora Milaje accompanied him to lead the attack and defend him. The rest stayed to defend Shuri, Jakarra, and the country.

T'Challa would have to gain entry fast to reach his goal, and he and his task force swept into the underground tunnels, sending Pretorius' mercenary guards scattering like sheep before Pretorius himself was even aware of the assault.
The timing was deliberate. Pretorius himself was not there, though T'Challa would eagerly await that reckoning. But the guards were on the highest alert when he was at home, and T'Challa would not risk an innocent life.

With communications severed, by the time Pretorius knew what was in progress and could think to give his men any instructions, it was already too late.

The Dora Milaje and T'Challa's trusted warriors secured the deepest bunkers, and found many prisoners, terrified innocents of all ages. T'Challa would see them all rescued and safely returned to their homes - if their homes still existed, but he'd come for one in particular.

They found her in a section of the bunker that obscenely resembled a harem, among many other women, all of them black, held for service to Pretorius and his allies' gruesome fetishes. T'Challa kept his guard up when he and the Dora Milaje entered, although the captives were terrified and cowered wherever they could.

Only one, the eldest, her hair white, her face hollow with long fear and suffering, moved forward. "T'Chaka?"

T'Challa's heart sank. He should not have assumed she would know.

He removed his helmet, and the woman sank to her knees. "No, Stepfather. I am T'Challa. I've come to bring you home."

Ramonda barely resembled the woman T'Challa remembered as his surrogate mother when Shuri and Jakarra had been small, when his father had been happiest. She'd been proud and passionate, undeniably lovely. Now she was small and aged, and she shivered as she covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

T'Challa handed his helmet to Ayo and gathered her into his arms. To the other women, he announced, "Do not be frightened. If you wish to leave this place, then come with us. We'll see you all safely returned to your homes, or if you have none where you feel safe, we will find new homes for you. The man who owns this house will answer for what he's done."

No one chose to stay.

The local police forces and media were gathering at the perimeter set by T'Challa's team, but could do little more than bellow their outrage at the "unjustified invasion" while better-equipped officials debated what to do.

That shouted outrage gradually fell silent as T'Challa emerged carrying his stepmother in his arms, followed by a parade of dazed, frightened men, women, and children who were unmistakably captives and slaves. By the time his team had boarded their helicopters to return to Wakanda with the refugees, all of the local authorities had wandered away.

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK...

Tony, Vision, and Rhodey were still desperately bullshitting to the hysterical UN and a bunch of reporters who insisted T'Challa was the next Saddam Hussein and South Africa was the next Kuwait when the Black Panther was captured on the cameras emerging from Anton Pretorius's compound.

As in South Africa, silence settled, heavy and stunned, on the room full of diplomats. It was Rhodey who broke it, staring at the woman wrapped in a blanket in T'Challa's arms. "What in the name of God was going on in there?"
A girl behind the king and his guards stumbled and fell, losing her grip on the blanket she was wearing. Underneath, she was nearly naked - and Tony very much doubted she was through puberty. "I think we know exactly what was going on in there," he growled. "And this is speculation, ladies and gentlemen, but I'll go out on a limb and guess that at least one of those people is a Wakandan citizen. Beyond that, I think we could all stand to calm down a little and wait to learn the facts before we start putting together a peacekeeping force or demanding Avengers intervention. So, I'm gonna just, ya know, go - " He made a show of starting for the door and then spinning back around. "Actually, let me change that: I'm gonna give the Wakandan ambassador a call and ask if there's anything I can do to help those prisoners."

To an eruption of shouted questions and roars of approval, Tony sauntered for the doors. Vision and Rhodey followed.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Shuri and Jakarra are left reeling as all they believed of their mother is turned upside down. A stunned world reacts to the rescue of Queen Mother Ramonda, and learns the wrath of the Black Panther is a force to be reckoned with!

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Dahab:** Chief of medical technology research, doctor and engineer. Age 50ish, six-foot-three, wears wire-rimmed glasses. Specializes in uses of vibranium for medical purposes (his job is part of what Shuri does in the Black Panther movie and prelude comics.)

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**President Ronald Bunt:** President of the United States, elected in 2016. Likes to Twitter and play golf and shoot his mouth off. No, he's not based on anyone in the Real World. No, really.
Thirty

Chapter Summary

Shuri and Jakarra are left reeling as all they believed of their mother is turned upside down. A stunned world reacts to the rescue of Queen Mother Ramonda and learns the wrath of the Black Panther is a force to be reckoned with!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Dear Readers, my sincerest apologies for the long wait for this update. Work has been an absolute beast, and I've been too completely exhausted to do more than go to work, come home, feed myself, and sleep. Hopefully it's quieting down enough. But I have a slew of updates for your reading pleasure, and I hope you enjoy!

Canon Notes: These next few chapters continue my own twist on Ramonda's storyline from the comics, trying to blend it in with the events of the MCU. Hope you like!

Trigger Warning: There is general mention of sexual assault and slavery in these next few chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

Shuri of Wakanda didn't fear that tears would make her weak. She knew better. The men and women of Wakanda knew better. In times of great distress, to weep was no shame on any woman or man, though a prince or a princess might try to maintain their calm for the sake of their people.

Shuri and Jakarra were entirely alone when they saw T'Challa emerge from Anton Pretorius's compound with the white-haired woman in his arms. There was no need for them to worry about decorum or their public image to their people.

Jakarra burst into deep, heaving sobs and doubled over, pulled to collapse by some combination of elation, grief, and rage. Shuri put her hand on his back and waited for the burning chemical mixture of emotions scorching inside her own chest to explode out in tears.

It didn't. A part of her wanted to scream and howl like a child in a temper, to tear the room apart in a tantrum like she'd done in those first years after her mother had deserted – no…no, she didn't abandon us. She didn't desert our father. They took her, took her…

She stayed on the floor of the private royal suite with her brother and let him give voice to both their pain. She should do the same. When their mother – Mothermothermother! – returned, they would need to be calm and strong for her, to ease her pain and her shock. Shuri couldn't afford to collapse once Ramonda – Mother – was home. She should let it out now, run into the private gardens and
turn the disruption fields as high as they would go and just scream, scream at the heavens and at the
gods, how dare you, HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO HER!

Were the gods to blame, or…Pretorius. Anton Pretorius. Shuri and Jakarra hadn't known his name
until T’Challa's intelligence ministers brought it to them as their prime suspect. They'd been little
when their mother had returned to her native land to speak for the end of apartheid. Shuri had been
only five, Jakarra had been eight, and T’Challa eleven when their father, struggling to conceal his
own emotions, had explained to them that their mother had decided not to return.

T’Chaka had never known. He hadn't lived to learn that his wife hadn't deserted him and Wakanda
for another man.

Shuri released her brother and stumbled to her feet like a drunken woman, flailing until she got her
hands to the nearest palm messenger. The voice of the aide on duty was shaky, as all of Wakanda
was shaken. "Y-your orders, my princess?"

"What is the king's expected time of arrival? How far away is my mother?"

"Eight hours, assuming they fly…directly."

Assuming this Pretorius didn't retaliate, assuming no one waylaid them, assuming no one fired on
them, it was a long flight, and there were so many captives…Shuri began seeing spots in her vision
and realized she was hyperventilating. "Defenses – what defenses do they have – the flight - "

"W’Kabi has the report, my lady. Do you wish to see him?"

"Yes. Yes, tell him to bring it. I want to know." If the defenses for the squadron of helicopters were
insufficient, Shuri would order more. Secrecy be damned. That's my mother. My mother, my queen,
slandered all my life as a deserter. We're bringing her home. And this Pretorius…whoever he is…
he'll pay.

W’Kabi didn't bat an eye at Shuri or Jakarra's emotional state, and if Shuri could have spared any
emotions from the turmoil consuming her soul, she'd have been grateful. As W’Kabi briskly
explained the defenses for the helicopter squadron that had carried the assault force to Pretorius'
compound and now carried T’Challa and the rescued captives - and Shuri's mother - back to
Wakanda, a little of Shuri's initial panic began to ease.

They had planned ahead. They had known this operation would quickly enter the public eye and
inspire many reactions in South Africa and the West - especially among the whites. This Pretorius
had many wealthy and powerful friends, and very few would have the moral fiber to be turned off by
the discovery that he was keeping dozens of innocent people captive in his home.

"The open forum of public opinion can be turned to our advantage," said W’Kabi. "And we're
making use of it now. Most governments who aren't consumed by corruption will decline to
condemn a rescue operation for our abducted queen, and even those that are corrupt will have
difficulty putting a positive spin on sexual slavery and sadism."

Shuri saw spots again, and W’Kabi moved towards her. "I beg your pardon, my princess, I wasn't
thinking when I said that."

"Was she - did he?" muttered Jakarra.

"I don't know," W’Kabi admitted. "It may be that she was just a prize, and that it was the younger
captives who received the worst treatment - not to say that is any great consolation."
Shuri pawed at W'Kabi's tablet, searching not for the report of the armaments carried by the squadron, but of the passengers. "Her condition, how is she?"

"There's little detail thus far, but none of the captives are reported as requiring emergency medical assistance. I'm certain the plans would have changed if her life was in danger." W'Kabi said. He glanced at the door, looking a little out of his depth. He was only T'Challa's age, and while they were friends, W'Kabi was an only child, uncertain of how to deal with the king's brother and sister in the throes of emotional breakdown. "Minister Subira is also here, offering her...assistance."

Subira, who'd stepped in as surrogate parent to the king's children when they were suddenly motherless. That thought appealed, but...but my mother isn't gone. She's coming back. Subira was an elder, more of an age to be grandmother than mother to Shuri and her brothers. She, unlike W'Kabi, had seen the children of T'Chakka at their worst.

Jakarra was the one who answered. "Yes, send her in."

Subira marched in, as brisk as W'Kabi had been, but as soon as W'Kabi had gone, she dispensed with all court formality and went to sit between Shuri and Jakarra. "Don't bother with blame and questions today," she told them. "There will be time. She's safe now."

At last, at the touch of Subira's wrinkled hand, the hard shell that had been holding the storm inside of Shuri broke, and a deep, wracking sob rose out of her. She pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes and let the next sob come, and the next, and the next, some great purge of everything that had exploded to life in her soul, too much too fast to process.

Jakarra moved around Subira and came to sit on Shuri's left side, and as she'd done with him, she let him put an arm around her while she wept. For most of their lives, T'Challa had taken this position with them, especially in their youth, the wise elder brother who was not the son of Ramonda the Deserter - liarsliarsliars! But from time to time, Shuri and Jakarra had allowed themselves to comfort and be comforted by each other. Such as those dark first days after T'Chaka had died abroad, and T'Challa was in the wind, pursuing the man he thought to be the killer.

"I don't know what to do," she finally admitted. She wanted to run from the palace and arm herself. She wanted to fight. She wanted to find this man, Pretorius, stake him to the ground by his hands and feet and take him apart, piece by piece for thirty years. Perhaps she might gather the families of the other captives, those men, women, and children who'd been visible stumbling and shivering behind T'Challa and Shuri's mother, dazed by the brilliance of the sunlight. She would give each of them a blade and invite them to take back the pieces of their hearts and souls that Pretorius had taken from them.

"Not that now," said Subira, as if she could see what Shuri was thinking. Maybe it was all too predictable. T'Challa had done the same. Who didn't want to avenge a wrong done to their mother or father? "She'll need you with her when she returns. Whatever was done to her, she must also see her children again, knowing she was unable to raise you herself. That will be hard for her. None of you will heal in a day."

Thirty years...but in a way, Shuri felt that this day had regressed her, and she was five years old again, too confused and angry and hurt to make sense of a huge, strange world, unable to think of anything but, "I want my mother."

Had Shuri said that aloud? Subira put a hand on her shoulder. "She's coming, child. She's coming."

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**BIRNIN ZANA MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, WAKANDA**
All hell had broken loose in the medical research center. Work on Bucky's arm had stopped, and there was no need to guess why. All non-essential work had come to a screeching halt, and the senior medics kept having to bark at their subordinates to keep them focused on whatever work was essential.

Bucky and the Avengers took the hint; they kept to the doorway of the room where Dr. Dahab had been calibrating Bucky's arm and stayed out of everyone's way. (Well, Bucky and Sam worried that they'd have to sit on Steve.)

Wanda and Clint had the best command of Wakandan after eighteen months, and Wanda had her power advantage, even though they weren't close enough to see the drama playing out on the screens in the workers' stations. And they all knew it meant something big when gasps and cries of shock and disbelief rang out, and a few of the older Wakandans looked like they might burst into tears.

Bucky could only just make out that Black Panther had reemerged from the building his team had attacked, and he'd brought a large number of prisoners out with him, including one he was carrying in his arms. Dazed whispers and speculation rippled through the medics, technicians, and orderlies, and among the chatter, again and again, Bucky heard a name: "Ramonda!"

"Ramonda?" the younger staff whispered.

He felt Wanda suck in her breath as she watched the tableau over his shoulder. "Who's Ramonda?"

Scott whispered.

"I think...my God," Wanda murmured. "She was queen here. She was mother of Princess Shuri and Prince Jakarra. Years ago, she disappeared. They thought she'd...left them."

A rather ashen security officer eventually came to them. "Avengers, we must ask that you accompany us back to the palace. Wakanda is under the highest security alert, and my king wishes you to be at the safest location."

"Yes, sir," said Steve, though he looked at Bucky. Bucky just nodded. Whatever his own anxiety about being at the center of Wakandan government, he couldn't very well argue.

Bucky didn't look out the windows during the shuttle flight to the center of the city, and was relieved that Steve and the others (consciously or not, it was a toss-up) clustered around him on the short walk to the handsome guest house that wasn't connected to the main palace buildings on the well-guarded grounds.

"You can't see through the fence from the outside," Steve explained when Bucky cringed away at the sight of it. "They've got all kinds of fields generated by the vibranium. It's safe."

Clint broke off from the group towards another house. "They're probably gonna want us to stay inside, so I'm gonna go stick with Laura and the kids. I'll see you guys later."

"No problem," said Steve.

"I'll go with you," said Scott, and followed him. The guards let them pass, but one of them stopped Clint and said something to him. Clint and Scott nodded and hurried on.

The guards outside the Avengers' house stepped towards them as they approached. "Captain, the palace orders are that all residents and guests remain indoors now until the alert is lifted."

"I understand," Steve said. "Thank you." He and Wanda ushered Bucky inside. "This place has about a half-dozen bedrooms, so pick whichever one you want."
"Except mine!" added Sam.

"Except Sam's," Steve amended it, rolling his eyes. "You can have mine if you want."

"Sam's still mad that you made him scream like a little girl," said Wanda, giving him a saucy grin. She started for the television, then caught herself. "Oh - I was going to see if there was news, but it's probably live." She looked at Bucky. "I can turn it on in my room if you want."

Bucky hesitated, then took a deep breath against his instinctive retreat from all media. *The words are gone. Even if they do try, it's gone. We did it six times. It's gone. It's over. "You don't have to watch TV, you know. Whatever's happened, it sounds pretty unpleasant if King T'Challa was willing to invade Cape Town over it," said Steve.*

Bucky swallowed hard and shook his head. "No, it's - it's okay. I'm curious too," he said, forcing a smile. *They can't get to me now, not this way. I'm getting the bastards out of my head, in every way. Even the stuff that was only ever in my own head.* Wanda pursed her lips, but turned the TV on to the local Wakandan channel and added English subtitles.

"*There is no official statement yet from the palace, except to confirm that His Highness the King took part in a rescue mission today in Cape Town, and liberated approximately eighty prisoners from the compound of South African white supremacist Anton Pretorius.*"

Not all that unlike western media, the Wakandan reporters were re-playing the most dramatic video clips again and again - namely the Black Panther and his companions scaling the walls and making short work of the guards at the compound, then emerging some time later with a tragically small, white-haired woman cradled in the king's arms, followed by a long train of other captives.

The Wakandan reporters didn't repeat the rumors that the Avengers had heard back at the medical center, that the woman T'Challa had carried out of the compound was a former Wakandan queen. On the other hand, the international media had already tried to place her from the brief shots they had of her face, and several had jumped on that theory.

Stark called Steve twice, but Steve repeated the official line that was - at least from his perspective - true: "Tony, I probably know less than you do at this point. People are shaken up, we're staying out of the way, and T'Challa and his family have a hundred things more important to deal with right now than field questions from me, so I'm not asking."

"*Yeah, I get that. We were expecting a press conference from the asshole whose compound that is, but he canceled at the last minute, now he's gone to ground. But some of his fans have a LOT to say - the bastard's a white supremacist, an old pro-apartheid holdout.*"

"God almighty," Steve muttered.

The international coverage wasn't confined to the speculation about Black Panther. Pro-Accords factions in the US and other governments were all holding press conference, ranting and railing that King T'Challa's "illegal invasion of South Africa" was further proof that enhanced individuals couldn't be trusted to abide by the law. Senator Kelly in the US huffed and puffed that "if King T'Challa thought there were people being held against their will by Mr. Pretorius, there are legal channels to make a complaint!" Graydon Creed and his Friends of Humanity thugs were not so restrained, and were calling on President Bunt to declare Wakanda a rogue state and sign a series of executive orders that would only strengthen the powers allowing US officials to detain people on suspicion of being enhanced.

President Bunt finally turned up at a rally somewhere in the midwest and bellowed, "*Captain*
America needs to show his face again! His country needs him to bring rogue actors like T'Challa under control, and if T'Challa thinks he can keep harassing law-abiding citizens, he needs to be dealt with!

"Lock him up! Lock him up!" the crowd chanted.

"Nothing changes," Steve muttered.

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EN ROUTE TO WAKANDA

Ramonda said nothing for the first few hours of the flight, and T'Challa didn't try to press her. His mind spun with images of what these last thirty years must have been like until he forced himself to stop thinking about it (rather than lose his mind and put his fist through the window). But he remained at Ramonda's side while the medic on board carefully examined her.

"My queen mother is in reasonably good health," the doctor concluded. "Once back home, rest and peace will be all she needs to make a full physical recovery."

T'Challa didn't miss the qualification: physical recovery. What recovery could there be for thirty years of...that?

Ramonda hadn't looked at him since they left the bunker underground, but after the doctor bowed and withdrew to the front of the helicopter's cabin, she met T'Challa's eyes. "They told me...a year ago...they told me T'Chaka was dead."

T'Challa sighed. Of course, this had to happen. He put a hand on hers and pretended not to notice how badly her hand was scarred. "I'm so sorry. It's true. There was a bombing in Vienna, at a summit for the signing of - of an international treaty that we had chosen to join. He didn't suffer," he quickly tried to reassure her. "I was with him; it was nearly instantaneous, though I know...that's little consolation."

How do I tell her he believed she'd deserted him for another man? Did she know he never spoke her name again? What would have stopped Pretorius from gleefully reporting such things to his victim, to increase her suffering with the knowledge that no one cared to come for her. Please forgive him. He didn't know.

Ramonda rested her head in her hands and began to cry again. She went to the hardest subject before T'Challa could broach it. "I didn't leave your father, T'Challa. I loved him. I never left him."

"I know," T'Challa croaked around a throat that suddenly couldn't draw air to breathe or speak properly. "I'm sorry. Pret - he deceived everyone. I'm sorry we failed to see through it. The truth is known now." Too late. Too late.

Her voice rough with tears, without raising her face from her hands, Ramonda asked, "What of your brother and sister? Jakarra and Shuri?"

"They're fine," he rushed to promise her. "You'll be very proud of them. They've grown up strong and well." They were angry. They missed you. But they know the truth now. "They're waiting for you at home."

Ramonda sobbed again, but it seemed to be more of rage than grief. "He told me they were exiled."

T'Challa managed not to snarl. "Lies. Whatever...my father was deceived into believing of you, he never blamed Jakarra or Shuri, not once, nor loved them any less. Soon I must name an heir, and as
I've no wife or children, most likely it will be one of them. You'll see them very soon. They want to see you."

They could barely bring themselves to believe this was possible, because such a hope would hurt so deeply if we lost it again. Through all the planning of this mission, neither of them would acknowledge that you might be alive, but not because they didn't want to see you.

He quietly sent a text message to his brother and sister when Ramonda wasn't looking: You WILL be waiting at the palace when we arrive, whatever hesitation you feel, you have three hours to get over it.

Within a minute, he had an answer from his sister: At the first opportunity, you and I will meet in the gymnasium, and I'm going to pound you to mush for suggesting I would hesitate to see my mother.

T'Challa grinned to himself. A few seconds later, he got Jakarra's answer: I'll wait until you've healed from being pounded by Shuri, then I'll pound you myself.

Excellent. They would all need a good bout to unload the distress of these last few days, and if either of his siblings beat him, he'd accept that as well-deserved - but worth it.

Zuri messaged him, The predicted international protests and public statements are taking place in reaction to the mission. We're about to come under more scrutiny than ever in our history, and it's very likely that many of our capabilities will now become known.

At T'Challa's right, his stepmother, queen mother of Wakanda, beloved wife of T'Chaka and mother of a prince and princess, put her damaged hand against the window, into the sunlight. T'Challa smiled and answered Zuri, As we stepped forward into the international stage, the disclosure of some of our secrets was inevitable. The success of this mission was more than worth it.

I agree, my king, and I believe most of your people will feel the same.

ROYAL PALACE, BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

By the time the squadron was safely over Wakandan airspace, the team on the other helicopters had sent T'Challa a full report. "Minor injuries to a few of our task force, my king, but nothing that requires more than a bandage and a little rest. Eighty-four captives rescued, and our satellites indicate that we didn't miss any spaces within the compound."

"Gods forbid," T'Challa murmured. The thought of leaving any poor prisoner trapped in that place turned his stomach. He would gladly have sent another task force straight back with orders to root out every one of Pretorius' hiding places until every last captive was free. "What is the condition of the captives?"

"It varies. With your permission, the helicopters carrying them will land at the research center airfield to take them immediately for medical treatment. None are in life-threatening condition, but many have injuries from abuse and malnutrition."

T'Challa stole a glance at Ramonda, who was still staring out the windows in fascination. She had no fresh physical injuries, but her scars spoke of old ones. That room beneath the ground might have been draped in garish silk and jewels like a Westerner's idea of what a sultan's harem should look like, but there'd been no natural light, and T'Challa doubted a captive of Ramonda's status had ever been allowed near a window.

"My king?"
"Learn what you can about where they come from, the other captives. We'll offer sanctuary to any and all who wish to stay, or if they want to return to their homes, we'll help them find their families and ensure their safety."

"It will be done, my king. Also, Prince Jakarra and Princess Shuri have ordered that all official documents be revised regarding the...events, thirty years ago. That Queen Ramonda's name be returned to its proper place, and her abduction be reported."

"Good." So when Ramonda did have the opportunity to learn what had happened at home after she was taken, she'd not see herself described only as The Deserter. Fools, you fools, all of us, such gullible fools, how could we have allowed this?! He swallowed his rage. It would have to wait. First he would get his stepmother safely home and reunite her with her children.

Whatever followed, he'd deal with that.

They touched down in the central courtyard, where only the eldest ministers of the highest standing dared to intrude at this moment. But a few did come. Minister Zuri, Minister Subira, and Minister Abrihet were among them.

All bowed as protocol demanded when T'Challa existed the helicopter and assisted Ramonda down the steps, but there was a slight off-center tilt to their bodies. At this moment, it was not the king to whom they paid homage.

Ramonda didn't notice any of them, not even the ones who'd been her friends. Once her feet were on the ground, she sought out at once the pair waiting at the front, and then T'Challa doubted she could even see anyone else.

Shuri and Jakarra were kneeling. They didn't need to do that...or maybe it was just the strict formality giving them an excuse to stay off their feet while the world had pitched out of balance.

Garbed in the decent, if drab clothing the team had found for her, Ramonda still kept the blanket clutched around her shoulders as she went hesitantly toward her grown children.

The ministers and Dora Milaje were silent, but as they straightened, T'Challa saw the tears on the face of Zuri. While Ramonda slowly put her hands to Jakarra and Shuri's faces, T'Challa discreetly approached his ministers. "Friends, I thank you for your support in this. But I must ask for patience and privacy."

Subira bowed. "Of course, my king. I speak for all your council, I'm certain, when I say that if we may be of assistance in any way, you need only send for us, day or night."

Ramonda, Jakarra, and Shuri never noticed, but the ministers and Dora Milaje all bowed to them again as they left.

T'Challa stayed at a slight remove until Ramonda crumbled, caught in Jakarra's arms, then went to join them. "Let's go inside. You need to rest."

This time, Jakarra carried her.

The following morning, soft chimes from the television startled Bucky awake. "It's a government announcement," Wanda explained, and turned it on.

After a few minutes, King T'Challa appeared. "People of Wakanda. As many of you know, yesterday I led a task force, as a warrior and king of Wakanda, against a foreign residential compound on the
soil of our ally, South Africa. I must now explain myself, but I will do so before you and the international community without shame. The compound was operated by Anton Pretorius, and our intelligence had learned that he was holding a number of prisoners against their will, including citizens of Wakanda. Most prominent among these victims was Ramonda, wife of T'Chaka, queen mother of Wakanda. During her work in South Africa to end the terrible regime of apartheid, she was abducted in 1987, and records falsified and witnesses killed or coerced to suggest she left her husband and her children of her own free will. Among the victims, we have discovered thirteen other citizens of Wakanda, abducted from their families and homes over the past thirty years. I depart today to present these findings to the international community, and to demand justice on behalf of Wakanda and all of the victims. I ask for your prayers and your patience for the queen mother's recovery from this long ordeal."

"Jesus Christ," Sam muttered as the screen went dark. "Who the hell is this Pretorius guy, and where the hell can we find the fucker?"

"Don't tempt me," said Steve. "Some of those prisoners are kids."

"I hope T'Challa's careful," said Bucky. "If the bastard had the brains to keep a queen prisoner and under wraps for thirty years, he's not someone to mess around with. He'll be wanted by a dozen countries, and that may make him desperate."

The lockdown on the palace was lifted after King T'Challa arrived in New York to breathe hellfire and damnation (or near enough) at the South African representatives. A growing crowd of representatives were soon backing him, including nearly every anti-human-trafficking coalition member and ambassadors from fifty countries.

"King T'Challa has had no private meetings since stepping off his plane and driving to the UN emergency session, so this conversation is entirely spontaneous!" gasped an American reporter in total awe. "Twenty-four hours ago, our analysts were guessing that Wakanda was now on a path to being declared a rogue state, but we can safely say that the opposite is true: for a nation whose leadership appeared at international events once a year at most up until two years ago, Wakanda is now emerging at the center of an incredibly powerful coalition with a serious human rights platform! They have some very strong words for the South African delegates!"

Within a few hours, South Africa had sent the military in to seize Pretorius' compound and anyone and anything still on the premises, and its president and ambassadors were pledging a massive investigation of Anton Pretorius and his known allies for suspected human trafficking and politically-motivated kidnappings and assassinations.

Pretorius had properties in France and Spain, both of which were promptly swarmed by local authorities and special forces, and most of his foreign bank accounts were frozen, but Steve and Sam growled in unison when President Bunt dithered about sending SWAT for the compound Pretorius owned in southern California or seizing his American assets. "Ten bucks says that's where he currently is," said Steve.

"Sucker bet," said Sam. "Nah, governor of California can send a team in without Bunt's say-so. Pretorius won't hang around. He's got places off the books, you can bet, probably in the islands or south Asia."

An aide came to the guesthouse the next day to look in on everyone, and pass along to Bucky, "Dr. Dahab sends his apologies for the interruption of your treatment."

Bucky's left hand was still a little sluggish and clumsy, but he could raise it. "Absolutely none necessary. I can wait."
The anti-enhanced factions were scrambling around trying to do damage control as public opinion soared in favor of T'Challa. Tony Stark was no fool, and acted downright humble and sympathetic in his brief conversation with T'Challa. "It's really, really unnerving when he gets like that," said Sam. Wanda snickered.

On the screen, Stark shook T'Challa's hands firmly and muttered a few words to him, then stepped towards the cameras while T'Challa made his escape. "I've just given King T'Challa my best wishes for the recovery of his family, and the support of all the Avengers."

"Mr. Stark, are you saying the Avengers approve of Black Panther's rogue and unauthorized attack on foreign soil?" squawked a Fox News reporter.

Stark stared the man down. "You're kidding, right? Do we approve of breaking up a human trafficking ring? Do we approve of a man rescuing a member of his own family from thirty years of captivity and abuse? Do we approve of freeing eighty-four men, women, and children from nine different countries who've been held as slaves underground and abused? Yes, we fucking approve, and I'll pay the FCC fine for dropping that F-bomb, because there's never been a time it's more warranted than answering your stupid-ass question! You have a problem with enhanced people 'acting without authority'? If it's the choice between that and letting human traffickers and white supremacist organizations go unchallenged, I know damn well what option I'll pick!"

A number of onlookers burst into applause.

"Stark better knock it off or I'm gonna start admiring him," huffed Scott.

Bucky didn't realize until later that as questions directed at Stark focused more on "enhanced activities" and the Avengers, Wanda got quiet and thoughtful.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: With Bucky on the mend and international outcry still loud for enhanced beings who've committed crimes, Wanda makes a grave choice that some of our heroes will have a hard time accepting.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Minister Subira: Wakanda's senior minister of domestic and international diplomacy, former chieftainess of a Wakandan tribe closely allied with T'Chaka's government. Mid-80s, oldest councilor to the Wakandan throne. Widowed, mother of her tribe's current chieftainess.

Minister Abrihet: Chieftainess of a minor tribe who serves on Wakanda's royal council, mid-60's, whose young adult children advocated for the Lagos outreach program only to be killed by the bomb at the beginning of Civil War.
Chapter Thirty-One

ROYAL PALACE, BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA

Wanda sensed Princess Shuri in the outer gardens before she saw her, and quietly wandered away from the Avengers. Once Shuri spotted Wanda, she smiled and waited for Wanda to join her. She looked very tired and from Wanda's mental eyes, felt simply exhausted.

"I don't mean to intrude if you want to be alone," she said.

"You're not intruding," said Shuri.

"How is your family?" Wanda asked hesitantly.

Shuri looked quickly away. "As well as can be expected." She knew Wanda could sense it was so much more than that, but they both pretended otherwise. "How is Sergeant Barnes?"
"He's...getting better. But he's still getting used to not having to worry about Hydra in his head," said Wanda.

"I can't blame him," Shuri sighed, but in her mind, Wanda heard her musings: *I wonder how many years he remembers as a captive. As many as thirty? More?*

Wanda managed not to wince and prayed Shuri wouldn't ask that question out loud, because Wanda knew the answer was more. *As sorry as I feel for Queen Ramonda, I hope I don't meet her just yet. It's hard enough to control how I feel about Bucky's memories. "There's...I've been watching the news, the coverage of the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, and there's something I've been thinking about for a little while now - since before the, ah, incident in South Africa." Such an undiplomatic way to put it. She cringed as Shuri stopped walking, but plowed on. "I want to go to The Hague."

Shuri looked dismayed at first, then Wanda heard the princess making the calculations in her mind, pulling the facts she knew together like an equation, much as Tony Stark would do. "Now? While Bucky is still in treatment?"

"His mental treatment for Hydra's triggers is finished. Their conditioning is destroyed, or at least disabled," said Wanda, though she knew that wasn't quite what Shuri meant. "He doesn't need me for what's left."

"But the International Criminal Court also wants to see him as well as Captain Rogers. Why do you want to go without them?"

Wanda gulped. *So if people are angry, they can take it out on me rather than him. Bucky's been through enough. I'm not like Black Widow; I was sixteen when I chose Hydra. I even had the chance to leave with Pietro of our own will, and chose to stay. "I...I don't want them to know what I tell you," she stammered.*

Shuri sighed and closed her eyes. After considering it for a moment, she nodded. "Very well. Speak in confidence."

"Steve won't leave Bucky - and he shouldn't. It's still early in treatment of his arm, and...much too soon for him to be in front of a court. I want to do this alone, without Steve trying to shield me." She smiled dryly at the weak pun. "Or Bucky, he'd try to do that too. They shouldn't. Maybe Steve as commander could take formal responsibility for me in Lagos, but not for what I did before. I've let them protect me for too long. It's time I answered for myself."

Shuri's eyes were full. "You must know that you oversimplify your time with Hydra in the eyes of many, including me. Your choice was far less than you imagined."

"I was a telepath even then, your highness. If Pietro or I had wanted to go, Strucker would have let us go." Wanda shook her head. "What a strange, terrible man he was. All the evil he did, all the death he knowingly caused, yet he took no subject by force. And he was gentle with us, as some of us had never known in our lives, or at least not since we lost our parents."

"So like many monsters, he was capable of ensnaring his victims with a facade of kindness," Shuri countered. "Perhaps it was even a facade he himself believed. That doesn't mean you were any less his victims." She shook her head. "You're not a prisoner here, Wanda. If you truly wish to go now, I won't try to stop you and nor will my brother. But for all your power, I think you don't understand that you won't be making your friends’ lives any easier. Especially not Bucky's. You and he have gone through a great deal; he won't feel any better watching you before the International Criminal Court from a distance."
"I know." Wanda sighed. "Believe me, I've spent time thinking about it. I just...I'm ready. I've hidden behind the others for too long. Given half the chance, they'll follow me straight away whether I want them to or not. So I want to go now. And...maybe my reappearance will take some of the pressure of King T'Challa."

She was relieved to sense no offense, but Shuri snorted. "King T'Challa can handle this pressure and then some, and if he couldn't, he'd be unfit to be king. As I said, I won't stop you, but I would urge you to speak to him first, and you must tell your friends."

"I will. I wouldn't just disappear on them. There's a safe house in Belarus that Hawkeye and Black Widow used to use. It's not known, and there'd be no way to prove I haven't been there all this time, if we could get me there undetected. From there I could contact Romanoff in The Hague, and she could bring me there."

"For shame, Wanda, raiding your friends' secrets!"

As predicted, the Secret Avengers were not happy. Everyone started yelling at once. "Wanda, come ON, they'll tear you apart!"

"Are you crazy?!"

"At least wait until Bucky and I can go with you!"

"You can't go into that snake pit alone!"

On the video feed from New York, only King T'Challa didn't shout, though he looked as dismayed as Princess Shuri had felt. "Why do you want to go now?"

Wanda shot the others what she hoped was a quelling look. "I feel the time is right. And so these two," she jerked her head at Steve and Bucky, "aren't following me at once trying to take all the shots."

That got her a matched pair of wounded puppy looks on top of the stabs of hurt in her mind, and she fought not to let it show on her face.

"Why?" Damn it, why did Bucky have to be the one who asked it?

Wanda forced herself to look at him. "Because I - I want to do this, at least part of this alone."

"You don't have to, though." It was Steve who said it, but Wanda had to smile - it echoed in both his and Bucky's minds.

"I know I don't have to," she said, fighting the tightness in her throat. "But I want to know that I can."

The men exchanged uncomfortable looks. King T'Challa said reluctantly, "If she is certain that she wishes to leave, I will not prevent Miss Maximoff from doing so, Captain. Nor should you try."

Steve's shoulders slumped, and he looked away from all of them. "I won't."

"Do you wish to go directly to The Hague?"

Wanda shook her head. "Belarus. It's a place...people might expect me to turn up and not have been found. From there I can go to The Hague, and no one would trace me to Wakanda."
Clint sighed. "There's a safehouse there that - oh, well, sure, you know that. I guess you wouldn't be cool with me going with you either."

"Stay with your family. You're retired," said Wanda, trying to keep her voice light. "I'll call Natasha when I'm in Minsk, and I'm sure Stark and Vision will show up as soon as I appear. I won't be completely by myself." She cast a look around the room, meeting each of their eyes. "Let me go. I need to do this." She looked at Steve the longest. "I'm ready."

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**WANDA MAXIMOFF SURRENDERS!**

_Fugitive Avenger, terrorist suspect contacted Romanoff from Belarus, arrives in The Hague under heavy security._

ICC Deputy Prosecutor Damien Fallaci has been assigned the investigation into the current and former Avengers as well as the case of James Buchanan Barnes. The Pre-Trial Chamber has authorized the Office of the Prosecutor investigate Maximoff for crimes against humanity, including murder, torture, and "other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health". They are also investigating Maximoff for non-international war crimes of murder, cruel treatment and torture, attacks upon civilians and peacekeepers.

Sokovia is not a party to the Rome Statute that granted jurisdiction of the ICC over its citizens, which led many experts to conclude that investigation of Maximoff would be futile, as she could not be compelled to appear. Now, however, if Maximoff formally accepts the Court’s jurisdiction over her person in writing, she may be charged and tried.

"Goddamnit," Steve snarled and would've punched the wall if Bucky hadn't caught his arm.

"She's not in for anything she did with the Avengers. It's what she did with Ultron and Strucker."

"She's a KID! She was a kid then too – a teenager!" Steve exploded. "The second she saw what Ultron really planned, she turned on him!"

"I know. So do they, but she chose this, Steve," Bucky insisted. "What we tell her about her responsibility or lack of it isn't enough. She feels like she owes those people, and she wants to hear from someone unbiased what she needs to do to answer for it." Steve blinked at Bucky, then turned away. "There's no law that says any of us have to like it. It's her choice."

"Will they put her in a collar again?" Steve's voice sounded small.

"Not if Stark has anything to say about it. I don't think so this time, man, not after what they did to her in there before," said Sam. "He's got an Amnesty International legal team already there, and Nelson and Murdock are doing enhanced cases almost full-time now, from what I've read. Murdock's already representing Natasha, and Nelson's published two articles that people who didn't consent to be enhanced can't be criminally responsible for what they do in service of their captors."

"But Wanda did consent," muttered Steve. "That's what they'll say."

Bucky watched him pace for a few moments, then said, "Timing." Steve eyed him. "She wants to take the first phase on her own. We should respect that. But if it starts going bad, I can give them a bigger fish to fry."

"Aw, man, Barnes," Sam groaned as Steve went dead white. "That was so the wrong thing to say."
Steve, hey," he held up a hand. "Nobody's getting fried. Not Wanda, not Bucky, not Natasha - oh, and not you either. We're gonna have to answer questions. Fine. People want the truth, they've got a right to it. We've never been the ones who withheld the truth, and that's already showing in the court of public opinion. Ross, Hydra, Zemo, they're the kinds who manipulate and lie and kill for their own gain."

Maybe Steve needed to hear that from someone who didn't have hundreds of murder charges hanging over his head and whose brains weren't still Swiss cheese, Bucky reasoned. So he kept his mouth shut and watched as Steve and Sam locked eyes.

Sam went on, "Nat got taken as a toddler. Wanda was an orphan teenager who got manipulated and made some really big mistakes that she acknowledged the minute she saw what it meant. Bucky's 'training' videos that Nat shared are making people puke and cry all over the known world. And you - Cap, you are so far up on the moral high ground, you could zipline to the summit of Mt. Everest."

"Now you're laying it on thick, and his ego is already the size of an aircraft carrier," said Bucky.

"Shuddup, one-armed bandit, I'm trying to get Mr. Weight-of-the-World to put the damn world down for a second."

"Sam!" Steve blurted, but Bucky just waved him off.

"Okay, fair enough. Good luck; I'm getting a beer."

"I want one too," said Sam.

"Sorry, can't reach into the fridge more than once, it's too traumatic."

"You two are gonna be the death of me," Steve muttered, but he was starting to grin.

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THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS

Wanda knew the first days would be difficult. That was why she'd chosen to do it. I need to know. I need to see for myself that I can speak for myself, without anyone holding my hand or shielding me.

When Natasha picked her up from the empty lot in Minsk, as Wanda hoped, she was all business. "I don't want you to say anything to anyone after you arrive until you have a lawyer. I have one, and Stark has a dozen more on speed dial, including one who's specifically interested in representing you. He passes muster - used to be Matt Murdock's partner - and his firm is getting more and more involved in representation of accused enhanced and mutants."

"Do they know I don't have any money?"

Natasha snorted. "You know you don't need any. Stark's taking care of it."

As if the flashbulbs and the cameras and microphone booms and faces weren't enough of a gauntlet to run from the helicopter pad to the car and then from the car into the Court, along with the shouted questions came a maelstrom of thoughts and emotions from the crowds of reporters and onlookers and protesters.

"Don't answer them," Natasha kept muttering, but as they rushed up the steps towards Stark, Wanda saw Vision next to him and faltered.
"Miss Maximoff," a reporter yelled. "Are you surrendering yourself to the International Criminal Court?"

"Y-yes," Wanda blurted, looking for anything to distract herself.

A man barely Stark's height came running down the steps at Stark's side. Vision stayed where he was. "There will be no other questions for my client until we've had a chance to confer. Come on, let's get you out of this chaos." He took Wanda's elbow and Stark took the other, with Natasha behind them, and Wanda couldn't stop looking at Vision in front of them.

She realized why everyone was so edgy inside - half a dozen men pointed guns at her. "HEY!" Stark snapped as he jumped in front of her. "I thought the order was no force!"

The man in the lead, American, retorted, "Wanda Maximoff has been deemed a major threat by the Committee on Enhanced Activities, and we're required to hold her in maximum security upon her apprehension."

"She hasn't been apprehended by the US, and a Congressional joint committee has no jurisdiction over the International Criminal Court," snapped the man on Wanda's right - the lawyer, Nelson.

"President Bunt authorized - "

" - oh, puh-leeze, we all know what Ronald Bunt's executive orders on foreign policy are worth," Stark said.

Vision remained between the gunmen and Wanda. "Please lower your weapons, gentlemen. Miss Maximoff has come voluntarily and entered these premises without any aggression or threat of violence, and it is for the government of the Netherlands, not the United States, to decide the details of her custody."

"The US gets a say in the security measures," the American insisted.

"You had your say, Major Heller, and the Court ordered no use of firearms without an immediate threat. Now stand down!" a gray-haired man stalked through a side door. Only after Major Heller and the gunmen did lower their weapons did he turn towards Wanda.

"Agent Ross," said Vision.

"Vision, Mr. Stark. Miss Maximoff, I'm Everett Ross, U.S. State Department liaison. I'm technically assigned to cases involving Americans or American organizations, but since you're an Avenger, I've been ordered to keep my hand on this one." Wanda nodded mutely. "Mr. Nelson, you're taking Miss Maximoff's representation?"

"If she'll have me," said the man at Wanda's right dryly. "But considering we didn't get a chance to introduce ourselves or sign a retainer before getting guns in our faces, I can't be sure."

"You've got the conference rooms next to Mr. Murdock's. We're still working out accommodations, but we should have something ready by the time you're done with all the housekeeping this evening."

"I can handle accommodations," said Stark dismissively.

"Yeah, no, Stark, not happening. If Miss Maximoff's coming under the jurisdiction of the ICC, the ICC will house her until it decides whether to charge her," said Ross. Seeing everyone's expressions, he said, "Relax, she won't be in the detention center. Helmut Zemo's serving his time there, and the
whole damn planet knows not to put him within ten miles of anybody on these cases. We're working something out."

Stark caught Wanda's elbow when the others started to tug her in the direction Ross pointed. "We get access to her twenty-four-seven, you understand? No Raft, no straight-jacket, no collar, and none of those friendly fellas are guarding her."

Ross rolled his eyes. "You don't want much, do you? Look, the guard who slapped her on the Raft was disciplined..." Vision took a step towards him. Ross faltered, then dropped the metaphorical rope. "But the judges are also a little nervous about her welfare, so she's getting the Court's security, not U.S. military."

Much to Wanda's embarrassment, she realized she'd grabbed Stark's hand. Ross, Vision, and Nelson were looking at her. She hastily let go and followed them to the conference room without another word.

"You okay?" Stark asked her once the door was closed. Wanda nodded and struggled to not look at Vision. "Sorry 'bout that. The cameras on the Raft caught that asshole hitting you, so I gave 'em holy hell about that much. I haven't said anything about the rest."

"What 'rest'?” demanded the lawyer.

"Ask your client, Wanda, this is Foggy Nelson. Foggy, Wanda."

Wanda's mood see-sawed, and she couldn't quite hold back a snicker. "'Foggy'?"

Nelson shrugged and grinned. "Some nicknames stick." He clapped his hands. "So let me give you the quick rundown before I kick everyone else out of the room. Mr. Stark has hired my firm to represent any and all Avengers, but - assuming you're okay with this - you are my client. I don't report to him or the court or anybody else, no matter who's paying my bills. What you say to me is confidential. What advice I give you is confidential. Nobody gets their hands on it from either of us unless you choose to share it - and I'm going to have a lot of words about what you should share." He raised his eyebrows. "From what I hear, you'll know what my advice is before I say it."

The tight knot in Wanda's chest started to loosen up. "I can read people's minds, but not quite...like a lot of people imagine," she explained awkwardly. "I only get the gist of ideas or thoughts unless I'm concentrating very hard - and I don't do that unless I have to." Not anymore. Not since Ultron, anyway. "But if you really want to represent a former Hydra operative, that's all right with me."

"And here I thought being a superhero always came with a massive ego. Okay, everybody not employed by me, shoo. Everybody employing me, shoo too." Foggy pointed directly at Stark for that, and Wanda couldn't quite hold back another giggle.

It was Vision who lingered the longest before leaving the room. With the door shut, Foggy considered her. "Whether you can hear this in my head or not, I've gotta say, I'm impressed. You had every reason in the world not to show up."

Wanda shrugged. "I had my reasons that I did want to show up. I've spent almost four years in limbo since Sokovia, hiding inside loopholes and neutral zones, and during that time, more people died at the hands of someone looking for revenge for Sokovia. Maybe it's time everyone else who got hurt had their day in court too, before someone else decides to blow up a building to frame Bucky Barnes."

"You understand what they're going to charge you with? On top of helping an international fugitive
assassin and smashing up an airport - and from what Stark says, that alone had prison guards beating up on you."

"I've come to terms with that, and I told Stark to leave it alone," Wanda huffed and paced around the conference table just for something to do. All of Foggy Nelson's papers and folders stacked there were intimidating. 'I'm not here because I trust the legal system - er, no offense."

Foggy snorted. "Absolutely none taken. As a rule, neither do the best lawyers."

She chuckled. "Hiding myself hasn't made me feel any better, and I doubt it's done much to heal anyone else." Except Bucky? Maybe? I hope? "I saw people on television, marching for me. Others march because they want me dead. I don't want to hide forever. If that means going on trial for crimes against humanity, well, I suppose that's fair. I helped two monsters, Hydra and Ultron, and a lot of people died."

Foggy said quietly, "Then we need to issue a written statement, that you're submitting yourself to the jurisdiction of the Court. Once that happens, you're in their custody until they release you. You may think it's no big deal, but I agree with Stark that if US special forces already grabbed the opportunity to be abusive to you, we're not giving them another one. In a way, being in the ICC's custody will protect you. The investigators are going to want a lot of unpleasant details, you'll be questioned by a pretrial chamber of judges, and then they decide whether to indict you, and what for. Only then does the full-blown trial start. It's a long, exhausting, scary process even by lawyer standards, what you're volunteering to go through."

Wanda straightened and made herself look him in the eyes. To her relief, her voice was steady. "I understand."

"Okay. Then let's get to work."

Tony insisted (i.e. nagged, whined, threatened, and generally made a pain in the ass of himself until he got his way, actions about which he had no qualms whatsoever given the stakes) on seeing the "secure accommodations" that the ICC's security department arranged for Wanda. Close to the close of business, she and Foggy appeared before a hastily-convened panel of judges to deliver her declaration of submission to the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction. Tony felt a little like he was watching a car go over a cliff as the chief judge questioned her.

"Miss Maximoff, are you submitting yourself to this Court's jurisdiction and investigation of your own free will?"

"I am," said Wanda calmly.

"And do you understand that by doing so, you give this Court the power to detain you for the duration of this investigation, for the duration of trial, and afterwards for any sentence the Court may impose?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Have you been in any way coerced, threatened, or deceived into making this declaration?"

"No, I have not."

The judge...Danish, wasn't she?...regarded Wanda with what looked like puzzlement, but maybe...some respect? Tony hoped so. Wanda's presence here deserved that much. "Very well. Let the record show that on December 11, 2018, the International Criminal Court accepted the
declaration of Wanda Maximoff that she submits to its jurisdiction for investigation and trial. Given
the severity of the potential charges and the threats acknowledged both against and by the Defendant,
Miss Maximoff is placed under house arrest in a secure location of the Court's choosing until a
decision to indict is rendered."

The "secure location of the Court's choosing" turned out to be an annexed dormitory, near what
appeared to be a school. "The Leiden Preparatory School moved to a new location last year," Vision
said, having placed it and its history. "The government of the Netherlands purchased the old property
to convert into a secure complex for certain high-profile but not altogether trusted visitors to the
country, including witnesses and suspects of the International Criminal Court."

Yeah, Tony doubted that the barbed wire and guard towers had been original features to the local
university's swanky prep school, and there were a lot of guards out on the grounds.

"Miss Maximoff is permitted anywhere on this floor," the guards at the dorm told them once they
were in one of the upper floors. "There is a library and meeting room for counsel, as well as a lounge
and kitchen, although meals are prepared on the ground floor in the cafeteria."

The common rooms were...okay, but Tony grumbled at the sight of Wanda's suite. It was a two-
room flat, plus a little bathroom, with a bed and small desk in the bedroom and a little dinette table
and two chairs in the "living room" along with one rather worn armchair. "Relax, Stark, I used to
live in worse," she said.

"A school like this, they've deliberately given you the cheapest, tiredest room in the whole place,"
Tony said.

Once their escort had left, Wanda shrugged it off. "I think they did. Still, it's better than a cell or
where Pietro and I lived back home." She looked from Tony to Vision to Natasha to Foggy, then
looked away.

Foggy cleared his throat. "Well, I'll let you settle in. You've got my number, and I'm in the hotel
downtown, less than a mile from here, so call me anytime. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you," she said, watching out the door as he passed the guards.

Then the door closed, and it was just Avengers again.

They all stared at each other. "The room's bugged," said Nat, unnecessarily. "Attorney-client
privilege or not, assume that every place you go is bugged and everything you say to Nelson is being
recorded and listened to live."

"I will." Wanda looked down. "How are things in America?"

As if she hadn't seen them in years - well, not bad acting. "Not much different. Maybe a little less
bloodthirsty since the Accords were proven to be a scam," Tony said. "Rhodey's on a committee
trying to write new ones that don't involve detaining people by the thousands."

"I've read a little about it," she acknowledged.

Well, as awkward reunion scenes went, they were all method acting. Nat was her usual optimistic
self. "Keep away from the windows and stairwell doors, and don't use your powers unless you
absolutely have to. Some of these guards are jittery, and would rather shoot to kill and deal with
justifying it later. I'm going to turn in, but call or text me if you need anything."

Tony knew Vision was going nowhere, so he might as well head out. "I guess that's my queue to get
out of here too. You need a lift?"

"No, thank you, Tony, I'll make my own arrangements."

Tony fled.

And then there were two.

Wanda forced a smile. "I haven't seen you since Mumbai, and we didn't exactly get to chat then."

"No," Vision agreed. "If we had, I would have asked you to forgive me, although I understand if you don't." Her throat tightened and she couldn't come up with anything to say, but he went on. "I was wrong to believe that you would be treated fairly after your arrest in Leipzig."

Bitterness sizzled in her chest, and she muttered, "You watched them put the straight jacket and suppression collar on me; did you think they had friendly intentions?" If only it didn't sound so petulant.

"I understand that you're angry."

A huff of air escaped her - or at least, she told herself it was a huff as she turned away and looked at anything in the room except for him. "No, I don't think you do understand, Vis. It's not even anger anymore; it's been too long. That's not even what still...hurts. What hurts is being lied to, being manipulated, you playing on what you knew I was afraid of just to keep me under your control before I ever put a foot out of line at the Compound. Why should I have trusted you when you made it so clear you didn't trust me?" She shook her head and looked at his blurry reflection in the window rather than at him. "It's too soon, and it's been a long day. Foggy says I have a lot of those coming, so I need to get some sleep."

She didn't know whether to hope he'd press to stay or not. But he didn't, just accepted her request with a calmness that made her throat get even tighter. "All right. If you...would like any company, to talk about things other than your case, please don't hesitate to call me. I'll be close."

He walked out straight through the wall, and the startled yelp outside in the hallway broke Wanda out of her dark mood - for a few seconds anyway. Then she took a shower, stubbornly refusing to let herself cry, and went to bed.

It was a long time before she slept.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: **T'Challa's hunt for human traffickers who may have Wakandan prisoners grows, but draws the attention of a tribe who's had no contact with the rest of Wakanda for decades. Make way for M'Baku as the Secret Avengers determine their own role in bringing down the filthiest of all criminals!**

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Chapter Summary

T’Challa's hunt for human traffickers who may have Wakandan prisoners grows, but draws the attention of a tribe who's had no contact with the rest of Wakanda for decades. Make way for M'Baku as the Secret Avengers determine their own role in bringing down the filthiest of all criminals!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to you all for the incredible feedback! This chapter marks the beginning of my merging the Black Panther movie canon - though our various heroes will meet and collaborate for different reasons and in different ways. Hope you like! (Interestingly, in some ways this ended up being the inverse of the movie, with M’Baku being forced by circumstances to come to T’Challa for help. Recall I hadn't seen the movie when I wrote this.)

Canon Note: As a reminder, this fic took the idea that the challenge day for succession to Wakanda's occurred years ago, while T'Chaka was still alive but too old to continue as Black Panther and "defender of the nation" as it were. It draws a little from the comic canon that both Shuri and Jakarra challenged their brother but lost. M'Baku also appeared, but lost in much the same way as the movie. All the villains named in this chapter are from the comics.

Trigger Warning: This chapter also delves a little deeper into the motives behind human trafficking. It's based on a lesson burned into my head from 7th grade, about "safaris" wealthy whites took in Africa as recently as the early 20th century where the target wasn't animal game, but human beings. Our teacher saw no reason to think such activities had stopped especially among white supremacists who'd lost ground in apartheid conflicts. The details aren't graphic, but it's unpleasant and sad subject matter. Be advised if you're sensitive to this sort of thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Two

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA...

Steve and Bucky's plan to finish up Bucky's treatment and get to The Hague as fast as possible started hitting roadblocks from the beginning. Calibrating Bucky's new arm took work, and the secure area of the hospital was inaccessible to the visitors for days after Wanda left, since there were over seventy confused, scared foreign visitors now being treated.

Waiting had Steve about to climb the walls, but he'd have chewed his own arm off before he complained to anyone. King T'Challa and the rest of Wakanda had enough to deal with right now.
T'Challa himself was abroad for weeks, politely and diplomatically intimidating the hell out of the UN and every country that turned up in the investigation into Anton Pretorius's human trafficking ring. Along with human trafficking, the bastard was also deep into weapons trafficking to the kinds of groups that the Ten Rings might have even balked at dealing with - maybe. Some of it was Hydra, some just more regional malcontents who were Hydra's kindred spirits. There were also drug cartels, and essentially every really vile business conceived by humankind feeding into and from Pretorius and his associates' finances.

South Africa had quickly come around to T'Challa's point of view and even were persuaded to kick down a few more doors in Cape Town. The raids yielded another two hundred captives - eleven of whom were Wakandan - more financial evidence, and three previously wealthy and influential white supremacists behind bars while eight more were on the run. Several other African nations followed suit and bagged more suspects and evidence.

One raid in Ethiopia yielded a hastily-abandoned compound and forty bodies.

When T'Challa returned, he asked to see Steve and the team. "We're quietly aiding our neighbors in raids of suspected human trafficking stations. I've decided to let our ambassadors and envoys continue the diplomatic discussions, but the difficulty is that these evil men are now on alert and preparing themselves for assaults. The last few attacks have rendered their bases unusable, but at the cost of the murder of the witnesses and victims."

"We need to get ahead of them," said Steve. "Strike before they see us coming and get the base secure, at least enough to protect the victims until conventional military can move in."

T'Challa narrowed his eyes. "I must caution you, Captain, that you may only speak of what 'we' do if I agree."

Steve felt his face go deep red, and Sam snickered, the traitor. "Yes, I'm...sorry, I didn't mean to presume anything. It was just an offer."

The king relaxed and smiled. "It won't be long before some witnesses recognize you, but if possible, we'll put that off for as long as we can. Would it bother you very much if your shield was no longer American colors?"

Steve grinned, his face still hot. "No. Seeing as I'm still wanted, I can't very well call myself Captain America. In Mumbai, I wore black. And...considering what you've been finding in those bases, if you want, I'll take a gun."

Shuri turned to the others. "Gentlemen?"

"I'm in," said Sam immediately. "If you need stealth entry to bring down their defenses, Mini-Me over here might be useful."

Scott nodded. "I'm in."

"Me too," added Clint. "Damn, where's Wanda when we need her?"

Steve felt Bucky shift next to him and turned to argue, but T'Challa raised a hand. The reluctance on his face said it all. "Sergeant Barnes, I'm sorry..."

Bucky's expression closed, and he nodded curtly before leaving the room. "Damn," muttered Clint. "Y'know, he probably could've been useful."

"I've no doubt of it, but there are many risks to these missions already. We will ask for his help if he's
willing, to learn what he might know about some of the bases that may have been associated with Hydra."

After the meeting, Clint, Sam, and Scott stayed, while Steve took the first opportunity to run for it and look for Bucky. He found Bucky in his bedroom at the guesthouse with all the windows screened, staring at his new hand. "T'Challa's not wrong," Bucky said. "I still have trouble making a fist. There'd be even more trouble if anyone saw my face."

"Actually, they're hoping you might be able to help with information, about some of the bases they want to hit that they think used to be Hydra's," said Steve.

Bucky snorted. "I dunno; I'd feel completely guilty about ratting out my old comrades. Some of the ones still alive might lose their vacation homes."

"What a crying shame. We'll do our best not to damage the flooring when we're looking for underground sexual slavery bunkers." Steve clapped him on the back, then eyed the silver arm. At Bucky's nod, he hesitantly ran a hand over it. "How's it feel?"

Bucky closed his eyes. "Like...having a real arm again. Almost. More than the old one ever did. I could feel some in the hand and fingers. They needed it to feel, so I could move and shoot, or know it was damaged. But nothing more than that. I couldn't have felt...this." He nodded to Steve, and Steve gently squeezed. There was no give from the metal flesh, but...it struck Steve that it felt a little warm. Bucky abruptly turned towards him, and Steve needed no encouragement to pull him into a hug. He rubbed the metal arm, patting him at the shoulder where metal met flesh. "I know he's not wrong," Bucky murmured. "Still hate not being able to watch your back."

"I'd rather have you with me anytime; you know that," Steve replied. "But you've earned the right to not be anybody's soldier anymore."

"So have you. I'll retire when you do." They both chuckled. "One of the international C-Span channels is broadcasting the ICC proceedings in real time. I looked in on Wanda." Steve stood back eagerly. "She's doing well. Her attorney is some guy hand-picked by Stark. They're starting with her and her brother's years in orphan homes and on the street, what they saw of Hydra's recruiting efforts."

"How's she feeling? Can you tell?"

"She's nervous, no surprise. Looks a little tired, but she's holding her own. Stark was there at the beginning and Romanoff's been there for every session. Vision shows up a lot too."

Steve sighed. "I'm glad she's not completely alone up there."

"Yeah." Bucky waited until Steve was looking at him. "I don't like it either, but...she did have a right. To know she could do this herself, even if she doesn't have to. Maybe that was something I didn't get when you and I were kids."

Steve smiled. "Nah, it's not the same. Not really. I may have wanted to prove something by joining up, but after my mom died...I just didn't want to impose on anyone."

"I remember that. There's so much I still don't remember, but I remember what I said after your mom's funeral. The key, and...what I told you. It's the first thing that came back to me, in DC."

*I'm with you til the end of the line...*

Steve's memory of what happened in the end on the helicarrier was hazy at best. He only vaguely
recalled saying it to Bucky. "Then finish it. 'cause I'm with you til the end of the line." He remembered that he'd meant it. If it was a choice between continuing to fight Bucky and letting the line end there at Bucky's hand rather than face that everything they'd been through together was gone... he'd chosen to die right there.

But he'd woken up in the hospital. A security camera hundreds of meters away had just caught the blurry, dark images of Bucky pulling him from the water.

Once the ICC session was done for the day, they thought to head for the gym, but one of the guards waylaid them. "Please remain inside your guesthouse this evening, gentlemen. There are unfriendly eyes at the palace."

She didn't have to warn them twice, and soon Sam and Scott had joined them. "Any idea what's going on?" Steve asked.

"Somebody's here that T'Challa does not want to find out about us," reasoned Bucky. "Foreign envoys, maybe."

"Nooo, not foreign," said Sam. "Scott and I were talking infiltration plans on the next target with W'Kabi in the war room; whoever it was came strutting through the front doors like they owned the place, and the vehicles looked Wakandan."

"Shit," Steve breathed. The idea that there might be "unfriendly eyes" within Wakanda hadn't really occurred to him. "Where're Clint and Laura and the kids?"

"They're in their house; I checked," said Scott.

The team watched recaps of Wanda and Natasha's testimony to the ICC and tried not to peek out the windows too much. It was late, well past dinner, and Sam was teaching some formal MMA positions to Scott and Bucky (well, more like giving Bucky the formal names for stuff he probably had been trained in) when T'Challa and Shuri arrived.

"Gentlemen." T'Challa was poker-faced, but Shuri smirked at how eagerly the four of them came hurrying to the door. "We must talk."

The last thing T'Challa had been expecting was a formal visit from M'Baku. The Jabari had led the faction opposed to international outreach before Lagos, and even as far back as the anti-apartheid movement. Generations ago, they'd fought with the Panthers for the right to rule the kingdom. M'Baku had appeared at the great tournament to challenge T'Chaka's children for the right to the succession, and T'Challa had known this man would be one of his greatest rivals.

Since T'Challa, Shuri, and Jakarra had all beaten M'Baku, leaving him a distant fourth, T'Challa hadn't seen M'Baku himself since.

The Jabari had shunned both the funeral rites for T'Chaka and the coronation of T'Challa, so naturally, they were not entitled to know of the Avengers' presence in Wakanda.

But that didn't mean they couldn't have found out.

Even so, T'Challa had appearances to maintain. He addressed M'Baku as warmly as if he were an ally. "I welcome you to my palace with all the blessings of the gods, M'Baku of the Jabari. Speak of your needs and your wishes, and your king attends."

M'Baku did not bow, causing all the Dora Milaje to advance a pace. A bow wasn't strictly required,
but it was reasonable for the Dora Milaje to treat the visitor as potentially hostile as a result. "I come not of my own will, but at the demand and plea of my tribe."

T’Challa betrayed no reaction, but some of the councilors and ministers witnessing the meeting let out murmurs of shock. So this was an act of some urgency - or desperation. T’Challa pretended not to notice the veiled insults of neither a bow nor an address as king, but beckoned for a chair to be brought before the throne. "Sit, then, and speak."

M’Baku watched T’Challa as warily as the Dora Milaje watched him, but he did take the chair. "Even my people who will accept no foreign devices have learned of the Panthers’ increased dealings beyond our borders. The abduction of the wife of T’Chaka was an outcome that might have been predicted when we last meddled in matters that were not our own."

His chin lifted as murmurs of anger rippled through the room, and T’Challa was very glad that neither Jakarra nor Shuri were present. "So you come urgently to remind us of what you opposed thirty years ago?" he asked in the most bored voice he could manage.

M’Baku scowled. "I would not come but at my people's demand. As chieftain of their tribe, I am their servant."

"As I am of all tribes," T’Challa acknowledged. So get on with it.

There was such a long silence that more whispers went through the room. M’Baku must have been very opposed to speaking of what his people had demanded. But whatever his distaste, whatever his disgust for T’Challa’s family and their policies, he was at least by reputation, as devoted to his tribe and his people as T’Challa was.

So he came out with it at last. "After the news spread of Wakandan citizens found prisoner of these human traffickers, some of my people came to me to reexamine cases of relatives who have gone missing without explanation, particularly children."

This time, T’Challa didn't manage to quite hide his reaction. Gods. How much worse is it? "How many?" he asked tightly.

"Since 1980, sixteen of our children have disappeared. Twenty-nine adults," M’Baku admitted, lowering his eyes for the first time. "The mountain lands are a harsh environment, and there are predators as well as smugglers pursuing our minerals. Our people have always accepted it, that our homelands have dangers. We’ve found bodies in other cases, but those forty-five simply vanished."

Shuri slipped into the throne room and considered M’Baku with intense eyes. No other single tribe had reported such losses, not even those that bordered South Sudan and Uganda. If you hadn't been too stubborn to approach my father or me before now, we could have tightened security at the border or at least discovered and eliminated some of the threats! T’Challa fumed.

It wouldn't do any good to start that conversation. M’Baku was making a massive concession to come to Birnin Zana and speak of this openly, to even ask for help by implication - and he knew it. If the Jabari's complacency about the dangers of their tribal lands had opened an opportunity for traffickers in more than just vibranium to gain entry, he knew it already.

There was no room for smugness in this quest for justice.

T’Challa's councilors and ministers watched him, curious as to how he would respond. He did so - carefully. "As you may know, the discovery of Anton Pretorius' abduction of the queen mother have led to more rescue missions abroad. Such missions have brought Wakanda under greater
international scrutiny, but your king - and the majority of his council - feel this is a price entirely worth paying. Thus far, we have liberated twenty-three Wakandan citizens, though some were too young at the time of their capture to name the tribe of their birth."

M'Baku nodded. "This is why I've come. And to learn if the search will continue."

Was that...more than just an idle question? Was M'Baku...volunteering?

Whether an alliance to that degree was possible couldn't be certain. But T'Challa was willing to make a concession himself, some small reassurance, if not to M'Baku, than to the bereaved families in his tribe who had seen their children disappear without a trace. "We will not stop. It would be the height of arrogance to think we can end human sex trafficking on this continent or anywhere, but as long as we have leads that sons and daughters of Wakanda may be among the victims, we will hunt those responsible down."

"As for identifying the families of the rescued, have you brought DNA profiles," asked Shuri. "Or do you shun DNA identification because of English involvement?"

"Shuri!" T'Challa snapped.

M'Baku ignored her, which only irritated her further, but one of his aides raised the case in his hand. "If any of the rescued captives are found to be Jabari, will the Panthers allow them to be reunited with their people, or insist on holding them here?"

T'Challa barked for silence as Shuri and several of his ministers leaped to their feet to claim insult. "Sit. All of you." Keeping his eyes on M'Baku, he answered, "I have no doubt that one of the intruders' many goals was to weaken the family ties and tribal histories of this nation. Any family whose son or daughter is discovered among these victims will be brought at once see them. But it will be that person's choice, if an adult, where they will live now that they're free."

M'Baku glowered around the room. "Their choice will still be influenced by tribes other than their own."

"That's why it's called a choice," said Zuri. "Contrary to what you and your fathers have always believed, the Panthers have never tried to eliminate your existence - at least not since the time when the Jabari were trying equally hard to eliminate other tribes. Rather than be governed by ancient conflicts, perhaps we can - at last - see our common enemies and unite to defend our borders and restore our stolen children."

T'Challa raised a hand to silence the murmurs of agreement. "How much or how little you wish to involve yourself in operations outside our borders is up to you."

M'Baku considered that, then said slowly, "Do you believe there are more of our people being held?"

T'Challa nodded. Minister Subira spoke up. "Like yours, other tribes are now reinvestigating cases of their people who've disappeared in the past. Some were young men and women journeying abroad, but others simply vanished from within the country. There are far easier places to target for young boys and girls, however vile the practice." M'Baku stiffened, and if possible, his eyes went even harder. Subira nodded grimly. "You see? We begin to think that our people have been hunted for sport."

If her goal had been to incite M'Baku's rage, she certainly succeeded. "Who?"

"Some names, we know. Anton Pretorius, Ulysses Klaue, Douglas Birely, the Sons of the Serpent.
We have suspicions about members of the Bilderberg Conference."

"And what is being done to make the perpetrators pay?"

M'Baku wasn't the first to ask that question, and he wouldn't be the last, for it was all too natural. In those first hours after learning Ramonda had been abducted, T'Challa had been torn between launching a rescue mission in the slim hope that she still lived, or simply seeking out Anton Pretorius and tearing the bastard apart. Memory of the last time he'd felt such rage had stopped him. I will not let vengeance consume me again. He had opted for patience, focusing on the chance of finding some Wakandans in Pretorius' hands still alive, even if Ramonda might not be among them. That patience had been rewarded, and now he had to keep others on that path.

T'Challa leaned forward. "Evidence is being gathered, and our first priority has been and will remain the rescue and protection of our people. When the time comes for justice, we will seek it openly and lawfully first."

As he fully expected, M'Baku sneered. "When it was your own family's blood spilled, you didn't wait for the consent of the United Nations."

T'Challa didn't break eye contact with M'Baku, but let the Dora Milaje call the room to order this time. "You are correct. I saw my father's blood spilled and sought blood, and only by good fortune did I learn the truth before I killed an innocent man. I have learned from that error, and I will not again seek vengeance out of passion. Passion has a way of blinding us to the truth." He leaned back on the throne and pointed out, "As it is, Wakanda is not the only nation whose people have suffered these abductions. The families of victims from nations other than Wakanda have a right to justice as well as we do. If you wish to take part in these operations, you will do so under my command, M'Baku. Otherwise, you're outside the law and outside Wakanda's protection."

"You also risk the safety of untold numbers of prisoners that our king and his task force are still trying to locate and rescue," added W'Kabi.

Every pair of eyes in the room, including those of his own delegation, were fixed on M'Baku. A weaker man might have felt entrapped, but T'Chaka had once lectured all three of his children to remember the purpose for being surrounded by tribal chieftains, councilors, and ministers: to provide other perspectives. If you feel assailed from all directions, that's when it's most important to consider the possibility that you are wrong.

So a weaker man might have thought it shameful to lower his eyes and relent, but in T'Challa's perspective, M'Baku's esteem grew when he did so. "I will join the Black Panther's force, in the name of the Jabari and for the sake of all innocents taken by these traffickers."

A murmur of approval went through the room, and the tension (some of it) seeped away.

T'Challa beckoned to one of his aides. "Take the Jabari DNA samples to the medical center for testing. If any matches are found, their chieftain is to be notified at once."

M'Baku's aide surrendered the case, then M'Baku turned back to cast a critical eye at T'Challa and the rest of the assembly. "Who else takes part in these operations? Are all of our supporters of Wakandan blood, or have you gone outside our borders for aid?"

He was answered by suddenly-blank expressions from every direction.

*Now this part will be very awkward.*
The minute T'Challa and Shuri came in, Sam had a vibe that something was up - something possibly not good.

"Whether the Avengers still wish to join me in operations against human traffickers is each of your decision," the king told the group, though he was mostly addressing Steve. "However, I must caution you that the situation has grown more complicated due to Wakanda's...internal politics."

"Unfriendly eyes,' we heard," Sam said.

"Yes. By now, you've noticed that we're home to many tribes with their own history and traditions, and sometimes differing beliefs. Today, most of Wakanda's tribes exist together in peace and gladly aid each other and celebrate their differences. There are a few who...are not so accepting."

Princess Shuri rolled her eyes. "My brother means that Wakanda's tribes warred against each other over the throne, and a certain tribe lost the throne nearly thousands of years ago, but are still not over it."

T'Challa shot her a look that was...half-annoyed, half-amused, so her description must've been accurate.

"So I'm guessing one of those tribes is getting interested in current events?" said Steve.

T'Challa nodded. "Their chieftain is M'Baku, and he visited the palace today. His tribe is the Jabari, and they have never favored dealings with Wakanda's neighbors or the outside world. During my father's reign, their contact with other tribes and the central government was minimal. But their lands touch the border, and they are - wisely - beginning to question sudden disappearances of their people in the last few decades. So he is sent by his tribe to take part in my venture."

*Hm. So the king says no and this chief gets insulted, and that's an internal conflict nobody needs right now, Sam mused. Or the king says yes and maybe mends internal fences, but what's this isolationist tribe gonna think when they find a bunch of fugitive Avengers on the roster?*

"You reminded me a few weeks ago that you were the one in charge," Steve said, with a sly quirk to his smile. T'Challa didn't react, but Shuri smirked. "So I'd say it's your decision whether you want us to have any contact with this new guy."

"Ten-love," said Shuri, and now T'Challa glared at her. But Sam could tell he was having trouble not grinning.

"As it happens, I've been forced to have very similar conversations with M'Baku to the ones I've had with you about who is in charge of this task force, and I doubt that will be the last I have with either of you."

Sam couldn't resist. "Ten-all." Steve shot him a mock-wounded look - and that did it, every damn one of them started laughing, king and all. Even Bucky laughed.

"So it's been that kind of day for all of us," Sam observed, wiping his eyes. "Hell, I'm still in if you want me. Just let us know how or if you want us to have friendly chats with the new guy."

"I sincerely doubt any attempt to 'chat' will be friendly," T'Challa replied. "In fact, I'd be surprised if he wishes to speak with outsiders at all. But he's devoted to his people, as I am, and these abductions have enraged us all. He'll have plenty to say about your presence here, but I'll require that he say those things to me, not you. And work with you if necessary."

"If that works for you, it works for me," said Steve.
Bucky leaned forward. "I've been looking at some of the materials W'Kabi brought. Not just of the suspected external bases, but the sites of the abductions."

T'Challa lost all humor. "And? You've noticed a pattern?"

"Not exactly. More like the lack of one. There's nothing strategic about these kidnappings or the targets. So far, the only real increase turned up after Pretorius got his hands on your queen. Since then, it's been crimes of opportunity, and the perpetrators aren't serving any cause other than their own egos." Bucky scowled, looking disgusted. "They're wealthy, Western, and not even all that interested in world domination - not the way Hydra was, because in their minds, they're already there."

"So what do you conclude?" asked Shuri.

"That to them, this is a game. A really fucking sick game. The next step down from animal trophy hunting - well, to them, it's leveling up. They don't need to take people from Wakanda. There are other places, far lower risk for human traffickers. But that's why they do it: bragging rights." Bucky's eyes were dark and hot, and he looked back at the king and princess, whose gazes were even darker and hotter. "I'm sure we've all worked out what color they are, if not what countries they come from. They're white supremacists, closet racists, that kind of thing. This gets them off."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Finally, T'Challa said in a low voice, "My own investigators are reaching this same conclusion, but I'm pleased that with your own skills, you've come to it separately. That makes it more likely that we are correct."

"What can I do to help?"

"Join my strategists tomorrow. This may not be a concerted campaign by Hydra or its affiliates, but I suspect that many participants are also sympathizers to Hydra's aims. Your knowledge may be helpful."

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**SERPENT VALLEY, WAKANDA**

The next morning, the team got suited up and went with the guards to a compound deep in the jungle where the Wakandan military trained - and prepared their campaign. Sam and Clint were the only ones who might have been really recognizable as Avengers, and that was because of Sam's wings and Clint had worn black even beforehand. They all had masks now. Steve's wasn't all that dissimilar to the helmet he'd worn as Captain America; it was just entirely black, and he'd stopped shaving.

In a clearing surrounded by heavily-armed Wakandans, Sam got his first glimpse of this Jabari chieftain, M'Baku. And M'Baku got his first glimpse of T'Challa's foreign support.

Sam had had almost two years to learn Wakandan, but it was still hard to keep up when the native speakers really got excited, so he couldn't quite track what M'Baku said to T'Challa...but judging by the tone, it was the Wakandan equivalent of "Are you fucking kidding me!?"

Sam cleared his throat at the others, and jerked his head. Steve gave a polite nod to T'Challa that they all echoed before slipping off to the periphery of the gathering while the king and the chieftain argued.

Even Bucky wore a mask, similar to Clint's, having remarked to the aides, "It might be weird if the one white guy not covering his face is the most wanted fugitive in the world." He hid his metal arm under long sleeves and gloves. With his hair tucked behind his ears, Sam thought it just might be
possible that people wouldn't recognize the ex-Winter Soldier if they weren't expecting to see him.

Bucky flatly ignored the tableau between T'Challa and M'Baku and went on working with W'Kabi and Shuri as if nothing was going on. Sam ambled over to join them, and Steve soon followed.

Their next target was a wealthy compound in Indonesia, run by a bunch of American tax-dodgers. "The current owners aren't active Hydra," said Bucky. "But the location was, once. These names all show up in Romanoff's info dump from 2014, but too far back for a lot of 'em to be active now. These are retirees and their trust fund brats."

"Amusing themselves by kidnapping Wakandans in some kind of pseudo-safari?" Sam muttered. "Rich white people."

"Rich, bored, and paranoid white people," said Shuri. "The men who live in this place don't vacation in Monaco or the French Alps. They fancy themselves more adventurous, and little things like national borders and protected wildlife don't concern them. Why should the rights of human beings give them pause? Their fathers and grandfathers financed Hydra and totalitarian regimes in return for tax protections."

"Even if we don't find any of your people here, we'll find evidence," Sam agreed. "But getting in there's gonna be a challenge...for those of us who don't hang around with insects, anyway. What do you say, Tic-Tac?"

Scott's face mask was the only color remaining on any of their suits. "I need the red; vision gets a little weird when you're that small," he'd explained. Beyond the screens, M'Baku and T'Challa had fallen silent and were watching.

"Recon should be no problem," said Scott. "I'll go in with the bugs underground, but they might detect my recording device's signal."

"We'll replace it with our recording device," said T'Challa. "They will not detect our cameras. They use a large number of drones to patrol their perimeter, and closed-circuit cameras inside the complex. We'll hack the signals without raising any alarm, for any intelligence that can be gained before moving." He raised his eyebrows at M'Baku.

The Jabari chief said nothing, just eyed the Avengers, and masked or not, Sam had a feeling the guy was placing them, one by one. His Wakandan was good enough that he could pick up what T'Challa said to M'Baku. "You must decide now."

Without looking at the king, M'Baku answered curtly, "I will come."

Scott's recon mission and the drone-hacking operation went off without a hitch. And as T'Challa's intelligence team suspected, the compound had plenty of unwilling "staff" from all over the world. "I don't think Wakanda's the only place they like to have this 'sport' of theirs," Bucky mused, examining the images and recordings. "I'm hearing at least three different Arabic dialects, Hebrew, Spanish, Thai, Japanese, and Cantonese."

"There are also prisoners speaking Wakandan," growled W'Kabi. "I notice that only those captives who speak English are allowed above ground."

"Most of the prisoners are underground," Scott confirmed. His usually-cheerful demeanor was almost as grim as Bucky's. "There're some above ground...either they're not prisoners, or they're so far gone with Stockholm Syndrome that they're actually happy where they are."
"You did well with capturing faces," said Minister Zuri. "We are running our recognition program worldwide, trying to learn how many of these people are missing from their homes. So far nine have already been identified."

Bucky only planned to glance briefly at the missing person ads - until one of the faces, smiling casually, leapt out at him, and his heart leapt out of his chest.

Not all missions had been kills.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: With a new, horrible truth about Bucky's past in Hydra's hands revealed, T'Challa relents and allows him to join the mission against the human traffickers. Our heroes from Wakanda and the Secret Avengers take the fight abroad in defense of victims from many nations!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Minister Subira: Wakanda's senior minister of domestic and international diplomacy, former chieftainess of a Wakandan tribe closely allied with T'Chaka's government. Mid-80s, oldest councilor to the Wakandan throne. Widowed, mother of her tribe's current chieftainess.
Chapter Summary

With a new, horrible truth about Bucky's past in Hydra's hands revealed, T'Challa relents and allows him to join the mission against the human traffickers. Our heroes from Wakanda and the Secret Avengers take the fight abroad in defense of victims from many nations!

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the incredible feedback and discussion! Please keep it coming!

**Canon Notes:** I have some very specific ideas of what the Winter Soldier's "duties" were for Hydra and the types of missions he was generally given (other than just stealth murder), and this chapter begins to reveal some of them. More to follow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Three

SERPENT VALLEY, WAKANDA

"Eliminate eyewitnesses and extract the child alive. Deliver her unharmed to the rendezvous."

Rumlow had included pictures in the file. Family photos, school photos, children at play. Target: Mahsa Turani. Female, age seven.

The house had been guarded. With his guns on silencers, he'd eliminated the guards and made entry without waking most of the staff. "Parents are in New York for the 9/11 anniversary summit. They'll leave when they learn we've got her."

2011. The nanny had been awake and reading. She'd opened her mouth to scream, but the Soldier had snatched up the child and held a gun to her head. The child's heart had pounded under his hand, and the nanny had tearfully raised her hands. Compliance to protect the child. After he'd taped the child's mouth shut and bound her hands and feet, he'd beckoned the nanny over. She'd come willingly, assuming she would receive the same. Instead, he'd shot her between the eyes. She'd watched. Even through the tap on her mouth, she'd tried to scream and struggle, but he'd carried her in one arm out the window.

The girl had watched. Even through the tap on her mouth, she'd tried to scream and struggle, but he'd carried her in one arm out the window.

It had been nineteen miles to the rendezvous. Ordered to deliver her unharmed, the Soldier had uncovered her mouth and given her water. He'd spoken enough Persian to know what she said to him. She'd begged and cried for her parents, for her freedom. He'd ignored her. For the last few miles, she'd simply stared at him, half-terrified, half-fascinated.

Some of the rendezvous team had jeered - or leered - at the rendezvous, and the child had actually
tried to hang onto the Soldier, more frightened by them than by him. "Aww, did you make a friend?" Rumlow had laughed, yanking her loose.

As he walked away, he'd heard her begging and screaming. He hadn't looked back.

"Bucky? Hey." Hands touched his face.

Warm, damp air, the smell of stone and metal, but also vegetation. The sound of birds and insects. The murmur of confused voices.

There was something hard beneath his knees and feet. A dark stone floor.

Target: Mahsa Turani. Female, age seven. Extract alive, eliminate witnesses...oh God...

A semi-familiar face, a scruffy beard...oh, Steve. Steve looked strange with a beard. He'd tugged the mask off Bucky's face. "What is it?" he whispered. "What do you remember?"

"Mission," Bucky mumbled with a mouth that felt full of cotton. "I took a child. Had orders...deliver her unharmed. She was seven." So now she's a teenager. T'Challa's facial recognition still found her.

Only a few witnesses remained; T'Challa's people must have cleared the room fast. Great, I flashbacked in front of that rival chieftain. Minister Zuri remained, holding the damning picture. "This is the girl? Mahsa Turani?" Bucky could only nod. "Her family was involved in human rights movements in Iran. They are among many influential people who abruptly withdrew from the activities due to deaths and disappearances of their family members during the Arab Spring."

"Figures, Hydra wouldn't want Arab Spring to succeed," said Sam. "So she's alive. What happened to her family?"

"They are now living in Switzerland," said Zuri, reading the assembled file. "They spoke publicly of their daughter's abduction in 2011 and paid the demanded ransom, but she was never returned."

"They laughed," Bucky breathed. Steve cringed. "My handlers, when I turned her over...the way they were talking...like she was a toy."

"Fuck." Scott jumped up and walked out of the room. Sam followed and Bucky could still hear them through the closing doorway.

"Hey, man, that wasn't Barnes -"

"- I know, I know, I just...need a minute...fuck..."

The door closed. Bucky looked around and saw that T'Challa was there. "I'm sorry, if M'Baku saw."

"I will worry about him," said T'Challa.

Silence hung heavy over them all, so Bucky broke it. "I want...please, I need to go with you." I put her in there. I need to get her out. She's one of the only ones I can bring back.

T'Challa didn't answer for a long time. Steve kept a tight grip on Bucky's shoulders. Bucky held onto Steve's elbows and cursed how weak his left hand felt. Finally, the king said quietly, "Then you must go to Dr. Dahab immediately. Your arm must be completely calibrated and functional by the time we depart."

Maybe it was completely foolish to allow Bucky Barnes to participate in the raid itself. But T'Challa
simply couldn't find it in his heart to deny him.

The masks hadn't done much to prevent M'Baku from identifying the three Avengers and the former Winter Soldier, and T'Challa had his doubts that it would help once a camera caught them in public again. Still, it was better than nothing, and once the prisoners were liberated, even the most callous media or state officials would have a difficult time supporting the owners of that compound. Especially given its connection to Hydra.

*My people taken for sport. Children of activists were stolen by terrorists. Everyone who knows what is inside that compound will answer for it if it takes a hundred generations.*

Nine of the Wakandans rescued in the previous raids had been Jabari. M'Baku left Birnin Zana only long enough to retrieve their families, then rejoined the task force preparations. Dr. Dahab and a group of security officers sneaked Bucky in and out of the medical research center's technology unit to avoid the rescued captives still being treated on the upper floors, and spent hours working on his arm.

Before the plan for the raid was complete, Bucky returned to the task force with a faint, sly smile and challenged Okoye to a rematch.

They fought to a stalemate. Twice. Ayo beat him, but it was close, and T'Challa had no doubt that the entire Wakandan military and all the Dora Milaje would be lining up for hours for a bout if they hadn't all needed to get back to work. So Bucky joined the sharpshooter team to practice with their ICER rifles in between giving the planning team every Hydra alert code and defense scenario that he could remember.

"We will take as many of the captors alive as possible," said T'Challa. "They will answer for what they've done before the eyes of the world, and their victims."

"After our previous raids, they'll be on heightened alert, my king," W'Kabi warned.

"But as this is the refuge for at least some of their own families, they'll hesitate to destroy it," said Shuri.

"Destroy it, yes, but they won't hesitate to kill their prisoners or try to use them as hostages. If a standoff starts, we'll lose people," said Sam.

T'Challa returned to the palace for a brief goodbye to Jakarra and Shuri and Ramonda. "I trust the Avengers to support you more than I do M'Baku,"Jakarra grumbled when T'Challa again ordered his brother and sister to stay behind.

"If we didn't know they're holding at least two Jabari in that site, I might decline to take him, but we're certain we've identified one adult and one child from his lands. He has a right,"T'Challa said.

Ramonda remained very quiet whenever T'Challa visited, and he spoke only a little of his plans to her. But the morning the team left, she put her hands on his face. He remembered her doing that when he was little. "Your father would be very proud of you. As I am proud of you."

T'Challa kissed her hand. "I'll return soon."

**SUMBA ISLAND, INDONESIA**

Ten days later, T'Challa and his force were in full gear, quietly surrounding a compound on a beautiful, tropical island that to a casual observer would have appeared to be a mere wealthy vacation
resort. Their entire entry rested on the aim of the snipers and the vanguard of Scott Lang, who would quietly insert programming chips to the internal cameras and security systems.

At T'Challa's side was M'Baku of the Jabari. He still had few words for T'Challa and absolutely no words for the Avengers.

In the Indonesian jungle, it was nine long hours of waiting as Ant-Man crept from one camera to the next, one circuit board in the security room to the next, replacing components to give the task force complete control of the systems. Finally, all the tiny red lights on the schematic were green.

"All the locks are in place," whispered Scott's voice on the comm. "I'm moving into position at the main underground entry."

"All units, report ready," ordered Okoye.

"Snipers ready."

"Air support ready."

"Gate team ready."

"Medical ready."

T'Challa and M'Baku locked their helmets in place. Behind him, the man once known as Captain America was clad and helmeted entirely in black, with no mark of allegiance on his own armor - except that T'Challa had seen him quietly etching the stylized "A" of the Avengers onto the inside of his helmet.

T'Challa touched his earpiece. "Go."

Their assault was silent. Guards slumped unconscious in their watchtowers with instant sedative darts in their skin - and a few struck by arrows. The compound's air warning system remained inactive and showed nothing as a Wakandan stealth shuttle swept to deliver its troops to the roof of the buildings, and a smaller, shadowy winged figure flew down to one of the security buildings. T'Challa and M'Baku approached on foot, and they already had the doors open when the first cry went up.

"Hold everyone above ground even if they appear to be prisoners. Secure all entry points and internal entrances to the underground levels." They charged into the compound to be met by a flood of half-panicked, half-dressed private security and several screaming white civilians. "Civilian" being a term used loosely, since they clearly live here and must be well-aware of what takes place beneath their feet.

Bucky leapt down the wall from his sniper nest and began hauling the "civilians" off their feet, disarming the few who did have weapons and either tagging them with ICERs or slapping cuffs onto them and shoving them into a corner.

Inside the buildings was chaos and more screaming. T'Challa and Steve snagged M'Baku when he would have kept on pummeling a man who tried to hold a servant girl hostage. "Hold! He is down; leave him," T'Challa ordered. Steve pulled the man away and frisked him while M'Baku and T'Challa glared at each other, and hogtied him in addition to the magnetized shackles. He bound the sobbing girl more gently. "We use deadly force only in defense of lives!" T'Challa snapped at M'Baku as they headed into the lower levels.

Beneath the compound, Bucky and the Dora Milaje did resort to deadly force when several guards aimed their guns into the cells. The screams of women and children and the report of weapons were
deafening in the underground corridors.

Unsurprisingly, some of the denizens of the hive attempted to flee through the corridors into escape tunnels. They would find more of T'Challa's task force waiting at the tunnel exits, but they complicated everyone's lives by blowing one of the tunnel entrances, bringing part of the ceiling down on their own guards, T'Challa's team, and panicked prisoners.

T'Challa rolled clear of the falling rubble, pulling two children with him, and whirled around. "M'Baku!"

"Bucky, Sam!" shouted Steve.

Nakia crawled free, cursing and limping as she got to her feet, then the rubble shifted, and a silver arm appeared under a torn sleeve. T'Challa grabbed Bucky's hand, and as they pushed the concrete chunks aside, they found Sam Wilson and M'Baku hunched behind the worst of it under Steve's shield.

M'Baku looked befuddled, to say the least. "Are you hurt?" Sam asked him in Wakandan.

"No." M'Baku looked at T'Challa, and though his face was hidden behind the Panther's mask, T'Challa grinned. "I thank you." He hurried away from Sam without another word.

"Upper levels secured. All hostiles down," said Barton.

"Lower levels secured. All hostiles down," confirmed Okoye. "East escape tunnel still active."

"We have them," said Ayo, whose team was awaiting the group who'd blown the tunnel and run.

"Clear the building quickly. We'll sort the hostiles from the civilians later," T'Challa ordered.

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COIMBATORE, INDIA

All the unarmed men, women, and children found huddled below the complex were put on one plane; the guards and "civilians" who'd been basking in luxury above-ground went into another. Rather than return directly to Wakanda, T'Challa had selected a rendezvous at an Indian air cargo base, calling in favors that would be fulfilled judging by the number of prisoners who looked to be Indian citizens.

M'Baku scoured the darker-skinned prisoners in search of Wakandans, and soon had them identified. "They should not be held on foreign soil any longer. I want to take them home at once."

T'Challa nodded. "Take our wounded with you." He beckoned to the Avengers. "And my guests."

M'Baku couldn't very well complain about the Avengers' presence now, and he knew it. He nodded curtly at Sam and walked away.

But Bucky held back, his eyes on a teenaged girl who was staring at him with equal intensity. "Your highness, I want to stay. I need to get her home."

T'Challa hesitated. "You can trust us to protect her, my friend," Okoye said.

"I do trust you, but this is my duty. I owe it to her." He met T'Challa's eyes through their masks. "Please."

T'Challa motioned him out of earshot. Bucky had made impressive progress in learning Wakandan,
given that he'd been in stasis for the first year on their soil, but he wasn't completely fluent. And
T'Challa wanted to make sure he was understood, so he switched to English. "I understand that you
feel a duty, and I don't blame you. But it won't be possible to return the child that her parents lost, nor
give her back the last seven years."

Bucky looked down. "I know. I just...please, I need to do this much. It may be the only chance I ever
have."

It would risk T'Challa's exposure as the one harboring Barnes. She's already seen him, and by now
they all know their rescuers come from Wakanda. It was an absurd waste of resources for one man to
ease his conscience. His arm is already partially exposed, through no fault of his own. It won't be
long before the connection is made between James Barnes and myself. T'Challa's concern should be
with his own people, not indulging the whims of foreigners. He would see to it that all these non-
Wakandan victims were safely delivered to the United Nations, and that their captors were delivered
to justice, but beyond that...

"They were both victims. If I can help one of them find peace..."

"If your guys can drop us in Germany, I can get her home," Bucky insisted.

"And after that, where will you go? Back to Wakanda?" T'Challa eyed Bucky.. "Or The Hague?"
Behind the mask, he saw Bucky's ears turn red. "It's your decision, but if you choose The Hague, be
kind enough to tell Steve. He deserves to know."

"I will," Bucky sighed and closed his eyes. "I...I'll come back. Wanda's not ready for us to join her
yet. I don't like it, but I'll respect it. Maybe I can help you get some of the other prisoners back to
their families."

That was good enough, and as close to peace as could be had for a victim who'd been forced to
destroy so many lives. "I will send one of our pilots to take you in. We can get you to Switzerland,
close to their home without being detected. When you've done...what you wish to do, call them, and
they will retrieve you."

"Thank you, your highness," Bucky murmured. "Thank you."

"Good luck, my friend." T'Challa briefly gripped Bucky's arm, then walked away. Steve hurried past
him, correctly sensing that something was up, and an anxious pantomime ensued, but in the end,
Bucky persuaded his friend to leave with Scott, Sam, and Clint.

I wonder, M'Baku, what do you think of these foreigners now? T'Challa thought, smiling to himself.
Probably not much, but their value in combat was unmistakable to any honest observer. To say
nothing of the fact that Sam Wilson had saved M'Baku, if not his life, at least from serious injury
under tons of falling debris.

With the Avengers and M'Baku away, T'Challa surreptitiously watched Bucky approach the girl. He
was still masked, but addressed her in English. "Do you remember me?"

She stood slowly and warily, but with a courage that impressed T'Challa. In a strange way, it
reminded him of Ramonda. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. For what I did to you. If you want, I'll take you to your parents. Right now. They've
never stopped searching for you."

Her eyes widened. Several other girls, who also appeared to be from the Middle East, whispered to
each other. Mahsa Turani. T'Challa had learned the names of many of the captives before the
mission began, but this one was hard to forget after hearing Bucky's story. She now had every reason in the world to hate and fear the man standing before her, to run from him.

Instead, when he held out his hand, offering her a choice, she took it. She asked him something in her own language, and Bucky answered. Whatever he said made the other girls perk up eagerly.

He paused as they passed T'Challa. "She asked what will happen to the others. I told her they'll all get to go home."

"They will," T'Challa promised. "We will find all of their families, and see to it..."...that their captors are punished? Does that include the Winter Soldier? He didn't finish his sentence, but it was enough to ease the girl's mind, and she left with Bucky for the escort shuttle.

M'Baku had taken all of the Wakandan prisoners home. That left T'Challa and his task force to guard the foreign captives - and hold the captors until international troops arrived.

"Hold our prisoners on their plane. We'll bring the victims outside for some air," he decided. "Begin taking their names and learning their origin, if they remember. We must ensure that they all are returned home, if they still have one."

"What of those who don't have homes any longer?" asked Okoye.

T'Challa, his father, and grandfather had offered asylum to victims of African origin before, even if they weren't Wakandan. Until now, the Avengers and the Barton family were the sole exception to that long-standing rule. Few of the foreign victims here were white, but many weren't African either. There were many from the Middle East and South Asia, some who spoke Spanish and must have been South or Central Americans. Others spoke languages that none of the task force could place, and origins that T'Challa and even the Avengers could only guess at. Some remote places, perhaps indigenous communities in larger nations. It would amuse these barbarians to target even their own country's native peoples.

He put the decision off. "I'll decide once we know how many no longer have homes."

Even when the Indian military authorities arrived, T'Challa stayed. He would own what he'd done and the actions he'd chosen to take. According to his team on the second plane, the denizens of the compound were whining and protesting their treatment. "They have food and water and ventilation and access to the toilet," Ayo huffed. "What right do they have to demand more than they gave to their captives?"

"In the eyes of white, wealthy Americans without conscience, you'll find they think they have far more rights," T'Challa replied.

Once the reporters began to line the airfield, T'Challa removed his helmet, and it was not long before the familiar sound of rockets and American rock music rang through the air, and Iron Man roared down to land on the tarmac next to T'Challa. "Nice catch, your highness."

"This is not a 'catch,'" T'Challa snapped. Then he sighed. He had no quarrel with Stark today. He shouldn't take out his ill humor on the man who undoubtedly only wanted to help. "Nineteen people in the compound we raided yesterday were from my country. I've already sent them home. The rest of these, we must still find their homes, or learn if they no longer have any. Their captors are all aboard that plane, and I'm not feeling terribly charitable towards them."

Stark shed his armor and turned his face slightly away from the cameras. "Were our crew with you?"

"Yes, and of great assistance. They've gone with my people." He didn't mention Bucky.
"'kay. I think I can help you with getting the guys in charge of that creepy little spa where they belong, if you like," Stark offered, gesturing to the second plane.

"Gladly, but I'd rather have the victims safely removed from their sight first. My prisoners have access to all basic needs, which is more than they gave the people they abducted for sport or profit."

Stark smirked. "Yeah, they can wait. Let's see what I can do to help place some of these kids."

With no helmet to hide behind, T'Challa couldn't roll his eyes. *Always you saunter in without asking whether anyone actually wants your help.* Or maybe that was still too harsh. After all, T'Challa had been daunted before at having responsibility for so many people who weren't his own. Well, he still counted himself an Avenger. Maybe that connection could be useful for more than just vengeance against his father's killer.

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**BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA**

To Steve's surprise (but intense relief) Bucky made it back to Wakanda before T'Challa and the rest of his task force did. He swallowed the questions he wanted to ask; Bucky looked like hell, and didn't seem in the mood to talk. Scott asked, "How'd it go?" only to have Bucky turn around and look at him. He raised his hands and said, "Sorry," then beat a hasty retreat.

Steve quietly put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. What was there to say? What was there to ask? "You got her back to her parents?" Bucky nodded.

*What'd they think, seeing the man who abducted their child suddenly show up and bring her back to the doorstep?* Somehow, Steve doubted they'd been grateful. Why should they be?

"I can leave you alone if you want." Bucky shook his head. "Okay." They sat down on the grass of the private gardens, just against each other's sides, and said nothing else. Sometimes, Steve felt Bucky tremble and thought he might cry. He never did, but Steve rubbed his back anyway.

It was another day before T'Challa and his team returned. Steve and the team watched the international news covering the raid and the rescue of over four hundred men, women, and children. There were some big names among the residents, whose families began loudly and tearfully protesting their innocence and their ignorance of what had been going on underground. The six minors who'd actually lived there were sent back to the US, but the adults were cooling their heels in Indian prison while sixteen countries fought over who got extradition. (The captives actually came from a total of twenty-one countries, but five of them, including Iran, had had a vested interest in seeing the relatives of certain political opponents disappear, and didn't seem interested in bringing the kidnappers to justice.)

Seven of the Wakandan captives had turned out to be from M'Baku's tribe. He'd herded them out of the group at the hospital and disappeared with them as soon as the doctors let them go, but not before casting another vaguely-puzzled look at Sam.

"What's he so confused about?" Sam wondered. "Did he honestly think I'd just let him get crushed?"

"Given the Avengers' reputation? Maybe," said Clint. "We can all count ourselves damn lucky that the actual ruler of Wakanda's more open-minded."

Bucky didn't say anything. Bucky said almost nothing for the first few days he was back. In a weird way, when Steve watched the news from The Hague, Bucky's mood seemed reflected by Wanda, who was getting the third degree by the increasingly-zealous prosecutor and some deeply embittered
victims from Sokovia. She seemed less resolved and more resigned when she testified, and looked increasingly tired.

"For fuck's sake, Zemo didn't get questioned this damn hard," Clint fumed. "And unlike Wanda, he was trying to butcher people!"

"I'll talk to Tony," said Steve. "She may not agree, but maybe it's time I showed up and took some of the heat."

The guys looked at each other reluctantly. Bucky was outside, out of earshot. "You know he'll insist on going with you, though," said Sam.

"Yeah, believe me. I know." In a lot of ways, that's the only reason I haven't gone already.

They didn't see much of T'Challa for the next few days. He was still handling both domestic and international shockwaves over breaking up the human trafficking rings. President Bunt tweeted a threat to invade Wakanda to "rescue the American hostages," then deleted the tweet to correct it to a threat to invade India. Then Australia's prime minister had words with him about the fifty Aboriginal Australians who'd been rescued, and Bunt vowed that he'd "extradite those kidnappers to you with my own two hands" in front of a live microphone.

"Never a dull moment with Ronald Bunt, is there?" mused Bucky.

"What?" snorted Scott. "'Are you not entertained'?"

"I'm many things when Ronald Bunt starts talking, but 'entertained' is not one of them," Steve muttered.

They all spoke too soon. An American jet came rolling into Wakandan airspace a week after T'Challa returned, ferrying Congressman (formerly General) Dixon Wallace, demanding to meet with King T'Challa.

Steve and Sam got a little overanxious and went rushing to the palace to intercede with T'Challa, who gave them a disgusted look once they were led in to meet with him. "Yes, gentlemen, I absolutely intend to shoot the plane down and kill everyone on board."

"We, uh..." Steve felt himself turning red and Princess Shuri quietly started laughing. "We never thought that..." Not really, anyway.

"The situation is under control," said Minister Zuri with the exaggerated patience of a harried parent. "Congressman Wallace will land where he is permitted to land, and will find that his instruments fail to record any images of the ground - and that Wakanda's weather patterns fail to even allow visuals of the ground while he's in the air. He will give up and leave out of sheer boredom in a day or two when we don't scurry to attend him."

"Sorry, your highness," said Sam. "Seriously, we were more worried about what he might do."

T'Challa took pity on them and grinned. "We know Dixon Wallace's reputation, but even he knows better than to start an armed conflict. This is a bluff that will be very politely called."

"What's to stop him from claiming otherwise?" Sam pointed out.

"Oh, there will be plenty of cameras. The airstrip where they'll land is in the savanna west of Lake Turkana, populated by herding villages but surrounded by a strong fence to keep animals off the runway - just what Americans with a particular stereotype imagine when they think of Africa," he
added, with a pointed look at Steve.

Ouch.

Steve slunk out of the palace and hid in his room for the rest of the day, especially after getting "I told you so" from both Clint and Bucky. But they all watched the broadcast and found that the Wakandans were no strangers to dealing with incursions like this one. The plane landed on a runway in the middle of (apparently) nowhere, and fascinated locals came to take pictures with their phones. The air traffic controller at the airstrip spoke no English other than airport commands (or at least he pretended not to) but chattered effusively in Wakandan at Congressman Wallace and kept saying that word had been sent to the king.

But he wouldn't let anyone leave the airstrip, and there was nowhere in sight that Wallace could've gone even if he'd managed to get past the fence.

So all the media had to go on was a bunch of bored-looking US servicemen sitting in the shade of the plane and Congressman Wallace yelling on his phone in the little control tower, and Wakandans from nearby villages taking selfies in front of the fence.

After Bunt tweeted that Wallace was making a fool of himself, the little expeditionary force packed up and left.

"Of course, they've begun to realize that our capabilities are far beyond our appearances," said Prince Jakarra. "But that doesn't mean we're simply going to announce them. It's not the American military's business how we conduct our internal affairs. My brother was completely open about our efforts to rescue our own citizens abroad, and that's all anyone is entitled to know."

"Can't argue with that," said Steve.

But late the following evening, it was Shuri who called the guest house in a rush. "Steve. Turn on the television. Wanda Maximoff has been hospitalized."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: In The Hague, Vision realizes that Wanda's lethargy isn't just a sign of depression, and rushes to take action whether the guards like it or not. In Wakanda, our heroes decide the time has come to return to the outside world and face the music.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Mahsa Turani: Iranian girl whose parents were supporters of Arab Spring; kidnapped by the Winter Soldier at Hydra's command in 2011 and held in the Sumba Island compound until age 14, when Bucky rescued her and returned her to her family.

Ronald Bunt: President of the United States, elected in 2016. Likes to Twitter and play golf and shoot his mouth off. No, he's not based on anyone in the Real World. No, really.
Chapter Summary

In The Hague, Vision realizes that Wanda's lethargy isn't just depression and rushes to take action whether the guards like it or not. In Wakanda, our heroes decide the time has come to return to the outside world and face the music.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: My dear readers, my deepest apologies for this long, unexpected hiatus. This may not have been the worst five-month period of my life...but probably among the worst. I had to take mental health breaks from pretty much everything that didn't pay the bills. I'm hoping to resume regularish updates now on this story as well as Character & Fitness for my Pacific Rim readers. Thank you all for your understanding, and here's a long chapter to make up for it.

Previous Chapter Recap: After Wanda turned herself in to the International Criminal Court, the remaining Secret Avengers and T'Challa's people joined forces with M'Baku of the Jabari on another mission against human trafficking. Bucky, initially barred for secrecy, was allowed to join after he remembered one of the victims in Hydra-funded compound the team was targeting. The mission was a success, and Sam wielded Captain America's shield to save M'Baku's life, giving M'Baku a lot to think about. Bucky found a girl he'd been sent to kidnap as the Winter Soldier 7 years before and took her back to her family, but wouldn't speak of what happened. Then our heroes got the alarming news that Wanda has been hospitalized.

Canon Note: Elizabeth (Betsy) Braddock, aka Psylocke/Captain Britain, is one of the X-Men, a British-Japanese mutant with psionic powers of telekinesis and telepathy that exceed even Wanda's. This fic headcanons that she's an MI6 and Interpol agent (swiped from the great Minisinoo's The Room With The Computer, a Harry Potter/X-Men Movieverse crossover) forced into the open by the Sokovia Accords. I headcanon (not sure if it's real canon) that the Winter Soldier was sent more than once against Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters and other secret mutant sanctuaries, but the missions failed despite his escape unharmed - and Hydra never figured out why. Nor did Bucky. Haven't decided whether I'm going to add those details to this fic yet - it's already quite long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Four
Vision had grown increasingly worried about Wanda's emotional state, and finally decided to confront her outright the day she stopped paying attention to the courtroom proceedings altogether.

Some humans, especially the young, found legal proceedings very dull, he knew. For Wanda, they were also emotionally difficult, as she was either required to be questioned harshly about what she knew about Baron Strucker, Hydra, and Ultron's intentions, or listen to the painful testimony of the victims.

When Vision arrived at her room, Wanda was picking at her meal, which appeared to have come from the kitchens downstairs rather than the one on her floor. Up until now, all Vision's observations were that she loved to cook. Yet she'd immured herself in her room and taken the rather bland cafeteria meals instead for the better part of a week.

She looked very tired when he came in through the door (without waiting for her to open it). She didn't even scold him. "Oh, hello, Vis."

He didn't bother with small talk. "Wanda, I'm concerned about you."

She didn't look at him, just smiled distantly, as if distracted. "So is everyone else, haven't you been paying attention?"

"I have," Vision said sharply, touching her hand. That alarmed him. Her skin temperature suggested a body temperature lower than it ought to be, as if her blood pressure was low. "You haven't. I've been concerned that you're suffering from depression, but now looking closer - Wanda, I think you're ill."

She blinked, but seemed to be having trouble focusing on what he was saying. Her eye movement, her respiration...he raced through his medical sources, and yes, all indicated symptoms of either illness...or a powerful depressant medication. Or poison. She submitted to having her forehead touched, and let him take her pulse without a complaint or question. He liberated a small notepad and began jotting down his observations...in the barely half-hour it took, she fell asleep next to her plate.

"Wanda?" Vision shook her. She didn't respond. He turned and flew through the wall, slapping the emergency alarm outside. The four guards for that floor came hurrying down. "Miss Maximoff is experiencing signs of physical distress. Her vital signs are low and she's lost consciousness."

"I'll radio for medical assistance," said one of them.

Vision returned to Wanda's room, disregarding the prohibition on tapping into security communications. The guards did keep their word and radioed that Miss Maximoff appeared to be having a medical issue, but to Vision's frustration, the response from the central authority fell far short of the urgency of the situation. "Command says she can visit the Court's medical facility when it opens at six am."

Vision had already projected the current progression of Wanda's symptoms. By morning, in fact, within the next few hours, her blood pressure and pulse would have reached a critical point where insufficient oxygen was reaching her brain, and she would be in danger of permanent damage or death.

He brought his written notes to the guards and repeated his demand: "Miss Maximoff is unconscious and unresponsive and must be transported to an emergency medical facility now. Her condition is serious and deteriorating, and she will be in critical condition before morning."
The guard, a young American who at least didn't seem as scornful as some of his seniors, looked helpless. "Sorry, sir, our orders are to wait until morning."

Vision looked the four men over, seeing resolution in their faces. The other three saw no cause for concern, and had no investment in Wanda's survival, let alone her health or comfort.

Vision did. And it was soon clear that the most the security guards were willing to do was send a nurse practitioner from a local overnight clinic to check Wanda's vitals. ETA two hours. Unacceptable.

Vision located the nearest hospital with a fully-equipped emergency ward and returned to Wanda's room. He lifted her carefully and cradled her head on his shoulder, then turned to the living room window. With a few carefully-aimed shots at its seals and mountings, the window simply fell out. Vision allowed the guards to rush in at the noise, and they stared open-mouthed at the sight of him with Wanda's limp body in his arms.

"I repeat, Miss Maximoff requires immediate emergency medical attention. I'm taking her for that purpose."

He turned away, ignoring the guards' shouts and threats, and flew out the window.

They startled the staff and civilians outside the Wassenar Hospital, but Vision carried Wanda into the emergency ward and called in Dutch for assistance. To their credit, the medics brushed aside whatever alarm or confusion they felt and rushed forward to assess their unconscious patient.

By the time the ICC's security authorities arrived, Wanda was already in the intensive care ward, and two doctors and a team of nurses and assistants were already in her room. The hospital security waylaid the ICC's authorities, insisting, as Vision had, that their patient was in serious distress and at risk of death without immediate treatment.

Vision simply ignored the guards' questions.

He stayed close to Wanda in the event that she might awaken and panic, causing an incident with her powers, but the longer he observed, he could see how unlikely that was. The doctors put her on oxygen and stimulants to restore and maintain a safe pulse and respiration rate, and drew blood in search of the cause.

"This appears to be drug-induced," the senior physician informed Vision and the American guards in English. "We've taken blood samples to identify the cause, but you should begin an investigation at once. Miss Maximoff has been poisoned."

"I have noticed changes in her behavior for several weeks," Vision said. "I believed they were merely indications of stress and depression, but it is possible that she has been exposed to a drug or poison for an extended period of time."

The guards started to mutter about it being impossible, then Everett Ross dodged through them, followed by Foggy Nelson. "Did I hear the word 'poison' right?" Nelson demanded.

"You did, Mr. Nelson. Agent Ross, while the physicians haven't yet isolated the exact drug, the most likely delivery would have been her food," Vision said. The doctors nodded.

Ross looked at Wanda, his jaw working, then turned and snapped at the guards, "Get the witness facility and all supply facilities on lockdown now. Every person who has ever had contact with anything Wanda Maximoff has touched, eaten, drunk, or breathed - guards, switchboard operators, deliverymen, cooks, repairmen, plumbers, not a goddamn one of them is to leave the area,
do you understand?"

Only when they'd rushed out did he turn back to Vision. "I trust Mr. Vision won't be penalized for seeking emergency services?" Nelson asked coldly.

"Hell, no. In fact, I just sent a message to Tony Stark. Either whoever did this got poison past our security, or it was an inside job. Either way, everyone who was on her security detail is now off it and not coming near her. So that leaves the Avengers," said Ross. He gave Vision a wry smile. "I trust you won't mind keeping an eye on her?"

"I require no sleep or nutrition," said Vision. "Rather, I would insist on it. I also suggest that Mr. Stark be permitted to station one or two of his suits here. They're capable of scanning for toxins even beyond my own abilities."

"I'll talk to hospital security. It'll happen." Ross sighed. "Damn it. Once she wakes up, I've got some groveling apologies to make. This should not have happened, to a defendant or a witness in any court. When I find out who did it, they're gonna be up on charges themselves."

"Suspects?" asked Nelson. "The obvious one is Zemo. Not all of his former associates have been found."

"Yeah, that's my first thought too - hell, I'd actually be relieved if that's all it turns out to be. Let me deal with that. You prepare whatever motions you need to halt the proceedings - I'll sign off to authorize the Avengers and Stark's tech as the only trustworthy protection for her."

Ross turned to Vision. "What've they said about her prognosis?"

"She has been stabilized, but until the poison can be isolated, they can't be sure how long her recovery will take, or what will be necessary to eliminate it from her system," Vision said. "Miss Maximoff's metabolism is drastically different from any ordinary human's, down to the manner in which her cells process energy."

Tony Stark had received his message and was now on his way - in his armor, with two suits crossing the Atlantic. "Mr. Stark is preparing all the medical workup information available, although we're both concerned about the security of that information."

Ross leaned towards him. "Do whatever you need to do to vet the staff at this hospital. Any red flags, let me know."

BIRNIN ZANA, WAKANDA...

"She's stable and no longer deteriorating," he reported. "But the doctors agree she has been poisoned - repeatedly - by adulterated food."

James Barnes was angrier than T'Challa had ever seen him. "Sons of bitches. I don't believe Zemo could pull this off, at least not without help from somebody in charge of her protection detail."

"Vision, Stark, and Romanoff agree. A report will be made to the Court's panel this evening; the judges are highly agitated that a defendant and witness was nearly killed while in custody. All of her security detail have been detained."

"That includes a number of Americans, which I'm afraid President Bunt is expressing his usual form of disagreement with, but Sharon Carter of the CIA is publicly backing the choice, saying this is too severe a security breach to take lightly."

"I need to go up there," Steve whispered. T'Challa wasn't surprised.
Bucky folded his arms, and T'Challa knew what was coming. "We do. She wanted to face the Court alone; she's done that, and someone - possibly more than one - almost took her out. Once I'm up there, she'll be a far smaller, far less controversial target."

Steve looked stricken, but he didn't attempt to argue. Sam, Clint, and Scott exchanged long looks. T'Challa said carefully, "Where you go after leaving Wakanda is and has always been each of your decisions, although I do ask that you do all in your power to avoid exposing my involvement." The men nodded. "I can arrange discreet transportation as close as possible to The Hague, where Mr. Stark or Agent Romanoff can safely bring you the rest of the way. However, you must realize that you may not be allowed to see her."

Bucky sighed. "I hate to say it, man, but the king's got a point," said Sam. "The minute any of us – especially the two of you – turn up, the whole planet's gonna scrutinize our every movement since Berlin, and a lot of pro-Accords, anti-Avengers, or anti-Winter-Soldier people have guessed that we've had some powerful allies helping hide us. Nobody important has pointed the finger at Wakanda - so far."

But T'Challa raised a hand. "You shouldn't take it as a catastrophe if I am found out. It was a risk I chose to take from the beginning, and if it does happen, I'll deal with the consequences. I know what she means to you."

Clint was shifting on his feet, as if physically responding to the pull in two directions T'Challa knew had to be on his mind: should he stay here with his wife and children, or go to Wanda's side?

Shuri was upset by the news; she liked Wanda and was outraged that the girl had put herself into the hands of an unsympathetic international tribunal only to be poisoned. It both surprised and pleased T'Challa to notice how many of his own people were angry and distressed on Wanda Maximoff's behalf. Even among those Wakandans who had no idea T'Challa had been sheltering the Avengers, opinions about Wanda and her teammates had grown more sympathetic.

He left Steve and his friends to talk amongst themselves. Several hours later, Shuri had joined T'Challa when the Secret Avengers asked to see T'Challa again. The group was a little formal about it, which on its own told T'Challa and Shuri of their decision.

"Your highness, none of us can begin to repay your generosity," said Steve.

T'Challa nodded acknowledgment. "I take it some of you will be leaving us." He looked at Clint. "Your wife and children are free to remain safely in the sanctuary of Wakanda for as long as you wish, and they will be under my protection."

"Thank you, your highness," said Clint. "My wife and I've talked it over, and we'd like to take you up on that. I'm going to The Hague to support the rest of the team; it'll ease my mind no end knowing they're here."

"They'll be safe," Shuri promised. "You are all going to The Hague, then?"

"All except me," said Scott. "I've been away from my daughter too long. If the feds want to arrest me when I get home, they can do it, as long as I can see her first."

"We can arrange for you to arrive and visit her before anyone sees you have returned to the U.S.," T'Challa told him. He looked at Sam and raised his eyebrows.

"The rest of us are heading to the ICC. They can take their pound of flesh if they want it," he said. "I stand by everything I did with this team."
Judging by the way the rest of the Avengers suddenly looked down, it occurred to T'Challa that perhaps none of the others could look back on their choices and actions with no remorse. T'Challa certainly couldn’t.

THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS

Tony knew they were coming; T'Challa subtly warned him. So he, Nat, Rhodey, and Vision and his suits were all there at the hospital to talk down the security guards from freaking out when three fugitive Avengers and one ex-Winter Soldier came through the doors. Hospital personnel sputtered, but Tony and Nat reassured them, and persuaded the staff to let the unarmed visitors up to the high security floor.

Vision regarded Rogers and Barnes with only a little suspicion. "She is still comatose, I'm afraid."

"What do we know? Is there a lead on who did this?" Steve asked.

Tony nodded, but Nat beat him to it. "It isn't being made public yet. Steps are being taken to secure the suspects. The important thing is they can't get to her now."

"What was it?" Sam asked, peering past Vision at Wanda's door.

"An anti-psychotic sedative, similar to what was administered during transportation to the Raft," said Vision. That alone probably identified the suspects. "However, her metabolism didn't process it as an ordinary human's would, and it was accumulating in her system, causing the effects to increase."

"Another meal, and she'd have passed out and never woken up," said Nat.

Steve's eyes blazed, and Barnes too stared past Vision and the Iron Sentries at the door. "I'm turning myself in. Before I do...even if she's asleep, can I see her?"

Vision and Rhodey looked startled. Right, they hadn't been privy to much that'd gone on in Wakanda, though Vision had certainly worked out that Wanda might have had a hand in freeing Barnes from Hydra's conditioning. Tony and Nat had never mentioned how close the pair had gotten.

Vision and Rhodey looked at each other, then at Tony and Nat, and it was Nat who nodded. Tony ordered the Iron Sentries to stand down.

Wanda looked like hell, on oxygen and IVs and tubes, hooked up to a dozen machines. Tony heard Steve's breath catch at the sight of her, and Sam and Clint too made little noises of anguish. Barnes didn't make a sound, but when Tony couldn't resist stealing a look - whoa.

For the first time, James fucking Barnes looked as young as Steve. Tony had realized back in Wakanda that Wanda cared a lot about the guy (even without that declaration of entirely-platonic love that Tony'd been totally justified in misinterpreting!)...but it hadn't really occurred to him that it might be mutual.

Steve, Sam, and Clint all held back to let Bucky take the chair at Wanda's bedside, and the same flesh hand that had strangled Tony's mom on a dark street touched Wanda's head with utter gentleness. Moreover...she reacted. Just the littlest turn of her face toward Bucky, but her eyes fluttered, and the readings on the monitors jumped.

"Hey, kid," said Clint softly. The monitor readings jumped again, if not as much. He reached past Steve to pat her hand. "You just relax, okay? We're all here, keeping an eye on you. You're safe."
In the hallway, the security guards were chattering, and Tony heard Everett Ross's voice. "I'll deal with this," he muttered, and slipped out.

Ross, his path blocked by Rhodey and the Iron Sentries, was trying his best to be intimidating and failing miserably. More like a housewife trying to scold adult kids, hands on his hips. "Did I hear right? Four out of five are in that room including the Winter Soldier?"

"Yep," said Rhodey, unsympathetic. "All unarmed and haven't lifted a finger to harm her - unlike the people you assigned to her."

"Yeah, yeah. Relax, I'm not here to arrest any of 'em. Can't." Ross looked a bit ragged, come to think of it. Tony raised his eyebrows. "The Court has just officially withdrawn the credentials of all American security personnel. We no longer have any authority whatsoever to involve ourselves in any case, any defendant, or any witness."

"So it was us," Rhodey concluded.

Ross sighed and nodded. "For what it's worth - and I know it's not much - that order didn't come from the CIA. Sentinel personnel were assigned to the ICC cases involving the Avengers. They may not be operating under the authority of my name-twin anymore, but they share his ideals. We're still working on where the decision came from; it might've been from the guys on the ground. For 'security purposes' to keep her from suddenly becoming aggressive."

Rhodey actually seemed to inflate. Tony half-expected him to turn green as he took a step towards Ross. "Do...you...realize...how much...credibility the United States government and military have just lost when it comes to international law enforcement, Agent?"

"Believe me, Colonel, the damage this has done to our intelligence apparatus is foremost on my mind," Ross said. "I haven't slept in seventy-two hours, I've got people screaming at me in eleven different languages every time I pick up the phone, and when they shut up long enough, I'm screaming at everybody else in eleven different languages. Heads are gonna roll for this screw-up."

Rhodey was unimpressed. "And not a milisecond of compassion spent noticing that a twenty-three-year-old woman is in a coma as a result."

"Compassion for suspects isn't in my job description, Rhodes. Deal with it."

Rhodey would've pushed the issue, but alarmed murmurs drew Tony's attention behind him, and he realized something was going on in Wanda's room. He and Rhodey hurried back, but the Iron Sentries barred Ross from following. "Aw, Stark, come on!"

"Sorry, Agent, I've programmed 'em," Tony replied. "Nobody without compassion gets near her."

He wasn't sure what he expected, but found Barnes trying to escape the chair beside Wanda's bed - and a trail of red light holding him there like a handcuff. The rest of the team were halfway between laughter and alarm as Barnes spoke Sokovian to Wanda, obviously trying to persuade her to let go.

"She's not fully conscious," said Vision, examining the monitors. "I fear she simply senses your presence and doesn't want you to leave." There was a strange edge to his voice, but Tony didn't have time to really ponder it.

"Well, that complicates things," said Steve, grinning. But he dropped his smile and looked past Tony and Rhodey. "How long can we keep Ross and the rest of the goons at bay?"

"Ross'll stay at bay as long as we need him to," Tony told them. "He's not passing the suits. But
"I know, I know, this wasn't in the plan," muttered Barnes, pulling in vain. "Steve, what the hell do I do? She won't let go!"

Clint considered the scene, then said, "Everybody chill for a second. Let me make some calls. I know a few people."

As Tony feared, a larger group of special forces from multiple countries (excluding, to his amusement, the US) was soon surrounding the hospital. Rhodey and Natasha smooth-talked the nervous hospital staff, who peeked in and saw the very befuddled Winter Soldier unable to free himself from Wanda Maximoff's telekinetic grip, and most people actually in the hospital calmed down a great deal.

Tony greased a few palms, helped reassure the hospital's honchos, and with the Avengers backing them, they refused to evacuate the building or allow international SWAT teams to simply storm the place. "Mr. Barnes has made no aggressive action!" the hospital president informed one of the military leaders (in front of a slew of cameras). "Due to her incapacitation from poison, Ms. Maximoff can't understand verbal communication, and she's simply reacting to Mr. Barnes' presence by holding onto him telekinetically."

"Is she hurting him?" a reporter asked, actually sounding concerned.

"No, no, nothing like that," Tony said quickly. "But he's not willing to risk hurting her to make her let go."

The woman with purple hair, passing through the crowd with credentials that startled even the special forces personnel, caught his attention, and Clint came to meet her. Curious, Tony slipped away from the tableau and followed. "This is Betsy Braddock, British intelligence," Clint said. "We've worked together a few times."

"I know you," Tony recalled. "You're a mutant, on the Accords Index."

"I wasn't exactly given a choice about being on that Index," she said, shooting Tony a reproachful look.

"Ouch."

Rhodey knew her too, and shook her hand warmly. "Betsy, good to see you. I don't suppose this means the committee's approved you?"

"Not yet. For some reason, psionic mutants with powers of suggestion make politicians nervous," she replied. Rhodey grinned. "Now, if you'll allow it, I think I can persuade young Miss Maximoff to let go of her friend."

Rhodey looked past her at Tony and nodded. "She's good. Let her in." That was more than good enough for Tony, so he cleared her to pass the Iron Sentries. (Ross tried to slip in, but was promptly blocked again. Tony figured he didn't have to do that. It was probably safe to let the guy pass, but frustrating Ross was fun.)

When Barnes looked up, he spotted Braddock, and his eyes widened. Steve froze. "You know each other?"

"Uh-oh. "Sergeant Barnes," said Braddock, her voice not as cold as it might have been if she'd ever
gone against the Winter Soldier. "I'm pleased to meet you under such better circumstances."

Barnes swallowed hard and looked down. "I...I know you, but I don't remember...where."

_Damn._ That had to be absolute shit for the poor bastard. Tony doubted there was any risk of her taking a swipe at Barnes, but Steve got to his feet, shifting his weight in anticipation of having to throw himself in front of his BFF. Braddock held up a hand. "Don't be alarmed, please; as a telepath myself, I was well aware of your complete lack of agency when you were, ah, deployed against people under my protection twenty years ago."

Barnes looked young again as he raised his eyes to hers. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No. If anything, we'd apologize to you for having been unable to rescue you. We did try." Barnes looked down again and shrugged. Steve's eyes filled, and he went around the bed to put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Now let me see what I can do for the two of you without putting young Wanda under any stress."

"You're enhanced, I take it?" asked Steve.

"Mutant. My naturally-occurring powers have a great deal in common with the powers that developed when she was enhanced - probably not a coincidence. Human brains have the capacity for substantial psionic abilities." She laid a gentle hand on Wanda's head, and while no visible power appeared, Wanda sighed and curled up, and her red power released Bucky's hand.

"She's okay?" Bucky whispered, and Tony was struck by the intensity of the emotion in his voice, as he squeezed her hand once more before getting up. He kept staring at her like he didn't expect to see her again. _Well, when the black ops guys take him into custody...I guess it may be awhile. Damn._

"She'll be fine," Braddock assured Barnes gently. "I've made her understand that you'll be back as soon as you can, and she must let you go for the time being."

Barnes wavered. "Someone needs to stay with her."

"I will," said Vision. "I haven't left her since bringing her here. Mr. Stark's suits scan everyone and everything that comes into this room. No one will be able to harm her again."

Barnes said something to her in Sokovian. Wanda sighed in her sleep, then he quickly left the room. Tony followed.

Once they were out of the room, Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Sam kept their hands at their sides, fingers spread, and their movements slow. Everett Ross stared at the now-completely-unrestrained man walking past and asked, "I don't suppose you'll consent to be interviewed?"

"What for? You're not authorized by the Court, so I'll just have to do it again when I get there," Bucky retorted, with only the faintest sarcasm. "You had your chance; not my fault you botched it." Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Sam's grin at Ross and had to fight the temptation to do the same.

Ross looked more resigned than anything else. _Yeah, you deserved that and you know it. This time, he does get a lawyer._

Tony murmured to Steve, "So far the only one charged with anything is Barnes. You should have Murdock take his case. He's representing Nat too. His old partner, Nelson, he's representing Wanda."
"I know Murdock," said Sam. "He's good. Nelson was doing a good job for Wanda 'till she got sick."

"Yeah, but I doubt I can afford either of 'em," said Clint.

"I'm handling the bills," said Tony briskly. That stopped Clint, and the two men stared at each other for several long seconds. Even the security officers waited.

Finally, Clint looked over his shoulder at Nat, who nodded. Then he nodded too, as did Sam. "Okay."

Steve looked at Bucky, who simply shrugged. Steve fought the urge to sigh. Bucky never seemed to understand the rest of the team's outrage at how Ross had blown off the suggestion of a lawyer. Well, neither had Wanda. The idea was, literally, foreign to her.

Once upon a time, Bucky would've understood. Without the war (and with money) Bucky might have made a lawyer. He'd dragged Steve to the courthouse once or twice to watch trials, just for the fascination of it. Steve hadn't found the whole process so intriguing, but he'd liked sketching the proceedings, and felt more at ease when he realized the courts paid people to do that.

He and the courthouse sketch artist had once gotten into a deep discussion, comparing their work while Bucky had enthusiastically quizzed one of the prosecutors after a trial ended, and both of them had been glowing from getting claps on the back and urgings to "look me up when you finish school, son. I might have a job for you!"

Then had come the war and Pearl Harbor, and all other aspirations died as other young men died in Europe and the Pacific and Bucky's draft letter had come in.

"Cap?" Sam sounded concerned.

Steve blinked back to the present. Everyone was staring at him...shit, and there were cameras. How long had he been staring into the past? "Sorry. I...guess my bank account's still frozen?" He forced a weak smile that he knew would fool no one.

Tony wrinkled his nose and nodded. "If you really want, I'll make it a loan. You need a lawyer, Cap, a good one. You all do."

"'kay," he mumbled. "Thanks, Tony."

"If you're not sure about Nelson or Murdock, say the word, and I'll have business cards from half the attorney population of the planet in twenty-four hours," Tony offered, half-joking.

"Nah, I've been watching the broadcasts. No question they know what they're doing," said Steve in as light a voice as he could manage. "Unless - well, this is a lot of clients for just two guys."

"They've got some associates too, but I'll make sure," Tony promised, then they all walked through the outer doors into a wall of sound.

The hospital staff had steered them to a partially-enclosed exit area for "high profile patients," and there a fleet of armored vehicles was waiting. The noise was from around the walls, where reporters were jammed so thick Steve feared they'd crush each other, shoving their cameras into every gap, yelling questions.

"Gentlemen!" called a Dutch officer, beckoning them over. "I've come from the International Criminal Court; I am in charge of your protection and security."
Tony and Nat nodded their approval, so after Bucky cast a long look over the vehicles, they all got in. There were no boxes or restraints inside, just seats behind thick blast-proof glass. "Damn, they're not messing around," muttered Sam once they started.

"A defendant was poisoned while in custody," the Dutch commander said. "We take that very seriously."

"We hear it was our countrymen," said Sam.

"Yes. Agents from the American Sentinel Program had been assigned to the American portion of the security detail, and their commander evidently decided they were free to take action against Miss Maximoff without permission from the Court. They've all been detained, and ICC's security is now being administered by a Dutch, Danish, and Finnish task force."

"No Germans this time?" Sam asked, sounding like he was only half-joking.

"No. Although the Court has used German Special Forces in the past, they were unwilling to abide by the new terms set by the Court in light of these recent events, so they too are not permitted to participate."

Sam shot Steve an impressed look. Clint seemed cautiously approving, while Nat and Tony were...smirking. All promising, though Bucky just looked at his knees, far too much like the way he'd looked in that box.

*It won't be like that. This Court actually gives a damn about your rights. This time'll be different.* Steve bit the words back. Somehow he doubted that was what was worrying Bucky.

When they got to the Court, Steve fully expected them to be hauled in front of the judges right away - and for Bucky to be clapped in irons. Instead, they were met by Nelson and Murdock and a court official. "Gentlemen, the Court has ordered that you be permitted to speak first with your attorneys. Conference rooms have been set aside for you. As long as you are not aggressive, you will not be restrained."

Even Bucky raised his eyebrows at that. While all the court personnel and security officers were watching nervously, not a single gun was pointed at them. "Cap, gentlemen, good to meet you," said Nelson, and they all shook hands. It raised both lawyers in Steve's esteem that neither hesitated to shake hands with Bucky. "Let's talk."

Once the conference room door was shut, Sam remarked, "Damn, the judges must've really been pissed."

"Oh, they were, believe me - or at least the majority was. Judge Irina Ginsburg heads up the pretrial panel - Danish, no relation to the Notorious," said Nelson. Sam and Clint grinned, though the joke went over Steve's head. "She's a good egg; I was glad to see her on Wanda's panel, and when we got confirmation it was the U.S. security crew that drugged the food, she hit the ceiling. Hence us being able to actually work with the four of you without guns in our faces."

"She must be willing to take a lot on faith," Bucky muttered, staring at the floor.

"Well, you haven't gone nuts and tried to kill anyone so far," said Murdock. "First question on everybody's mind is going to be those trigger words Zemo announced; do they still work?" Bucky shook his head. "Would you be okay if someone read them to you in front of the Court?"

"Yeah."
There was a long silence as the two lawyers waited, obviously hoping Bucky would elaborate. Murdock finally said, "Mr. Barnes - "

" - Bucky." He still didn't look up.

"Bucky. Are you okay with Foggy and me representing you?"

"Sure, that's fine," Bucky murmured distantly, still not looking up.

"All right. I'd like for us to talk briefly with you alone."

But Bucky snorted quietly. "No point. I know about attorney-client privilege, but it's not gonna apply. There're at least six different listening devices in this room." He tilted his head. "Possibly a video camera."

Steve stiffened, but to his surprise, Murdock chuckled. "Yeah, I noticed. However, the judges won't allow anything that any intelligence agency obtains from this room to be used against you if it's during a meeting between you and your lawyers. But that privilege gets waived by the presence of third parties."

Natasha tugged Steve's elbow, and after trying in vain to catch Bucky's eye, Steve left with the others. "I trust them," she said as they regathered in the next conference room. "They're both going to handle Bucky's case, since he's the one with the most potential charges."

Steve's hearing, along with everything else, was enhanced. Despite the thickness of the walls (probably built precisely to prevent what Steve was doing) he could just make out the conversation in the next room.

"Steve," Nat scolded, but she didn't try to stop him.

"I understand this has to be very overwhelming," Nelson was saying.

"I'm fine," Bucky said.

"Seriously? No offense, Bucky, but I don't believe that for a second. Nobody who's been treated the way you have would be all right," said Murdock. Bucky actually chuckled softly. "So can you tell us how you got those words out of your head?"

There was a long silence, then, "Wanda. Her power. I'm...not entirely sure how it worked. Just that it did."

"We wondered. But that's a good answer; if you don't know how, then you don't know how. I, ah...don't know how familiar you are with being questioned by attorneys and judges rather than, well..."

Bucky sounded amused. "Not really, no, but I figure it can't be worse than any interrogations I used to get."

"It damn well better not be, or this Court can drop all claims of serving justice," huffed Nelson. "You're not about to go on trial. This is a pretrial procedure while the Court decides if it's able to charge you with anything. There are a lot of potential charges floating around, but the pretrial panel decides if there's sufficient evidence."

"How could there not be?"
There was a long pause, then Murdock asked, "Are you, ah, aware of the information Natasha Romanoff leaked about your...time as a prisoner of Hydra?"

"What...oh, you mean the training stuff. Yeah, I know about it, but I haven't watched the videos. I doubt they're very pleasant."

"Well, they're what we in the profession would call 'mitigating circumstances out the wazoo,' not to put to fine a point on it. They also seriously call into question whether you were responsible for anything you did while under their control."

Though Steve listened hard, to his intense disappointment, Bucky didn't say anything to that.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon:

The pretrial of the century begins (sorry, lawyer pun). A lot of people are relieved to learn Bucky can no longer be triggered by Zemo's Hydra words, but Team Defense soon hits a snag: nobody believes Wanda could have beaten the conditioning alone. A choice looms between risking Bucky’s freedom and T’Challa’s.

PLEASE don't forget to review!
Thirty-Five

Chapter Summary

The pretrial of the century begins (sorry, lawyer pun). A lot of people are relieved to learn Bucky can no longer be triggered by Hydra's words, but Team Defense soon hits a snag: nobody believes Wanda could have beaten the conditioning alone. A choice looms between risking Bucky's freedom and T'Challa's.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all so much for the wonderful feedback on the last chapter! As a token of my gratitude, here's the next chapter a little early!

**Real World Notes:** As a reminder, my research into the workings of the International Criminal Court involved wikipedia, Google, and a couple of very out-of-date law school classes. The ICC judges are all original characters, most a mix of real jurists and characters from other fandoms. Also, don't go looking to poison someone with cazlomine - it doesn't exist.

**Canon Notes:** Leonard Samson is an AUish interpretation, a mix of his comics and movie backgrounds.

**Trigger Warning:** Non-graphic discussion of non-consensual body modification and implied sexual abuse in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

**AVENGERS, FORMER WINTER SOLDIER SURRENDER TO INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT!**

Steve Rogers, James Buchanan Barnes, Clinton Barton, and Samuel Wilson met with counsel and formally submitted to the ICC's jurisdiction Tuesday afternoon.

**ICC: AMERICAN SENTINEL AGENTS POISONED WANDA MAXIMOFF**

American security personnel claim they drugged Maximoff to prevent her use of her powers against the Court, but she nearly died as a result.

The International Criminal Court's internal investigation panel formally released its findings regarding the poisoning of defendant Wanda Maximoff, who is under pretrial investigation for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Along with multiple other member nations, the United States contributed personnel to provide
security for the ICC's proceedings, witnesses, and parties, who are, according to the Court's rules, required to follow the Court's instructions. However, the American contingent involved in guarding Wanda Maximoff admitted to introducing cazlomine, a powerful anti-psychotic sedative, to Maximoff's food while in custody. They claimed their intention was to prevent her from using her telepathic and telekinetic powers aggressively, even though Maximoff had surrendered of her own free will and had not used her powers at any time since doing so. Due to Maximoff's altered metabolism, the drug accumulated in her organs, making her increasingly lethargic and unable to focus, and she collapsed after a court session last Wednesday.

Avenger Vision realized Maximoff was going into distress and rushed her to a local hospital over her guards' objections, where doctors confirmed she had gone into a coma and was in critical condition. She was stabilized after 36 hours, but remains unconscious.

Judge Irina Ginsburg, head of the pretrial panel examining Maximoff's case, delivered a blistering condemnation of the American agents' actions, and the entire Court voted to revoke all American credentials for security. Additionally, American Judge Cate Darby was recused by a majority vote of the panel after Maximoff's attorney introduced evidence of social media posts describing human enhancement as "unnatural", an "abomination," and suggesting sympathy with radical organizations such as the Watchdogs and Friends of Humanity.

Upon their arrival at The Hague, the Avengers visited Maximoff at the hospital before surrendering to the Court, and sources report all four showed intense distress over her condition, fueling rumors that they and Maximoff had been in hiding together.

**AVENGERS AND LAWYERS: BARNES NO LONGER AT RISK OF HYDRA CONTROL!**

The "trigger words" revealed by Helmut Zemo in 2017 were read to Barnes in Court this morning and had no effect.

Barnes and his lawyers, Matthew Murdock and Fred Nelson, claim he is no longer susceptible to control from hearing the words. They confirmed what experts theorized after seeing the "training videos" from Hydra, that the words had been used to condition Barnes to obey his captors' orders, and Zemo had used them to gain control of him in Berlin after his capture.

However, two different bailiffs read the series of Russian words and phrases to Barnes before a tense session of the Court, and although Barnes displayed discomfort and nervousness, he did not obey any instructions. Afterward, he asked one of the reporters recording the proceedings, "Do me a favor and send that to Zemo."

Asked how he'd defeated Hydra's conditioning, Barnes claimed Wanda Maximoff had aided him with her telepathic power, although he could not explain exactly how that had worked. Until Maximoff recovers from her poisoning by U.S. Sentinel Program agents, Barnes' testimony can't be confirmed.

Apart from testing the trigger words, Barnes showed little emotion during the first day of testimony, except for when Prosecutor Damien Fallaci attempted to schedule a replay of the leaked Hydra videos. Barnes asked if he had to watch them, and Murdock objected to Fallaci's demand that Barnes be present. The judges instructed the attorneys on both sides to brief the issue and adjourned for the day.

"I don't suppose you guys had access to any mental health professionals wherever you were hiding out," Foggy asked Steve, Clint, and Sam.
"Uh..."

"Look, I'm pushing the line of attorney-client confidentiality here, but I can't imagine you all don't realize Bucky needs one, and I'd bet dollars to doughnuts you all do," Foggy pressed.

Everyone avoided his eyes at first, but it was Sam who finally started laughing and shook his head. "Yeah, you're not wrong, but seriously, who would you trust? Leonard Samson's on Fallaci's expert list."

"Hell, no, not Samson - that guy was so pro-Accords, he made Tony seem ambivalent," Clint exclaimed. "Why's he still here? Shouldn't he have been booted by the Court with the rest of the Americans?"

Murdock shook his head. "No, the non-security personnel got to stay so long as they submitted to 'extreme vetting' - and you'll never convince me Chief Judge Rahat didn't use that phrasing on purpose." They all grinned. "And none of them get access to any defendant or witness without a court reporter present and a few dozen cameras. So Fallaci got to keep his American legal team and his American experts."

Steve stiffened. "Does that mean this...Samson, he's gonna be able to question Bucky?"

"Yes, but not without both of us in the room," said Matt. "We're interviewing potential psychiatric experts too, but by law, they can't be his treating physicians - and I agree with Foggy. There should be a treating physician. This is going to be a long, painful process even if the Court does let Bucky out of having to watch those tapes."

"I know a few who might be trustworthy," said Sam. "Though they've got pretty full plates back home, and it's a big risk for anyone to have their name connected with this."

"Yeah, you're not wrong there either," Foggy sighed. "I already had a couple turn me down; none unsympathetic, but they're terrified of the risk to their families and their practices, not to mention their other patients."

When they returned to their lodgings for the day - the same complex as Wanda but with nearly the entire security force replaced - they found Tony and Nat waiting with Bucky. "Hey, have you guys had any word from...down south?"

Steve worked out quickly that he meant Wakanda. "No. I'd have thought you would hear before us."

"We've heard nothing, and that's what's worrying us," said Nat. "Complete radio silence. I sent a ping on the secure channel yesterday. No response."

"Oh my God. T'Challa? Shuri? "Something's not right," Steve murmured. T'Challa had been all over the media the day they turned themselves in, expressing cautiously-worded surprise and feigned ignorance, as planned, then returning his attention to Wakanda's increasingly-public mission of ending human trafficking.

"How many days since we last heard from them?" Sam muttered, and counted on his fingers.

"Eight," said Nat immediately.

"What about Scott?" asked Clint.

"Scott's fine. He got picked up and ankle-tagged, but the feds are still trying to decide whether to charge him with anything, since his whereabouts were well-known before Leipzig, so the only
"My guys in the States let the feds know Zemo may still have operatives gunning for Avengers' families. They've already got egg on their faces over what happened to Wanda. They agreed Scott should stay off the grid except for a few with high clearance," Tony said. "I'm a lot more worried about the other issue. Getting close to flying down there."

What the hell could've happened? The most obvious answer was that Pretorius or one of the other groups T'Challa and his allies had threatened might have managed a counter-strike.

Bucky held up a hand. "Don't do anything, not yet. This could easily be a trap - for us or for them."

Bucky wore long sleeves and a glove over his metal arm, and nobody (so far) had asked to examine it, so it was possible nobody had realized it wasn't the same one he'd had in Leipzig and Romania. Once it was discovered to be vibranium, things would get a little more complicated. The initial idea had been to suggest the vibranium had come from the rubble in Sokovia, but then Wanda had been hospitalized and all alibi planning had crashed to a halt.

Can we really assume nobody's already suspecting T'Challa was involved with us after we went into action with him in Indonesia? Bucky at least was partly visible, and any of the residents we took prisoner might've talked by now.

Steve sighed. "You're saying we can't do anything?"

Bucky put a hand on his shoulder. "We all knew it would come to that once we turned ourselves in. If we move, we guarantee exposing them."

Tony and Nat looked at each other, and she said, "If we don't hear anything in another twenty-four hours, I'll try some other channels. Vision can get pretty deep into communications, deeper than even Tony's probes."

"So Vision knows about..." Clint tilted his head expressively.

Tony and Nat nodded.

The following day, the Court was still in recess while the lawyers prepped and fought over how Bucky should be treated as a witness/potential defendant - and Tony and Nat still had no word from T'Challa or Wakanda.

To Steve's complete astonishment, the group of them were given permission to continue visiting Wanda at the hospital. "She's still not conscious, but two of us can go at a time," said Clint. "Give Vision a break."

And let Vision find out what the hell is going on in Wakanda.

Bucky wanted to see Wanda, and Nat insisted Steve always go with him. "The Court may have decided he's not an imminent threat, but a lot of people are nervous, and they'll be calmer if you're with him."

Still, Tony went too. Vision looked a little reluctant to surrender Wanda's bedside, but Tony sent him a message through the armor, and he quietly stepped out.

Steve and Bucky sat at either side of Wanda's bed, telling her about the week's events - Steve in English, Bucky in Sokovian - until Tony and Vision came back, and Tony gave Steve a wordless
thumbs-up. They both let out their breath in relief. Vision beckoned Steve over, and murmured, "We have thirty seconds disruption of all surveillance."

Tony leaned quickly towards Steve. "Everybody's okay, but something did happen."

"Pretorius?"

"Worse. Attempted coup d'etat."

"Fuck!" Steve blurted. "Who the hell..."

"Let's just say W'Kabi and his tribe just lost a lot of standing, and that mountain guy Sam made such a good impression on is now on T'Challa's council." Tony motioned them all away, and Steve resumed his place at Wanda's bedside, trying to school his expression to pretend nothing had happened.

"How soon do the doctors think she might come out of it? She will come out of it, right?"

"Yes, they are certain. The drug accumulation in her system had to decrease naturally, but she is showing indications of recovery as she metabolizes it," said Vision. "She's more responsive to stimuli now and sometimes reacts to voices."

"Good," Steve said. He patted her hand. "You just relax, okay? Take your time. We'll be here."

"Can I stay a little longer?" Bucky surprised him by asking.

"Sure." Steve surrendered his chair to Vision and wandered into the hallway to talk to Tony. Can't talk about T'Challa, it's too risky. Damn it! W'Kabi had seemed like a good friend to the king; how could he have done that?

Then again...Princess Shuri had said something once, about W'Kabi not liking T'Challa's decision to admit the Avengers. Maybe W'Kabi and his tribe had felt more strongly about it than anyone realized.

Vision had studied James Barnes' interactions with Wanda very closely both times he was in the room, but his results were inconclusive. There was no mistaking that Wanda felt a connection to Barnes that went far beyond her connection to any of the other fugitives - but the nature of that connection was still unclear.

So when Wanda's brainwave monitors indicated she was not aware of any aural stimuli, Vision dared to ask. "Are you and Wanda in a romantic relationship?"

Barnes froze...and looked so shocked that Vision was satisfied as to the answer of that question - mostly. Barnes had clearly not even considered that a possibility - however, that didn't preclude the possibility that Wanda might harbor romantic feelings for Barnes.

"N-no," Barnes said, blushing. "No, nothing like that. She's been in my head. I told the Court the truth; she's the reason Zemo and Hydra can't get in my head again." Vision was quite certain that was only the partial truth, but on that aspect, he could understand why Barnes would be unwilling to disclose the details. If the details of how Hydra's conditioning had been undone were made public, they could be extrapolated and duplicated, if not against Barnes, then against others. "I guess it's hard not to get close to someone when they do that for you."

"That's understandable," Vision allowed. "But perhaps she has romantic feelings towards you." To
confront Barnes about that possibility might serve little purpose, but for some reason, Vision found himself being less than rational where Wanda was concerned.

Barnes looked away and smiled, shaking his head. "Nah, she doesn't. Steve thought the same..." He stiffened, then turned and gave Vision such a piercing look that if Vision were capable of blushing, he would have done so. Barnes grinned broadly. "Not for the same reason as you, though, huh?" Vision didn't answer, but he knew that was all the answer Barnes needed. He hadn't expected the grim-faced, traumatized former Winter Soldier to be so perceptive. To his surprise, Barnes went on, "She had a brother once; I had sisters once. It just worked out that way."

Eager to keep the discussion off his own feelings, Vision said, "I fear that possibility is already under discussion by both your prosecution and defense, each for their own purpose."

Barnes blinked, then winced. "Of me and Wanda? Shit. Well, figures. Then all this really gets interesting." Seeing Vision's puzzled expression, he sighed and said, "Even if she wasn't way too young, that's...not a possibility. Not for me. Hydra needed an emotionless killing machine. Hormones and nerve connections got in the way, so they did the same thing they did with everything else that made me human: got rid of 'em. I'm impotent."

Vision had discovered very early in his life that he was capable of many emotions, from amusement to romantic and sexual interest - and embarrassment. He felt the latter acutely now. "I'm...very sorry. I didn't realize."

"It's all right. It'll come out eventually. Hell, she knows. She couldn't miss it after all the time she spent digging around for memories. I didn't know when they did it, but some of the handlers liked to joke about it in front of me."

Vision was unsure whether he was capable of the rage that humans sometimes expressed, but he was quite capable of anger, particularly on behalf of another. "That is appalling. I suppose there's little chance of any of your captors being found alive and brought to justice?"

"So far, no." Barnes sounded utterly resigned to that. "From what I hear, most of 'em are dead. That doesn't bother me. Outliving 'em long enough to find out my own name again...I guess that's revenge, in a way."

Vision was forced to reevaluate his own thoughts on Barnes since the events eight days before, and reached the uncomfortable conclusion that he had regarded this man with considerable bias. Motivated by jealousy, no less. My word has been taken as unbiased by many important authorities, including my fellow Avengers, yet it turns out I'm no less capable of malicious thinking than any human. He had hoped that Barnes would not be permitted to return to the hospital while his case was pending, and that he would be deemed too dangerous to be free. Yet the objective evidence to date indicates he is not only trustworthy but cares deeply for Wanda. I wanted to keep him away from her.

Fortunately, he'd never voiced his biased suspicions about Barnes or had the opportunity to influence anyone. But once Wanda awoke...how long would it take her to recognize what Vision had thought of someone so dear to her?

And I once lectured Tony Stark for being irrational on the subject of James Barnes. Somehow, this man inspires intense emotions in everyone he meets: either antipathy or devout loyalty.

There could be only one explanation for Wanda's sensing Barnes and trying to hold him at her side with raw power at a moment she was so weak she couldn't function without medical aid. It was the most powerful trust, an emotion very few humans would ever associate with James Buchanan
Barnes, even those who sympathized with his plight.

In Washington, D.C., Steve Rogers had chosen to trust James Barnes or die trying, but given their history, it was understandable. Since arriving, only a little questioning had been directed to the other Avengers, but all four had attested to their trust of James Barnes. Vision had been quite certain none of them had lied to the Court.

Even Tony, who had every reason to be irrational on the subject of Barnes, had gone so far as to aid in his treatment in Wakanda. He claimed it was for Steve and Wanda's sake, and for the sake of reuniting the Avengers, which Vision entirely agreed with. However, even James Rhodes and Pepper Potts had remarked in Vision's hearing that they suspected there was more to Tony's choice. They'd decided among themselves not to question him amid the horrific revelations about Ross's actions, Barnes' and Romanoff's histories, and the pressure from so many different quarters. Vision had agreed.

King T'Challa was beyond the reach of any government, and if he had chosen to shelter Barnes and the other Avengers, there was almost literally nothing anyone could do without the risk of provoking massive international conflict. Since Tony had visited Wakanda multiple times and decided eventually to aid their efforts...the only logical conclusion was that he'd learned T'Challa's reasoning and agreed with it.

Vision, Rhodes, and Potts had elected not to question that. Now the result of those choices sat at Wanda's side across from him...and Vision suspected it was the trust, not the suspicions, that had been vindicated.

All Avengers were intensely relieved when the news announced T'Challa would be addressing the United Nations in Vienna – and even moreso when they saw T'Challa on the camera. It was frustrating as hell not to be able to give it away.

"Check it out – Ross is there," Sam murmured. That got him startled looks, and he clarified, "The other Ross, the CIA guy. Mini-Ross."

"Well, he and the rest of the CIA lost their clearance here. Must've been reassigned..." Rhodey frowned to himself. "Though I dunno if I like the idea of him sniffing around Wakanda."

T'Challa's speech was intriguing to say the least. "Is he saying they're gonna open the borders?" Tony demanded.

"I'm not sure," said Nat, looking intrigued.

Then when one of the representatives from Europe snidely asked what "a nation of farmers" had to offer, not only did T'Challa smirk...but Ross did.

**Okay...that's weird. That's really weird.** It was driving Sam crazier every day to not be able to talk about it, and judging by the way everyone else was fidgeting, he wasn't the only one climbing the walls.

Court questioning of Bucky resumed the following day – speaking of shit driving people crazy. A new army of lawyers for all sides descended on the place, and the frazzled judges decided to suspend proceedings on Steve, Clint, and Natasha while they dealt with the question of whether Bucky Barnes could be held responsible for...anything, really.

The doctors' reports on Wanda were positive, but she still wasn't awake, much less fit to be in the hot seat, so her case was suspended until further notice. At least that left Sam and Steve free to be in the
courtroom behind the lawyers while Bucky was answering questions.

The judges won a lot of points in Sam's view by *not* requiring Bucky to be present for "the Hydra tapes" being played. During those sessions, only Natasha attended and answered questions about where she'd obtained the material. Steve and Bucky spent a lot of time at the hospital with Wanda, while Sam and Clint did research with some of Nelson and Murdock's paralegals or read recaps of the tapes if they were feeling masochistic.

The problem that quickly arose was a predictable one: experts for the prosecution, the defense, *and* the independent ones hired by the Court soon concluded that there was no way Wanda Maximoff, a twenty-three-year-old with the equivalent of a middle-school education, could have defeated Hydra's conditioning of Bucky on her own. "I do not believe he would have survived without thorough medical, neurological, and psychiatric assistance," the Court's expert said.

"How much do we actually know about the extent of Wanda Maximoff's abilities?" Murdock argued.

The Court expert brought up some diagrams and graphs on his screen that made no sense to Sam, but *all* the experts were nodding. "She can induce hallucinations, view memories, even manipulate what a person sees and feels, but the precision involved with undoing damage like this without rendering the victim a vegetable is simply not within her abilities. Some of the defendant's brain scans may reveal that he is healing from the damage, which is attributable to the serum. But not the kind of manipulation Wanda Maximoff's power engages in."

"What are you saying, doctor? What do you think is the cause of his recovery?" a judge asked.

The experts eyed Bucky's brain scans and shook their heads. "Some power or force beyond the known abilities of any registered mutant, inhuman, or enhanced individual. These readings indicate James Barnes' brain was exposed to electromagnetic fields and molecular manipulation with a level of precision that should be impossible."

*Oh, shit. So close, yet so far, and now we've got ourselves another witch hunt,* Sam thought.

Sure enough, the judges wanted Bucky back on the stand in the afternoon session, and Matt and Foggy warned them, "Look, I don't know what the explanation actually is, but it's pretty clear there is one way beyond Wanda, and suspicion is going to grow really fast if we're not willing to give it."

Everyone looked at each other. "So he hasn't told you?" asked Sam in surprise.

"Nope," said Foggy. "He's refused point-blank. I don't even blame him – or the rest of you – but whatever it is, whoever it is, they better be worth losing it all for."

*Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit.* Bucky rejoined them in the conference room.

"What the hell do we do?" Sam demanded.

"Nothing," Bucky said. "We tell them nothing."

"Buck - "

"Steve, will you just trust me?! People believe what they want to believe, and no matter what we say, they're gonna spin this as the work of the devil!" Bucky insisted. "And even if we tell them everything, they're gonna want more gory details – things nobody should know who doesn't already, namely how to manipulate somebody's brain and mentally condition them. Tell them," he said to Nat.
She nodded. "He's right. Even I haven't revealed everything I found about what Hydra did to his brain, and for a very good reason: we don't want anyone trying to replicate it. That information is dangerous to more than just...friends of ours."

Steve looked stricken, but Clint backed them. "We can do two good turns by not making that information public. Yeah, they'll give Bucky a hard time, but when all's said and done, it's not gonna have that big an impact on whether he was responsible for what Hydra did."

Foggy and Matt looked at each other, and Matt said slowly, "As much as I want to give Bucky the strongest possible case, I don't disagree. Sometimes the greater good does even outweigh vindicating an innocent person – and there's no question in any decent mind that you're innocent. I just hope you really trust whoever does have this information."

For that, at least, they had a consensus. Sam exchanged a broad grin with the others. "Well, guess that answers that question," said Foggy. "But no, the judges are not going to be happy, Fallaci's going to try to plop every one of you into the hot seat, and when you all refuse to answer, he'll demand you be held in contempt. Some of the judges may be inclined to agree."

"So what happens if they find us in contempt?" asked Tony.

"They...fine everyone who's not in custody and confine everyone who is?"

Clint put the back of his hand to his forehead and deadpanned, "Oh, no, not house arrest!"

"They definitely won't let any of us near Wanda after that," Bucky sighed, but he shook his head. "She'll understand. Vision thinks she'll be awake in a day or so."

"And he is the only reason they don't have to explain a dead defendant in their custody," said Tony. "They owe him a lot of huge favors. I don't think they'll ask him. If they ask me," he put the back of his hand to his forehead, "oh no, not a fine!"

Everyone chuckled, but Foggy said, "You're not wrong, but let's try and not be too sarcastic when we're in court, okay? It's going to antagonize them enough when you refuse point-blank to tell them what they want to know, however wise your reasons. We need to make it clear that this isn't out of contempt for the Court or the law, but protection of the whole damn human race from monsters who've already accomplished this abomination at least once. Defying the International Criminal Court's not something to do lightly."

"Believe me, counselor, there is nothing light about our motives," said Natasha.

So after a little more coaching on how to respond if questioned, off they went to the Court's session to watch all hell break loose. Everyone except Rhodey and Vision sat in the gallery (Rhodey and Vision were at the hospital standing watch over Wanda) when Bucky took the stand.

The judges didn't bother letting the prosecutor control the questioning. The judges did it themselves. "Sergeant Barnes, our experts are of the opinion that Wanda Maximoff's power alone could not explain how you overcame Hydra's conditioning. Please tell this Court what person or persons other than Miss Maximoff were involved in your treatment."

Bucky took a deep breath, and next to Sam, Steve did as well. "I...respectfully refuse to answer."

A murmur rippled through the room. Steve was completely rigid; it was taking all Sam's self-control not to look directly at him, knowing every camera in the room not pointed at Bucky was pointed at the row of Avengers.
Another judge asked, "Are you invoking your right against self-incrimination?"

"No, your honor, there was no crime involved. I'm respectfully refusing to respond."

Prosecutor Fallaci shot out of his chair. "That's contempt of court!"

"Sit down, Mr. Fallaci, we know the definition of contempt," snapped Judge Ginsburg. She returned her attention to Bucky. "Mr. Barnes, have you been advised by counsel to refuse to answer this question?"

"No, your honor. I've chosen to."

"Can you explain why?"

"Because…among other things, the information surrounding my treatment is no less dangerous than the information surrounding how…how…" Bucky lost focus, and another murmur went through the room.

Shiiiiiiit! Sam dared to shift a little closer to Steve. Don't move, man, don't…

But Bucky recovered and finished, "How I was…conditioned in the first place."

"But we're not asking how," the third judge protested. "We're simply asking who."

Matt stood up. "Your honors, respectfully, my client has a very valid point. Wanda Maximoff has been poisoned. Any other person or persons with the skills or power to undo the conditioning and brainwashing we saw inflicted on Sergeant Barnes will immediately have a target on their back and forehead if they're revealed to the public."

"Or they could be engaged in doing God-knows-what with that information," Fallaci shot back.

"Well, so far, they've healed this man so he can no longer be wielded as a weapon by anyone who knows ten phrases," Matt answered. "Surely that's a point or ten in their favor."

But uneasy murmurs were growing, and the judges looked unhappy. Steve trembled, and Sam murmured, "Breathe, man, we knew this wasn't gonna be easy. He's doing good." He meant it; apart from that brief lapse, Bucky looked okay. Resolved and dignified. Sam would never admit it out loud, but he was proud of the guy.

However, the judges weren't satisfied. "There are ways to protect confidential information. We can dismiss all media and non-parties from the session and close it. Sergeant Barnes, will that satisfy you?"

Bucky didn't take long to shake his head. "No. I'm sorry. I won't answer."

Oo-kay, the judges were officially pissed. "Mr. Murdock, Mr. Nelson, is there any reason under the rules of procedures that Sergeant Barnes cannot answer this question?"

Matt and Foggy looked at each other, then Matt admitted, "No, your honor."

"Sergeant Barnes, do you understand that this Court can hold you in contempt - "

Someone came in. Everybody jumped when the doors opened, then the cameras started flashing and whispers rose, then chatter – then shouts of question as the reporters completely lost their shit. Sam craned his neck – then didn't believe what he was seeing at first glance and just stood up for a better view.
Holy FUCK, it's the cavalry!

Hell, fuck the cavalry. It was the Dora Milaje. It was Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris. It was King T'Challa.

Dr. Kelile slipped past her entourage – as if the king himself was part of her entourage – and walked briskly up to the defense counsel table. She handed a thick folder to Foggy, who looked down – and his eyes popped in complete astonishment.

"Uh, ahem, your honors…it says here that this is Dr. Kelile of…Wakanda…Sergeant Barnes' treating physician."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Our heroes reunite with T'Challa, and Wanda wakes up, but their enemies rally and strike another legal blow at Wanda and Bucky.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Dr. Kelile:** Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

**Dr. Damaris:** Wakandan psychologist/psychiatrist who kept an eye on the Avengers at T'Challa's instruction and headed the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

**Damian Fallaci** - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

**Judge Irina Ginsburg, Judge Cate Darcy, Chief Judge Rahat** - judges of the International Criminal Court, from various countries.
Thirty-Six

Chapter Summary

Ch. 36: Our heroes reunite with T’Challa, and Wanda wakes up and reunites with most of them, but the prosecution rallies and strikes another legal blow at Wanda and Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes:
Thank you all so much for the feedback! Oh, and in defense of lawyers, you’ll rarely find a lawyer admitting they’ll probably lose a motion. Every boss I’ve ever had would eat me alive if I said that to a client. But since the MCU has superheroes, its lawyers can get away with complete candor.

Previous Chapter Recap: As our heroes watched over Wanda and prepared for Bucky's pretrial to begin, they realized they'd heard nothing from Wakanda in over a week. Vision was jealous of Bucky’s relationship with Wanda - only for Bucky to set him straight that their relationship is platonic, not to mention Hydra's modifications to his body left him impotent. But the Court and the prosecution suspect it took more than Wanda to defeat Bucky's conditioning, and wanted answers, which Bucky refused to give even at risk of losing his own case. Reprieve arrived when T'Challa opened Wakanda to the rest of the world - and came to the International Criminal Court to declare himself as the one who'd been harboring the fugitive Avengers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Six

THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS…

Sam would’ve bet good money that half the reporters and the entire prosecution team promptly shat themselves. He’d never seen so many mouths hanging open outside a really bad courtroom drama. As all hell broke loose and everyone started yelling at once, Clint leaned over to Stark and yelled, "Hate to tell you, bro, but there's someone on the team now who makes bigger entrances than you!"

Steve was grinning broadly at Bucky, who was just staring in slack-jawed silence at the Wakandans. The judges had evidently forgotten how to use their gavels and were just gaping at T’Challa, and Sam desperately wanted to cheer.

Well, then Okoye actually winked at him, and he kind of wanted to swoon. She had that effect.

The Dora Milaje kept a close eye on the shouting reporters and witnesses, but nothing more than a microphone or camera was thrust in the king’s direction…and Sam had no doubt T’Challa was enjoying himself. *Yep, definitely a flair for the dramatic to rival Stark and Thor. Imagine that.*

Finally, the judges remembered the word "order" and started yelling for it. The chaos slowly came
back under control. Matt and Foggy were still a bit slack-jawed themselves as T'Challa slipped into the row next to the Avengers.

"Your honors, we've just had…" Foggy looked down at the folders in his hands, "a pretty massive amount of new evidence handed to us. The defense requests a recess for the day."

Prosecutor Fallaci was so befuddled he didn't even bother to object. "The Court is in recess," announced Judge Ginsburg, but to Sam's amusement, none of the judges were in a hurry to leave the bench – they were all still watching the king of Wakanda warmly greeting the formerly-fugitive Avengers.

Bucky came down from the stand, and T'Challa shook his hand amid the strobe flash of the cameras. "Don't be concerned," the king told Bucky. "Wakanda's policy is changing in many ways. I will proudly stand by my choice to give you amnesty in 2017."

Steve looked like it was taking all his self-restraint not to bust out with a million questions, not that Sam blamed him. What the hell had prompted a policy change this dramatic, and who the hell had tried to pull off a coup d'etat in Wakanda?! Instead, Steve just beckoned Foggy and Matt over and introduced them to the king.

"Your highness, it's an honor and a welcome surprise," Matt said, shaking T'Challa's hand.

"Let's move this conversation into the conference room," Nat suggested, since it was obvious the reporters weren't going to stop filming without being tackled.

They got chased all the way to the secure floor, but even the Dora Milaje let the Court security deal with barring the reporters. "Word of warning: the private conference rooms aren't that private," said Stark. "There's at least five cameras and more microphones in every room we've been given."

T'Challa smirked. "They won't work, have no fear." Once the doors closed, he informed them, "We can speak freely for now."

From the way they all launched into questions, the Avengers might as well have been reporters themselves. Not that Sam couldn't help himself either. "What the hell happened in Wakanda?!"

"Is your family okay?"

"How bad was it?"

"Your highness, is announcing you've been harboring international fugitives really a good idea?"

"Was it because of us?"

"Please, please," T'Challa held up his hands, though the doctors and even Okoye and Ayo looked pleased by everyone's concern. "To ease your worries, no, it was not because of your presence; the amnesty I gave you was at most a peripheral issue. You must understand, I don't wish to air certain details even to trusted friends."

"Yeah, fair enough," said Sam, giving the others a meaningful look. A king's not going to want to share gory details of an internal conflict with a bunch of foreigners.

"Even so, as much as a lot of communities around the world are gonna benefit from what you're offering, you're bringing an awful lot of scrutiny down on yourself," said Rhody.

"I'm aware of that and prepared for it. In 2017, I chose to make amends to the Avengers and to
Bucky Barnes, and it's a choice I don't regret. Let anyone who wishes question the decision; I will stand by it."

"As will we," said Dr. Damaris. "You run the risk of crippling your own case if you do not present evidence from your treating physicians. There is no question in any of our minds that you were incapable of understanding, let alone resisting Hydra's commands while you were their captive. Indeed, the tapes Miss Romanoff has already introduced demonstrate that this was their precise goal, to remove your agency entirely."

Bucky didn't look reassured. Sam fought the urge to sigh. But to his surprise, Bucky looked at Stark. "You said...there were missions I failed, where they sent me after...and I wouldn't do it. What does that mean?"

"The Court's seen those; they were in the batch I produced," said Nat. "It means when you did have any individuality or agency, you fought back, and in response, they ground you down that much harder until they were sure they'd erased everything of you. That's evidence in your favor, not against it."

Stark paced away, arms tightly folded, avoiding anyone's eyes, but he wasn't arguing either. "Problem, Stark?" asked Clint.

If Sam had been closer to Clint, he'd have thrown an elbow, but Tony just shot him a scornful look and said, "No. I'm gonna go look in on Wanda," and left.

Steve glared at Clint and started to go after Stark, but this time, Sam was close enough. "Hey, no." He caught Steve's elbow, and Steve looked ready to pull himself free, but Sam insisted, "Let him have some space."

Steve scowled, but Bucky broke in, "It's fine, Steve. Leave him alone."

"It's not fine - "

" - that's not up to you!" Bucky snapped.

Dr. Kelile stepped between them. "Gentlemen. We do not have much time; Dr. Damaris and I have patients in Wakanda who need our care. We should begin working."

"Motion granted," said Foggy, eagerly coming to her side with the folder she'd given him. "Have a seat - Bucky, you too. The rest of you, unless you want to give me more details about Bucy's treatment, scram - oh, sorry, your highness, I guess you can stay."

T'Challa grinned. "I have less of the technical details of treatment, but I can explain my reasoning for the Avengers' presence in Wakanda all this time."

Matt stepped forward, folding up a laptop. "Then let's go next door. Cap, Natasha - actually, all of you who went on the lam, with me."

Tony got a message while he sat with was from Pepper. R u ok?

I'm always ok

Whatever xxx

It made him smile. "Tony?" Vision's voice jolted him back to his surroundings, and several nurses
and a doctor came into the room. Vision was leaning over Wanda as if listening to something. "I think she's coming 'round."

Tony put his phone away and looked eagerly at Wanda, but although she still seemed to be asleep, all the readings on her monitors were rising. "You there, kiddo?" he asked softly.

To his astonishment, he felt...something, like the brush of a feather in his mind. He almost took her hand, but decided against it. The two of them might've hugged a couple of times, but she'd be disoriented and groggy now, and he rather doubted his face was the first she'd want to see.

A few doctors and staff were peering through the door, but Tony ignored them and prayed Wanda wouldn't freak out.

She didn't. The way she gently opened her eyes and focused immediately on Vision with a sleepy smile, Tony was half-tempted to call her Sleeping Beauty. "Vision?"

"Welcome back, Wanda," Vision said softly.

To Tony's genuine surprise, she focused her eyes on him and smiled too. "Hi, Tony," she murmured.

Holy shit, Wanda Maximoff's actually glad to see me.

That purple-haired Brit, Betsy Braddock, had been nice enough to stick around after Barton called her to solve Wanda's subconscious telekinetic separation anxiety. She popped into the room as Wanda squinted in confusion from Vision to Tony, then to Braddock.

"I...know you?"

"My name is Betsy, Wanda. Clint Barton brought me to see you while you were unconscious. I know everything's a little muddled right now. Just let your head clear."

Wanda relaxed a little, maybe with Braddock's help. Tony edged toward the door, but incredibly, felt a telekinetic tug on his sleeve. He'd have thought he imagined it if it weren't for the flicker of red and the mental whisper of, Wait...

With that mental whisper came sensations. As much as Tony got nervous about thoughts in his head that weren't his own, he couldn't avoid these or deny them. She was groggy. She was scared. She didn't know who to trust...just Tony and Vision, the only familiar faces. She wanted him to stay.

"I'm right here, kid," he said.

At his and Vision's urging, Wanda relaxed and let Braddock do whatever telepathic voodoo she was doing. Braddock and Vision did most of the explaining about what'd happened and how Wanda had wound up in a coma in the first place.

Then Wanda met Tony's eyes, he felt a flicker of red behind them, and she gasped. "Bucky!"

"Jesus!" Tony lurched back instinctively, feeling bad even as panic took over his higher brain functions; he didn't want to hurt her feelings, but didn't, didn't want anybody picking in his head.

"Wanda, no! Wanda, relax, relax," Braddock was saying as Tony slid to the floor and Vision got in front of him. "Anything you want to know, we can tell you. Don't use your power now; I know it's instinct but you're too confused to control it."

"I...what..."
She didn't understand...trying to see, trying to know...where was...what had...why...Tony wheezed and scrubbed his face as the red fingers inside his head faded. He blinked up at Braddock, whose hand was outstretched towards him. Wanda was making whimpering noises in the bed as Vision ordered the medics out.

"No one without mental shielding should come into this room for the time being. Miss Maximoff is confused and could inadvertently harm someone."

"S-sorry..."

"'s okay," Tony croaked, trying to get to his feet. She was scared. He'd felt it; he couldn't not feel it. She'd seen Bucky in his mind and wanted to find him; she hadn't meant to hurt him. Shit, he hadn't felt this fucked in the head since a few bad trips before 2008.

"Tony, you should go outside as well," Vision began, but Wanda protested.

"No, please, I'm sorry - sorry - " Braddock shushed Wanda as she cried, struggling against all the lines and tubes and machines and where was everyone and why was...

"Tony?" Vision tugged at his arm, trying to get him upright and pull him to the door.

"No," Tony said, pulling himself up the wall. "No, 's okay. I'll stay. Take it easy." What's done is done, kid, I know you didn't mean it. Just take it easy. I'll stay with you.

She curled up with her hands over her head as if trying to hold her powers in. Tony started imagining some very creative activities for that Sentinel detail who'd drugged her, only for Braddock to glare at him. "Control yourself, Mr. Stark. Her mental hearing is very powerful at the best of times."

Damn. Okay...soothing thoughts, right...think about Pepper - only, oh, shit, not too much! Wanda's giggle was a little gratifying, and Braddock snorted. Tony finally settled on vacation with Pepper in Capri the year before Ultron. Not the nights - no, no, not the nights, but the days, the squeaking noises she'd made when they had to lie down in the boat to get into the Blue Grotto, but the delight in her face as their boatman serenaded them in the shimmering space. Tony and Happy mock-whining as she dragged them shopping and that coral and pearl and ruby necklace she'd almost put back when she saw the price. Tony'd had Happy "restrain her" while he bought it - the paparazzi had loved that - but the delighted shop owner had brought a mirror out into the sunlight and insisted she put it on.

"Much better." Tony blinked. Wanda had a dreamy smile on her face, but she'd relaxed on her bed, and Braddock was studying readings on her laptop with a satisfied expression. "We'll loosen that as you become more alert."

"'s okay...feels safer," Wanda murmured and rolled towards Vision, falling asleep on her side.

"What'd you do?" Tony asked.

"With her consent, I've suppressed her mental powers for the time being. It actually can be done without shock collars and drugs. As disoriented as she is now, she can't control or contain her powers - she didn't mean to use telepathy on you."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, I got - sensed that, I guess. It's like she didn't know the difference between reading me and looking at me."

"When she's feeling more herself, the suppression will release on its own, or I'll release it. I know she seems very confused, but her entire system had been on the verge of shutting down from the
poisoning. Her enhancement is also the reason she survived at all. She's recovering."

Once Braddock had left, it was just Vision at Wanda's side and Tony against the wall feeling superfluous. He belatedly remembered his phone and sent a message to Rhodey. Wanda came around for a few minutes. She's pretty out of it, and Braddock had to help her control her powers. She's asleep again.

Rhodey answered, Yeah, the hospital sent a message to the judges she was awake but still too weak to be whole gang wants to see her; the medics and the lawyers got them all to slow down.

Yeah, Barnes was probably climbing the walls. Tony started to text Rhodey that she was too weak for more visitors, then caught himself. Am I just gonna say that because it's Barnes? He considered Wanda, looking so small wrapped in blankets and surrounded by machinery. She'd want to see him. She's asleep again, but she'll want to see him. She asked after him.

I'll let him know.

It had thrown Rhodey to realize how attached Barnes was to Wanda, but the more he learned about her involvement in his treatment, the more it made sense. Of all the things that worried the rest of the team when it came to Barnes, his relationship with Wanda didn't seem to be one of them. Even Tony wasn't concerned.

So Rhodey wasn't surprised Barnes almost bolted out the door when word reached the team that she'd awakened, but he backed down at Steve and the medics' urging.

Eventually, Tony returned after the hospital's visiting hours had ended and joined the main group talking with T'Challa. "The doctors think she's gonna sleep the rest of the night. Vision's standing watch, and Braddock's sticking around too. Her power went a little crazy - I could feel her sniffing in my brain at first."

"Thank you very much for that mental image," muttered Sam, but Steve looked alarmed.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh? Yeah, yeah, it was no big deal." Rhodey had no doubt Tony was lying about that, but he bit his tongue. "It was like...well, it was kind of like a puppy or a toddler who's really curious and gets up in your face," said Tony with a shrug. "Braddock got her to stop, but I guess there's a risk she'll do that to anyone who doesn't have mental powers until her own head's clear. She can't control the telepathy."

"So...what about the telekinesis? No 'Carrie' episodes?" asked Clint.

Tony smirked. "No, but I'm kind of hoping she has one if that prosecutor gives her a hard time when she's back on the stand."

"She won't," Natasha cut in, narrowing her eyes. "She came here to prove something to herself. Don't forget that, not when there's a big group who want to disprove it and lock her in a bunker permanently - if she's lucky."

Everyone who'd smirked at Tony's remark now cringed. "Yeah, good point," Clint sighed. "And if she's having trouble keeping the telepathy senses under control, we'd all better watch what we're thinking for awhile."

"Yeah, Braddock already chewed me out for thinking too vengeful where she can 'hear,'" Tony
confirmed, tapping his head.

With Tony back, Foggy Nelson took the opportunity to prep him for being inevitably called to testify about when and how long he knew T'Challa was sheltering the fugitives. "Under the Accords, as an Avenger, you were a mandatory reporter," Foggy pointed out.

Tony hesitated, then sighed. "Yeah, I broke the things six ways from Sunday even before that. What's the worst that happens?"

"Supermax and a few dozen SWAT teams trying to take possession of your armor?" Sam said. "Which won't end well for the SWAT teams, but still!"

"But," Clint held up a hand, giving Sam a look that Rhodey couldn't translate, "the very day he traced us to Wakanda, he also found out the Raft guards had been abusing Wanda. Pretty damn mitigating circumstance for not revealing where she was."

"How'd he find out?" Foggy asked.

"I told him," said Clint. "Loudly, without her consent, but you get the idea."

T'Challa nodded. "I was there. That did...alter Mr. Stark's viewpoint considerably."

"Excellent - oh, I mean, oh dear, that makes it complicated," said Foggy, and they all grinned again.

"Honestly, after the Mumbai attack, I think most of the world with two brain cells to rub together worked out Iron Man and the other official Avengers probably knew where Cap and his crew were hiding. Of all the charges they might throw at you, breaching an international treaty that's already on life support is one of the least concerning."

Someone knocked on the door. "Court message, sir!"

"Come in!"

Foggy met the intern and took an envelope as Tony muttered, "They're still using paper documents?"

Rhodey snorted. "So is the U.S. military. Some parts of government are sloooowww to progress with technology."

"Maybe yours are," said one of T'Challa's bodyguards. That earned her a scolding in Wakandan from the king - but a round of snickers from everyone else.

Foggy was staring down at the cover sheet. "Uh-oh," said Tony. "What's the word? Are we all arrested?"

"No..." Foggy looked up, half-confused, half-outraged. "Prosecutor Fallaci has filed a motion that James Buchanan Barnes be prohibited from any physical proximity to Wanda Maximoff."

They were all still processing it when Barnes burst into the room, looking frantic, with Matt Murdock and the two Wakandan medics at his heels. "What the hell is this? Why don't they want me to see her?!"

Foggy scanned the document and swore under his breath. "Because you and she are both suspects with active cases, they don't want her being able to use her mental power to communicate with you secretly."

Sam Wilson looked more pissed off than Rhodey could ever recall seeing him, approaching Foggy
with bared teeth, eyes blazing. "The girl has been in a coma for nearly...three...weeks...poisoned by our...damn...security, and the American fucking prosecutor thinks he has any business saying her closest friend can't visit her while she's recovering?!

"We're going to make that point," Murdock said patiently. "We'll get to work on an opposition right away – it'll be filed before she's ready for visitors anyway, based on what Mr. Stark and the hospital staff have said."

Barnes said nothing else, just started pacing along the walls and avoiding everyone's eyes. Steve took a few halting steps toward him, then thought better of it. "The International Criminal Court may not isolate suspects or even defendants," Dr. Damaris said angrily. "This motion cannot be granted!"

Foggy sighed. *Uh-oh,* thought Rhodey. "But here's our problem: they're not asking for Wanda or Bucky to be put into solitary. Damian Fallaci may be a jingoist xenophobic bigot, but he's a savvy attorney; he anticipated that he'd never be able to cut either of them off without evidence of collusion to breach the Court's rules. So he's emphasizing here that they can communicate in all 'conventional' ways: phone, Skype, instant message, et cetera. Just not in a way that's impossible for the Court to track."

Now Murdock sighed. "As galling as it is...Bucky, he has a point."

Bucky had his flesh hand pressed against the wall, practically with his whole body against it. He didn't turn around, and spoke so quietly Rhodey almost couldn't make out what he said. "I...I've been...I can cope. It's Wanda I'm worried about. She needs..." He didn't finish.

"She's very tactile," Natasha finished. "She was that way with her brother long before they were enhanced, probably due to their trauma. "Dr. Damaris nodded. "She's transferred that to Bucky, and occasionally Clint. Maybe Steve. Being physically separated and not able to be in mental contact with him will be very hard on her, the longer it lasts."

Murdock turned toward Dr. Damaris. "Do you think it could be enough for us to argue undue mental hardship?"

"I think we should try, yes, Mr. Murdock. I was also Miss Maximoff's treating psychologist."

Team Avengers, as the media christened them, worked fast, and Nelson and Murdock's opposition to Prosecutor Fallaci's motion was in the Court's file within two days. To the team's frustrated disgust, the Court made a "temporary" order for Bucky not to visit Wanda until they'd made a final decision.

It was another day before Wanda's mind was clear enough for Betsy Braddock to clear any non-mentally-enhanced visitors.

To the surprise of all, the first person she wanted to see was Tony. Clint went with him. The minute they got into the hospital room, Wanda was sitting up in bed and blurted, "Tony, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean - "

"Hey, hey, whoa, Wanda, easy!" Tony exclaimed, throwing out a hand. "You're gonna work yourself up when you're supposed to be relaxing; I know you didn't mean it. You didn't hurt me, kid. Surprised me a little, yeah, but not like – well, you know. The thing in Sokovia. Nothing at all like that. It's all right."

Wanda sighed, keeping eye contact with him, and Clint didn't think she'd talk telepathically with Tony if he wasn't okay with that. Rather, judging by her hesitant smile, Tony was saying something mentally to her. Only when that had passed did Clint approach to hug her.
"So good to see you up. How're you feeling?"

"Awake," Wanda said dryly. "Not like…everything took too much energy before, even sitting and listening." She huffed. "You'd think I would have realized."

"Your guards adulterated your food supply outside the building where you were housed," Vision told her. "Probably for the express purpose of preventing you from sensing a threat, and also because they themselves had no idea how severely the drug would affect you."

"I didn't care what happened, the longer I was here," she mused. "When I first got here, I did care. I wanted to tell the truth and listen to what they said, and give justice to anyone who deserved it...but then I cared less and less."

"That's part of the problem," Foggy said, sitting in a chair next to her. "The Court can't accept testimony from a drugged witness. They're either going to have to start all over again - which'll be hell on everyone involved - or dismiss the case against you."

Wanda stiffened. "No, they shouldn't dismiss it! Not until the people I hurt get their day in court!"

Tony shot Clint an uncomfortable look, but Foggy went on patiently, "Wanda, you have rights too - every defendant has rights, and there's a saying: better to let a hundred guilty men go free than one innocent man be imprisoned. I get you want to fix your part in Sokovia and Ultron, but look at it this way: Bucky's about to start the exact same process. How would you feel if someone did to him what they did to you, and the Court just let it slide?"

_Ooh, this guy's good!_ Clint thought. Wanda couldn't argue with that. "Why won't they let me see him?"

Foggy sighed. "You can talk to him, just not in person. Unfortunately, I have a feeling that's going to be the rule as long as either of you are up on charges."

"Pepper's got our legal team back home reading everything that gets filed - no offense," said Tony to Foggy.

"None taken. What do your guys think?"

"They think Fallaci's gonna win this one, and it'll become the rule for anyone suspected of telepathy, especially recognized telepaths. Physical isolation from anyone who can't establish a privilege, like a lawyer or doctor." Tony scowled. "And the Friends of Humanity bastards'll keep pushing it by claiming every mutant or enhanced might be a telepath now."

"Not to make you think we're not fighting it - Dr. Damaris signed an affidavit that forcing you to be physically separated from Bucky for months or more will damage your mental health- but yeah, I think we're probably going to lose this one." Foggy patted Wanda's hand. "On the bright side, Fallaci already conceded you can have contact with anybody you want via Skype, email, phone, or webcam, so you will be free to communicate with him."

Wanda sighed. "I suppose I can't blame them entirely. Only...does that mean everyone who isn't my lawyer or my doctor can't visit me? Why just Bucky?"

"Their reasoning is that right now, Bucky's the only person charged," said Tony. "I think Fallaci was going to push to keep all Avengers away, but Vision pointed out he can access the whole Internet and still respected laws about classified information. So this is the 'compromise.'"

"But what if they charge the others?" She stiffened, sensing the conclusion they'd been hoping she
"They...might," Foggy said carefully. "Cap and Black Widow are the most likely targets. At worst, Sam Wilson, Clint, and maybe Tony too. But not the ones who signed the Accords and mostly abided by them."

Wanda was back on her feet - barely - enough to testify on the motion. Bucky and Steve watched in real time from the heavily-reinforced (meaning it might've taken either of them five minutes longer to break out of it than an ordinary building) but reasonably-comfortable "dangerous enhanced defendant housing" that'd been built near the court complex.

Bucky didn't mind the place; it was comfortable enough, and the Court was letting Steve stay with him. All that security outside would do more to keep hostiles out than keeping Bucky or Steve in, but nobody else needed to know that.

He did wish he'd managed to see Wanda in person once while she was awake. She'd lost weight and looked thin and weak, and the judges looked appalled by her condition. Even Fallaci and the prosecution's legal team looked a little dismayed. Bucky could only hope that was a good sign.

But that didn't stop Fallaci from getting straight to the point. "Miss Maximoff, are you and James Barnes in a romantic relationship?"

Wanda looked startled. Bucky groaned into his hands. "Should've seen that coming."

"No," Wanda answered warily.

"Are you and James Barnes related?"

"No."

"Is he your lawyer?"

"No."

"Objection, your honors, the nature of Miss Maximoff's relationship with Sergeant Barnes has been stipulated," said Foggy.

"Don't mock the witness, Mr. Fallaci," said one of the judges.

Fallaci went on, "Your psychologist says you have to have physical contact for the sake of your mental health. Can you explain that?"

"Objection, Miss Maximoff isn't a psychologist."

"I'm entitled to question her regarding the reason given for opposing my motion."

"Overruled."

Wanda bit her lip, and Fallaci added in a gentle voice that Bucky was sure was feigned, "In your own words is fine."

"I...since...my enhancement...it's...hard to be alone." Wanda murmured, turning deep red. "When my brother was alive, it was easier. He stayed near me. After he died...it's harder."

"But James Barnes isn't your brother."
"No, but he understands."

"How is that?"

"I told him," Wanda said, not meeting anyone's eyes. "It seemed only fair. I know so much of what's inside him. I told him."

"I don't understand," said one of the judges. "Miss Maximoff, what do you mean by 'what's inside' Sergeant Barnes?"

"It's...how my telepathy works," Wanda explained. "To help untie the trigger words, I had to see his memories, his thoughts, for weeks. Anything on his mind when we were working, I could see. I couldn't help it; I try not to invade people's privacy."

"Is physical contact necessary to use telepathy?" another judge asked.

"No, sir, although it does make it easier." Wanda frowned to herself. "I don't think I could do...treatment like that without physical contact."

"Did you ever tell anyone else about your need for physical contact?" the chief judge asked.

"Vision and Agent Barton. And, ah, the psychologists who treated me."

The chief judge raised her hand. "You don't need to speak anything about your medical or psychological treatment, Miss Maximoff. That is confidential."

That was something, Bucky supposed. But even though the judges seemed sympathetic, in the end, they granted the prosecutor's motion.

"Damn it," Steve growled. "So she can't see you until this is over."

Bucky leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's not just her."

"...what?"

She told me things to make up for being in my head, like she owed me something. She doesn't tell anyone what she's seen in my head. "She knows..." Why the hell can't I tell Steve?

He opened his eyes and winced at the way Steve was staring at him. Did he think there was a one-sided thing from Bucky's end? Nah, Steve knew better. She was too young. So Steve knew he wasn't gearing up towards a romantic confession. "Apart... from you and her...I can barely remember what it's like. Being touched by someone who isn't a medic or Hydra or trying to kill me."

"You mean it...if we touch you, it doesn't...bother you?"

Bucky smiled weakly and shook his head. Wanda had admitted to it. He might as well. "Opposite," he whispered.

Steve blinked, then slowly put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. Bucky shifted, wanting to pull closer, but still...not quite sure how. So Steve did, raising his hand to Bucky's neck, cupping his face like Wanda sometimes did. Bucky shut his eyes and trembled, but not from distress. Steve cautiously pulled Bucky into his arms, and Bucky leaned fully against him.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Since they reunited in Germany, Steve had been so hesitant about touching Bucky, let alone hugging
him, probably assuming it would stress Bucky out. Except it was the opposite. That embrace Steve had given him on the hospital lawn when Bucky'd nearly come apart at the seams from sheer terror at going into treatment of his conditioning had been half the reason he'd had the strength to say yes. Bucky rubbed his cheek against Steve's shoulder and murmured, "Didn't know how."

Steve tightened his grip and rubbed Bucky's back. They sat that way for a long time. Steve opened his mouth, then shut it again, but Bucky mused, "We've done this before." He searched the tattered remains of his memories. "I...when you were smaller."

"Yeah."

Bucky went on, his voice somehow staying level despite how hard he was clinging to Steve. "Till...the end of the line...the day I told you that...at first you wouldn't let me. Finally you did. Only I held you."

He felt Steve nod. Even after Steve had accepted the key to their family's place, Bucky'd refused to leave him alone. Eventually, late that evening, Steve had broken. Bucky'd held him as he tried in vain to stifle his sobs. "It's okay, pal. I know. I'm here."

By the time the war started, they'd had a place of their own. Steve had been so proud to be able to pay some of the rent, and Bucky...he thought he remembered being happy there, enjoying the quiet. Bucky didn't remember the start of the war, just a sense of dread that had grown as the enlistment posters and newsreels had played and more and more guys signed up.

Even when Bucky'd been teaching Steve to box, he'd known Steve sensed his anxiety. The first time Steve had tried to say anything, Bucky'd snapped at him, "You think I'm a coward?!"

"You know I don't think that! I know you'd never dodge service!" Steve had protested. They hadn't talked about it again for almost a year.

Bucky'd joked and bragged his way through the enlistment process and training, probably fooling everyone who wasn't Steve or his sister Becca. He'd started spending more of his pocket money on cigarettes, smoking and staring into the distance for a future that terrified him – or maybe no future at all. He remembered that.

As more units started forming up and shipping out, he'd stopped going on dates and spending his money on the really good smokes. Steve found him on the fire escape one night with a pile of cigarette butts and sat silently next to him. Bucky'd stubbed his smoke out before Steve could tell him not to bother; he never smoked near Steve to avoid setting off an asthma attack – thought Steve always insisted it wasn't necessary.

Maybe that was what finally got the confession out of him, a muttered admission: "I'm scared, Steve."

"I know. Hey, I don't blame you - or anybody else. War's scary. This war is scarier."

"Why're you so desperate to fight in it, then?"

"Because someone has to. It's not that I'm not scared," he'd insisted.

"Yeah, right. You were born without any self-preservation." Bucky'd pulled his knees up to his chest, not looking at him. Steve had really had to reach to get an arm around Bucky's shoulders back then, but he'd managed it. Bucky'd been tense at first, but eventually relaxed against Steve - well, half against Steve, half-braced against the stair railing.
Steve had insisted, "I'm gonna be with you when you go over there."

Bucky'd sat up and looked at him in exasperation, wondering if Steve had any idea how very un-reassuring it was to hear that. "You're not gonna give up until you get arrested for fraud on your enlistment form, are you?"

"No, I'm not giving up until they let me join!"

Maybe there was a reason he remembered that conversation so clearly. Bucky tightened his grip so Steve wouldn't let him go, and murmured another confession: "I'm scared, Steve."

Steve hesitated a moment, then asked carefully, "Of...the trial?"

Bucky nodded, still not lifting his head from Steve's shoulder. "I didn't think I would be. But I am."

Whatever Steve wanted to say, he didn't insult Bucky's intelligence by insisting it would be okay and they'd win the case. It wasn't completely out of their hands, but in the end, it wouldn't be up to any of them."I'll be here," Steve finally said. "No matter what happens. Till the end of the line."

MAXIMOFF CASE RESUMES BEFORE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT!

Doctors cleared former Avenger Wanda Maximoff to continue appearing before the ICC last week as the Court considers whether to charge her with crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Her attorney, Fred Nelson, has filed a motion demanding all her prior testimony be thrown out in light of overwhelming evidence Maximoff was being drugged by the American contingent of Court security. The agents responsible, all members of the American Enhanced Sentinel Program, claimed the substance used was "medication" to prevent Maximoff from using her dramatic mental and telekinetic powers aggressively against anyone at the Court. Doctors say she was almost poisoned by the drug. Maximoff was in a coma for nearly three weeks.

Wakandan King T'Challa has admitted he was sheltering Maximoff and the other fugitive Avengers, as well as James Buchanan Barnes aka the Winter Soldier, since shortly after the popularly-termed "Civil War" between factions of the Avengers in Leipzig, Germany.

The Ronald Bunt administration and several U.N. delegates have called for sanctions King T'Challa's government, but the response has been lukewarm. Since rescuing his stepmother, Queen Ramonda, from thirty years of captivity in the hands of white supremacist Anton Pretorius, T'Challa has led multiple anti-human-trafficking operations and freed over 500 victims.

Experts say even if the U.S. or the U.N. succeed in passing sanctions against Wakanda, the impact on the secretive nation's economy will be minimal.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Wanda's case is set to resume, but Team Avengers wants the case dismissed due to her poisoning. Wanda doesn't. Nothing frustrates lawyers more than clients who won't follow their advice.
PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Dr. Kelile: Senior physician of Wakandan medical research and hospitals, head of the medical research team treating Bucky. Age 50ish, five-foot-one.

Dr. Damaris: Wakandan psychologist/psychiatrist who kept an eye on the Avengers at T’Challa’s instruction and headed the psychiatric aspects of Bucky's treatment. Mid-40s, has studied both at home and abroad.

Damian Fallaci - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

Judge Irina Ginsburg - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel, handling the Avengers' cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her. Possibly.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Summary

Wanda's case is set to resume, but Team Avengers wants the case dismissed due to her poisoning. Wanda doesn't. And Thaddeus Ross may be out of the picture, but some of his true believers aren't, and they're arrived at the court with several missions.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to all of my readers for your amazing feedback! FYI, one bummer in the news - I got kicked off Tumblr in this week's purge. My blog was not marked NSFW and never had an explicit flag - cats, landscapes, fandom, and politics are pretty tame unless Tumblr decided to snap everyone who protested the new rules out of existence a la Thanos (wouldn't put it past them). Really depressing because I had actually planned on staying and hadn't backed up any of my headcanons or other Tumblr-exclusive content. I've tried to appeal, but so far no response in almost a week. For those of you still on Tumblr, please pass the word that I didn't bail (I was 3Fluffies), but obviously can't post update alerts there for the foreseeable future.

Canon Notes: There's a lot of legalese and international relations in this chapter, and I've no doubt I have the International Criminal Court's procedures completely wrong. I'm a 'murican lawyer so I tend to write law from that perspective, even though the ICC follows different formats. Still, I'd like to thing the principles governing the ICC are reflected in the judges' speech in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"She doesn't just get to walk because of an accident!" a Fox News pundit squalled on the courthouse steps as the Avengers headed into the building.

"If that was an accident, I've got some asbestos insulation to sell you," Clint muttered.

Sam added, "Maybe ask him if he'd like to participate in a study of STDs and get free health care."

They all fought to keep straight faces as they passed protesters waving signs - many in Sokovian - demanding justice for the victims...among other things.

She Has Rights, But So Do We!

Who Will Avenge Our Children?!

Murdering Hydra Cunt

Natasha wondered if Bucky was watching this - and if so, how he was reacting. Clint was twitching
the way he did when his hands itched for a bow and arrow at the men shouting misogynistic and antisemitic slurs. Steve faltered, but Nat caught his elbow and tugged him along.

_No good will come of engaging with them._ Though if Wanda were with them having to walk this gauntlet instead of being admitted through the secure entrance with Foggy, the rest of the Avengers might not have been so restrained.

In the courtroom, while nervous and unhappy, Wanda looked more like herself in the courtroom than she had on television. Natasha was satisfied that she'd completely recovered – physically, anyway. Team Avengers' lawyers were frustrated with her. They wanted to go full-on scorched earth about Wanda's case and argue that the whole thing should be thrown out because she'd been impaired through no fault of her own while testifying.

Wanda didn't agree. She was still determined to give the victims of Sokovia, Johannesburg, and everything in between their shot at her.

Good thing the International Criminal Court's panel had decent human beings as judges. "Mr. Nelson, am I to understand you are _not_ asking the case against Ms. Maximoff to be thrown out?"

Foggy said, _very_ slowly, "At the instructions of my client, I am not permitted to request that relief."

The message got through loud and clear. Judge Ginsburg eyed Wanda, then said to the other judges, "We cannot make a decision without hearing from the defendant. Miss Maximoff, are you prepared to testify, or does your counsel need a recess to prepare?"

Wanda swallowed hard and glanced at Foggy. At his nod, she said, "I can testify now."

Natasha sighed inwardly as Wanda made her way up to the stand. Everyone jumped as the courtroom door thudded open and three suited figures stalked in. A bailiff went to intercept them. "The courtroom is full," he said, but the man in the lead flashed a badge.

Tony looked back and bristled, placing the pair almost as fast as Nat had. "Who the hell are they?" muttered Clint as the group wedged themselves into the first row of the gallery, ignoring the scowls of the spectators who'd made it in on time.

Tony said, "Congressman Dixon Wallace, Senator Robert Kelly, Senator Ellen Nadeer - the unholy trio of the Committee on Enhanced Activities..._fuck._ Vision, check the chatter. Are they here with an extradition team?"

Matt Murdock had noticed the new arrivals too, blind or not. "They may be here with one, but they won't succeed in extraditing her. She subjected herself to the ICC's jurisdiction, _not_ the United States, and the latter doesn't just flow automatically from the former. Even if she walks, she won't be leaving with them."

_Unless Wanda decides to martyr herself_, Nat thought. But Wanda was looking at the Americans, frowning, and her chin went up. Nat was glad to see that. Whatever Wanda might be feeling about giving the victims of Ultron their chance at her, she would pick up on the unholy trio's agenda very quickly.

"They are planning to extradite her, or try, at any rate," said Vision.

Nat focused on the gallery as Wanda took the stand. More than half of it was occupied by the media, but the members of the public who'd been allowed to enter had been thoroughly searched (as had the reporters). Most of the public in attendance had lost loved ones in Sokovia, Johannesburg, or Lagos. For the Avengers' case, the courtroom had been retrofitted with a massive bulletproof glass wall that
could be slid automatically between the gallery and the rest of the chamber to protect the gallery from an enhanced defendant - and vice versa.

The survivors' and families' expressions weren't very sympathetic to Wanda, though some of them saw Nat looking at them and exchanged nervous glances. *Be angry all you want, just don't get any ideas.*

Was that fair? Nat winced inwardly and glanced over her shoulder - yep, Wanda was looking at her. She gave the barest nod, her expression bleak.

Once everyone was settled again, the judges handled the questioning of Wanda themselves. "Miss Maximoff, are we to understand you are *not* asking for your case to be dismissed?"

"Yes," said Wanda.

The three judges exchanged troubled looks. "Why not?" Judge Ginsburg finally asked.

Wanda took a deep breath before answering without looking at anyone - not even the gallery. "I think...it's not right to dismiss the case without even a trial. I...I hurt many people. They and their loved ones deserve answers."

A mutter of agreement went through the gallery, and Nat (and Clint) checked the group over once again. One of the other judges said sharply, "I remind everyone in this courtroom that any person interrupting these proceedings will be removed."

That settled the public down, though some people still looked bitter and resentful. When Nat turned back, Wanda was hunching her shoulders, but looking past her friends as if trying to meet people's eyes. *Don't do that to yourself - shit, this No Telepathy rule is harder than I thought.* She half-hoped it would make Wanda smile. But it didn't.

Judge Ginsburg went on, "Miss Maximoff, do you understand the severity of what was done to you? You are a defendant and witness before this Court, and anything you said could be used against you - or used against other defendants such as James Buchanan Barnes or the rest of the Avengers. Setting aside - only for a moment - the fact that you nearly died as a result of your security guards' unauthorized actions, you were drugged without your knowledge or consent, and as a result, you had no way of knowing you were impaired during your appearances before this Court. Do you understand what that means?"

Wanda frowned to herself, genuinely puzzled. "I-I think so."

"This Court is concerned that you don't. Any person facing charges for a crime must be able to understand those charges. They must understand the questions being asked and the implications of their answer. A person sedated during court proceedings and while answering questions from the prosecution can't fully grasp the proceedings. You also cannot have been able to fully assist in your own defense. What appeared to this panel to be nothing more than anxiety and grief has now been revealed to be physical impairment."

"But I did that to people," Wanda murmured.

"What?"

"When I worked for-for Hydra. And then Ultron. I made people get lost in their own minds. Mostly memories, but sometimes, if I really wanted to hurt them, I made them see what they feared most."

"Aw, come on, that is *not* the same thing!" Tony exploded.
Most of the team nodded agreement, but Nat winced, especially when someone in the gallery yelled angrily, "Yes, it is!"

"Remove Mr. Stark and that man from the courtroom," one of the judges ordered.

Nat grabbed Tony's arm and hissed, "You are not helping her, Stark. And leave that other guy alone."

Tony glared at her for a second, then looked over his shoulder to see Wanda's stricken expression. He sighed and nodded as a bailiff came up behind him. Tony mouthed, Don't worry about it, at Wanda before turning and walking out.

The other heckler from the gallery took a few steps toward Tony, but another bailiff was flanking him and pulled the man away. Vision murmured, "American, security guard from Sierra Nevada Mineral Research facility. He was hospitalized for two weeks, then transferred to a psychiatric inpatient facility for four months."

"Dammit," Steve muttered.

"Hey, we all knew this was gonna happen," said Sam.

"So does she," said Clint. "It's not just naïveté that has her wanting to give people their day in court."

They all braced themselves and sat down as the judges called the room to order again. Judge Ginsburg returned her attention to Wanda. "So your position that your case should not be dismissed is based on your history of using your telepathic power to put others into an impaired state?"

"Yes?" Wanda said. "And...I just think they have a right to be heard. I don't mind starting over, if that's what it takes. I really don't."

The judges looked at each other, then another - Judge Eloise Lagarde from France - asked, "I assume you're aware that this Court is considering charges against James Buchanan Barnes, and may also initiate pretrial proceedings against Samuel Wilson, Clinton Barton, and Steven Rogers, yes?"

Wanda swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Then if any of your fellow Avengers had been subjected to the same treatment by this Court's security - drugged, resulting in their impairment for weeks of testimony and near-death, along with three weeks of coma - would you feel it was just for this Court to proceed with their cases, or simply apologize and require them, through no fault of their own, to start over?"

To Nat's surprised gratification, there were uneasy murmurs from the gallery. She elbowed Clint to stop him from looking back again. The last thing they needed was an accusation of intimidating the victims and their families. Even some of Prosecutor Fallaci's assistants and witnesses looked uncomfortable, though Fallaci himself looked more resentful than anything else.

Wanda was quiet so long that the third judge, Salim Jibril of Uganda, prompted her. "Miss Maximoff?"

"I...don't know," she answered miserably, no longer looking at anyone.

The judges exchanged another look, then Judge Ginsburg said, "The Court has no further questions. Defense?"

Foggy stood up. "Wanda, do you remember what you were questioned about on May 13, 2019?"
Wanda frowned to herself. "I don't think so."

"Would it help you remember if we read some of the transcript to you?"

"Yes, it will."

"Your honors, I move for the court reporter to read the attached highlighted testimony into the record." Foggy handed a single page to Fallaci and the officials.

"Objections, Mr. Fallaci?"

Fallaci looked like he really wanted to object, but couldn't come up with a good reason. "Is this really necessary, your honor? A witness isn't going to remember word-for-word how she testified over a month ago before - as Mr. Nelson keeps reminding us - she went into a coma for three weeks."

"Miss Maximoff, do you remember your testimony on the subject of Bruce Banner's attack on Johannesburg?" asked Judge Jibril.

Wanda shook her head, then belatedly remembered to answer aloud, "Well, yes, I know there were questions about it."

"Do you recall at all what you said in response to those questions, or the nature of the questions even?"

"I...don't think so. I mean, it was almost two months ago," Wanda said, shooting Foggy a nervous look.

"I'm allowing the reading. Madam Court Reporter, please read the highlighted portion of the transcript."

"Mr. Fallaci: Miss Maximoff, were the Avengers disabled at the time you left the shipyard?"

Witness: Mostly.

Mr. Fallaci: So you, your brother, and Ultron had successfully taken the vibranium and made your escape, hadn't you?

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: But then you decided you wanted to use your powers to bring out the Hulk, right?

Mr. Nelson: Objection, leading and assumes facts not in evidence.

Judge Lagarde: Sustained.

Mr. Fallaci: Let me rephrase, did you use your powers on any of the Avengers who hadn't been disabled after you left the shipyard?

Witness: Yes, Bruce Banner.

Mr. Fallaci: Where was Bruce Banner?

Witness: With the Avengers' plane.

Mr. Fallaci: Could Bruce Banner fly a plane?
Mr. Nelson: Objection, assumes facts not in evidence. How was she supposed to know whether he could fly a plane?

Mr. Fallaci: She was a telepath, wasn't she?

Judge Jibril: Miss Maximoff, did you know at the time you attacked him whether Bruce Banner could fly a plane?

Witness: No

Judge Jibril: You didn't know or you know he couldn't?

Witness: I didn't know.

Mr. Fallaci: Did you fear he would pursue you in the Avengers' plane?

Witness: No.

Mr. Fallaci: So your purpose in attacking him was to bring out the Hulk?

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Nelson: Objection, leading.

Mr. Fallaci: Witness is letting herself be led pretty willingly, your honors, and she's a defendant, by definition hostile. Leading questions are allowed as to motive.

Judge Ginsburg: Overruled. Continue, but Miss Maximoff, don't answer until your attorney has a chance to object.

Mr. Fallaci: Miss Maximoff, didn't you attack Bruce Banner in order to unleash the Hulk on the general public as well as the Avengers?

Witness: I don't know.

Mr. Fallaci: Well, let's break it down. Did you intend for the Hulk to attack the Avengers?

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: "Did you intend for the Hulk to distract the Avengers?"

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: And if the Hulk had attacked any civilians who happened to be in the wrong place or the wrong time, or if he charged into a major urban center like Johannesburg, that would distract the Avengers, wouldn't it?

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: And that's exactly what happened, isn't it?

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: Tony Stark could fly as Iron Man, couldn't he?

Witness: Yes.
Mr. Fallaci: So instead of chasing you and Ultron and the vibranium down, he had to go to Johannesburg and fight the Hulk through the city streets, causing the death of 133 people, didn't he?

Mr. Nelson: Objection, where does that death toll number come from? This is the first I've heard of it.

Witness: Yes.

Mr. Fallaci: Asked and answered, your honors."

Nat had been in the courtroom for that, as had Vision. She'd thought Wanda was losing interest in defending herself, she'd been so dull and monotone. Luckily, Vision had worked out the truth before she went into a coma that night.

"Does that refresh your memory, Wanda?" Foggy asked.

Wanda grimaced and admitted, "Not really."

"Okay...your honors, I request that the video of Miss Maximoff's testimony be replayed. I believe it's approximately three minutes."

"Objection, your honors, this is cumulative, and the witness just said she doesn't remember!" Fallaci argued.

"Miss Maximoff, do you think you might remember if you saw the video of the testimony?" Judge Lagarde asked.

"I can try," Wanda said.

"Madam Court Reporter, please replay the video of the testimony."

Fallaci sighed heavily, and Nat managed not to smirk too much. Yeah, it was one thing to hear it read in a dispassionate court reporter's voice, quite another to see Fallaci practically in Wanda's face, snarling the details of the Hulk's attack with all the vitriol he could muster, and Wanda's dull-eyed, dull-voiced one-word answers. Watching now, even Wanda looked startled, and Nat could hear people shifting in the gallery behind them.

When the replay was over, Judge Ginsburg took over the questioning. "Miss Maximoff, do you remember this testimony now?"

Wanda looked down at the front of the witness stand. Nat felt Steve and Clint holding their breath on either side of her.

"Miss Maximoff?"

Wanda was turning red. You have to tell the truth, kid. Oops. Thought at her again.

Foggy pressed gently. "Wanda? Do you remember any of those questions or what you answered?"

Her eyes brimming, Wanda shook her head and whispered, "No."

"No further questions, your honors."

"Mr. Fallaci?"

Fallaci studied his tablet for several moments, then said delicately, "Miss Maximoff, did you ever tell
anyone you were feeling too tired to testify?"

Wanda blinked. At least it had the effect of getting her back to the present. "I...no, I don't think so."

"Did you ever tell anyone you weren't feeling well?"

"No."

"So you weren't that impaired, were you?!"

"I don't know - "

"Objection, the drugged witness had no way of knowing how impaired she was!" snapped Foggy.

"In any case, Miss Maximoff, wasn't it Mr. Nelson's job to pay attention to whether you were capable of giving accurate answers?"

"I - "

" - and if he didn't do his job, how is that the Court's problem?"

"Objection!"

"Sustained!" snapped Judge Jibril.

Fallaci demanded, "Your honors, doesn't it strike this Court even a little odd that Miss Maximoff was so terribly impaired, but her counsel doesn't bother to complain until now?"

"That is enough! Do you have further questions?"

Fallaci heaved a dramatic sigh. "No further questions, then!"

"Someone thinks he's Billy Flynn," muttered Clint.

"Wrong side, though same cross technique. Fallaci was a DA back in the states, learned melodrama made him looked tough on crime," Sam whispered. "Did a good job on that Bosnian creep in 2012, I guess."

"This Court is in recess," announced Judge Ginsburg.

The room erupted into chatter and reporters' voices as Wanda came down from the stand. Clint stood up quickly and caught her elbow on cue as she stumbled. "You did good, kid."

She let him put an arm around her, then stiffened when a woman in the gallery said, "No one is there to hug my daughter!"

One of the bailiffs hurried forward, and Wanda opened her mouth, but half the Avengers hissed. "No, no, uh-uh, that'll get her in almost as much trouble as it gets you," Sam said, blocking her physically from seeing the middle-aged woman who was stalking for the exits. "We know, you want to give them their day, but this won't help anybody."

"Let's get you home," Clint urged. "You can Skype Bucky."

Wanda let them lead her, but looked back at Steve. "He isn't alone, is he? He shouldn't be alone!"

"No, no, Rhody's with him," Steve reassured her. "I'll go join him now that today's hearing's over.
Get some rest, okay?” He squeezed her shoulder, then smiled at Vision and jerked his head toward Wanda.

"I heard that,” she said, weakly joking. They all chuckled. Nat pondered which group she should join, and decided on following Steve and Sam.

It must have been easier for Wanda and company to get to her housing than for Nat, Sam, and Steve to get through the layers of security to Bucky's. (Well, they were going in the conventional way, complying with all the various security checks and entrances. If they hadn't been, they could've reached Barnes in roughly ninety seconds after arrival at the outer perimeter. Security was pretty tight.)

So Barnes was already on a Skype call with Wanda when the others arrived. Nat could never decide whether to be amazed by how gentle the ex-Winter Soldier could be. He had a hand against the webcam, meeting hers, speaking Sokovian as she cried.

“You know it better than any of us: there is nothing you can do or say to change people's minds. If they want to hate you with their dying breaths, they will. Or even if they eventually decide they do forgive you, they'll do that on their own. You can't persuade somebody who's been hurt.”

"I have no right to just walk away from this!” she insisted. "I'm not doing it to change anyone's minds. I'm doing it because I'm guilty!"

"Wanda!” Bucky exclaimed. "This Court's all about crimes against humanity. War crimes. Yeah, you did some awful things, but you weren't torturing or raping people on behalf of a government - or against one. You didn't rip Sokovia City out of the ground. Ultron did, and you were actively working against him from the minute you realized what he was up to. Nothing you did even comes close. In all likelihood they wouldn't have indicted you anyway.” He sighed. "It sounds like the U.S. still wants their pound of flesh from all of us, so you can always go there after this is over."

"I suppose they'll keep me from seeing you in person there, too.”

"Probably.” Bucky smiled sadly. "They can't bar everybody. And it's impossible for you to do anything to influence how the survivors and the casualties' families feel, a lot of people all over the world are amazed at what you're taking on by choice. Remember that."

"I will. I promise.” Wanda glanced behind her and rolled her eyes. "Vision and Clint are going to start yelling if I don't eat soon."

"Scram,” Bucky ordered in English. Only when the webcam went dark did he drop his cheerful, reassuring demeanor.

Steve went immediately to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. Bucky closed his eyes and leaned his head against Steve's arm. Nat managed to hide a smirk. She'd wondered when Barnes was going to admit he was as tactile as Wanda.

Early the next day, the Court ordered Wanda and all the lawyers back to hear their decision on whether her case would go forward. But the messenger who brought the instructions to her quarters knew what the judges were going to decide, so Wanda knew then.

She couldn't quite hide a flinch.

The whole team, sans Bucky, gathered at her quarters before making their way to the court building. There was promptly a fight over Skype.
"Someone has to stay with Bucky," Wanda insisted.

But to the surprise of only a few, Steve shook his head. "Today of all days, I need to be behind you. You were on my team. You still are."

"Same," said Sam.

Rhodey said reluctantly, "I can stay again if necessary, though I agree with Cap. Every one of us who can be there should be. There may be trouble."

"Or there may be trouble when they know Bucky is alone," Wanda retorted.

"Wanda, do you honestly think I can't defend myself?" Bucky scoffed.

"I doubt they'd be stupid enough to storm the place," said Clint. "Those 'dangerous enhanced defendant' buildings are self-contained for ventilation, supposedly for protection of the defendant. I call bullshit. They want to be able to gas you. I don't mean lethal - not necessarily anyway," he added hastily, seeing Wanda stiffen.

Stark was trying to pretend he wasn't pay attention, but Wanda could hear him thinking about the puzzle loud and clear. "What about a couple of suits? They'll detect threats before any human could."

Everyone looked at him, and he kept his eyes on his hologram. Finally, Bucky spoke up. "Yeah, that's fine. Everyone who can be with Wanda should be."

Even T'Challa arrived in the courtroom and joined the Avengers in a dramatic "gallery of superheroes", as the reporters began calling it, behind Wanda, Foggy, and Matt. Wanda had to struggle to keep a straight face and not drop a hint that she already knew the outcome.

"This Court has considered carefully all the evidence before it and the positions of the prosecution and the defense, as well as the position of Miss Maximoff herself and those who have come to this Court to seek justice for their losses and their injuries.

By rights, those injuries and losses, and Wanda Maximoff's role in bringing them about, should have been the sole issue before this Court. Instead, we are now forced to consider those tragedies against the broader issue of the rights of the accused when he or she is placed in this Court's custody.

This Court concludes that Wanda Jaelle Maximoff's testimony before this panel is irreversibly tainted. We note her personal refusal to request that her case be dismissed, and her voluntary proposal to simply wipe the slate clean and begin this process again. However, this Court has the discretion to consider a position even if it is not advanced by either party, and we must consider whether any desire for justice outweighs the very harm to the purpose of justice if this case goes forward.

The drugging of a witness is the antithesis of this Court's purpose, particularly when that witness is herself a potential defendant, and her testimony may lead to charges being brought. It is the most severe contravention of justice, an act of violence equal to threats of harm or actual harm in order to obtain favorable testimony. The fact that it was not - allegedly - directed at influencing her testimony is irrelevant.

This breach not only endangered the life of a witness and derailed this search for truth, it also endangered the very soul of this Court and the justice we are bound to seek.

Only one remedy can be allowed here. All proceedings against Wanda Jaelle Maximoff for the events from 2009 through 2017 are hereby dismissed with prejudice."
The wave of rage and grief and disgust slammed into Wanda from multiple directions, and despite having had advanced telepathic notice of every word Judge Ginsburg said, she still flinched hard. The relief that flowed from Matt, Foggy, and Wanda's friends was no comfort.

Judge Ginsburg waited, hand on her gavel, but the room quieted with no more than hisses and mutterings and gasps. Then she looked directly at Wanda. Wanda made herself meet the older woman's eyes.

"Miss Maximoff, your desire to present yourself to the jurisdiction of this Court is commendable. But I must caution you: no non-ecclesiastical court on this Earth is in the business of absolution. We choose to uphold this Court's commitment to justice and fairness, and therefore must dismiss your case without indictment, but even if any part of your testimony could be accepted, the actions you acknowledge cannot be remedied by words."

A murmur of agreement went through the gallery. Someone was sobbing - a South African man, a father whose two children had died in Johannesburg. A woman hissed curses under her breath, damming Wanda, damming the judges, damming the Avengers for her husband's death in Sokovia.

Judge Ginsburg addressed those people as well. "Your anger and pain are all too justified. You who came here to seek justice have been robbed of it, but not by this witness. There is no guarantee what the outcome of these proceedings would have been, but the unauthorized and unwarranted actions of the American Sentinel detachment left this Court with no choice. We cannot consider the testimony of a drugged witness, and the case against her cannot proceed after she was so inexcusably endangered. If we cannot protect the safety of a witness and assure that her testimony is made knowingly without unlawful interference, then no justice can come from here. You all, defendants, witnesses, and public alike, have this Court's profuse apologies for this incident. We did not authorize our security's actions, but the consequences must still be borne by us all. The pretrial investigation of Wanda Jaelle Maximoff is hereby adjourned and closed."

"You cowardly BITCH!" an American roared, and bailiffs hurried toward the gallery as more people started shouting.

Wanda turned and looked at them, made herself stare at row after row of tear-stained, angry, devastated faces and drowned her mind in wave after wave of pain and hurt and loss and rage.

Maybe Judge Ginsburg wasn't wrong about the purpose of the Court, but still...I did this. It's all I can give them.

They raged and shouted and gesticulated at Wanda and the other Avengers and the judges until the bailiffs pulled them away, one by one. Wanda shook Foggy and Vision off when they tried to pull her away. She vaguely heard Natasha telling the rest of the team to just leave Wanda alone.

The gallery was almost completely clear except for a few people who were near collapse, when Tony shifted towards them. "Friday just pinged me. Barnes is getting really agitated."

That broke the spell, and Wanda actually swayed on her feet when she looked back at them. "Tell him I'm fine. We're done…" Something tugged at her mental awareness. "…or not."

Sure enough, there were those two Senators and that Congressman, talking animatedly with Fallaci. The judges were watching, and Matt muttered, "Yep, they're going straight for extradition."

"Wanda's not in Netherlands custody anymore!" protested Rhodey. "They're not empowered to turn her over."
Fallaci eyed Wanda and said, "Before the Court adjourns for the day, I must make an urgent motion regarding the still-pending case of James Buchanan Barnes." Wanda huffed out a sigh, but she wasn't surprised. "The same risk of concealed communication between Wanda Maximoff and Barnes exists, so the prosecution requests the order barring her from physical proximity to Barnes remain in effect."

Senator Kelly stepped forward. "And we're here to present the United States order for extradition of Maximoff."

Judge Ginsburg eyed him. Wanda almost choked when the judge asked, "And who are you, sir?"

"Robert Kelly, United States Senator. I'm here with Senator Ellen Nadeer and Congressman Dixon Wallace on an executive order from President Bunt."

"Executive order? Has this extradition request not been processed by the embassies pursuant to the International Extradition Treaty?" asked Judge Jibril.

Even Fallaci looked thrown. Senator Nadeer answered, "No, your honor, in light of the very urgent need to bring enhanced individuals into custody for the public safety, all enhanced extradition orders are being entered by the President of the United States."

Judge Lagarde actually stifled a laugh. The press were practically salivating. Wanda rammed an elbow into Tony's ribs to keep him from interrupting. The judges would handle this just fine. Judge Ginsburg said delicately, "I'm afraid any amendments to the treaty to make a special provision for enhanced individuals still need to come from both of our nation's governments."

The two American men huffed, then looked expectantly at Nadeer, who was looking at the press. Now Wanda had to discreetly hide behind Vision and Steve so the press wouldn't see her trying not to laugh.

Senator Ellen Nadeer of New York was supposed to fling herself to the ground shrieking that Wanda was doing something to her mind. At least, that was the plan she and her colleagues had dreamed up on the flight. But now that she was here before the media and the International Criminal Court, Nadeer, for all her bigotry, was having second thoughts, if only because she was recognizing the harm to her career.

Kelly, however, didn't have that same sense. "Are you... feeling okay, Ellen?"

Instead of launching into her amateur dramatics, Nadeer turned to Fallaci and began muttering that the Court's decision should be challenged. "Your honors, the prosecution requests time to prepare a motion for rehearing on the issue of Wanda Maximoff – there is, ah, concern that she may have used her enhancement to unduly influence your decisions."

"I, uh, don't think I feel well," added Kelly.

"Maybe you should sit down then, Senator," said Judge Ginsburg. Rhodey stifled a laugh and gave himself the hiccups. "You may brief the issue, Mr. Fallaci, but the Court will take a dim view of motions resting on any evidence other than verifiable facts."

"Your honor, respectfully, the problem with having a telepath before this Court is we can't verify what she may be doing!"

"You never said you didn't want me in the Courtroom!" Wanda blurted before she could stop herself. Then she winced, Kelly put a hand to his throat, and she said more quietly to Foggy, "I could appear
"Let us deal with that," said Foggy. "Unbelievable, it's 2019 and we're about to get a proffer of spectral evidence."

Kelly was practically stomping his foot. "You can't just turn her loose!"

"Senator, you're out of order. Mr. Fallaci, do you intend to have any of these individuals join the prosecution team?"

"Er…"

Congressman Wallace stepped forward. "We apologize, your honor. It seems there were some procedural errors." He leaned toward Fallaci and muttered something inaudible, but Wanda heard it loud and clear.

She's not important as long as she stays in custody as a material witness. The Winter Soldier has to be the real priority here.

Wanda went from wanting to laugh to wanting to shiver.

Sure enough, she left the court building still in custody – only now as a material witness rather than a potential defendant, and she still couldn't see Bucky!

Any comfort the other Avengers might have taken in her deliverance fell to ash in their minds when they passed a reporter giving a recap of the day's events.

"Although it's small consolation to the victims of Sokovia, Johannesburg, and Lagos, experts agree Wanda Maximoff is a small-time international criminal compared to the bloodshed and destruction carried out by the Winter Soldier. I think Congressman Wallace realized that and so led the decision by the American delegation to back down in order to keep their hand in as these proceedings go on. One phase of the Avengers' reckoning is over, but now the real trial of the millennium is about to begin!"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: The world turns its attention to deciding whether to charge Bucky with crimes against humanity. Many people with different agendas are involved - including Helmut Zemo, who has not given up on seeing an empire fall.

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Original Character Guide

Damian Fallaci- a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

Judge Irina Ginsburg - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel, handling the Avengers' cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her.
Possibly.

Judge Eloise Lagarde - second judge on the pretrial panel, French, mid-60s.

Judge Salim Jibril - third judge on the pretrial panel, Ugandan, mid-60s.
Chapter Summary

The world turns its attention to deciding whether to charge Bucky with crimes against humanity. Bucky and his defenders struggle to face the horrors he endured - and inflicted at Hydra's command.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Many thanks to all my readers for your feedback and patience. Writing Bucky's experience in court is rather delicate, and this chapter and the next one involve a lot of rewrites. Thank you all also for your support during my brief exile from Tumblr. I'm happy to report justice has prevailed (after almost 2 weeks!) and I'm back and active on the site as 3Fluffies. Also, as a reminder, Bucky's mission to kidnap seven-year-old Mahsa Turani is described in Chapter 33.

Fandom Crossover Note: My judges are original characters, but the three psychology experts are drawn from Marvel canon as well as another unrelated canon. Anyone recognize them all?

Legalese Note: Once again, I play a little fast and loose with the pretrial process for a potential defendant building an insanity/lack of capacity defense. I have no idea if rebuttal witnesses are allowed in pretrial before the ICC. However, I do use the actual Rome Statute's standard for that defense.

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains references to and implications of sexual assault and torture, including a child victim. Nothing graphic, but please be advised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Associated Press, September 27, 2019

TRIAL OF THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS: WILL JAMES BARNES BE CHARGED WITH CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY?

Some call him America's longest-held prisoner of war. Others call him a traitor and merciless killer. Today the International Criminal Court begins the long process of deciding whether James Buchanan Barnes should be charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity for his activities as the Winter Soldier!

Experts are quick to remind media outlets that this is not actually a trial. Rather, the proceeding is a pretrial similar to America's grand jury indictment process, deciding if Barnes even be charged.
There is no question that Barnes committed over two hundred assassinations and several kidnappings for Hydra and the former Soviet Union. Yet there is also no question that Barnes was a prisoner of war for over seventy years and subjected to substantial torture and physical enhancement, at least partly against his will. The remaining question is whether he can be held legally responsible for any of his actions.

The "Winter Soldier Tapes," leaked to the public by Natasha Romanoff, present compelling evidence that Barnes was an unwilling prisoner, tortured and left amnesic and incapable of making decisions. However, the insanity defense in any Western court is a hard standard to meet. Barnes and his attorneys must show he was incapable of recognizing his actions were unlawful.

According to the ICC's enacting Rome Statute, a person is not criminally responsible for his conduct if "[t]he person suffers from a mental disease or defect that destroys that person's capacity to appreciate the unlawfulness or nature of his or her conduct, or capacity to control his or her conduct to conform to the requirements of law." In particular, Barnes and his attorneys must show that his ability to understand that his actions were unlawful or his ability to control himself were actively destroyed.

General Dixon Wallace, now a United States Congressman, has joined the prosecution team. While not an attorney, Wallace is contributing substantial resources for debunking the defense's argument that Barnes' time in captivity rendered him incapable of recognizing the unlawfulness of his actions.

"I feel for each and every American who has ever been taken prisoner by our enemies," Wallace told Fox News in his first interview after joining the prosecution team. "I'm doing this in their name, to stop their names from being sullied by having this traitor and murderer hiding behind their ordeal."

Experts in the insanity defense and in psychological treatment of prisoners of war are watching this case unfolds anxiously, particularly the testimony of the three psychological/psychiatric experts: Dr. Ashley Kafka for the defense, Dr. Leonard Samson for the prosecution, and Dr. Emil Skoda for the Court. All three experts have medical and psychology/psychiatry doctorates and are American.

It was questions, questions, questions for days on end. Bucky never would have imagined wishing he could go back into cryo to escape anything that wasn't Hydra. God, he was tired, and he hadn't even started testifying in front of the judges. The first ten days were strictly questions by the psych experts, not even in court. For some reason, it made him squirm more than he thought he would if he had been in court.

"What do you remember about the mission to kill Dr. Aloysius Samberly?"

"Uh…nothing. Is that his picture? No, I don't recognize him. I must not have succeeded."

"So you don't remember assignments where you failed?"

"That's correct – not so far, anyway – no, wait…I remember some where I failed the first time, then sort of…reset in the field. I tried again and finished…the kills. Those I remember."

"How does that make you feel?"

Like a fucking murder prodigy, asshole, how the hell would it make you feel?!

Well, truth be told, none of the shrinks were really that bad. Bucky disliked Skoda the least – or maybe it was the lack of lawyers whispering in the guy's ear or slipping him notes and the calm, brisk manners that Bucky found least stressful to deal with. Kafka, the defense expert, was okay, and
Murdock and Nelson kept their own interference to a minimum. But her gentle, concerned eyes burned Bucky with her sympathy, and he wanted to climb the walls.

Samson himself actually wasn't bad. His manners were a lot like Skoda's. But Wallace and Fallaci were endlessly hissing questions and passing him notes, to the point that Samson won a lot of points in Bucky's view by snapping, "If you're so sure you know how this questioning should go, I'll go home and you can take over, but good luck getting the Court to accept your qualifications as a psychological expert!"

There was no rule against discussing the sessions with the shrinks, so Bucky told Wanda and Steve about it that night. At least it made them laugh.

Only then, two weeks after his case was officially opened, did the public questioning in the Court in front of the judges begin.

The night before, once he'd looked at Nelson and Murdock's planned review of the Hydra tapes, Bucky approached Wilson and Romanoff. "Some of what they're going to play wasn't in the material you leaked."

"Yes, the most graphic material went only to the Court," Romanoff said.

Wilson closed his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you mean 'graphic' in the worst possible way?"

"Yeah." Bucky came right out with it. "I don't want Steve in the courtroom."

Dead silence. Wilson's brow furrowed in confusion, but Romanoff stared Bucky down. Feeling his face growing hot, he looked away for several beats and muttered, "I know I can't stop him from watching, just…don't want to see him watching. I know he won't think ill of me – nothing would make him do that. I just can't face watching his heart break over and over."

They said nothing. Finally, he made himself meet their eyes again and snapped, "Look, can one of you stay with him?"

Romanoff answered, "Of course. He shouldn't be alone when he sees it. But we're not going to ask him for you, Barnes. That part you have to do yourself. Use your words."

"Hey!" To Bucky's surprise, Wilson's indignation wasn't on Steve's behalf, but Bucky's. He glared at Romanoff. "You wanna lay off?" He turned reluctantly back toward Bucky, and Bucky sighed. "She does have a point, though. He's not gonna take our word for it that you'll feel better without him there."

So that was how Bucky had possibly the most difficult conversation of his life (conversations with Hydra included). At least Wilson was nice enough to "prep" Bucky for it. "Steve, I…need to ask a favor."

Steve, so accommodating, started to say "anything" without thinking, but then saw the look on Bucky's face and apparently thought better of it. "What?" he asked, his voice a little weak. It stabbed Bucky through the heart.

Bucky swallowed hard and made himself talk. He couldn't look at Steve anymore. "Tomorrow, they're…opening with some of the worst stuff. Stuff on the Hydra tapes that Romanoff didn't leak because of…how…graphic it is."

He might not be looking at Steve, but he could hear Steve draw a shaky breath. "I…yeah, I kind of guessed that. At least they're closing the session to the general public."
"Don't go," Bucky blurted. He felt Steve stiffen, but stared harder at a point on the floor. "Please," he muttered. Why the hell did his voice have to sound so weak? Damn it. "Please."

There was a long, agonizing silence before Steve gently touched his head. "I... Buck... oh God." Bucky knew he was hunching tighter and tighter in on himself, but couldn't seem to stop. "Y'know... you don't even have to be there and watch it. The Court decided that."

"I know. But I'm gonna go," Bucky mumbled. "I need... seeing things might help me remember. I want to remember everything."

"Buck..." The grief in Steve's voice was going to kill him. "Why do that to yourself? What can it help to remember... stuff like that?"

Bucky made himself look at Steve. "Because... it's... the doctors in Wakanda and here, they all say my memories are like a puzzle. The further back I go, the less I can remember or even really, uh, identify what's missing. But the more I fill in other pieces - even the horrific stuff - the more I can see what I want to know." He put an arm around Steve's shoulders. He'd finally remembered he could do that, initiate an embrace or a touch on his own, rather than just letting someone touch him. It felt good. "Yeah, watching it isn't gonna be pleasant, but... I don't care. They took it from me, and for better or worse, it's mine. I want to remember everything, no matter how bad it is. I want to remember me."

Now Steve was the one who looked away. "But I can't? You're right, I mean, I understand why you'd want to know, no matter how horrific, but... that goes for me too. It happened to you. I told Nat the same thing when she was working on the first tapes. What happened to you happened, and I want to know because I care."

"Damn it. I don't mean it like that, just... don't make me watch you." Steve sighed, and Bucky pressed a little harder. "Nat and Sam said they'll stay with you. I thought - maybe you could stay with Wanda, but that's probably a bad idea. She'd hear what you were feeling."

Steve closed his eyes and slid his own arm behind Bucky's back. "Yeah, it'll be hard enough on her to see it if she watches."

"You'll do it? Go somewhere else?" Bucky pressed.

Steve was silent for a long time. Then he murmured, "You really think that'll help you?"

Bucky didn't dare let any doubt creep into his voice. "Yeah. It will."

"Okay. Okay."

Associated Press, October 16, 2019

**HYDRA'S MERCILESS TORTURE OF BUCKY BARNES LASTED NEARLY TEN YEARS BEFORE THEY COULD COMPEL HIM TO COMMIT A SINGLE MURDER!**

**Experts are calling it extraordinary that James Buchanan Barnes took almost a decade to break.**

The story of James Buchanan Barnes has gained a horrific chapter with the replay of hours of video footage from his time in Hydra captivity. The details are being withheld at the instruction of the International Criminal Court, but several reporters were permitted to attend the sessions.

The earliest tapes begin only days after Barnes was taken into Hydra custody. Rescued by a group
of Soviet soldiers in the Austrian Alps below the cliff from which Barnes fell from the Howling Commandos' mission to capture Armin Zola. The river and valley floor were at the bottom of a nearly-700-foot drop.

A small Soviet detachment had discovered Barnes and negotiated to turn him over to Hydra as part of a secret recruiting program. Several of the soldiers expressed reluctance and argued Barnes should instead be turned over to the Americans to bolster American trust. They were overruled by their commander, who completed the exchange, only for the Hydra soldiers to shoot the entire detachment dead, effectively eliminating any chance of Barnes' survival being known.

These events took place three weeks after Barnes' fall. Suffering from shock, hypothermia, blood loss, and infection, Barnes was delirious and incapable of defending himself. Hydra turned him over to their medical staff. No instruction to restore a gravely injured and sick man has ever seemed more ominous.

Once Barnes was restored to reasonable health – if still with a severed left arm – his true agony began. It is clear the order was to break the man, and Hydra had no shortage of enthusiastic volunteers. James Buchanan Barnes, American citizen, was subjected to abuse, torture, and degradation that left even many of the Winter Soldier's victims and their families in tears. The judges called several recesses so those in the courtroom – including the judges themselves – could compose themselves. Even the prosecution team's lead attorney and consultants frequently looked away or covered their ears.

Armin Zola reappeared on the scene in 1952, having received clemency in order to serve SHIELD with his expertise. Barnes was, incredibly, still defiant despite having been repeatedly told Captain America had died only weeks after Barnes' "death" in 1945. It was Zola who first posed the idea of erasing Barnes' memory in response to the prisoner's vow that he would never serve Hydra after what they had done.

Throughout those early years of unrelenting torture and torment, James Barnes was frequently reduced to catatonia, sometimes for weeks or longer. When he did awaken, he often said nothing to his captors but repeated to himself, again and again: "Steve." Other times, he chanted the names of his sisters, Rebecca, Elizabeth, and Helen.

Zola unveiled a device intended to rob Barnes of his memory in 1954. It took several repetitions, all agonizing for the prisoner and terrifying for those watching in the present day, before James Barnes was left confused and completely vulnerable. His captors then starved him for over a week before giving him a knife and telling him he would be fed if he killed another prisoner. Barnes' complete confusion is unmistakable in that horrifying clip, as he asked only where he was, and what was going on. Eventually, presented with a large, fragrant meal to eat if he obeyed, Barnes killed the masked prisoner.

From that point, Hydra's objective clearly changed to turning James Buchanan Barnes into the Winter Soldier. (Note: this name was not used by Hydra until 1969.) Early in the procedures, Barnes frequently balked at following Hydra's orders and occasionally began to remember his past, usually his family and Steve Rogers. Hydra's "punishments" for disobedience were merciless and depraved. Judge Salim Jibril was forced to call a sudden recess during one such video and ran from the courtroom. Sources say she was unable to reach the washroom and vomited into a trash can.

The Winter Soldier's first field "missions" took place in 1959. All of these were long-distance sniper assignments under heavy guard in Tibet, Yugoslavia, and the Congo. Barnes balked at 4 of the 7 shots. Each time, his handlers beat and assaulted him mercilessly while other Hydra snipers carried out the kills. Barnes was then subjected to more torture and memory erasure in Hydra's facilities.
After the airing of the tapes concluded, Wanda Maximoff testified via satellite from the secret housing installation where she is confined as a material witness. Visibly distressed and occasionally in tears, Maximoff testified that she had never seen any of these memories in Barnes' mind.

"Where his memory is gone, there's just emptiness. I sometimes see flashes of memories, but it's very disjointed. I think I recognize some things, like where the remainder of his left arm was cut off – they did that without anesthesia. He remembered being on their tables."

Lead prosecutor Damian Fallaci asked Maximoff, "What about the shootings? Does he remember those?"

Maximoff answered, "Yes, but there's almost no context. I couldn't tell you where most of them were if not for these tapes. Just – out of the emptiness, suddenly he has a gun and someone is whispering in his ear about the target, ordering him to fire."

"But he does shoot?"

"Yes, in his memories. He has no memory of the moments where he failed to carry out a mission, but these tapes show that did happen often."

As horrific as the footage is, experts agree this is powerful evidence of Barnes' coercion and manipulation to the point that he was unable to understand the unlawfulness of any murder he committed at Hydra's behest.

Congressman Dixon Wallace, a lead prosecution consultant on prisoners of war, retorts, "We'll see how coerced he really was when you hear about the kinds of torture and brutality the Winter Soldier committed."

In a way, Steve supposed he was glad in the end that Bucky had asked him not to be in the courtroom. As a witness, he was allowed to watch the live feed, but from the privacy of the hotel where he could curse, cry, or vomit his guts out without anyone (especially Bucky or Wanda) seeing him.

He felt guilty for Sam and Natasha having to deal with him in this state, and more than once told them (petulantly, like a damn toddler), "You don't have to hover over me. You can go."

"Get fucked," Sam retorted and handed him a wet washcloth to clean his face off.

Sam especially had a rough time seeing the tapes and kept his focus on Steve more often than the screen, which Steve hated himself for. Nat just watched the playback with a completely dispassionate expression, until she turned to Steve and suddenly became human again, gentling him and sometimes holding him while he broke down. Sam seemed to have an uncanny instinct for when Steve was about to blow up at her, and either distracted him or – more than once – gave Steve an elbow to the ribs or even a pinch to make sure he didn't have the breath to do it.

"Leave her alone. These are her demons too. If that's how she deals, let her deal."

Steve hoped he made up for it a little by putting his arm around Sam when he found Sam shaking on the kitchen floor after a particularly hideous clip of Bucky being "punished" for refusing to shoot a child.

"Have you ever…seen stuff like that before?"

Sam shook his head. "Not seen, no. Just heard about it. Saw evidence of it. On pararescue and then
At the VA sessions. A couple of our guys – and girls – were pretty open about it. It's how they coped. I wasn't about to tell them not to."

At the end of every day, Steve went to the secure facility to meet Bucky, and the two of them hugged so tight it was a miracle they didn't break their ribs. Once Sam made the mistake of trying to reassure them, "You're gonna get through this," then found himself in the middle of said hug, grunting and yelling, "Hey, I'm not a supersoldier – you two are giving me crush asphyxia, heeeelp!" until all three of them were laughing.

On the last day, Nat went with them, and all four of them wound up in a huddle of embraces. "Thank you," Bucky kept saying to Sam and Nat. "Thank you."

"Anytime, you know that," said Nat.

*Is that for Bucky or for me?* Steve wondered – and promptly got nudges from both Bucky and Sam. In any case, he was too tired to parse it all out. "How're you feeling?" he asked as they all shuffled into the kitchen and tried to come up with something to give them an appetite.

Bucky shrugged, but didn't look at him. "Okay, I guess. I kind of figured it'd be...you know. At least now I do know. I'll deal with the rest."

"'The rest' is whatever Fallaci and Wallace decide to grill you on," Sam warned.

"Believe me, I know."
there're more.

Why did he even bother asking God? God had turned his back on James Buchanan Barnes nearly a century ago.

Still, he'd vowed not to hide from any of them any longer, so they were the memories he'd sought the hardest. Even if he didn't remember them alive, he could usually place them from memories of seeing them dead. "I...I think I remember all the - the missions. If she'd ever been a target, I think I'd know her."

"Perhaps she was mere collateral damage?" Fallaci sneered.

Damien Federico Fallaci's sneers had absolutely no impact on Bucky. "I remember them too. For mission reports, I had to identify witnesses who I - eliminated. I remember them."

"'Eliminated.' What a way to describe it," Fallaci huffed. "Are you denying that you killed this woman?"

"I don't remember," Bucky growled. "I've got enough holes in my recall that it's possible I'm wrong, yeah. I don't recognize her from this. Give me a name, time of death, place, I'll try and figure it out. I didn't come here to try and cover anything up."

A murmur rippled through the room at that, and Bucky forced himself not to look towards Steve. Seeing Steve here everyday was...sometimes the only thing that could keep Bucky going, but since this grisly line of questioning had started, Bucky'd held back from seeking that comfort. Comfort definitely isn't something I deserve for this.

Fallaci quickly recovered and looked through his notes, then drawled out, "Her name is Renata Janulis. She immigrated legally to the United States from Lithuania in 2009 at age 46. On July 13, 2014, her body was found in Rock Creek Park, Washington, DC. She'd been shot dead with a handgun."

"Oh, Renata! I wish you would've knocked."

Bucky stiffened, and Fallaci saw it. "Oh, now she rings a bell?"

"Objection," said Murdock.

"Let the witness answer, Mr. Fallaci," one of the judges ordered.

Bucky didn't care. A sarcastic asshole lawyer was the least of Bucky's problems. He wracked his brain. He didn't remember firing a shot at her, but...he'd seen people die by hands other than his own, on team missions, or...

"I wish you would've knocked!"

No, not a mission. Shocked blue eyes and a scream suddenly cut off by gunshots...shadows, but not a mission. Not a mission yet...an assignment, receiving it...it must've been close to a wipe, it was so faint and disjointed in his mind...

"No, uh, it's fine, Renata, you can go home!"

"Okay, night-night!"

Blue eyes, but familiar ones. Mission assignment. A house in a gated community, slipping in through
the shadows, unknown to the housekeeper...

Bucky took a deep breath. "I think...she worked for Alexander Pierce." In the gallery, the woman and man clutched each other, too anguished anymore to remember their rage. "I didn't shoot her," Bucky murmured. *I remember her eyes. Shadows, it was dark in the room, and he didn't turn the light on when he saw me. She never saw him pick up the gun...she was staring at me.*

"I'm – sorry...Mr. Pierce, I forgot my...phone." He remembered her eyes through the shadows. Confused, alarmed, then...comprehending. She'd understood in those last seconds of her life why her employer was meeting with this dark stranger with a metal arm in the shadows. She'd known a monster when she saw one.

That comprehension had been her death sentence. *"Oh, Renata! I wish you would've knocked."*

"Pierce. He shot her when she came in and saw me."

The courtroom erupted. Reporters began shouting questions, the judges shouted for order, but Bucky barely heard any of it. His eyes were drawn to the gallery again. The man and woman... *Mother and...husband? Brother, maybe.* They broke down sobbing. The truth was no consolation to them. She was still dead.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

They didn't notice. In the chaos, maybe they hadn't heard him. Or maybe they had and it just didn't matter to them. Why should it? Renata'd died because she saw him, the Winter Soldier, her employer's filthy secret. Bucky might not have pulled the trigger, but he'd seen her die and hadn't even blinked. He'd forgotten her without even needing a mind wipe, dismissed her from his mind the moment she was dead and no longer a threat to the mission.

He'd thrown Fallaci for a loop. "So you disposed of Renata Janulis' body?"

The couple in the gallery flinched as if the question caused them physical pain. "No," said Bucky. "I don't know who did. He probably called someone in. I'm sorry." It came out again before he could catch himself, and it wasn't directed at Fallaci. The man in the gallery, his arms around the old woman, looked up and met Bucky's eyes.

*Brother,* Bucky concluded. His eyes were the same as the woman in the picture. Entirely the same, comprehending the monster in front of him just as Renata had.

After the fifth week of Barnes' pretrial finished, at Wanda's request, Vision visited Barnes in person to deliver some krofne she'd made for him. "She didn't have to go to that trouble," Barnes murmured, but his smile was soft.

"In her mind, it's not trouble, I assure you," said Vision. "She has settled on cooking and baking as a means to cope with the stress of being separated from you."

Barnes scowled, but his ire wasn't directed at Vision. "I'm glad they're letting her do her own cooking now, since security's was a little lacking."

Vision quite agreed with him. "That was precisely Tony Stark's point when her accommodations were moved. He's seen to it that her supplies are inspected by his own security after the Court's examines them - and they kindly provide her with any provision she wants. Hence her new pastime."

Barnes blinked and returned his full attention to Vision. "She's still under the Court's security? They
dismissed her case."

"So they did, but she is a witness for your case as well as the potential case against the Avengers as a group, so she's essentially under house arrest. Airman Wilson expressed a similar protest, but the Court's official reasoning is that there has already been one attack on her which tainted her testimony and threatened her life." He found it difficult to meet Barnes' eyes as he concluded, "So she remains in custody, much as she was at Avengers Compound two years ago."

In my own custody. Except that I didn't inform her of this, and it hurt her to discover it. He felt a growing distress at continuing on that topic. To his relief, Barnes opened the box and tasted one of the krofne. That his eyes widened, then fluttered closed seemed indicative of intense pleasure, so Vision would be able to report to Wanda that the treat was appreciated.

"Want one?"

"Thank you, no. I tried one earlier, but although I have inherited certain human biological systems and emotions, it seems understanding of food and flavors is beyond me. Although Wanda is determined to keep trying."

Barnes smiled. "My mom was that way about her cooking..." He trailed off, staring into the distance. "...I think." He put the half-eaten krofne down and stared at the ones in the box.

Vision studied him. He suspected this question might push the limits of appropriate tact, but decided that understanding this man was important to mending his relationship with his fellow Avengers. "Is it true that you still don't remember your family?"

Barnes shrugged and closed the box. Now it seemed to Vision that he was feigning his casual attitude. There was a fine tremor to his body, slightly elevated respiration that didn't seem to have any physical cause other than emotional distress. His voice was steady with practiced calm as he answered, "Partly. I remember my parents a little. Not my sisters."

Hoping to make amends for his very unwarranted assumption about Barnes' intentions towards Wanda, Vision tried to be encouraging. "If the memories of your past are still returning, perhaps recollection of your sisters will come back to you."

"Maybe," Barnes said. His eyes narrowed at the half eaten krofne, and he swallowed hard. "Maybe not."

"Do you not want to remember?" Vision asked in confusion. He certainly didn't mean to increase Barnes' distress, but the question did. The tremor grew worse, to the point that a human could probably detect it, and Barnes swallowed again, his throat spasming in the characteristic human prelude to tears - and the desperate effort to suppress them. "Sergeant - "

" - don't," Barnes whispered, his breathing ragged. "Don't call me that. Call me Bucky if you want, not that."

This was clearly important to him. "Why not? That was your military rank."

"It was before," Barnes ground out, his jaw clenched tight. "What I've become...'m not that anymore. The things I did, maybe I...' He squeezed his eyes shut. "...don't deserve to remember them. Let alone be called by that title."

Barnes' shoulders hunched, his head bent as if weighted out, all symptoms of rapidly-increasing distress. Not every victim of treatment like Barnes had endured would find physical contact comforting, let alone with a near-stranger, but Vision thought it was worth the offer. He cautiously
stepped closer and put a hand on his shoulder. There was a risk to doing that, but Barnes wasn't startled or alarmed, though he did seem puzzled as he looked down at it.

"As I'm sure you know, I'm not human, Bucky," said Vision. "My hand can withstand considerable pressure."

Bucky's breathing hitched again, once, twice, three times, but Vision didn't withdraw his hand, and as he hoped, Bucky seized it, holding on tight. An anchor, texts on post-traumatic stress disorder called it. Vision had read a great deal on the topic since the events of Leipzig and Siberia, and realized yet another error had been failure to start that research immediately after returning from Sokovia. Perhaps it would have been helpful, both as a teammate and as a friend.

Bucky didn't look at him, but didn't let go. Vision spoke up again quietly, "You deserve to remember your family, and you're not at fault for what was done to you as a prisoner."

No doubt Bucky had heard statements like this before, from Steve, from Wanda, and others among their friends. Maybe hearing it from a stranger like Vision would mean very little - or maybe it would mean more.

"Were you employed only as a sniper, Mr. Barnes?" asked Fallaci at the beginning of week six.

Bucky knew by then to wait for Matt or Foggy to pop out of their chairs like jack-in-the-boxes. "Objection, assumes facts not in evidence. The nature of this witness's situation is definitely not 'employment,'" said Matt.

"Fine, fine, the activities you carried out at Hydra's behest, does that better fit the semantics?" scoffed Fallaci.

Bucky managed not to roll his eyes. "What was the question again?"

"Did you only serve as a sniper?"

_Oh. This will be unpleasant._ Not that any part of this had been pleasant. Bucky sighed and admitted, "No, I can remember at least once, I kidnapped someone."

"Who?"

"Mahsa Turani, a child in Iran. I don't, I…"

Fuck, stay on target, Barnes, stay focused…

"Sergeant Barnes?"

"Bucky?"

Shit, he'd zoned out. The world was a little hazy around him, but he could hear the judges and Matt and Foggy talking, and – Steve, Steve was in front of him, a hand on his face, tapping his cheek gently. "Sorry," Bucky breathed.

"May we have a short recess, your honor?" someone said.

"Your honor, this defendant is in the middle of being examined, and shouldn't be allowed extra prep time every time he pulls a melodramatic stunt - "

_"Excuse me, your honor, Mr. Fallaci is being highly -"_

"That's enough, both of you! We're not going to recess, but if necessary you can bring a physician in
to determine if he's able to go on."

"I can," Bucky rasped, clumsily pushing Steve away. "'m okay."

Judge Lagarde eyed him. "For the same reasons as in Wanda Maximoff's case, we can't allow a witness to testify while impaired. Take a few minutes."

Steve brought him a glass of wonderfully-cold water, and the brain freeze did make his head feel a little clearer. After a few minutes, he could say (without lying through his teeth), "I'm okay. You can go on."

"Why, thank you," said Fallaci. "Returning to subject if you've gotten over your fainting spell - "

"Mr. Fallaci, that's enough sarcasm," said Judge Lagarde before Matt or Foggy could even object.

"Sorry, your honor. Tell us about Mahsa Turani, Mr. Barnes. How old was she?"

"Seven," said Bucky.

"And why did you take her?"

"It was my mission. To…to take her alive, leave no witnesses, and deliver her unharmed to the rendezvous team outside Tehran," Bucky said. He dug his metal nails into the fleshy part of his inner arm to keep that darkness and those big, terrified, tear-filled eyes from drowning him. Not that he didn't deserve it, but he had to keep his head above it if he was going to tell the truth.

"Did you carry that mission out?"

"Yes." Damn how weak his voice sounded. He couldn't look at anyone anymore.

"Do you know what happened to her after you turned her over to – what was it? The rendezvous team?"

Not "know," not exactly. Even with nothing in my brain but the mission, I had an idea of what was going to happen. "I don't know. But I…thought…I got a sense."

"What did you sense?"

His brain straddled the past and the present, and he did his best to narrate it. "They were…leering. Saying things…I knew they were going to hurt her. I think she knew too. She tried to stay with me instead of let them take her."

"Mr. Barnes…" Fallaci affected dismay. "Are you saying your team intended to rape and torture the seven-year-old girl you delivered into their hands for that purpose?"

"Objection, assumes facts not in evidence!" Foggy snapped.

But Bucky needed to answer. "I think so."

"And you did nothing to try to protect her, did you?"

"No," he whispered. God damn me to hell.

He was dimly aware of Fallaci's smug statement of, "your witness" to Matt and Foggy. Then Matt was in front of the stand. "Do you need a minute?"
Bucky sucked in his breath and wrenched his mind back to the present. "No, I'm fine." Okay, that was a lie. He was not fine.

"Bucky, what do you remember immediately before that assignment to kidnap Mahsa Turani?"

Bucky frowned to himself. "I…nothing. The first thing I remember is being in the chair."

"The chair? Is that where your memory was wiped?"

"Yes, in Siberia, where I was kept. As far as…" Bucky wracked his tattered memories. "As far as I can…that's all I remember. There may've been other places, but I don't remember them."

Matt handed Bucky a small book. "Do you recognize this?"

It wasn't the book his primary handler used to use. "No," Bucky said. He opened it. "It's…an instruction manual. It doesn't have the trigger words, just…the steps, for taking me out of cryo, conducting the wipe."

"Is this process familiar to you?"

Bucky tried not to sound irritated. "No, not at all." The first step was my brain getting zapped, how the hell am I supposed to remember what came immediately before that?

"Can you read those steps for the Court? Oh, and translate them as best you can into English."

Bucky swallowed. "They say…they give instructions for operating the cryo machinery. How to thaw…him. The asset." Somehow it was easier to think of it being someone else. "Immediately upon thawing, the asset's brain must be wiped. There are instructions for how to operate the chair for the wipe. Then…at – at the end of the wipe sequence, the trigger sequence must be delivered. Only the most senior officer on the team is authorized to initiate the trigger sequence or give instructions for missions."

"Trigger sequence – is that those ten words?"

"Yes."

"Are they in this book?"

"No. This…" he leafed through it. "This seems more like a manual for more junior personnel. The rudimentary steps. There was another book – I remember seeing it. Only the ranking officers used it. Then they'd give him instructions for the mission."

"Who is 'him'?"

Bucky gulped. "Me. The asset."

"Is that what they called you?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes they called me 'soldat.' Soldier."

"Do you remember many missions beginning in that chair?"

"Almost…almost all of them that I remember. If it was a long mission, anything over a few days, they'd have a chair somewhere else. I woke up in those a lot."

"Each time you 'woke up,' do you mean your memory had been wiped?"
"Sometimes only partly. If it was anywhere other than Siberia, usually I could remember the prepping we'd been doing, the reconnaissance to prepare for a mission. But nothing before the missions began."

"So let me try and sum this up. For each mission, that 'chair' and those trigger words effectively made you a blank slate, entirely suggestible, to ensure you would obey any command given to you?"

Bucky nodded. "Yes."

"Bucky, do you know how much current is lethal to most humans?"

Bucky blinked. "Uh…no."

"For a reference, I'm handing you this pamphlet about safety with electrical devices. Can you read the highlighted sentence?"

"'Currents between one hundred and two hundred milliamps are lethal,'" Bucky read.

"Thank you. And now, turning back to this book, can you read the instruction on page three – it's flagged for you. The instruction on the current levels into the subject's brain?"

Bucky grimaced. So that's where it was going. Shit, no wonder my brain is swiss cheese.

"'Initial current must be maintained twenty milliamps and gradually increased over five minutes to the maximum level of four hundred milliamps. Maximum current must be maintained for no less than thirty seconds before verbal trigger sequence begins.'"

Several people sucked in their breath. Bucky looked up and met Steve's eyes – and immediately wished he hadn't. Steve was white as a sheet. Matt went on, "Do you understand the gravity of what was done to you every time your captors had a 'mission' for you?"

"I…" Apparently it wasn't enough to stop me from carrying those missions out. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Okay, go down to the bottom of that page. There's a section on…I understand that's Russian for troubleshooting, more or less. Very dispassionate term for running lethal levels of current through a human being's brain. Can you read and translate the second note?"

"'Maintain and test defibrillation and oxygen equipment prior to initiating wipe. Interruption of normal pulse and/or cardiac arrest is a common danger of wipe process.'"

"So, to sum it up, the routine for waking you up for a 'mission' was to put strap you into a chair and run current through your brain more than twice ordinarily lethal levels, and that routine could include your heart stopping, requiring you to be resuscitated?" asked Matt.

"I think so. I don't remember that ever happening," said Bucky.

"Let's have you look at one more document. Deployment process statistics, is the name of this folder – at least, that's the translation. Do you see that spreadsheet labeled 'Incidents'?"

"Yes?"

"Okay, that first line on the graph, can you read the label and the number?"

"'Total revivals, 943. Includes…training and experimental deployments.'"

"And the next line?"
"'Incidents requiring use of one or more resuscitation methods, 521,'" Bucky read.

"So this process was used to revive you from cryogenic stasis at least 943 times, and more than half of those times, that process nearly killed you and required you to be resuscitated."

"Yes," Bucky whispered.

Matt took a step closer. "I know this is hard for you, Bucky, but can you remember at all what that process felt like?"

Bucky swallowed hard and drained the rest of the water in his glass. "N-not really."

_I always said ready to comply. I was ready to comply. I did whatever they wanted._

"Do you remember being in pain?"

Bucky could only nod.

"No further questions, your honors."

But Fallaci stood up. "Your honor, the prosecution requests a recess to call and prepare two rebuttal witnesses."

"Who are the witnesses?" asked Judge Ginsburg.

"Hamid Turani, father of Mahsa Turani."

"Objections, Mr. Murdock?"

"Yes, your honors. The only actual witness to the Winter Soldier's involvement or her treatment at Hydra's hands is Mahsa Turani herself."

Fallaci threw up his hands. "Mr. Murdock wants a traumatized fourteen-year-old girl to sit in this courtroom and tell us all about her torture and abuse in front of the man responsible?!"

"Control yourself, Mr. Fallaci," said Judge Ginsburg. "Both sides are to brief whether the minor witness should be compelled to testify."

_No, no, don't make her come here!_ Bucky looked urgently at the lawyers, and Foggy held up a quelling hand.

"Who is the other witness?" Judge Ginsburg asked Fallaci.

Fallaci affected a completely bland expression. "Colonel Helmut Zemo."

_To Be Continued..._

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Bucky faces the grief-stricken family of a girl whose childhood he destroyed, and Zemo takes the stand with an agenda that surprises no one.
Damian Fallaci - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

Judge Irina Ginsburg - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel, handling the Avengers' cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her. Possibly.

Judge Eloise Lagarde - second judge on the pretrial panel, French, mid-60s.

Judge Salim Jibril - third judge on the pretrial panel, Ugandan, mid-60s.

Mahsa Turani - Iranian girl whose parents were supporters of Arab Spring; kidnapped by the Winter Soldier at Hydra's command in 2011 and held in a Hydra compound in Indonesia until age 14, when Bucky rescued her and returned her to her family.
Chapter Summary

As the International Criminal Court investigates whether to charge Bucky Barnes with crimes against humanity, Zemo takes the stand with an agenda that surprises no one, and Bucky faces the testimony of a girl whose childhood he destroyed.

Chapter Notes

**Author's Notes:** Once again, dear readers, I must beg your forgiveness for the insanely-long wait for an update. This past year has really been brutal, and everytime I think I'm done getting kicked around by Real Life, it starts again. (For example, I haven't even seen Endgame yet! Though I spoilered myself on purpose because I just can't take emotional upheaval these days.) Thank you all so much for your patience, and here's an extra-long chapter. I can't promise entirely regular updates yet (I'm taking a much-needed vacation at the end of this month) but I did get a couple more chapters written and will try to post them before I go. Come hell or high water, I am going to finish this fic.

**Bit Character Notes:** The Turanis are OCs, but there are a couple of bit characters in this chapter borrowed from other fandoms. (Hint: one is an X-Man, the other is from a non-genre TV show.) Anybody recognize them?

**TRIGGER WARNING:** This chapter contains references to and implications of sexual assault and torture, including a child victim. Nothing graphic, but please be advised.

**Previous Chapter Recap:** Bucky's questioning began so the Court and psychological experts to decide if he could be held legally responsible for his actions as the Winter Soldier. At his request, Steve agreed not to be in the courtroom when the worst of the videos portraying Bucky's torture and punishments were played. Matt Murdock presented evidence that Hydra's mind-wiping chair pumped lethal levels of current into Bucky's brain and forced him to be resuscitated more than half the times his memories were erased. The lead prosecutor, Damian Fallaci, announced two rebuttal witnesses: the father of Mahsa Turani, the Iranian girl Bucky kidnapped and later rescued in a Wakandan anti-trafficking mission, and Helmut Zemo himself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Who is the other witness?" Judge Ginsburg asked Fallaci.

"Colonel Helmut Zemo."
On Steve's right, Tony had been taking a drink from a bottle of water and promptly choked. Rhodey pounded on his back while reporters went berserk and the judges pounded their gavels.

*Oh shit.* "Get word to T'Challa; he'll want to know," Steve muttered in Nat's ear.

"Already on it."

Once everyone settled down, Judge Ginsburg shot the prosecution side a dubious look. "What will Colonel Zemo testify about regarding the Winter Soldier?"

"As the disclosures from Hydra's records show, Zemo worked with the defendant on one of his 'extended missions' over several days," said Fallaci. "He had ample opportunity to see how James Barnes discharged his duties to Hydra and whether or not he did so wholeheartedly."

Well, Steve supposed the judges' expressions were encouraging. They were…perturbed, for lack of a better word. "Recess is granted. You'll receive a briefing schedule for presentation of both rebuttal witnesses by the end of the day."

But Bucky wasn't concerned about Helmut Zemo's testimony; he was incensed about the idea of Mahsa Turani's, the girl he'd kidnapped at Hydra's behest to be held and abused for seven years. As soon as they were back in the conference room, Bucky went off on Matt and Foggy. "You are not demanding that kid come here in person! I've done enough damage to her life!"

Foggy, remarkably, wasn't the least bit intimidated by Bucky at his biggest and angriest. The smaller man pointed at Bucky and snapped, "You need to settle the hell down and let us do our jobs, man! We're not gonna torture the kid, but we're also not gonna let her enraged father come in here and start spewing his interpretation of what he thinks happened to her. He wasn't there - she was!"

"Hey, come on!" Sam shouted. "You both are playing right into Fallaci's hands!"

Bucky and Foggy looked at him. Matt puffed out his breath. "Sam took the words right out of my mouth. Okay, *everybody* sit down and calm down. Bucky, you're our client; we're gonna hear you, but you also need to hear us out, okay? You're into week six of living under a microscope after a hell that no human being should have to endure. We've all got to keep it together."

Bucky looked away, arms folded, but began breathing a little slower. Steve went closer, but Bucky stepped away and dropped into a chair, forehead on his hand. Steve looked around and realized only then that Tony hadn't followed. Neither had Rhodey.

**Great, what if Zemo manages to convince Tony that Bucky really was a willing participant?**

"How the hell can Zemo testify about Bucky's state of mind; he's not a shrink," said Clint.

Foggy sighed. "No, but he is a rare eyewitness to the Winter Soldier in action – sorry, Bucky." Bucky waved him off, still distracted. "I say we brief his many, many, many, MANY credibility issues," at least that got everyone grinning, "but tear him to pieces on cross examination. Zemo's no fool, but neither are the judges. They'll know what his agenda is."

"What about Mahsa?" Bucky murmured, not looking at anyone.

Matt resumed the loaded topic more delicately. "Bucky, her father can't speak for her. She's also an eyewitness to…the Soldier's behavior, one of very few who spent any time in your presence and…well…"

"Lived to tell the tale," Bucky finished. He seemed to be shrinking. Steve hated it, but when he
reached for Bucky's shoulder, Bucky flinched away. "It's not fair to make her do this."

"We're not gonna tear her to pieces on cross-examination. She's not even remotely in the same category as Zemo," Matt said. "I've had to question traumatized child victims before. Foggy and I've both been trained for it, and we'll call up those consultants who trained us. It'll be gentle, but the accused – you – you have a right to confront her."

"I don't want to confront her!" Bucky protested. "She shouldn't have to face me again." He rubbed his eyes. "Do I have to be there? What if we agree, I won't so she doesn't have to look at me?"

Foggy looked at Matt. Neither of them answered, so Nat said, "You could waive your right to confront a witness, yes."

Foggy glared at her. "Thanks, 'counselor."

She was unmoved. "As Murdock says, Barnes is your client. Advise him on all his options."

"We are, but that means this can't be a group brainstorming session, so everybody out."

Associated Press, November 19, 2019

**ZEMO TAKES THE STAND!**

*United Nations bomber worked assassination missions with the Winter Soldier in early 2010, will testify about James Buchanan Barnes' state of mind in Hydra's service.*

*Numerous survivors of the Vienna bombing are attending his testimony, but nearly all who agreed to be interviewed voiced skepticism of his credibility as a witness. "He was open that his entire goal was to destroy the Avengers," said one survivor who asked to remain anonymous. "Even if he did see the Winter Soldier in action, nothing he says is trustworthy."

*King T'Challa of Wakanda is not planning to attend. "I have far better things to do than listen to that pitiful man lie. I hope my fellow Avengers will see his motives for what they are."

Steve had been trying to corner Stark and sound him out, but Stark had evaded him. Bucky wasn't all that concerned about Stark himself going ballistic again. In the end, the man would believe what he wanted to believe, and Bucky couldn't exactly blame him. On the other hand, it would break Steve's heart – again – if Stark changed his mind.

Matt and Foggy were wondering at the reasoning of the prosecution, given the transparency of Zemo's agenda. As Zemo was led into the courtroom, shackled hand and foot but with an unrepentant smirk on his face, Bucky had to admit he wondered too. Was it his imagination, or did even Fallaci look uncomfortable?

Bucky scanned the prosecution table. General Wallace, on the other hand, looked eager. Hm. So maybe this hadn't been the actual prosecuting attorney's idea.

"Colonel Zemo, you say you 'worked' with the defendant before," said Fallaci. "When was that?"

"January 2010, in collaboration with Hydra," said Zemo.

A murmur went through the room. Fallaci asked, "You're aware that you've just admitted to working with Hydra, an international terrorist organization?"
Zemo shrugged. "I'm already in prison for the remainder of my life. What do I have to lose?"

"I see. Why were you collaborating with Hydra?"

"Sokovia was engaged in a border dispute with Slovakia and the Czech Republic. My team had been ordered to eliminate certain officials in those nations who were responsible for threatening military force against Sokovia. To aid in complete stealth, we were loaned Sergeant Barnes' services."

"Do you mean the Winter Soldier?"

"No, I mean Sergeant Barnes," said Zemo with a completely straight face. "That's how he introduced himself."

Fallaci hesitated for a beat. "Are you saying the defendant did know who he was?"

"Oh, yes. He was very businesslike. He never explained why he defected from the United States military, but he was quite in possession of his own faculties."

"Objection, this witness is not a psychologist," said Matt.

"This witness had conversations with James Barnes and saw him putting his skills to use. We're not offering him as a psychology expert," Fallaci countered.

"Overruled."

"What sort of things did the defendant talk about?"

Zemo shrugged. "For the most part, he wasn't terribly talkative. He showed great satisfaction each time he made a successful kill. He did boast a few times during off hours about his record as a sniper."

Fallaci asked, "Did he…mention any specifics?"

"Howard and Maria Stark."

Bucky couldn't quite hold back a flinch.

"What did James Barnes say about Howard and Maria Stark?"

"Sergeant Barnes boasted about a mission in 1991 to obtain the only potentially viable doses of supersoldier serum from the United States. Stark and his wife were transporting the serum themselves. He eliminated both of them without firing a shot and was amused that the world believed it was an accident."

Complete bullshit, of course. But would that matter to their son? Does it matter what I said or didn't say about it when I'm the one who did it?

"Did James Barnes show any remorse?"

"Absolutely none."

Fallaci turned around – and faltered, eyes on the gallery. Bucky looked over his shoulder before he could catch himself – oh.

In the gallery row behind the other Avengers, Tony Stark was laughing.
He was being quiet about it, but his eyes were sparkling with amusement as he laughed silently into his hand. A befuddled Rhodes looked like he couldn't decide whether to say something to his friend or not, and the other Avengers were watching Stark with equal surprise.

So much for worrying Stark might believe him.

Afterward, Bucky, Matt, and Foggy left by the secure exit, but hung around in the conference room waiting for the rest of the team to arrive. On television, they saw Stark approaching a flock of frenzied reporters outside the courthouse as Steve and the other Avengers looked on nervously.

"Mr. Stark, what is your impression of the credibility of Helmut Zemo's testimony?" a reporter managed to shout over the others.

Stark paused, seeming dignified and composed… then stretched out his arm and sang out, "Bulllll-shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!" like an opera singer giving an aria.

Behind him, Rhodes and several Avengers facepalmed, but many couldn't hide their grins. Stark turned on his heel and joined them as they all retreated back to the building.

"I really hope Zemo sees that," said Matt.

Associated Press, November 20, 2019

EXPERTS: PROSECUTION MADE A MISTAKE CALLING ZEMO!

CNN's legal experts are baffled by ICC Prosecutor Damian Fallaci's decision to put admitted terrorist and kill squad commander Helmut Zemo on the stand to testify regarding James Barnes' culpability.

"I don't think I've ever seen a less credible witness," said legal correspondent Abbie Carmichael, a former prosecutor. "This man's agenda has been very clear from day one, and I also don't think I've ever seen ICC judges looking so unimpressed!"

Despite Zemo's testimony that Barnes did remember the murder of Howard and Maria Stark and boasted about it, Tony Stark was even less impressed. Stark was visibly laughing until Colonel James Rhodes was heard telling him to stop, reminding him, "People still died in that 'mission' of theirs."

Tomorrow, there is not likely to be anyone laughing in the courtroom. The Court has ruled that 14-year-old M. T., kidnapped by the Winter Soldier in 2011 when she was 7 years old, must testify in person. However, at Barnes' demand, the defense has waived his right to confront the young witness and told the Court he will not be physically present in order to make testimony easier on her.

Prosecutor Fallaci called it a ploy to make Barnes seem kind after he placed the child in Hydra's hands to be abused for over 7 years.

When Bucky asked the team to stay out of the courtroom too for Mahsa's testimony, Steve was okay with that. Anything to avoid intimidating that poor kid.

But when Bucky also told Steve he wanted to be alone to watch the testimony, Steve drew the line. "No. That's a step too far."

"I told Murdock and Nelson I'd watch; it'd be just like if I was in the courtroom," Bucky argued.
Steve folded his arms. "Like hell it would. In the courtroom, I'd be right behind you along with the rest of the team. Don't hand me a line, Buck. This is you still trying to torture yourself."

For a second, he thought Bucky would explode again. Instead, Bucky shrank, and Steve found himself wishing Bucky had exploded. Anything was better than him looking so beaten-down. "Steve, I…don’t deserve anyone behind me. Not for this. I did this to her."

"No." Steve tried to be gentle about it. The last thing he wanted was to be another person pushing Bucky around. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder and tugged gently. After a moment, Bucky sighed and stepped closer to let Steve hug him. "You and I both know that isn't true. You didn't torture her. You didn't…abuse her for entertainment. That's on Rumlow and the rest of those stinking bastards who sent you to kidnap her and then put her in that hellhole for seven years. I hope they're all burning in hell. You had no way of understanding what you were doing – I knew that even before I knew the legalese for it."

As he hoped, Bucky laughed softly into his shoulder.

RARE WINTER SOLDIER SURVIVOR TAKES THE STAND!

14-year-old M.T. was kidnapped by the Winter Soldier at age 7 and must now testify against him.

Bucky would spend the day of Mahsa's testimony in a separate courtroom with the press and galleries, while she and her family were in front of the judges. Every reporter's cameras and recording equipment had been confiscated for the duration, and even the sketch artists weren't allowed to draw her face, just a silhouette.

Before the bailiffs brought the poor kid into the courtroom, the three judges ordered all the attorneys on their feet and threatened them within an inch of their lives. "In the interests of justice and pursuit of the truth, this Court is allowing the testimony of a fourteen-year-old girl who has undergone seven years of unimaginable trauma. Ladies and gentlemen, I promise you, anyone who does anything to intimidate, manipulate, or steer this witness in any way will face the most severe sanctions and reprisals in this Court's power to impose, up to and including incarceration and criminal charges of witness intimidation. Do. Not. Test this Court." Judge Ginsburg glared daggers at each of them in turn, and then addressed them one by one. "Mr. Nelson, do you understand."

"Yes, your honor," said Foggy without hesitating.

"Mr. Murdock, do you understand?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Mr. Fallaci, do you understand?"

Fallaci gulped before answering, "Yes, your honor." Any other day, people behind Bucky would've snickered.

Judge Ginsburg finished, "That goes for your teams as well. Make no mistake, gentlemen, you will be held responsible for any disruptive or intimidating behavior by any member of your teams. If you think there is any doubt that your staff or associates don't understand any part of these instructions, then you will make it clear now before the witness is brought in."

Matt and Foggy just looked back at their legal team, all of whom nodded, then turned and nodded to the Court. Fallaci, on the other hand, turned back to his table and muttered urgently at General
Wallace, who sighed before nodding.

Then it was time to bring Mahsa before the Court.

She came in with a dog, specially trained and authorized by the Court according to Matt, and the judges let her sit at a table facing the judges instead of on the witness stand facing the whole room. Bucky supposed that was something, but her father got agitated when he wasn't allowed to sit next to her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Turani," said Judge Ginsburg. "Mahsa must answer us on her own, but we will take as many breaks as she needs." She turned her attention to Mahsa. "Mahsa, have the attorneys explained why you're here?"

She looked nervous, but answered, "Yes."

"We understand you speak English very well, but if you're not certain you understand what someone is saying, Mr. Ramsey, the translator, is here to help you. If you need to stop and rest, you only need to tell us. If you do not understand a question, you must tell us. Take your time. You are not in trouble, and there is no 'correct' answer. All we want to know is what you remember. Do you understand, dear?"

The judge's sudden grandmotherly demeanor was a relief to Bucky, though he heard murmurs of surprise from some of the reporters and onlookers. True, it was a far cry from the sharp, no-nonsense, downright-threatening stance of just a few minutes earlier. At least it had the effect of calming Mahsa a little more, though she compulsively petted the dog and never stopped all afternoon.

Fallaci went first. "Mahsa, I'm going to ask you some questions about September 9, 2011. Do you remember what happened around 11:00 that night?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell us?"

Mahsa stared at the dog and took a deep breath. The dog put his head on her knee, and Bucky fought not to bury his face in his hands. He didn't have a right to do anything but listen.

"I was asleep. I woke up when...someone grabbed me. It was...the man, the Soldier. He had his hand over my mouth. He was pointing a gun at Giti."

"Who was Giti?"

"My nanny."

"Okay. Go on?"

Bucky couldn't help wrapping his arms around himself. I shot her in the head right in front of a kid right in front of a kid...

She went on, "He had my mouth covered and...he was holding me so tight I couldn't fight. He put tape over my mouth so I couldn't scream and tied me up. Giti whispered to me to do what he wanted. She said it would be okay. Then he put me down and told her to come - but he shot her. There was blood on her face when she fell. He carried me out the window."

Out into the dark on a one-way trip to hell. Bucky's left hand was clenched so tight around his right arm that a bone shifted, sending pain shooting up his right arm. He didn't care. He deserved it.
"He was wearing a mask, and there was black ink around his eyes. I thought he wasn't human."

That was because he wasn't.

"He never looked at me until...I was crying and my mouth was dry. He stopped and took the tape off and gave me a bottle of water to drink. I kept begging him to let me go or take me home, but he...he didn't seem to hear or understand me. But he didn't hurt me either. In the morning, we came to a group of men with a plane. He gave me to them. That was the last time I saw him until this year."

Fallaci moved on to asking Mahsa about her seven-year ordeal in her captors' hands. Bucky wouldn't let himself feel any malice even towards the Hydra fuckers. This wasn't about them. It was about him. He'd condemned her to it without a backward glance.

It annoyed him that Matt and Foggy kept objecting to Fallaci's lines of questioning. "Your honors, Sergeant Barnes had no way of knowing what was happening to Mahsa in that compound."

"He testified he knew his 'retrieval team' was going to hurt her. He's responsible for what happened to her once he gave her to them," Fallaci retorted.

"We will allow it. Continue," said Judge Lagarde. "Gently. Are you doing all right, dear? Do you want to stop and take a break?"

"No, thank you," Mahsa answered. In some ways, it hit Bucky in the guts harder to hear her say things like this than it did to hear her describe Bucky shooting her nanny in the face. She should never have had to be this brave.

Finally, Fallaci was done, and Foggy stood up. "Mahsa, my name is Mr. Nelson. I'd like to talk to you about what something you told Mr. Fallaci, that you didn't see Sergeant Barnes again until this year. What happened this year?"

"In the Paradise Compound, there was a raid. Most of them were wearing masks, but I recognized him. He knew me too. But he was different. His eyes were...human. He unshackled everyone in my cell and told us not to be afraid, that we were being rescued. He was gentle. He protected us."

"Who was he protecting you from?"

"The guards and the masters. They always said nobody would ever find us, and even if they did, they'd kill us all before they let anyone take us away. They said we were property and they'd throw their property in the trash before they let anyone else have it. When the raid started, some of the guards and the masters came into the pit to kill us like they said."

"What was the pit?"

"That's what they called the cages underground where we lived. If we wouldn't...do what they wanted, like they wanted, we had to live in the pit. We could only come upstairs when they let us."

"Did they hurt any of you that night?"

"They shot at us. They shot my friend Seema, but it didn't kill her. Master Cecil shot at her and she fell, but when I turned around, Master Cecil was dead on the ground. The Soldier had come, but now he was shooting at the guards and the masters."

"Who were the masters?"

"They...I think they were the men in charge. That's just what they called themselves. The masters, the
ladies, the help, the guards, and the property. They called us the property if we didn't make them happy. The property who made them happy got...promoted, I guess, to being the help. They could live upstairs as long as they made the masters and the ladies happy."

"Your honors, can we return to subject?" Fallaci asked, albeit softly.

"Overruled, Mr. Fallaci. Mahsa, you can tell us whatever you think is important that you remember."

"The, uh, the Soldier, I didn't know what he'd do, but I realized he was protecting us. Some other people came in - I knew they weren't guards because they were black. That's when he broke into the cage. He just ripped the door off. He was looking at me. Some of the other girls tried to hide in the back, but I...didn't. He said he wouldn't hurt me and broke off my shackles. He never looked at me when he was talking, it was like...like we're supposed to be with the masters. We're supposed to look down."

Bucky hadn't realized he was doing that; it had just been hard to look her in the eyes.

He murmured reassurances in languages he hadn't realized he knew as he undid shackles from skinny teenagers' legs, warning them all to stay back while the fight raged upstairs. Then he resumed his defensive position at the door. M'Baku came roaring down the stairs, sending some of the kids whimpering to huddle against the wall, but he softened on seeing them and pulled off his gorilla mask. It would've surprised Bucky if he hadn't been so full of turmoil.

"Can they understand you?" he asked Bucky in perfect English.

"Yeah - most of 'em."

"Tell them I won't hurt them. Tell them we're here to rescue them."

Bucky repeated the message, then a flood of the compound's residents rushed out of a hidden stairwell into the tunnels, shrieking and sobbing. Even though most of the bastards weren't armed, the kids' terror at seeing them told the tale of what normally went on when these people (using the term loosely) came downstairs.

He, Sam, and M'Baku charged after the fleeing group, only to nearly wind up buried when the tunnel entrance caved in.

After the dust settled, he found her with the other girls, shell-shocked as they waited for the rescue plane to arrive. He almost took his mask off, then decided against it. Even though his sleeve was torn, exposing part of his metal arm, some people still might not recognize him, even if she undoubtedly did.

He half-expected her to spit in his face when he apologized and offered to take her home - or at least to cringe and flinch away from him. But she deserved the choice, so he offered it, trying to be as unthreatening as possible.

To his amazement, she took his hand.

Steve watched from a distance with full eyes, but didn't approach while Mahsa was at Bucky's side, probably to avoid intimidating or confusing the poor kid more than she already was.

On the Wakandan shuttle, he was barely able to look at her. The pilot, Eddel, smiled and demurred when Mahsa asked who she was and what country had sent this strange plane. She only spoke Wakandan and Mandarin, so Bucky translated for her. "It is a secret, child. But we came to help..."
you. You don’t have to be afraid anymore. We are taking you home. There is food and water in the
supplies if she’s hungry," she added to Bucky.

Bucky busied himself with making sure Mahsa could eat and drink as much as she wanted and was
warm and comfortable, staving off the inevitable question as long as he could. Finally, she asked it:
"Why? Why did you take me?"

A lump tightened his throat, and he cursed himself and forced it down. He had no goddamn right to
 cringe from that question or let her feel a modicum of sympathy for him. But at the same time, she
deserved the truth. "I...I was under their control. They had erased my memories so I would do
whatever they wanted. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He knew what her next question would be. "Why did you come back for me?"

All he could give her was the truth. "Because I'm not under their control anymore. I hate what I did
for them. I'll try to fix it, wherever I can, as much as I can." He made himself look at her. "I know I
can't give you back your childhood. But I can take you home, for whatever it's worth." Nothing. It
was worth nothing.

When she stared at him and whispered, "Thank you," he couldn't hold her gaze anymore.

"Don't thank me." He had to whisper it. "Don't."

They landed on the edge of a small, heavily secured compound in the outskirts of Geneva. Bucky
didn't bother asking if the shuttle was cloaked; they slid past the international security and radar
stations without so much as a chirp from Eddel's instruments. "I doubt I'll be long," he told her,
managing not to sigh.

Some guards honed in on their position as soon as Bucky and Mahsa appeared, while Mahsa was
still staring in amazement towards the invisible shuttle. Bucky raised his hands, and to their credit,
the guards recognized the girl at his side and realized what her presence meant. They kept their
weapons trained on him, but one hurried toward her.

To Bucky's embarrassment, she pulled closer to him. "I'm bringing her home," he told the guards in
English, then repeated it in German and Persian for good measure.

None of the guards questioned whether this was truly the Turanis' daughter. She stayed at Bucky's
hip until a woman screamed from the house, and two people came sprinting across the grass.

Bucky stopped, and Mahsa finally broke away from him. "Mama!" She threw herself into her
mother's arms, and her father flung himself at both of them, sobbing. "Baba!"

Bucky kept his gaze on the ground. He had no right to watch this reunion. But he stayed until
Mahsa's father and mother noticed him. Whatever they wanted to ask or say, he owed it to them to
hear.

When Mahsa's father demanded, "Who are you?!!" Bucky made himself meet the man's eyes and told
the truth:

"Seven years ago, I took your daughter from you."

Mahsa's mother gasped and pulled the girl tighter, but as her father snarled and gestured to the
guards, Mahsa protested, "Baba, no, no, he rescued me!"

"How could you be rescued by your kidnapper?" her father hissed, eyes locked on Bucky. "You will
"pay for the agony you've caused us, monster!" Bucky wasn't about to argue. "Take him!" he told the guards.

"No, please!" the girl begged.

Bucky wondered if he should tell Mahsa not to worry, not to bother. But no, watching her sobbing mother clinging to her, her face in her daughter's hair, he didn't. She was home, for what miserable consolation it was. He had no business speaking to her ever again.

It was a little complicated when the guards cautiously approached; if Bucky was taken, T'Challa would be exposed. And he'd promised to go back to Steve, to let Wanda face the ICC alone at least in the beginning. So he didn't kneel when they ordered him to and looked only at Mahsa's father. "I can't stay," he told the angry, devastated man in Persian. "I'm sorry. I know that's worth nothing. But I'm sorry."

"Shoot him!" Mahsa's father demanded as Bucky turned away, but now his wife argued.

"No, Hamid, no, not in front of her!"

"Please, please, he saved me!" Mahsa pleaded. It burned, and Bucky's vision blurred as he kept walking. It was so hideously wrong for her to be doing that.

"Just let him go, Hamid! She's home, forget everything, just let the creature be gone!"

Hamid Turani cursed through his sobs and snapped at the guards, "Let him leave. Go, you merciless bastard! Damn you to the deepest hell for what you've done, whoever you are; this deed doesn't atone you!"

No, of course not.

"Go, go, go! Get away from us and never see or speak of my child again! Damn you to eternal torment!" There was a faint thud as Mahsa's father dropped to his knees, but Bucky didn't turn around, just listened to the man's sobs now muffled by his daughter's shoulder. "Why? WHY?!"

Bucky had no answer.

Unlike their daughter, the Turanis barely noticed when a faint door appeared out of thin air for him to re-board the plane, and they didn't look twice at the lights from the invisible craft as they ascended. They stayed where they were, kneeling on the ground with their daughter between them, unable to let her go.

At altitude, Eddel said quietly, "You should rest, Sergeant Barnes. It is seven hours to Birnin Zana if you wish to sleep."

Bucky just shook his head. He stared out the front window and didn't move for the entire flight back to Wakanda, letting Hamid Turani's words echo in his brain and burrow toward his soul where they belonged.

In the courtroom, Bucky could hear Hamid Turani crying again as his daughter described her rescue and the trip to Switzerland.

Both the prosecutors, the defense, and the Court's experts followed the judges' warnings and were very gentle with their questions, but after four hours, they'd all run out of things to ask. "Mr. and Mrs. Turani, you've endured an ordeal that would shatter the souls of any family," Judge Ginsburg told them. "But you should be very proud of your daughter today. Sergeant Barnes will testify this
afternoon, then we will release Mahsa from the summons so she can return home."

"Does she have to watch?" Hamid asked.

"No, in fact, we advise against it. You can rest at the hotel, and we will have you picked up if any other questions need to be asked."

But where Hamid and his wife looked (and Bucky felt) relieved, Mahsa looked dismayed. "I can't see him at all?"

Everyone blinked. The judges exchanged looks. Judge Jibril asked carefully, "Are you saying you want to see him, Mahsa?" She nodded."...why?"

"I want to talk to him."

"No!" Hamid blurted.

"Please, Mr. Turani, we will handle this. Mahsa, I'm afraid that is against the rules because you are a witness to...a witness in this case. He can't talk to you about it."

"I only wanted to tell him - "

"You cannot!" her father said desperately.

"Mr. Turani," said Judge Ginsburg, a little more sternly. "I understand this is just more of a truly terrible time in your life, but you can't interrupt this Court or your daughter while she is testifying."

"She's confused, please, don't you see?" he pleaded. "You can't allow her to speak for her captor!"

"We've heard a great deal of testimony about Mahsa's mental - about the effect of this ordeal," said Judge Jibril. "And we'll take that into account, but if she wants to address the Court, she's free to do so."

"Ah, your honors, I think I have a couple of follow-up questions," said Fallaci. He gave a reassuring smile at Mahsa and Hamid. "They won't take long."

"Go ahead."

"Okay. Mahsa, have you ever heard of Stockholm Syndrome?"

"Yes. Some of the older prop - I mean, the older girls and boys in the pit told me about it. My dad thinks I have it."

"Oh? Why is that? Well, let's back up a little. What do you understand it to mean, Stockholm Syndrome?"

She frowned to herself and said, "It means a slave likes their captor, or falls in love with them. But I don't have it," she insisted.

Hamid hissed a denial, and Judge Ginsburg held up a hand. "Mr. Turani, we've already told you not to interrupt or try to influence Mahsa's testimony. I understand you're very upset, but if you do it again, we will have to order the bailiff to make you wait outside the courtroom. I don't want to do that. You should be here for your daughter, but you can only be here if you don't disrupt her testimony."

He sobbed into his hands, but nodded. Fallaci held up a placating hand. "I have nothing further, your
Foggy said, "I'm afraid now I have a few follow-up questions, your honors. I'll keep it as simple as possible, but we need to hear what Mahsa has to say."

"Yes. Also," Judge Ginsburg looked at the other two and they both nodded. "We will allow her to address the Court and Sergeant Barnes, but after questions are done."

"Understood. Mahsa, can you tell us why you think you don't have Stockholm Syndrome?"

"Oh, your honors, I have to object, Mahsa isn't a psychologist," Fallaci protested.

"Mr. Fallaci asked her about it," Foggy countered.

"We'll allow the questions."

Mahsa's chin had gone up. "I hated all the masters. I never liked them. The Soldier wasn't like them."

"Can you tell us what you mean? How wasn't he like them?"

"I watched him, the night he...took me. He was...empty." Bucky realized his shoulders were hunched and made himself straighten up. No right to act pathetic or upset. No right. "His eyes, they were different. He was like a robot. He...he didn't react to things. He looked at me, but it was like he didn't see me."

"And - I'm sorry, this may be a hard question. How were the others different, the ones who took you from him?"

She shivered. Bucky cursed himself again. "They were evil, but they acted human. They showed emotions. The ones he gave me to...they were laughing and...when they...did things to me. The masters laughed a lot. Sometimes they were angry. Some of the ladies and the young ladies were...like they wanted to be our friends. They'd give us gifts, or have the doctors take care of us. I knew they were as cruel as the masters even if they tried to be nice. I never liked them or trusted them, but there were some who had Stockholm Syndrome. The ones who had it thought the masters were kind and wanted to make them happy. I always felt sorry for them."

"You're a remarkably brave young lady, Mahsa. So when he took you, did the Soldier hurt you?"

"No. He tied me up, but he didn't hit me or...do anything else." As if that excused him. She was wrong. She did have Stockholm Syndrome, imagining Bucky as the good guy because he was the only one that night who hadn't raped or humiliated her.

"You mentioned the men who took you to the masters laughed. Did you ever see the Soldier laugh?"

"No, never."

"Did you ever see him angry?"

"Not then, but when he came back for us. Sometimes he looked angry."

"That's during the raid in May of this year?"

"Yes."

"So backing up to the night he took you in 2011, you never saw him look angry?"
"No."

"Did you ever think he was afraid?"

"No."

"What about happy, did he ever seem happy?"

"No."

"Sad?"

"No."

"Any emotions at all that you remember seeing in him that night?"

"No. I thought it was so strange. That's why I thought he wasn't human."

"Okay. Now remembering back in May when you were rescued, did you ever see Sergeant Barnes look happy?"

"No."

"You said he did look angry?"

"Yes. He yelled and cursed at the guards and masters who tried to shoot us."

"Did he ever look angry at you or the other people he rescued?"

"No, when he looked at us, he looked sad."

"Sad? Didn't he have a mask on?"

"Just over his eyes, but I knew it was him. It looked like the paint he'd worn the night he took me, but...he was different this time."

"How? Because he was angry - and sad?"

"Yes. There were tears in his eyes."

Bucky flinched.

"What other emotions did he show in May?"

"Sometimes he was afraid. Some of the young masters and the ladies tried to get out from the escape tunnels and collapsed it on some of the men who rescued us. He was shouting people's names, asking if anyone was hurt. Steve, Sam, and – and another man's name, I don't remember them all."

"That's okay. Is there anything else you remember about how he seemed different?"

"Everything about him was different. He looked like a person when he came back for me. He said he was sorry again and again, and he was so sad. I believe what he told me, that he was under their control. He didn't have to take me home himself. When I thanked him, he told me not to."

"Okay. Thank you, Mahsa. No further questions, your honors."

The judges muttered to each other, then Judge Ginsburg said, "Counsel, rather than require this
young lady to come back tomorrow, is there any objection to letting her address the Court and Sergeant Barnes with her thoughts now?" Bucky flinched again and braced himself. Neither side had a problem with it. "Very well. Mahsa, you said you had something to say to Sergeant Barnes. He's not in this room, but as I explained when we started, he is watching via video. So you can say anything you wish to say to him or to us."

The girl gulped and looked at the judges rather than the cameras. At least that was one small relief. "I...want to tell him I don't blame him. I've been watching on TV. His lawyers and doctors say his mind was controlled, and I believe them. I don't think he knew what he was doing. So...I forgive him, even if my father and mother don't. People should forgive him."

Bucky willed his body to be vibranium, not to wilt or tremble or bend. He had no right to this from anyone whose life he'd shattered this way. No right. She was wrong.

She looked anxiously over her shoulder, but her parents, now resigned, forced smiles at her. Once it was clear she was finished, Judge Ginsburg said, "Thank you, Mahsa. Remember that until we release the summons, you are still under oath, and must not talk about your testimony with anyone, even your parents. Mr. and Mrs. Turani, you must not try to influence your daughter on these events until she is released. Her words are her own, and she may still be called back to answer more questions. Do all of you understand?" The group nodded. "We will reconvene after lunch for Sergeant Barnes' testimony."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** Bucky is back on the hot seat, but Team Avengers has a rebuttal witness of their own: Natasha, whose testimony, while supportive of Bucky, shakes Steve to his core. The prosecution regroups...but Zemo has regrouped too!

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Damian Fallaci** - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

**Judge Irina Ginsburg** - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel, handling the Avengers’ cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her. Possibly.

**Judge Eloise Lagarde** - second judge on the pretrial panel, French, mid-60s.

**Judge Salim Jibril** - third judge on the pretrial panel, Ugandan, mid-60s.

**Mahsa Turani** - Iranian girl whose parents were supporters of Arab Spring; kidnapped by the Winter Soldier at Hydra's command in 2011 and held in a Hydra compound in Indonesia until age 14, when Bucky rescued her and returned her to her family.
Hamid Turani - Mahsa's father
Forty

Chapter Summary

Testimony before the International Criminal Court continues. Bucky is back on the hot seat, but Team Avengers has a rebuttal witness of their own: Natasha, whose testimony, while supportive of Bucky, shakes Steve to his core. The prosecution regroups...but Zemo has regrouped too!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: So, my dear readers, I had a small conundrum. I go on a desperately-needed vacation in 10 days, but my next two chapters end in cliffhangers! I want to try to not leave you hanging for 2 weeks out of gratitude to all of you who have stayed with this story through such long dry spells. SO! I am endeavoring to provide 3 more chapters, beginning with this one, in the next 10 days. Can't promise it'll happen, but I shall truly try. Thank you all so very very much. Your reviews and encouragement through some very difficult months truly mean the world to me. For those following my Pacific Rim Generation K series, I'm also trying to finish it before my departure.

Canon Notes: As a reminder, this fic combines the comic canon and MCU canon with regard to Natasha's history. I make her a much older character also subjected to enhancement by the Red Room causing her to stop aging, so she's actually 70 in 2019 when the trial is taking place. She uses the date of her defection, 1984, as her official "date of birth". Also, General (now Congressman) Dixon Wallace, Dr. Ashley Kafka, and Dr. Leonard Samson are not original characters - they are comics canon characters who I appropriated for this fic. See their little bios in the end notes.

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains blunt references to rape and sexual abuse of both children and adults. No graphic details or imagery, but it is mentioned several times.

Previous Chapter Recap: Helmut Zemo testified about Echo Scorpion's use of the Winter Soldier in 2008 and claimed Bucky was well aware of his identity and bragged about the murder of the Starks. Tony was...less than impressed, to say nothing of the judges and international community. But the prosecution's next witness was 14-year-old Mahsa Turani, kidnapped by the Winter Soldier to a horrific 7-year captivity in a Hydra compound. But Mahsa surprised both the prosecution and defense by defending Bucky and providing eyewitness testimony of the visible differences between the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty

Bucky finally wilted from the rigid pose he'd held all morning when they were back in the
conference rooms. He sat heavily at the nearest table, dropped his head into his hands, ignored his food, and said next to nothing.

Steve wasn't surprised that Bucky wouldn't even let himself be hugged during lunch break. He flinched when anyone came too close, so Steve let him have his space, even if he ached to start arguing with the thoughts he knew were in Bucky's mind. She's right, Buck. Can't you let yourself believe she's right? She understands better than you do.

That poor kid. All those poor kids. When she'd described what Rumlow and his team had done to her, Steve had wanted to dig the fucker up, bring him back to life, and flay him alive, or maybe burn him at the stake. His bomb failed to kill me, just a few dozen more innocent people. But I think I'm glad I got to hear him scream, that sadistic piece of shit. I hope it hurt long enough for him to realize he wasn't dead and kept hurting all the way down to hell.

Steve couldn't really blame Hamid Turani for hating Bucky. Those poor parents might not be capable of seeing Bucky as anything other than the monster who stole their child. No more than Tony could stop seeing Bucky as the man who killed his parents. I've got no right to try to force them. Any of them. And yet, Tony was here with them. He wasn't saying much, just having a murmured conversation with Rhodey and Clint off to one side, but he was here in the room. That wasn't nothing.

Matt and Foggy were as gentle with Bucky as they'd been with Mahsa. "You know, this is it," said Matt. "We have to lay everything out, because they're going to try to make you one of the sadists. Are you ready?"

Bucky nodded, not looking up. "Bucky, you've gotta focus," said Foggy. "I don't blame you one damn bit; you and that poor kid have both been to hell and back. But you do have a right to have the truth known, not the story Dixon Wallace and Damien Fallaci want to tell. And..." he moved a little closer. "She has a right to know the truth. She's already lived through the worst of it. No truth of what happened to you will hurt her."

"He's right," said Dr. Kafka, the defense psychological expert. "On the contrary - the truth can only help her." Bucky looked up, startled, and Steve could've kissed both Foggy and Kafka. "Those 'masters' fed those captives a lot of white supremacist bullshit, and some of them were ground down enough to believe it. But a surprising number of human trafficking victims can hold onto their sense of self and their faith for a long time, and Mahsa's one of them. She believes you're innocent. It'll strengthen her own sense of reality by giving her proof that she's not wrong."

Bucky sighed and closed his eyes. "I hadn't thought about it that way." He opened them and looked wearily at the two lawyers. "I don't suppose there's much chance we can finish this today so she can go home and be done?"

"We'll try," said Matt. "But we all know Fallaci and his crew are gonna come at you with everything they've got, and we're going to need to rebut it. Speaking of which, are you ready, Natasha? You're our star rebuttal witness, but they're gonna come down on you too."

"Of course," she said. "I've dealt with much worse than Damian Fallaci or Dixon Wallace."

"I believe you. Bucky, c'mon, eat up. You're not doing this on an empty stomach after an emotional pounding."

An hour later, they were all back in the courtroom, and Bucky was in the witness hot seat. Steve was bracing himself to sit on his hands and had a feeling Sam was preparing to sit on him if necessary. Fallaci was practically slavering. "So, Mr. Barnes, you heard Miss Turani say you showed no
emotion when you shot her nanny in front of her, tied her up, taped her mouth shut, and dragged her nineteen miles to hand her over to be raped and tortured for seven years of her young life."

"Yes," Bucky said.

"And you yourself have testified that you at least suspected what Brock Rumlow and the 'retrieval team' intended to do to that child."

"Objection, asked and answered," said Matt.

"A recital of Sergeant Barnes' previous testimony isn't necessary, Mr. Fallaci," said Judge Jibril. "Move on."

"Yes, your honor. Moving on - so is your testimony that other than putting her in the hands of traffickers and rapists, you didn't harm Mahsa Turani?"

Bucky said, "I never said that wasn't harm. It was."

"That's not quite what I met. Apart from what's been testified, are you saying you never hit her?"

"No, I never hit her."

"How far was it to that 'retrieval' point from her home?"

"Nineteen miles."

"Did she struggle?"

"Yes."

"Did she scream?"

"She tried, but I had gagged her."

"Did she cry?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you worried that she might alert the authorities to your presence?"

Bucky frowned to himself, then shook his head. "No. There…in my orders, there was stealth, but not the – the highest level. I think…" He stared into the distance, squinting as if trying to make something out. "I'm sorry, I…I can't remember. But the stealth level was pretty low. They were just relaxing by the plane when they dropped me off and when I got back. I was supposed to eliminate witnesses, but deliver her alive and unharmed. They were very explicit about the unharmed part," he added bitterly.

"So you're telling this Court that you dragged this panicked, struggling, screaming seven-year-old nineteen miles through the outskirts of Tehran and never once resorted to hitting her to keep her quiet?" Fallaci demanded.

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you." Bucky sounded so damn tired. "I had an arm that couldn't be damaged, and she was bound and gagged. I was under orders not to hurt her, and didn't need to. There was nothing she could do to get away."

Fallaci huffed, but moved on. "When did you realize your 'team' intended to harm Mahsa?"
"When I brought her to them. The way they were looking at her. The sounds they were making, leering. The jokes."

"How did you know what jokes and leering meant if you had no memories?"

"I don't know." Bucky braced himself, and so did Steve.

And Fallaci went there. "So you're also telling us that when your 'team' began sexually abusing and torturing Mahsa Turani for their own entertainment, you just stood there and watched."

"No, I was under orders to be retrieved by another team. I left her with them."

"Were they already hurting her?"

The color was leaving Bucky's face. "Yes," he whispered.

Fallaci could see it and charged on. "So tell me, how many times did you take part in Hydra's form of entertainment by torturing or raping?"

Thank God Matt and Foggy and Nat had spent a long time working with Bucky on how he'd handle these questions. The truth was on their side, but Steve knew better than to think Fallaci would be satisfied with the truth.

Bucky didn't look at anyone. "I don't remember ever doing things like that. I know there are videos where I took part in – in – torture, but I don't remember any of it."

"Let's be clear, Mr. Barnes: how many rapes do you know you committed for Hydra?"

As pale as Bucky'd become, his voice was steady. "I don't know of any. There's no mention of rape in the records or videos, and I don't remember any."

Fallaci folded his arms and shot an incredulous look at the judges. "You're telling me amid all the times you kidnapped, murdered, and tortured, you never committed any sexual acts against a target or a captive?"

Bucky flushed. He finally looked irritated, but Steve would bet he was more embarrassed at turning red than at having to answer. "Not without orders and not for entertainment. The Soldier was a stealth weapon. They…" He had to catch his breath and looked even more frustrated. "They did something to me. I'm impotent."

Dead silence. Fallaci was completely flat-footed.

"Did Fallaci's team seriously not read the medical file?" Sam muttered to someone.

"Probably were looking for the wrong info," muttered Clint.

Fallaci shot an accusing look at his staff, then asked awkwardly, "They castrated you?!"

Was that possibly a bit of sympathy?

But Bucky shook his head, staring hard at the front of the witness stand. "No, I'm intact. Physically, externally, anyway, as far as I know. I think it was something directly to the nerves, but whatever it was, even the serum never healed from it." He finally looked up at Fallaci. "I'm glad they did it if it means they never ordered me to rape anybody."

That was a mistake, and Fallaci pounced on it. "So if you had been ordered to rape, are you saying
you'd have done it, with any, let's say, implement you could find?"

Bucky flinched and dropped his eyes. "Yes," he whispered. "I think so."

"What about torture? Do you remember beating or causing pain to a prisoner for information?"

Grimacing, Bucky said, "No. I know I did, for interrogators, but I don't remember it."

"Why would that be?"

"I have no idea."

"Don't you think it's convenient that you don't remember the most heinous things a Hydra agent would have done?"

"Objection," said Matt.

"Overruled," said Judge Ginsburg. Steve gritted his teeth.

"I don't know why I don't remember. It's not like they explained what they erased," Bucky said.

"But you would have tortured or raped on your commanders' orders?"

"Yes," Bucky said quietly, looking down again.

"No further questions," said Fallaci triumphantly. General Wallace actually clapped him on the back when he sat down. Steve noticed a light flickering above the prosecution's table and found himself wishing it'd fall directly on top of them, preferably setting them on fire.

Matt got up. "Bucky, do you know why some of your 'work' for Hydra was erased?"

"Not personally. They never told me anything about it."

"Has it refreshed your memory to watch any of the videos of your time in Hydra's hands?"

"Only sometimes."

"Okay. I'd like to play some clips for you from the videos and see if they can help refresh your memory at all."

Steve had seen the tapes already, but they still made him cringe and want to look away. He could only imagine what watching them did to Bucky. The first ones were very old, showing Zola in black and white observing and commenting as Bucky's tormentors tried to make him another prisoner's tormentor. They were far enough into his brainwashing that he obeyed their orders, beating the hapless man and injuring him as they instructed, but he was robotic, simply doing exactly what they said and no more. All the handlers were frustrated.

"This is useless," one of them said, the translation for his Russian appearing on the screen. "To order the asset to do this takes twice as long. He's not going to help any interrogation. He isn't frightening."

"He's frightening enough with a gun in his hand," said another.

Zola sighed. "I must agree. Interrogation and observation is an inefficient and ineffective use of the Soldier. He lacks the, ah, predisposition for this kind of work, at least in part due to the wiping process. These tasks require a level of emotional involvement that the Soldier simply does not have."
"What we need are some truly loyal operatives with the skills and training."

"Oh, we have those. What we need is to reengineer an effective serum. Much of my work was lost in the war, and I've yet to manage to duplicate it. When we have the serum, we'll have an unstoppable force, including interrogators. In the mean time, we must be content with the Soldier's true purpose: stealth and lethality. Those skills alone make him a priceless asset."

The tape ended. "Do you understand what Arnim Zola meant, Bucky?" asked Matt.

"I think so. It's...I was supposed to be emotionless, obey any order. But t-torturing people needed emotion. I needed to have it, and understand it. When I'd been wiped, I didn't. They...they told me to hurt someone, and I knew how, but...I think I needed to scare them too. I didn't really know how to do that." Bucky sighed and amended it, "At least I don't think I did."

"You've been alive for one hundred two years, and Hydra's records seem to indicate you were awake from stasis for a total of thirty-two years, out of the sixty-nine years Hydra had you. How much time out of stasis do you think you remember?"

"A lot less than that. And it's all in fragments. I don't remember context or — or...a lot of things."

"No more questions."

Fallaci stood up. "I have a few more, your honors."

"Go ahead," said Judge Jibril.

Fallaci wandered towards Bucky, looking thoughtful. "Tell me, what do you think of Mahsa Turani's statement about you?"

Shit, thought Steve. Bucky seemed to shrink. When he finally answered, his voice was very soft. "I...she's been incredibly brave, and I don't want — I don't - I think she's wrong." FUCK, Bucky, no! "I think she does have Stockholm Syndrome. She...yeah, I didn't hit her or rape her, but I brought her to them and didn't lift a finger to help her even when I saw they were going to. She thinks I'm a hero because I took her home. I shouldn't have done that."

Fallaci made a big mistake by asking, "Why on earth would you regret bringing a kidnapped child home?"

Bucky was too lost in his own mind to say anything other than the truth. "I shouldn't have done it myself; that was selfish. I wanted...to undo something I'd done as the Soldier. I thought it was my only chance, but I was wrong, I had no right to try. All it did was make her imprint on me. I didn't mean for that to happen. I should've let T'Challa's people take her home like they promised."

Steve almost cracked, but Sam elbowed him in the ribs.

At least Fallaci was thrown by the answer. "So...you — you admit that you're a public threat?"

"Objection, mischaracterizing."

But Bucky answered. "Yes. I think I still am."

"What about those trigger words? Weren't they erased?"

"Yes, but..." Bucky frowned at the witness stand. "I don't know, I just...have a feeling."

Fallaci couldn't seem to come up with any response or follow-up to that. "No more questions."
"Anything further from the defense?" asked Judge Ginsburg.

Matt stood up. "We have a rebuttal witness, your honor, but if Mr. Fallaci has no objection, I think we've covered all subject matter raised by Mahsa Turani's testimony, and suggest this Court release her from the summons."

Fallaci rustled through his papers and muttered with Wallace for a few minutes, then nodded. "No objection, your honors."

"Very well. Mahsa Turani is released from this Court's summons and may return home, with the gratitude of the International Criminal Court." Bucky let his breath out, relaxing a little for the first time that day. Steve wished he could put a hand on Bucky's shoulder without being seen. Judge Ginsburg looked at the clock. "Do you anticipate you can finish your next witness's testimony today, Mr. Murdock?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Proceed."

"The defense calls Natasha Romanoff, formerly known as Natalia Romanova."

Steve grabbed and squeezed Nat's hand as she slipped past him to take the stand. "Agent Romanoff, you found, digitized, and prepared the Winter Soldier videos before providing them to the United Nations, correct?"

"Correct, with the help of Sergeant Barnes' treatment team in Wakanda."

"So you've viewed all of the footage provided to this Court?"

"Yes, most of it more than once."

"You yourself were raised and educated by a Soviet KGB installation known as the Red Room, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"How long did you work for the Red Room?"

"Seventeen years, from the time I graduated - that's 1967 - through 1984, when I defected."

"To your knowledge, did you ever work for Hydra rather than the KGB?"

Nat tilted her head as if considering it, though Steve knew she and Matt had gone over the entire line of questioning already. "Definitely not exclusively for Hydra. During my time in the Red Room, I always reported to my superiors there, though I know many of our assignments were at the request of Hydra rather than strictly the Soviet Union. It was...I heard it described as a 'lend-lease' many times."

"What a way to phrase it," said Matt.

"Oh, they did that on purpose, to thumb their noses at the Allies."

"How would you describe the relationship between Hydra and the KGB?"

"A very tense alliance. They worked together towards common aims, but kept their own secrets wherever possible. There was always a fear - very justified - that one might turn on the other."
"Is this going somewhere, your honors?" griped Fallaci.

"In sum, would you say that in thirty-two years in the Red Room, you have substantial firsthand knowledge and experience on the objectives, methods, and operations of both the KGB and Hydra?"

"Yes."

"Prior to his defection from Hydra in 2014, had you ever met the Winter Soldier in person?"

"Yes. The most recent before 2014 was when I worked for Shield. He assassinated a scientist I was protecting in 2009."

"Did you see him on that occasion with your own eyes?"

"Yes. He shot out our tires outside Odessa, and we went over a cliff. When we escaped the wreck, I saw him. I was shielding the scientist with my own body, but the Soldier shot him directly through my stomach."

"Ouch," said Matt. "Any times before that?"

"Yes, when I was in the Red Room, both as a student and after, he was brought in several times. They didn't call him the Soldier then, they called him the Asset."

Steve stiffened. Why hadn't he ever heard about this?

"Why was he brought into the Red Room?"

"To train us and test us sometimes. Other times, for us to train and test him."

"Do you recall when?"

Nat swallowed. "When he was the one being tested, it was periodic throughout the 1970s. Before that, I don't know exactly when he was training us - my memory of my training is very spotty, I think by design. The earliest I remember seeing him was when I was only in the second phase – age eight to twelve, so it would've been during the 1950s and 1960s. There might have been other times."

"What was he doing as your trainer?"

"Teaching us to fight and evade a large, powerful opponent - at least as far as I remember. There may have been other things."

"I understand. And what did you do to train him?"

Nat's eyes darted towards Steve in a flash of raw emotion he rarely saw in her, and his stomach dropped. They've made an effort to stop me from hearing about this before, and now she's nervous about saying it in front of me. I'm really not gonna like it.

"They had me...I was trying to train him...more in the aspects of espionage where I worked. Seduction. Weaponized sexuality. Arousal. And...in the late 1960s, almost immediately after I graduated, they had me...test him. Test whether their surgical...internal castration – that's how they described it – whether it had taken."

Oh...Jesus...God. Steve's ears were starting to ring.

The part of Steve not in a haze of shock and revulsion noticed that every Avenger in the row had also gone dead rigid...except Clint. Steve couldn't decide how to feel about any of this. In front of
them, at the defense table next to Foggy, Bucky was stiff, but not shocked or humiliated. Steve wished he could see Bucky's face to know what he was feeling.

Matt went on gently, "How did you do that? How did you test their...procedure?"

"I was ordered to use every technique at seduction and arousal, including against a target's will, that I knew to try and arouse him, to garner a sexual reaction in him." Nat was steady, but her eyes were fixed on Matt and not so much as glancing anywhere else. "The handlers for Hydra and the KGB were watching on camera to see if he responded."

"Did he respond?"

"No. At one point there were four of us...on that project at the same time, in the same room. Two experienced Black Widows who'd graduated a decade earlier, and two younger ones - that included me. He was just...confused by the whole thing. Many times I could tell he was uncomfortable, but our job was to ignore any resistance."

"Natasha," now Matt sounded reluctant. "It sounds like you're testifying that you sexually assaulted James Barnes."

Nat opened her mouth, then paused and swallowed, going rigid herself as if she was fighting to avoid looking anywhere but at Matt. This time Steve was certain she wasn't performing. "That's correct. It was part of a Black Widow's job. There was no distinction between seduction and sexual assault. If we were ordered to seduce someone, we did. If we were ordered to have sex with them, we did, whether seduction worked or not. If we were ordered to arouse someone, we aroused them, whether they wanted it or not." Her voice had gone rough.

"How did the...handlers react to these 'training' sessions? Do you know of anything they did to him as a result?"

"Yes, we were part of some of the debriefings. He never was. Those were group discussions about how best to use assets - both him and Black Widows. We all agreed he couldn't be seduced and he'd never be capable of using sexuality to his advantage either."

"Do you recall what the handlers had to say about him?"

"The Hydra team was defensive. They kept talking about how efficient and foolproof he was at stealth kills, and they said that 'James Bond-type nonsense' wasn't his purpose. But they admitted he didn't have the capacity for malice and sadism necessary for things like interrogation of prisoners or punitive torture. They'd tried, and he'd follow orders to hurt someone, but he just...his heart wasn't in it. There was...a joke, or a boast, I suppose, that the Hydra personnel liked to make - they'd engineered the one man immune to Black Widows."

"Meaning the - what was it? The asset?"

"Yes. His..." She actually cringed. "His 'shortcomings', as my handlers referred to them, were well-known. In a fight or a stealth operation, he was unmatched, but for anything more complex than hiding in plain sight, he was useless."

Sam put a hand on Steve's shoulder, and Steve jumped a mile. "Easy, man, easy," Sam murmured, his lips barely moving. Steve managed - barely - not to shudder or double over.

But Matt turned his head slightly, hearing their small movements, and asked, "Natasha, during all the time you worked for the Red Room, did you know the Asset or the Winter Soldier was James Buchanan Barnes?"
Her eyes darted towards Steve again, and the pain in them brought him up short - again. When she answered, her voice actually cracked. "No. There - there were strict rules about interacting with him. He was always masked, and we usually were too. We weren't allowed to see each other's faces, ever, even when I was still a child. When I was an adult, I never knew who I was touching - molesting," she corrected herself and looked back at Matt.

"Did you know he was a prisoner?"

"That was the rumor, and...I always thought it was true."

"Why is that?"

"I liked - " Nat grimaced. "Group combat operations with him, we actually enjoyed. It was the only time he seemed human, more like our operatives, just focused and driven. It was the only time he talked. Most of the time, he spoke Russian so well I assumed he was Russian and that all the other languages he knew were training for assignments. The Red Room did the same thing as part of our training. But once, in the late 1970s, his rifle jammed, and he swore in English, just like an American. Then he got confused and couldn't understand what was going on."

"What happened then?"

The handlers halted the exercise, and the Hydra team hauled him out. They were angry and embarrassed about him 'breaking conditioning' - their words - and we all knew he was going to be punished."

"Do you know how he was punished?"

"Not exactly, although there are videos for around that time period of Barnes being tortured, beaten, and violently raped for failures that weren't ever specified. Any one of them could be this one, and there are so many I doubt it really matters exactly which punishment was for exactly which 'failure'."

There was a murmur of dismay through the gallery and even some of the prosecution's team swallowed hard at Natasha's blunt, inescapable words. Even Matt paused for a breath before going on. "After that...'failure of conditioning', did you ever see him again?"

"Not until Odessa, more than twenty years later."

"Did you hear anything about him between that last meeting and Odessa?"

"Yes. In the early '80s, right before I defected, another Black Widow had been assigned to work with him in Siberia. Her handlers talked a lot about him - they were scornful about how Hydra's new commander kept trying to instill loyalty in him."

"Did they say how the commander did that?"

"Pep talks, apparently. About how important his work was and how valued he was."

"Did they say how he responded?"

"Objection, all of this is hearsay," Fallaci protested weakly.

"We can corroborate it with video recordings of those training sessions if necessary, your honors," said Matt.

"We'll reserve ruling to view those videos, but for now, you can continue," said Judge Ginsburg.
"Did your handlers say or describe his reaction to being 'pep talked'?

"Yes," said Natasha. "He either didn't react or just looked confused. My handlers - and most of the KGB personnel who worked with us, they called him...sometimes they called him the zombie, or the vegetable."

"No further questions."

When Steve made to leave with Bucky after that grueling day, Clint chased after him, ignoring Nat's mutter to let him go. "Hey," he growled, catching Cap's elbow. To Clint's relief, Steve didn't look angry when he turned back, just dazed. "Before you go," Clint muttered. "Talk to her. She's scared out of her mind that you'll hate her for this. If Bucky was innocent - and we all know he was - then so was she. She doesn't understand that, but you should. He swallowed it all. Nat wouldn't thank him.

He was pushing her good will by going after Steve at all.

To his intense relief, Bucky shifted back towards them. "Go," he murmured to Steve. "It's okay. I'm okay." Bullshit, but thanks for the lie, buddy, I owe you one. "Steve, go."

Steve blinked at them and said, "You shouldn't be alone."

"I'll stay with him," said Sam. Bucky mock-groaned. "Come on, we can play Pictionary or something."

I owe you both a drink - forget it, I owe both of you a fucking keg, Clint vowed to Sam and Bucky as Steve trailed after him to the smaller conference room.

Matt and Foggy detoured everybody else to the larger one. "Take your time," Matt told them.

Clint wavered over whether to follow Steve. By rights, they should have privacy for this conversation, but Nat was having a harder time than either of them had anticipated, and although Clint thought Steve would understand, he...wasn't entirely sure. And if the worst case scenario happened, and Steve refused to understand, Nat would need Clint. So he went into the room with them and hovered as unobtrusively as possible.

Nat was sitting in a chair turned away from the table, watching Steve with haunted eyes. She never let anyone see her this vulnerable by choice - not even Clint. Steve's breath caught at the sight of her; this must have been the first time he'd ever seen her control break. To an outside observer, she'd only look stressed and worried, unhappy. But to Natasha Romanoff, even that was too much to reveal. Steve had worked with her long enough to know that.

She spoke very softly, forcing herself to meet Steve's eyes. "I know I should've told you. I'm sorry."

Steve quietly turned another chair so he could sit next to her. He wasn't looking at her. C'mon, man, say the right things.

"Why didn't you?" At least it wasn't accusing, though there was hurt in his voice. Nat barely flinched.

She didn't watch him once he was sitting, just stared at where the floor met the wall. "Shock, at first. After we found out who he was...and Fury was dead, I was bleeding out, Hydra was about to launch Insight. When I tried to wrap my head around the Soldier being your Bucky, it was...like a dream. So much was happening so fast. There wasn't time."

"And after?"
Nat sighed and started to rub her eyes, then dropped her hand. "Cowardice. I hadn't expected to...care so much about you, let alone your opinion of me. I never told anyone until prep with Matt and Barnes."

Steve shuddered hard. "Jesus. Did he know?"

"No. He remembers none of it, thank God." She stared hard at the floor, then forced herself to turn towards him. "I'm so sorry, Steve. I can't undo it."

*For a second, you were this close to asking him to forgive you, Clint thought. Come on, Cap, be a hero.*

Steve Rogers was a big damn hero, and Clint Barton had never loved him more for it than at this moment. Steve's eyes were wet, but he barely hesitated to reach out, and Nat sank into his embrace with a deep shudder, pressing her face into his shoulder. "You don't have to apologize any more than he does."

She flinched hard and shook her head, but didn't lift it from Steve's shoulder. "I'm not like him, Steve. I knew who I was and what I was doing, it just...shit, there's no way you could or should ever understand - right and wrong didn't exist for me. I was as amoral as they came."

Clint opened his mouth, about to break his self-imposed vow of silence, but Steve beat him to it: "Bullshit. You're wrong. Completely wrong, for the same reasons as him. You both think because you remember doing things that you're to blame. Neither of you had a choice. They had you from a toddler, did God-knows-what to your mind - you've told us that, they stole your memories too. You had no way of understanding that there was a choice."

She pulled away and looked at him. "Then how did I defect in '84?"

Steve sighed. "You'd have to tell me."

Nat shut her eyes. "You'll hate me, Steve."

"I doubt it. Nat," he put his hand on her shoulder, and she shuddered again. Both of them were shaking. "There were a lot of things different in what you and he were supposed to do, but how they made you do them was pretty damn similar. Neither of you are saints, and neither of you would've been saints even if you'd spent your lives free."

Voice breaking, she shook her head and insisted, "I ran for me, not because I knew it was wrong. I ran because I knew the Red Room was on its last legs, and sooner or later they'd kill me rather than let me loose with their secrets." She opened her eyes and looked bitterly at him, baring her soul and all the darkness she thought he'd see. "I ran and offered my 'services' to anyone who could pay, no matter who the target was, no matter what the goal was. Barnes didn't. He didn't even kill the bastards who operated that chair! I could've lived like him, on odd jobs and keeping my head down."

"And look how well that turned out for him," Steve shot back. He sighed and slid his chair closer so he could put his arm around her. She let him. "You're not him, and I don't expect you to be, and I'm not gonna judge you for how you survived." He looked past her and smirked. "The guy who's currently lurking in the corner thought you were worth saving, and I'm not questioning his judgment."

Nat leaned completely against his side and smiled. "Oh, Rogers, you haven't known that guy as long as I have - if you don't question it, you'll wind up shooting noodles in slingshots in Budapest to thwart surveillance cameras."
Steve made a noise halfway between a laugh and sputter, but Clint grinned and nodded confirmation. "You want me to stay with you at the hotel for awhile?" Steve asked, tightening his arm around her.

"Don't be stupid. Today will have wrung him out too, for good reason. I'll be okay. Go on."

"I'll keep an eye on her," Clint promised as he joined them to pull Nat to her feet.

"As if you ever could."

Clint punched her gently in the shoulder. "I always do when it counts."

She smiled at him, warm and unguarded. "Yeah. I guess you have."

Steve put a big, warm hand on both of their shoulders before they all left the room.

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Steve arrived at the "enhanced defendant housing" to find Bucky and Wanda talking on Skype while Sam snored on the couch. It actually made him smile. Bucky spun around as Steve came in, and chorused with Wanda, "It wasn't Natasha's fault!"

Steve held up his hands. "I know, I know. Don't worry, she and I talked." He pulled a chair up next to Bucky and smiled at Wanda. "How're you holding up?"

Wanda shrugged. "Well enough. You?"

"Well enough." They exchanged a wry look, then he looked at Bucky.

"Well enough," said Bucky, and both Steve and Wanda snorted. "I'll survive. Romanoff told me everything, Steve, and I said I'd let decide how to tell you. I don't think she feels any better about it than I feel about kidnapping that girl."

Steve blurted, "Then if you don't blame her, why blame yourself?"

"Thank you!" Wanda huffed.

Bucky sighed. "I know." He leaned toward Steve, and that was all the prompting Steve needed to put an arm around him. "Matt and Foggy think momentum's on our side. They're running more videos tomorrow of some of those 'pep talks' - it was Pierce they were talking about, if you hadn't worked it out."

Steve stared. "Pierce tried to 'pep-talk' you while you were strapped to a chair?!"

"Funny, isn't it?"

"That is not the word I'd choose." Steve looked sideways at Bucky. "I'm so sorry for everything you went through, Buck."

Bucky smiled wearily. "Don't worry about it. I remember almost none of it, and even when or if I do remember...what happened at the Red Room, I still won't blame Romanoff. Her world was even more fucked up than mine."

"I'd say they were both hideous," Wanda said. "I'm going to bed, and you should too. Vision thinks the prosecutors are going to be regrouping tonight." On cue, Sam let out a particularly-loud snore. "Yes, what Sam said."

Steve and Bucky had to laugh.
Tony didn't get to see Natasha the evening after she testified, but dared to ask her in the morning:
"Hey, is Cap...okay?" Okay with this? Cap obviously hadn't known what she'd done - Tony had never seen Steve turn so white as he had during that testimony. The press were all collectively losing their shit.

She nodded distractedly. "Yeah, we talked."

Good. He shouldn't bl - The thought kept forming in Tony's mind, and he kept slapping it back, because if Cap shouldn't blame Nat for what she'd done after decades of indoctrination by the Red Room, then how could Tony blame - He slapped it back again. Unfair, of course, illogical, for sure, completely fucking irrational, but… I'm not ready. Not ready.

Technicians were moving a screen into the courtroom for the viewing of more "training videos" when Tony arrived with the other Avengers.

Matt Murdock came over to them. "We're not planning on playing the ones involving your father today, Tony, but pretty soon we're going to have to."

Tony swallowed hard. "Yeah, I figured."

It never ceased to amaze him how keen Matt Murdock's other senses were. (It was also easier to focus on that on any given day than the subject matter in front of the Court.) Matt wove deftly around tables and chairs and could put his hand to folders and laptops without hesitation, and almost always answered anyone who spoke by name even if they'd only talked to him once or twice.

Hell, sometimes he noticed things about people he'd never met. He turned toward the technician setting up the playback and said, "Are you the same person we worked with yesterday?"

"Uh…" the man said sheepishly. "Not – good – English?" He started to hold up the thumb drives with the defense team's videos, then blinked at Matt's sunglassed face and awkwardly held them out to Foggy.

"Oh, the prosecution's got some vids to queue up too," Foggy said, nodding to the man. He too turned to Tony. "Brace yourself, man. They're gonna go for the jugular, not just for Bucky, but any other Avenger they can aim for. Or that they think they can sway."

"Maybe we oughtta go," Rhodey suggested quietly. "Check on the progress of some of the long-term threat watches, check in with Wakanda, that kind of thing."

Tony considered it, and before he could catch himself, he looked at Steve. Glued to Barnes' side, Steve had still heard the whole exchange and was watching Tony with a pained expression. No, Steve didn't expect Tony to stick around. "You could hang with Wanda," added Clint. Steve nodded.

Wanda would be watching today, and Tony didn't care much for her having to pick up the backwash of what would go through his mind seeing his father or stand-ins for his father being lined up to die at the Soldier's hand. Bad enough that she'd gotten it that night in Wakanda.

And did Tony Stark really want to bail on something so desperately important to so many of the team, even if it was about Barnes?

He took a deep breath. "Nah, don't worry about it. I've seen most of it. I'll stick with the team."

Damn it, Rogers' eyes filled, and he actually left his BFF to hurry over. "Tony, you don't have to
Tony shrugged. "I'm good." Bullshit, and Cap knew it; they all knew it. Even Barnes was watching Tony with sympathetic eyes, and that really rankled. Tony sat down in a hurry and fiddled with his Starkphone to avoid everyone's eyes. He could mug for cameras and crowds both adoring and scornful without a qualm, but today, Tony Stark was tired of his friends' eyes.

He was tremendously relieved when the judges came in and pronounced everything ready. A different technician (hopefully one who spoke English) took the thumb drives from the non-English-speaking dude, who left. Foggy sorted through them and muttered to the tech, then said, "We're ready here, your honors. We're going to begin with a recording of 'training' of the Winter Soldier in the year 1974. The man just offscreen has been identified by both sides' voice recognition experts as Alexander Pierce, then a State Department employee as well as Hydra agent."

Tony relaxed. So this one wouldn't involve his dad – probably.

The video started, showing a man on the screen who clearly wasn't the Soldier, shuffling some papers. Foggy blinked. "Uh, I'm sorry, this isn't the correct video," said Matt. Just a few sounds, and he'd worked it out, Tony marveled.

As Foggy and the confused Court tech began checking the thumb drives, muttering about mislabeling, the man on the screen began to read from the papers:

"Khuliganami...plyazh..."

Barnes cried out. Every pair of eyes in the room fell on him as he reeled back in his seat and clutched his head. "No!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: Zemo's final gambit takes shape, and the Avengers assemble to stop it!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Russian Translations

Khuliganami – bullies

Plyazh - beach

Original Character Guide

Damian Fallaci - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

Judge Irina Ginsburg - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel, handling the Avengers' cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her. Possibly.
Judge Eloise Lagarde - second judge on the pretrial panel, French, mid-60s.

Judge Salim Jibril - third judge on the pretrial panel, Ugandan, mid-60s.

Mahsa Turani - Iranian girl whose parents were supporters of Arab Spring; kidnapped by the Winter Soldier at Hydra's command in 2011 and held in a Hydra compound in Indonesia until age 14, when Bucky rescued her and returned her to her family.

Hamid Turani - Mahsa's father

Repurposed Canon Characters

General Wallace (I invented his first name) is a racist and violent-tempered military antagonist in the Black Panther comics. In this fic, he was elected to Congress on a hardline anti-enhanced platform and has joined the prosecution team as a consultant with an undisguised agenda to turn the screws on the Winter Soldier and Avengers wherever possible in furtherance of the floundering Sokovia Accords.

Dr. Ashley Kafka is a Spider-Man comics psychologist who founded an institute for the criminally insane and treated many such supervillains. In this fic, she signed on as the defense expert witness into the issue of whether Bucky can be deemed responsible for his actions as the Winter Soldier.

Dr. Leonard Samson is both a comics and MCU minor antagonist - he reported Bruce Banner to Thaddeus Ross in one of the Hulk films, and joined the registered superheroes against the Secret Avengers in the comics. So in this fic, he is firmly pro-Accords and is working as the prosecution's expert witness to try to prove Bucky is criminally responsible for the actions of the Winter Soldier.

Dr. Emil Skoda is not a comic character, but he is an American psychologist and psychiatrist from a non-genre series well-known for being highly skeptical of the insanity and lack of capacity defenses. Anybody recognize him? In this fic, he is a neutral expert hired by the Court (this is common - at least in the United States - when a case hinges where heavy expert knowledge is needed. Both sides have experts of their own, then the Court also gets an expert of its own).
Chapter Summary

Chaos erupts at the Winter Soldier Trial! Zemo's final gambit takes shape, and the Avengers assemble to stop it! But they may be too late for Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Thank you all so much for the amazing feedback and support! We're on track to end this round of cliffhangers later this week before I go on vacation! As a reminder, while removing Bucky's programming, Bucky asked the Wakandan doctors to keep the Sputnik trigger so he could be rendered unconscious if necessary. They agreed Sputnik had to go, but compromised on implanting a new sequence of three words that only Steve, T'Challa, Wanda, Tony, and the doctors would know.

Previous Chapter Recap: Bucky was grilled on the stand for his role in kidnapping a young girl and questioned on whether he ever tortured or raped for Hydra. Natasha took the stand in his defense but was forced to admit ugly things about her time as a Black Widow that even Steve didn't know. But when Team Avengers tried to show videos of Alexander Pierce, Zemo and his allies made another move with new trigger words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-One

Everyone leapt to their feet, Tony included. Foggy dove for the projector and stabbed at the stop key, but nothing happened, and the man on the screen kept reading. "Tri…deyat'…-

"NO!" Barnes practically screamed, clapping his hands over his ears, wild-eyed. "Stop, STOP IT!"

"Budushcheye..."

"FUCK!" Clint leaped over the barrier to the defense tables, grabbed Foggy's empty chair, dodged between the baffled techs and lawyers and smashed the machine. He whirled back while most of the others were still sputtering. "You okay?!"

Barnes wasn't okay – he was bent double in his seat, eyes squeezed shut, hands over his ears, shaking violently. "Buck?" Steve jumped the barrier too and knelt beside his friend. "It's okay – who the hell set that up?! Bucky, do you know me?"

Lowering his hands, still shaking like a leaf, Barnes squinted at Steve, and – something buzzed on a speaker overhead.

"Amerika... vera..."
"No – no! Stop, STOP IT!" Barnes lurched back again. His eyes were glassy, tortured, terrified – " - There!" Rhodey pointed – there was someone up in the interpreter's booth with the interpreter nowhere to be found – FUCK, it was that tech!

Everyone in the room still seated now jumped up, Steve sprinted straight for it as one of the judges began yelling, "Get that man out of there! Cut the power!"

Barnes was almost convulsing. Tony broke out of his trance and scrambled over the barricade, seizing the panicked man's shoulders. "Tablitsa!" he hissed. Barnes jerked and met Tony's eyes. "Swoboda!" Barnes let out a gasp of what might have been relief. "Sketchbook!"

"Thank - " Barnes breathed, but the three words took effect just as planned, and his consciousness fled. Tony caught him and eased him to the floor.

"What the hell?!" someone yelled. All hell was breaking loose – the infiltrator fled the booth as Rogers climbed straight up to it and started punching the glass (the shit was supposed to be bulletproof, but Cap was denting it!)

"Lock down the building! Evacuate the - "

Banging and popping echoed in the hallways outside the courtroom – gunshots. "Everyone down!" Rhodey roared. "Down, down, down! Keep your seats and take cover!"

Despite the rising panic, the gallery and reporters did as he ordered. Tony'd long believed Rhodey in command voice could stop the running of the bulls. Steve came sprinting back to the front, cursing. "He's in the main hall – HEY!" He leaped in front of the prone Barnes as General Wallace snatched a gun from a confused security guard and stalked toward the defense table. "What the hell are you doing?!!"

"He has to be put down!"

"NO, what the fuck - "

"CONGRESSMAN WALLACE," roared Judge Ginsburg. "DROP THAT WEAPON! Disarm him and take him into custody!"

Wallace wasn't listening and started to aim for Steve, but Tony already had his feet in his armor, and in the time it took to shove Steve out of the way, Wallace found himself facing Iron Man.

"That's contempt of court!" Tony yanked the gun out of the stunned man's hand and shoved him towards two security guards, but they were too busy relaying what they were hearing on their headsets.

"Shots fired, shots fired in the main entrance hall and corridors on this floor! Your honors, security is down at the Detention Centre! Complete security failure!"

"Zemo," Steve breathed. He faltered, half-turning toward Barnes and then the door, then back again. Tony caught his elbow. "I just used the shutdown words on him; he's okay."

"God, thanks. We need Vision – and Wanda. Where's my shield?"

"On its way. I've got Rhodey's armor bringing it with the rest of the suits. Hang on," Tony shut off the external speaker and called Vision. "We could use you and Wanda here now."
"We're already on our way," said Vision, and Tony heard the harsh whistle of wind on the comm. "King T'Challa was supposed to arrive in a few hours with the doctors for more medical testimony, but he says he should arrive within one hour. They just broke the sound barrier."

"Good. Guys, we've got Vision, Scarlet Witch, and Black Panther incoming. Cap, you want to hold here or spread out?"

Everett Ross burst into the room, causing a chorus of screams, but he held up his hands (even though Tony had no doubt the guy was armed to the teeth.) "I'm clear, I'm clear – Avengers, we could really fucking use you now – that Rappaccini woman just reappeared with a few dozen friends!"

"Where?!" Clint demanded.

"HERE! They landed at Saint Hubert's park and are headed for the embassies. They've got another team coming out of the detention centre!"

"Damn it." Steve pointed at the judges. "Your honors, you need to shelter here with all guards you can trust. We - " he glanced down at Bucky.

Judge Ginsburg and Judge Jibril came down from the bench. "We'll keep him safe. We're not having a defendant murdered. Go!"

They tried to pull Bucky by the shoulders towards the heavily-shielded bench, but two elderly women couldn't budge an unconscious supersoldier. "Just get to cover. I'll stay here," Ross told them, and pointed at some of the frazzled guards. "You, you, and you, cover the doors – Wallace, if you even sneeze in Barnes' direction, I'll take out your kneecaps!"

Wallace started to argue, but Fallaci yelled from behind the prosecutors' barrier, "Just shut the fuck up and GET DOWN!"

"All of you, stay here and stay down until this building's secured!" Steve bellowed, and started charging for the door. "Avengers assemble!"

Wanda and Vision were watching the proceedings on television, as always, and both leapt to their feet when all hell broke loose in the courtroom.

She heard Vision doing the calculations in his head. "This is a coordinated attack. Do you feel able to fight?"

"Am I allowed to fight?!" she blurted.

"I rather doubt anyone will bother enforcing the Accords now." Vision held out his arms, and she stepped into them without a second more of hesitation.

He was already moving as he fired the mind stone at the windows, blasting them out, and before her security guards even reached her door, they were airborne.

Wanda and Vision arrived outside the courthouse at the same time as Rhodey's armor, bearing Steve's shield, Clint's bow, and Sam's wings. Tapped into the incoming Wakandan shuttle, Vision announced, "T'Challa will head for the detention centre and round up Zemo and the other escapees with his Dora Milaje."

"Good," said Steve. His mind was racing as he sorted through all the variables – everyone's minds were racing, but Wanda wasn't shaken by it. The Avengers were an island of focus amid a
maelstrom of screams, gunfire, and people running and hiding and fighting, confused and disoriented.

Tony took the shield from the now-suited Rhodey and handed it to Steve. "Call it, Cap."

It only took Steve a moment more to make his decisions. "Everyone with containment abilities or contained suits, concentrate on getting their weapons that might have bio or chemical agents," Cap ordered. "Stark, Vision, Rhodes, you're airborne on the perimeter, identify their weaponry and vehicles, disable everything you can. Wanda, disable every hostile you can. Romanoff and Barton, intercept them before they get to the embassies, move in from the west; Sam, Wanda, and me, we're intercepting from the east. All of you - take them alive if you can, especially Rappaccini, Zemo, and that technician. Understood?"

"Let's do this!" Rhodey and Tony launched with Vision.

Sam grabbed Steve under the arms, and Wanda launched with them. Wanda had some trouble making out details amid the busy minds like an ant's nest as they approached the park – especially when all those minds exploded with alarm upon seeing the Avengers. Sam and Steve were focused on visuals. "All of our hostiles are wearing biohazard masks and combat suits; they're packing the bad stuff," Sam announced.

"Wanda, with me," said Steve. "Sam, drop me by that hydrant – that looks like decontamination equipment. Then stay airborne, pick 'em off from above, but watch out for fire." Wanda felt a ripple of anxiety through Steve's mind. "There was nothing I could do. It was like I was up there just to watch." Steve pushed it to the background of his mind, but it didn't go away. Wanda had to push it to the background of hers as well.

They were under fire as they approached, but Wanda could tell the shooters weren't skilled enough to track such fast-moving targets, even with Sam carrying Steve's weight. He swept down low for the decontamination site, and Wanda and Steve landed and started running. Sam swooped back up, whipped out two guns and started taking terrorists out.

Most of the men on the ground simply ran in terror when they spotted Captain America and Scarlet Witch. It was almost comical – or it would have been if Wanda didn't pick up just how many were carrying bioweapons.

"Vision, can you recon the attack at the detention centre?" Steve called.

"The attackers there are not wearing biohazard protection. I don't see Zemo."

"We're seeing only conventional weapons there," T'Challa confirmed. "We're less than two minutes out."

Zemo had to be running. Wanda scanned everyone she could sense, but there was no sign of his mind. Still, she had other targets to find. "Who saw the man in the courtroom? I need to find him."

"Here." Steve stepped closer, bringing what he remembered to the front of his mind. His mental view of the man was hazy, but it was a start.

"Captain, I see three heavily-reinforced cargo containers which appear to have environmental controls," Vision announced.

"Confirmed, they've got some kind of airlock system. They haven't been opened yet," said Tony. "Hostiles are moving some modified low-range missile launchers around them."
"I'm thinking this isn't just about the Court," said Rhodey. "If what they've got in those crates is lethal and they're even half full, an attack of this scale could wipe out the whole city and more."

"Agreed. Priority has to be taking out those launchers and getting control of those containers!" said Steve. "Forget playing nice – use deadly force!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Wanda sensed Tony still aimed for knees where he could, but for the assholes who were actively loading non-grenades into their shoulder launchers, he couldn't take the risk.

But Wanda could get more than scanner readings in the minds of the men and women around them. "Wait! They're decoys!" she shouted. She simply pounced on the nearest man and seized his face, poring through his knowledge like a book. "There's almost nothing in them - the biohazards are in grenade-sized containers being carried! Their directive is to fire at will at any large group of people!" She wasn't sure she could safely render her prisoner unconscious with her power, so she just grabbed one of his guns and clubbed him with the butt. The bullets were coming in so thick and fast it was taking too much of her power to generate shields for herself and Steve. "Steve, you are a primary target!" warned Wanda.

"Yeah, kind of guessed." Steve was holding his own despite dozens of weapons firing on him, leaving a stream of prone bodies as he plowed toward the choppers. "Disable their vehicles - we don't want them escaping again."

"Keep your heads down!" Tony warned and started shooting at cars and choppers from above. "These guys had to come from somewhere not too far away – air traffic control didn't get anything and these choppers couldn't handle long distance. Vision, any luck cracking their signals?"

"I'm making progress."

Wanda liberated several of the contaminated grenades from the attackers, but hesitated to lob them into the water. "Vision, I saw a lot of vessel traffic flying over. Is it safe to submerge these things?"

"Stand by – no, this area of the North Sea is simply too crowded. The risk of contaminating ships or boats would be substantial."

"Damn it - " She dodged between vehicles with a fleet of hovering objects behind her, blocked from gunfire. "I need somewhere to put them!"

T'Challa's voice came over the comms. "We've arrived. I'm sending my shuttle to you. Throw them inside - it is pressurized and unoccupied, and our decontamination procedure will destroy any bioagents and render chemicals inert."

He made good on his promise, and his shuttle was soon hovering directly over the park, not even dented by the grenades, anti-aircraft guns, and high-powered rifles firing on it. "You sure you want to fill your royal flying limo with bug bombs?" Tony asked.

"They won't damage it."

"Okay." Wanda was soon halting grenades – dammit, now she was thinking of them as bug bombs - left and right and sending them whirling through the shuttle's open hatch.

"What's the situation at the detention centre?" asked Steve, full-body tackling a couple of goons who were trying to open another box of bug bombs. Wanda sent the whole box into the shuttle.

"This was another decoy," Vision concluded. "All prisoners have escaped, but ICC security is
already apprehending many. It's clear most prisoners had no idea this was to happen, but so far there's no sign of Zemo or any of the known Hydra operatives who were held here."

"This whole thing was a gambit," Nat agreed. "They need people with connections, not weapons or just obliterating the ICC - and they want to be seen defeating the Avengers."

Wanda straightened and scanned the minds in her vicinity, snatching any contaminated weapons and also searching for their secrets. "They also want – OH!" There you are! She went airborne as her senses zeroed in on the mind of figure trying to stay inconspicuous among the vehicles. "I've got him, I feel him, the man from the Court! There, Steve, there on your right, he's Hydra - long-time Hydra! Take him alive!"

"I've got visual," said Friday from Tony's comm. "Running facial recognition - the man appears to be around sixty-five years old, so there's potential for activity with Hydra well back into the 1980s or 1970s."

"Get that, Cap?"

Steve tackled on the man, and Wanda came down a second behind him. "Careful! Hang on!" She seized his face and searched for plans, intentions…

"These words won't trigger the Soldier, but they'll certainly trigger Barnes," Dorokhin – that was his name, Dorokhin – boasted to Rappaccini.

"Could he become violent?" Rappaccini asked.

"If he does, all the better for us and Zemo, especially if Stark is there. Zemo wants the Avengers destroyed – that means Stark and Rogers can't reconcile."

Deeper, older, she plowed mercilessly into his memories – a younger man, ambitious and frustrated, determined to prove his worth for Hydra but never truly noticed in all the years and years of service – the Asset, the Soldier, in and out of stasis, torn down and trained up, Dorokhin watched, Dorokhin helped… sanction and extract, no witnesses…serum…Stark…

Dorokhin grunted and shifted his intentions to something more immediate – his teeth, his teeth – Wanda yelped and followed with her power, forcing his jaws open and finding what he wanted. She yanked them out, ignoring a startled exclamation on the comm. "These are cyanide," she panted, sending the false teeth flying into the Wakandan shuttle. "He was trying to - "

Heil Hydra, death before betrayal…she'll find everything, can't let her, can't let her…

"You will let me," she snarled. Images flashed across her mind's eyes – she'd seen them before on a screen and in Tony and Steve's memories – images in black and white, but now they were in color – a prisoner dressed and made up as Howard Stark, kneeling in front of the confused Soldier – Dorokhin beat him and struck him with stun batons on Karpov's command – the Soldier wouldn't be allowed to fail again – He was there, he was there, he knows – got you, got you alive, you merciless monster!

Vision flew down to her side and snatched Dorokhin up as dozens of the goons concentrated their fire on Wanda, preventing her from probing further. "I'll get him into custody."

"Keep him alive," Wanda panted. She glared into the hapless man's eyes. "The world has questions for you. We'll keep you alive." We thought there was no chance of finding any of you…you exposed yourself, and you'll pay the price.
But as she was returning her attention to repelling gunfire from Dorokhin's allies, alarm surged through her mental senses from her own allies. "Oh, fuck - Avengers, we've got massive incoming!" Rhodey yelled. "Not an authorized vehicle, major stealth - wait - "

People scrambled and shouted as sonic booms shook everything, and then there was a sleek black stealth jet roaring into view. SR-71 Blackbird, Wanda picked up from Tony as he flew low to shield her and Steve. Oh fuck is right - if Hydra has their hands on a plane like that...

Their coms buzzed with a new message. "Avengers, hold your fire, we're not hostile! It's Betsy Braddock! We thought you could use reinforcements!"

What?! The jet's hatch opened, and a group of dark-clad figures leaped to the ground. Above Wanda, Tony spotted the telltale X on the back of their suits. "It's the X-Men!"

"Winds have dropped to zero and barometric pressure is rising," Vision said. "Aerosols and gases will hardly spread or expand at all."

"Wow, who's got power over the atmosphere?" Tony demanded, diving to knock a clutch of goons away from another crate of bug bombs. Wanda returned her focus to getting them into the Wakandan shuttle, but listened in her mind and on the comm.

"That would be Storm," said T'Challa. "I, for one, welcome their assistance.."

"No complaints here either," Steve agreed.

"Just tell the lawful authorities not to fire on us," said a woman's voice.

"Already on it," Rhodey promised. "Tony, I'm trying to trace their comm signals - any luck?"

"Not much - Vision, try backdooring them through the wifi and phone lines!"

"Stand by...I have a signal origin in the switchboard of Bionorm Biochemists, nine miles due south. They also have a large distribution warehouse that was closed this morning due to reports of an electrical fire."

"Okay, Rhodey, Vision, Wanda, go knock on the door; I'll meet you outside. Take anyone you can alive," said Steve. "X-Men, you have anyone with pressurized suits or immunity to...everything who wants to join us?"

"Iceman and Wolverine, go with them," said an unfamiliar voice. "We're sending them in with a teleporter - don't shoot him."

"That's Cyclops, Boss, on America's Most Wanted list, believed leader of the X-Men," Friday told them all.

"Well, I'm not bothering with Accords enforcement today," said Tony. "X-Men, can your teleporter drop our guys on them before they know we're coming?"

"One moment," said a heavily-accented voice, and a blue man with a tail was soon disappearing and reappearing around the X-Men landing site. "I'll stay on-site in case rapid evacuation becomes necessary."

Wanda only hesitated for a second when he landed beside her. Then she stepped into his arms, and felt herself yanked to a different place with a Bamf! and puff of sulfurous yellow smoke.
"Now that is cool," Tony observed on the comm.

Vision didn't bother with teleporting, but he could fly near-invisible and undetectable by any device. "I'm attempting to break into the hostile signals and intercept their transmissions. Nearly decrypted..."

Wanda grimaced as the speakers buzzed. She took stock: Steve, Rhodey, Vision, and the three X-Men were now making entry to the warehouse, and a barrage of gunfire told everyone they'd found the right place. She brought up the rear and shielded them from the perimeter guards' desperate shots.

"I've decrypted Rappaccini's signal," Vision announced, and shouting voices came over the comms.

Wanda smirked to herself at the panic in many of those voices, echoing the panic she was sensing louder and louder as she got closer. "All exits are cut off - Zemo where the hell are you?!" shrieked an Italian-accented woman.

"Found you, Monica Rappaccini. "Take her alive definitely," Tony murmured on the secure comm.

"Got her location - she's in the foreman's office," said Rhodey, ahead of Wanda.

Tony and Sam were back at St. Hubert's park capturing the remaining weapons. "Uh-uh, Wilson, don't handle them! You deal with the perps; I'll get the bug bombs!"

"ZEMO!" Rappaccini screamed, and there was a lovely sound of shattering glass on the compromised comm.

"Watch it, watch it, she's got test tubes in here!" Rhodey warned, both on the main comm and audible on Rappaccini's line.

"I've got them!" said Wanda, snagging them with her power and hovering them out of Rappaccini's reach. "No, Steve, say back, you and I don't have masks! Bobby, Logan, you too!" There hadn't really been time for formal introductions, but given Betsy and Jean Grey were among them, the X-Men probably were used to telepaths knowing their identities on sight.

"Okay, we've got Rappaccini in custody! Secure the building!" Cap announced.

Someone sighed heavily. "Thank heavens, I thought I'd have to page the Avengers myself when it took you so long to break into our comm line," said Zemo's voice.

Wanda nearly dropped the goon she was suspending in mid-air for Rhodey to cuff. Oh shit. Here comes the villainous declaration again, she heard him think.

"You get lost, Zemo?" Tony asked. "Even if whatever bullshit you're about to tell us is true, we're not turning on each other this time."

"Yes, I know, Mr. Stark, I realized that before I ever testified. So I'm afraid I had to change my objective to simply hurting you as much as possible. Do convey my apologies to Monica - I admire her tenacity, but I couldn't help her with her little project. I simply needed to get back to the courthouse."

Wanda's stomach dropped along with everyone else's she could sense.

There were gunshots on Zemo's comm. "Security here is stretched rather thin - they never prepared for a truly total assault. If I can't destroy the Avengers, I'll settle for one of you, and who better than Captain America? He's left his most beloved treasure completely vulnerable."
Wanda's eyes flew to Steve's as they both faltered. *Bucky…Bucky, no…* There was nothing more from Zemo's comm except screams and gunshots.

Tony dimly heard T'Challa bellowing at the Dora Milaje to get to the courthouse, but they had no shuttle. He had no idea where the X-Men's teleporter guy had gone, and Cap was a dozen miles from the courthouse.

"Fry, full power to thrusters! Cap, keep doing your thing, I'll get there!" Tony didn't think, just veered off and blasted back towards the courthouse. Anything less than full speed was unthinkable.

*I've got him on the internal cameras, Boss - security's trying to move Barnes, but they're not going to make it! Barnes is still incapacitated!"

*"What's this, Iron Man's going to rescue the man who murdered his parents?"* Zemo taunted. *"You'll never know if he could have made it, Captain!"

Tony fucking made it. *"Hope they're all on the floor,"* he growled, and smashed straight through the blast-proof windows - okay, definitely not blast-proof, he'd have to chat with the architects.

Zemo was already blasting through the doors, and didn't hesitate to fire - but he hit Everett Ross, who had leaped in front of Barnes, Matt, and Foggy. The lawyers were trying to drag Barnes into the dubious shelter of the defendant holding cell. Zemo corrected his aim, now unblocked from the semi-conscious Barnes - and Tony landed in the way. His repulsor shot missed, but Zemo was forced to dive for cover behind a barrier - and into a crowd of terrified civilians, judging by the shrieks.

Cursing and bleeding, Ross staggered upright and charged, his left arm useless but his gun hand remarkably steady. So when Zemo came up holding a terrified young intern with his gun to her head, even a covert kill squad operator was focused on Iron Man…and he thought to look to the left before Everett Ross fired.

The shot put a one-lane tunnel right between Zemo's eyes.

Zemo went straight backwards, pulling the poor screaming girl down with him, and Tony leapt over the barriers to pull her free and toss Zemo's gun away. *"Zemo's down, people,"* he announced on the comm. *"We've got a lot of casualties in the courthouse, but Barnes is - unharmed."* He glanced over his shoulder and grimaced. *Unharmed by guns, anyway.*

James Buchanan Barnes, former Howling Commando, the Winter Soldier, was huddled in fetal position on the floor, completely out of it and even more terrified than he'd looked the day they tested those other trigger words in Wakanda.

Despite being too far away to read his mind, Wanda had caught the uncertainty in Tony's voice. *"What's happened to him? Tony?!"

"Not sure," he hedged. *"He's not injured, but he's freaked out. He's not the Soldier, though."* He whirled as running feet came down the hall, but it was Ayo, Nakia, and Aneka. *"Reinforcements are here."* To Matt and Foggy, he said, *"Keep an eye on him."

*"The courthouse has been cleared of attackers,"* Ayo announced. *"There are heavy casualties among the security personnel."*

*"Yeah,"* Ross grunted, kneeling and clutching his shoulder. He didn't look in danger of bleeding out, but that bullet wound had to hurt like a bitch. *"Sharon Carter and I brought a CIA detachment - they're all people we trust,"* he added. *"We'll secure the place until reinforcements get in."*
"Everett? Are you hurt?" asked T'Challa, to Tony's surprise.

Nakia hurried toward Ross, who answered, "'s not bad. Zemo got me in the shoulder. Flesh wound."

"You should have a shield of your own so you stop getting shot shielding others," Nakia said as she examined Ross's shoulder, to Tony's even greater surprise.

*What the hell went down between Ross and the Wakandans?* Well, there wasn't time to find out now, but he'd have to investigate later. No way would they be on such friendly terms without going through some serious shit together. *Maybe Ross was somehow involved in thwarting that coup attempt.*

"What's the situation at the detention centre?" Tony asked.

"There are CIA agents here as well - yes? Ah, thank you, Agent Carter. Yes, please do, I'll join you. Most of the escapees have been apprehended; several are dead."

"Good deal."

"Romanoff, Barton, how're we doing at St. Hubert's Park?"

"Same, Cap. The X-Men have blocked all access to the embassies, and most of the suspects are in custody. A few dozen are down; local authorities are coming in to take the ones we caught alive."

"Power's back at the prison," called Ross, his good hand on his earpiece. "All suspects can go in there."

"You get that, Cap?" Tony asked.

"Yeah. We're pursuing some runners down here but the warehouse is secure, and Rappaccini's in custody."

"What about Bucky?" asked Wanda, undoubtedly voicing the question for both herself and Steve.

"He's, uh, conscious, but I'm not sure..."

"Hey, Tony, you might want to come here," said Matt.

Tony reluctantly went closer. Barnes didn't seem to really see him and kept murmuring in Russian. Then he focused on Tony and said it louder: "Pozhaluista, ubey menya, pozhaluista..."

"Boss?" said Friday. "He's saying, 'please kill me.'"

*Fucking. Hell.* Tony flipped back his helmet mask. "Barnes, d'you know me?"

Barnes just blinked at him, like he was trying to concentrate but getting distracted by God-knew-what. He was shivering, horrified by whatever he was seeing. "He hasn't managed to answer anyone," said Matt softly. "He keeps going catatonic. I don't know what those words did to him; this obviously isn't the Winter Soldier."

"Well, he didn't get all the words - I put him under before. Anyone know how many were left?"

Foggy scrubbed at his face and stepped toward his laptop. "No, but I could play them on my laptop once Bucky's out of here."

"Yeah, no running it where he can hear." Someone began making announcements on the courtroom
speakers, and Barnes curled up even smaller, hands over his ears. "Jesus."

"Your honors, you need to not be out here!" someone exclaimed, and Tony looked up to see Ginsburg and Jibril peering through their entry doors.

"Was he hurt?"

"Those words on the video triggered something, we're just not sure what," Matt said.

Tony flipped his mask back down. Barnes flinched, and he said, "Easy, I'm not gonna hurt you," though he wondered if Barnes could hear or understand him. He turned off the external speaker.

"Friday, run EEG. What're we getting?"

"No brain injury, Boss - no new one anyway, but the high frequency brainwaves associated with PTSD are off the chart. Those words may not have triggered anything other than the mother of all flashbacks."

"Dunno, this seems like…more. Like he's afraid of changing personalities again. Rhodey, come in? Take a look at these readings from Barnes. Does this look like just a PTSD episode?"

"I'm no neurologist, but I'll try - daaaaaaammn, that's not good! Not what I'd expect from a sleeper personality like the Winter Soldier...what's his behavior like?"

"Switching between total catatonia and begging us in Russian to kill him."

"Shit. All our telepaths are hunting down the stragglers. Wanda'll come as soon as she can, I'm sure."

"Yeah." Tony reopened his comm to the rest of the team. "Cap, Barnes is freaked out, but not any kind of danger - his vitals are, well, they're okay. Just have Wanda come when she's done out there."

"I will," said Wanda.

"Thanks, Tony," said Rogers, with feeling.

Judge Ginsburg scowled at the broken windows. Tony shrugged. "Sorry about that, your honor."

She waved him off. "This building isn't secure any longer. You should take him back to the enhanced safe house. It's unbreached, and we can't risk him being harmed any further. Mr. Nelson, once this is all over, please review those altered videos with an Avenger present and prepare a report."

"Yes, your honor."

Tony could easily get Barnes to the safe house, but...someone would have to stay with him. Tony started to turn to ask one of the Dora Milaje, or maybe Matt and Foggy. Then he stopped.

Tony trusted Matt and Foggy as well as the Dora Milaje. So did Steve and Wanda. That'd be fine. They'd keep Barnes safe and look after him until Wanda could get there. They could probably keep him calm - as calm as he could be staring at horrors no one else could see.

He buzzed the teams still in the field. "You guys need Iron Man reinforcements?" Anybody? Anywhere? Please?

"The detention centre is now under control," said T'Challa. "We're joining Romanoff, Barton, and the X-Men."
"Their warehouse is locked down; we're just chasing the last few runners," said Rhodey. "I'd stay close to the courthouse, Tony, in case anything comes up."

In other words, babysit the Winter Soldier. Tony sighed to himself. No, Rhodey wouldn't ask that and had no idea what Tony was considering - hell, Steve probably wouldn't ask.

"Okay," he heard himself say. "The judges want Barnes back in the safe house. I'll take him and stay until Wanda gets there."

"Wha - " Steve caught himself. At least that made Tony feel smug. Yeah, Cap never would've expected this. "...okay. Thanks - THERE!" The comm rang with gunshots hitting Cap's shield.

"Runner, two o'clock!" yelled Rhodey. "Shots fired! Uh-uh, where do you think you're going?"

Aw, Rhodey'd had to break up Cap's awkward expression of gratitude. Well, now came Tony's turn to be awkward. He flipped back his helmet again and said to Barnes, "We need to get you back to the safe house. Cap – Steve will meet us there." Soon, I hope.

The poor bastard didn't even seem to hear him, so when Tony reached out to try and pull Barnes to his feet, he jerked away in a panic. Hell, this'll be fun. Barnes might not be the Winter Soldier, but he was still a serum-enhanced supersoldier with a vibranium arm. Okay, Plan B. Tony beckoned to Matt and Foggy. "Get close around us and don't ever repeat what I tell him. It'll be easier on him if he's under." Not to mention easier on me.

"What - " Foggy began, but Matt nudged him.

Tony leaned in and whispered, "Tablitsa, swobodza, sketchbook." There was no show of relief or gratitude this time; Barnes just collapsed. Tony hauled him up. "Secure passenger." What Rhodey referred to as the "sidecar" folded out, securing Barnes against Tony and shielding him from wind shear or debris, at least theoretically. Tony hadn't really used it in a full crisis situation yet.

"Boss, Judging by his brainwaves and vitals, we've got less than five minutes before he comes around," Friday warned.

"Won't need that long. Let's go." He took off back through the shattered windows.

At least the guards at the safe house had survived unscathed, and somebody had warned them to open the various gates and doors so Tony could more or less fly himself and Barnes straight inside and trust them to re-lock everything.

Inside, the Court's announcements about security breaches and shelter orders were still playing - hell, that was unnerving and annoying to Tony, to say nothing of all the activity visible from the windows. If Barnes was still mindfucked when he woke, he'd probably freak out even more. Rather than settle him in the bedrooms, Tony deftly hacked the lock on the internal panic room - thick-walled and windowless with a mattress, lights, air filters and a supply of food, water, and reading material to hide for a month. He laid Barnes gently enough on the mattress just as the guy started twitching, and went back to the doorway.

Maybe Barnes would be less freaked if Tony wasn't in armor - but if he went berserk, Tony wouldn't have a prayer. So Tony stayed suited up with his helmet folded back and watched.

Barnes didn't go berserk. He just curled back into a fetal position and clutched his head, whimpering like a child who couldn't wake up from a nightmare. Hell, Tony'd probably looked like that a few times, waking up from his own nightmares.
"It's all right," he said quietly.

Barnes blinked huge, wet eyes towards him and whispered, "Pozhaluista, ubey menya."

"This isn't gonna change what happened!"

"I don't care. He killed my mom."

The guy who'd strangled Tony's mom and beaten his father to death was completely helpless. Tony could shoot him dead right here and nobody would be around to stop him.

Tony didn't want to shoot him Bucky Barnes. He wanted to comfort him. He had no idea how, just occasionally muttered, "It's all right," when Barnes got especially scared. Even though Barnes gave few signs he even heard Tony, let alone understood, Tony kept repeating it. He had no idea what else to do.

"He killed my mom."

"Pozhaluista, ubey menya, pozhaluiста..."

From the way Barnes was rubbing his head and eyes, it seemed like he wasn't just scared but in pain. But if Tony announced that, he'd panic Steve and Wanda. "Hey, the sooner we can get Wanda or Braddock in here, the better."

"We're clear to the north," said the lead X-Man.

"Tony, I'm heading to the safehouse now. I need to talk to you too," said Wanda. "The X-Men, Rhodey, and Steve are still rooting stragglers out between St. Hubert's Park and the warehouse."

Thank God! "Wanda's on her way," Tony told Barnes. Barnes didn't react to that either.

Tony was hovering near the windows when Wanda arrived, and he hurried out to meet her. "Let her in," he ordered the guards, and to his relief, they were too thrown by the day's events to challenge her.

She caught his elbow as he led her into the house. "Tony, that man who triggered Bucky again, he was with Hydra for a very long time."

"High rank?"

"No, though not for lack of trying," she muttered. "But he does..."

She stumbled to a stop before they even got to the panic room. "Wanda?" Tony turned to her. She looked scared, staring at nothing, or at something only she could see - like Barnes. "Wanda!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Coming Soon: With Bucky incoherent from Zemo's new attempt at triggering him, the Avengers made the mistake of letting a telepath into the room and Tony struggles to
help a distraught Wanda as the attack reveals more than even Zemo and the remnants
of Hydra could have predicted!

PLEASE don't forget to review!

Russian Translations

Tri – three

desyat' – ten

Budushcheye – future

Amerika – that one should be obvious

Vera - belief

Pozhaluista, ubey menya, pozhaluista – please, kill me, please

Original Character Guide

Maksim Dorokhin - a former Hydra operative who worked on the Winter Soldier
program, aspiring to great things but never fully succeeding, fell in with Zemo and
Monica Rappaccini in an attempt to use bioterrorism and the former Winter Soldier to
destroy the Avengers and revitalize Hydra.

Damian Fallaci - a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, American, mid-
40s, still dedicated to the principles of the Sokovia Accords.

Judge Irina Ginsburg - chief judge of the International Criminal Court's pretrial panel,
handling the Avengers' cases. Danish, mid-60s, no relation to another famous and
utterly awesome judge by the name of Ginsburg - but possibly named after her.
Possibly.

Judge Eloise Lagarde - second judge on the pretrial panel, French, mid-60s.

Judge Salim Jibril - third judge on the pretrial panel, Ugandan, mid-60s.

Repurposed Canon Characters

Monica Rappaccini - a biochemist who heads Advanced Idea Mechanics ("A.I.M."),
was attempting to weaponize smallpox and anthrax in a Mumbai research facility, got
involved with Zemo and the remnants of Hydra after her attack on her former facility
failed to retrieve some of her research. Resurfaced in an attack by Zemo on The Hague
only to discover he had double-crossed her.

General Wallace (I invented his first name) is a racist and violent-tempered military
antagonist in the Black Panther comics. In this fic, he was elected to Congress on a
hardline anti-enhanced platform and has joined the prosecution team as a consultant with
an undisguised agenda to turn the screws on the Winter Soldier and Avengers wherever
possible in furtherance of the floundering Sokovia Accords.
Forty-Two

Chapter Summary

With Bucky incoherent from Zemo's new attempt at triggering him, the Avengers made the mistake of letting a telepath into the room and Tony struggles to help a distraught Wanda as the attack reveals more than even Zemo and the remnants of Hydra could have predicted!

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: So here it is, dear readers, the last in this little update spree! No more chapters for a few weeks, I'm afraid, since I'm off wandering the Alps for the next couple of weeks! At least this chapter doesn't end in a cliffhanger! Thank you all so much for the incredible feedback on the last few chapters! Please keep it coming! Even on vacation, I still long for reviews!

Last Chapter Recap: Zemo's final gambit took shape. A former Hydra agent read trigger words the team never knew in the courtroom, and while they didn't trigger the Soldier, they left Bucky terrified and begging to die. The Hague came under attack by Monica Rappaccini's bioterrorist band, leading the Avengers to re-assemble and be joined by the X-Men. But Rappaccini found herself double-crossed, as Zemo, once freed, decided to settle for destroying Captain America by murdering Bucky. It fell to Tony to get back to the courtroom to stop him, but Tony succeeded, and Zemo met his end at the hands of Everett Ross. Tony took the catatonic Bucky back to the safe house, and Wanda went to help, only to find herself mentally overwhelmed by the torment in Bucky's mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-Two

Tony caught Wanda's shoulders, and she let out a violent gasp of horror and pain and started hyperventilating. "Oh fuck, Wanda? Hey, c'mon, let's get you back outside -"

"No!" she shrieked, and a flash of red force threw Tony back against the wall. She staggered towards the panic room but fell in just a few steps, clutching her head, choking back sobs. "Ah – oh God, please, p-please, kill – no, no!"

Fuuuuck! "Cap, come in, I need Braddock here NOW!" Tony blurted into his comm.

"Betsy, do you read? Tony, what's happened?!"

"Wanda just tapped into whatever is in Barnes' head, now she's freaking out too. I tried to get her out of the house; she put me into the wall."

"Tony, this is Betsy. Don't try to interfere unless one or both of them goes into physical distress; if
Wanda's lost reality, she could hurt you. Just look after them; I'll be there as quick as possible."

Clint was just muttering, "Shit, shit, shit..." in the background on the comm line.

"Clint, we've got it under control at the park. Go check it out, but don't get physical. She may not know you," urged Nat.

"Okay. Hey, Nightcrawler, can you give me a lift?"

"Of course. It will take a few jumps because I've not seen the place before," said the German-accented mutant.

Wanda was half-stumbling, half-crawling toward the panic room. Tony cautiously approached. "Hey. Just let me help, 'kay? Give me your arms."

She blinked at him, trying to focus, but she did reach for him. "T-To-ny...please..."

"It's all right. I gotcha." He helped her to her feet, and she let him, leaning heavily on him as he guided her into the panic room.

Barnes didn't react to her, but she sobbed, broke away from Tony and scrambled to his side, draping herself over him and crying, gnawing on the knuckles of one hand. Tony heard the door open and rushed back out, but it was Barton, accompanied by that crazy-looking blue mutant with a freaking tail.

"Now that I've seen the inside, I will be able to bring Betsy here directly," he said.

"Tony Stark, Kurt Wagner," Clint said absently. Wagner exchanged a brisk nod with Tony before he vanished in a bamf of sulfurous smoke, and Clint and Tony went back to the panic room. "How is she?"

"Unglued," Tony breathed. "I've got no idea what's happened to him, but whatever it is, she's getting it by osmosis or something. He's unresponsive; she's barely responsive. At least to me - see if she recognizes you."

Clint had no more success getting Wanda to pay attention to him than Tony did, though she clearly tried. She was just too overwhelmed by whatever she was getting from Barnes.

Finally, Cap buzzed them. "Betsy thinks we've rooted all the stragglers out. She's having Wagner bring her straight there."

"Hey, wait!" Tony exclaimed. "Is that a good idea? Wanda went incoherent five steps inside the door."

"Uh, Betsy?"

"Don't be concerned, gentlemen. Wanda has good natural shields, but no experience in actively shielding herself, so I suspect that's why she was overwhelmed, in addition to her bond with Bucky. I have substantial experience at this, particularly enhanced individuals."

"What if it still doesn't work?" asked Clint.

"Call my team. They'll be able to pull me out."

"I really hope you're right, or that's two telepaths we've broken," Tony muttered. "Okay."
There was another bamf, then Betsy came down the hall, completely in control of herself, though she was grimacing. "Oh dear. Yes, I can't say I'm shocked. Let me see what I can do. Wanda?" She knelt beside the huddled pair and laid a hand on Wanda's head. "Come back to us, love."

Wanda jerked in shock then sat up and clutched Betsy's elbows, shaking hard. "What - he - " She sobbed and grabbed the sides of her head the way Barnes kept doing to himself, like she wanted to block her ears or just press it out of her mind. "He remembers everything!"

Clint sucked in his breath, and Tony thought, Oh my God, as the implications set in.

Betsy just nodded. "I know, I know. Well, we were right that the memories weren't erased, only blocked. Now the dam has broken, and it's drowning you both. Let me shield you - "

" - no, no, please, I have to stay, he needs me – he doesn't understand - "

" - Wanda!" Betsy shook her gently. "Stay with me. You can't help him while you're in this condition. He's drowning and pulling you under, and he'd be devastated if you suffered a mental injury. You must let me help. You won't lose your connection to him, just dampen the impact of this cascade. Once he's coherent, we'll shield him too."

Wanda sobbed, putting a hand on Bucky's shoulder, but finally nodded, squeezing her eyes shut. Betsy's power wasn't visible to Tony and Clint the way Wanda's was, but after barely thirty seconds, she was calming down, if still crying and shaken. "Better?" Clint asked, coming closer.

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. "It's all back. Everything, every day, every minute, every year, everything they did to him, everything they made him do." She shuddered and shut her eyes again. "They...oh God, they hurt him so much, they...it never stopped...he'd go under...they'd bring him out and it started all over again, and again...he's – he's so afraid – he remembers being the Soldier – he's afraid he'll become the Soldier again, so he keeps begging to die – he can't, he can't - "

"Stay with me, Wanda," Clint urged, tugging her closer at Betsy's gesture.

"It hurts," she choked out.

"I know, I know. We're gonna get you both through this." He sat on the floor with an arm around her while Betsy turned her attention to Barnes.

Again, there was nothing Tony could distinguish with his own eyes, but both Barnes and Wanda began to breathe a little slower and their trembling eased - though it didn't stop. Barnes eventually blinked red, wet eyes at Betsy. "Bucky? Do you know me?" she asked.

He shuddered and nodded. "Betsy..." He pulled himself into a sitting position on trembling limbs. Wanda pulled free of Clint and dove onto the mattress to wrap her arms around Barnes. "N-no," he mumbled, shutting his eyes. "Oh God...Wanda, i'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault," Betsy told him, patting his shoulder.

"I didn't know there were other words! Please, you can't let them - "

" – Easy, Bucky! They didn't trigger the Soldier. It's not what you think," said Betsy. "Those words aren't a threat to anyone else, only to you."

Meaning you don't have to die, Tony thought. He wasn't even startled by his own relief.

"Even Dorokhin knew the words were only dangerous to you," Wanda confirmed, pulling back to
look Barnes in the face. "He and Zemo just thought hearing the older words would make you go berserk and force the Court security to kill you in front of Steve. Or - " She grimaced and looked over her shoulder. "Or that Tony would."

Tony just managed to hold her gaze. "I wouldn't."

"I know," she said softly, and her eyes burned him. Tony had to look away.

Betsy went on, "What's happened is the final complication of trying to suppress an eidetic, serum-enhanced memory - eventually it fails. It would have occurred gradually, but now you're overwhelmed and at risk of still more damage. So I want to place - "

" - no!" Barnes recoiled. "Don't take it again, please!"

"Bucky, listen. It won't be permanent, and you won't go back to all that empty space in your memories. But you can't go on like this; you'll just be left reliving one horror after another, catatonic one minute, hysterical the next, and you will suffer more brain damage. Even a brain as powerful as a supersoldier's can't withstand so much traumatic recall - the human psyche simply isn't built for it. The only reason I can is a lot of practice and a psionic mutation."

Barnes trembled, seemingly unaware of the tears falling again. His eyes darted around the room as if it were full of people. "I...can you...I don't want to forget..."

Betsy got it. "Yes, I can leave some non-traumatic memories unsuppressed. You won't lose your family again."

Jesus, Tony thought. Hadn't Barnes come from a big family? Had the guy remembered any of them before now? What a way to get it back. Wonder if any of them are alive. Descendants, maybe, from siblings or cousins.

"Can't..." Barnes squeezed his eyes shut and jerked his head, like he was trying to shake something loose. Wanda kept doing the same, Tony noticed. "Can't...why not just...like this?"

"This is only a dulling of your emotional reaction, not the recall cascade. It's even less safe for you; I only used it to obtain your consent to treat you," Betsy explained.

"I...I can't...think..." he muttered, rubbing his temples.

"No, you're mentally white-water rafting on a massive flood. Bucky, this temporary emotional shield won't hold for long; you must let me help, or you'll collapse again," Betsy pressed.

Maybe that was unfair of her, to pressure the guy in this condition, Tony thought. Or maybe not. In the end, it was Wanda's pained whimper that finally broke through Barnes' confusion. "I - okay...will-will it stop hurting her?"

"This will ease it, and I'm going to help Wanda construct some stronger mental shields until she knows how to use her own," Betsy promised. "Lie down. You'll be more comfortable asleep."

Barnes obeyed, assisted by a trembling Wanda, then they all heard the door open. "Wait! Wait - Steve - "

They all turned, but it was Vision. He told Bucky, "Steve is on his way. He and Colonel Rhodes are finishing making reports on these events and running interference for the X-Men. Congressman Wallace is making demands," he added to Tony, with just a hint of snideness.
Tony snorted. "That jackass can demand whatever he wants; he's got no authority here."

"What about Bucky's case?" Wanda asked, keeping her hand on Bucky's chest to prevent him from getting up. Bucky seemed to be zoning out again, staring into space. At least he was calmer.

"The Court is in recess until further notice," said Vision. "The death toll in security personnel is currently thirty-seven, and another nineteen civilians were killed. However, no biological or chemical agents were successfully deployed, and some of their grenades did contain weaponized smallpox, anthrax, and biological and chemical agents. The team successfully stopped all of them." He looked at Barnes. "Dr. Kelile and Dr. Damaris have seen the video of Mr. Dorokhin's attack, and believe that although the words he recited didn't cause you to become the Winter Soldier, they may have triggered massive flashbacks."

"Got it in one," said Clint.

"I r'member everything," Barnes murmured. "Can't...need to wait," he told Betsy. "For Steve, I need to..."

"All right, just hang on." Betsy leaned toward him. "I'm going to reinforce the suppression of your reactions for a little longer, but after you've seen Steve, we must remove it and put psionic shields in place. This is putting dangerous strain on your mind when it's already processing a tremendous amount of new information."

He sat up again as the door opened a second time, and this time, it was Steve, trailed by T'Challa, Wilson, Romanoff, and Rhodey. "The gang's all here," remarked Clint, but they all moved out of Steve's way, even Vision and Betsy.

Steve knelt next to Wanda and Barnes, studying each of them. "Hey. What happened?"

Barnes still was having trouble concentrating enough to talk, so Wanda answered. "The words Dorokhin said - they were from older attempts at conditioning Bucky. They broke the last of the memory suppression, and everything came back at once."

"Everything," Bucky confirmed, looking at nothing.

But rather than tackle-hug his BFF as Tony half-expected, Steve just looked at Wanda, taking in her red, puffy eyes and still-ashen face. "I'm okay, I...wasn't prepared, and..." She looked helplessly at Betsy.

"You supersoldiers have loud, powerful minds, and an explosion of such intense recall overwhelmed Wanda's natural shields," she explained. "Being overcome by intense emotions and memories in another person's mind is an occupational hazard for telepaths."

"You've...fixed it, then?" Steve asked.

Wanda nodded, trying and failing to smile. "Betsy did something, even though...I still hear..." She trembled and looked down.

"I...Steve, I..." Barnes breathed. When Steve looked at him again, he'd focused a little and almost smiled. "I - I remember..." Steve cupped his neck, and Barnes finally managed to say it. "Becca. Lizzie and Helen. I...they..." His breath caught, and Steve's eyes welled up. "I remember them! I...I remember you!" He stared at Steve and whispered, "I remember...me."

Wanda started to cry again, but she was smiling, and the three of them embraced like the golden trio from Harry Potter. "I'm so sorry you've had to go through all this, Buck," Steve murmured, his
voice *mostly* steady, but Tony saw tears escaping his eyes.

Barnes shuddered, and Betsy said, "I'm sorry, but the temporary shielding I put in place for Bucky is going to fail soon."

Steve stiffened. "What happens then?!"

Barnes sighed, and Wanda admitted, "Reliving everything Hydra put him through and no way to stop it." She scooted off the mattress so Betsy could return, though she wasn't able to stand when Vision tried to help her up. She sat on the floor next to Clint.

"How much...will I forget?" Barnes asked Betsy.

"Technically, nothing," she said. "And definitely not your family or your friends. I'm artificially creating the conditions of long-term PTSD treatment - you'll be able to remember things, even painful things, without reliving them, and recall won't overwhelm you. If there's something you need to remember, that you're trying to remember, you'll be able to. It will gradually erode on its own, but will help a great deal with your own treatment - there's no shortcut on recovery, I'm afraid."

Tony had his doubts that Barnes fully grasped it, but Barnes nodded. "Is that gonna be painful?" asked Rhodey.

"No, but he'll be more comfortable if I do it while you sleep - which you desperately need in any case," Betsy pointed out.

Steve joined in the coaxing to get Barnes to lie down. "You want to take him back to his room first?" suggested Rhodey, but Wanda shook her head vigorously.

But as Betsy was about to put her hand on his temple, Barnes jerked. "Stark!" Tony jumped, then stared. Glassy blue eyes focused on him. "I...I'm sorry...I..."

*He remembers everything. That means now he remembers 'training' to kill my dad. The 'mission.' He remembers...* 

"'Training.' *If he hesitated, they punished him,"* Nat had told Tony the night he demanded to see the Hydra tapes she was compiling.

"*What happened when he refused to kill?" T'Challa had asked.*

"*Punishment. A wipe of his memories. Recalibration, the full sequence of the words and the chair. Drugs. In 1984, they'd sent him after Howard Stark a second time, and he froze.*"

"*How long until he stopped hesitating?" Tony had demanded.*

"*Three to four years. He hesitated, but with enough prompting, he'd make the kill without turning on his handlers. And by prompting, I mean electric shocks, drowning, and breaking his bones.*"

Tony'd lashed out then, furious with Nat for forcing him to know what Hydra had done to Barnes. *But now I know. Even then, she'd held back the worst. Maybe more for Steve's sake than mine, but...* He’d seen hours of tapes by now. Sexual assault. Breaking his bones and then setting them without anesthesia. Hell, for all the injuries inflicted and treated, never once had Hydra used anesthesia on that poor bastard. Sometimes there’d been literal salt in his wounds.

*Three to four years, just in the 1980s for them to make him shoot my dad without hesitating. Before that, decades. No end. They sent him to kill my dad twice before and he still fought them. Alone. No...*
Yinsen, no bunch of tech-clueless cave-dwelling terrorists to overcome. Dad used to say how smart he was, how brilliant a sniper and strategist. He'd probably have made it out if it'd been Ten Rings instead of Hydra.

"Tony?" Rhodey had a hand on his shoulder. Tony blinked back to the present. Maybe this memory flash-flood thing was contagious to non-telepaths, or maybe Wanda was projecting it by accident.

"She's not," Betsy said softly, her eyes all too knowing.

Tony looked at Barnes, whose mind had wandered off too, leaving him looking like Tony felt, trying and only half-succeeding in paying attention to what was in front of him. Barnes might not remember this; it'd be too drowned out by the noise and chaos of so much...memory.

"It's okay," Tony heard himself say. Bucky blinked at him. "It wasn't your fault." He wasn't sure Bucky understood what he was saying. "My parents weren't your fault. I know you were innocent." It was an anticlimactic reaction to such a confession; Bucky seemed like he could barely understand.

Steve's tear-filled eyes burned into Tony, and he had to look away. "You were still a dick to not tell me, Cap."

"I believe you," Steve muttered, still wiping his eyes. "You okay, Buck?"

"I..." Barnes was looking increasingly disoriented.

"Sorry, let's take care of you." Betsy returned her attention to Bucky, and his eyes began to flutter, but the tension was leaving him. Steve rubbed his hand as it went slack, and Wanda relaxed in unison with Bucky, sinking against Clint.

Tony wondered if the suit would pick up any readings on what Betsy did, but after barely one minute, she sat back, and Barnes appeared to be sleeping calmly. "Wanda?" asked Vision.

She sighed and touched Bucky's face. "He's better, so much better."

"Now you need to get some rest," Betsy said.

"I know, but..." Wanda looked up at them. "Do I have to leave him again?"

Everyone exchanged glances. "Screw 'em," Tony said. "You're a big reason they're not cleaning up freeze-dried smallpox and anthrax and pockets of nerve gas all over town."

"Yeah, we'll ask forgiveness instead of permission," Rhodey agreed. "Vision, you mind staying?"

"Of course not. However, you should sleep in a bed," Vision said.

"I'm staying too," said Steve.

Betsy nodded. "I assume you've no objection if I borrow the couch? I should stay close to both of
"I was gonna ask if you hadn't volunteered," said Clint, getting up and stretching. "The rest of us should probably get some shut-eye while we can. All hell of the bureaucratic variety's gonna break loose tomorrow."

"Despite being shot in the shoulder, Agent Ross is doing an impressive job of running interference, as are Agent Carter and my team," said T'Challa.

"What about the X-Men?" asked Wanda, standing unsteadily with Vision's help.

"Most of them have returned to the United States. A few are here assisting with clean-up along with Agent Braddock."

"Good," she murmured and swayed as Vision tugged her towards the bedrooms. But as the others started to leave, she exclaimed, "Tony!", pulled away from Vision, and came stumbling after him. "I - I forgot, I was going to - "

"Hey, Wanda!" Tony caught her elbows as she swayed heavily. "It'll keep - "

" - no, no, wait, it's - it's important. Maksim Dorokhin, the man who triggered Bucky today, he was there! He started in 1972 when he was seventeen - he wasn't high-ranking, but he knows, he knows all about training Bucky to target your father. He was there for the whole process, all the way to 1991!" She shook her head and squinted at him. "You'll - Tony, there're answers. He has them, he was there, he was part… Maybe not all, but some. That's why I stopped him from suiciding - he can't go. And - and," she looked at T'Challa. "He knows Anton Pretorius."

T'Challa smiled warmly. "We know. Now that their communications have been intercepted, we've located Pretorius. Wakandan war dogs have pinpointed his home in the South Pacific and will soon have him."

"The world has questions for you," Tony remembered Wanda snarling on the comm. So that was what she'd seen. This Dorokhin character standing by, maybe taking notes or doing technical stuff as Bucky Barnes got tortured and lobotomized, 'trained' out of recognizing Tony's father until the poor bastard could murder without hesitating. And he'd been there that night, when Obie and Pierce gave the order for the Soldier to get the serum and take Tony's parents out. Maybe he was with that Karpov bastard, waiting when the Soldier returned having accomplished their "mission."

**How many other missions? How many other men, women, and children did Dorokhin help send Barnes out to kill? Maybe he was around when the Soldier went to kidnap that girl seven years ago.**

He patted Wanda's shoulder awkwardly and steered her back into Vision's grasp. "Thanks, kid. Just...get some rest, okay? It's all right."

He should've said so much more, to this stupidly-young woman who'd joined Hydra as a teenager in a vendetta against him but came back to humanity's sides without billions of dollars and military contracts to protect her, and kept right on taking risks and walking into hell for innocent people - and not-so-innocent people like Tony. He wanted to say more to her. But it was all too much, too many thoughts and memories spinning around in Tony's head, like a microcosm of what Barnes and Wanda had to be dealing with now. He couldn't find the words. So he just nodded weakly as Vision ushered her down the hall.

They didn't quite make it; Wanda's legs buckled, and she simply went limp. Vision had to scoop her up and carry her into the nearest bedroom.
Clint and Tony rushed after them, but Betsy intercepted them. "She's all right, just exhausted. We'll look after her."

Tony glanced back into the panic room as he passed; Steve wasn't even willing to take a bedroom. He was seated on the floor next to the mattress, lightly covering Bucky's hand with his own.

_Huh. So I guess it's Bucky now. I guess I forgive you after all, you poor bastard._ Maybe still not _quite_ Steve, for withholding the truth, but Tony was closer to that than he'd ever imagined possible. _What does that say about me?_

"Only that you're human," said Betsy. Tony winced. "Well, you are. And grief can take a very long time, especially for a sudden, violent loss. Acceptance is the last stage, but even that takes a long time."

Tony suddenly didn't want to hear any more about it, not from an enhanced shrink who could see right to the heart of him. Rude, but he figured she'd understand when he hurried away.

He found Nat waiting for him when he got back to the hotel. "You all right?" she asked.

He refused to consider the possibility that he wasn't. "Hell, yeah! Are you kidding? This was awesome news! I didn't think many Hydra goons were still alive, now we've got one of the fuckers who orchestrated the whole thing. I'm so happy I feel kinda guilty - "

But _something_ ripped through the babbled words like a flood through a forest, and snatched his voice, turned it into a choked sob, and he had to steady himself on the wall. It left him completely helpless as another followed, and another, tears, breaths ragged, all self-control out the window right in front of the ice queen...

...there was a hand on his shoulder. Too small to be Rhodey's, but remarkably strong. Steady, like a stone keeping a balloon from flying away into oblivion. He found himself clutching it as he tried to hide his face...but then she was close, her arms around him. She didn't try to say anything to comfort him, didn't burn him with her sympathy like the others did or humiliate him with her pity. Somehow, she was just...there. And it was perfect. He would never have thought Natasha Romanoff could do that. Let alone that she'd want to do such a thing for Tony Stark.

But he was out of energy to try to hide or pretend or do anything but just stand there and let himself be held and sob, deep and hard into her shoulder.

As he finally wound down, she said only one thing: "I know. Closure isn't all it's cracked up to be."

And he laughed through his tears. _Speaking from experience?"

"You even have to ask, genius?" They both laughed and started for their rooms, arm-in-arm, but she suddenly paused and rapped on Rhodey's door. Tony couldn't find the energy to tell her not to.

Rhodey needed only one look when he opened his door. "Okay. Pepper time."

Tony mustered himself enough to say, "Not in the middle of the night."

"It's seven p.m. there; she can sleep on the plane over. Thanks, Nat." He came out and put an arm around Tony from the other side. "You good?"

"I'm always good," she said, with a quirk of her mouth that let them all know she was bullshitting. But to Tony's surprise, she said, "Clint's room's adjoined to mine." With a weary smile and wave, she went into hers.
Rhodey practically tucked Tony into bed first. Tony knew if he talked to Pepper tonight, he'd lose it again, so Rhodey made the phone call as Tony dully listened. "No, no, he's alive and kicking, it was just a really rough day. Okay. You're a saint, Pep. See you tomorrow. As far as I know, Rotterdam Airport's open, but buzz me if you have trouble; I'll get you routed somewhere. Great. Yeah, it was also a really long day. Tony's asleep, and I'm gonna turn in now too."

T'Challa purchased hotel rooms for Ororo and her team, Katherine Pryde, Robert Drake, Kurt Wagner, and Logan. "Damn, I want to team up with Black Panther more often," he heard Drake saying to the others as they headed for their own rooms on the most exclusive floor.

Ororo lingered in the lounge, waiting for him to join her. "Were any of your X-Men injured?" T'Challa asked.

"No. Well, Logan got shot a few times, but he's fine now." She smirked at T'Challa's startled look. "It doesn't phase him. Scott took the rest back home. Kurt can teleport us if things get difficult."

"You know I'll defend you if things get difficult."

"Now I do." She looked out the window and smiled. "I see Pretorius is in a standoff against an international task force of primarily African special forces."

"Yes. He may be the inaugural prisoner to be tried by the African Nations Consolidated Court for human trafficking. We were already preparing to sign its formation treaty when he was finally located."

"Does its treaty have anything to say about mutants?"

He'd expected she'd asked that. "It does. Mutants are among the demographics listed as at particular risk of genocide and human trafficking as child soldiers, political prisoners, and forced prostitution. Attacks on them in continental Africa will merit an increase in charges and penalties. We're also submitting a proposal for a similar classification in other international courts."

She finally met his eyes. "Thank you, T'Challa."

"It's the very least I could do, though I know I can't erase the damage the Sokovia Accords did to your people."

Ororo sighed. "None of us can erase the things we've done." He knew she wouldn't forgive him; Ororo's capacity for holding grudges was legendary, but if they had a detente, it would be enough. "How is your stepmother?"

"Recovering, with tremendous progress. She's helping to write the human rights code for the African Nations Coalition. Pretorius, for all his evil and abuse, couldn't erase her knowledge, and she remains dedicated to the cause that led her to return to her home country to fight apartheid, even though it led to her capture."

"I remember your stories about her, all that you felt when you believed she'd left your family." Ororo sighed. "In your shoes, I would have believed what you did."

"That's small consolation to Ramonda. My father died believing she'd deserted him and her children." Rage and shame bubbled up in T'Challa again.

Ororo put a hand on his shoulder. "I rather doubt she wants her newfound freedom to be concerned by others' guilt." No, she had little patience for wallowing. "Now tell me about this girl."
"W-what makes you think there's a girl!!"

"You neither froze nor stuttered and stammered while introducing me to the Avengers," she replied, folding her arms and smirking at him. Mortified, T'Challa, well, froze, and her grin broadened. "So? Have you finally picked one of your Dora Milaje to settle down with?"

It'd been almost twenty years since they wandered their neighboring countries together, and she could still read him like a book. Ororo Munroe claimed her mutation was not telepathic, but sometimes T'Challa wondered. He smiled sheepishly and gave in. "Nakia. You met her today."

Ororo tilted her head as she recalled the introductions. "Ah, I thought she looked at me rather intensely. She is a beauty. So has the royal courtship begun or will she let you dispense with it?"

T'Challa snorted. "Neither. She's leaving the Dora Milaje. Our work against human trafficking and all the agony we've witnessed struck her very hard. She wishes to become a war dog and infiltrate such operations." He smiled sadly. "I won't deny her, though that will make things difficult if not impossible for us."

"Has she ended it, then?"

"No, not ended it - "

"– then she doesn't consider it impossible. Don't be so pessimistic."

"Since when are you an optimist? There must be someone in your life as well!"

"None of your business!"

*To Be Continued...*

Chapter End Notes

**Coming Soon:** The exhausted Avengers face a world that wants answers along with the still-looming question of whether Bucky can be held responsible for his actions as the Winter Soldier - with the new twist of all Bucky's returned memories.

**PLEASE don't forget to review!**

**Original Character Guide**

**Maksim Dorokhin** - a former Hydra operative who worked on the Winter Soldier program, aspiring to great things but never fully succeeding, fell in with Zemo and Monica Rappaccini in an attempt to use bioterrorism and the former Winter Soldier to destroy the Avengers and revitalize Hydra.

**Repurposed Canon Characters**

**Ororo Munroe aka Storm** - co-leader of the X-Men, a mutant with power to control weather conditions. Once had a romantic relationship with T'Challa when they met in Kenya as young adults.
Bobby Drake aka Ice Man - a mutant with power to generate ice and reduce an object to near-absolute zero temperatures.

Logan aka Wolverine - a mutant with adamantium grafted onto his entire skeleton, giving him claws and near-indestructibility combined with near-unlimited healing.

Kitty Pryde aka Shadowcat - a mutant who can phase her body through walls and almost any object.

Monica Rappaccini - a biochemist who heads Advanced Idea Mechanics ("A.I.M.") was attempting to weaponize smallpox and anthrax in a Mumbai research facility, got involved with Zemo and the remnants of Hydra after her attack on her former facility failed to retrieve some of her research. Resurfaced in an attack by Zemo on The Hague only to discover he had double-crossed her.

Congressman Dixon Wallace (I invented his first name) - A racist and violent former General elected to Congress on a hardline anti-enhanced platform who joined the prosecution team as a consultant with an undisguised agenda to turn the screws on the Winter Soldier and Avengers wherever possible in furtherance of the floundering Sokovia Accords.

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