Summary

No longer the Winter Soldier, he is not quite Bucky Barnes either. He has only just regained his freedom after HYDRA, but now Bucky voluntarily sets it aside again to protect the girl who helped him. One of a pair of complimentary stories. Neither will include Infinity War or Endgame.
Surprised to hear a knock at the door, as it was quite late, Thea put down her teacup on the table in front of her and slowly got up from the sofa. As she pressed into her crutches so she could cross the floor, she wondered if she was going to be able to use the cane the next day or if she would be stuck on crutches for a fourth day in a row. If she didn't admit to her brother that she had been having another flare soon and he found out, then he was going to kick up a fuss again about her living on her own. Sometimes, Richard drove her mad, but especially when she knew he was right.

The person at the door knocked again more aggressively, so Thea began to quickly undo all the locks and turned off the alarm as she pulled the door open. There was no one there. Confused and rather annoyed, Thea started to close the door again when she was swiftly pushed inside, then the door slammed shut. As she stumbled and fell into the wall where she had been shoved by the intruder, Thea looked up into the face of the man in front of her and nearly screamed with fear at the roughness in his fierce expression.

The man placed a hand over her mouth and stood there panting for several moments, as he scanned her face. He then stared emotionlessly at her as he growled, "I will not harm you if you comply."

His long, shaggy dark hair and a scruffy beard hid much of his face, but she could see the cold grey-blue eyes that were glaring down at her as he waited for her to agree to cooperate. She nodded her head and tried to keep her balance despite being held incredibly firmly against the wall by the man's left arm.

"No sound."

She nodded again, so he removed his hand from her mouth. Thea tried to keep from making any sound, but a small sob of fear came out as she watched him fearfully.

He looked around the room—clearly assessing all the possible sources of danger and anything strategically useful—and then turned back to her. As he kept his eyes on her, the man reached his free arm over to the door locks and rapidly put all four back on. His voice croaked, as he commanded, "Kitchen. Walk in front."

Thea found herself released and tried to stabilise as quickly as she could. Then, she started to work her way across the floor towards the door—the clicking sound of her crutches seeming louder than normal as she wondered fearfully whether the intruder was going to let her go once he got what he wanted (or if he would just kill her). As soon as they entered the kitchen, she turned her head and whispered, "What do you want?"

He jerked his head towards the sink. "Water. Food. Then bandages."

Surprised, she answered anxiously, "Oh. Are you badly hurt?"

He shook his head angrily, "Water and food first."

"Erm...what do you want me to make you?"

The man glared at her silently, so Thea hurried over to the bread box and pulled out a loaf of bread. Propping one crutch against the table, she limped with the other to the refrigerator and pulled out a container of chicken salad mixture. She made a sandwich as quickly as possible and placed the plate on the table next to where he was standing. When the man didn't say anything, she went to the cupboard and got a glass that she filled with water.
"Is that all right?"

The man merely grunted and said harshly, "Sit."

Thea lowered herself into the second chair at the table and waited to see what he was going to do. This was when she saw it: his entire left arm was made of metal and had a large red star on it. This was the man who had been on the news a few months ago; he was the one who had attacked Captain America! She felt herself begin to shake with fear but did not speak, as he dropped into the other chair and began eating the sandwich ravenously with both eyes trained on her much like a skittish stray dog. When he was finished, the man downed the entire glass of water at once and made a small sound like a sigh before he fiercely stated, "Bandages."

"I…I only have plasters. Band-aids, I mean. I don't have anything large. Are you very badly hurt?"

He stood up and glared down at her more fiercely than before, as he instructed, "Get a sheet, large towel, and some alcohol."

Thea used one crutch to push herself up from the table and then snatched up the other one, so she could head out of the room and towards the linen cupboard. She heard him follow, but she did not turn around. As she pulled out the towel and a sheet, she turned back to him and asked, "Would you hold them? I need both crutches to get into the bathroom."

He snatched the items from her and allowed her to walk into the bathroom first. Whilst the man stood glaring menacingly down at her from the doorway, Thea lowered herself gingerly down to get the bottle of alcohol from underneath the sink. "Do you want me to get out antibiotic ointment or any other medicine?"

Making no reply, the man entered the bathroom and shut the door behind him, causing her to yelp with fear. Finally, he gruffly demanded, "Scissors."

Thea opened a drawer with one shaking hand and pulled out a pair of white-handled scissors, which she held out to him. He did not take them, but instructed, "Sit." As soon as she sat on the edge of the bathtub, he took her crutches and placed them far away from her by the door. Then he handed her the sheet and said, "Make strips."

As soon as she unfolded the sheet, Thea looked up and saw that he had taken off his black tactical vest and was pulling off the black shirt underneath it. Her face suddenly uncomfortably red, she asked nervously, "How long do you want them?"

He did not reply but leant against the counter of the bathroom and watched her intently.

Understanding that he was not going to explain further, she took the scissors and began to pull them through the sheet until she had cut off a full length of the fabric. Looking up at him for guidance, Thea paused to see if she was doing it correctly. When he still said nothing, she began to cut another full strip. When she was done that one, he said tersely, "Bring them here."

Thea tried to get up but found it impossible after several abortive tries. Finally, he moved towards her, picked her up firmly by the upper arms, and placed her down in front of the sink. Taking the two strips of sheet from her hand, the man shoved the towel in hers. It was clear to her that he now wanted her to clean his wounds, so Thea wet the towel under the warm water. She moved her hands to begin with the gash on his face, but he pulled away sharply. He turned incredibly quickly and leant his hands against the counter. Thea then saw the horrible wounds on his back and gasped. "Are you sure you want me to clean them with just water? It's going to hurt awfully. You have so many of them. You could use the shower first."
He laughed roughly. "Yes, while you call the police."

"I wouldn't. I'll even stay in here where you can see me if you want. Anyway, you'd feel less manky. They are all going to get infected if you don't wash them well."

He placed his face directly overtop hers so she could not turn away and hissed, "I will restrain you."

"I promise I won't move. The ones on your back are horrid. They need better cleaning than just water and a towel."

Without warning, the man shoved her onto the toilet seat, pulled a black zip tie out of one of his many pockets, and slipped it over her hands. He then brought out a second one, slipped it over her feet, and pulled tightly. This left Thea sitting on the toilet lid with her wrists and ankles stinging and the man staring at her intensely. Finally, he began to pull on the belt to his trousers, so she closed her eyes and looked away with deep embarrassment. She could hear him tug both legs of his trousers down and then both boots fall to the ground. Then, she heard a series of sharp clunks as things were placed on the counter of the bathroom, but she didn't dare open her eyes to look. Finally, the water to the shower turned on and she heard the man step inside.

It was quite uncomfortable and very embarrassing to be perched where she was: both unable to move and afraid to open her eyes. Yet, Thea could hear the man grunt with pain several times and wondered if he had worse injuries than she had been able to see. He didn't take long to clean himself. Her brother Christopher had always teased her about how long her showers took, but she never saw the point in 'combat showers' if one wasn't actually in a warzone. The man, despite being covered in grime and injuries, had taken a shower every bit as short as Christopher ever did. She heard the curtain slide back again and squeezed her eyes shut even more than before, so she wouldn't accidentally see anything embarrassing.

Thea could hear the man drying off and then the sound of cloth being pulled over skin. Then he moved closer to her, which caused her to begin panicking and breathing shallowly. Yet, when the bonds on her hands were snipped off, Thea looked up and saw that he was now crouching down to remove the bonds on her ankles and he had nothing on but very tight, thigh-length black pants. She exclaimed, "Oh!"

He looked up and asked blankly, "What?"

"You…your…" She was looking away determinedly and gesturing towards him. "No trousers on."

"It doesn't matter. Come clean the wounds with the alcohol."

Mortified and overwhelmed with embarrassment and fear, Thea pulled herself up using the counter edge and then picked up the towel from where he had tossed it next to the sink. She soaked a portion of it in alcohol and turned back towards him. The man had propped himself against the counter, so his back was facing her. Therefore, she began dabbing the towel against several long gashes on his bare back, periodically washing the towel in the water and then soaking it in more alcohol and returning to cleaning. Finally, he turned around. She could not feel comfortable this close to him, especially when he wore nearly nothing and was quite likely to kill her with any of the impressive array of weapons on her bathroom counter or even just his bare hands. Yet, she didn't feel as if he would care about her embarrassment at all. Therefore, she forced herself to tentatively begin cleaning the angry scratches and lacerations that ran along nearly all his abdomen, as well as some ugly purple bruises and black marks that were criss-crossed by numerous scars. "Do you want me to do that one on your arm? I think it might hurt less if you do it, really."
He nodded once and waited for her to begin dabbing at the nasty slice that crossed his upper arm. He seemed nearly impervious to the pain as she tried to get all the dried blood and grime out and then asked him, "Do you want to do the leg now? I mean...well, it looks bad." Her face brilliant red, she stammered, "Maybe you would prefer to clean it?"

Once again, he did not reply, so Thea turned the water back on, rinsed the towel, soaked it in a lot of alcohol, and very hesitantly started working on his thigh wound. She could not believe that he had been able to walk, let alone function, with the degree of injuries that she had seen. Oddly, he hardly reacted when she worked, despite her clumsiness and the severity of his wound. Finally, she said, "I'm finished, I suppose. I am sorry that I'm not quite sure what I am doing. I hope it wasn't hurting too much when I pressed on it. Are there any others?"

He shook his head and watched her for a moment before he replied, "Just minor. Pour the alcohol over it."

"Oh, but that much alcohol on it will you hurt horribly. Are you sure?"

He looked at her furiously, so Thea picked up the bottle of alcohol and unscrewed the cap again. "I am sure that this is going to sting a lot, so I apologise in advance. I promise that I'll do it fast as I can." She let some of the alcohol gush over the thigh wound and looked up at him apprehensively. "Is that enough?"

The man picked up the sheet strip and began to expertly wrap the wound. Then he stood up, so close to her that she could smell the strange mixture of her floral scented shampoo and his natural scent. At least he no longer smelt as sweaty and grotty as before, but it was odd smelling her (quite feminine) lavender body wash on a man. The man took the alcohol bottle from her and poured the remaining portion over his abdomen and arm. He quickly wiped off his face with the still damp towel, but he did nothing to the cuts and scratches there. He next used the remaining strip of sheet to bind the arm wound and then asked, "Who else lives here?"

"Just me."

"I need other clothing."

"Oh! Actually, I have my brother's gym bag, since he left it the other day. I mean, Richard isn't as big as you, but his things might stretch just enough for you to wear them."

He nodded, gathered two of the wide assortment of weapons on the counter, and then picked up her crutches to give to her. Thea led him down the hall and into the spare bedroom where there was a pile of luggage on the bed. "It is the black bag there."

The man pulled a black bag off the top of a stack of perfectly matched luggage, unzipped it, and roughly yanked out all the contents. The long-sleeved, dark blue shirt that he held up was at least a size too small, but he tugged it over his head anyway. It was so tight that Thea wondered how he even got the sleeves over his broad shoulders, then she questioned whether her brother's sweatpants would be able to fit the man at all. Her brother was tall but slight, whereas this man was extremely muscular. She turned away, so he could change, but the man ordered roughly, "Sit."

Surprised, Thea turned to sit down on the chair and then closed her eyes tightly. As she waited, she heard him slide on the trousers. After a moment in which he seemed not to have moved, Thea risked opening her eyes and saw that the trousers definitely did not fit. "Oh dear, I was worried they might be too small. My brother is almost your height, but he is very slender."

Unconcerned, the man pulled the cord out of the sweatpants, pushed them down on his hips, and
tugged the too-tight shirt back down over the waistband. He then pulled out a pair of socks and asked, "Shoes?"

"Aren't there some trainers in there? Oh dear. Maybe Richard didn't leave them in the bag. He must have worn them home that day, although that doesn't seem very like him. I'm sorry. There might be shower shoes in there though."

The man dug into one of the pockets and pulled out a pair of blue plastic slippers. He briefly looked a bit perplexed but quickly shoved his feet in them. He then asked roughly, "When is someone next supposed to come here? Do not lie."

"No one should come at all. I'm not expecting anyone."

In a cold, flat tone, the man said, "If someone comes to the door, then I will assume they are my enemy and kill them. Therefore, be very certain that you are not lying to me now, if you don't want someone you care about to die."

Thea stammered, "I-I'm not. I'm not, really, I promise!"

He pushed the bags that had been laid on the bed onto the floor and commanded, "Lay down."

Absolutely terrified, she whispered desperately, "Please, no!"

Rage suddenly filled his eyes, as he snarled, "If I had come for that, then you would already know. Now lay down and sleep." The man lowered himself in the chair where she had been sitting and then laid his gun in front of him. "Quiet."

She saw that at least he was pointing the gun towards the doorway and not her, so Thea laid down and began to pray desperately. It seemed like the man was going to stay for a while.
When Thea awoke, the man was standing over her with one hand on her mouth. He had her brother Christopher's old rucksack from Afghanistan in his other hand and overtop her brother's t-shirt he was now wearing his strange, one-armed tactical vest, which looked like he had somehow cleaned it. When she sat up, she saw that he had also cleaned his boots and put them back on yet was still wearing her brother Richard's sweatpants. It was a strange outfit, but it was clear that he was prepared to leave wearing it.

"Eat."

Thea looked to where he was pointing beside her and saw he had brought her a breakfast of sorts in the form of a stack of sandwich bread and a bottle of carbonated apple juice. She dutifully began to eat the plain bread and wondered what was going to happen now. She saw that one of her suitcases was tossed onto its side on the ground and her other bags were thrown against the wardrobe door. He had also found a second rucksack somewhere—one that she didn't even remember owning—which was sitting open on the end of the bed. How long had she actually slept with this terrifying man ransacking her flat?

When she had finally finished eating, Thea got up and asked, "May I go wash my face?"

"Quickly."

She looked around for her crutches and saw that they were now all the way over by the door. It seemed he had not wanted her capable of leaving the bed the night before. "Might I have them, please?"

He made a sound of annoyance, but he strode over to get the crutches and then brought them to her. "Five minutes."

"Why? What is going to happen?" Thea gasped and asked nervously, "Are you leaving now?"

"We are, yes."

Terrified, she began begging earnestly, "No, please, I really won't tell anyone. You could just take my car and go. I won't phone the police or anything. I really won't."

The man continued staring dispassionately at her as he answered simply, "No."

"I promise that I shan't turn you in. You can even give me false information and I will pass that to them. Please?"

"No. You won't be returning here. Get what you need quickly."

With a fearful look up at him, as she wondered what he was planning to do to her now, she asked, "What do I bring?"

"Whatever you need to survive."

"I need my medicine. I cannot go without it. May I?"

He nodded, so Thea walked to the bathroom, limping badly from the stiffness in her hip. After another scared glance up at him, she opened the cupboard next to the bathtub and pulled out a large
white box as well as a small white jar and a tan coloured tube. "Ok. May I wash up now?"

He snorted with annoyance, but he shut the door firmly behind him, leaving her alone. She quickly washed her face and brushed her hair before using the loo and then washing her hands. She didn't think the man would let her do more. When she opened the door, he was standing there with both bags.

"May I change into something more sensible?"

Running his eyes over her, the man shrugged. "No. We have to go now."

"I would really be very quick."

"No."

Thea bit her lip as she tried to think through the embassy training for something useful that might stall their departure. "Is there anything else I should get? What about things for you?"

"I already have food and a blanket in here. We must leave quickly."

Recognising that she already had lost, Thea nodded. She waited for the man to move out of her way, then she tried to hurry into the sitting room where her large handbag was laid on a chair. She tucked her phone into it and hobbled over to the wall to grab the charger.

"Time to go. Get that jacket."

"It isn't very thick. I ought to get a better one."

The man looked at her coldly, so Thea grabbed the silk coat from the back of a chair and clumsily slipped it on.

He quickly zipped up the rucksack, then snarled, "Come."

Nearly twenty minutes later, they were still driving. Thea was huddled up in the seat next to him as they drove through the Virginia countryside. He had forced her to send a text to both her brothers and to turn on her security alarm. There was no reason for anyone to know she was missing for days, since she was supposed to be leaving for Richard's hunting cabin that day. The man had taken the battery out of her phone, so it couldn't be tracked. He could dump her in the middle of nowhere and she'd be lost for days. He could do even worse, too. Steeling herself to try again, Thea asked, "Are you going to let me go?"

"Not yet."

"But why are you taking me with you? I can't do anything to help you and I'm going to be a horrible liability with my crutches and everything."

It was several minutes before he replied. "They will track me to your apartment. Then they will torture you for information."

She half-whispered in horror, "You mean like the CIA or something? But…but I've not done anything. Why would they do that?"

The man's answer was cold, and he did not take his eyes from the winding country road. "They won't care."

"But will my car not be tracked then?"
He didn't reply, so Thea leant back against the door and stared out the window. When they got off the road an hour later, he silently parked the car in front of a dark cabin and then turned to look at her fiercely. "Stay here and make no sound."

Thea had no idea how long she sat there waiting. He had put her crutches were in the boot, so she couldn't really hope to escape very far. Her phone was on the seat, but the battery was in his pocket. The closest thing to a weapon that she had found when searching the car was an old pen that had fallen in between the driver's seat and the console. Yet, she didn't even attempt to pull it out, as that was hardly going to be much use against a man like him. Therefore, she had realised that she was stuck waiting until whenever the man finally returned.

Just when Thea was starting to feel a bit of hope that the man wasn't going to return after all, the driver's side door opened quickly and he slid in. He started the car immediately and pulled out so rapidly that Thea was forced to grab the door handle to keep from being thrown to the side. He tossed a bag that had been in his lap onto the floor by her feet, which made her yelp in surprise. His unimpressed glare was enough to convince Thea that it would be best for her to move as little as possible and stay perfectly quiet.

They kept driving for almost another hour before the man stopped the car with a sudden screech of the brakes on the side of the road next to a bus shelter. "Get out and wait here."

Despite a flash of hope that she might be able to escape and get away from him, Thea realised that she was in the middle of the countryside with no buildings visible and still no crutches or phone in hand. "Please don't leave me out here. I can't walk far enough to the next town."

In reply, the man grunted with annoyance and got out of the car without even a glance at her. She heard the boot open and wondered if he was getting some horrible weapon or something else nasty. Yet, when her door suddenly wrenched open, Thea realised that the man was holding out her folded crutches. "Now, out and just wait there on the bench." The man passed her a small knife, which made her look at him with confused surprise. "I will return. Trust no one else, not if you value your safety."

Thea tucked the knife in her handbag and then unfolded her crutches. She got out of the car and then turned to shut the door, but the man moved to do it for her. He then walked around the car, slamming the boot lid as he passed by, and got back behind the wheel before she had even processed what was happening. Without waiting for her to walk away from the car, the man suddenly turned it about and sped off at a shockingly fast speed.

Thereupon, Thea was left standing beside the dingy country road, as she looked blankly all round her. Utterly out of place in her current situation, she was still dressed in the tweed skirt suit that she had worn to the meeting with her attorney the day before. She had only the thin silk coat overtop, as well. As she was sure the man knew quite well, there just was nowhere for her to go. Her Louboutin flats were hardly designed for walking far and she was unable manage much anyway. He had cleverly managed everything so she would simply have to sit and wait. Either she obediently waited for the man, who she knew for certain was extremely dangerous, or she waited for someone else about whom she knew nothing to drive along and offer to help. Yet what if they were one of the people he warned her about? How did she know he was even telling the truth that she was in any danger from anyone but him?

As she sat on the bench, using her handbag as a cushion, Thea finally began to cry. The box with her medicine was in the car. She was exhausted and far from home. The fear and uncertainty of her situation was nearly too much to bear. She knew the man was some horrible, dangerous assassin or something and that the police, the FBI, and everyone were probably looking for him. However, she
couldn't be blamed if he forced her to help him, could she? He had said that they would torture her. That meant someone else was very aggressively looking for him. CIA? MI6? A former employer? Was it even safe to go to the local police here—wherever here was? Her brother should be able to keep her safe through the embassy. Or could he?

Thea sat on the ratty wooden bench waiting for the man to return for quite a long time. She didn't know how long, but, compared to waiting at the house earlier, this seemed like an eternity. No one drove by and there was no house visible anywhere even if she were willing to risk the danger and push herself to walk that far to find help. Finally, Thea could see a dark blue truck slowing down as it approached her location. She tried to get up from the bench, but discovered that she had been sitting for too long and her joints were too stiff to stand on her own. As the truck stopped, she called out desperately, "Help!"

However, instead of a local resident or even a passing motorist, Thea realised that it was the man again. He had simply got another vehicle and returned for her. She was surprised to find that a small part of her was relieved. Yet, as she had been left there marooned without hope of being rescued soon, Thea did not allow her relief at not being left cold, in pain, and alone to colour her view of the man who she knew without a doubt to be extraordinarily dangerous. She had no reason to trust him to keep safe, even though he had mostly treated her decently for a kidnapper/assassin/terrifying bad guy.

Thea watched as the man rapidly moved round the front of the truck to the bus shelter, then picked her up awkwardly and placed her in the truck before handing her both her crutches and handbag. Defeated, as she had not taken the opportunity to even try to escape, she folded her crutches before tucking them behind her in the truck's rear seat. "Why did you come back to get me?"

"We are returning to DC."

Not very hopefully, Thea asked, "Will you let me go when I get there?"

It was several moments before he replied only, "No."

"But won't I bollocks up your escape?"

"Yes, you are hampering everything. Be quiet and sleep."

Thea looked at his ragged hair and unkept short beard and wondered how long the man had been on the run. "Why are you bringing me along then?"

He turned his head only briefly and then reiterated, "Rest and be quiet."

When she awoke hours later, the man was hurriedly grabbing her up in his arms to remove her from the truck. He then tossed over his left shoulder cruelly and dragged the bags, her crutches, and handbag all in his other hand. Her yelp of protest and surprise only caused him to grip her more securely with his metal arm. He ducked inside the building, which seemed to be an old, abandoned warehouse. Then, he moved quite quickly to the back of the structure towards an enclosed office. Once inside, the man dropped Thea onto her feet and tossed the bags and her crutches onto the floor. "You will stay in here if you do not want to die. Do you understand?"

She opened her eyes wide, as she replied quietly, "Okay."

"If you move from this room, then I will not be the one you should fear." He checked to see the effect of his words on her, before he added savagely, "They do not have mercy."
She nodded to indicate both comprehension and acceptance of his command. "I will stay here. I promise."

"I will return, but it will not be soon." He looked down at her with narrowed eyes and asked belligerently, "Do I need to restrain you again?"

Quite suddenly feeling almost hysterical with fear, Thea insisted, "No, I promise! I will stay here. I'll be quiet."

He towered over her, looking down with his intense stare for some time, before he turned abruptly and shut the door firmly behind him. It was only as she watched him stalking away through the narrow window in the door that she realised that he had somewhere found some shoes, a jacket, and a ragged Washington Nationals ballcap.

Thea remained huddled in the corner of the old, filthy office for hours. She was glad for the blanket that she pulled out from one of the bags, since the air was quite chilly and getting colder. However, no matter how many times she thought through why the man might have dragged her with him, Thea could not come up with a satisfactory answer. He was one just of those bad men, wasn't he? Surely there could be no benign reason behind her kidnapping. He did not look like the sort of man who did things out of kindness, really.

Her fear and boredom eventually led her to fall asleep again for several hours, so when Thea woke up she saw that the man had returned and was sitting on an old, rusted chair that had not been there earlier. "Oh! You are back. Will we be staying here for a while?"

"Yes. I have more supplies." He tossed a bag of crisps and a foil-wrapped sandwich onto the floor next to her.

As she unwrapped the sandwich eagerly, Thea noticed that he seemed to be wet from his hair to his clothes. "It must be raining horribly."

He ignored her comment and demanded, "Why did you have a suitcase packed?"

"I was meant to go up to my brother's cottage today. I was to have a week alone first and then another with both my older brothers joining me."

"And when you do not arrive?"

She tried not to make a face, since the answer should be sufficiently obvious. "They will phone repeatedly, check my flat, search everywhere they know I have ever gone in DC and Virginia, and ring the police."

He threw a tall water bottle over to her, as he unfeelingly commented, "Your car is at the bottom of a ravine in a river. They will not look for you for long."

"Oh no! But they will think that I have been killed! Why, why did you do that?"

Lounging back in his chair and unwrapping his second sandwich, the man said dispassionately, "Because I want them to think you are dead."

Shocked at his callous reply and uneasy what that meant for her future, Thea exclaimed, "No! This will kill them. You don't understand. We are ever so close, especially after losing Christopher. They worry constantly about me, the both of them."

Swallowing another mouthful of his sandwich, the man said seriously, "They should. You were
Feeling strangely embarrassed by his assessment, Thea nodded acceptance. "Right. So, you actually want them to think I'm dead. Then why not kill me? Why do you want me here?"

"I do not want you here."

She looked up at him and said simply, "Then let me go."

The man only stared at her blankly.

"My brother Richard would come get me immediately. I know he'd drive anywhere or pay whatever you ask. I promise not to tell anyone where you are."

He balled up the wrapper for his second sandwich and started to open a third. Despite focussing intently on the intractable clingfilm wrapper, his rough reply was firm enough to leave no room for discussion. "Do not ask again."

The man sounded so dangerously fed up that Thea knew she ought to stop talking. However, her desperation and frustration caused her to whinge further, "Why are you being so horrid? I helped you. Yet in return you kidnapped me and now you've even destroyed my car. I haven't done anything to harm you."

He turned his intense grey-blue eyes towards her and stated, "HYDRA has no pity."

"What is HYDRA?"

"I was HYDRA. Silence."

Thea rolled from her position to one from which she could stand and tried to push herself up. Using the wall and a crutch, she was able to get up and walk over to the man. "I do not want to be quiet. I want answers. I helped you. I was nice to you. Now you are keeping me imprisoned here with you for no good reason. My family will be distraught. I do not understand why you are keeping me against my will, since you say you don't even want me to be here. Who is HYDRA?"

"HYDRA brings order to the world at any cost. That is their mission. There is no mercy to be had, only obedience or pain."

She frowned nervously, "Are you taking me to them?"

He looked quite cross, as he replied, "No."

"Do you still work for them?"

Thea saw uncertainty and pain flicker across his face for a moment, but he did not answer.

"Well, do you have some sort of plan?"

He shrugged and took a bite of his final sandwich. "Survive."

She took one step closer. "That really isn't much of a plan. What is your name then?"

Getting up with a languorous stretch of his back, the man then pushed her into the chair firmly. Afterwards, he turned away to stalk towards the wall. As he leant against it with his foot and shoulders, the man said, "I am the Winter Soldier."
"OK, but that isn't your name."

He took the time to chew another bite of sandwich before he answered, "I have no other name."

"Everyone has a name, Winter Soldier."

The man looked away angrily and mouthed something to himself, but he did not reply. Finally, he took another large bite and chewed silently.

Remembering the hostage training that she had got before they moved to the States, Thea asked one last time, "What do I call you then?"

The man said nothing.

"Well, if I'm going to be here, then we should at least be able to use names. I'm Thea, or Theodora if you want to be proper."

Looking at her with disinterest, he said only, "I will go out soon."

She sighed angrily. "And I will remain here again, quiet as a mouse, right?"

He did not reply immediately but snatched up the blanket from the floor and threw it to her. Gathering all the rubbish from their meal and tucking it in his jacket pocket, the man stated clearly, "Yes, you will. And I will return once I have what I need. Do not make any noise."
Chapter 3

After almost an hour, Thea stood up and went over to her brother's tatty old MOD-issue rucksack. She stroked the faded name tape and patted the Royal Anglian Regiment badge that was pinned to the flap. At least it was comforting to have something of Christopher with her here. She knew that the man had put her laptop inside and that it had several films downloaded. The battery might still be fully powered up, since she'd left it to charge when she got home. After she found the charger, Thea limped over to a power point and plugged it in, hoping it might help keep the battery full as she watched. However, the mains was no longer switched on to the building, which was hardly surprising since it was uninhabited. Then she suddenly wondered if there was a usable lavatory anywhere. There probably wouldn't be water, so what could she do? Just over two hours later when *Star Trek* had finished, Thea was desperate enough that she decided to risk leaving the office. The man probably wouldn't come back in the little bit of time she spent poking round for a loo.

Thea grabbed the handle of the door, which she very slowly and quietly turned. Then she stuck her head out, but she saw no one. As silently as is possible with forearm crutches, Thea began moving along the wall and keeping her eyes wide open for any movement. When she got to the end of the office wall, she saw a door that had an old sign marked 'Restrooms' next to it, so she began moving even faster towards it. However, long before she got there, she heard something rapidly moving behind her. Before she could even turn towards the sound, she was caught up and held so tightly that she could not move.

The man's voice was thick with rage, as he snarled, "I told you to remain in that room."

Thea looked at his face in terror and stammered, "I need a loo."

"Wait."

"I've been waiting. I haven't been able to go since early this morning. Please?"

His fury unabated, the man dragged her with him to the lavatory door and opened it. She could see in the dim streetlight that was filtering through the tiny window that the toilets were all covered by black plastic. "Go ahead."

"But…where?"

"Quickly."

Thea stared at him open mouthed. "But…"

"Or don't go."

"Are you going to stand there watching? I can't!"

He grunted and stepped back so the door slammed shut. Thea looked around herself miserably and tried hurriedly to figure out a solution. A few minutes later when she was done, she was reaching for the door when it suddenly opened, whacking painfully into her hand. Unconcerned, the man looked down at her and said, "Come."

Thea didn't move, holding her throbbing hand against her chest so her crutch was left dangling at her elbow. There was no way that she could use that hand to bear down now. It was a minute before she took a deep breath and moved forwards on just the one crutch, as she tried not to think of the pain in her hand. As soon as she was beside him, the man pulled her hand towards him and

She limped very slowly after him, which obviously annoyed him. However, he didn't say anything until they were inside the old office.

"Food is there. You may sleep after. We will leave in five hours."

Thea saw that there was a new large green duffle bag and what looked to be a pile of wrapped sandwiches. She asked, "Does it matter which one I eat?"

He said nothing as he passed her a water bottle. Then he handed a sandwich bundle to her and took the other four for himself. As she slowly ate the unappetizingly cold and stale sandwich, Thea watched him quickly finish all of his own, take a few sips of water, and then open the duffle bag. When she finished the food, Thea looked over to the corner where the blanket and her bags were. Keeping her eye cautiously on him, she settled onto the floor and asked, "Where are we going next?"

Of course, he did not answer, so she wrapped herself up inside the blanket and used her handbag as a pillow once more. She could see he was taking apart some sort of long gun, but she didn't really want to know more. Perhaps he truly wasn't going to kill her, but that didn't mean he would be equally restrained with others. Thea eventually drifted into a dreamless sleep, which was disturbed only when the man awoke her by tapping her with one of her crutches. She sat up and tried to see through the pitch black, as she whispered, "Are we leaving?"

"Yes. Come."

"But…"

"I will carry this. You put your pocketbook inside and take that one."

Her brother's rucksack was dropped next to her and Thea quickly shoved her handbag in it, wondering who said pocketbook these days. That was the word her Canadian grandmother had used. Perhaps he was not a native speaker, despite sounding quite American. Thea struggled for a moment to be able to get up from the floor, finally rolling over onto all fours and working her way up from there. Her eyes had adjusted slightly to the dark, but she still had very little vision. "May I at least get my medicine from the black rucksack if we aren't taking it? I actually need several pills now."

To her surprise, he paused and asked, "Which ones?"

"They are in the large white box on the top of the black bag. I need the blue pill, a square white one, and the small yellow one."

Thea was astonished to see him dig into the green duffle bag and drag out the white box. Apparently, he had transferred it over, which seemed rather thoughtful for a kidnapper. He handed it to her and waited as she found what she needed. When she passed it back to him, he pushed it back into the bag.

"I can't dry swallow them."

"Water is in that bag."

She fumbled with her brother's rucksack, having previously placed her large handbag overtop everything, so she now needed to dig about. After her medicine was taken, the man said forcefully, "Now come."
Thea tried to slip on the enormous rucksack, which was much too heavy for her, and then settled her hands into her crutches. She didn't think she could put much weight on her hand yet, but she didn't dare admit that. Whatever bizarre impulse had led him to bring her along, he might simply decide she was no longer worth the effort and it didn't look like he would just release her. They made their way towards a back door, which led into a small shed space. As they exited, Thea asked, "Are we driving far?"

"That truck was stolen so we are walking. Hurry."

Stunned that he thought that walking anywhere with her was a solid plan, Thea felt her stomach drop. The Winter Soldier didn't seem to have much patience and she was about to push what little he did have to the limit. She found a strange loping stride/hop that worked with the one crutch she could use that didn't make the rucksack bang into her back too painfully. This worked for nearly 15 minutes. Then she tried shifting to another stride and then a third one before she finally had to accept that she was going to have to slow down. The man looked back at her when she started limping more noticeably and then he stopped.

Thea shrunk away from him, as she muttered, "Sorry."

He seemed to be considering something, which caused her stomach to start doing flips. Was he going to simply leave her? Or was he just going to snap her neck? Therefore, when he wrenched her crutch from her injured arm and folded it before unzipping his large duffel and shoving it in, Thea stumbled a few steps away from him and asked fearfully, "What are you doing?"

The man then took her other crutch and did the same thing, transferred his duffle to his right side, and snatched her up to toss her over his left shoulder. Next, he began walking rapidly down the street and turned into the alley. They continued this way for 30 minutes. As supremely uncomfortable as it was for her, Thea considered that it must be agony for him. She was only 5 feet and just over 90 pounds, but she had the rucksack on and he was also carrying his enormous duffle. Thea wondered how he could even stand up let alone walk so quickly when he was already injured. Finally, he set her down and pulled a knife out of a pocket in his tactical vest and handed it to her. "Sit. Do not move."

Thea dropped onto the steps of the decrepit old building and rubbed her stomach, which felt raw and nauseous from being carried over the man’s shoulder for so long. She was making things at least twice as difficult for him. Why was he so determined to take her with him? Ransom didn't make much sense, despite her family's wealth, since he had tried to make it look like she was already dead. He was also clearly hiding from someone far more dangerous than just the police.

About fifteen minutes later, she heard his voice behind her demand, "Come."

She turned and saw the man holding out his hand to her, which she took uneasily. When he pulled her up with a sharp tug, she winced but didn't speak. Dutifully, she shuffled slowly, following him inside what appeared to be an old, unoccupied hotel. They walked down a foul-smelling old hallway towards the very back of the building. He opened a door through which he pushed her none too gently. She realised that they were in an old ballroom of sorts. The floor was littered with traces of former squatters and vagrants, but it smelled less horrible than the front of the hotel had done.

Unable to disguise her distaste, Thea asked with horror, "Are we staying here?"

The man did not reply but gestured to a scarred, grotty old wooden dining table on which he had placed their belongings.
"What do you want me to do?"

"Sleep on that. Rats are less likely to climb it."

Thea shrieked. "Rats? No, I cannot handle rats. Please." Through the darkness she could just see his angry expression, but Thea had reached a point of no return. "I just cannot bear rats. I can't. I've followed you and done whatever you wanted. However, I can't bear rats. Please don't make me."

The man growled, "This is where we are staying. Sit down and be quiet."

Thea shook her head. "Why won't you just let me phone my brother? The HYDRA people won't find me here, will they? I don't even know where we are. Or I could just go to the police and tell them I'm lost. I should be safe then. I won't tell them anything about you."

"HYDRA will find you anywhere."

Exasperated and overwrought, Thea demanded, "But who are they?"

"Give me your hand."

Thea took a deep breath and held out her hand. The man pulled a small roll of tape from one pocket and began wrapping her hand. When he was finished, she softly said, "Thank you."

"Helping me put you in danger. HYDRA will not stop at anything to recapture me."

"Why? I thought you worked for them."

He grunted and replied roughly, "I did. I am not returning."

"But you can't take me along with you forever, Winter Soldier. I can't run or even walk without my sticks during a flare-up, I can't carry much, and I can't fight at all. I will make you so much slower."

He shrugged and stated, "You will be safe with me. If I let you go, then they will destroy you."

"Why do you even care? I thought you were one of those HYDRA people that have no mercy."

"Not now."

Thea sat very still, shivering in her thin coat. She had flipped up the fur collar, but the body of the coat was woefully insufficient for a March night. "Then who are you now?"

There was silence as he stalked all about the room, double checking the doors and the grungy windows. Finally, as the man approached her from behind, he said in an odd, halting voice, "James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky. I don't really remember, but the museum said that was my name."

"Is that what you want me to call you?"

His tone was uneasy as he responded, "I have not had a name. I didn't need one."

"Everyone should have a name. Should I call you James or Bucky or would you rather I just said Winter Soldier?"

He sounded almost confused as he said, "I was the Winter Soldier, but I am not now. I think I am Bucky."
"Did something happen to your memory? Do you not actually remember who you are?"

He did not answer but turned towards the table where he dug into the large duffel and pulled out the blanket. "I removed the people who were here. Some might return, so I will stay awake."

"But you need to sleep, too."

He gestured with his head towards the blanket on the table. "We leave in four hours."

Thea wiggled herself up onto the table and asked, "You won't let any rats climb on me, will you?"

He grunted and pulled out a second gun from his vest. "Sleep."
This time the man—Bucky—awoke her with one hand on her shoulder and the other on her mouth. He was sitting very close to her with a look of intense concentration. Once her initial feeling of terror calmed, she heard the sounds of several people talking nearby. All at once, he pulled her up and placed her firmly on his lap facing away from the door. She felt his gun pressing into her stomach where he was concealing it. Just as the voices approached the door, he gripped her head with his left hand and tightly pressed it down onto his shoulder as if they were cuddling.

"Hey, Jorge, lookit. Seems like someone is making themselves at home here."

"I told you, Quint, I wasn't lyin'. This is the freak who chased us out."

Thea could hear one of the men walk closer as his voice neared them. She buried her face in the man's shoulder and tried unsuccessfully to control her shaking.

"You let yourself get chased off by some tweaker and his ho? F***, you are useless."

"Quint, man, that don't look like no tweaker to me and that girl ain't no ho. Maybe we better…"

Suddenly, Bucky whipped out his gun and said in a menacing snarl, "Leave now and I will not shoot."

"Who the f*** do you think we are, p****s? We ain't afraid of some tweaker with a gun. Get the f*** off our turf or I will show you how we deal with dumb f***s like you."

A third voice that Thea had not yet heard laughed nastily. She realised that he was standing right next to her as he reached out and touched her thigh as he said, "We might just take turns with your girl here and make you watch us tap that. How's that, f***er? Pretty legs like that, bet she…"

Three shots rang out followed by the sound of three dull thuds. Thea screamed in terror, then grabbed onto Bucky's neck, and began to sob into his shoulder. "Are they dead? Heavens and saints preserve us! Are they all dead?"

Instead of chivvying her up as she expected, Bucky allowed her to hang onto him for a few minutes and then said seriously, "Time to go. Come."

"But…they were going to shoot us. That man said he was going to…"

His voice was thick with anger and almost gravelly as he replied, "Which is why they are dead. Gunshots draw attention, so we have only minutes." He picked her up from his lap and set her down on the floor, still facing away from the bodies. He handed her the rucksack and then grabbed the duffel and the blanket. "I can move more quickly with you on my back. Hurry."

Once he pulled her up, she wriggled up onto the table so she was higher, but she was still short enough that he needed to help her. As soon as she had wrapped herself around him, he darted towards the side door and marched at a half-run down the corridor. As soon as they were outside, he began running impressively fast down the next alley and out onto a street that wound behind some old warehouses. They continued twisting around and down back alleys and deserted streets for several miles. Finally, he stopped running and began walking at a brisk march. When they approached an old church, Bucky stopped and seemed to be investigating something. Then he hurried along, dropped over the half wall and ran down the narrow pathway. When they entered the cemetery, his pace slowed again, and he said, "You can get off now."
Thea slid her legs down and then released her hands, so she was standing behind him. She limped over to him slowly as Bucky bent down and fiddled with the lock on the mausoleum. He then swung the door open and pulled her in quickly. As soon as he shut the door behind them, Thea sank to the ground and began crying again.

"We can stay here for a while."

She whispered with horror, "But-but they were dead!"

"Did you expect me to let them harm you?"

Thea looked up with a puzzled, overwrought expression. "No, I suppose not, but I wish they didn't have to die."

"People die, Thea." Bucky moved past her and looked around them. He dropped the duffel off his shoulders and then the rucksack. Pausing only to shake his shoulders, he looked back at her and said, "Come. You still need to sleep."

Thea shook her head. "I've never seen a dead person before."

He walked back, picked her up roughly, and carried her over to the long marble slab under the window. He sat her down on it and then turned to the duffel to pull out the blanket. He wrapped it around her and then sat down next to her. After almost ten minutes of silence, he finally said gruffly, "If you really want me to, then I will take you to your brother tomorrow."

"I thought you said that HYDRA would find me."

Bucky sighed. "They will."

"And they will torture me."

"Yes."

"And I won't see you again?"

"No, you won't."

Thea asked, "You would really let me go?"

"You aren't actually my prisoner. I told you, I have been trying to protect you."

"Why?"

He frowned as if uncertain. "There is no kindness in HYDRA—only pain and torture. There was never a choice. You were kind. I made a choice."

"If everything you are saying is true, then you will get yourself killed protecting me. There really isn't any way you can escape from these HYDRA bastards for long if you are carrying me on your back."

"I deserve it. You do not. However, I won't force you to stay with me. You have the choice."

Quite stunned that she was being given a choice and that he seriously seemed to believe that some horrible, evil organisation would kill her if they found her, Thea asked, "Where would we go?"

"Do you want to stay, Thea?"
She realised suddenly that he had used her name twice now and that his conversation had shifted slowly over the last three days from terse, rough commands to something slightly closer to human. Somehow, he now seemed rather different from the man who forced himself into her apartment. "I don't know what I ought to do if there will be people wanting to harm me. You don't owe me, ok?"

Bucky’s reply was matter-of-fact. "Yes, I do."

"You cannot keep carrying me everywhere when my body gives out. I will be a heavy burden for a man on the run from some scary killer organisation."

He looked down at her for a moment and then shook his hair out of his eyes. His voice was low and fierce as he replied, "You don’t really understand this yet, but I destroyed your life when I forced you to help me. You won’t be safe there again. I can handle it. You cannot."

"No, I don't want to live like that. I would rather go back to my brother than hide forever, please."

Thea saw him narrow his eyes as he regarded her silently. Finally, Bucky got up and said, "Lay down and get some sleep. I will wake you when it is time to move."

"Won't you rest, too? Surely no one is going to come looking for us in a nasty, old crypt."

"It is unlikely, but possible."

"Have you even slept at all?"

"I can go longer than you can. I will sleep tomorrow night once you are back with your brother."

Several minutes later, Thea whispered, "Thank you for saving me from those men."

Bucky looked surprised, but he didn't reply.

She laid down on the slab and peered up at him. Something had changed. He looked…empty. His eyes appeared dead and his expression was stony. She noticed his hands had formed fists and his shoulders were strangely stiff. She asked sleepily, "Aren't you cold?"

"No."

"I'm freezing. You must be."

He breathed in and out several times, as if attempting to remain grounded. "You have another sweater in my bag."

"You brought my clothing, too? I thought it was all back at home."

She could see that he had shoved both hands in his hair, as he explained, "The stuff you’d packed is all there under the guns. If you want the sweater, I will get it for you."

"Please? Thank you, Bucky."

Starting slightly as she used his name, he then crouched down and dug into the bag for a moment until he pulled out a thin, pink cotton jumper. He brought it to her and waited for her to slip it over her head and then as she put her suit jacket and coat back on.

"Thank you. I always get cold easily."

Bucky shrugged, as if to say that he was never cold. "See if you can sleep now."
Thea laid back down with the blanket cocooned around her and regarded him seriously. She had never really looked at him as a person before. Now...she realised that he was clearly not just a cold assassin. No man like that would have carried her around for days to hide her from HYDRA. Who was he? "Are you an American?"

"Apparently. I spent a lot of time in Russia. My arm has a Soviet star. I think in Russian more than English. I was told that I am Russian. However, the museum said I was from Brooklyn."

"Do you remember your childhood?"
He did not reply immediately. "No."

"Do you even know how old you are?"
It was even longer before he finally said, "I was born in 1917."

Thea sat up, as she exclaimed, "What? This is 2014. That is impossible!"

"Not to HYDRA. They did experiments, although I don't remember them."

"Do you mean you are like Captain America or something like that?"

He seemed quite annoyed at this. "Perhaps."

"Do you not age?"
Anger raced back into his speech as he nearly spat out, "Cryosleep storage. I was frozen for years until each time they needed to use me."

"They put you in storage? Bucky, that is horrific. They...they used you like an object. Are they responsible for you not remembering things?"

Somewhat more calmly, he explained, "My job is to complete my assignments. I'm their asset. Anything not useful is suppressed if it becomes a distraction."

"So, they did it more than once? How could you even survive that?"

He stood in the middle of the mausoleum floor, head hanging down and hands behind his neck, and seemed to be thinking for quite some time. Finally, Bucky replied slowly, "I don't know how many times. I get flashes and parts sometimes. I always remember enough to know I don't want to be wiped again, but it still happens eventually. When they don't need me anymore, then I am put back in cryosleep."

Pushing herself up with the wall, Thea got up and limped over to him. She said sympathetically, "No one should be treated like that."

"I am an assassin. I don't have rights, nor should I."

She shook her head. "You are a person, so yes, you do. I think you should."

"You might feel different if I had killed someone you know. All I know how to do is kill and I do it very well."

"Do you like it?"

Bucky made a noise of disgust. "No, but it doesn't matter. They sent me to kill, so I killed."
"You didn't kill me."

"No, but I was not on a mission then."

She asked gently, "Sit with me?"

Bucky narrowed his eyes at her and asked, "What do you want?"

"I want you to sit with me."

"Why?"

"That's what people do, you know? They sit down with people. They have conversations. It's just this weird thing that people do. You'll get used to it if you stay away from evil organisations."

Bucky regarded her suspiciously but slumped down next to her. "Where does your brother live?"

"Mm, McClean Gardens. Are you really going to take me there and then just go?"

He shrugged again and said flatly, "If that is what you want, yes."

"Then what shall you do?"

"I am planning to leave the country."

"Is that real or what you want me to tell them?"

"Real. You tell them what you want." Bucky got back up and stalked away towards the door where he turned and propped himself.

"I really don't want to never see you again though."

He harshly demanded, "Why?"

Thea blinked across the dark space and tried to see his face, but she could only see the outline of his shaggy hair. "Because although you’ve mostly been horrid, you also saved me, so you matter to me now."

"I shouldn't. I'm just a HYDRA assassin. I am not worth your thoughts. I will get you to your brother safely."

Thea hugged her arms to herself and sighed. "I can't help that you matter to me now. You just do and that's my decision, not yours. Do you have any friends?"

"No. Well, I did. I cannot go to him."

She clapped her hands together and said, "Oh. Oh, I’m so stupid. I remember now. The Howling Commandos. You're that chap they said died in the war!"

"Yes."

"But you didn't. They captured you then?"

He grunted. "They must have."

"Then you are Captain America's best friend."
"I do not remember that. I have a few flashes about being Steve Rogers' friend. I remember some of the war."

Thea said seriously, "But everyone says that Captain America is a good person. He would probably want to help you. Does he know you are alive?"

"Yes. I tried to kill him as the Winter Soldier."

"Ah. Right. That rather complicates things." Thea shivered inside the blanket that was wrapped around her. "What if I tried to contact him to see if he would want to help you?"

"No. Anyone who helps me would be in danger."

She sighed. "Like me."

"Yes."

Wearily, even though she had come to realise the answer already, she asked, "I suppose that I'm in danger no matter what I do, aren't I? And my family would be at risk by extension?"

Angrily, Bucky said, "I should not have come into your apartment. I had never considered the consequences before. I don't know why you were different."

"Perhaps because I'm gimpy."

Confused, he asked, "Gimpy?"

"Disabled. I assumed that was why you decided to trust me. What was I going to do? Beat you with my crutches?"

Bucky grunted angrily. "That was not why. I have told you why."

"Oh, you mean because I was kind? All I did was obey your orders."

Bucky crossed the floor and stood over her. "No. You treated me like a person. I have done exactly what I did with you before: break into a house and force the occupants to help me. No one has ever asked what I wanted to eat, nearly pleaded with me to take a shower so I wouldn't get infected, worried about hurting me as they clean my wounds, or apologised for not having clothes that fit me."

"That is just being a decent person. I am not unusual."

Suddenly Bucky grabbed her upper arms and snarled, "You are ridiculous. I am a vicious assassin who has killed hundreds. I do not matter. Stop being so foolish, or you will get yourself killed. Your brothers should be beaten for letting a girl like you live alone where she can be easily kidnapped like this."

Thea began to cry softly and refused to look up at him. "Just because I'm gimpy doesn't mean I cannot do things for myself. My brothers didn't want me to live alone. It was my choice."

"Men like me take advantage of girls like you. You need protection. Living alone is asking for danger."

"I thought you were the one who protected me from the men who wanted to take advantage of me. Isn't that why there are three bodies lying in that horrible old building now?"
He was shaking with fury as he stated firmly, "Do not push me. I will only hurt you. A girl like you deserves different."

"That is the third time you've called me that. I'm sorry if my disease makes you uncomfortable. I didn't ask to have it. Rheumatoid arthritis is nasty, but I cannot change it."

He gripped her upper arms and insisted, "I'm not talking about your disease. I am talking about you."

"Me? The girl with the crutches. That's me."

Pushing away as if burnt, Bucky snarled, "You know exactly how beautiful you are. Don't pretend that I would not notice. If a man who has had his brain fried for decades by HYDRA notices you, then every other man does, too. You should not live alone."

"Oh."

"Did you think I was so inhuman that I couldn't care about that?"

Thea honestly said, "I didn't think about it. I was too busy being scared of what was going to happen to me to wonder if you thought I was pretty."

With a condescending huff, Bucky growled, "Pretty is a word for children. You have extraordinary beauty, which is a weapon that you should know how to use. Instead, you are like a baby—unaware of the damage you cause."

She whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be smart."

She quietly replied, "I don't know what you want me to do. I'm just not like that."

"I know. That is why you need to live with someone who will be sure you are safe. You don't watch out for yourself, Thea."

She looked away from him and said, "Okay."

"Good. Now get your rest. I will stand watch until it is time to take you to McClean Gardens."

"Now who is being foolish, Bucky? You must be exhausted."

His voice was so tight that he sounded like he was in pain, "I warned you not to push me."

"Why? Are you going to snap my neck now because I asked you to be a person and not a machine?"

He turned around and stalked back to lean against the door, "I will never harm you."

"But you are going to let me go back to my brother even though you are certain that HYDRA people will take me?"

His voice devoid of all emotion, Bucky stated, "I won't force you to stay with me. No girl deserves that, especially not you." He began to pace the length of the small mausoleum.

Thea suddenly gasped. "Oh no, you aren't leaving the country, are you? You're planning to hang about to protect me after you leave me there." His silence confirmed her suspicion as he stopped
pacing near where she was sitting, so Thea reached up and put her hand on his arm.

"Do not touch me. Do not get close to me."

Neither of them spoke for a while. Eventually, Bucky sat down on the stone slab near enough to her that she could almost see his face. He didn't move for some time. Thea sat shivering in her blanket, as she tried to wrap her mind around what she thought had just happened. She had never considered that reason when she had endlessly questioned why he had brought her along. Bucky was pretty much the definition of unstable and dangerous. Anything could happen. Could he turn back into the Winter Soldier again? Would he always be rough and controlling? Could anyone ever find a way to live a healthy life after what he had been through? Poor man.

Finally, she moved closer to him, so she could see his face and said, "I'm sorry that I upset you."

He muttered, "It does not matter."

"Yes, it does. I don't know what to say after all that." Thea turned her face up towards his and said gently, "I didn't understand you felt that way."

Bucky shifted away from her slightly and said tautly, "It is irrelevant. I will take you to your brother and do my best to keep HYDRA away. Perhaps I will be successful."

"What is the safest option? I am sure that you have thought it all out. You have a plan that you wanted to implement before I said I wanted to go to my brother." Thea huddled with her arms round her knees, as she waited to hear what he said.

Bucky leant back into the wall behind the slab. "The safest plan would be to remove you from the country. I have thought through several options, so if one plan is thwarted then I could be prepared to take you somewhere else quickly. However, you would not be able to see your family again and I am not a very safe person to be around long term. I am still a trained killer."

"Are you going to keep killing?"

He responded forcefully, "Only in defence. I will never return to that kind of work again."

"Are you dangerous to me?"

Bucky did not respond immediately. Eventually, he said sadly, "I don't know. I won't knowingly harm you."

"I see." Thea took a deep breath and made a decision. Her stomach churning and head spinning as she tried to accept what she was going to do, she laid her head very lightly on his shoulder and asked, "How long do I have to sleep now?"

He did not reply for a moment. She could feel his body was tensed as if he was expecting an attack, but finally he replied gruffly, "Four hours at most. Or else we would have to stay in here the whole day."

Allowing herself to lean into him a bit, Thea murmured, "I could almost sleep for a whole day."

"When does your brother leave for work?"

"Do you want me to go there?"

"No."
"Then it doesn't matter when he leaves." Thea shivered as a gust of wind blew against the outside of the little building.

His arm slipped around her and he pulled her closer. "Are you coming with me?"

This time, Thea did not reply, as she tried to get used to the feeling of his arm possessively holding her. She quite definitely was not comfortable. She could hear her brain shouting at her that she was crazy and that it couldn't truly be possible that her life was sufficiently in danger for her to go with this man she barely knew. But the lives of her family might truly be at risk, which she couldn’t bear. As she was thinking this, Bucky’s head bent over her and he asked in a low, rumbling voice, "Thea, are you coming with me?"

She stared up at him, trying not to panic, and whispered, "Yes." She felt him relax all at once and his other hand tug her blanket more securely around her shoulders. Otherwise, he did not move even when she fell asleep.
When she awoke, it took a few moments to figure out where she was. Thea could feel Bucky’s arm was still tightly wrapped around her, but she was embarrassed to look up and see if he was watching her. All the things that they had discussed the night before had been more intense than she had ever experienced with a man. She had never had more than a few dates here and there. Yet even if she had, Thea did not think she would have been better prepared for her current situation.

Quite frankly, discovering that a dangerous assassin—who she had only known for three days—believed himself to be in love with her and keeping her safe from some shadowy villainous association was so far beyond the pale that it didn’t feel real. So, either she had misunderstood—although the tight grip his arm had seemingly held her in all night made that seem unlikely—or it was actually true? Honestly, she thought that was even scarier than being kidnapped had been. What was the best-case scenario? Was this strange, frightening man actually capable of love or kindness? Seemed a bit doubtful, really. He might be one of those men who expected a woman to wait on him hand and food and then beat her if she didn’t do it perfectly. That seemed probable. He could be the kind of man who wouldn't care about her boundaries. Also, likely. She had made a genuinely horrible choice, hadn't she? And now she was going to sit up and see him looking at her and she was going freak out and cry. Then he'd get angry and she'd cry more. Then she'd be embarrassed and scared and it would get ugly from there.

"I know that you are awake."

Thea sighed. "Do we need to leave?"

"Not now. Better sit up." He removed his arm from around her and gently helped her shift, so she was sitting next to him.

"May we eat?"

Bucky ran his hand through his hair as he regarded her for a moment and then pulled over the large duffel. He dug around for a moment and then pulled out a packet of pop-tarts and handed them to her. He didn't pull out anything for himself, but just leant back against the stone wall to watch her.

Thea's embarrassment grew as she fumbled to open the package, so he reached over and ripped it for her. She didn't look up, but said quietly, "Thank you."

"I know that you don't have any feelings for me. You don't have to fear that I'm expecting anything of you."

She looked up at him with puzzled eyes and replied, "What exactly do you want?"

"Your safety and my freedom. We will leave tonight, but I will have to go out for a while today. You will need to stay here alone."

She sighed resignedly. "Okay."

"Do you know how to use a knife for defence?"

"No. Oh, I still have that one you gave me. It is in my handbag."

"I already took it back. Don't you need your medicine?"
"Oh yes, I forgot!" She watched as he pulled out the white box and opened it. She was surprised that he remembered which pills she needed, so she smiled slightly and said, "Thank you."

He then handed her the bottle of water and asked, "How many days of medicine do you have there?"

"Erm, it was a month's worth when I packed it. How will we get my meds when we are hiding from these HYDRA people?"

"Do not worry about it. I only needed to know how long I have to make a plan."

"I have other meds, too, but those two are the critical ones. I am supposed to have my injection of methotrexate monthly."

"How many weeks away now?"

"Three."

"Can you do it yourself?"

"Yes."

"Then it won't be a problem. Is that all?"

"I suppose so. I'm meant to be monitored and all that, but I can do without it if I must. Will I ever be able to live normally somewhere again?"

"I don't know. Not for a while."

"I very much feel as if I'm making a horrible mistake. Am I?"

He looked almost amused for a second, but his serious expression returned quickly. "Are you asking if I am going to be cruel to you?"

She replied genuinely, "Well, I wasn't, but I am now. Are you?"

"No, but that is not the same thing as being whatever it is you would want. Whatever I was before HYDRA got me, I'm definitely not a hero now."

"Well last night when we were talking, it seemed like I had a choice between two things." Thea frowned as she gestured accordingly, "One: to be with you or Two: go home and risk HYDRA killing me and very possibly my family."

Bucky breathed out long and hard, then he shoved his hands tightly into his hair. "You don't have to be in a relationship with me if you come along with me. That was never what I meant. I'm not a good person, but I am not like that." He got up and stood in front of her. "I am offering to protect you no matter what I mean to you. However, I suggest you think about what you want. If you ever did start something with me and decide I'm too broken to handle, which I probably am, then you will still be stuck there with me protecting you."

"But…I'm not like most women. I'm one of those weird, religious girls, you know."

He made a dismissive sound and replied, "I saw your apartment. I know that."

"I don't feel comfortable with all the same things most other women my age do."
"Thea, that is more than obvious to me."

"Is it?"

He laughed slightly. "Yes."

"Well it isn't going to change. I am still…"

He took her hand in his and said seriously, "Quiet. I understand."

"You are very unusual."

He laughed again, which made Thea hold her breath as she noticed how much it changed his face. "I hope so. The world does not need multiple 97-year-old ex-HYDRA assassins with brain trauma."

Feeling as if she ought to smile at his joke, but not really finding his statement funny as it was very, very true, Thea agreed firmly, "I suppose not."

"This won't be a fun journey. It will be long and uncomfortable."

"Really?"

"Yes, very. We will probably take a ship."

She shivered. "Oh. I get horrible motion sickness."

"The other option is a cargo plane."

Thea tried to read Bucky's expression as she asked seriously, "Why is that not better?"

"Because we would be in with the cargo."

Thea sighed with relief. "Please, may we do that option? Anything but a boat."

Bucky considered her for a moment. "It will be very cold and extremely loud."

"But it would be over faster. And not a boat."

"It isn't fast, but yes, it is a shorter trip than the ship." Bucky stared down at her for quite some time, clearly considering multiple variables. "Very well. I will work on it today."

Blatantly relieved, Thea asked curiously, "Are we going to leave soon?"

He seemed to be vacillating between two polar, yet strong emotions as he watched her. However, he finally replied, "Yes. I will get some more supplies today."

"Do I really have all my clothing in there? May I change?"

"Yes. You are also going to have to change your name."

Thea sank crestfallen against the wall behind the slab. "I guess so. I hadn't thought about it."

"Then think about it. Make it something you won't forget. I need to know before I leave."

"Well what will your name be? Should mine match it?"

"I will be Russian again. It is easiest. Yakov."
She clearly did not approve of his choice, as she asked, "I don't have to be Russian, do I? Can't I just be English?"

"Only if you can still speak with a correct regional accent for whatever legend we create. No one can pick apart an accent faster than a Brit."

"Well I was born in Coventry, but I have lived in London, Cambridge, or Madrid for most of my life until I moved here to be with my brother Richard, who is attached to the embassy."

"London is sufficiently generic, so that is acceptable. Your name?"

"I don't know. How do I choose one? I cannot imagine answering to another name."

"Then think of it as a nickname." Bucky saw her resistance and asked with annoyance, "Do you want me to pick it?"

Relieved, Thea nodded. "Yes, please."

"Ysobel spelled with a Y, which would give you and me the same initials. Never know when that could be useful." He suddenly smiled and looked at her intently, so she began to flush. "I can call you Bella, which is very appropriate. I will wait while you change and then go." He watched her for a brief moment, apparently enjoying her embarrassment, and then turned his back towards her.

Thea asked, "Promise you won't turn around?"

Bucky's voice snarled a furious response, "I am not a masher, Bella."

As she grabbed a pair of trousers and some undergarments from the bag, Thea asked, "What is a masher?"

"Figure it out. Dress warmly."

She tried as much as possible to get dressed without exposing herself, which made it take longer. When she was finally finished, she said, "I'm done, Bucky."

"Yakov. I am Yakov. Don't forget again."

Her cheeks turned apple red and she blinked back the ready tears that his censure brought. "Sorry. I didn't know we had to use the names with each other."

"Always. Do not forget. During the day when I am gone, you will need to think up your legend—the details of your life story. You must to be prepared when you are asked a question. I will teach you the shared details of our history later."

"Ok."

"You cannot leave this structure. Not for anything. I am going to show you how to use a knife. When you hear someone outside, you must be ready to attack. If it is me, you won't be able to hurt me, so don't be afraid to attack even if you are unsure who it is."

"What if it is the people who own this building or a church sexton?"

"The only people that would come here today are me or someone that wants to harm you. Attack first and then run."

"What if I have to run? How will you find me?"
"Easily. Here is your knife. How would you hold it?"

Thea tried to hold it, but he immediately disarmed her.

"Try again."

She gripped it firmly, but he disarmed her again.

"Try again."

She failed three more times before she asked tearfully, "Well how do I do it? I don't know."

"You don't attack me from the front."

"Oh. But they will be coming in through the door and facing me."

He asked in a leading way, "Where do you stand if you hear them at the door then?"

"Over there?"

"Exactly. So how do you attack me when you are at the side?"

"Jab you like this?"

He snorted with amusement. "No, I'll break your arm. Try again."

"I don't know. What do I do, throw it?"

"No, you let me get close to you like this. Then you let the knife drop into your hand like...like that."

Thea could smell the same mixture of sweat and muskiness that she had awakened to as he stood so close. She felt so confused and overwhelmed that she stepped back.

"Stand still. You want to be close to the attacker and you don't want them to know you have a knife. When you have let it drop into your hand, then you make a short jab forwards. He will be in too much pain to react as you get out."

"Do I stab the stomach?"

"No. Castration is much more effective though not lethal."

She squealed with shock. "I can't do that!"

"It is most likely your assailant would be male. This will be the least expected and easiest manoeuvre to execute for a girl of your inexperience with your disability. Now show me how you drop the knife down without them knowing what you are doing."

Thea attempted to do it, but she was so clumsy that she dropped the knife. Bucky picked it up and handed it back. "Again." They practiced it 10 more times until Thea could do it without dropping it or falling over.

"That is good enough. If you hesitate, then you are giving them the opening they need to kill you. This move won't be enough for them to die, but it will give you time to break free. Then you should run for somewhere with people."
"Can't I just come with you?"

"No. You cannot be a part of what I am doing today."

She nodded. "Okay."

Bucky stepped back and picked up the dark jacket he had been wearing the day before. "I will return as soon as I can, but it might be quite a while."

"They might catch you."

"If anyone tries to capture me, then I will kill them. I am not going back to HYDRA and I will not fail to return." Bucky then stepped very close to her again. He looked down into her nervous, teary blue eyes and said, "Will you do what I have told you?"

"Yes."

He searched her face to see what she was thinking. "You are certain that this is what you want to do?"

"No, but I think it is the best choice."

"Once we leave, then you cannot change your mind. Spend the day thinking about it."

"I don't think that I will change my mind. I cannot risk my family's safety. I'm just scared. I feel like I am making a monumentally stupid decision and I'm not completely sure why I'm doing it."

Bucky's lips pressed together tightly, as he watched her for a minute. Then he answered seriously, "Spend the day thinking. My intentions will not have changed." He turned and moved to the door, which he swung open and shut behind himself rapidly.

Thea dropped back down on the marble slab and began to cry so desperately that she didn't hear when he came back in. She sat there bawling miserably until she felt his presence and looked up with a shocked yelp.

"I could hear you as far over as the church."

"I'm sorry." She sniffled, but she didn't keep the tears from continuing to run down her cheeks.

Bucky put his hand under her chin and lifted it a little too roughly, so he could see her reaction as he said, "I will keep you safe, Bella."

"Maybe physically, but that is not everything."

His eyes looked pained, but his voice was angry as he said, "I cannot make you feel one way or the other. All I can do is protect you."

"I know and thank you for keeping me safe. However, I'm just not very brave, so I'm dead scared. You've chosen a pretty poor lot with me."

Bucky placed his metal arm around her very firmly and growled, "Do not say that again."

"It is true."

He bent his head down closer and answered in a low whisper, "I meant what I said last night."
"Why?"

"That should be obvious to you."

She refused to look at him and pulled back as far as his firm grip would allow. She murmured, "Well, it isn't."

"Then you will have plenty of time to think about it today. I do not want to hear you break down again when I leave. Are you going to be able to stay in control?"

"Yes."

"Good." He dropped his arm and said, "I will be back as soon as I can."

By the time that it begun to get dark outside, Thea considered that she had never really properly known boredom before that day. Her computer had run out of power. He had made her phone useless. Therefore, she had nothing to do but sit/lay/pace about a small, dusty mausoleum for the whole day. She had dug through the large duffel bag to find some food and found a shocking array of weaponry inside, in addition to all the clothing that he had removed from her suitcase at home. Thea also found that he had stuffed an assortment of currencies and pawnable items in various pockets. She didn't want to know where Bucky had got any of it. There were also several books in Russian and a small wooden box with a strange symbol on the top. The rucksack also had money and two weapons, as well as the water bottles and a notebook partially filled with sketches and diagrams with all the text written in another language that she assumed was Russian. Most surprising to her was when she dug through her own handbag and found a gun, a knife, a roll of Canadian dollars, a number of items from her own jewellery box, and an envelope with her papers. Clearly, he had scoured her apartment thoroughly when she had been sleeping.

Thea had also risked danger and his censure by slipping outside in the middle of the afternoon. She had no idea how dangerous assassins handled things like bodily functions, but she knew that she needed to go. Three days previous she would never have considered using a bit of a shrubbery as her personal loo, but her life had taken a pretty dramatic turn since then. Finally, she had spent the last hour really and truly considering Bucky. She wondered if he would be shocked to know that she found him incredibly good looking. Perhaps he would be, but she thought he rather knew he was handsome. He probably had used that to his advantage during his missions or whatever he called them. In fact, he was so attractive to her that she feared that she would make her decision based on that and not logical thinking. Handsomeness was not a character trait, so she needed to look beyond that to more important considerations. Thea didn't think that Bucky would ever be able to have a normal type of relationship, so she wasn't sure what that meant for her. Or what if he was lying to her? He might actually be leading her to HYDRA. He might be tricking her in some way. What if she was actually a mission?

Not that there was any reason for someone to hire an assassin of Bucky's calibre to capture her. An untrained school boy could probably easily subdue her and do whatever the hypothetical client wanted. Nor was there any good reason for anyone to want to harm her. It seemed unlikely in the extreme that Bucky was playing a game with her or lying about everything. Except, it still seemed so highly improbable that he could have suddenly developed feelings for her in a space of three days, so...what was really true?

Maybe he just was attracted to a pretty girl who was kind and he was confusing that for more. When was the last time anyone had been decent to him? When had he last had a chance to even talk to a girl? He might not have any true reference point for normal decency or even love. She would need to watch Bucky and be sure. He would have to show her something real before she could trust it. She would have to hold him at arm's length until he proved himself. Once she gave in, she was
absolutely sure that she was going to fall headlong into terrifyingly deep love for the first time in her life with a very dangerous, extremely unstable man. Golly, she was ridiculous! Why was it so impossible to stop thinking of how he had looked at her as he insisted that he had truly meant everything he had said the night before? Suddenly, her already hijacked life was very seriously going against plan.

When she heard the sound of someone outside, Thea realised that she had to get across the floor quickly and that her crutches were out of reach. A wave of terror rushed over her, yet she knew she had to push past her fear and simply do it. She clenched her teeth and pushed herself up despite the searing pain in her hip as she placed pressure on it. She clutched the knife he had shown her and hobbled painfully over to the wall beside the door. The pain was nearly enough for her to cry, but she held her breath so she would not be heard. As soon as the door opened, she pushed herself close to the person and looked up before she jabbed.

His hand closed around hers and his eyes flashed, as Bucky quietly said, "Good girl. That was just what I showed you." Thea started to collapse, but he caught her quickly and whispered, "It is me. You are safe."

However, Thea could not keep from crying as she said dumbly, "It's you. Not them." Bucky lifted her up and carried her over to the marble slab and then set her down gently. She tucked her head into his chest and cried quietly for several minutes before she whispered through shallow breaths, "So afraid. Left my crutches there but heard someone outside. Couldn't reach them quickly so had to get up and walk without them. Really hurts."

Bucky pulled her closer briefly and then said, "Then I am even more impressed. You listened to what I said. Do you have something you can take to help with the pain?"

"Yes. White box."

Bucky first sat her up and then crouched on the ground in front of the duffle. He dug out the white box and asked, "Which pill?"

"White, oblong, M365 on one side."

Bucky snapped the box shut again and tucked it back in the bag along with something he pulled out of his jacket pocket. Then he got up and handed the pill to Thea. He grabbed the water bottle she had left on the other end of the marble slab and handed that to her, as well. Then he sat down beside her and watched her closely. "You didn't stay inside the whole day."

She gasped. "How did you know?"

"I had a marker on the door. It was not there when I returned."

"Don't be angry. Please? I had to have a pee. I know what you said, but girls can't wait as long as men can. I found a shrubbery. It was quite embarrassing."

"You could have been seen."

"Well would you rather I went in here? I promise, girls are just different in that way."

"I will have to remember that. This is the second time you have disobeyed me for the same reason."

She felt a lurch in her stomach as she heard his words. This was the sort of thing that she was afraid of. He was going to be the sort of man who demanded obedience. She was a naturally compliant
sort of girl in many ways, but she was not willing to be controlled. She frowned and turned her face away for a moment. Then she changed her mind and turned to look him directly in the eyes. "I had to make my own decision, Yakov."

She was surprised to see him smile. "I am trying to keep you safe, Bella. This is my expertise, so I expect you to listen to me. I will just have to be sure that you have a way to go wherever we are in the future."

"Fine."

"Do you still want to do this?"

Thea did not reply. She held herself stiffly away from him and waited to see what he was going to do.

"I need to know, Bella. I will not force you to come, but once we are on our way there is no turning back. Did you decide?"

"I don't know. I barely know you. You don't know me either. How do I know that you won't become the Winter Soldier assassin again? What if you decide you don't really like me very much after all? My disability will definitely be a burden to you. I have this horrible feeling that I'm being very stupid."

"I could become the Winter Soldier again if they capture me. It is definitely possible. If they capture me, then you should assume that I am gone. They will wipe me again and I will forget. Anyone who has the right words can turn me back into the Winter Soldier. Their conditioning was extremely thorough."

"Are there no words to bring you back out?"

"There are. They needed them when I got too violent."

Relieved, she asked, "What are they?"

"I don't know. I would know when I was activated as Winter Soldier, but I would never tell them to you in that state."

"We can't work on something together to undo it?"

Bucky's posture stiffened tightly as he stated, "That would be far too dangerous. I would never risk that with you present."

"I just thought you could work on conditioning yourself to do something like go to sleep with some words you chose."

Horrified, Bucky explained, "No, definitely not. Conditioning like mine is far too complicated and extremely dangerous to play with."

"Do you know what the words are to turn you into the Winter Soldier?"

Increasingly agitated, Bucky insisted, "Yes. You cannot know them."

She shook her head and explained, "Can you not work on reconditioning yourself differently to the first word? That would disrupt the chain."

"Bella, no!"
Thea turned herself even further away from him than before.

"I won't risk your safety. Did you not understand that?"

Thea did not speak, but she did try to adjust herself to a more comfortable position and cried out in pain. Immediately, Bucky's hand was on her arm and he asked, "How long until the pill can help you?"

"A while. Sitting on hard surfaces makes it worse and being cold is just as bad. That's all I've been doing for days now."

He pulled her onto his legs and said seriously, "I wish that I had chosen another door to knock on. Then you would be safe and not in so much pain because of me."

Unlike the time in the abandoned hotel when she assumed he had only held her in his lap to disguise himself and hide his gun from the thugs, this time she knew why Bucky wanted her so close and it flustered her so much that she felt like she couldn't breathe. She felt his arms tighten around her and she tried to calm herself, but was utterly unsuccessful. What was she doing? He was the man who attacked Captain America. He had killed so many people when controlled by HYDRA. He was dangerous and very unstable. She should fight back and run away. Why did she find him so stupidly good-looking anyway? He had crazy caveman hair and she'd always, always hated beards. She had literally never been attracted to his type before. It was going to be so hard to keep him at arm's length and that was genuinely terrifying to her.

Bucky had wrapped the blanket around her and settled her against him, so she was no longer sitting on the cold, hard slab and was nestled against his shoulder. It was intimate, but she did not feel like he was trying to seduce her. In fact, she suspected that he felt she didn't even like him. Things really needed to remain that way.

"Have you made your decision?"

"I thought about it and I haven't changed my mind. This is the most sensible option, so I will go with you instead of going home. I won't risk Richard's or Thomas's safety."

His arm twitched across her back, but his voice was steady as he replied, "I am glad. We will leave in a few hours. You should sleep now if you can. There will not be as much opportunity later."

"I have never been this close to a man before, so I don't see how I can possibly sleep like this."

Bucky replied stiffly, "If you are warm enough now, I will set you down now."

She nodded, so he set her on the marble slab, which felt nastily cold after resting on his very warm legs. Thea tried to lay down, but the stiffness of the stone was so uncomfortable that she sat up again.

"I won't get the wrong idea if you want to lean against me again. I know how we stand, Bella."

Accordingly, she leant her head against his right shoulder and pulled the blanket as close as she could. They sat like that in silence until she finally drifted into a very restless sleep.
"Wake up. We need to leave in five minutes, Bella."

Thea sat up quickly and looked at him in surprise. "I didn't think I would sleep at all."

"You've been sleeping for three hours. Here, you need this. It is your wedding ring."

Thea looked at the thick gold band that he was extending to her and then stammered, "Why?"

"Because you are now Ysobel Grushnikova, my wife. I am Yakov Grushnikov. We married three years ago on the 15th of December. I was in the Russian Army where I lost my arm, but now I am in business. You know nothing about my business and you don't want to know, since it has ties to the SVR. We live in London, but we came here to visit my uncle. Now repeat that."

"I am Ysobel Grush…what was it?"

"Grushnikova. Say it."

"Grushnikova."

"Again."

"Grushnikova."

"Good. Now the story, including what you thought of during the day."

"I am Ysobel Grushnikova. I was a primary teacher and lived in a flat in Kensington with my brother until I married you three years ago. My anniversary is the 15th of December. You were a soldier in the Russian army and you lost your arm in combat. Where?"

"Chechnya."

"In Chechnya. You are in business. I don't know anything about it. I don't know what the SVR is. I still live in London with you, but we came to America to visit your uncle."
"Pretty good, but you will need to sound more evasive at the mention of the SVR and also a bit nervous. The SVR is a branch of the Russian intelligence service. Yakov Grushnikov would not be a gentle husband. Remember that."

"Ok, but is my name different than yours or did I mishear it?"

"You are female. The ending changes."

"Oh. Okay."

"If you get stuck then look to me. Ysobel Grushnikova would be very nervous about upsetting her husband. I will take over if you need it."

"Okay."

"Now again."

"I am Ysobel Grushnikova. We are in America visiting my husband's uncle. We have lived in London together since we got married three years ago. My anniversary is the 15th of December. I used to be a teacher. My husband was in the Russian army and lost his arm in Chechnya. Now he is in business. How did I do?"

"Good enough. Put the ring on."

Thea bit her lip. "I feel weird about it. It feels wrong to pretend to be married."

Bucky picked up her hand and slid the wedding band over her finger but it was a little loose. "Be glad we can just pretend. I knew your finger was tiny, but this was the smallest they had. It will have to do, so just be careful it doesn't slide off. Here is the engagement ring."

Thea gasped. "Oh my goodness."

"Yakov Grushnikov would want everyone to know he could afford the very best."

She stared at the diamond in the ring and asked, "Did you steal this?"

"No. Put it on."

"Then how did you get it?"

Bucky looked quite fed up as he asked sharply, "Bella, are you going to question everything I do?"

"No, but…"

"Then stop now. It is time to leave."

Thea shoved the ring over her finger and then stood up with his help. He put both bags over his shoulders and handed her the crutches. She leant into them heavily and slowly made her way across the floor of the mausoleum. Bucky opened the door and they stepped outside. As they made their way across the church yard, Thea wondered if he was going to expect her to walk very far. If so, he was going to have to carry her again, which she definitely did not want. However, he was directing her towards a car that was parked in front of the church. He opened the door and she got in gratefully. After he had tossed their bags in the back seat, Bucky got in beside her and started the car.

Thea realised with pleasure that there were heated seats, so she clicked the button on the dash and
waited for the comforting warmth to start soothing her joints. By the time they reached their next destination almost an hour later, she was nearly asleep.

"Bella, would you like take a minute to freshen up inside? I don't know when the next chance will be."

She looked around and realised that they were at a fast food restaurant. She turned to Bucky and asked, "Ok. Would you help me get my handbag out?"

He pursed his lips with annoyance, but he still opened the back door and dug inside the rucksack to find her handbag. He then handed it to her and asked, "Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Tea or coffee?"

"Always tea."

"Okay, go inside. The car will be on the other side when you are done."

Thea hurried inside with her crutches clicking loudly, as she found her way to the bathroom. Once inside, however, she stopped at the mirror and nearly burst into tears. Why had he not told her that she looked so horrible? Her hair was a disaster and her face was marked in several places with dirt. She looked like a vagrant. It was almost fifteen minutes before she felt like she looked human again. Her hair needed a lot more brushing. She really needed a shower. But at least she looked respectable now. Bucky had a lot of nerve telling her how beautiful he thought she was when she looked like crazy careening about in a go-kart.

What was wrong with her? She was escaping the country with a former assassin. She was probably even going to fall for this mad man. Her life had been sliding off into horror for almost exactly a year before she met him, but this was just the latest chapter in the story of the sad woman, who had once been Dr. Theodora Arnwell, PhD, Investigador en arte sacro ibérico del Museo Nacional del Prado. What nastiness was going to happen to her next?

Suddenly Thea felt her stomach lurch and she raced to a cubicle into which she barely made it in time. When she was finished, she looked at her watch and realised that she had taken a quite long time. As soon as she came out, she saw Bucky waiting at a table by the bathroom with a look of utter desperation in his eyes. He did not speak, but firmly put his metal arm around her shoulders and escorted her out with a tight grip that she knew was going to leave a bruise. It was not until they were both in the car that he spoke viciously, "What were you doing?"

"You said to freshen up. I looked like I was homeless. I had dirt on my face and my hair was sticking straight up. I was also feeling a bit ill, so that took time, too. I'm sorry. I didn't think I would take so long."

He snarled furiously, "You cannot do that again."

"Well you knew where I was. I didn't run away."

His voice now more distressed than angry, Bucky replied, "I didn't actually know that. I drove the car around, went through the drive through, and then waited. The manager would not let me in there to look, although I was very close to doing it anyway. You could have gone anywhere in that time. Anyone could have dragged you off and I would not have known. That is the last time you go in to a building alone."
"Bucky…"

He growled, "Yakov. I told you not to forget again!"

Thea looked at him and said tearfully, "You are so horrid. I didn't do anything wrong. Why are you acting like I did something wrong? And I'm not a spy, so I'm not precisely au fait with fake name protocol and all that sort of thing. Why are you being so awful?"

Bucky looked at her with surprise and then frowned darkly. "I am trying to keep you safe."

"Fine, then keep me safe with no words. I don't want to talk to you at all."

He was quiet for a moment and then said softly, "I thought you were gone."

Thea did not reply but turned to look out the window, so he would not see that she was crying.

Bucky tried to explain, "I thought you were gone and I didn't know if it was because you wanted to escape from me, which I could at least understand, or if someone got you and I needed to be out looking for you."

Thea still refused to respond. Bucky put his hand on her shoulder, the one that he had gripped so firmly a few minutes before, and he said, "I am not used to thinking about other people."

She sneered angrily, "I can tell."

After an audible sigh, Bucky replied, "I have had no one that cared about anything regarding me other than whether I could complete the mission. HYDRA's methods made survival the only positive thing you could even hope to achieve. There was no avoiding pain, but just doing everything I could to stretch out the time in between. I am only two and a half months out of that. You awakened something I didn't know existed in me, so I freely admit that I don't know what I am doing."

Thea turned back around and looked at him sympathetically as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I don't know how you are able to function at all after such abuse. I cannot imagine humans treating each other like that."

"I think once I would have wondered the same thing. However, it is all I've known for so long that I don't really remember the before time. I know it is there and that must be what you brought alive in me. I must have known goodness once."

Feeling a flash of forgiveness that surprised her, Thea reached out and tucked her hand in his. "You are going to have to choose to believe in good things now. It is possible, you know."

Bucky watched her with a blank face but did not respond.

"Okay, I will make you a promise. If you are choosing to work on healing and becoming someone other than just the man who was the Winter Soldier, then you will also have me there to help you."

"You should not make that promise, Bella."

"Well I am choosing to do it, just like I hope you are going to make a choice to heal yourself. I know you are never going to be free from some of the effects of what happened. However, it doesn't have to be horrible forever. Maybe you can even find something good."

Bucky grunted with anger. "I do not want you to make promises to someone like me. As long as I
know that you are safe, then I have enough good to hold onto."

"Are you always going to be this difficult?"

He looked over at her and said with a wry look, "Probably."

She leant forwards and replied firmly, "Right then. Do you want me to like you or would you prefer that I hate you?"

"I don't want you to hate me. I just know that you really should."

Thea shook her head. "Ah, well you have done a lot to keep me safe in the last few days and I suspect you are going to do far more in the next few weeks. I don't think I ought to hate you. And I make my own decisions about people, thank you."

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest and watched her for a moment. Eventually he admitted uncomfortably, "I don't want you to hate me."

"Good. Do you want me to like you?"

Bucky looked away. "I don't expect that. There isn't anything here to like. All that was stripped away and replaced by whatever HYDRA put in."

"Golly, are you trying to be this irritating? I am not asking what your guilty conscience says. I don't want you to tell me what the rest of the world will think either. I simply want to know what you want."

There was a long pause as Thea waited for Bucky to reply. When he did not, she asked again with asperity, "If you don't tell me what you want, then you will definitely never get it. I want to know what you really want."

Bucky let out a harsh, shuddering sigh. Then he closed his eyes and spoke in a low voice so quiet that she could hardly believe what she heard. "If you really need me to say it, then fine. I want you to love me." After a moment of silence between them, he asked sharply, "Did I pass your test?"

Thea bit her lip as she tried to control her expression, so he would not see the pity that his answer caused in her. She had not expected him to be quite that brutally honest. She had only wanted him to admit that he wanted to be liked. She had thought that if he could say it, then it might make him recognise that his humanity was more intact that he realised. However, the raw heartache on his face was painful to witness. "I'm sorry. I really didn't expect that answer."

"You demanded my honesty, Bella."

She nodded as she rapidly tried to decide what to do. If he saw her pity, then that would surely hurt him more terribly. "Do you want me to be honest?"

"Not really." Bucky took a deep breath and then admitted miserably, "Yes."

"I thought about this a lot earlier today.‖ Thea tried to look at him with as much kindness as possible, while she attempted to organise her thoughts. "I think it takes real courage to hope for something better after only horror and abuse for so long. You've also been quite candid with me about your past when a lesser man might have done otherwise. Honesty is incredibly important to me and I think it is very natural to you.‖ Thea looked at Bucky as she attempted to suss whether he understood what she was trying to explain. "I was also thinking how after so long being controlled by HYDRA, you finally gained some freedom. Yet, then you immediately put it aside to keep me
safe. Literally no one else but you would have done that, I think. So, although you can be difficult, dictatorial, and rather frightening, you are also brave and honest, which is why I already like you."

Bucky shook his head. "I'm not that good of a person. It doesn't matter how much control HYDRA had. I killed hundreds. Maybe more. That was me."

Thea made a sound of frustration. She was really trying, so it wouldn't hurt him to make an effort, too. Stupid man. "Your hands, yes. You were their weapon. That doesn't make it your choice and therefore your fault. Whatever you do now though, that is on you."

He said flatly, "I will not regret whatever I have to do to keep you safe."

"Ok, all right. Do you really want to convince me that I'm mistaken and you are horrid? Or would you rather entertain the idea that I might be right and you aren't completely awful? Your choice."

Bucky shrugged uncomfortably and replied tensely, "Of course, I want to pretend that might happen. I just told you what I want."

"Well that's good then. I would not lie to you about that, Bucky, because that would be cruel. I think that I am willing to try something, at least. If you want."

Bucky looked at her with confusion and seemed to be scanning her face to understand. Finally, he slowly stated, "You want to be with me."

She knew it was a question, but she waited for him to answer it himself.

He frowned with extreme discomfort, as he awkwardly said, "But you don't have any feelings for me, Bella. You don't like me."

"Well, I'm not in love with you, but, fascinatingly, most relationships start that way, did you know? Why would that preclude us from making a go of it?"

He bitterly replied, "Because we can't be like regular people and go on dates or whatever it is people do."

"Well what do we do then?"

Bucky shook his head like a dog as if he was trying to clear the confusion from his mind. Then he gripped the steering wheel and muttered, "Чёрт возьми!" After a few minutes of staring into the distance ahead, he shifted his whole body, so he was facing her. "I am a подонок, Bella. Do you understand that?"

"No, since I speak no Russian."

"А ублюдок. А халявщик. I do not remember an English word strong enough for what I am. I do not deserve kindness. Я не знаю, почему я забыл мои английские слова. Что, блядь, со мной не так?"

"You know that I don't understand any of that. However, you are wrong. You—more than many others—deserve kindness after so long without any. You are not evil. You regret what they made you do and you genuinely want to be better. That is why I am willing to do this."

Bucky leant forwards onto the steering wheel and began muttering to himself, "Дерьмо! Если я испорчу это, то я действительно убью себя. Блядь!" Finally, he sat up and looked at her. "I do not know how to say what I want to say. I think that I will f*** this up, but I don't want to."
"I'm not going to skip out the back door on you. If I am unhappy with you, then I will tell you."

"Ты слишком совершенен и хорош, чтобы заслуживать такого бесполезного ублюдка, как я. I hope that you will be understanding when I act stupid like I was before. Because I definitely will be a disaster and make constant mistakes."

"Ok, well, are you going to keep saying everything in Russian? It is massively annoying. I don't know if it is good things or bad things or what it is."

"It has been a long time since I needed English for more than just a basic conversation. My thoughts come easier in Russian, especially for emotions."

"What were you saying?"

"I was talking aloud to myself. Mostly threatening myself not to f*** up."

She knew that he was not being completely truthful, but it wouldn't do any good to say so. "Oh. Ok."

Bucky was still sitting so he faced her and she was looking at him uncertainly. "You are sure? I can still make a different plan if you want."

Thea slipped her hand into his. "I am sure."

Bucky muttered, "Невероятный. У меня никогда не было такого хорошего сна." Then he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Thank you. We are an hour behind. I'm going to drive very fast."

Rather flustered by the kiss he had placed on her hand, Thea asked breathlessly, "Will we be driving a long time?"

"We are heading towards Canada."

"Oh! So, I can sleep for a while?"

He answered seriously, "I want you to rest, yes. Eat your food first though. Your tea won't be hot anymore."

"I don't care. I haven't had a cup in days."

Chapter End Notes

I understand that it might be frustrating that I do not translate the Russian (or Ukrainian in a later chapter) here for the readers, however this is purposeful. At this time, the story is being told strictly from Thea's point of view. She does not know what Bucky is saying, so I do not translate it for you. Later, once the POV shifts, I will provide translations for any non-English dialogue, since Bucky does understand what he is saying and therefore the reader ought to do as well. My sincere apologies to anyone for whom this is frustrating.
Three hours later, Bucky pulled the car into a park, found a secluded spot, and then turned it off. He looked over at Thea, who was still sleeping and shook his head like a dog, saying, "Она слишком красивая, чтобы быть реальной." He then grabbed the bag that he had stashed under the seat and reached gently over to Thea. When her eyes opened drowsily, he softly said, "I will be back. Stay here."

Suddenly very alert, Thea sat up and demanded, "What is wrong?"

He rasped, "Nothing to concern yourself about. I must do something unpleasant. I do not want you to watch."

Immediately, Thea began hyperventilating. "Oh my goodness! What is it?"

"Bella, I said that I don't want you to watch. Please just trust me."

Thea asked, "Would it upset me?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"But it was necessary."

Bucky vehemently replied, "Unfortunately."

"You promise?"

"Yes, Bella. I don't do that anymore."

"Okay. Okay. I won't watch."

Bucky watched her for a moment, before he said seriously, "Get down so you can't be seen and don't look out."

After he got out of the car, Thea laid down on the front seat and began to softly cry. She heard the boot open and felt the car move as he got something heavy out. She knew that they were in danger and that he might well have to kill again to protect them. She knew that. However, had they actually been driving in the car with a body in the boot for hours and she hadn't even known? Surely there was another explanation. It had to be something else large and heavy that he would not want her to see. Because there are so many things that fit that description, right?

Then she thought of the three men that he had shot to protect her, including the one that had threatened to rape her, and she began to shake as she lay crying. How had her life come to this? She had always believed she knew how her life would be. She had spent years studying what had been her heart's delight and doing such wonderful research. Yet after last year, none of that felt important or even interesting anymore. She had rather lost herself, but surely choosing to go along with this man was the crowning achievement of her madness. How could he be the person to whom she knew she was wildly attracted against all reason, yet be the violent, rough man who tossed her over his shoulder to carry her to safety, and worse be the desperate assassin who burst into her house and ordered her around so aggressively? Even more important, how could she be ok with any of this? Why did it matter so much to her that he should believe he was redeemable? She had always disdained girls who got caught up with trying to save the boys with the broken wings, but now she must be the most naïve, idealistic, foolish girl in the world. Thea continued to berate herself and
second guess her decision to jump suddenly into a relationship with a former stone-cold killer, as she hunched down in the car alone and waiting.

However, when Bucky returned and opened the door, she sat up and watched as he dropped heavily in his seat. She could see the genuine misery on his face and felt a few of her doubts slip away. "Was it HYDRA?"

"You do not need to know details, Bella. It was simply necessary."

"Are you ok?"

Bucky looked at her as if she were crazy. "I've done this before. Just never as me."

"I know, that is why I asked if you were ok."

"If I were ok with this, then I would still be the assassin that HYDRA wanted me to be. I will never be ok with it."

Thea bugged closer to Bucky and said, "I'm really, seriously scared."

Clearly hurt, Bucky asked seriously, "Of me?"

"Of you keeping terrifying secrets like something horrid in the boot? Yes. Of whether there will have to be lots more killing? Yes, and you should know that I can't manage much more. Of the fact that I barely know you and have decided to trust you with my entire life? Yeah, pretty terrifying, really. So, do tell me, am I being stupid to be scared?"

He shook his head. "You can trust that I will keep you safe, Bella. Do you want to know about it? I will tell you, if you want me to. I don't think that it will change your discomfort though, nor should it, honestly."

"Yes, I do want you to tell me."

He sighed. "Ok. His name was Kuznetsov. He was not just HYDRA, but he actually worked with me on several past missions. He wasn't looking for us, but he was trying to secure an exit from the same source we are using and followed me back to the church. There was no other option, Bella. I had to move him out here, so even if my efforts fail and the remains are able to be identified, his death will not be tied to us in DC. Not many people could take down Kuznetsov, so I would be one of those suspected immediately."

Thea peered up at him and saw the wild look in his eyes. She doubled down on her earlier decision and put her hand on his shoulder. She said softly, "How horrible. Okay. I will trust you."

Bucky sat very still, then he slipped his hand around her arm for a very brief moment. Then he reached forward and started the car. Thea sat forward to turn on the seat heater before leaning back and drifting into a wretched sleep.

Nearly six hours later, Thea was sitting in the middle of a bed in a hotel room and waiting for Bucky to finish his shower. She had not enjoyed a shower that much in a very long time. Her hair was still wet, but it would dry eventually. At least she didn't feel grotty and smell worse like she had done for days. Now she was wrapped up in a blanket overtop her nightdress and dressing gown. She couldn't let him see her in the nightdress, of course, but it would be wonderful not to sleep in day clothes for a change. They had an actual bed and shower. She had brushed her teeth like a human being. It felt like months and not days since she had lived normally. The dividing line between before and after Bucky seemed like the Great Wall. Beforehand, she would absolutely
NEVER have been in a hotel room with a man other than one of her brothers—certainly not in a nightdress and most definitely not when she knew that the man had feelings for her. Now she was ready to deal with the embarrassment just to sleep properly for a change.

Bucky burst out of the bathroom wearing a black long-sleeved t-shirt and black trousers that she had not yet seen. She had to look away, since she felt a wave of deep mortification swarm over her. Good heavens, he was far too good-looking, and she was here alone with him.

Bucky dropped onto the sofa and asked, "Do you need any medication?"

"Oh, yes, I do actually. Thank you."

"Which one?"

"The same. White oblong. And I need the small yellow pill again."

Bucky fiddled with the pills in the box until he found what she needed and brought it to her. He spoke in a flat tone, "I'm not going to try anything. You don't need to look like that."

Surprised, Thea looked up at him and saw that he was, if anything, more uncomfortable than she was. "It is just that I know my family would disapprove. It feels so wrong. I'm not supposed to let a man see me like this until I am married."

He snorted. "Like what? Wrapped up in three layers and sitting on top of the covers? You are not doing anything inappropriate. I know what kind of girl you are. I am not going to take advantage of you."

"Well, I know I'm being silly. You lifted me like a sack of flour through the street. You carried me on your back for miles. I slept leaning against you in a mausoleum of all ruddy places. I don't know why I'm so uncomfortable now."

"You are back in a normal environment, so you expect a normal situation. It was like that for us during the war a few times when we would have a few days of respite in some miraculously unbombed town. Go ahead and sleep. I'm going to be over here."

Surprised by his comment, Thea regarded him thoughtfully. After a moment, she asked seriously, "You are going to let yourself sleep, aren't you?"

"I have to sleep, or I won't be able to function fully tomorrow. There is a knife under your pillow and a gun under the pillow next to you."

She stared at him for a moment anxiously. "Is that truly necessary?" His look answered her question, so she asked further, "Well, is it at least a small one? My hands can just barely handle the P238 Richard bought me, but I can't use my brother's Glock."

Bucky leant further back into the sofa cushion as he watched her. "It is your Sig."

"You found my gun box?"

He made a derisive sound before he said, "Easily. I found your jewellery, your document safe, everything. I will have to show you how to better hide things, Bella."

Quite annoyed, since she had believed that she did a good job at following her brother's security procedures, Thea flopped back onto the bed and said, "Ok. Fine. Good night, Yakov."
Bucky made a pleased noise at her use of his cover name. "Good night."

She laid there for an hour trying to sleep. He had dropped off quickly, but she couldn't manage a wink. Finally, she decided to get up and go sit at the window. It felt weird to be sitting there calmly and comfortably. As she pulled back the curtains and peeked out, she heard Bucky move.

"What is wrong?!

Thea turned her head. "Nothing really. I just couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd look out the window for a while."

"Go back to bed, Bella. You need the rest. I could see how much pain you were in."

Thea sighed. Then she got up and shuffled over to the bed. "I feel better now though."

"That is because you took a pain pill. Your body still needs the rest. Go lay down."

Suddenly, Thea thought of the night before when Bucky had held her as she slept. It hadn't felt at all romantic. It just felt comforting, but now she wished he were next to her again. However, it would mean something quite different here and she did not want that. She laid back down and stared up at the ceiling. She was genuinely losing her mind.

"Go to sleep, Bella."

"I am trying to do." She rolled over and looked into the darkness. She felt so restless that it was like ants were crawling over her. "I feel like I'm going mad. This is all just overwhelming."

Bucky's deep voice carried quietly across the dark hotel room. "I know, but you are safe right now. No one is going to come into this room. I would take down anyone who tried. You know that I have a plan how to get where we are going. You are safe."

"I believe you. However, I've just tossed away my whole life. I've left my family behind and they all think that I'm dead. Knowing how distraught they must be is hurting me more than I can say. I don't know where I'm going to be in a week, let alone a year. I don't know how to deal with this."

Bucky got up from the sofa and came over to the bed. He said down and said, "I forget that what feels like freedom to me might be anarchy to you."

Still quite jittery and very uncomfortable with having Bucky so close as he sat on the edge of the bed, Thea vehemently agreed, "Yes, it is! I don't know how to deal with it. I don't like uncertainty. I love organisation and plans."

There was a long silence as Bucky sat breathing a little heavily next to her. Then he miserably answered, "Bella, I will do anything you want. What would help you?"

"I really don't think that anything can help. Ugh, I still have those dumb rings on." Thea slipped both fake wedding rings off and slammed them on the table.

"You will need them again tomorrow."

"Yes, so we can be fake married. I remember."

Bucky was silent again as he sat next to her. She could tell that he was upset, but neither of them spoke. Finally, he asked, "It is only a cover story. Why does it bother you so much?"

"Because I believe that marriage is sacred. You shouldn't make a mockery of it by pretending to be
"I can make a different identity once we are in Alaska. I can make you my sister, if you prefer that."

"No, thank you. I am not your sister and people would notice that we don't act like siblings."

"Then you are stuck with this identity and me as your fake husband. I am sorry."

Thea could hear the pain and self-doubt in his voice. "I don't object to you, just the lying."

"You should. Now go to sleep, Bella."

"Don't do that. Don't put yourself down and then me by extension just because I don't dislike you."

Bucky got up and said in a strangled voice, "I need to separate myself. It would be better if I went back over there."

Annoyed, Thea laid down and said, "Fine."

Bucky dropped onto the sofa and murmured, "ты не знаешь, как сильно я хочу тебя сейчас."

Thea pulled the covers over her and said, "I'll just try to sleep then."
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

For those who might have missed the note in the earlier chapter: I know that there is a lot of non-English dialogue in this chapter, but there is a good reason that it is not translated here. We are still following the story from Thea's POV. Since she cannot understand anything Bucky says in Russian or Ukrainian, the reader is not meant to do either. It is not critical to know what he says, but I will tell you that Bucky's language is quite crass in Russian (he did learn Russian from HYDRA after all). When the POV changes to Bucky, then I will translate everything.

Я прошу прощения за все ненормативную лексику, но я думаю, что Баки будет говорить так после многих лет с HYDRA. Я должен был попросить моего двоюродного брата о помощи в этой части, поэтому я надеюсь, что все это имеет смысл.

Thea had taken the opportunity to have yet another shower that morning, since she had no way of knowing when the next one would be. She slathered on her face cream, trimmed her nails, and brushed her hair until it was a smooth shining auburn river down her back. She used up the little bottles of lotion that the hotel had provided so her legs felt smooth and normal. With a small smile at the woman she saw in the mirror, Thea admitted that she felt more like herself than she had since everything began. If she were being honest, she wanted particularly to look as pretty as she could manage after having seen that quite horrifying reflection of herself in the restaurant bathroom.

Then she put on several pieces of her jewellery that Bucky had taken for them to pawn. She really hoped that would never become necessary, especially not with her mother's wedding earrings. Surely, he should be back with breakfast soon. A bit concerned, Thea left the bathroom and walked out with just one crutch to see that he had come back without her hearing it. "Oh my goodness! How did you get in so incredibly quietly?"

Bucky rapidly stood up from the sofa when she walked out. It was immediately clear from his reaction that her efforts had been extremely effective. He stood very still, regarding her closely, as she took her little makeup bag and brush back over to her handbag. When she turned around, he was still standing stiffly as he watched her. A part of her mind was thrilled to have such an effect on a man, especially him. However, the more sensible part of her brain was still resisting her impulsive decision to go with him voluntarily, so his increased interest unnerved her.

She quietly asked, "Are we going to eat?" Bucky did not reply, so Thea walked over to him and softly asked again, "May we eat now?"

"Yes."

Thea looked up at him and waited for him to say or do something.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you to tell me what we are doing today."
"That is not what you are doing."

"Yes, it really is."

Bucky put his hands on her shoulders and dropped his voice even lower as he said, "Do not ask for something you do not want."

A panicky feeling settled in her stomach as she realised what he was saying, but she attempted to steer him away from any misunderstanding by replying, "Well, it might surprise you, but I do actually want breakfast, Yakov."

"You are trying to do something to me. Why would you do that?"

Thea made a growling sound of real anger. "No, I'm not. Why would you make it sound like I'm a slag just because I want to brush my hair and look nice again after days of vagrancy?"

"Я схожу с ума. Очевидно, я снова облажался." Bucky stood with his eyes closed and fists so tightly clenched that Thea took a step back. Finally, his eyes popped open and he moved very close to her to say, "I am sorry."

Thea stepped a bit further away. "I suppose, but I am not terribly impressed. You said that you wouldn't push me. You will keep your word, won't you?"

"Yes. I understand how you feel."

Rather relieved that he apparently had no idea how very attracted to him she was—and really hoping that she could keep that secret a little longer—Thea asked seriously, "Do you?"

Bucky sighed and turned on his heel to walk back over to the sofa. "I will never push you, but you must be careful."

"Does it have to be all or nothing? Can we not just do things like regular people? Take our time just a bit? I've not known you a week even."

"No." He paused and then continued, "I don't know. Eat your breakfast. It is on the table. I will be back." Bucky snatched up his jacket and charged from the room without glancing behind him.

Thea sunk onto a chair and tried to catch her breath. The moment of pleased surprise when she saw how genuinely Bucky was attracted to her was subsumed by the realisation that he had a very thin layer of control over whatever were his true feelings for her. She had been right to be worried. He was a very unstable man and she had no idea to what end his instincts might drive him.

Bucky did not return for nearly an hour. When he did, he was totally different. His face was utterly blank as he closed the door silently behind him. He stalked to the large green duffel and placed a wrapped package inside. He then walked past her to get her brother's rucksack. "Is everything packed?"

"Yes."

"Good. We are leaving."

Thea grabbed her crutches and pushed herself up from the table. Her hand still hurt, but it was better. Her SI joint and hip, however, felt like they were on fire. She looked around, hoping vaguely that she hadn't forgotten anything. However, Bucky said sharply, "Now."
Thea glanced up at him and saw the aggression in his eyes, which made her frown and look down unhappily. Apparently, his way of dealing with emotionally difficult things was to borrow from his Winter Soldier persona. Filled with disappointment, she said nothing as she followed him out of the room and then down the corridor. She stopped short when she saw that their vehicle was now different.

He opened her door and said flatly, "Get in, Bella."

"What about the other car?"

"Gone. Just get in."

Thea sighed and got into the large SUV. It was the sort that had all the extras, so she was surprised he had chosen it. Wouldn't it be more conspicuous? She fastened her seatbelt and leant back with only a nervous look over at Bucky. He had already tossed both bags in the back and climbed in next to her. "We are driving to Alaska now."

"Driving? Won't that be days?"

"It will. I won't be taking all the main roads, so it will be even longer. There will be nights when we will be sleeping in the vehicle. I know that will be uncomfortable for you, Bella, but it is unavoidable. I made sure you had heated seats for your pain, but that was the best I could do."

She stiffly replied, "Thank you."

Bucky grunted his reply and pulled the SUV out quickly. After an hour of driving, Thea wondered if he had ever actually driven normally. His two speeds seemed to be either fast or terrifying and he appeared to have no fear on curves, bridges, or any other obstacle. He drove like a stunt driver, but she was no stuntwoman and it was genuinely frightening.

The day wore on with only two breaks, which she felt certain he would not have taken if she wasn't there. He escorted her to the door of the lavatory and was waiting there the moment she came out. He had a very firm arm around her when they placed their food orders and seemed to want to stare down any man within sight of her. She was beginning to feel like his prisoner again, although she believed she understood his motives. They had barely spoken the entire day. He had allowed her to turn on the radio, but there had been nothing good on. Nevertheless, it was better than the silence.

The trouble came when they got to Thunder Bay. They had pulled into a small sandwich shop and Bucky was keeping Thea extremely close to him. When they entered, Thea was accidentally almost knocked over by one of the men in the queue, which caused Bucky to glare angrily at him. Unfortunately, the man planted himself in front of Bucky and demanded belligerently, "What are you looking at, bub?"

Thea could feel a wave of aggression wrap around Bucky as he gripped her possessively and muttered almost inaudibly under his breath, "Я надеюсь что кто-то трахает тебя как девочку, жалкая пизда."

The man seemed to be determined to draw out a fight, as he pushed himself closer to Bucky and demanded belligerently, "What are you looking at, bub?"

"Я надеюсь что кто-то трахает тебя как девочку, жалкая пизда."

The man seemed to be determined to draw out a fight, as he pushed himself closer to Bucky and demanded, "What the f***, idiot?"

Bucky gritted his teeth, but said simply, "Please move out of our way." With his arm wrapped around her, she could feel how tightly his body was wound; as if it would take only a touch to cause Bucky to burst into violent retribution against the other man. However, much to Thea's relief, Bucky simply started to move away towards the front of the store. However, her stomach
dropped when she heard the man's next words.

"Come on, Boris. You really wanna go? I'm good for a fight, comrade."

Shaking his head, Bucky replied, "I want you to apologise to my wife for running into her, наркоман."

The man looked at Thea, who was sure she looked as nervous as she felt. His expression changed, and he looked uneasy. "Yeah, sorry if I hurt you. You okay?"

Thea nodded.

Bucky looked down at Thea and said, "Come on." She stumbled a bit with her crutches as he tried to help her along.

The man called after him, "Look who is talking, you bastard. You're treating her like a rag doll. You f***ing Russians don’t even know how to treat a lady, do you? You’re a piece of s***."

Thea gasped as Bucky turned around and snarled a stream of invective that made her burst into nervous tears. "Ебись она в рот! С меня хватит тебя и твоей глупости. Я прикончу тебя, грязное животное, если ты не уйдешь."

A short, elderly woman burst out from behind the counter and began berating Bucky in rapid Russian, "Вы животное или мужчина? Твоя мать научила тебя говорить так вокруг женщины, как твоя жена? Вы, русские, все одинаковы. Грубый и невнимательный. Я не потерплю этого."

Bucky seemed paralysed for a moment and then replied quietly in careful Ukrainian, "Вибач, бабуся. Я помилявся бути таким грубим."

First glaring at the other man, who had inched his way over to the doorway, the woman turned back to Bucky and seemed to accept his apology. "Russian idiot making a hassle in my respectable shop. For your wife's sake, I make you a sandwich. If it was only you, I would make you go hungry. Come."

The other man took his opportunity to escape, so Thea and Bucky followed the old woman towards the counter. Bucky pulled out a chair for Thea, who sat down gratefully and asked with her shaking hands pressed to her face, "May I have an enormous Coke, please?"

"Of course." Bucky turned to the elderly woman, who had shooed away both of the other clerks. The store was now empty except for the three of them.

The old woman looked Bucky directly in the eye and asked, "Ваша маленька краса не Російська?"

He nodded and replied quietly, "Ні, бабуся, вона англійська."

"І вона не розмовляє українською або російською?"

He looked over at Thea and then replied, "Ні, бабуся, тільки англійська."

As she worked quickly at making sandwiches, the old woman shook her head and began to rattle off advice in a grandmotherly tone. "Вона, як видається, ніжний, хороша дівчина. Не робіть її страждати від вашої любові, або вона ніколи не навчиться любити вас назад. Вона не байдужа. Ви ще не втратили свій шанс. Повірте мені, Російська, одного разу я був також
Bucky nodded again. "Так, бабуся."

"Here is sandwich for pretty lady. Cookie to make her smile. She want very big Coke, I get it. You take that. I will not make you more."

"Thank you, babusya. You are kind."

"No sweet words. Save those for pretty wife. Go."

Bucky took the tray to Thea, who had stopped paying attention during their conversation, since she had understood nothing. She quietly said her prayer and then began to nibble on the sandwich that she was really far too nervous to eat. When the old woman brought her a large cup of Coke, Thea looked up at her with an anxious smile. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Your husband act stupid, but only because he is crazy for you. Once my Vasyl was this way, too. He get over it. Forgive him, my dear. You are only young once." The woman waddled away, leaving Thea so embarrassed that she just stared down at her sandwich.

Bucky did not say anything for a few moments. Thea could feel him watching her carefully, which only made her more uncomfortable. Finally, he said quietly, "Bella, I am sorry that happened."

Thea nodded, but did not reply or look up.

Looking genuinely embarrassed, Bucky said, "I am sorry about all of today honestly."

"Ok."

He grimly added, "As soon as you are feeling calmer, we need to go. We have attracted all the wrong sort of attention."

"That isn't my fault."

"I know, Bella. I am not blaming you. Why don't you take a minute to go to the bathroom and freshen up? You will feel better."

Thea sighed and grabbed her crutches. Bucky stood up and watched her work her way to the bathroom door. Then he sat down just as a pair of policemen entered the shop.

The older of the two stopped in front of the table where Bucky was sitting and looked him up and down as he said, "Sir, I would like to see your identification, please."

Pausing briefly as he considered the situation, Bucky then stood up and pulled his wallet from his pocket. He passed it over to the policeman who had spoken, as he sized up the younger policeman. "What is the reason for this?"

"A disturbance was reported."

Bucky shrugged. "There is no disturbance."

"I have to investigate, sir, I am sure you understand. I understand there was a young lady."

"My wife is in the bathroom."

"We will need to speak with her, sir."
The elderly woman waddled out again and demanded, "Why are you hassling my customers, Brian Southerlin?"

"A domestic disturbance was reported, Mrs Shevchenko."

"Nonsense. Jack McWorthy almost knock this man's wife over. This man say apologise. McWorthy is rude and make the lady cry. This is not domestic disturbance."

"Are you sure, Mrs Shevchenko? Because Jack said…"

"I do not care what Jack McWorthy say. I don't like Russians, but I am not allowing them to be a target of McWorthy. He is a boil on a horse's a**."

"Very well, Mrs Shevchenko. Here is your ID, sir. If we can confirm this with your wife, then we will leave you alone."

The elderly woman shook her finger at the policeman. "I don't want you writing reports with this man's name and making him a victim. It is hard enough in Canada to have everyone with bad assumptions about Slavic people."

"I have to write a report, ma'am."

"Yes, and report goes out that this man beat his wife and then he want a job and then what happens?"

"It is not that sort of report, Mrs Shevchenko. It won't harm anyone."

"Oh no? Like when you arrest my grandson? And he do nothing? Then he almost lose his scholarship."

"That was a terrible misunderstanding, Mrs Shevchenko."

"Yes, you arrest Ukrainian boy first then ask questions. Who is it that was guilty? Canadian boy. You leave the Russian alone. No ruining his life like you almost do to my grandson."

"Mrs Shevchenko, Dmytro is doing well at McGill, isn't he? That is what Marianne told my wife."

"No thanks to you. Now here is his pretty wife. You feel better now, my dear? Policeman wants to talk to you so they know your husband is not a bad guy. I tell them."

Thea immediately went to Bucky, who wrapped his hand around hers and stood protectively next to her. "Ma'am, may I have your identification, please?"

Uncertain what she should do, Thea turned towards Bucky and asked, "What is wrong, Yakov?"

"Nothing, Bella. Someone misunderstood what happened earlier. Just give them your wallet."

Thea fumbled with her handbag and found her wallet. She opened it up and passed it to them, so they could see her identification.

"Ysobel Grushnikova. Very good, ma'am. Would you prefer to conduct this interview more privately?"

Shrinking back at the thought of being taken somewhere else apart from Bucky, Thea firmly replied, "No, no thank you. I want my husband here."
"Very well, ma'am. Can you tell me in your own words what happened earlier?"

Trying very hard to remain cool and calm, Thea said, "Some man bumped into me so hard that I almost fell down. Yakov asked him to apologise and finally he did, but he accused Yakov of hurting me when I tripped. That man was just really rude. After he left, we sat down to eat and then you lot came in."

"This is all that happened?"

"Basically. The shop owner came out and talked to Yakov, too."

The younger policeman pulled a face that made it clear he didn't believe anything that they had said. He asked suspiciously, "And may I ask why a Russian and an Englishwoman are here in Canada, ma'am?"

Confused why this concerned him, Thea shrugged. "We came over to visit my husband's uncle."

"Here in Canada?"

"No. In America."

"Then why are you in Canada, ma'am?"

Bucky's reply was very firm. "I had a disagreement with my uncle, so we did not stay."

"Which caused you to come to Thunder Bay?"

Bucky quite calmly explained, "No, we are driving to Banff."

Both policemen could not have made it clearer that they disbelieved everything Bucky and Thea had told them, but they did not seem to have figured out a way to detain them. The younger policeman continued intermittently staring at Thea, which made her fear that they had got some sort of missing person report. Although, it seemed quite unlikely for Canadian policeman to be looking out for someone missing from Virginia.

Anxious to end the interaction, Thea quietly asked, "May I please have my ID back?"

The policeman handed her the wallet and wrote several more things down in his book.

"I think that is all, sir. Thank you, ma'am. I hope that you enjoy your visit to Canada."

Bucky waited until the policeman were out of the shop and then exclaimed, "Дерьмо!"

The old woman asked with a knowing look, "Was your disagreement with your uncle very bad?"

"The worst kind."

"Then you are in trouble. I am sorry, Russian. I will not give information."

"Thank you, babusya. Come, Bella. Change of plans."

Thea grabbed her sandwich and Coke, but Bucky took them from her, so she could use the crutches to work her way out of the store. When they were back in the car, Bucky said, "Hold on." He pulled the SUV out quickly and made a sharp turn to the alley and then through a parking lot. By the time that they had reached the other side, Bucky saw the police car and parked quickly. "Stay here."
"Don't do anything to them, please. Bucky, they were just trying to help. What are you going to do?!

"This information will get back to HYDRA."

"How? We weren't arrested. They didn't take copies of our IDs."

"Stay here, Bella."

"No. Tell me, please. What are you going to do?"

"It is not important for you to know. I promise it will be fine."

Her head resting against the cool of the window, Thea could not fight the nausea that was overwhelming her. She sat miserably in the SUV for nearly fifteen minutes before Bucky finally came back. When they pulled out again, heading in the same direction as before, there was complete silence in the car. Feeling far too ill, she didn't even touch her food or drink. Finally, after nearly twenty minutes of quiet, Thea asked, "Tell me what you did. Did you kill them?"

Shocked, Bucky replied with fierce anger, "Absolutely not! Какого черта ты думаешь, что я? Ты считаешь, что я монстр?! I persuaded them that they met a man answering the description of another HYDRA agent, who is also a Russian. I convinced them that the girl with him was very tall and blond. They will not forget what I persuaded them they saw. Черт возьми!"

"Well how did you do that then? What did you do?"

"This is a part of my training. Both men are physically unharmed, but they will not forget what I reminded them they actually saw."

Thea murmured disbelievingly, "I can't believe you could do all of that in only 15 minutes without hurting them."

Bucky took a corner extremely aggressively, as he angrily explained, "I said they are physically unharmed and that is the truth. Believe me or not as you wish, Bella."

They drove for nearly twenty minutes in complete silence, before Bucky said miserably, "When I got free, I made a vow not to kill unless there was truly no other option. My total since then is now five men in just over two months. So, I am still a killer, despite my desire otherwise. Did you really think I would murder those policemen? Черт возьми, Bella!"

Thea whispered, "I had no idea what to think. You just said that I didn't need to know. That sounded like killing."

"Do you think that is all I do? There are hundreds of ugly things that men can do to each other that are far short of death, Bella. I am trained in many of them."

"I am sorry. I suppose it was unfair of me to assume you were going to do that."

Bucky grunted. "Yes, since I have promised you that I do not do that anymore. I can understand you not trusting me completely, but if you believe that I am still an assassin then why are you here?"

Thea frowned. "I want to trust you and I really, really want to believe you. However, we drove for miles with a body in the boot and I didn't even know. That's terrifying. It isn't too surprising that I'm still very unsure of you, is it?"
Bucky's expression of rage softened and finally he said "No, it isn't. Ultimately this is my f*** up, not yours."

Thea looked down at the space between them, noticed her sandwich and watery, warm coke, and sighed. She put her hand on his arm placatingly and asked, "Why did you act so insane with that man in the sandwich shop? He was a jerk, but certainly not worth it."

Bucky did not reply for almost five minutes, by which time Thea had turned away.

"Because I was angry at myself about this morning. I should have more restraint. I have always had excellent self-control and now I am just...I don't know, lost."

Surprised, she said, "I am sorry."

He clenched his jaw as he replied stiffly, "You should not keep apologising when I make mistakes."

"I feel like we are in a farce." With an odd little laugh, she replied, "In a film, this would all be so easy."

Surprised, Bucky looked over at her and replied, "The only part of this situation that is like a movie is the reform of the villain by a good, beautiful girl. But I think this is not a romance, but a tragedy."

Thea looked over at him and then said seriously, "I don't want to be in a tragedy. According to you, I could have had that by going home and staying with my brother." She curled her legs up on the seat, so her feet were touching him slightly and leant against the door with a sigh. "Instead, I am here with you."

Bucky did not reply, so they drove in silence for some time.
Chapter 9

Things had become extremely difficult and strained between them for the four days it took to reach Watson Lake. They had slept in the SUV each night: Thea curled up on the bench under two blankets and Bucky on the floor beneath her. She knew that there were at least three more days in which they were sleeping in the SUV, which she could hardly wait to be rid of. It was boring, but it would not have been nearly so unpleasant had Bucky not been very stiff and dictatorial about everything. In fact, she felt sure that if he weren't being such a horrid berk, then they could have been doing much better. As it was, she was strongly regretting agreeing to consider something with him. Of course, they had not really acted on it in any meaningful way. Thank goodness. Yet, she knew that her decision had changed things in his mind, nor was it likely to be easily reversible. What would happen if she told him that she was over the idea and wanted nothing from him other than his services as a friendly ex-HYDRA assassin? That seemed unlikely to be a popular decision, really.

Forcing herself to use the cover name she so disliked, Thea whispered, "Yakov?"

"Mm."

A little more loudly, she said clearly, "Yakov."

Bucky lifted himself up on one elbow and looked at Thea. "What is wrong?"

"I don't like this."

He sat all the way up and leant against the back of the driver's seat. "I can't change it. Our travel is always going to be circuitous and slow."

"I don't mean that, really."

He breathed out heavily. "I see. I don't have any solution for that either."

Her voice shaky with her frustration and disappointment, Thea asked, "Why must you be such a massive, great git? Can you really not talk pleasantly to me? Perhaps treat me nicely like an actual person?"

Bucky shifted his position and looked at her in the near darkness. "Of course, I should be able to do it, but I keep losing control. Я знаю, что я не заслуживаю тебя. Я не могу по-настоящему выиграть тебя. Ты здесь, потому что ты оказались в ловушке."

"You always start saying things in Russian when you are talking about us or anything emotional. But you know that I don't understand, so it's awfully rude. Please stop."

Bucky sighed miserably. "I am not trying to be rude, Bella. I am trying to respect you and what is right for you now. My need or desire is not important."

"Well, I need to be treated like a person. You have gone back to barking orders at me and barely looking at me, which is bang out of order. How am I supposed to feel when you are like that?"

Bucky cursed bluntly and unfolded himself from his position on the floor to get up on the seat next to her. He took her hand in his and said, "I knew I would f*** things up. I am sorry."

"Did something else happen back at that sandwich shop when the lady was talking to you? Is that
what made you start being this difficult and weird with me again or was it my assumption about you going after the policemen?"

He let his hair fall in front of his face in the way he did when he did not want her to see his emotions, as he replied blankly, "Both. I know that everyone else will assume that I am still a heartless killer. I hoped you were different."

"I don't think that now, but you have to understand that you made it very easy for me to get the wrong idea."

Bucky shrugged and looked away, as if he were unaffected by her words. However, Thea could see his misery clearly from his posture. "You are right. The babushya at the shop talked to me of you. She had me pegged perfectly."

"What did she say?"

Cutting his eyes towards her briefly, he asked bitterly, "Other than comments on mannerless Russian men?"

"But wasn't she Russian?"

"No, no, no. She was Ukrainian."

Surprised, Thea asked, "Do you speak Ukrainian, too?"

Bucky shrugged again. "Of course. It was useful, so they had me learn. I learnt Arabic, Farsi, Serbo-Croatian, German, Italian, and Romanian well, but I was only proficient in languages like Spanish or Chinese. Some of the others knew thirty languages."

Not sure she wanted to learn who these others were, Thea replied, "Oh. Ok. What did the old lady say to you?"

Bucky leant back against the bench cushion and groaned. "It doesn't matter."

Thea narrowed her eyes and looked at him with an unimpressed frown. "Apparently it does, since you are still upset about it days later."

He stared up at the ceiling of the SUV and bitterly stated, "Advice about surviving unrequited love. Is this what you wanted to know?"

Thea sighed with frustration, but when she saw the deeply pained look he turned on her, she placed her hand on his briefly and asked, "So your solution was to guarantee she would be right by making me wish I had never agreed to consider this?"

He picked up her hand gently and asked with concern, "Is that what I have done?"

"Almost."

"But not completely?"

"Not completely. But very nearly."

Bucky reached out and touched his fingers to the back of her hand before pulling away quickly. She budged up closer to him and heard the intake of breath her movement caused him to take. She leant over and put her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes, and yawned before she said again a bit drowsily, "But not completely."
She was unprepared for how swiftly and tightly his right arm encircled her. He whispered in her ear, "Good. Ты мой, а я твой."

When she woke up, Thea realised that her head was laid across Bucky's lap with his arm wrapped around her midriff to keep her from rolling off the bench. She knew that she had not fallen asleep in such an extremely intimate position, but she didn't feel like she minded particularly either, which was surprising in itself. She was going to have to process what that meant, but there would be plenty of time for that during the long hours ahead of driving. In the very early light, Thea turned her face and saw that he was awake and watching her. "Do we need to go now?"

"If you are ready."

Thea sat up with his help, looked at his anxious expression, and smiled reassuringly. "Did you sleep?"

"No."

"I could drive you know. If you wanted to sleep, I mean."

Suddenly very tense, he replied sharply, "No. I am fine."

"I didn't mean to cause you to get so little rest. I should have waited to talk to you this morning."

"I would not trade a minute of sleep for last night."

Thea's face flushed. "I don't remember shifting position. Was it terribly uncomfortable with me like that?"

He reached behind them and pulled forwards a large black parka, which he handed to her. He dismissively replied, "No. I could sit like that with you for days. Put on your coat before we climb out. It is very cold."

Thea slipped on the heavy parka that Bucky had gotten for her in Regina and started to feel about for her crutches under the seat. Instead, Bucky reached past her and opened the door. Then he gripped her in his metal arm and slid out. Thea was too shocked to react, but as he opened the front door and deposited her on the passenger seat, she wondered how he could carry her so easily. Just how strong had those HYDRA experiments made him?

When he had got in on the driver side and shut the door, Thea turned and asked, "May I ask a question?"

Surprised, Bucky replied, "Yes."

"Are you a super-soldier like Captain America or is it something else that they did to you?"

Bucky's face switched rapidly from placid to angry, but he stiffly replied, "Yes, it is very similar."

"So that is all?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'all'. They have changed me completely. I am faster, stronger, more durable, everything. I am hardly human now."

"That isn't true. Your body has just been changed." She looked at him for a moment and saw clearly the rage and self-disgust he felt. "My body was changed, too. You know, I used to be a competitive ice-skater. I was quite good, really. Then after a bad injury and lots of visits to
specialists, I got the diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis. In a short amount of time, I went from swimming, playing tennis, and skating all the time, to barely being able to walk round my family's house without a cane. Methotrexate helped stabilise me somewhat, but biologics have so far been unhelpful. Therefore, I slid from well above average athletic ability down to far below. We are neither of us less human because our bodies changed, are we?"

Bucky watched her for a while, clearly considering what she had told him. Eventually, he asked anxiously, "Your disease…is it fatal?"

"No, not really. I can live a pretty long, full life." Bucky breathed out with relief, which made Thea peer up at him. "You've been worried about that, haven't you?"

He answered with an intense look down at her. "Yes."

"I'm ok. I have more fragile bones and I get injured very easily. But I will push through it."

"Then it is good that I don't, so I can protect you."

Thea commented lightly, "You lifted me in one arm like I'm a baby kitten." Pausing for a moment, she then decided to risk adding, "It's a bit ridiculous really, but rather excellent, if I'm honest."

Bucky glanced at her with genuine shock and, after a full minute of watching her, he then smiled almost mischievously. "You like that?"

"I'm a very petite girl. Of course, I find that appealing, you silly man."

"I'll have to keep doing it then."

Suddenly feeling like laughing, Thea replied, "That was not an invitation. It was only meant to be a compliment, you plonker."

"Too late, kitten." He started the engine, swerved out onto the road, and quickly accelerated to his usual breakneck speed.

The following three days were nearly the polar opposite from the previous four. She had begun to tuck her hand in his whenever they stopped for breaks. She knew that she was smiling much more often and noticed that he was watching her even more than before. At night, whilst still sleeping on the ground below her, she still knew he was attuned to her every move, but she no longer felt it was out of anger or criticism.

Even more important, she had managed to get Bucky to actually talk about himself. After his initial discomfort and anger, he seemed to have grown comfortable enough to answer her questions once she told him that learning about him was non-negotiable if he wanted her to be friendly. His memories of the more distant past were still mostly non-existent. He remembered a few things about Brooklyn. He remembered Steve Rogers. Eventually, he felt that he remembered a girl, which seemed to upset him very much. This brought on a sullen fit, which lasted most of an afternoon before Thea finally decided to ask him more. "Why did remembering that girl make you so upset? I've never seen you like that, honestly."

"I remember that she was pretty and really liked me, but I wasted it. Her name was…Bonnie? Yes, Bonnie. But there is a Connie somewhere, too. I think she was Bonnie though."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

He shrugged as if to say he didn't care, but Thea could see he was deeply disturbed. "I had hoped to
find that before they captured me, I was more decent. If I was a better man once, then I could possibly be again. But I remember her crying and me just walking away. That makes me a pretty bad guy, Bella."

"Is that all you remember? You don't know why she was crying. Was it during the war? Maybe she was saying goodbye because you were going off to fight."

Bucky's hands tightened on the wheel as he considered what she said. "I don't know. I don't remember enough."

"Then you can't judge that memory yet. Anyway, your assessment now is more important to me. You think that a man who leaves a woman crying and coldly walks away is a bastard. That says something about who you are now, doesn't it?"

Bucky didn't reply for a while. Finally, he said, "You are very willing to think the very best of everything I do. You shouldn't. I have done things that cannot be rehabilitated."

Thea nodded. "That is true, but I am not trying to change those things, since it is impossible. I want you to become whoever you are meant to be now. You will have to find a way to accept all that. The past can't be changed, but you can be."

"I'm still guilty, Bella. I am still a mass murderer."

"You did not choose to commit any of those murders. I don't know what they did, but from the look in your eyes when you mention the conditioning, it must have been unbelievably horrible."

He did not reply for several minutes as he tried to control his breathing. Finally, Bucky said emotionlessly, "All I remember was pain beyond description."

"No one could go through that and withstand it, right?"

Bucky's voice was extremely harsh as he said, "Никто. Это было без конца и без побега."

Making a face at his return to Russian, she asked sarcastically, "I assume that was an answer?"

"No end and no escape. It would break anyone."

"Then you cannot blame yourself for being one of the victims of their crimes. You did those things. You still have the skills and the knowledge from then, but you don't have their conditioning forcing you to do it again."

"All they have to do is say ten words. That is all, Bella. Ten words and I'm their убийство шлюха."

"Ten words that only became meaningful after intense torture."

Bucky pulled the SUV over as he rasped miserably, "But that is all that is needed now, Bella. They could say 10 words and I would forget you. I would kill you if they ordered it and not even know it was you. That is not the only thing that they have ordered me to do, Bella. I didn't only kill. I tortured."

Thea laid her hand over his comfortably and replied gently, "I'm sorry. How horrible to remember being forced to do things you naturally despise."

His voice vibrated with rage, as he said, "I am the one who did that. You don't feel sorry for the criminal, Bella. I'm the man who did that."
Catching her breath at the strength of his fury, Thea then replied as firmly as she could, "I am sorry precisely because you are a victim, too."

"Imagine watching a movie of the worst crime and it is real—a memory from your own eyes. I cannot ever deserve to touch you after that, Bella. I can’t wash that s*** off these hands. Ever."

Thea moved all the way over next to him and put her hands on his knee. She ignored his agonised expression and said gently, "I cannot tell you what to feel or how to think. However, I can decide what I think or how I feel. I believe that you are a good man who had horrid, awful things done to force him to perpetrate what he would never have done otherwise. Now you are free and you want to do what is right. Do not punish the wrong person for HYDRA's crimes. Not you and not me."

Bucky slid one hand up and stroked her hair reverently. "Why are you here with me? What made you come?"

She shrugged and made a sad, uncertain sound as she thought for a moment. "Somehow I trusted you. I couldn't go to my brother and put him at risk from these HYDRA people. Therefore, I had to go with you, so I did. And here I am."

He continued to play with a strand of her long hair, but he could not bring himself to look in her eyes as he replied, "But you didn't have to be here like this. You could have let me protect you, but you didn't have to choose this. Why did you?"

"I don't think that is entirely true. Do you really think that the two of us could be on the run, essentially, and remain nice platonic companions? I know that you offered that, and I think you would have tried your best to be respectful if I refused you. However, I don't think that you are very good at burrying your emotions. Given your feelings and unhealthy recent past, expecting mere companionship seemed highly unrealistic. I'm actually not uninterested in you, but I do have reasonable concerns. Yet there are things that make me hopeful, too."

Bucky looked up in shock at her brutally honest reply, but she was glancing away with embarrassment as she continued to explain, "You gave up your freedom after having regained it for only two months. You could already be well into a new life in another country now, but here you are driving across North America with me."

"I have a million doubts about this and us and you and everything. But then I see that determined look on your face and suddenly my doubts slide away. That is why I trust you."

"Is that all you feel?"

She looked down at his chest and bit her lip as she hesitated.

He picked up her hand and held it between his. "I need to know, Bella."

"No, but I am not totally sure what I feel yet, if I'm honest. I have these preconceived traditional notions about how a romance is supposed to go. We don't fit any of it. Not at all."

"No. You cannot have normal, not with me, Bella."

She sighed with exasperation and replied, "That is quite an understatement. I can't even call you your real name. I don't like using the other name, so I avoid it."
He slid his left arm around her and said very firmly, "I don't really want you to use that name right now."

Thea looked up at him and saw a look of extreme intensity and suddenly knew what he was planning to do. Her head swam and she felt her chest tighten in panic. His metal arm stiffened around her and his right hand firmly gripped the back of her head. She felt a wave of uncertainty and fear that simply dropped away the instant that his lips touched hers. All at once, her mind floated off and she was drifting somewhere that only the moment mattered. When he pulled away, she looked up at him with such confusion that he asked with panic. "Bella?"

She didn't trust herself to say anything other than his name. "Bucky."

"Was that…was that okay?"

"Hmm. Yes."

"Are you sure?"

She replied softly, "I've never been kissed before."

His hand cupped the back of her head again and he kissed her again but with all the longing and despair that he had restrained before. Thea responded gently at first but was finally so overwhelmed by him that she was left feeling completely addled. She didn't speak but just collapsed against his shoulder and let him hold her much more tightly than she would normally be comfortable with. It was quite some time before she gathered her wits together, but she did not think that he was much in control of himself either. She moved slightly, so her head was more on his chest than his metal shoulder. However, her movement brought him out of whatever trance he had fallen into, so he said with raw emotion, "I love you, Bella."

Totally unprepared to deal with his statement and overwhelmed with everything, Thea hid her face in his chest and drew in a deep, sobbing breath. She didn't move for a while, but then felt as if she needed to see his face so she pulled back. Thinking that she wanted to get away from him, Bucky released her and looked down at her in sudden consternation.

"I only wanted to look at your face instead of your t-shirt. I'm sorry."

After a moment, his expression relaxed, and he smiled slightly. "That was much more intense than I expected."

"I always wondered why people made such a big deal about kissing. I didn't see how it could really be quite that amazing. Funny. I think I feel drunk or at least what I imagine being drunk feels like."

Bucky laughed genuinely at that. "You too? Kissing has never felt like that before. I would fail any sobriety test right now. How in the h*ll did you just do that to me?"

Thea was finding it very difficult to look away from him, as she allowed herself finally to admit that he was ridiculously handsome and she was stupidly attracted to him. This really wasn't supposed to happen. She was meant to hold him at arms-length until she was sure he wasn't some coldblooded killer or insane or just too broken to handle. She was sure of the first two, but not about the last. It was too late to turn back now. She was absolutely going to fall for him, too, and there probably was nothing she could do to stop it. Attempting to salvage some portion of control over the situation, Thea cheekily replied, "Awesomeness. Obviously."

He let his head roll back as he laughed before he kissed her forehead and replied, "Ok, kitten. I will have to agree with you there."
"It's cold."

He snorted with amusement but started the car and turned up the heat. "There. It will warm up quickly."

"Bucky?"

His eyes snapped to her sharply, but he replied evenly, "Yes?"

"Is it all going to be ok?"

He slid his arm back around her and said seriously, "If you mean will I keep you safe, then yes. However, if you mean us, then I don't know. I can promise to do everything that I can to make you happy, but I don't know whether I can be what you want."

She did not reply, but when he tugged her closer, she laid her head on his shoulder and asked, "Do we need to drive more still?"

Bucky looked extremely conflicted, but he finally said honestly, "Yes, we should get back on the road now."

"Okay. Still cold."

Bucky reached back and pulled her parka forwards. "Lay this over you."

Thea smiled at him in a way that she didn't even realise was different, but Bucky's eyes widened, and he grabbed her hand to raise to his lips.

"I'm suddenly super tired."

"We need to drive another two hours before we stop, but you can fall asleep now."

"Okay, you sure you don't mind?"

Bucky shook his head. "Go to sleep, kitten."
Chapter 10

"Okay, do you remember what I said?"

Thea looked up at him with very scared eyes, as she replied, "Yes. Is it going to be really awful, Bucky?"

His voice very tense, Bucky replied seriously, "You cannot call me that now, Bella."

"Oh all right. Yakov. I don't like that name. It isn't you."

"It is, actually. James is my first name. Yakov is the closest Russian equivalent."

She pulled a face that made her opinion very clear. "I still don't like it. It doesn't match you."

His voice very deep as he attempted to impress the importance of keeping their cover on her, Bucky stated firmly, "It doesn't matter. It is my name now."

"Ok. Fine. But I really do need to know though. Is it going to be awful?"

Bucky kissed the top of her head and said honestly, "Yes, but I will be right there with you. We have warm clothing and ear protection. It is the best we can do. I have oxygen, in case of depressurisation."

Gasping with fear, Thea moaned, "Oh golly, that sounds horrific. I really am scared now."

He watched her for a moment, as if trying to decide something. "I have done it before. It is not pleasant, but you will be ok. When this part of the journey is all over, we will be in Algiers."

"How many stops?"

"Three at least."

She sat silently for a moment and then commented through a haze of terror, "I've not even thought of going to North Africa before."

Bucky put both arms around her and said with a slight smile, "Well, as a travel agent, I'm pretty terrible. Not very good accommodations, but we will fly in without anyone knowing and we should be safe. Those are the only two considerations we can have for now."

Thea sighed and replied, "Ok. All right. I'm ready."

He leant down and kissed her firmly, more like he was saying goodbye than anything romantic. "Good. I will carry you in, so you just need to hold on and keep your head down. There will be several serious jumps. They won't hurt me, but you will feel a shock when we land. Hold on as tightly as you can manage. You cannot withstand a jump like that if I'm not holding on to you."

Looking really frightened, Thea whispered, "Ok. I will hold on."

"Are you sure you don't want me to tie you on? There is the added risk that you can't escape on your own in case of discovery, but it would be worth it if you need the extra help staying on, Bella."

She shivered with fear. "I-I wouldn't even know how to escape. No, I promise that I won't let go."
"All right, then we start now."

They got out of the car and Bucky began tossing the contents of the back seat onto the ground. Then he dropped the blanket on the ground and pulled her close to him again. "You will be safe here, Bella. Understand? I won't be long."

She tucked her face into his chest, so he would not see the terror on her face, as she asked, "How long will you be?"

Not deceived, Bucky lifted her face with his hand and looked down at her intently. "Not long. I will torch the SUV and then run back. Maybe 20 minutes."

Thea breathed in and out several times before she finally managed to whisper, "Ok."

"I would not leave you here if I did not believe that you would be completely safe, Bella." He kissed her forehead and said, "Time for me to go. There is a strict clock on this op, kitten."

"Ok. I'll...I'll just wait here." Thea immediately dropped onto the blanket with the bags next to her and looked up at him. Bucky smiled tightly, but she could see that he had already pulled back into tactical mode. Looking quickly at his watch, he hurried around the vehicle and got inside without even a look back at her.

She watched as he sped off at what was probably top speed and felt a rill of terror when the rear lights disappeared. She sat very still and listened to all the sounds around her. The knife he had given her was in her coat pocket and she had promised him that she would be ready. However, it was closer to 25 minutes when he returned. He had approached her very silently and it was not from the direction that she was expecting. Therefore, when he placed a hand on her shoulder, she spun and dropped her knife to jab so quickly that she hadn't even realised it was him until he had already closed his hand around hers and stopped it. "You are getting very good at that, kitten. Very good. A normal man would be screaming right now."

"Why didn't you say something? I could have hurt you!"

He laughed, which made her glare at him furiously. "Bella, you couldn't have. My reflexes are far too quick for you, and since I know your defence move, I was very prepared."

Outraged, she demanded, "Do you mean that you did that on purpose to test me?"

"Yes, and you passed."

"You scared me! That isn't nice."

Bucky smiled slightly at her and replied firmly, "Neither is HYDRA. You need to be prepared. As much as I wish I could just spend every day relaxing with you, I can't. My primary job is keeping you safe and I can never let down my guard."

"I think that scaring me on purpose makes you a big stupid jerk."

"Well, as long as I'm your big stupid jerk, Bella, then I will accept that. Come on."

He helped her up and then rolled the blanket into a tight ball to tuck into the large duffel. He put the rucksack on her and hung the duffel on his front before crouching down. "Go ahead and get on, kitten. You need to get a very firm grip. I will hold your hands in place when I jump, but I will have to hold your legs the rest of the time, so just grab tight."
Thea draped her hands around his neck and her legs around his waist. He held her much more tightly than he had the other time he had carried her this way. Then he began to run. By the time he got up to full speed, she was hanging on for dear life, as he was moving incredibly fast. He was carrying the equivalent of his body weight at least and yet he was quicker than most sprinters and he just kept on running. She realised that when she had been impressed by his physical abilities before, that she had not seen even the half of it. Then she saw they were approaching a wall. Her arms braced against each other with her hands gripping her forearms and felt him jump with such power that she was stunned. He had managed to scale a wall. With her on his back.

They continued forwards, keeping to the shadows, until they reached a building with another wall. She closed her eyes, waited for the jump, and felt another shock when he landed on top of the wall and then jumped up to the top of the building. He ran in a crouched position, gripping her legs around him tightly. When they got to the end of the building, he jumped off as if it were just a few steps. Bucky wove behind several posts and piles of cargo, looking round as he ran and occasionally changing direction based on unexpected obstacles. Finally, he clambered over something and jumped again, but Thea was no longer looking. She kept her face buried in his back and gripped her arms together so tightly that she knew she was going to be in terrible pain later.

After a sudden further burst of speed that quite took her breath away, she felt they were somewhere dark and noticed that the smell around them had changed. She risked looking and saw that they had somehow got inside the belly of the cargo plane. When had that happened?

Bucky dropped her legs and she took that as a sign that she could get off, so she slid down his back to stand on the floor of the plane. He took her hand tightly and pulled her behind a very large vehicle with a large gun on top. That was when it occurred to her that they must be in a military plane even though the airfield had definitely not looked like a military base at all. If they got caught there, then it would totally be curtains for sure. First adjusting his duffel to one side and grabbing the rucksack from her, Bucky swept her up in his arms and moved further back to one side of the plane. He walked up to a crate, which he then nudged with his foot, so the false front swung open like a door. He carried her inside and then nudged the crate side closed again. Almost immediately, she heard movement in the cargo area and clung to him in terror. He smiled down at her and shook his head to reassure her. Then he dropped down to the ground with her still in his arms. Setting her onto his lap and not the ground, Bucky pulled the rucksack closer and opened it to get out their ear protection. He slipped one over her ears and then put on his own. Next, he leant against the side of the crate and pulled her down, so she had her head on his shoulder and was leaning against his chest with her legs stretched out between his so they just barely fit within the crate's walls. Lastly, he pulled their blanket out and tugged it overtop them.

The next 36 hours was a jarring, horrifying h*ll for Thea. The sound was so loud that it vibrated in her chest. For her the cold was bone deep, despite her winter weather gear and Bucky holding her to try to keep her warm. She was quite terrified of being found and being arrested by soldiers, who she assumed were the people moving around occasionally in the cargo area. Eventually, she was in so much pain that she eventually reached a point of half consciousness. By the time that they arrived in their final destination, she was so ill that Bucky strapped both the green duffle and the rucksack to his back and clutched her to his chest as he disembarked. Accordingly, he came extremely close to being caught, as he was not able to run quite as quickly when struggling to keep her clutched to him.

When they finally got off the airfield and around to where he had planned to appropriate his next vehicle, Bucky looked down at Thea and felt his fear increase. She was extremely pale and wasn't responding to any stimuli. Something was very wrong. Angrily, he stalked up to a large SUV and made short work of the locks, so he could place her on the back seat. He did not like the feel of her clammy brow: that did not betoken well. He knew that this would be too much for her. It was physically tiring for him, so it would be beyond bearable for someone as fragile as Thea. He
should not have been swayed by her pleading. He had known that she didn't understand what she was asking them to do.

Thea opened her eyes and saw that she was on a hospital bed in an unfamiliar place and that Bucky was asleep in the chair next to her. Where were they and what had happened? She immediately tried to sit up but felt a wave of pain sear through her arm when she pressed herself up. However, her movement was enough to wake Bucky, who had been holding her hand as he slept.

He broke into a wide, joyous smile unlike anything she had seen from him, as he jumped up and exclaimed, "Bella! How do you feel?"

"Where are we?"

Bucky's voice was somewhat gravelly, as if it he had not used it in a long time. He brought her hand up to his chest, as he explained gently, "I had to take you to the hospital, Bella. We have been here for three days."

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry! That will muck up all your plans."

Incredulous, Bucky leant over and kissed her forehead. "Do you really think that matters if you are sick? I was very afraid that you might not be ok. You wouldn't wake up, Bella."

A nurse came into the room and began conversing with Bucky in rapid Arabic. The woman then turned to Thea and asked questions with Bucky translating for them. It seemed that she had a hairline fracture in her right forearm and a serious respiratory infection, as well as an imbalance due to her RA medications that they had set right. She was told that she would have to stay for several more days, but, after the misery of the plane, she wasn't too sorry to stay in a comfortable hospital bed for a while.

When they were finally alone again, Bucky said awkwardly, "They didn't approve of me sitting in here all this time. I had to get very insistent before they allowed it."

Thea smiled gratefully. "I am glad. I would have been so scared if I woke up without you here."

Bucky took a deep breath as he sat down and looked at her for a while before finally speaking. "So that is what I want to talk to you about: where we are going from here. Our final destination is somewhere I plan to stay for quite a while. Maybe a few months or more. How we get there is not completely decided yet."

Very firmly, Thea said, "No more cargo planes. Ever."

"Yes, that will never happen again. I should have held my ground on that decision, since I knew you had no idea what it is like to travel that way."

Thea saw a flash of anger pass over Bucky's face and realised how much he was blaming himself for her illness. "I should have listened to you when you said it was going to be very uncomfortable."

Bucky nodded tightly. "Well, that is settled. It will take some time to get to our final destination, however. We will travel an extremely indirect route and rarely stay anywhere other than very rundown locations. It won't be safe in any way for you to be on your own much of the time."

She shrugged and said with a small smile, "That isn't very different from how it has been."
"No, Bella, it is. We aren't going to hide in abandoned buildings or sleep in a car. There will be people around and they will notice you. It is unavoidable."

"Ok, but you will be there, won't you?"

Bucky's voice dropped as he watched her more intently and replied, "I will. However, we will have to practice your self-defence much more. You will spend a lot of time inside whatever room we rent, and we will not be able to stay separately. It is unavoidable. I am sorry."

 Quite confused, Thea asked, "We've not stayed separately yet, so what is the problem? What are you trying to say?"

He stood up and started walking back and forth anxiously. "When I was your age, if a man had any respect for a woman then he would never have stayed in the same room as her—let alone the same bed. I don't know how to adjust to the expectations of this time, especially since you are unusually conservative and do not fit the modern standards either. There will be one bed for you and the floor for me, but it will appear as if we are together."

Thea sighed. "Okay. I'm not very worried about what other people think about us, really. I'm much more concerned about how we actually are with each other. Also, sleeping on the floor every night is quite unacceptable. You cannot do that for very long."

His expression making it abundantly clear that he would brook no opposition, Bucky angrily replied, "I can, I have, and I will. I slept on the floor next to Steve many times as a kid when he was sick with something again. I can take it fine, Bella."

"You mean Steve Rogers."

"Yeah, who else? He wasn't always like he is now. When we were kids, he had just about every f***in' thing wrong with him that you could have and then some. I was the stronger one then, not that he ever gave in to his limits, the stupid jerk. Why do you think I am so comfortable carryin' someone on my back that way, Bella? When we were pretty young, like 9 and 10, the dumb idiot would get himself into yet another fight and I'd end up carryin' him back after I pounded the bastard as had hit him. Steve was so tiny that he was as small as my little brother Jack, who was 7. He was always so f***in' weak and sick all winter long and he'd always push himself too far. I'd be terrified each winter that he wasn't gonna to make it through. When Steve was sick and his mother was on her shift at the hospital, that's when I'd stay there with him. Ma always worried that I'd get sick too, but no matter how ill Steve was, I never got nothing. I remember one time, I stayed there a whole week before the fever broke."

Her eyes wide with surprise and empathy, Thea replied, "You really were close, weren't you? I didn't realise how much you cared for him."

"Essentially, Steve and me, we were brothers, Thea."

She looked at him sadly. "But you can't contact him now? Maybe he would want to help you. He must know that you didn't chose to be the Winter Soldier."

His eyes darting around the room as his hand moved to a pocket that Thea knew held a gun and probably more, Bucky snarled, "Don't say that name here, Bella. We are not secure. It is a hospital room."

Her eyes filled with tears as she replied, "Right. You are such a berk."

"Better you think that than someone overhears and passes information on us. The nurses might
pretend they don't understand English, but most of them do."

"Maybe, but you don't have to be awful to me."

Bucky groaned. "No, no I don't. F***. I'm sorry, Bella." He dropped into the chair next to her and repeated again, "I'm sorry. S***."

Thea looked away. They sat in silence for a bit, before she said quietly, "Will you tell me more about your family?"

Bucky gestured resignedly with both hands. "I had two brothers of my own, but Steve and me were closer. Jack and me were too different. Joe didn't care as much, since he and Jack were as close as Steve and me. They even enlisted together, the stupid punks. It got 'em both killed. Jack in France, Joe in Africa." Bucky clenched his hands together tightly and made a face of intense anger. "They were d*** good kids. F***, I truly wanted to be Hitler's personal escort to h*** after I heard about Joe. Instead, I got delivered right to HYDRA's Nazi scientists like a f***in’ Christmas present. One of the last things I remember—other than worrying about if Steve got back from the mission safe—is being put in the Chair as I was thinking that Ma deserved much better than to loose all three boys to the same s*** bastards."

Thea managed to grab one of his hands and placed a kiss on it, which startled him enough to stop his enraged, heavy breathing. He leant his head onto the edge of her bed and stayed like that for quite some time.

Finally, Thea said gently, "I am so sorry about Jack and Joe. I know how painful it is to lose a brother to war."

Bucky sat up sharply and looked at her with surprise. She could see him thinking for a while before he asked, "That was Christopher? Was it in Afghanistan?"

"Yes. I don't want to talk about it, really. I will tell you more about it one day, but it was only a year ago and I just can't talk about it yet. I sort of went mad when it happened actually. I can't imagine how you felt losing them both."

He got up from the chair and sat on the edge of her hospital bed. "You can tell me when you are ready, Bella. I did worry what happened to my sister when she lost all three of us. Ma died only a year after the war. I did find that out from the museum exhibit, which just f***in’ killed me. She had it so hard and it never got easy for her. I know my sister must have been married, since the stuff she donated to the exhibit had her married name on the sign. I'm not sure I can handle knowing more because it might be bad like with Ma."

Thea took his hand and gave it another tiny kiss. "I can only imagine. When Christopher died...oh I can't, Bucky. It was the end of the world. Richard and Tommy were still there, but it wasn't enough. Tommy was so hurt that he couldn't help me, even though he and I were really close as children. However, Christopher and I were just different. We didn't need words sometimes. We just knew what each other thought. He was a little insane though. He genuinely loved being a soldier and was so excited to be going back to Afghanistan. He couldn't stand sitting about and feeling useless."

Bucky blew out a sharp breath and replied, "I understand that very well. Kitten, I am d*** sorry that you lost Christopher. I'm also sorry that I blew my top with you and brought all this s*** up. You don't need to deal with my baggage."

She squeezed his hand and looked at him with a sad smile. "If not me, then who? I want to know
these things about you, ok? This is the first time you've talked about that time specifically. You actually sounded like Sergeant Barnes, too, and not a former Russian operative who just remembered Barnes' life. You told all that to me as the man to whom it happened, complete with all the emotions, and you sounded as Brooklyn as you could be."

Clearly surprised, Bucky replied, "It feels like me. It didn't when I read it at the Smithsonian, but it does now. Most memories are too distant or more like a movie than my actual life. Others like some stuff about Steve or losing my brothers feel like they just happened."

"I understand that."

"Perhaps you do. I'm not certain what we should do now." With an embarrassed smile, he said, "I was not thinking entirely clearly when I dragged you along on this journey, so I did not consider everything that I might have otherwise."

Surprised, Thea shook her head and asked, "It seemed like you had quite a lot thought out. How did you even manage to know about that secret crate thing where we hid on that plane? How did we get in and out of there without people shooting at us? I am not sure I want to know how you find and pay for everything we have used so far. You seem a pretty capable planner, even if I suspect you are rather too au fait with extra-legal means of procuring everything."

Bucky grunted and gave her a wry look. "That was all operational knowledge from past missions. That was what I set up the day you stayed in the mausoleum, Bella. We need to discuss the other part of this. When I entered your apartment that day, I fell into a fit of raging temporary insanity that lasted until we were in Alaska. Now I am trying to figure out where we go from here. No, kitten, don't look like that, please. What the h*ll did I say to upset you now?"

Thea stammered in panic, "What do you mean? Was I not really in danger? Was none of that real?"

He took both her hands in his own and said very seriously, "You were and are still in extremely serious danger. I absolutely needed to get you out, Bella. I only meant that my sudden, very unexpected feelings for you took over to a degree that they completely overwhelmed both of us. I have had three days to think about what we should do now. I am unwilling to force anything on you, but we need to talk things through seriously. You need to have full input and consent on whatever happens next."

Thea was bewildered, especially because Bucky had never before included her in the planning. He only presented the plan to her and expected obedience. After a moment, she replied, "Ok. What should we talk about?"

"I cannot promise that you will be able to go back, Bella. This may always be how things are."

A sliver of hope still clinging, Thea asked, "But that might not be the case, mightn't it?"

"If you are able to return to your previous life, it might still be a very long time from now. I cannot go back either, so you should be aware of that, too."

"So to be clear, I may never be able to go home and if I do, then it will be alone."

"Correct."

She breathed out angrily, "Well, that is a fairly rubbish choice."

Dropping her hands and standing up, Bucky sighed. "Yeah, I suppose it is. There are some other just as s*** ones coming, too. I'm sorry. We are going to eventually stop and live somewhere,
which means we will be undocumented. I can easily find some kind of manual work, but we will have to settle in a tenement somewhere. We need to remain invisible."

Thea's eyes were wide with disquiet, "Oh. Ok. Lovely."

"As I said, the plan is to survive, but it won't be in any form of luxury."

Thea looked at him seriously and asked, "Clearly. Is there any other option?"

"No. I'm offering you safety, protection, and my complete devotion, but I cannot promise any comfort."

She faintly replied, "I sort of understood we weren't on holiday, you know."

"Yes. I know." Bucky looked almost sick with anxiety, as he looked down at her.

She stared up at him with very nervous eyes for a few moments, then whispered, "You are scaring me. What is the problem?"

"It isn't a problem. It is a question. Will you mind waking up with me? Can you want that?"

Thea asked with a catch in her voice, "Do I have to know now?"

He almost formally replied, "Not at all."

"Ok." Thea watched him warily. "Was that the only question you had?"

"No, but everything else can wait."

Thea nodded. She watched Bucky stand hunched over with his hands in his jacket pockets. She knew what he wanted. She rolled slightly to find a somewhat more comfortable position. Yet, he was still standing there watching. "I am not ready yet. Is that ok?"

"Yes, of course. I will be back in a few minutes. It is nearly 3 and you should have had your medications 30 minutes ago."

Two days later, Bucky was leaning back in his chair and reading a paperback book in Russian as Thea flipped through a French language magazine. As pretty the pictures were, she knew she was not going to be shopping for any beautiful clothing soon. If ever again, really. Her former life—not much more than a fortnight previously the only life she ever knew or wanted—was hideously at odds with where she was now. "Did they say that I could leave tomorrow?"

He looked up from his book and nodded. "Yes."

"Where are we going after we leave?"

"Our next secure location."

Thea made a very fed up face. "Right, ok. I don't get to know?"

"I prefer to keep my plans quiet for security reasons. Will it change anything for you if you know? If so, I will tell you."

"I suppose it won't matter, no. You wanted to talk about something before. You wanted me to agree to something."
Bucky looked away from her and said stiffly, "I am not asking for anything from you right now, Bella."

"I told you before about what happens if you don't ask me for what you want."

Bucky closed his book and watched her for a while. Finally, he said, "My emotions and desires to have you for mine alone have only strengthened. When I feared that you might not actually wake up, I was terrified that I lost you. I do not ever want to feel like that again, Bella."

She watched him, but she did not speak.

"I have just the one thing that I want. That's you. I will accept to whatever degree that happens even if I am uncomfortable, but not if you are."

"Well, what is the point? We are together whether I am happy or not. You call all the shots, don't you?"

Bucky seemed appalled. "No, far from it, Bella." He flicked her 'wedding ring' and continued, "If I had what I wanted, then we would stop the pretence that upsets you so much and get over to Malta where I can make it happen for real. However, I told you before that you will never have to be with me. You are the one who calls those shots, Bella. I'm just the bodyguard."

Looking down at her fake rings, Thea shook her head and closed her eyes. "I don't feel the same way you do yet though."

His jaws clenched slightly as he stared at her through anguished eyes. However, he answered softly, "I know." He sat back down in his chair and picked up his book. He had been slogging through "Серебряный век: Имена и события" for days. He could tell that he would like reading Azadovsky at any other time, but he didn't have enough brain power left over to process anything intellectual right then. He should return to reading the Russian language collection of Tintin comics that he had found. It was more his speed and somehow those comics felt familiar—almost like he'd read them before.
Too exhausted from days of illness, Thea allowed Bucky to carry her out from the hospital doors to the latest vehicle that he had commandeered. As he reached for the seatbelt to strap her in, she felt a sudden surge of affection for him that surprised her in its randomness and strength.

"Still hungry?"

She took a deep breath and replied, "Very, but most of all I think I could murder a cup of tea."

Bucky cut his eyes to look at her with a surprised laugh. "You are so d*** English sometimes, Bella. OK, I'll have to find you a cup of strong tea to murder."

"Go ahead. Make fun all you like. At least I don't use words that went out with my grandfather."

He laughed again and replied with complete equanimity, "Yep. I'm old. You'll have to find much better insults than that if you want to bother me, Bella."

"So, do I get to know yet where we are going?"

"If it matters, yes. There will be a boat."

"Oh, seriously? Can't we do a plane in the regular way?"

He shook his head and said firmly, "Nope. A boat."

She looked at Bucky and implored him, "Isn't there anywhere we can go without doing a boat, please?"

Bucky started the engine and replied as he pulled out rapidly into the narrow street. "Not really. We need to get north and that is the only way. I'm not taking you through Syria and Palestine right now, which would be the other route."

She closed her eyes and moaned. "Boats are evil incarnate. I hate them."

"The doctor in the hospital said that you could take scopolamine on your current medication regime, so I got some for you. It should help."

Popping her eyes open again, Thea looked at him with pleased surprise, "Did you? Thank you. I suppose there isn't anything else I can do."

Bucky turned the bulky old SUV down a back street as he said, "You need to pull that scarf back up, Bella. We can't draw unwanted attention, and this is an extremely conservative area."

She obediently tugged the dark blue scarf over her hair, but replied angrily, "I really don't like it."

He unsympathetically answered, "We will do a lot of things that we don't like to stay as invisible as possible, Bella. When was the last time you saw me out of doors without a hat? Yet, I despise hats."

"Do you really?"
Nodding, Bucky looked over at her for a moment with an expression she couldn't place, but then turned quickly back at the road. "You can handle a scarf. Are you hungry for a meal or just a snack?"

Thea replied emphatically, "I could eat anything."

He turned the SUV yet again and replied, "Ok. I will get you to our room first and then bring something in to eat."

"All right." Thea turned away and closed her eyes as they drove for another ten minutes. Yet, all of a sudden, she faced him and said, "Bucky?"

Surprised, as he had believed her to be asleep, Bucky replied firmly, "Yakov, kitten, please remember. What is it?"

"I'm not sure what I want to do. I think I'm a bit of a disaster emotionally right now."

Alarmed, Bucky asked, "What is wrong?" He pulled the SUV in front of a very dilapidated, white building. As soon as he had parked, he reached out and took Thea's hand in his.

Thea caught a sob in her throat and sniffed. "I don't even know what I mean. I'm so confused. We are going to live on the run forever? Really?"

He let out a harsh sigh. "I just don't know, Bella. It is also possible that I'll be caught and tossed into a prison somewhere for what I did with HYDRA. That's one of the better of the mostly total s*** possibilities that are likely, actually. Sooner or later, HYDRA should focus their efforts to find me on something other than you. Therefore, it might be possible to set you up with a new identity somewhere eventually, if you want to live a better life away from me. There are a lot of options. Not many of 'em work out too good for me, but I will do anything to be sure you are safe, at least."

Thea shook her head. She curled her legs up to her chest and leant against her knees as she said, "But we are making plans to traverse Europe, I assume, acting like we are married and living in the most rotten of bedsits in horrid tenements. And you will be acting as financial support and bodyguard whilst I do...nothing, really. Is that the plan?"

Obviously upset, Bucky replied unhappily, "Essentially, yeah. I'm not too crazy about what that does to your reputation, Bella, but I guess this isn't back in my day anymore, so no one but me would care even if they did find out we weren't married. Also, we will have to figure out what you will be doing, of course, so you don't go crazy just sitting in a room every day."

"Yeah." She looked over at him and then shoved her face into her knees. "Ok then, Bucky. We should do it."

"Ok, good." He gestured with a grimace towards the building. "We won't be staying anywhere much nicer than this no matter where we are. I have not completely finished arranging the boat, but I will do that tomorrow morning. That means we should be here two nights."

Thea looked over at him and repeated, "Bucky."

"Yes, kitten?"

"I said yes."

Bucky stared at her for a moment as he tried to understand to what she was agreeing. Finally, he
had a flash of understanding. He stared down at her with disbelief. "You want to go to Malta?"

"It makes sense to do so now, since Malta is on the way north sort of. I'm in this situation either way and it is what you want, isn't it?"

He still stared at her as if unconvinced that what he had heard was real. It was worse than he thought. He had managed to crush her spirit along with everything else. "Bella...no. I don't want you to be forced into anything. That is the wrong way. I would never want that."

She turned all the way around, so she could see him clearly, and asked sadly, "What do you want then, Bucky?"

He stared at her for a long time and then quietly replied, "You know what I want, kitten. I am willing to wait for when you are ready. If you are ever ready."

Thea reached out her hand and asked, "I don't just want a bodyguard. That won't really work for either of us anymore, Bucky."

Bucky closed his eyes and lapsed back into Russian for a moment as he tried to control his breathing. "Боже, помоги мне! Ты мой рай и ты мой. Я уничтожу любого, кто попытается отобрать тебя у меня. (G-d, help me! You are my paradise and you are mine. I will destroy any man who tries to take you from me.)" Then he pulled her closer to him and replied, "Be very sure, Bella. I will not part with what is mine once I have it. I will wait as long as you need. It does not matter how long."

Smiling up at him, she asked with a soft, admiring expression that he had not expected to see on any woman's face when looking at him, "Why would I want you to give me up?"

"I like this ring ever so much better."

Bucky looked down and laughed with incredulity. "The other ring was a 12-carat diamond, my pretty one."

"Yes, but it was just a big lie. This one is for real. That is more important."

He had been mortifyingly self-conscious when he presented her with the plain gold band. It was just as clear to him that she was aware that he was embarrassed, which made things even harder for him. He knew that he had let her down, since she deserved something as enormous and special as the ring she had so hated to wear as part of their cover. However, Bucky told himself that he just had to accept what he could afford, since he wasn't stealing something or selling any of that HYDRA s*** to pay for his girl's wedding band. No way. He had parted with favourite gun and his lucky Gerber Tanto pair to fund it, which had just barely been enough. The man had offered something better if Bucky had been willing to give him his Intratec and the custom matched pair of P226Rs, but he had to keep a minimum level of weapons to protect Thea. As it was, he was left with only those and his Derringer, in addition to the remaining five combat knives, the Skorpion, the Milkor, and the Barrett. That didn't really feel like enough. He was going to miss that gun, too. If she was willing to be satisfied or even pretend to be content, then he would choose to believe her. Thankfully, she had not yet asked what he had done with the old rings. "If you are happy, then that is all that matters."

"I am, but it isn't that important what the ring looks like, really. Just the fact that it is a real one."

An involuntary smile passed across his face, as he put both arms around her and laid his chin on top of her head. "I never thought I would be married. I considered it in the before-time, but it
wasn’t something concrete. Steve was always the one imagining that kind of thing then. Of course, this was not a dream that entered my thoughts as the Winter Soldier."

"Did they even allow you to have dreams?"

Powerful memories of nearly unbearable night terrors coursed through his mind, but he managed to reply tersely, "Nightmares."

"I definitely don't approve of revenge and I really don't like taking justice into your own hands. However, I would quite like to find every one of those HYDRA people and make them live just one day like you did and see how well they function."

As much as he understood her sentiment, he did not like to hear Thea's thoughts turning so dark. He feared that he had brought more pain and horror into her life than anything and it haunted him constantly. Guiltily, Bucky stroked her cheek briefly and then returned to holding her tightly. "I went back. Shortly after I escaped, I went back and found a few of the HYDRA scientists who had been responsible for carrying out Pierce's orders on me. I intended to kill them."

Shocked, Thea exclaimed, "Oh, Bucky! You never told me about that! What happened?"

He kissed the top of her head again before he said roughly, "I didn't do it. One of them said something that made me realise they were just people and that I didn't want to needlessly kill people anymore. It would have been revenge murder, not defence. I beat them, but I didn't kill them."

Thea turned around and placed both hands on his face. "That is exactly why I keep telling you that you are different from the Winter Soldier. You are naturally a moral, decent man."

The intense guilt nearly overpowered him as he heard how well he had misled her. She truly believed he was worthy of her time. He might be too cowardly to tell her the whole truth about his past as the Winter Soldier, but he was not afraid to spend his life—or even give it—attempting to become a man worthy of being her husband. "Maybe. It was one decent act, at least. Perhaps if I pile up enough of them, I might one day feel like a human and not a killer."

She squinted up at him in a way that he knew meant she was not impressed. "Did I marry a human?"

In spite of himself, his lip twitched, as he replied cheekily, "You did, ma'am, yes."

"That's what I thought."

They sat like that for a while longer. Bucky could feel her body was quite relaxed and she seemed very content. He asked tentatively, "Are you happy, Bella?"

"Very."

Unprepared for the intense joy that her response sent racing through him, he replied fervently, "I would do anything to make you happy, you know."

Thea turned around and faced him. "But I am happy." She lowered her head and he could see the flush rapidly covering her cheeks as she continued, "Except, I am sorry about, well, I mean that I don't want you to think that, you know."

Bucky wrapped her up tightly in his arms and said in a soft voice that sounded to him very unlike his own, "I do know and please don't apologise again, Bella. That will come in time. You aren't
ready yet, so we will wait. I don't care how long it takes. I have you, so I have everything I want.”

He could hear her disbelief as she whispered with mortification, "It isn't very fair to you though."

Bucky tried to pull back just enough that he could watch her reaction and she would be able to see his own expression. Trying not to show his hurt that she thought so lowly of him, he asked, "Why? Do you truly think that is the only thing that I want from you?"

Thea looked down and bit her lips tightly to keep from crying. After a moment, she replied so softly that he would never have heard if his hearing had not been enhanced. "No. It is just that I know that you must have expected it.”

Well, f***. She really did think he was a dog, didn't she? Bucky brushed her hair back from her face and said as gently and emphatically as he could, "That is something far too precious to rush. Right now, I get to fall asleep with you in my arms and wake up with you the same way. I could die happy having gained that." She had to understand. He couldn't let her believe she was worth so little to him.

Thea put her arms around his waist and tucked her head into his chest, which made his heart race painfully and his breath catch in his throat. "Are we returning tomorrow?"

Accepting her desire to change the topic of conversation, he replied with a sense of genuine disappointment, "Yes. Back to being Mr and Mrs Grushnikov."

"Why did you pick that last name?"

Trying to think back, he had to admit honestly, "Not sure why I did originally. As for now, it was next on my mental list."

Surprised, she asked, "How many names are on that list?"

"Russian names—about 30."

"Wow. That means you have other non-Russian names."

He had no desire to discuss this, but she had a right to know. "Of course. Ukrainian, Romanian, German, Italian, English. Having a list made it simpler to plan, since I had already decided."

"And they don't know the list?"

He shook his head and tightened his arms around her to help him to overcome the huge waves of anxiety that already made his chest feel like it might explode, as he allowed himself to remember. "No, this is my private list. I was trained to be exceedingly efficient, Bella. They didn't want to bother with planning the details if I could do that better. I have my own access and egress plans. I have various houses across Eastern Europe that I used that they didn't know, which probably still have supplies stocked."

"I assumed they told you how to do everything."

Bucky cleared his throat to give himself a moment to calm down. Attempting to ground himself, he tried to use the feeling of her silky hair that was draped over his arm as a sensation that could keep him focussed on the present. "They gave me a mission and any specifics or specials they needed. I made the plans and executed them. That was part of my skill set. Nevertheless, I could not go more than 12 hours without any contact and 24 hours without physical contact. I do not think that they trusted the conditioning sufficiently beyond that."
"Oh. Well. I suppose that knowledge is going to come in very useful now for us though."

"Yes, it is. It is time for me to talk to you about Eden."

Thea frowned. "What is Eden?"

Preparing himself for her inevitable reaction, Bucky stated simply, "Your exit strategy."

"No. I am not having an exit strategy apart from you. No, no!"

His own emotions were nearly overwhelming him, but Bucky knew he needed to stay focussed on her and the present, so he could explain everything to her. Her safety above everything else. "Yes, you are. You are going to listen, do you understand?"

Thea narrowed her eyes at him, but he was watching her with an expression that he hoped made it clear that he was not going to accept anything but her obedience. She sighed. "Ok."

He took a deep breath and began to explain. "Something might happen. Perhaps I get activated. Perhaps my past becomes public and I am arrested. Perhaps I am killed. Any event in which you cannot stay wherever we are because I am gone or unsafe, then you activate Eden. I know the plan, so if I get away then I can join you. I also am considering the possibility that we may eventually find someone trustworthy that I could send for you. There is a protocol for that. You will go there and find the money and documents that will keep you safe. You could stay there as long as you need."

"I don't like it. It sounds awful. I don't want to think of going somewhere without you."

Ignoring the pleasure that it gave him to hear her say she didn't want to be parted from him, he forced himself to talk to her firmly. Just like he had with those two baby-faced privates from Ohio in the 107th who didn't know their elbow from their ear and had to be hand-held when they'd headed into that first battle in Greece. H*ll, where had that memory come from? "Well, that is too bad, since you need to think about it. We need to have the plan so well-rehearsed that you can implement it with no notice at all. If you see me being taken, you walk away as if you don't even know me. If I get free, then I will join you there. If you hesitate or make it clear you belong to me, then you will be taken too. If you don't know the details perfectly, then you will hesitate. If you don't have it memorised, then you will make a mistake. If you cannot get to Eden, then I won't know where to find you."

"Okay, I will learn the plan. I know that makes sense. I'm just scared to think of a time that we may need that."

Kissing the top of her head, Bucky said sadly, "I know, but that is part of being with me. This is always going to be a strong risk."

"Well, yes, but I really want to think about now and not the future. I like now a lot."

Bucky smiled and turned her around so he was facing her. He looked at her with wonder. She was an incredible beauty and she was his. He had always liked the really petite girls, but Thea was truly perfect. And it seemed that he was still hopeless about redheads of her particular shade of auburn. H*ll, all those times that Steve had teased him about it until it had really pissed him off...like Steve didn't have a definite type of his own. Jerk. He could only imagine what Steve would say now that Bucky had been so wild about a girl that he dragged her with him on the run and married her in the old church in Marsaxlokk. Incredible that they had rebuilt it. And old Sinjura Gallea's pretty granddaughter still lived in the house, but she looked as aged as old Sinjura once had. "I like now
too, Bella. I have no idea how I got you. There are decent guys everywhere who haven't met a girl who will give them the time of day. I was two months out from being a vicious assassin and I meet the best girl in the world when I bust into her house. Then I kidnap her to keep her safe from HYDRA and somehow in less than a month she marries me. I don't got any right to be this lucky."

Thea smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "But here you are anyway. By the way, if you have any doubt that you are from Brooklyn originally, let me banish it for you now. That was the strongest New York accent I've heard in a while."

He allowed the joy to roll over him as he laughed loudly. If she thought he sounded street Brooklyn now…man, she should have heard him before. She had no idea how much of himself she was helping to awaken. Every day he felt more like an actual person—Bucky Barnes—and not just a mindless assassin who had once been James Buchanan Barnes before HYDRA had f***ed his s*** up. "Really? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I don't think it is one or the other really. You are very American, which I quite surprisingly enjoy. I suppose there must be Englishmen who would do all the crazy things you do or there would be no SAS, but then you are very different from most Americans, too. The Russian stuff though…I am going to have to learn it just so I know all those things you always say."

Bucky laughed again genuinely as he tapped the tip of her nose and said, "You do not want to know a lot of what I am saying. I am a wizard at cursing and Russian mat is particularly crass. You would be very shocked."

"I don't mean those things. I mean…"

He kissed her very gently and smiled lovingly down at her. "I know what you meant. I have to relearn how to say those things in English. It may be my native language, but until recently, I had not used it for decades. Emotions still come easier in Russian."

"Well, you can get better with practicing."

"Yes, I can, my beautiful one."

"How do I say 'kiss me'?"

Bucky's voice was low as he whispered in her ear, "Поцелуй меня."

"Pot…what?"

"Поцелуй меня."

Thea tried to say it. "Potseloo menyua."

He repeated it for her again. "Поцелуй меня."

"Поцелуй меня."

"Отлично. (Excellent.)" He placed his hand behind her head and lowered her onto the sofa as he kissed her with fiery determination. "Теперь давайте практиковать действия и получить это право. (Now let's put that into action and get it right.)"

It was several minutes before she absently replied, "No fair."

He laughed and said, "Too bad, kitten."
Chapter 12

Nearly hanging out the window as she gazed across the low roofs of the old buildings of Izmir, Thea sighed happily and turned back to say, "I love Spring. Don't you? Flowers everywhere. It just feels so hopeful."

Bucky looked up from where he was sitting on the floor, cleaning the Skorpion. He really wanted to get to the Barrett next, but he knew that look on Thea's face. She wanted to go somewhere. "Want a walk, Bella?"

His reward was immediate, as Thea's face brightened and she smiled in the way that sometimes made him dizzy. "Yes, could we? It will be twilight soon. I know you prefer not to go out during the day."

He sighed, since he knew how much she liked sitting out in the sun. Yet one more thing that being with him was denying her. "I'll be another five minutes on this. Then we can go get something to eat and take a walk afterwards. Sound good?"

Surprised, Thea tilted her head and asked cautiously, "You don't want to do that other one first? The really big one? I know you always like to clean that gun when you do this one. If you are going to be frustrated, then it would just be better to wait."

Nice to know he was so predictable. Bucky clenched his jaws for a moment and then took a deep breath. "I can finish it later. Good maintenance of your weapon is important, Bella."

He was sure she rolled her eyes, but he had purposely looked back down at the Skorpion and picked up the cleaning pad so he didn't see her response. He heard her move away from the window and then say, "Are you going to make me do mine again?"

Returning to oiling the bolt, Bucky replied, "Not today. The more you do it yourself, however, then the more comfortable you will be with your gun, Bella." He lifted the bolt to check it and, since he was unsatisfied, he resumed cleaning it before saying further, "When you need to use it, I cannot risk you freezing up. It needs to feel comfortable in your hand. You need to be able to immediately extend and grip properly, sight, and fire with proper follow through. No time wasted."

The horrible squeaking sound of the ancient mattress told him she had dropped onto the bed angrily, so he looked up again. He could see immediately how very annoyed she was. He knew that she hated that he made her dry practice with her Sig every day. She hated his frequent reminders of how to be prepared at all times for various scenarios. She really hated when they reviewed the Eden protocol. Even worse was how much she hated their cover story. It was everything he could do not to lash out at her in frustration that she did not see the incredible importance of it all. He was f***ing trying to keep her safe, but she couldn't seem to remember much of what he had tried repeatedly to impress upon her. Honestly, he didn't think she was even trying sometimes. "Might as well say what you are thinking, Bella. I can see you are unhappy."

Thea shook her head and sighed. "You know what I think. I don't want to have a row. It is amazing how quickly you can take a lovely moment and turn into another lecture on guns or some all-important protocol. You give me more lectures than my tutors did at Cambridge, Yasha."

His fury rising to the surface quickly, Bucky growled, "Ты ведешь себя как такой ребенок, поэтому иногда я просто хочу относиться к тебе как к ребенку и наказывать тебя соответственно. Почему ты не понимаешь, что я делаю все это для тебя? (You act like such a
brat that sometimes I just want to treat you like a child and discipline you. Why don't you understand that I am doing all this for you?)"

"Lovely. Russian again. I think that I'm going to go take a bath. Not much else for me to do, is there?" Thea gripped her cane and walked slowly past him into the tiny bathroom.

He couldn't let her go off angry. Pushing his own frustration aside, Bucky called out, "Bella." He watched her turn around slowly and look at him with more anger than usual. His stomach dropped with trepidation. "What is wrong? Is this really just about the guns?"

She shook her head. "No. You know it isn't. Why don't you finish up your favourite big one there and I'll get cleaned off? It's hot and I really want a bath."

"I don't care about the f***ing Barrett, Bella. I can clean it after you go to sleep. None of that matters if you are this upset. I tell you all those things because I want you to be safe. You may be tired of hearing it all, but if someone finds us then you'll be very happy you know it. Practice is boring, but important."

"I understand that, but you miss out on so many other things because you are so worried about safety. You think about safety so often that I wonder if you have any time left for much else. What good is being safe if you are miserable, Yasha?"

Feeling a moment of satisfaction that she was taking to the nickname for his cover name better than the name itself, he asked seriously, "Are you miserable, Bella?"

"Pretty much, yes."

Bucky put the last piece back, checked it, and then set the Skorpion down on the towel that he had laid on the ground. "Ok." Scooping up his cleaning kit in his fist, he stood up and placed the bundle on the table. He then stood awkwardly watching her and wondered how much she would ask of him, as he questioned her, "What do you want for me to do, Bella? Tell me and I will do it, whatever it is."

She leant against the wall and gripped the handle of her cane tightly. "I want a break. Please. I am inundated by the constant reminders of how I am always in danger. Do you understand how stressful that is for me? I know that is how you live, but I don't really know how you do it. I can tell that you feel safer if you are constantly assessing threats and controlling our environment to keep me protected. However, that just makes me feel always on edge and fearful. I am not a trained operative. I'm not a soldier. I'm just an art historian. We don't typically wield guns or concern ourselves with operational security. Please, Yasha, may I just have a break from the constant training?"

Bucky nodded. He stood in front of her, watching carefully before he spoke, and wondering if there really was anything that he could do that would make her truly happy. He was aware that he was not what she had hoped. He had tried everything that he could, but he was still just himself. And what he was, she didn't really want. His voice sounded hollow to his own ears as he said, "I'm sorry that I have made you so unhappy, Bella."

He saw the flash of empathy in her eyes and knew that she was going to forgive him. Again. He didn't want her to constantly have to keep forgiving him every time he f***ed it all up. She bit her lip in that way that she had when she was trying to figure out what to say that wouldn't hurt him. As cute as she looked when she did that, he hated it, since she shouldn't have to fear his temper. Finally, she said, "I still need a bath, since it is horribly hot. I will come back out in a while, ok?"
Bucky nodded and said only, "All right." He walked into the bathroom after her and quickly washed his hands. Then he stalked out without saying anything, so she could have her space to do what she wanted.

He stood looking around the unpleasantly small and run-down room, thinking angrily of what she deserved compared to what he could actually give her. And it would never improve unless their fortunes took a shocking turn for the better. This was as good as she would probably ever get from him. He ought to change if they were going to leave the room. She hated this shirt. He actually didn't like it much either, but it did what he needed. These trousers would need a wash, too, so he'd better plan to do so as soon as they got back in. He didn't want his spare pair to be drying if they needed to leave on short notice the next day. She probably wasn't going to like Bursa much more than she had Izmir, but they needed to get on. He intended them to be in Burgas in four days.

Bucky heard the shower turn off and realised that he'd better get ready quickly if he didn't want her disappointed. He looked into the mirror and saw that his hair was a bit worse than he had realised. With the heat, he would just tie it up. It wasn't her favourite look, but it was neat. He hadn't quite figured it all out, but at least he knew she preferred when he was neat. He needed to buy a razor, too. It might make her happier if he trimmed the beard up some. Dragging his comb through all his hair roughly, he then pulled everything back and began to wrap a tie around it. As he twisted it all into a knot, he heard the door to the bathroom open.

"So, do I need to wear the scarf? I don't really understand the rules here."

He pushed his sleeves up as he looked at her and thought that she looked far too tired. Perhaps it was a mistake to go walking. "No, you will be fine where we are going. Are you hungry now or would you rather walk first?"

"I'm very hungry."

"Are you ok to walk? You look like you are exhausted, Bella."

"I'm tired, but emotionally I need to get out of this room and do something. Please, don't say that I can't."

He raised a hand to her hair and brushed it back from her face. "Ok, but bring your crutches. You need more than your cane if we are walking."

"I'm not having a flare right now though, Yasha. It is better for me to use my muscles when I can. The crutches cause me forearm pain, so, if I don't need them, then I really don't want to use them."

Bucky shrugged. He didn't know what her body needed better than she did. He would have to trust her on it for now until he understood her RA better. Yet, in many ways, she was exactly the same as Steve always had been. She saw a barrier and she wanted to push it just a little to see if she could. Of course, then she usually spent the next day in bed miserable and he would spend the same day in agony as he watched her suffer. "Ok, kitten. Your decision. Take your meds though? That one you take before you do anything physically stressful. Ibboo-something."

She laughed. "Ibuprofen? It's just prescription strength Advil."

Aware that he was missing something that he probably should know, Bucky jerked his shoulders to demonstrate that he didn't know and didn't care. But he did. "Ok, that one. I'll get it for you."

"Yes, but I have to take it with food, Yasha. I'll have it with dinner."

Bucky dragged the big white medicine box out of the rucksack and started digging for the large
brown pill. "I just want to know you are taking care of yourself, Bella. You don't, you know."

She sighed in the way he knew meant she didn't want to admit he was right. "RA is a cruel permanent resident, Yasha, so I like to spite it now and then."

Handing her the pill, Bucky then placed both hands on her face and pulled her in for a long, deep kiss. He could feel that although she had relaxed, that she did not feel the wave of passionate emotion that he did. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, let's."

Bucky tucked his arm around her tightly and kissed the back of Thea's head. "Happy?"

She breathed out contentedly and replied, "Definitely. Thessaloniki is the place to have brought me, Yasha. This may not be my era or country of expertise, but it is wonderful."

He groaned. They had gone to the Museum of Byzantine Culture two days in a row already, but he knew what she wanted. "We are going back tomorrow, aren't we?"

Thea turned in his arms so she was facing him. She looked up at him with those huge blue eyes that he absolutely couldn't resist and replied with determination, "Well, obviously. Byzantine religious art is wondrous and you know my interest is religious art."

He laughed. Actually, it was incredible that he had finally done something right. This was something that truly made her happy. They'd go back to that d*** museum every day for a week if that is what it took. "Really? You hadn't mentioned."

"Are you horribly bored by it all?"

Bucky kissed her forehead and replied, "It might surprise you, kitten, since I am a cultural heathen, however I went to art school in the before-time. I didn't have Steve's talent, but I liked it. I probably couldn't draw for s*** now, but I was passable once."

Her reaction greatly amused him, as she stared up at him with her mouth open for a moment. "Yasha! You did?"

He laughed as he tightened his arms around her. "I did, yes. If I had some paper and a bit of charcoal, then we could see just how much I remember. I doubt it is much."

"We should get you some. I'd like to see what you can do."

He snorted with amusement. If she had studied some of the great art of the world, his pitiful sketches would hardly impress. "I wouldn't mind drawing you, but it won't be anything much."

"Well, I will allow you to draw me if you like. You should have told me that you enjoy art, too. We could have seen what interested you instead of spending all the time on my things."

Bucky lifted one hand to her face. "This is what interests me, Bella. I was perfectly satisfied seeing a smile on your face. It has been too long."

"Do you want to see the archaeological stuff or the contemporary art instead?"

"Nope. I barely liked the contemporary stuff from my day. I don't even f***ing begin to understand the truly modern s*** now." He looked down at her disappointed face and decided to admit, "I loved Rothko. Always did. He made sense to me before and so much more now. Gorky and de
Kooning, too. I used to like Chagall, but it feels too far away from me now. However...I think that I remember his wife was named Bella. Why do I remember that, but I still can't remember my grandmother's first name?"

Thea snuggled her head into his chest and replied sleepily, "Memory is so nonlinear. You probably remembered Chagall's wife for some particular reason back then that somehow sticks out now. I can't imagine how frustrating it must be for you, Yasha. However, you remember so much compared to when we first met."

"My grandmother called me Beautiful Jamie Boy and gave me sweets during mass to keep me quiet. Bella, I should remember her name."

"What did you call her?"

"Gran."

"That was your name for her, Yasha. You remember her and you remember what you called her. Your parents didn't use her first name either, right?"

Bucky thought back and replied after a moment, "My mother just called her Mam or Mother dearest. My father didn't call her anything most of the time, but if he did it was Mother Hanrahan, I think."

"Then her first name is not a strong memory."

"And Marc Chagall's wife is?"

Thea sighed. "I don't know. It isn't my fault, you know, nor is it yours. I can't do anything about it."

Bucky dropped onto the wicker chair beside the window and winced as he felt it wobble dangerously. It was probably not meant for anyone over 150 lbs and he was a densely muscular 200 lbs on a bad day. Typical furniture was hardly designed for the Fist of HYDRA. Not much about him was meant for normal life anyway: he needed twice the normal human's calories, much more than 8 hours of sleep to be comfortable although he was perfectly functional on just four, after just a couple of repetitions he mastered skills that most men took weeks to learn, he barely remembered anything other than Steve Rogers from his past but he remembered minute details of maps from ops that must be decades old, he sometimes still struggled to converse in his native language but he was comfortable in languages he had no memory of learning, and his dreams were more nightmarish than he could ever risk putting into words. Too often, he felt very little like James Buchanan Barnes of Brooklyn, NY. Bucky couldn't, however, say who he was instead.

He hated how exposed they had been in that little church. Very little else could have made them stand out more to the local population than to show up at a small Catholic church in very Muslim Kosovo. However, nothing would do for Thea but to go. She had not been since they were in Greece and it was upsetting her, so he gave in. He always gave in to her. "Feel better, Bella?"

She tucked the small triangle of silk that she had worn over her hair at mass back into the rucksack and replied unhappily, "Yes, I suppose I do. However, you could have looked maybe a little less like you wanted to slaughter everyone there, their families, and their livestock. I am sure that the way you were dressed gave away your fierceness sufficiently, you know. You didn't have to try to scare the children, too, Yasha."

Bucky leant his head back against the wall and groaned. F***, why couldn't she leave it alone? He didn't want to go. He had gone because she wanted it. Now she was angry with how he had acted
He could see from her frown that she understood and agreed. However, she seemed so sad when she sat on the end of the bed with her eyes trained on him that he felt guilty for his sharp reply. "Well, you may be right, but don't we stand out even more if you look like you are someone to seriously fear than if you tried to just look a bit rough?"

He kept his voice neutral as he replied, "I will not risk our safety by allowing any local to think we are a target for grift or someone they want to get to know for any reason."

She closed her eyes and said with a flat tone that worried him, "Well, they surely won't want to know us after that, will they? I think that the priest was quite grateful that you didn't go up for the host."

Bucky's mouth tightened as he looked at her angrily. He did not want to have this conversation. "You know that I can't. If I ever decide that I could believe in any of that again, then I would have to get serious absolution. My past is a barrier."

Thea looked genuinely confused, as she answered, "But you did get absolution in Malta."

"Yes, that is what the priest said. It took him two days of talking to me for him to say it, but I don't feel like it took. I don't feel different. I'm still an assassin with hands red from the blood of my kills. Anyway, all this s*** is beyond me, Bella. I come from the time when you just were Catholic because you were born that way. You went to mass because they said you had to. You believed because you just did. I definitely didn't doubt the Church, but I was never devout like Steve. I felt guilty for being such a bad Catholic then, since I fooled around with girls and drank and gambled with the other soldiers. But I still did it. So, I'm just going to keep being a bad Catholic, ok? I don't know how to be like you. I'll go with you, but don't ask me for more."

Thea pulled her knees up to her chin and replied, "That is between you and G-d, Yasha. I'm not going to get involved in that. I just thought you took that nice, old priest in Malta seriously. It seemed like it then."

He dropped his head back against the wall and stared up at the ceiling as he replied, "Well, I wanted to, you know? I wish I could believe that I could be forgiven for everything. You have no idea how seductive the idea is, but I don't know that I understand how it can happen. Don't ask me for more than I can do, Bella."

He could hear the sadness in her voice as Thea said softly, "I just want you to know that you aren't a bad man, you know? You are always working so hard to keep me safe and you love me so much. I believe in you and I wish that you did, too."

Bucky didn't reply. He closed his eyes and waited for her to give up. Finally, she got up and went over to the table where all her books were. He tried to pretend that he had gone to sleep so she wouldn't talk. It was better that way.
"Is this the last place yet, Yasha?"

Bucky could see the exhaustion in Thea's face, as she looked up at him hopefully. She had nearly lost all of the sparkle that she had gained after their wedding. He had worked so hard to keep finding things she would enjoy: the iconostasis at the Church of Sveti Spas in Skopje, the frescos in the Cathedral of St Tryphon in Kotor, the Museum of Religious Art in Zadar…now today in Constanta the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. Those were almost the only times now that he saw her eyes light up with anything approaching joy or happiness. It was the only spark of, well, anything that he had managed to bring her so far. More often than he wanted to admit, the misery of his failure with Thea made him feel like giving up and becoming the final victim of the Winter Soldier. However, he couldn't allow himself to be a p**** about it. He didn't hope for redemption, but he did intend to go out at least having spent every day keeping Thea safe. Единственная цель, которую он оставил, быть телохранителем для его прекрасной девушки. (The only purpose he had left was to be a bodyguard for his beautiful one.)

For three months now, every week he had managed to find some church somewhere that she could attend without greatly endangering their safety. She had stopped saying anything about him angrily inhabiting his seat on the pew as he glared up at the Tabernacle like it owed him a debt. It was always the most painful, uncomfortable hour of every week for him. If he weren't afraid to leave her unattended in some unknown locale, then he'd just sit on the steps outside the church like a vagrant and wait for her. It didn't help his mood that she was always happier and friendlier with him after they went, too.

Thea had finally begun regularly using his cover name, or at least his nickname, without making a face and almost seemed resigned to every time they had to move. She would quietly clean her gun without complaint and get through her dry firing practice rapidly, so she could get away from the gun as quickly as possible. She could finally recite all three of their major safety protocols without fault. She was now proficient with two different defensive knife moves. He had even taught her how to use her cane in one big surprise push to hopefully give herself time to get away from an attacker. He ought to feel better. She was listening to him and practising whatever he taught her. However, she hated every minute of it, which hurt him in a way that he didn't know how to handle.

She had begun to fall asleep nearly as soon as they laid down at night. She rarely seemed inclined to do anything more than tuck her face into his chest as she slept. There had been nothing more than his desperate, impassioned kisses in the whole of their short four-month marriage and he began to wonder if that was all he was ever going to get. Not that he should ever complain. She was beautiful and she had chosen him, but she had been honest. She quietly put up with his bad days when he could do little more than bark orders at her in basic English mixed with Russian. She accepted the worse days when he was paranoid and belligerent. To his mortification and sorrow, she had even learnt to immediately shift out of the bed when he had one of his violent nightmares from which he would awake ferocious and angry. He had known he was being shockingly selfish in tying her permanently to him. He was pretty much the definition of a broken man. She deserved so much better.

"Yasha?"

Bucky shook his head to bring his focus back and replied, "It is not. We have to move again."

Just as he expected, her shoulders sagged as she answered, "Oh. When?"
"A few days."

She didn't even ask with hope, but she still asked, "Is the next move the last?"

Bucky leant forwards so his hands were propped on his knees as he watched her. This was such a f***ing disaster. "I will tell you when we are in the final destination."

She sighed, but didn't lift her eyes from her lap as she asked, "Why can't you tell me more?"

He gave his standard reply, but it was getting harder to believe himself. "Security. I don't know who is listening."

"Well, aren't we going to run out of money soon? We can't go on like this forever, can we?"

He was not about to explain to her how they were funding their lifestyle. The sooner they got to Minsk, then the better for them both. Once he could support her honestly, he would feel a little more like a man than a bum. "Money is not a problem right now, Bella. Please don't worry about it."

Bucky watched Thea as she sat down on a chair and looked out the nearby window. "Constanta is pretty. I like it here."

Memories of that long mission made him nearly shiver. He hated the Romanian coast. Hated it. "I never did. I've been here before."

"Oh. Well, I like it. I'm sorry that you don't. I hope that the next place is pretty, too. I hated the last three cities."

He took a deep breath and replied seriously, "I haven't been choosing them for their beauty, kitten."

Thea looked at him with complete understanding. "Yes, I know. How long has it been since you saw someone?"

Well, he didn't just see them, did he? But that was all she knew. "Forty-three days."

"That is good, right?"

Bucky grunted with frustration. "Yes, but it takes only one person to see me and know who I am to end us. If I don't stop them before intelligence is passed on, then we are done for. We cannot relax, Bella. Even though it was removed by someone since then, my profile was put out on the internet in the initial release when all the SHIELD-HYDRA data was dumped. If someone was looking for me, they could have pictures and a physical description, etc. For the right person, finding me wouldn't be that difficult, honestly. That is why we have to follow every protocol that I have set out, Bella."

Thea didn't bother to reply to his comment about protocol, of course. She knew it by now, since even he had to admit he harped incessantly on it. Instead, she asked with surprise, "Your missions? Are they out there?"

Bucky got up from the old, vinyl covered armchair and replied, "That was not on the data dump or someone removed it almost immediately. I have scoured the internet, including the dark web. I haven't found anything yet."

Now Thea asked with disbelief, "You really want to know?"
Did she think that he would run and hide? He might be an assassin, but he wasn't a coward. He would stand and take his punishment like a d*** soldier. "Of course, I want to know. I need to know, Bella. I have to understand what I did and to whom and where. That is my duty to know my crimes."

Standing up and wandering over towards him, Thea sighed, making his stomach lurch as he saw her deep sadness. "Ok. I actually do understand why you want to know, but I just worry about how you will be when you find something out. It was not your choice, nor can you change anything now." She slumped into the chair next to the one he had just vacated and closed her eyes. "I miss my family. My brothers. My cousins. I even miss my annoying auntie, who always asked me if I was ever going to get married. Now I can't phone them or even visit. Maybe I never will be able to. That means that they will never meet you, which makes me sad because I want them to know you. I want to have my family as an active part of our life and it is awful that they cannot ever do that, Yasha."

A wave of the crushing guilt with which he was all too familiar threatened to overwhelm him as he muttered, "That is entirely my fault, Bella. If I hadn't chosen your apartment to break into then…"

Yet Thea interrupted him, saying something that absolutely shocked him. "I don't regret being here with you, Yasha. I don't. If you hadn't come to my door, then I would never have known you. I don't like to even think of that. It is too horrible to contemplate."

How could she not regret being with him? How could she not feel that he was the worst thing to ever happen to her? "What am I offering you that makes it worth giving up your previous life and your entire family, Bella? You can't settle down somewhere and make friends or do anything that matters to you. You can't ever return to your career. I have taken you right out of your life and given you very little in return."

"Maybe not, but I do have you." Thea smiled at him sweetly, but he could see her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"That is not much of a trade."

She replied with such honesty that he could not make himself disbelieve her. "I think it is. I want to be wherever you are."

Why would she want that? He had nothing to offer, but more of what made her so unhappy. The pain in his chest almost too much to bear, Bucky growled. "So, I can do what for you? What do your days contain anymore? Nothing." He started to pace the floor as he raged, "Я как упырь. Я высосал всю радость из тебя. Ты даже не можешь завершить наш брак, Белла. Я пустая трата человека. (I am like a blood-sucking ghoul. I have sucked the joy right out of you. You cannot even bear to complete our marriage. I am a waste of a person."

Thea turned in her chair to face the window again as he increased his frenzied pacing, which made him even more upset. After a while, he punched his hand into the bathroom door and then said roughly, "I am going out."

She nodded but did not turn around. He knew when he exited the hotel that she was probably watching from the window and hoping that he would look back, but he didn't let himself do it. Constanta had brought out more memories than Bratislava, Skopje, and Zagreb combined. He had spent too much time here before. He knew the mission and he remembered his victims, but he didn't have all of the memories yet. He wasn't even sure when it had happened. Until he was certain that someone would not recognise him, they shouldn't spend too much time there. They should move on to Minsk. That would be safer. He did remember everything about Minsk and, as
awful as the memory was, he knew there was no one living to identify him.

Bucky stalked down the street adjacent to their hotel and had a sudden memory of a row of shops in the part of town a bit north of there. He was pretty certain that there was a dress shop when he was last there. It all could have been years ago, but he didn't think so. It felt recent. He burst off in that direction, wondering if he would even be able to choose some small item that she would like. Her family was very wealthy, so she had been used to very expensive clothing before he dragged her off into his personal disaster. What did women even like now?

When he got to the area of town that he remembered, however, it was very different. His memory had shown dress shops and other small stores. All he saw were glossy modern shop fronts. Those were not the sort of places he could go. Apparently, the mission in Constanta had been much longer ago than he had imagined. Therefore, he passed them by and continued to the end of the street where he saw a flower shop. That he could handle.

However, when he left the place twenty minutes later, Bucky wondered how he was so incompetent at normal life that he could even f*** up buying his wife some flowers. The poor shopkeeper had looked so upset that she was probably going to cry after he left. Yet another thing that he was seemingly too vicious to handle: flowers. He stalked down successive streets and made his way back to their hotel. As he crossed a street and angrily gestured to a passing driver, he noticed a small pastry shop. Thea loved sweets. He could do that. When he exited the pastry shop twenty minutes later, he breathed out forcefully and gripped the small white box along with the flowers. The man had intended to be kind—teasing him in a friendly tone that Bucky must either have a very romantic evening planned or he had put a foot wrong. He had not confirmed anything, but the man seemed to know perfectly well which of the two was the case. He had directed Bucky to buy several items that he promised had made his own wife feel more romantic after his own missteps. Bucky didn't actually think that pastry was a likely balm for Thea's unhappiness. Yet, it was not going to hurt either.

The closer he got to the hotel, the more unpleasant his nervousness became. He had to do something to make her happier. It was eating him alive to see her sad so often. He couldn't comfort her and he couldn't give her any normalcy. What could he give her that mattered? She had given him back more of himself than she could possibly imagine.

Walking around a skinny, pimply young man who seemed quite unnerved by him, Bucky wondered if he was ever going to be able to handle normal social interaction. He slowly trudged up the narrow steps and then approached the door to the hotel room with deep apprehension. When he walked in, he could smell that she had taken a bath, so he wondered if she had already gone to sleep. It was too early.

"Bella?"

"I'm in here."

He walked through to the bedroom and saw that she was in bed already, which she had never done before. He tried to control his fear, as he wondered what she meant by getting in bed before 8 o'clock and without him at least in the room. Bucky placed the flowers on the table and attempted an awkward apology, "I am sorry that I lost my temper and raged out. I needed to calm down."

She replied in a quiet voice very unlike normal, "Those are really lovely." Thea slipped out from the covers and he realised that she was wearing the silky nightdress that he had seen in the green duffel for months, but that she had never worn for him before. It was difficult to find words as he watched her.
Whilst she leant over to smell the small bouquet, Thea said almost apologetically, "You didn't have to bring me flowers. I understand."

He could hear that she was trying to mend fences and keep him from being angry, but he didn't want that. He had been the one to f*** up (as always) so he should be the one to fix things. "I wanted to give you something, Bella. I bought you a treat, as well. I've never had any of it, but the man said his wife loves them. I hope you like it."

As Thea smiled and took the box that he was holding out awkwardly, he wondered again whether she meant anything by going to bed without him. Perhaps they were going to shift into a new, even less pleasant stage of their marriage. Maybe he was about to get demoted to sleeping on the floor.

"Let me look." She opened the box and then smiled. "Yummy, we should eat them now." He felt her small hand grab his and allowed her to pull him over to the table.

Bucky dragged out a chair and sat down, pulling her gently onto his lap. She was being friendly enough that he might as well risk responding more demonstratively. Although she had always seemed extremely uncomfortable with any attempt on his part to be more physically intimate, Thea did like more chaste romantic gestures like a small kiss on the cheek. "I bought them specifically for you, Bella." He ran his hand along her hair and added, "You have not had much other than basic food in weeks."

"Neither have you. Come on, let's share them. That makes it more fun." She dug enthusiastically into the box and held out a fluffy white thing that looked ridiculously sweet to him. "Go ahead. Take a bite, Yasha."

Bucky looked at her and saw that she would he hurt if he refused, so he took a small nibble of the thing she was holding out to him and then commented mendaciously, "It is good."

She laughed merrily, in the way he had not heard in a couple of months, and said, "Oh dear, do you not really like sweets? Ok, I'll eat that one. You have to try them all though. Maybe this chocolate thing."

He dutifully took a nibble of the chocolate covered pastry and then made a valiant effort not to gag. Thea's eyes widened in surprise and she hastened to take it from him. "Oh, you don't have to eat it! I'm sorry. Here, give it back. You don't like chocolate, do you?"

"Apparently not."

She tilted her head and asked tentatively, "Okay, do you want to try the last one? You don't actually have to, Yasha."

"No, let me try." Bucky took a small bite and then a larger one. "I actually like this one."

"Ok, so it seems you like nuts. That is a good thing to know. Well then, you eat that one and I'll eat these." She slid back on his lap so that she was leaning against his shoulder, which she had not done since shortly after they married. Bucky didn't think he cared what disgusting pastries he had to eat if she would stay like that for a while longer. "Thank you for getting the sweets. I hadn't realised how much I miss this sort of thing."

Bucky kissed her head right above her ear and whispered, "I have definitely missed this."

Thea tried to wipe the sugar from around her mouth but laughed when she realised that she had got it everywhere. Her answer, however, was very serious and quite shut his brain down for a moment.
"Obviously, I have too. You haven't been very cuddly. It's been fairly awful, really."

He looked at her with confusion. "Whenever I tried to get close to you at all, Bella, you seemed very uncomfortable. Since I don't ever want to pressure you, I just stopped doing anything that I thought you didn't want."

Thea hummed sadly and then sighed. "Oh dear. I cannot imagine how you thought I would want you to act like giving me a kiss would actually give you the plague. You have been angry, grouchy, and so filled with self-hatred that I haven't really known what to do. Why do we not communicate at all, Yasha?"

"Communication was never a strength of mine. Not even in the before-time. Even less now probably. I typically read body language, which has usually been sufficient to gauge a target or a handler’s intentions when words were not enough. I have not needed more than that in a long time."

She laughed bitterly and then replied, "How horrible. I’m neither of those and you know that, Yasha. Body language won’t work when you have your own agenda or preconceived notions about the person you are trying to read. You have always assumed that I don't even like you or that I don't want to be here with you anymore—if I even ever did—or that I cannot possibly actually want to have married you. You clearly haven't the least idea what I want or what I am feeling."

Bucky gripped her hands in his and held her tightly to his chest, as he whispered into her ear, "Tell me? Please, Bella."

Thea took a deep, sobbing breath and replied, "Well, I do want to be with you, you total plonker. You really are an idiot, you know. I do want you to hold me and I definitely want you to…поселуй меня? Did I say that at all right?"

Bucky turned her more towards him on his lap and saw her hopeful expression, as he said, "Да, моя дорогая, это было правильно. (Yes, my darling, that is correct.)" He kissed her lightly and when he felt her arms wind round his neck, he pulled her in closer. "Ты прекрасна, моя красотка. (You are perfection, my beautiful one.)" He lifted her up and said seriously, "Are you very tired? I have never seen you go to bed this early before. You aren't starting another flare, are you?"

She shook her head, but he noticed that she was avoiding looking at him. Bucky knew that she tried to avoid admitting when her body was betraying her with an increase in RA symptoms. Thea plucked at the sleeve of his t-shirt as he carried her across the room and said evasively, "No, not really. But you weren't here and I had no idea when you would be back. Sometimes you take a really long time when you go out."

He frowned as he stood looking down and watching her for a few moments, then he set her lightly on the bed. "Yes, but you have never gone to bed without me here before, Bella. You aren't telling me everything, kitten."

"I just felt miserable. I simply thought I'd have a bath and then a little kip before you returned. You usually take really long walks or whatever you do when you get like that. Two hours or more sometimes. I planned to be back up before you returned."

Bucky sat down next to her and, as he reverently stroked her bare shoulder with the tip of his forefinger, said with a crack in his voice, "You don't need to apologise for taking a nap, Bella. I am only concerned because this is not usual behaviour for you."

"I know. Do we truly have to be so difficult all the time though, Yasha?"
He placed a kiss on her jaw right below her ear as he said sadly, "I don't want that either, krasotka. I never wanted us to be like this. I don't know what to do though. It is always you who have to be generous with me, which is very unfair, but you will have to do so again. Tell me what you need, since I will never figure it out on my own, Bella."

Her voice was very fragile, as Thea replied with embarrassment, "Yes, but you are awfully difficult to suss out, too. Your happiness matters to me. It matters so much. Could you not talk more to me?"

Bucky didn't know what she expected, but he had to try something. "Ok. I will try, but I don't know what I am doing." He looked down at her and asked, "Did you like the treat?"

Thea smiled and looked up at him warmly as she said, "Yes, although I haven't finished the chocolate one yet; I definitely will."

He replied seriously, "Do you want me to get it for you?"

"Well, yes, obviously. If you don't mind. I don't know how you don't like chocolate, but I love it."

He crossed the floor quickly and brought the pastry box over to her. "Why don't you finish it while I take a shower?"

Quickly opening the box back up and pulling out the last few bites of the chocolate, she said happily, "Thank you. Golly this is excellent. You know what I would really, really love, Yasha?"

Surprised, he asked hopefully, "What is it, kitten?"

"Couldn't we go have our breakfast out in the morning like we did in Khaskovo? That was so nice. I miss having a proper cup of tea in the morning, you know?"

Bucky did know, but there was little he could do about it. He couldn't exactly drag a tea kettle round with them. "We could probably do that on the day we move, since we would have all our bags and could leave immediately if there is trouble."

"Is that why we only did that on our last day in Khaskovo? I hadn't realised. Well, I'd like that anyway."

He watched her carefully, noticing her disappointment, and shook his head. "Unless there is a problem, then we will do that then. I'll be out soon." He surged into the bathroom and dropped his clothing on the floor quickly. Then he laid two guns on the sink and his knife inside the shower and stepped under the warm water. As he rapidly washed out his hair and hurried to scrub down, Bucky considered what she had said about his lack of affection. It genuinely had not occurred to him that she would misunderstand that way. Now he understood that he ought to have talked to her, but too often he didn't comprehend things with her until afterwards when he had already hurt her. Talking did not come easily to him at all, especially when he feared the answer. He knew he needed to explain things to her. If he avoided this conversation after she had essentially just pleaded with him to be more open, then it would be only his fault when things truly imploded. Better to go ahead and do it now.

He stepped out and made quick use of his towel before wrapping it around himself and snatching up his knife and guns. He'd forgotten to bring his change of clothes in like he usually did. He knew she got embarrassed easily, so he had never changed in front of her. He had not told her how he had noticed her determined attempt to preserve both his and her own modesty the day he had barged into her apartment. There probably wasn't another girl on the planet who would have reacted quite
that way. After all, he had just been an injured assassin forcing her to help him. In retrospect, he
understood her perspective and why she had been so uncomfortable, but at the time he had not been
allowed privacy in so long that he had nearly forgotten the concept.

Bucky tossed his clothing over next to the duffel bag. They badly needed washing, so he'd have to
do that later. As he dug in the bag for his clothing, he heard a sound behind him and turned. Thea
was standing with the pastry box in her hand and watching him with obvious nervousness. It struck
him that she had not seen him without a shirt on since that first day when she cleaned his wounds.
They had been married over four months and his wife was nervous about seeing him without a
shirt. Пиздец!

He dropped his shirt and socks on the bag and crossed the floor towards Thea, who looked
frightened as he wrapped one arm around her and pressed her up against the wall. "Bella, ты
сводишь меня с ума (You are making me crazy). I have no idea what to do with you."

"Why are you angry?"

As his arm tightened and pulled her closer, he growled into her ear. "This is not angry, krasotka."

She shivered slightly as she replied, "You look very angry."

He shook his head and looked seriously at her. "Not angry." He lowered his head and kissed her,
which led her jump up to try to put her arms around him. This made him laugh as he leant his
forehead down on hers. "You are like a…I don't know how to say it...a Фея (faerie)...you are so
short."

He could hear that she was annoyed as she replied, "You are just too tall."

Smiling down at her, he asked, "Would you rather I was shorter?" He then picked her up and
swung her onto his lap as he sat down on the bed.

Her voice was very high pitched as she replied, "Not really."

Bucky laughed again, knowing she was nervous but not scared. "Good. I can't really change that,
can I?"

"Were you always this tall and, you know, everything?" She gestured wildly in the air with her
hand, which amused him so much that he grabbed her hand and kissed it.

He flopped back onto the bed, trying to keep himself calm. Talking about the changes that he had
never wanted usually brought a rush of anger and hatred out of him, but he did not want to feel like
that now. "No, I didn't get taller, but then I was already sufficiently tall. However, I got broader
and much more muscular. Other things changed too, but that doesn't matter."

Thea bit her lips together and stared at him for a moment before she said, "Well, it is a good
result."

Laughing again at her comment, Bucky pulled her down to lay next to him. "I'm glad you think so.
Again, I can't really change it."

Her voice got very small as she said, "I don't want you to. I wish I could change me through."

"Bella, if you got any more beautiful, men would spontaneously combust when they saw you.
Don't you dare change." He smiled as he saw her eyes go wide and her cheeks flame red with
embarrassment. "I've never known anyone who embarrassed as easily as you, krasotka. Does it
make you that uncomfortable to know that I find you very beautiful?"

She looked away as she replied, "I don't know. I suppose I'm glad you do."

He lifted her chin, so he could look into her eyes. "I do. I noticed it the moment I entered your apartment. It was not something I expected. You were a волшебница (enchantress). Your words were like… колдовство…magic is the best way to say it. Everything was so strange and new that I didn't even understand what it meant until the next day. That was when I saw you leaving on your crutches and I felt you were escaping and I feared HYDRA would find you."

Incredulous, Thea asked, "You mean when I was trying to find the loo?"

Bucky shrugged. If he was going to tell her at all then it was time to explain it now. "I did not know that then. I just saw you escaping and I was terrified for you. Then I understood what was happening. Something I remembered from the before-time came back and I realised that I loved you."

Her voice was full of disbelief, but Bucky could see from her expression that she was willing to be convinced. "You didn't look very loving, you know."

He nodded. "I know. I am sorry. It was a new concept, let alone a strange new experience. All I could think of was that HYDRA was going to find you and kill you by torture and it was entirely my fault."

"I was so afraid of you then. You can be really scary."

Bucky propped himself up, so he could look down at her and replied with a mixture of humiliation and disappointment. "I know, krasotka. I really am sorry. That is still a part of me. It will probably happen again. I have seen how I sometimes frighten you when I don't mean to. I never mean to."

She bit her lip and looked down, so he knew she was trying not to upset him as she carefully thought out her answer. "Are you sure? You…well, you can be really intense when you are determined for me to obey you. I think you mean to scare me a bit then."

Bucky sat up and breathed out long and hard, as he held his head in his hands. "Maybe I do. I don't know. There are times when I know that we need to do something my way because it will keep us safe. I don't ever consciously think about scaring you. I will try to be more careful next time."

Thea rolled over, so she was on her side facing away from him. "You like things done your way, Yasha. That is just how it is with you. It isn't like I often try to go against you and I have never gotten away with it when I have."

A feeling of shame flashed over him as he heard her, and Bucky turned his head back towards her. "Kitten, is that how it really is?"

"Yes. You know it is. I don't mind about most things, really. I trust you know what we need to stay safe. But you are really dictatorial sometimes even when it isn't truly necessary."

Suddenly unable to withstand his emotions, Bucky rolled Thea towards him as he laid back down, so he was leaning over her. "I don't want you to feel scared of me, Bella. Not ever."

"I don't see how that is possible. I've seen you do things that are scary. So, when you say to do something with that particular look you have, then I'm rather quickly going to do it."
He knew that he had to make sure that Thea both understood and believed what he was saying. It was intolerable that she could be afraid of him or that she would not feel completely safe around him. No matter what painful or difficult changes he needed to effect in their relationship, Bucky was going to make absolutely certain that Thea trusted that he would always make everything right for her no matter the cost to him. "I would not harm you. I would not raise a hand to you, Bella, no matter how frustrated I am. That would never be acceptable. I love you."

Thea lifted a hand to his chest very lightly, which set loose such a flood of emotion through him that Bucky closed his eyes as he tried to ride it out. "But now you are angry."

His jaws clenched as he tried to find his bearings, Bucky replied, "This is not angry, krasotka. This is so very far from angry." He then opened his eyes and looked down at Thea, but he could see that she was quite unconvinced. He placed his hand in her hair and lowered himself so close that she gasped nervously. He allowed all the raging emotions and desire that he felt to come out as he kissed her, trying as much as he was capable to show her just what he really did mean. Finally, as her hand fluttered on his chest, he pulled back and said with purposeful intensity, "This is what that is, not anger, Bella."

Bucky stared into the mirror at himself and shook his head in disbelief. He was…destroyed. Absolutely wrecked. How in the h*ll was he going to do all he had planned for that day? Obviously, he wasn't going to do a d*** thing but stay in their room with her once she was awake. In all the time he had waited for her, it had never occurred to him that he would be the one so emotionally compromised when it finally occurred. She had drifted off to sleep in his arms, but he had no idea how long he had laid there looking at her the night before. It was beyond his comprehension that he had once taken this so casually. He remembered Bonnie much better now than he had a few months ago. Comparing Bonnie's desperation to Thea's feminine perfection was like comparing a candle to the sun. Once she was awake, Bucky was going to be useless to anything else than whatever she wanted him to do. He had to get done whatever he could before she awoke.

He shoved his arms through his shirt sleeves and pulled on his trousers as he wondered if he should leave her a second knife. Yes, he would. That would still leave four for him. He'd already slipped her gun under her pillow where she would know to find it. She had got much better at how to quickly pull out the weapon when they had practised. Both of her knife manoeuvres were sufficiently effective. Perhaps he could convince her later to practise the move with her right crutch that they had been developing. She seemed to find it hilarious that she could actually defend herself with the outward symbol of her physical weakness. Bucky just didn't think there was any reason to neglect to use two good carbon fibre rods when mounting a defence—even better if they had handles.

Bucky finished fastening his boot and stood up with a quick look in the mirror again. He should look different. He really should, considering how he felt. Finally, he turned away and strode out into the bedroom. He allowed himself a look at the bed and immediately realised that had been a mistake. Leaning back against the wall, he breathed deeply as he struggled for composure. Пришло время ему действовать, как мужчина. Ему нужно было найти контроль над его чувствами, или их брак погибнет. (It was time for him to be a man about it. He had to gain some control over his feelings or their marriage was going to die.)
"You are very different today, Yasha."

Bucky looked up at Thea with consternation from where he had been staring morosely for the past five minutes. "Hm? Sorry, kitten. I didn't mean to ignore you."

He noticed her tone was light and not accusatory, so he relaxed slightly that he wasn't in trouble at least. "You are not really. The point of sitting out here is to watch everything go by, is it not? I just meant that you are acting so differently today than usual. First, we were out walking together and then we sat in the park for nearly an hour. Next, we went to the pastry shop to get those nut thingies you liked. Now we are sat in a proper café having cake. You don't usually spend a whole day casually wandering about with me."

Hesitating as he tried to come up with an explanation other than the truth, Bucky watched her out of the side of his eye and replied slowly, "I suppose that I have been different today."

Her voice both hopeful and uncertain, Thea asked quietly, "Are we going to be able to be more like this now or is today unusual?"

He grimaced as he replied stiffly, "I will make that decision when we get to the next destination."

Thea’s breath caught for a moment, she looked down at her hands, and then she replied unsteadily, "I see. Today is an exception. Well, it has been very nice, you know."

Bucky peered down at her and saw her looking at him very sympathetically. He roughly took her hand and looked back out across the street as he tried to let his humiliation wash over him with as little outward affect as possible. It seemed that she understood exactly his situation and felt pity for him. Kind, gentle pity, but pity nonetheless. He was so f***ing emotionally compromised from the night before that he didn't know how he was going to find his way back again. She could have asked him to shave his head, strip down, and perform that part from his 6th grade production of "HMS Pinafore" in front of Constanta's National Theatre and he would blindly have done it. He was hopeless.

He had no idea what she was feeling. Her emotions were, as per usual, quiet and mostly hidden from him, whereas he was—even more than before—an exposed, raw nerve. He didn't expect her to feel quite the way he did. She had friends and family that she loved and still missed terribly. She had a life that she had left behind. She had come along with him because she trusted him to keep her safe, not because she loved him. He knew that she cared about him and maybe even loved him in a way. Whereas he was his entire world and he was a raging wildfire of desire, need, and hopeless love for her. It was not her fault. He was simply in a different place from her. However, she was his and she didn't seem to want that to change, so he was going to have to accept that and be grateful.

"Yasha?"

He heard her nervous question and frowned, "Hm?"

As she bit her fingernail and stared up at him anxiously, Thea asked, "Are you ok?"

Lying absolutely unconvincingly, Bucky replied, "Yes."

"Well, it is just that, you look a bit rough. The waitress has been avoiding our table and I really
want another tea. I don't know when I shall get a chance for another."

Bucky sat up and looked about for their waitress. He gave her a look that made it clear that he expected her to come immediately. When the girl hurried up, as scared as a rabbit, he said in rough Romanian, "Un alt ceai şi un tort pentru soţia mea. (Another tea and cake for my wife.)"

The waitress murmured, "Da, domnule." She then hurried off, probably too nervous to stay near them. He really had to learn how to be a human being again. He still had trouble being anything but the Winter Soldier with anyone other than Thea.

Sounding angry, Thea said, "Well that didn't help, Yasha. Why are you being so grouchy?"

Very embarrassed, Bucky looked away and groaned. "It isn't intentional, Bella. Who have I interacted with as an actual person other than you?"

He could hear her tiny gasp of breath and then she asked uneasily, "Oh. Is that the problem?"

He shrugged and demanded, "Well, is this how I seemed to you the first few days?"

She made a sound of annoyance and replied, "This is nicer, really. You were rather more terrifying than I want to admit to you. And recently you have been in a pretty massive strop. I, well, I had actually hoped you were going to start being more like you have been today. However, you are awfully moody, so I suppose I can’t expect it."

Bucky growled angrily, "What the hell is a strop? Are you saying that I've been frightening you lately?"

He immediately regretted his words, however, as Thea bit her lip and looked as if she might cry before she turned away. He reached for her hand again, but she pulled it into her lap out of his reach, as she looked determinately at the man who was washing down the pavement in front of his shop across the street.

Before Bucky could say anything, a broad, hulking man walked up and forcefully placed a teacup and a plate of cake in front of Thea, whilst looking threateningly at Bucky as he said in an extremely thick accent, "Your tea and a slice of cake, ma'am."

Thea nervously looked up at the man and said, "Thank you."

Bucky nodded at the man and said politely, "Asta e tot ce avem nevoie. Mulţumesc." (That is all that we will need. Thank you.)

The man stood in front of Bucky and said unpleasantly, "I hope that this is your last night in Constanta, Russian. I do not expect to see you in my shop again."

Bucky narrowed his eyes at the man, as he had never spoken a word of Russian when at the coffee shop. Yakov/Yasha was a name used across multiple Slavic countries. His accent in Romanian was, if anything, American. How had this man identified him as a Russian?

Bucky stood and raised himself to his full height as he tilted his head and asked in a low voice, "Do I know you, amice?"

The man replied pugnaciously, "No, we are not friends, Russian. You scared my sister. My brother works at your hotel. You offend my family."

Feeling a prickling of something that he couldn't manage to identify, Bucky's face became
completely expressionless as he said stiffly, "I am sorry that I frightened your sister. Please convey my apologies."

The man then gestured to Thea and added, "Out of respect to your wife, I will let her finish her tea. After that I ask that you leave."

Bucky shrugged. "Cum doriți. (As you like.)" Yet, as the man walked back into his restaurant, Bucky stared after him with the feeling that there was something he was meant to understand. Yet, he didn't know what it was, which was deeply concerning. He had to find out what he was missing. It wasn't HYDRA, of that he was sure. It wasn't something to do with Steve. Steve was never this subtle—what little Bucky remembered, he was sure of that much. He knew that he was obsessive to the point of insanity when it came to Thea's safety, but he had to admit that she should be safe to sit out on the patio for just three or four minutes in a public area. In that time, Bucky could quickly go in to push that waiter to explain himself. He asked Thea quietly, "Do you feel comfortable sitting here for a moment, Bella?"

Obviously surprised, most likely because he had lectured her only the day before about the unsuitability of leaving her alone anywhere unless she was in the hotel room, Thea replied with a nod, "Certainly. We are in public here, so I am fine, right?"

Bucky leant in and kissed her forehead, as he whispered, "And I am armed to the teeth, so you won't be in danger because I will be close. I intend to seek out the waiter again. I will be back in a moment." Then he stalked inside the restaurant and followed where he assumed the waiter must have gone.

Yet, as he strode inside, Bucky heard a voice off to the side demand, "Привет, русский. Вы были слишком глупы, чтобы понять наше сообщение?" (Hello there, Russian. Were you too slow to get our message?)

Bucky turned and saw a short, elderly man, who was sitting on a stool behind the counter. "Прошу прощения, дедушка, но я не понимаю." (I am sorry, grandfather, I do not understand.)

The old man grinned in a way that he clearly thought was threatening and said, "Сообщение состоит в том, что вы оскорбляете мою семью." (The message is that you offend our family.)

With a shock of fear, Bucky finally comprehended what the old man was trying to convey and just what he had been too lost in his emotions to recognise. He had never considered this scenario. It was incredible that he had so far lost himself in his feelings about the night before that he would leave Thea so unprotected. He had not checked perimeters. He had not made a security assessment of everyone nearby. He had not determined who held weapons. He had not looked for any signs of collaboration from persons at different tables. He had, in short, dropped his hypervigilance completely and now his girl was in danger.

Leaning in with the most vicious of what Thea called his Winter Soldier faces, Bucky growled, "Да? Это так? Ну, это чертовски плохо для вас, цыганский. Но было бы еще более прискорбно, если бы вы обидели меня или мою семью. Я знаю, что ты не будешь таким дольбанным идиотом-стервой. Мы редко прощаем. Ты действительно заботишься о своих людях, я полагаю, цыганский. (Yeah? That so? Too f***ing bad for you, gypsy. However, it would be even more unfortunate for you to offend me or my family. I know you wouldn't want to be such a f***ing stupid b**** as that. We are rarely forgiving. You actually care about your people, I suppose.)"
The old man stared at Bucky for a brief moment, then slid off his stool and hurried out to the patio. Beyond desperate to get back out to where Thea was, Bucky followed at such a brisk pace that he surpassed the old man, who he could see was now appropriately afraid. Bucky's hands were each in a pocket, both of which had the weapons that he considered might be necessary. When he and the old man arrived outside, Bucky saw three men rapidly rise from his and Thea's table from seats surrounding a hysterical and terrified Thea, who had a pastry fork gripped firmly in her hand like a weapon. One of them, the tall, pimply young man who had he had seen in the hall at their hotel, nearly jumped back as he saw Bucky raging in full, furious murderous aggression. The old man, attempting to diffuse the situation, immediately shouted in a language that Bucky assumed was Romany.

However, Bucky was beyond the point of sanity. They had threatened his wife. These unspeakable motherf***ers had dared to cause his girl to look more frightened than he had ever seen her. Before the old man had finished speaking to his people, Bucky had already taken down the two men nearest to him and was reaching for the kid from the hotel. He dragged the young man close to him and asked, "Îţi place durerea? Vrei să te fac o fată? Presupun că de asta îmi ameninţi soţia. (Do you like pain? Would you like me to make you a girl? I assume this is why you threaten my wife.)"

The boy was blubbering and so full of fear that he sounded like a squealing cat, as he soiled himself loudly. Disgusted, Bucky dropped him forcefully on the ground and turned to the old man. "Твой миньоны достаточно не повреждены, чтобы по-прежнему быть полезными для тебя. Я передаю тебя это уважение, дедушка, так как моя жена невредима. Я ожидаю, что твой дети будут вести себя намного лучше, когда я вернусь в Констанцу. Не позволяйте им снова прикасаться к моей собственности. Я никогда не прощаю, но сегодня я не хочу войны." (Your minions are sufficiently intact to still be useful to you. I offer you this respect, Grandfather, since my wife is unharmed. I expect that your children will be better behaved when I return to Constanta. Do not let them touch my property again. I never forgive, but I do not want war tonight.)

Bucky then turned and gently collected Thea, who looked so terrified and overwhelmed that he simply picked her up and carried her with her crutches dangling beside her all the way down the street towards their hotel. As he got the door of the hotel, he asked, "Do you want to walk now, kitten, or would you prefer me to carry you up?"

Thea leant her head against his shoulder and began crying messily as she clutched his shirt. He charged up the stairs to the top floor and hurriedly entered their room. He noticed that the door had been opened in their absence, so he gently set Thea down on the bed with a kiss on her forehead, then began to do a circuit of the room as he checked everything. All his hidden weapons were undisturbed. However, he could see that both the green duffel and the rucksack had been moved. Immediately, he dumped out the rucksack and started digging through all the seams and feeling everywhere for anything hidden. Then he put back each item and mentally checked them against the inventory of what should have been present. Next, he did the same thing for the green duffel. He found nothing hidden, but he did find a lot missing. He carefully laid everything back inside and then turned back to Thea. "Kitten, will you be all right to come with me when I confront the manager about the thefts?"

"No, no, please. I don't want to talk to any of those horrible people, Yasha. I hate it here. This morning it seemed like everything was so wonderful and perfect and now it is just horrid."

Filing away for later her statement about her feelings that morning, Bucky walked over and dropped down on the bed beside her. He stroked her cheek gently and explained, "There are tsygane everywhere, Thea, especially in Romania, Turkey, and Bulgaria. What I just cannot understand is being taken for a fool. They should have known not to f*** with me. Who the h*ll did they think I am that I would be vulnerable to that s***?"
Concerned about how she was shivering so violently, Bucky reached up and pulled down the bed covers, so Thea was wrapped up in them. Then he pulled her closer to him and wound his arms tightly around her. Finally, Thea asked unsteadily, "What do you mean?"

Bucky explained, "Gypsies. Those stupid f***s thought they could shake me down for protection on your behalf, Bella. That f***ing rat-faced fink from the hotel here is part of their family, which is why they chose us. He must have given them seriously faulty information, or else I have done a completely f***ing horrible job on our cover. Or both. Now, I need to go report these thefts and give them a chance to bring back what I need. Otherwise, I will have to go back there to the café to demand it and some of their family will not walk out again."

Slightly hysterical, Thea pleaded, "No! Oh, my goodness, Yasha, please. What could possibly be worth going back there? Is it actually important stuff? Can't we do without it?"

He very firmly insisted, "No. We cannot. It is critical that we get a few of those things back."

"Ok. Ok, I'll go with you. It isn't safer for me to stay in the room?"

He shook his head and attempted to explain as calmly as he could, "Normally, I would say yes. However, they have not been above threatening you in my absence. Come on, kitten."

Thea followed him. She was clearly genuinely terrified, but she gripped his hand and limped behind him to the door. However, just as they approached the it, there was a loud knock and the soft sound of something being placed against the door. Bucky shoved her out of the way quickly with his arm and swung the door open in time to see someone just dashing down the steps. Against the door was the computer, the iPad, a large envelope, and the small wooden box that Thea had once seen in his bag. Bucky cursed under his breath, swept up all the items in one hand, and shut the door quickly. He opened the envelope and swore, "Гребаные цыгане!"

"Is that everything?"

"No. But it is enough. It isn't worth pursuing. All your things are there. The bulk of our money was with me. The rest they can keep. Come. We are moving tonight. I won't have you stay here anymore."

"Oh, thank goodness. I cannot wait to be away from here, Yasha." Thea sat down on the bed and Bucky immediately wrapped her back up and knelt down in front of her.

"You are ok, Bella. I am not going to allow anything further to happen to you. You are safe, my precious krasotka."

Thea shivered and whispered, "I know. You promised, so I believe that."

"Good." He stayed on his knees in front of her, holding her hands between his and waiting for her to calm down sufficiently. Finally, he smiled tightly at her and said apologetically, "We need to leave right now, kitten. So, I am going to need those bedcovers."

Bucky could see she was startled, as she asked with an edge, "What? Why?"

He kissed her forehead and said only, "We will need them. Just trust me."

Thea got up and allowed him to rip the sheets and blanket off the bed as she stood near the table and watched him.

Bucky rapidly packed the weapons and the remaining items. Then he looked around the room and
made sure that nothing was left. Lastly, he crammed the bed covers in the bag and said, "Okay, give me the crutches now, kitten. We are leaving over the roof. I'll be carrying you again."

Thea handed him the crutches one at a time and then leant against the wall, as he folded them into the bag and barely managed to zip it up again. Then he hung the rucksack on her and the green duffel on his front. Bucky motioned to her to stand out of the way of the door as he opened it cautiously. He slid the door open so quietly that it was barely audible. Then he grabbed her and pulled her with him into the corridor before slowly closing the door again. Next, he crouched down silently, so she could climb on and then stood up as he gripped her legs with his hands. They moved down the corridor very quietly and stopped at the door to the attic. After a pause in which he listened for whatever noises were nearby, Bucky slipped through the door and then shut it again. He could feel Thea's face pressed into his back and her hair tickled his neck slightly, as she snuggled in closer. He whispered just loud enough for her to hear, "Ok, kitten, here we go. It will be ok, my precious one."

Then Bucky burst up the attic stairs and down the length of the attic towards the roof window. He pulled the string down, patted Thea's feet to tell her to grip them close to him, then used his hands to swing up and out onto the roof. Once there, he crouched down and looked all around him. He saw immediately which way he wanted to go and took off running. He made a jump from the old hotel onto another long building. Then he turned and took a very long leap onto an apartment building. As he bounded over the dormers and uneven roof, he could feel Thea's arms clutching him tighter and her legs shaking with exhaustion at having to hold on by themselves. He jumped down onto a lower building and ran along the length of it to a wall over which he swung himself, eliciting a muffled scream of fear from Thea. "It will be ok, hang on, krasotka." He ran faster as they passed down one street and onto another and the next until they were soon miles away and in a very different part of the city. He slipped behind a tall wall and then crouched down, saying between ragged breaths, "You can get down now, kitten."

Thea dropped her legs as well as the rucksack, but she gripped him unsteadily around the waist. "I don't think that I can walk much, Yasha. Not even with my crutches. I'm sorry."

Bucky dropped his bag and turned about so he could pull her tightly into his arms. She began to sob and clung to him desperately, as he rubbed his hands up and down her back and repeatedly kissed the top of her head. "That should never have occurred. I let my guard down. The instant I let my guard down that happened. I know better, but I did it anyway and they nearly harmed you. It is unforgivable and entirely my fault, Bella. All my fault. I noticed that little rat who dimed us out to his family at the hotel, but I knew he wasn't HYDRA so I ignored him. Then the server who confronted me called me a Russian, even though I knew we hadn't spoken in anything but English and my Romanian accent is American. I was more concerned with how he knew I am supposed to be a Russian and worried if he knew me or who I used to be. I should have connected it. The stupidest part of all was leaving you alone on the patio to follow him just because I intended to interrogate him. I expected you to be safe in full public view of the street, which was shockingly idiotic as I hadn’t even checked out the people at the other tables. I did everything that I have always said we can’t do. Every single part of that was my fault, krasotka."

Thea looked up at him and hung her arms around his neck as she stood on her tiptoes to reach. "You called me that last night for the first time and today you have said it repeatedly. What does it mean?"

Surprised, Bucky replied with a slight smile, "Beautiful little one, a beautiful girl."

She tucked her face into his chest where he held her tightly. After a moment, he heard with horrible guilt how strongly her voice throbbed with anger and emotion, as she insisted, "I won't
ever question your security again, Yasha. You were right. It was too risky to be out like that in the
part of town where we were staying. I'm the one who wanted to wander about our hotel
neighbourhood today and look how that ended up. We will only go out into public areas that you
know are safe in the future."

Even more surprised that this was her takeaway lesson from the evening's events, Bucky decided to
accept the serendipitous gift and run with it. "I am glad that you feel that way, but I made
extremely serious errors, too. This was not your mistake, but mine. I allowed emotion to overtake
what I knew I should do to keep you safe. We will return to how we did things before until we find
where we intend to stay." He finally found the courage to ask what had concerned him most, "Did
they touch you, Bella?"

She did not reply immediately but lifted her eyes to his for a moment. When she saw his
expression, she rapidly hid her face again and admitted, "That one man did put his hand on my leg.
I started to stab him with my fork, but then the old man came out and shouted something and the
man stood up before I could do anything."

His vision clouding and ears ringing with fury, Bucky felt a sickening rage fill his chest as he asked
intently, "Which man?"

Thea did not reply, but clutched his shirt more tightly in her hands. Bucky lowered his head and
spoke directly into her ear in the gentlest voice he could manage, "Bella, please tell me."

She sighed slowly. "The one you sent flying into the fence railing. He was still unconscious when
we left. I checked."

Trying to remember which one this was, Bucky replied, "I ought to have broken his hand for that."

Thea tried to get up on her tiptoes again, but he closed the distance and kissed her both
aggressively and lovingly until she gripped his collar with both hands and melted into his arm. "Oh
Bucky, will we be ok now?"

He heard the trust and hope in her voice and could not bring himself to reprimand her for using his
name. "Yes. We will be safe. You are protected now, Bella, I promise it. I will never make that
error again."

"Okay, I believe you."

Gripping his girl so firmly that every breath she took felt like a soothing reminder to him that she
was there, she was safe, and she was his, Bucky suddenly let out a rough, angry laugh. "I wish you
had stabbed the залупа чертовски, kitten. That would have made him think twice about touching
another man's girl again."

Thea hummed meditatively before she answered, "Well, the fork was already in motion. If he had
not stood up quite so quickly then he would have got it in the arm. But you were terrifying, Bucky.
Really, truly terrifying. Golly, it was wonderful."

Surprised, he looked down at her to gauge her expression. He had greatly feared that seeing him
break out even his non-lethal skill set in front of her would bring about another wave of shyness
and nervousness in her. He could not understand how she sounded so pleased. Not pleased…
thrilled was more accurate. "I didn't want you to see that, but it had to happen."

Her voice still sounded deeply satisfied. "It was over so quickly that I think the whole fight was
less than a minute. Three men. How do you do that?"
Bucky frowned. It was better to be honest if they were going to have this conversation. "If you had not been so close, then I could have taken them all out at once. I suppose that is something we need to practice, too. You should know what to do when I am fighting and what you should look out for."

"I don't know how you do things like that."

He sighed and pulled her closer. "That was not even close to my best work. That was nearly amateur for me, Bella. You don't ever want to see me if I am going for wet work."

Thea whispered, "Wow. You really are like a superhero."

Bucky kissed her forehead and stroked her hair before he replied, "More like a supervillain, my darling. Heroes don't slaughter people."

"No, they defend people, which sometimes means killing the bad guys. You said that is all you will do now. It's what you just did for me and you didn't kill anyone even though I could see the fury on your face when you came out. I know you wanted to destroy them, but you didn't. What does that make you?"

Bucky looked down into the worshipful expression on his wife's face and wanted to let her believe what she was saying. He wanted it with every fibre of his being, so she could believe that he was someone worth loving. However, he couldn't do it. "It makes me a former assassin, who has retired. I'm no one's hero, kitten."

"Yes, you are. You are mine. How can you have lived with me for months now and still not understand that? You are good, you are wonderful, and I love you so much."

Surrendering to her faulty belief because it had apparently, without him even realising it, earned him what he wanted most, Bucky asked, "Is that really true, krasotka?"

"Of course, I believe that. You are my hero, Yasha."

Unwilling to ask her again, since she had clearly not understood, Bucky picked up both bags, slung one over each shoulder, and then said, "I am going to carry you in front. If you put your arms around my neck, then I can hold your legs around my waist."

"Okay. Let me hold on." She tried to jump up, but he had to help her and then grabbed her legs firmly in his hands.

"Comfortable?"

Thea tucked her head into the jacket sleeve covering his metal shoulder and said, "Mm-hm."

"Okay, we are walking a good bit further. Let me know if you are too uncomfortable."

She tightened her arms around his neck and said only, "I love you."

Having now heard twice in one night that which he had desperately longed to hear for months, Bucky kissed the top of her head and said fervently, "You are my paradise, Bella. Love is not a strong enough word."
Chapter 15

He looked up from the floor where he had the Milkor taken apart and ready to be cleaned and asked, "Kitten, what are you doing?"

Thea replied as if the answer was obvious, "Getting ready to clean this horrid oven again. It is the worst, nastiest oven in the whole of Belarus, but it is all we have, Yasha. I am going to find some way to clean the decades of grime that make it smoke so much."

Bucky frowned. "It is probably too old to ever work properly, Bella."

She spoke through clenched teeth as she poured a mound of scouring powder onto the oven bottom. "Of course, it is, but it does work sufficiently to bake our dinner and surely it doesn't have to smoke like a chimney every time. That is from the grease and remnants of old meals that are all over it. Each time I clean it, the layer of filth gets a tiny bit less."

He nodded to indicate his understanding, but privately worried about all the things she wasn't saying. Uneasily, Bucky asked, "Should I get something else to help clean it better? I have no idea what you use to clean an oven."

As she attacked the oven surface with fiery determination, Thea declared, "Well to be honest, neither do I. Before we got this flat here, I'd never cleaned in my life. We always had a daily back home and I had one of those services in DC. It's not that hard to sort it out though, so I'm managing. I suppose if I read Russian—or is it Belarusian maybe?—anyway, then I could understand the labels on all the cleaning products, but I don't. I'm sure one of them mentions 'oven cleaner', Yasha."

"I will look. What other things should I get?"

Thea sat back and glared at the oven with a look of pure disgust. Then she looked back at Bucky with a small smile. "Something with a wand to it for cleaning the toilet. Some sort of scrubbing brush that is larger than this thing." She waved the little white brush in the air fiercely. "And so much more scouring powder. I don't think anyone who lived here in the last decade cleaned a thing."

He grunted agreement as he looked around the sad, tiny old flat. "That is why it is so cheap. It is old, filthy, and in a terrible neighbourhood. Not precisely a dream home."

Thea laughed. "It has you, so I think I will be fine."

Bucky looked back up with surprise. His eyes wide, he telegraphed a question to her. He saw her smile somewhat more brightly at him, but she didn't blush as she normally would do after a comment like that.

Finally, she sighed. "Yes, well, if you really need telling, Yasha..."

His hands still, gripping two components of the grenade launcher on the floor, he was nearly ready to beg as he waited for her to answer.

She acquiesced and said softly, "I don't like being in this flat all day even now that I have some books, but I do like being with you so that makes it bearable. I can only be happy now where you are and I could never be happy again if you were not with me. Therefore, I will just follow wherever you lead even if we have to stay in places like this forever. That is just how it is."
He told himself that it just didn't seem possible; it didn't seem real. He could barely control his voice, as he replied, "You could accept having to live like this for the rest of your life, Bella?"

He heard the hurt in her voice as she exclaimed, "Yes. What don't you understand? Where else would I want to be, Yasha?"

He groaned. "Anywhere. London with your family. Back at your old job at the Prado. DC with your brother. Any-f***ing-place but in a s*** apartment in Minsk with me, Bella."

"Well, if you were in those places, then ok. Otherwise, I'm not at all interested."

Grabbing a rag, Bucky got up from the floor and wiped his hands. "You cannot pretend you are at peace with this situation. You forget that I have enhanced hearing, so I hear you crying in the bathroom every night. I have seen the look on your face when you stare around at this s***hole and wonder how the f*** you got stuck with this life when you were born into such privilege. I'm not a genius, but I can see you don't like it here."

Thea dropped the scrubbing brush onto the inside of the oven door and walked across the tiny floor of the flat so she was standing directly in front of him. "You don't know what I am thinking, Yasha. You aren't a mind reader. Please don't make assumptions about what I am feeling or thinking. You don't have a good record of getting it right, or don't you remember?"

He did not know why he was picking this fight, but it didn't feel like he could stop it. He needed to say all this to her. "I grew up poor, kitten. It is a h*ll of a life. You were born into wealth. You aren't made for this."

"Ah, right, so I'm too much of a princess to be able to handle it, you mean? Thank you for that vote of confidence. I am far from the first woman who had to get used to poverty after having grown up with more. You are being purposely horrid. Why?"

Bucky shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't see how you can want to be here with me."

Thea gave him a look that told him she was deeply disappointed in his reply but said nothing. Eventually, he asked with a look of embarrassing vulnerability that he could not control, "Why do you cry so often then, Bella?"

She did not look away but peered up at him with a wide-eyed look filled with deep pain. She admitted, "I miss my family, Yasha. I love my brothers very much and I know that they are even worse off than I am, since they believe I am dead. I worry about them, you know? After Christopher died, they both changed. I did, too, of course. However, I can only imagine how Tommy will be drinking more than ever and philandering his way through any pretty blonde who likes naval officers. Richard is probably so wrapped up with his work that he barely leaves the embassy. That really nice neurologist with whom he was just starting a relationship, yeah, I am quite sure that didn't survive my disappearance. He probably won't find anyone for a long time. If ever. He goes all internal when he is hurt. Tommy is all external and rages out like you. And I could stop all that pain if I could just let them know that I am alive and well here in Minsk, married to you. Yet, I can't do that. How could you expect me not to want to cry, Yasha?"

Bucky stood very still and watched her as she watched him. He didn't know how to reply to her admission. Finally, he settled on total honesty, "I don't know what to say, Bella. Of course, you would feel like that. I just hadn't considered it. I'm sorry. I…f***, kitten. I'm sorry. I forget that you still have living siblings. I can understand the feelings and I should have been trying to help you with it. I remember wondering if it was Ma or my sister who put the third gold star on the flag in
the window when they got the notification telegram about me. I think it would have been my sister. I can't imagine how she felt. I can't process that. However, I am glad they thought I was dead. At least they were allowed to think I'd died like some f***ing hero. They didn't have to find out the truth."

She replied so flatly that he would have thought she was apathetic if he hadn't looked into her eyes and seen the pain was still there. "You are a hero, Yasha. They would be proud of who you are now, just like I am."

He was still unable to keep himself from saying what he knew was the wrong thing. "No, they would be horrified that I am a f***ed up HYDRA lab rat that became a killer. I know Ma would never get over this." He raised up his metal arm. "This would kill her."

Thea ran her hand along his prosthetic arm and replied softly, "Any mother would hurt to see her son lose a limb, but she wouldn't be horrified by you. You are a good man. I am sure she would be proud of you. I know you hate this, but I don't."

Bucky pulled his arm away from her hand and growled, "They made it to be a weapon, Bella, not something to touch a girl like you. These fingers have choked people. This metal hand has made bombs that blew up homes. You do not want to like this thing, do you understand?"

He watched her as she considered what to say. It was impossible for him to keep his hatred of what HYDRA had done both to him and with him separate from his opinion of his prosthetic arm. His raw detestation of it made him cringe when she touched it even accidentally. Even worse, he could not bear when she touched it on purpose. Yet, he also ached for her to keep doing so and knew he would hate if she stopped being so impressed by it.

Thea said finally, "Yes, I know all of that. However, they are not controlling you, your mind, your hands, your arm, or any of you now. You are. How are you going to use that arm now that it is yours?"

He closed his eyes, as he felt her run her hand along the full length of his arm, and he shivered in both agony and desperate need. As he heard her soft breath near his ear, he gave in and pulled her to him very firmly with the metal arm.

She smiled up at him and said with that serious, sweet expression that always undid him, "They made you into a weapon and you can't change that. However, you are the one who decides where and when you make use of your skills now. So far, you have used your ability to repeatedly keep me safe. Now you are doing miserable, rough labour with all that strength despite hating every moment of that job, but you do it to support us. You are not acting anything like what HYDRA tried to make you. You are your own man, Yasha."

Bucky shook his head but didn't say anything more. Even he wasn't going to be fool enough to ignore his wife's acceptance of the gleaming, ugly, and ever constant reminder of his servitude to HYDRA. He knew she loved when he did something that showed his enhanced strength. Nevertheless, he still felt like a freak. Barely human. Yet, if that was really what she liked, then he would give her all he had. He paused for a moment before suddenly using that arm, which still had her ensnared in its grasp, to swing her up onto his shoulder in one move. As she yelped in surprise, demanding to be let down, he shook his head. Stalking towards the corner where she had made a row of old cushions and the bedclothes from Constanta into their bed, he refused her request saying with a laugh, "Too bad, kitten."

Bucky dragged over another old magazine in front of him on the low table. He leant back into
Thea's legs from his position on the floor and said with a smile back at her, "Ok, Bella. Just imagine it like this."

Thea looked over his shoulder as Bucky tried to draw a diagram again. Holding his tongue between his teeth as he drew rapidly, Bucky then said excitedly, "Look, kitten, the infield is a diamond, right?"

"Uh, I guess?"

"Yeah, and the outfield is an arc behind the diamond. There is a wall…yeah, here. See?"

Trying her best to look interested at this oh-so-American game that seemed to make Bucky so uncharacteristically happy, Thea replied, "Ok, yes."

"So, the pitcher stands here on the mound. He throws to here, which is where the batter is."

Her brow wrinkled as she looked back at his first diagram and tried to remember what all the numbers meant. "That's where the catcher would be stood, right?"

Bucky nodded his head encouragingly. "Well obviously he needs to be there, kitten. He has to catch the balls that the batter doesn't hit or when the batter does hit a ball and it is thrown home."

She looked between the two diagrams and replied with confusion, "Erm, ok then, I see."

Bucky began drawing little arrows as he described each scenario, which only further served to muddle Thea's tenuous understanding. "Yeah, ok, so the batter is trying to hit the ball as far as he can. If he can get it over the wall, then that makes a home run, since no one can catch it. If he hits it outside those lines, that's a foul and he has to try again. If he hits to a player that catches the ball, then he's out. So, usually a batter hopes to get a base hit by hitting the ball where it can't be thrown fast enough to tag him out."

Thea looked up at him and finally admitted with a rueful laugh, "I have no idea what you just said. Hitting the ball is good. I've sussed that much."

"Yeah, ok. Maybe it's hard to get at first, but once you see a game it will make more sense."

Thea smiled brightly as she saw how unusually animated Bucky's expression was. "Well, I'd be happy to go to a game, but I'm not sure it would be my sport."

"I'm probably not the best at explaining it, kitten, but trust me. Baseball is the only sport that matters."

She laughed merrily and then laid her hand on his shoulder. "Don't say that to my brother, Tommy. He is the most football obsessed one in our entire family. He supports Arsenal, I'm sorry to say."

"I have no idea who they are."

"Football, Yasha. Soccer, you know. I am English, silly. Arsenal is one of the London sides. I don't care much about it, but Tommy and Richard do. Richard supports West Ham like Christopher did. Although, actually he is even more passionate about rugby, which I like even less."

Bucky leant his head back, as Thea started running her fingers through his hair lightly. He asked curiously, "What sport do you like, Bella?"

"Ice-skating was my sport until the RA, remember? I loved skating so much. I miss everything
about it: the feel of the cool air on my face as I first stepped into the rink, that swooping feeling as I pushed off, the glorious sensation of landing the perfect jump, oh everything. I still follow it even though I can't do it now. I don't really enjoy any team sports particularly well, but I don't mind watching football if it is on. I always used to watch with Christopher."

"I've never watched an entire soccer game. It wasn't played by anyone in Brooklyn back in my day. Sometimes we played football—real American football I mean—but mostly it was baseball. We made a diamond in an alley or a field using whatever was around. A trash can lid for home plate or whatever. I used to oil that d*** mitt and bind it to get the right crease, treating it like it was my most prized possession, which in a way it probably was. Didn't have many things I owned anyhow. Didn't have a bat, but Steve had an old one. We played all summer, whenever Steve wasn't sick. F***, how I used to dream of those summers after I shipped out."

"I had no idea that you loved baseball so much."

"Well, I didn't remember some of it until a couple of months ago. But it is one of those vibrant memories that feels so recent. You know?"

Thea smiled and continued to stroke the top of his head lightly as she replied, "Yes, I do. I think the memories of you and Steve are some of the brightest ones, aren't they?"

Bucky shrugged, but said, "Yeah. Steve and I only got to go to a game at Ebbets once. I worked my a** off to get a little extra money to buy those tickets for his birthday. He was so excited, but also angry that I'd 'wasted' my money on something like that. He could be such a jerk sometimes. But when we went though, it was incredible, Bella. It was better than I'd imagined. The sights, the smells, the sounds...f***, I could have gone right back every day the next week if I hadn't had a stupid notion to keep eating and paying our rent. Yet after we'd actually been, you know, then listening to the games on the radio was totally different. We actually could picture it, so we just laid on the floor of our apartment and listened. I remember us guys all went nuts when Brooklyn won the pennant in '41, which was incredible after years of stinking up the league. Of course, we still lost the Series to the f***ing Yankees. But, yeah, there wasn't nothing like it, kitten."

"It sounds like you and Steve really loved baseball."

"Didn't cost nothing to listen on the radio and all we needed was a ball and a bat to play in a field. It was a great sport for poor kids like us. All us guys played then. We even played a game in Italy, I remember, when we were waiting a few days in this s*** town in Brescia. But the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, so I guess I don't have a team no more."

"Oh. Aren't there any other teams you could support?"

"I don't know. It doesn't feel right choosing another team somehow. The Giants moved, too. I mean, the Yankees are still there, but no true Brooklyn kid could like them. I read that they have a new team called the Mets, but I ain't interested in no consolation prize team. I guess it doesn't really matter. We can't watch American baseball here in Poland, Bella. I doubt I'll ever get back anyway."

Thea leant her chin on the top of his head and asked, "If we do, then will you take me to a game?"

Bucky turned around and got up onto his knees so he could place his hands on her face. "You would want to go?"

"To see a game that means so much to you? Of course!"
He smiled one of those rare smiles that lit up his face in the way that made Thea's heart leap. "Then I promise that if we ever are able to return to America that we will go, krasotka."

"Bella, what is wrong?"

Thea got up from the bed rapidly and ran to the bathroom. As she knelt down on the floor afterwards, she began to cry. She was so tired of being sick. It had been three weeks of this. She knew her meds were off balance now that she was no longer taking the methotrexate, but they couldn't take her to a doctor to have them adjusted. And she couldn't go back on the methotrexate in this condition. If Bucky knew why she had stopped it, he would really go crazy. But she was just so tired.

"Bella, do you want some water?"

As she rested against the tile wall, she admitted miserably, "Yeah. Okay. I'm feeling just a bit better. Maybe I ought not to have eaten the fish. Now all I can think of is fish. Oh gosh!"

Bucky dropped to the floor beside her and pulled her hair back gently. When she was finished again, he pulled down a washrag and handed it to her. "Maybe we should get your mind on something else. Come back to bed and I'll read to you."

She was now limply laying on the floor and she didn't even care. Would this ever end or would it be this way the whole time? "Oh, I hate this."

He helped her off the ground and over to the sink. She leant against the edge of the basin and looked up at him in the mirror. She saw the pain in his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to smile in the hope that she could reassure him. "I'm such a baby about nausea. Ugh."

As she turned on the water and began to splash some onto her face, Thea knew that Bucky was not even slightly deceived. He had the same look as those bad days when he could barely converse in anything but Russian: haunted and lost. Those days happened so much less frequently then they once had. Everything had been steadily getting better. It hurt to see him look that way now.

Bucky nodded. "Want me to get a bowl and put it by the bed?"

"Yes, I guess so." She turned and put her head on his shoulder. All at once she realised that he had already sussed it all out. "You know, don't you?"

He sighed, as if both relieved and afraid. "Yes."

Confused, she looked up so she could see his face, as she asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He unhappily answered, "I could ask the same, Bella. You didn't want me to know, so I was waiting to find out why."

"Oh." She raised her hand and placed it on his chest in a silent appeal. "How long have you known?"

Bucky heavily sighed and replied despondently, "Almost three months."

Surprised, Thea snuggled her head into his bare chest and murmured, "How did you know so early? I was only sure two months ago."

Perplexed, Bucky said, "Of course I would know. Your body was different; I could feel it. Also,
when you get out of bed to be sick, I always wake up. You are eating differently. You don't like to wear that rose lotion anymore. There were so many signs. You didn't realise that?"

Thea shook her head. He was more attuned to her health than she was sometimes, so perhaps she ought not to be surprised. Yet she was. "Not really."

Clearly unwilling to continue this topic, Bucky asked quietly, "Are you ready to go back to bed?"

"Yeah, I think so. You'll really read to me again? I love when you do that. I think I could listen to your voice if you read a technical manual."

"Of course, I will read to you. Which book do you want?" Bucky gently lifted her up and took her back into the main room of their tiny bedsit. He knelt down so he could lay her on the thin mattress. Then he walked over to the miniscule kitchen, found the mixing bowl, and brought it to her. "Water?"

"Yeah. A bit." She took the bottle and allowed herself a sip before laying her head back.

Bucky put his hand on the stack of books they had collected in the two months they had lived in Krakow after their very hurried departure from Minsk, which included the three new books on Juan Bautista Maíno that she was now using for her project. "La Chanson de Roland again?"

"No, I know you don't really like reading French. Pick a Sherlock Holmes story. You like those, so surprise me."

Bucky grabbed the book and sat down on the narrow bed next to her. He didn't even attempt to hide his pain from her, as he asked, "Why have you been keeping it from me, Bella?"

She looked away from him, embarrassed, making it clear to him that she knew he was not going to like her answer. In fact, there could be no good reason for her silence. "Well, it wasn't part of your plan. You have always been so clear about each part of the protocol and this is definitely not something we discussed, so I wasn't sure if you might be upset."

Very surprised, Bucky asked heatedly, "Why would I be unhappy that you are going to have our baby? I am not ignorant; I certainly knew this was a possibility, Bella."

Thea turned back to him and admitted, "Lots of reasons. One of which is that it is going to affect my RA. I had to go off methotrexate as soon as I considered the possibility that we could have a baby." She saw his eyes flash with anger and she almost lost the nerve to continue, "I...I know how hard you worked to get me my doses, but I can't take it if there is any chance of a pregnancy. It would cause defects."

"Then you should have told me that you weren't taking it."

"Yes, I know. I do know that, Yasha. I was wrong. I felt that you wouldn't really have let me stop."

Was this the way things had been all this time? Had he deceived himself into believing she trusted him? Incensed, Bucky nearly shouted, "If I knew you were already expecting, I would! I wouldn't want anything to harm our child. F*** it, Bella, what do you think I am?"

He heard the wobble in her voice as she tried to explain, "I could not have waited until I am already pregnant to stop the meds, Yasha. I had to stop beforehand so there was no risk of birth defects. I didn't even know then how things were going to happen between us, since they, you know, they hadn't. So...I made a decision to plan ahead. And I think that I was right, since when it did happen, we weren't careful even a little bit. Not at all."
"Right." Bucky watched her with an odd sense of horrible familiarity. Yes, they had returned to this. Perhaps they always would. "Don't you think that you should give me the chance to do it right and not assume that I'll act like a мудак?"

"Yes, I really should have." She looked up at him and quietly said, "I know that I made the wrong decision initially and I have been trying to sort out how to tell you, but there didn't seem any good way to do it. I'm sorry."

His voice was hard, as he stared down at her with one of his Winter Soldier faces that he had never directed at her before. "Do you want this child, Bella? Or do you regret it?"

She looked up at him with pleading eyes. "Yes, I want this very much. I love you and this is ours, which makes it wonderful. I'm scared though. People like me are supposed to be monitored closely during pregnancy. I'm in a high-risk category."

He heard the sincerity in her voice, which mattered but didn't quite bridge the gap. Bucky nodded as a response to her and watched her reaction for a few moments. Finally, he spoke, using a harsh, commanding voice that he intended to warn her to be very careful how she replied to his question. "OK. What do you need?"

She shook her head. "Nothing really, beyond eating as nutritiously as I can and being cautious about physical activity. I bought prenatal vitamins."

He waved his hand dismissively. Why could she not just trust him with the truth? When had he not delivered what she needed? "Those purple pills, yes. I'm sure you need more than that."

She bit her lip anxiously and replied in a very small voice. "I always forget how hyper-observant you are. Ok, well, can you get me to a doctor soon? We are undocumented and in hiding, so I don't know what we can do."

Pulling a serious face that should have made very clear to Thea that her answer had further insulted him, Bucky replied, "I will find a doctor. I'll ask Jozef tomorrow during work."

Surprised, Thea asked, "You trust him enough?"

Bucky shrugged. He still intentionally spoke in his most imposing voice, as he replied sternly, "No, I don't trust anybody here. However, my wife needs a doctor. I will work it out, Bella."

Thea quelled for a moment, uncertain and even more nervous. Bucky waited with almost paralysing anxiety for how she would reply...how she would chose to take things from this point. Finally, she took a great, sobbing breath and began talking in a voice that nearly quivered with misery. "Oh, Yasha, I know that I should have told you. I regretted my decision pretty much instantly. Yet, I was stuck because you'd know that I had hidden things from you and that is pretty much the unforgiveable sin with you. I've been telling myself that I had to talk to you for weeks and weeks. I just didn't know how to undo what I started. Then things got more and more difficult, since it had been so long and I knew that you would be angry. I knew this would make things harder for you, too, so I just started trying to ignore it, I suppose. I'm the worst at secrets and I hate lying, so I've been horrified by how I trapped myself into this situation so stupidly. I'm so, so sorry, Yasha. I did this utterly wrong and you ought to be so disappointed and unhappy with me. I know I was wrong. Can I make things right, Yasha? Do you think that I've ruined things? Oh good heavens, please say something."

He sat for some time staring in the direction of the old wooden crucifix that was affixed above the door to the flat. He slowly tried to work out what had really happened—what she truly meant by
her decision to hide all of this from him. He knew that their relationship had begun in the most non-ideal conditions that he could imagine. He was also still extremely unstable and often difficult. She had good reason to fear his temper, since he could be as cold as f*** when he was angry. He replied to her question stiffly, "Yes, things will be alright. Do not hide anything again, however. I will not be able to take it again. I've know done worse to you, so I really don't have any right to complain. Bringing you with me might have given me a life but it destroyed yours, so I don't know how to judge that. Taking care of you has been the most worthwhile thing that I've ever done. If I cannot do everything in my power to protect you and this child, then I am useless, Bella. Lay down, now. I'll read the Speckled Band. I always liked that one."

"Yasha, are you really sure that I've not mucked everything up horribly forever? You won't really trust me now, do you?"

Yeah, well, she had destroyed his belief that she saw him as a man and not a dog, so…nope, the trust wasn't really there. How could he have any self-confidence when the entire centre of his universe rejected him so wholly? As he replied stiffly, he could see that she knew that he was not being honest, "It really will be all right in time. Just do not keep anything from me again."

"I won't. I promise. I really am sorry, Любимый."

Bucky caught his breath as he heard the Russian endearment and wondered where the h*ll she had learnt it. He looked at her again and saw the fear, remorse, and…love…definitely love…in her eyes. He suddenly lost his battle not to tell her the truth of what he felt. "We have been married nine months, Bella. I would have hoped that you knew me enough. I thought that you actually saw me as a man. Now I am left to wonder what you think."

Thea looked up at him and replied with such sincerity that he knew she believed she meant what she was saying, "Yasha, I trust you. This was actually my fault alone and nothing you did. I know that you will do anything to keep us safe. I do know that. My body is not going to make this easy."

He set the book firmly on his lap as he replied brutally, "No, it won't."

She sighed and reached out her hand, which she purposely entwined with his metal fingers. "But I want this."

First staring down at her hand with shock and then looking up at her, Bucky breathed out slowly and shoved the book away from himself. He asked, "You want my child?"

"Ever so much. Yours. No one else's."

He clenched his fingers lightly around hers, allowing himself for the first time to use that hand for anything but quotidian or brute work. He could sense only the presence of her fingers inside his, but none of the warmth that he could feel when she held his other hand. Yet, he felt a blazing sensation shoot through him as he saw the intensity with which she was holding on to him. Confused, he looked over to watch her for a moment. He pulled her closer with his arm and saw her smile in that special way that told him this was real. Their marriage was actually real. It was not a pathetic fantasy in his mind anymore. Наконец, она действительно принадлежала ему. Траха их, ГИДРА - ничто. Он был полностью готов напасть на всех и все, что им угрожало. Белла была его собственностью, и он собирался удержать свое владение. (Finally, she really belonged to him. F*** Hydra, they were nothing. He was completely ready to attack everyone and everything that threatened them. Bella was his property and he was going to keep his possession.)

"Yasha, just because I was stupid about this doesn't mean that it was your fault or because of anything you did. It doesn't mean that I don't love you. I do love you." She sighed and tucked
herself into his side. He allowed her to pull his prosthetic arm around her, which he had always angrily refused before. He could feel the shiver of satisfaction that passed through her before she sleepily said, "I love you. I am so glad to be here with you."

Bucky closed his eyes and kissed the top of her head. He breathed in and out slowly, trying to calm the riot of emotion that had completely overtaken his mind. Он знал, что их время вместе не будет длиться вечно. Она этого не понимала, но он знал. Вскоре он будет вынужден отправить ее в Эдем. Но он молился, да, он действительно молил Бога, чтобы разлучение не происходило до тех пор, пока не родится их ребенок. (He knew that their time together would not last forever. She did not understand this, but he knew. Soon he will be forced to send her to Eden. But he prayed, yes, he really prayed to God that the separation would not occur until after the birth of the child.) He could handle this. He could control himself. He said softly, "Close your eyes and I will read."
Chapter 16

Requiescat in pace Captain W.K. Jernigan. Quamquam 10 annos decessisset, multi tamen sentiunt absenti.

"Do you want something to eat, Bella?"

"No, thank you. Just set me down on the bed and give me a moment to rest? I feel like I'm on a ship in the ocean and the smell of food might push the nausea over the edge."  

He gently set her onto the mattress and asked, "Tea?"

She smiled brightly. "Yes, definitely. Thank you."

"So, five months. We have less time than we thought."

"I know! That was quite the surprise, wasn't it? I suppose that means it was Constanta."

Bucky nodded. As he filled the tea kettle, he said with a totally blank face, "Mark of a good sniper: we never miss."

Surprised, Thea looked up at him and stared until she realised that he was purposefully taking the mickey out of her. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him before saying, "Right."

He added seriously, "Now that we know just how easily it happens for us, we will have to be more cautious after this, Bella. I'm worried about your health."

"Well, we have months to worry about that now, Yasha. What about the second ultrasound? They want us to have it next month. Can we afford that?"

He shrugged. "I will make it happen. That was pretty incredible being able to see him in there. I didn't even know they could do that. That's definitely one of the few things here in the future that I do like."

Thea smiled and beckoned for him to come over to her. "It was, wasn't it? So small, but all the right fingers and toes. He looked so real and wonderful."

Bucky sank down on her right side intentionally. He closed his eyes and smiled as she placed her hand over his metal one. "He is perfect."

"Obviously. I hope he looks exactly like you."

Making a funny face, Bucky said firmly, "I don't think so."

She shot him a look of annoyance, but said lightly, "Well, that is what I want and I'm allowed to have my own opinion. However, I am sure I'll love whatever he looks like."

"We should have known earlier."

Thea nodded. "I should have, but I stopped the methotrexate that same month we were in Constanta. There were a lot of changes, but many of them felt like the adjustment to being off my DMARD. I expected to skip a month immediately if I was pregnant. I didn't."
"You stopped the methotrexate then?"

"Yes. I told you that, Yasha. I thought I should prepare in case you were as, you know...efficient in that department as you are at literally everything else."

Bucky looked down at her self-consciously. "Efficient? That is how you see me? Okay. Well, I hope you don't mind me being efficient then."

"I don't know how else to put it, Yasha, but you are a super soldier with ridiculously enhanced everything. So, yes. Do I have to learn a whole new Eden now?"

"No, not completely. I can salvage about 60%. When the child is born, we will need all his stuff closely contained, so I need to find the right bag."

"What about a pram? Surely, I can use one of those and it would mean I could hide my crutches folded underneath with the bag. That would make me stand out less and it would be quite normal for a woman to be walking her baby in a pram. That might be honestly the last thing they are looking for if someone is searching for you."

Bucky nodded and gripped her fingers between his metal ones. "I will have to consider it."

Astonished that he was actually prolonging the contact, since he usually only allowed a brief touch of his prosthetic arm if anything, Thea looked up at him with a smile. "I hope you don't have any silly ideas about names."

Surprised, Bucky asked with a slight smile, "What would be a silly name idea?"

"Something horrid like Vernon or Silas."

He laughed genuinely. "No, I planned on James."

Thea sighed. "That I can do. It isn't as if you go by that name so it would be confusing."

He got up and moved across the floor of the tiny flat to turn off the whistling tea kettle. As he poured the water into the teacup, he said, "My mother called me Jamie. My father only said James when I was in trouble and Buck otherwise. At school it was always Bucky."

"And how often would you say your father had to call you James?"

Bucky walked back over to their bed and sat down on the thin mattress before settling the teacup and a plate for the teabag on the floor. Then he looked at her and smirked as he said, "Fairly often. I gave them a hard time for a while during childhood. I grew out of it though. Mostly."

Thea smiled. "You did? Well, I think Christopher made my parents' lives a proper h*ll until he turned 16 and then something changed. That's when he got hyper-focussed and began setting and achieving goals like he was just wading through tall grass and pushing it out of his way. He loved the Army. Our family has always been a Navy family, but Chris wanted nothing to do with it. He couldn't wait to go to Afghanistan. He wanted that."

Bucky wrapped his arms around her and asked gently, "Are you ready to tell me about it?"

Looking up at him with deeply pained eyes, Thea replied, "Yes. I ought to have talked about it long ago. Of anyone, you would understand best. The day that you came to my flat...it was a very bad day, Bucky. I had spent the majority of the day with my attorney going over estate documents. We were finally settling everything for Christopher, since I had decided where I wanted to donate it all.
I was his beneficiary, you see. It was hard to do it all from the States, too. I was so determined to have everything done before the first anniversary. The next day I was supposed to go away, which was why I had that suitcase, do you remember?"

"Yes, krasotka. I do."

Thea sighed and continued in a shaky voice, "You see, he committed suicide when he was in Afghanistan. He was over there for his third deployment. Helmand Province that time. Two of his soldiers were killed. He wrote beautiful, long letters of condolence to their families. Next, he wrote a wonderful, loving letter to me and letters for Richard and Tommy, then he shot himself. The day I was to go away was a week before the first anniversary. I wanted that week to myself. My brothers were going to meet me there for the actual day and we were to spend that week all of us together. I think part of what makes my worries about them so great is that they might easily have found out I was missing on the actual anniversary day."

Bucky continued to tightly hold her and stroke her hair. "I am sorry, kitten. I don't know what else to say. I cannot imagine how awful that was for you. I was oblivious to anything that was going on with you then. It never occurred to me at that time to ask you why you would go away to be alone in a hunting cabin for a week."

"Of course, you wouldn't. Why would you? However, I have a bit more to explain. When Christopher died, I was working in Madrid. I loved my job. I was so happy there. As you know, my PhD is in Iberian religious art history."

Bucky kissed the top of her head. "That was when you were at the Prado?"

"Yes. I have had a passion for religious art from childhood. I never wanted to do anything else but study it and learn more about it. I prefer the Iberian varieties, but I enjoy the entire range of Christian religious art as you know. All those places you took me on our journey up to Minsk were wonderful. There is always something interesting to learn about the place each piece was made, the materials used, the artist who created it, in what environment it was conceived, the culture that was meant to consume it, oh and so much more."

Bucky had continued stroking her hair and kissing her head as she talked, but when she paused, he said, "I can understand that, honestly. Some of the stuff we saw was breathtakingly beautiful. Why did you leave your job and come to the US, krasotka?"

"When Christopher died, I went a bit mad for a while. When Richard called to tell me, I actually fainted right there in the 17th century Flemish section whilst getting ready to give a talk. I stopped eating. I eventually didn't leave the house. After some conversations with my doctor, my family brought me back to London where my aunt cared for me. The directors at the museum were very understanding, but after a few months I knew that I was not going back. Richard wanted me to come live with him in DC, so when my doctor cleared me, I decided to do that. I think Richard hoped that I might take an interest in my career again in America. Eventually, I felt that I really needed to start making an attempt at independence again. I had only moved into that flat six weeks before you came."

Horrified, Bucky buried his face in her hair and exclaimed sadly, "Six weeks! And then I tore you away from your independence and any hope of returning to your career. I am sorry, kitten. I destroyed that future for you."

Thea turned in his arms and got up onto her knees, so her eyes were nearly level with his. "I do not regret this. I want this. I want to be with you."
Clearly unconvinced, Bucky took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. "You could have so much more. I have nothing outside of you, Thea. You and this baby are my everything."

"I understand; however, you have the potential for more. One day, you can begin using your abilities to help people other than me, Yasha. Maybe like your friend Steve does."

Bucky shook his head. "The world does not want me charging after villains. I'm not trustworthy like Steve and his friends."

"You are trustworthy. You are a good man."

His voice low and angry, Bucky said, "How many times do I need to remind you? Ten words, Bella. If anyone ever found the book, if it still exists, I could be controlled. There are also several scientists, as well as Rumlow, Rollins, and Crosby that have heard the words. They might have memorised them, though it is very unlikely they did so. If they are still alive, then they are a threat. I am not safe out there, Bella."

Thea watched as he set the teabag on the plate and handed her the teacup. She looked sorrowfully up at him and said, "Maybe one day you can be healed though, Yasha. I'm sure there are therapies that could be tried. It doesn't hurt to have some hope, does it?"

"I let hope die only a few months into my capture, Bella. Hope can be more painful than the torture."

Thea looked at him with sadness, "Do you really have no hope still?"

"Hope in us, yes, but I'm realistic that my success story may eventually mean just getting you and the child to safety. That would be a win for me."

She shook her head fiercely. "Not for me. I need you there, too."

Bucky kissed her forehead. "I want that more than I can begin to explain to you, Bella. Every good dream I have is a future with you."

"I won't give up on that though, you know. I will have hope even if you won't."

He looked down at Thea very seriously and said, "You can have a full life without me if something happens, Bella. If you and the baby are living, then I can accept death without any fear. If it comes to that, then you should know that is the choice I am going to make. Do you understand?"

Thea nodded. "Yes, and I know that I can't change your mind either. I think you don't recognise that your life has value beyond your ability to protect me."

Bucky pulled himself away from her and said angrily, "I can fully remember 49 now. I have scattered memories of maybe 30 more. I will remember more. There were children. The violence that I perpetrated is something that cannot be repaid or redeemed, Bella."

"No, those who sent you to do it have so much blood on their hands. There is no way they can repay their guilt, really. You were as much a victim as those killed. Could you have stopped?"

He snarled, "No."

"Could you have refused to obey?"

"No."
She looked up at him and said succinctly, "Well, then you were not the murderer. You were a weapon."

"I did it though, Bella. I will always be the killer no matter what I wanted."

She nodded. "I know, but you aren't a murderer. There is a huge difference. Soldiers are killers when they fight to protect their country, but they aren't murderers. They have to live with what was done, but they are not evil. You are not evil."

"I'm never going to be a hero, Bella. Just drop it. No, I'm serious. Stop."

Thea nodded, but made it clear that she was not pleased.

"Я не вернусь! Я никогда не вернусь. Я больше не ваш шлюха-убийца. (I will not return! I will never go back. I am not your murder-w**** anymore.)"

Thea sat up in bed gasping and looked around in terror. "Yasha?"

In the dark, she saw a shadow lurch in her direction and realised that it was Bucky. He was in the throes of a terrible flashback. It had never happened quite like this before even though he had warned her that one day it would. He growled in a low terrifying voice, "Ты останешься! Я должен защищать тебя. Они тебя увидят, красотка. Я убью их всех, прежде чем они смогут коснуться тебя. (You will stay! I have to protect you. They'll see you, krasotka. I'll kill them all before they can touch you.)"

"Yasha, I don't understand. Пожалуйста, говори по-английски. Я не понимаю достаточно русского. Пожалуйста. (Please speak English. I don't understand enough Russian. Please.)"

Pushing her down onto the bed with his metal arm, Bucky ordered viciously, "Не говори! Они услышат тебя. Я не позволю им взять тебя. (Do not speak. They will hear you. I will not let them take you.)"

"Говори по-английски. Пожалуйста. (Speak English. Please.)"

She could see just enough in the near complete darkness to perceive the outline of his body. She could clearly hear his heavy, panicked breathing, as well as the metallic click of his wrist as he held her firmly in place. There was almost no other movement than the two of them breathing for several minutes. Bucky had told her never to move quickly or unexpectedly if he got like this. He had warned her to stay as calm as she could, comply if possible, and remain very quiet unless he asked her to speak. She did not dare move as she waited to see what would happen. Finally, he said in a gravelly, cold voice, "Do not speak. They will hear you."

She nodded her head and waited to see what would happen next. Finally, he lifted his left arm and put his right hand on her chest so she was pinned down firmly. He then moved rapidly in a gesture that she knew meant he was pulling out a weapon with his left hand, as he ordered, "Stay down."

She lay as still as possible and waited. Then he got up and went to the door where she could see from the basic outline of his stance that he was both listening for anything outside and watching her. She had no idea how long they remained like that, but suddenly she heard a gasp and then a sob from Bucky as he turned towards the door and leant into it with both hands. "Блядь! Я просто не могу исцелиться. Я постоянно сломался. Я бесполезно, чертовски дерьмо. Я такой мудак, чтобы рисковать твоей безопасностью. Я могу убить тебя так легко, Белла. Мне просто нужно умереть. Я должен умереть. Я просто умру. (F***! I just cannot be healed. I'm always broken. I'm a useless, f***ing s***. I'm such an a***** to risk your safety. I could kill you so
easily, Bella. I just need to die. I have to die. I'm just going to die.)"

Thea got up from the bed but did not risk going closer.

He did not turn around, but warned harshly, "Don't."

"Yasha?"

"Do not. Don't come over here, Bella. Stay away."

Although Thea did not move, she spoke a bit louder as she said, "I understood the words die and kill, Yasha. I didn't understand everything you said. Of course, I heard your two favourite Russian swear words, but you definitely said умереть twice and убить. Why?"

"I am a danger to you, Bella. Worse, I am a danger to the child. I could have killed you."

She did not feel like having this conversation at whatever horrible hour it was now. Thea replied with very audible annoyance, "You could, yes. Obviously, you are very capable of that, Yasha. However, you didn't, nor did it feel like that was a possibility."

"Don't talk about what you don't know. I am going to sit outside."

Thea asked flatly, "What will that be in aid of, Yasha?"

"It will let you go back to sleep and give me time to think."

She lost her temper and demanded, "About what? How you should rid the world of the Winter Soldier once and for all? Really? What if I don't want you to rid the world of my husband? What if I want you here with me? What if I am willing to go through this part with you?"

"I cannot believe how selfish I was to put you though this."

"Yasha, I don't want to hear it. I want to be here. Do you?"

Bucky groaned and slid down the door so he was seated on the floor. "Yes. And no. I don't want to go through this anymore. I don't want the nightmares. I don't want the fear of falling asleep when I'm having a bad day because I know it might become a worse night. I don't want the memories. F***, Bella, the memories. The sounds. The smells. The screams and pleading. I want it all to end, but it never will. No matter how healthy some doctor could make me, even though it won't never happen no matter how much I daydream about it, they can't erase what I've done and what I remember. It don't f***ing work like that. I could live another fifty d*** years and on my best day I'll still feel like a dirty, f***ing, murderer. Is that the man who should be raising a child? How many children do you want with that monster, Bella?"

Thea crossed the floor and sat down in front of him. She didn't say anything for a little while, but then reached out her hand and lightly put it on his knee. "I cannot imagine what it is like for you. I understand why you feel haunted by it. I'm not sure what would help you. However, I do want you here with me. I will not be better off if you leave or if you die, nor will you."

She could hear him breathing heavily, as if he were forcing himself to rapidly traverse rough ground. Finally, he gripped her hand with his and rasped, "I will not leave."

"Do I have your word, Yasha? Will you change your mind the next time this happens?"

"I may want to change my mind, but I give you my word. I won't leave."
"Define leave."

Bucky groaned. "I mean I won't abandon you. I won't harm myself."

"Okay, I needed to be sure."

"You were right to ask. I wish you didn't know me that well."

"No, you don't."

He sighed. "No. No, I don't. You shouldn't want this, Bella."

"Why? Do you get to make all my decisions for me, Yasha? I'm not interested in being told how
stupid and foolish I am to want my husband to stick around. You can really s*d off if you think that
is acceptable."

Thea was pleased to hear his grunt of displeasure at her strategic use of coarse language, which he
had certainly never heard her say before. After a few seconds of waiting to see if her ploy had
worked, she heard him reply roughly, "Don't start taking after me now, Bella. That ain't how things
should be. Maybe I better start watching what I say more."

"We both know that isn't likely to happen, Yasha. Nor are you dragging me down. I needed you to
really hear what I was saying."

To her great surprise, Thea heard a snort of amusement and then Bucky drawling in his somewhat
archaic, distinctive Brooklyn dialect, "You tryna shock me outta my stupid, kitten? That won't
work, I hate to break it to ya. Steve, Joe, and Jack all tried that for years, but it didn't never do a
d*** thing. I've always been a hopeless case of s***-for-brains, Bella. But I hear what you're tryna
say. I'm not going nowhere. I'm glad you want me, kitten. I am. You don't know just how glad I
am, kitten."

She never knew when he was going to drop back into that speech pattern. It was rare and always
sudden. She wondered if he had usually spoken like that back when he was Sgt Bucky Barnes, if it
was an affectation when he wanted to make a point, or a case of code-switching. He certainly knew
proper grammar and nearly always used it. In some ways it unnerved her, since it was like having a
different personality there with them. "Good."

It was another minute before he said in a low, uncertain voice, "Bella?"

"Yes?"

"Did I hurt you?"

She put her hand back on his knee and softly answered, "No, you just shouted in Russian, ordered
me to stay down and be quiet, and held me down first with your arm and then with your hand."

"I will probably hurt you one day. I may think you are someone from HYDRA or a target."

"You've told me that. I know."

He harshly stated, "And you know what to do."

"I won't need to do it, Yasha, but yes."

His voice grew harder as he insisted, "Do it. If I am harming you, then you can't be sure I will snap
out of it in time."
"I understand that."

Bucky banged his head into the door as he sat back forcefully and groaned miserably. "You cannot put me first."

"I know, not now."

"Not ever."

Thea sighed, but did not reply.

"Not ever, Bella."

"We've had this conversation too many times to have it again, Yasha."

Bucky reached out and slid his hand into her hair. He breathed out and whispered desperately, "I love you."

Thea's response was quiet and serious, "I love you, too."

He rapidly moved so that he was on his knees in front of her and looking down. He was close enough that she could just see his features in the very dim light. For a while, Bucky did not do anything more than cradle her head in his hand, his fingers deeply entwined in her long hair. When he spoke, it was so quiet that Thea only just heard him. His voice vibrated with fear and humiliation, as he begged, "Please, don't leave me, krasotka. No matter what I say, I need you. You have no idea how much."

Thea felt her heart jump in her chest as she listened to his mortified, broken plea. He had never asked that before. Instead, he had always insisted that she was better off without him—much to her frustration. She chose to use his name, as she answered gently, "I'll never leave you, Bucky."

The sobbing breath of relief that he let out was unlike anything she had heard from him either. Although she had seen him vulnerable, this was very new. How long had he feared even to ask this? Thea reached up to touch his face and felt that it was wet with tears. Her gesture seemed to spur Bucky to action, as he brought his face down for a desperate, wild kiss that Thea knew expressed his apparently deep fear that she wanted to leave him. She repeated, "I'll never leave. Never. I love you."

His response was to pull her towards him and position them so she was on his lap. With his arms very tightly wrapped around her, they sat on the floor for so long that she felt herself starting to drift off to sleep. Just before she finally gave in to her exhaustion, Bucky whispered, "Thank you."
Chapter 17

Bucky tried and failed to keep his voice neutral as he reiterated for the fourth time, "We need to go, Bella."

Thea didn't even look up whilst she stroked little Jamie's face as she cradled him close and replied disconsolately, "I can't get him to settle, Yasha. He is going to cry the whole way. What are we going to do?"

Exasperated, Bucky said tightly, "We will do what we have to do, Bella. Give him his dummy if he needs it. Walk the length of the train to calm him if I have to. It will be fine."

She shifted the fussy baby to her other shoulder and began patting his back rhythmically, as she replied in a very wobbly voice, "I don't have a lot of the formula either, you know. We will probably have to stop to get more at some point."

He knew she was stressed about the move and that she was not emotionally ready to leave, but there was no choice. Bucky tried to contain his frustration and answered, "We have at least four transfers before we get to our final destination, Bella. We will need to stop for more than baby formula."

"And nappies."

Before he could stop himself, Bucky snapped, "I know. You know perfectly well that I have the details pretty well planned out, Bella. Come on. Are you sure you have everything? I don't care if they can tell I was here, but I don't want a single trace of you or Jamie."

Finally, she lifted her eyes to him instead of the baby. He could see she was hurt, but he needed her to focus on leaving now. "Why don't you make sure? I tried, but I've been distracted."

Just then, Jamie began to cry quite loudly. Bucky snatched up the baby carrier from the top of the pram and started strapping it onto himself. He could see Thea was distraught and he just couldn't handle her looking so unhappy. He would settle the child even though he knew she wanted to be the one to carry him. She always looked so hopeless when their son didn't calm. "I'll take him, krasotka. You know how he falls asleep when I walk him like this."

"Yes, I know, but you were supposed to carry our bags. Now what do we do?"

"I will carry one on my back and you put the other two in the pram with your crutches. The train leaves in less than 20 minutes and I don't want to wait for the next one, since our connexions depend on this."

"Ok, ok. Here you go, darling boy. Go to Papa. There you go."

Bucky got the baby strapped all the way in and then popped a dummy back in the child's mouth. Jamie settled nearly immediately. Bucky looked at Thea and saw that she was both relieved and sad. Jamie was very much a Daddy's boy, which made Bucky feel terribly guilty. He placed a kiss on his son's head and looked at his wife with a sudden flash of gratitude. They both really were his, which was incredible. "Come on, Bella."

They hurriedly exited the tiny one-room flat where they had lived for nearly 7 months. Bucky could see from Thea's expression that she was feeling some sadness at leaving the place, but he was relieved. He had never intended for them to remain in Krakow that long. It was only Thea's
difficult pregnancy and then little Jamie's terrifying hospitalisation that had kept them in Poland
that long. The apartment might have been their home, but he felt no particular sentimentality about
it. The memories they had made in the apartment were very mixed, if he was honest. Now that he
was certain that the danger to Jamie had passed, he needed to remove them from the area. He was
confident that the authorities were still trying to track them down to find some explanation for
Jamie's bizarre recovery. He had spent the previous 9 days sweating with anxiety over their
inability to leave yet. They had to go immediately for *all* of their safety.

Hoping to keep their departure unnoticed, Bucky had taken them out through the back door.
Therefore, they were now winding their way down an alley towards the larger street on the other
side of the immense apartment complex opposite their own. Her RA had been in remission for
nearly 8 months, which had been an amazing blessing. Not only was he relieved to see her suffering
greatly reduced, she had been much more capable of doing the day-to-day things she needed. She
could even walk to the church on the corner with only a cane. He was particularly grateful for that
now, as Bucky was walking so quickly that she could never have kept up if her pain had been as
severe as the flare she had experienced when they met. Nevertheless, she was so exhausted and
sore by the time that they reached the train station, that she didn't even say anything before she
dropped onto the first bench that she found.

"Bella, we have to go. The train leaves in 9 minutes."

"I have to sit. I need to sit. Why didn't we leave earlier?"

"Because you were panicking about the baby. I wanted to leave 30 minutes earlier."

"Yes, but you know how I am about Jamie. You should have made me go."

Bucky raised his eyebrows and asked, "Really? Very well. Come."

Noticing the dangerous look in his eye that she had not seen in months, Thea stood up painfully
and heaved a great sigh before limping as quickly as she could after Bucky towards the train.

"I got lost whilst taking my walk with Jamie again."

Bucky looked up from the floor where he was putting the Skorpion back together and asked with a
sigh, "How badly?"

"I think we wandered for twenty minutes. I said the Romanian phrase you taught me, but the man I
asked didn't understand it. I must have pronounced it wrongly. I finally found someone who spoke
Russian, so I got directions."

Surprised, Bucky asked seriously, "Is your Russian comprehension that good now? You seem to
struggle with me."

Thea squinted a bit, as she peered across at him. "Well, you use a lot of *mat*, you know, Yasha. I
don't understand much of those kinds of words in Russian. And you speak really fast, whereas this
man's first language is Romanian so he spoke slowly like me."

He tilted his head and watched her for a moment before he replied, "I should speak more slowly
then. I apologise. You should know that I don't use many of those words when I am talking to you,
Bella."

Thea pulled a sour face and made it clear she didn't believe him. "No? Because your English
vocabulary is quite filthy. Sometimes you use three four-letter words in a sentence just to make
your point."

Bucky looked over at Jamie, who was sleeping soundly in the carrycot that was too small for him at nearly 6 months, and said softly, "I must work on that. I never spoke like that at home before, Bella. I wasn't even that bad with friends, especially since Steve always told me to get myself under control if I forgot myself too far. It was in the war after I enlisted that I stopped caring about being decent and just said whatever I wanted."

"Hm, well, you should get yourself under control, Yasha. I've put up with it, since it is just part of you and I love you. However, I have never liked it and I won't allow it once Jamie is old enough to understand. I'm not having that around him."

Bucky looked chagrined, as he replied, "Nor should you, Bella. I agree with you. I'm sorry."

Thea shook her head and smiled very slightly as she calmly replied, "I never said anything before, so it isn't really your fault. I am not angry with you, Yasha. I'm not so fragile that I cannot handle hearing profanity. You never met my brother Tommy, who is just as bad as you, really. I just don't want Jamie to hear you talking like that all the time."

"Ok, krasotka. I understand."

"Do you really mind this job as much as I think you do?"

Surprised by the change of subject, Bucky shook his head and lied. "Not really."

Not at all deceived, Thea replied with concern, "Oh, you really do hate it! Can you not find another then? Surely it is not the only available job in Bucharest."

Bucky sighed angrily as he explained, "I've been looking around for two weeks actually. I despise the manager here. He abuses the female employees. If I thought that I could get away with it, then I would personally exact punishment on him tomorrow for what he does."

Genuinely shocked, Thea asked, "Oh no, Yasha, can you not tell the police?"

With a fond, but exasperated look at his wife, Bucky explained, "An undocumented 'Russian' labourer has no legal standing to press charges against a Romanian citizen whose father-in-law is very well connected. I cannot risk being arrested or bringing attention to myself, since that would put you in danger. Perhaps if I find another place to work, then I can wait a few months to distance myself before meeting him in the dark somewhere."

"I hate people who think that they can use others like that. What a horrible man."

Bucky nodded. "He is; however, I cannot do anything about it yet. There are not a lot of places to work for undocumented men who cannot be seen publicly. Many jobs would have me interact with customers, which I cannot risk."

"I see. And you still don't want me to…"

He furiously interrupted, "Do. NOT. Suggest. That. Again! DO NOT. I will support you and any family we have, as I promised you when we married."

Thea got up and walked over to check on the baby, as she bitterly stated, "You are such a chauvinist."

Almost knocking the chair over as he stood up, Bucky insisted angrily, "Perhaps so. Nevertheless,
this is my job, Bella, so I will be the one to do it."

She turned on her head and regarded him for a moment before coldly asking, "Then what is my job, then? Having the babies? How many must I have to do my job well?"

Bucky growled with rage. "That is not how I see you, Bella, and you know it."

"Really? I don't know what I'm meant to do in your estimation, Yasha."

He shoved his hands into his hair as he did when he was at his emotional limit and replied in a flat tone, "I'm sorry." He turned away and leant into the wall with his head bowed as he muttered, "I'm sorry that I don't have a proper home for you and you can't return to your career. There isn't much to do in a tiny apartment like this except look after Jamie, I suppose. You deserve better than that."

Thea walked closer to him and said seriously, "You deserve better than the job you are working, but you are doing what you must. This is just what our life is like now, which is no different than what you promised me. I wish you wouldn't insist on bearing all that burden yourself, but I understand you and I know this is how it is going to be."

He turned and watched her for a moment before saying roughly, "Bella." Bucky reached out tentatively and, when Thea stepped into his arms, held her tightly to his chest and kissed the top of her head repeatedly. "I adore you. I love you. I love you so much, Bella."

Thea looked up at him and smiled gently. "I never loved anyone before you, you know. I won't ever love anyone else. You are all I want, Yasha." She saw the expression of disbelief and hope in his eyes and shook her head. "Yes, I will always want you, no matter what you keep telling yourself on your bad days. I love you."

"I could not bear losing you, Thea."

Shocked to hear him slip and use her actual name, Thea reached up to place both hands on his face. "I am not going anywhere. Я люблю тебя всем сердцем. Ты - лучше всех на свете. (I love you with all my heart. You are the best in the world.)"

Her use of Russian caused Bucky to completely freeze in place as he stared at her for almost a full minute. Then he dropped his face into her neck and kissed it, as he said thickly, "Я влюбилась в тебя с первого взгляда, Малышка. Теперь, моя душа принадлежит вам. (I fell in love with you at first sight, little one. Now, even my soul belongs to you.)"

Shocked, Thea insisted, "Нет, Яша, пожалуйста. Не говори так. (No, Yasha, please. Don't say that.)"

He did not lift his face from her hair, which he was kissing passionately, as he murmured, "Почему я должен говорить что-нибудь, кроме правды? (Why should I say anything less than the truth?)"

"Ты знаете ответ, Яша. (You know the answer, Yasha.)"

Bucky pulled back and looked down at her for a moment and then, finally, understood. "I was not being blasphemous, Bella. That was not what I meant."

Thea nodded and reached her arms around his neck before tucking her head into his chest. "Ты - моя любовь на всю жизнь. (You will always be my love.)"

He picked her up and whispered into her ear, "I pray that I can be worthy of that, Bella."
Bucky could not believe that he had allowed the wonderful news they had received the day before to turn into such an ugly argument this morning. It had not needed to go that way either. They had planned for this, after all. They had both agreed that now was the right time, since Thea could not stay off the DMARDs forever. Yet, suddenly he had lost his temper and made her cry. He had been wrong to speak so harshly and he knew it. All because she didn't want this to be their last child, yet he deeply feared the possible risk to her health if they had more than two. The hack doctor they had seen the evening before had brushed off all of Bucky's concerns and told them that a young woman of Thea's age could easily have six or more if they wanted. Six! Bucky had wanted to cut the doctor's tongue out. Even Thea admitted that the doctor was incompetent, since the specialist in Krakow had warned them against pushing Thea's body too far. Yet she wanted one (maybe two) more after this one. Bucky couldn't agree to it. It would be irresponsible and foolish.

Bucky charged through the street towards the warehouse—he was so angry at himself and the situation that he could barely think. He was late, too, and he needed this job. Actually, he needed it now more than ever, didn't he? What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just be happy at her news and enjoy the idea that Jamie would have a sibling? There was time enough to discuss everything else afterwards. He always f***ed everything up. It was his greatest talent—after being a deadly assassin, of course.

Bursting through the side door to the warehouse, he marched towards the loading zone on the other side. The work was almost as dull as possible, but it was so much better than his first job in Bucharest and at least it kept his muscles in use. He couldn't go running anymore, since Thea needed him at home. There was barely enough room for her and the baby in their apartment, which was much smaller than the one in Krakow. There certainly wasn't any room for him to do a real work out at all.

Alin called out, "Hey, Yasha! We wondered when you would arrive. Your son doing better?"

Bucky tried to smile at Alin, who was a good guy. It was not his fault that Bucky didn't want to talk to anyone. At all. Ever. Or that he couldn’t ever tell them the truth of why Thea had very good reason why she panicked any time Jamie was ill. The miraculous recovery of a poor Russian baby in Krakow from the nearly universally fatal Granulomatous amoebic encephalitis had caused far too much notice. Bucky was certain that he had destroyed all the tissue and blood samples taken from Jamie by the hospital as well as removed all records, but he still worried that something had been missed. He could not risk a whisper of connexion to that here now. "Yes. The last part of the fever passed, so my wife should be able to get some sleep now."

Mihai commented, "My wife was just the same with our first. Every sniffle she would hover over the cot and worry. By the time you have your third, your wife will take things more calmly."

Laughing at Bucky's stiff posture and frown at the mention of a third child, Alin asked, "So you don't want any more kids, huh?"

However, Bucky did not control his microexpressions fast enough. Mihai exclaimed, "Oh I think it doesn't matter what he thinks, Alin. He's already got another one in the pipeline!"

Alin nodded knowingly. "Fast work, buddy. Your son is only a year, right? Well I made the same mistake myself with number 2 and 3. Looks like you better resign yourself to it. You have a second one coming and there will be more in the future, perhaps. Maybe plan ahead next time or you'll bankrupt yourself before long."

Bucky ground his teeth together in an attempt not to say anything that he would regret. "Things
Mihai snorted. "Yeah, they do have a way of happening, don't they? My wife's mother asked me last Christmas if I had ever learnt how those things happen, so I could stop knocking up my wife… we'd just announced the youngest was due. Some women can't get enough grandchildren. Not my mother-in-law."

Bucky shrugged. He did not want to discuss his true thoughts. "Bella seems happy, so I'll figure things out."

"That's what matters, friend. Make the wife happy and everything else falls into place."

Nodding to himself, Bucky muttered, "That's always the plan."

"You available for an extra shift today, Yasha?"

Bucky hesitated. "Just four hours."

"Good. We have two extra trucks coming in. You can get done in four hours what some men take all day to do. You make us look bad, you hulking Russian freak."

His co-workers laughed, but Bucky shrugged. "Hey, not my fault Romania lost the genetic lottery."

"Woah…watch it. I'll have you know I was boxing champ back in the day, buddy."

"Yeah? Which day? Sometime in 1975?"

Alin nearly fell over laughing as he said, "Mihai, you are not winning this one. Face it, our resident Russian here is just a powerhouse."
"I have been thinking about the plan for the future, Bella."

"What part of the plan? Oh no, Yasha, please. You aren't changing Eden again, are you? Both babies can go in a double pram. We can buy one once little girl arrives."

"No, not Eden, although yes, we should buy one of those pram things closer to the time. I mean our long-term plans. We cannot stay here hiding in Romania."

"Good. I don't like it here at all. Where should we go?"

"I didn't mean moving, although let's come back to that thought again in a minute. I have been reconsidering whether I should contact Steve. The more I have remembered of the past, then the more I realise that Steve would absolutely never turn on me. He would want me to contact him. In fact, krasotka, I have not been entirely honest. I know that he is looking for me, actually."

"You…how long?"

"I think that he has probably been looking for me this whole time, honestly. However, I've only been sure for about seven months. He got to Krakow only weeks after we moved here."

"And you are happy about that?"

"I was happy to have eluded him, yes. Now I am reconsidering whether I should ask Steve for help getting us settled somewhere. Technically, I am a fugitive and could be charged with an enormous number of crimes. It is unlikely that I could gain immunity or claim innocence despite what HYDRA did to me. Yet, I might be able to take a plea deal. It might be possible to agree to 10 years or something less than life. Maybe I could be out before the children are adults."

"No."

"If I turn myself in, it would be better than if they catch me. I would be in a better place to negotiate a deal. If Captain America himself helps me surrender, then I might get better treatment. They might let you visit me with the children or something."

"No, Yasha. No. I won't accept you going to prison. I would rather spend the rest of our lives living like this. I will not agree to you being punished for someone else's crimes. You could not have said no. That would be like prosecuting an innocent store employee for the thefts committed by a burglar. No."

"Kitten, you know that this lifestyle is untenable. We cannot hope to be as lucky as we have been. I've kept HYDRA off of us, but someone somewhere will realise who I am eventually. I will be captured and it will not go well for me or you."

"Have there been HYDRA people that found us and you didn't tell me?"

"Yes."

"H-how many?"

"Five. Two were together, so it was four incidents."

"And you had to kill them?"
"I did. There is no other option, Bella."

"I know. I know. I just hate that you have to go through that when you don't want to take any more lives. It is awful for you."

"Not nearly as bad as losing you or returning to HYDRA. There will be others. The last was in Krakow four days after Jamie was born."

"Oh my. Oh, Yasha. Did they know we were there?"

"No, it was simply a HYDRA agent on the way down to Serbia. She recognised me, so I took care of things."

"I remember that day. You did not return until late that night after I went to sleep. You told me you had taken a nap and woke up late."

"That was not the time to tell you that I had just tortured a HYDRA agent for information and then murdered her. Or that she told me that HYDRA watched your brother Richard and some girl named Evelyn for over a year in case you weren't really dead."

"Evie is my best friend back home in London. Oh, my goodness, Yasha, they even brought Evie into this? You were right! If I had not gone with you, then they might have killed everyone I love. I'm so glad I trusted you that day!"

Bucky kissed her forehead and replied, "So am I and for so many reasons. If I were to surrender myself to the authorities, then there would be no continuing danger to you, your family, or your friends. They would not need information from you any longer."

"No. I will never agree to that. If you give yourself up, then I won't ever forgive you. Promise me that you won't do it?"

Bucky shook his head. "I cannot make that promise. However, I won't do it without telling you beforehand."

"Why can't you contact your friend Steve and see if he has some other, very much better plan?"

"I'm not sure what he would be able to do other than help get you somewhere safe and go with me to the authorities so I get fair treatment. Maybe help me find an attorney if there is one that would aid me."

Thea shook her head angrily. "I am not listening to that, Yasha. No. I could be the one to contact him and test the waters."

"No, krasotka. No."

"I cannot go along with this idea, Yasha."

"Well, it is only an idea right now. Now, returning to the subject of moving...I have determined where we will go after we leave Romania."

More resigned than anything else, Thea asked, "Where? When?"

"In five weeks. Osijek. I think that I have a job arranged there."

Looking at Bucky uncertainly, she asked, "Where is that?"
"Croatia."

"Oh, ok. You speak Serbo-Croatian, right?"

He shrugged. "Of course. I do not yet have an apartment. I will need to go down next week and see about that, so we have everything arranged beforehand like we did here."

"Five weeks is a pretty short amount of time, Yasha."

"I have the job aligned. I just need to go in person to speak to someone and then to find a room we can rent."

Thea closed her eyes and sighed with exhaustion. "Okay. I hate the idea of moving just now, since this morning sickness is still rather fierce."

"I would not think of it, except this job came up and I don't want to make the same mistake as we did in Krakow. I know there was no choice, since Jamie was sick, but I cannot risk staying here long enough here that I am found. If Steve can find me, then They can."

"I understand, Yasha. If it is time to move, then we move. I mean it when I say that I would rather live like this than have you in prison for any length of time. Jamie and I need you, ok?"

Smiling briefly at the sincerity behind his wife's comment, Bucky told himself that he could never deserve what he somehow got. Yet, as tiring as it was to live with his instincts always switched on so he could watch for pursuers, he would do it for as long as she wanted him to do.

"Anything particular you want at the market, krasotka?"

Thea smiled happily up at Bucky and said, "Oh, I don't think so. Just the usual. I'm looking forwards to having three days all together. It sounds heavenly. You've had to work so much to save for the move."

Bucky smiled at her. "I have been looking forwards to this time together, too, kitten. You have been feeling much better, haven't you?"

"Yes. No nausea at all, thank goodness. Remember with Jamie how I was at this point?"

He frowned as he remembered Thea's misery throughout the end of her pregnancy with their son. "I do. Your morning sickness came all at the end."

"Hyperemesis. Morning sickness is what little girl here has done to me. Jamie was a whole different thing. I can't wait for the final ultrasound tomorrow."

He smiled broadly. "Me neither. I hated not being there for little doll's first one."

"I know. And I'm still not going for the name Josephine."

Bucky laughed. "I was only teasing you, you know. You really, really hate that name. It was fun."

Shocked, Thea playfully swatted his arm. "Okay then, genius. Give me a few real names then."

"Okay. Winifred."
"You said that fast. Have you been thinking about it for a while?"

Bucky shook his head. "My mother was Winifred."

"Oh, I see. I actually like Winifred. I had a friend in school named that. Winnie was a lovely girl."

"My mother was a very special lady. She would have truly adored you, Bella."

Thea smiled sadly. "I am sorry. I wish my parents could have met you, too. I would settle for my brothers getting to meet you one day though."

Bucky put an arm around her and said seriously, "That may not happen, you know. We may always have to live like this."

"As long as I am with you, then I will be ok. Я люблю тебя всем сердцем (I love you with all my heart). You are still my hero." She tried to get up on her tiptoes to kiss him, however he swept her up in his arms and spun her around before dropping her back onto the ground.

"I better go to the market if I want us to have time to go to the National Museum of Art today."

With a purely happy look on her face that made Bucky's heart gallop joyfully, Thea replied, "Okay. Oh! You know what would be so good? Some fresh fruit. Plums or apricots maybe?"

"Okay, krasotka. I'll see what they have that looks good. Have everything for Jamie ready when I get back though, ok? If we spend the usual hour looking for his missing sock or an extra dummy, then we won't have time to go get you some of those chocolate pastries that you wanted."

"Oh gosh, so many lovely things. It's like Christmas today. Okay, hurry then. I will be all ready for you when you get back. Promise."

Bucky looked down at her and watched her very carefully for a moment before he admitted to himself that she really was happy. He was more content than he could ever remember being: even from the before-time. He didn't know he could feel that way ever again until her. Now in another four months he was going to be a father for the second time. It was surreal.

It was nice and bright out, if surprisingly cool for a Romanian June day. Bucky always liked to walk on days like this, since he could feel everything around him alive and breathing. There were sights and sounds that he missed during the day when he was at work. He used to love to walk with Steve on the way to art school when they passed the bakery. Maybe he would get a few buns at the bakery for Thea on the way back.

With a smile, Bucky crossed the street and began to peruse the stalls for some vegetables. She wanted vegetable soup again. This baby was going to come out green at this rate. The apricots didn't look that good, nor the peaches. Plums, yes. He'd buy just a few, since she was supposed to watch her sugar. He smiled and thanked the shop clerk, who had been the one that sold him the strawberries she had loved the week before.

Turning around, he saw the newsstand and felt all his instincts suddenly raging into high gear. What was it? What had the man seen? He crossed the road quickly as he realised that the man had left his stand. Snatching up the paper, he understood with horror that it was all over. It was done.

Quickly turning away, he pulled out his phone as nonchalantly as possible. His whole body reacted as he heard her sweet voice greet him. "Hello? Yasha?"

"Eden. Eden. I love you." He hung up and removed the battery. As he lengthened his stride, Bucky
crushed the phone in his hand and then dropped the battery in the street where it would be run over. Someone's tyre would be destroyed, but it couldn't be helped. He had to take the long way. He could not be seen even passing her in the street. She would be incapable of keeping her expression neutral. There had been plenty of time since that bombing for them to have tracked him to Bucharest. She would be heading west. He would have to escape capture just long enough to take them east.
Chapter 19

Bucky watched as Sam walked away and breathed out heavily. He looked at Steve…it really was his Steve…and managed to keep himself controlled, as he waited to see what Steve would do.

His face very stern and his body language making his disappointment and frustration clear, Steve said firmly, "Ok, Buck. I can see you have something else to say."

He really didn't. Thea was not something he wanted to share anything about yet. He had trusted Steve all his life before, but that life was…it wasn't gone, but it wasn't here either. He didn't know if he could risk Thea and the children's safety on a man he used to know. "I want to trust you, Steve. I really do. However, this isn't about me and it isn't about this mission."

Now clearly angry, Steve said sharply, "I can't go ahead on trust with you if you are hiding something, Buck. I've got to know."

Yeah, this Steve he remembered all too well. There would be no moving him. If Bucky didn't tell him then he would assume the worst. Bucky watched him for a moment and shook his head to get his brain to catch up with his emotions. He knew perfectly well who Steve was. Bucky had changed, but Steve was always Steve. Finally, nodding acquiescence, he replied, "My wife and son. They were gone before you got there?"

Certain from the shock on Steve's face that he had done a sufficient job of hiding his family's existence, Bucky watched his old friend as Steve clutched the doorway and repeated, "Your wife and son."

Bucky's eyebrows raised slightly, as he said succinctly, "Yes."

Steve groaned and gave Bucky a very fed up look, as he exclaimed, "Aw s***, Buck. The auburn-haired girl with crutches?"

A wave of panic coursed over him, as he realised that Thea must have been seen. She might have been caught. She might not have made it to the safe house. Jamie…what about his son? Bucky jumped out of his chair and growled in his most dangerous voice, "How do you know? She was there? Did they take her? Where. Is. She. Steven?"

Bucky saw Steve's stunned reaction to his demand, but the only emotion Bucky felt other than fury and fear was satisfaction that his message had been received. He watched his old friend carefully as he waited for Steve's response with no patience at all.

Finally, Steve lifted his hands as if in surrender. He replied very carefully, "Calm down, buddy. She wasn't there. They don't even know she exists. I wasn't aware either."

Bucky's eyes narrowed, as he demanded suspiciously, "Then how did you know what Thea looks like?"

Steve closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. Then, he explained cautiously, "Because Sam and I had a lead when we were trying to find you. There was a doctor in Algiers who was very eloquent about a crazy Russian man who had a very beautiful wife that had been quite sick."

Just as Sam came back into the room, Bucky punched the wall furiously and growled, "Я знал, что этот гребаный доктор хотел мою красотка. Черт, как это дерьмо происходит? (I knew that f***ing doctor wanted my krasotka. F*** this s***!)"
Sam stepped back and asked, "Cap?"

With his eyes trained closely on Bucky, Steve asked in a calm, but commanding voice, "Are you in control, Buck?"

Bucky nodded. "I knew that d*** doctor was a security concern."

Sam asked uneasily, "Are we talking about Berlin or…"

Steve said with a look over at Sam, "That lead in Algiers? That actually was Bucky."

Flabbergasted, Sam exclaimed, "Son of a b****! So, the girl?"

Bucky replied angrily, "My wife. She and my son should be safe if she escaped when I called."

"You have got to be kidding me!"

Casting an extremely unimpressed look at Sam, Bucky turned back to Steve and said, "We planned and practised for this. She knew the protocol and I was able to alert her as soon as I realised that we were compromised. She and my son should be on the way to the safe house."

Steve saw the unease and uncertainty in Bucky's response, but said only, "Then we can leave them out of the equation, right Buck?"

Bucky hoped that his expression was sufficiently threatening as he replied, "They are not involved."

Sam looked thoroughly unconvinced. "Cap, you are ok just accepting this? How do we know who this girl is? I don't know that she isn't working with them, do you?"

Before Steve could reply, Bucky stalked over to Sam and placed his face mere inches away. He didn't like this man before and he sure as f*** didn't like him now. He modulated his voice to produce just the right degree of cold fury, as he growled, "If you ever imply again that my wife would work for HYDRA or any other similar group, then you won't ever fly again, Bird Boy. Are we f***ing clear? She is a non-combatant."

Bucky heard Steve warn firmly, "Bucky."

His fists relaxing and posture pulling back, Bucky twisted around to look at Steve for a moment, but before he stepped away from Sam, he turned and snarled, "Watch your mouth. I won't let it go again." Then he walked back to where he had previously been standing next to Steve.

"Looks like we have a lot to talk about later, Bucky. However, I agree. Your wife is not involved, so we don't need anyone but we three to know about her."

Sam snorted and looked with fond annoyance at Steve in a way that felt very familiar to Bucky. He used to look at Steve like that, didn't he? "Sounds familiar."

Bucky looked between Steve and Sam with uneasiness and turned back to Steve with an expression that he hoped clearly told Steve that an answer was required.

After several moments in which he watched Bucky, Steve's shoulders sagged and he took a deep breath before he admitted, "I have kept my own marriage a secret from the rest of the Avengers. Sam does not approve." He turned back to look at Sam and then faced Bucky as he said, "It is time for us to get moving."
With a shrug, Bucky began to follow both Sam and Steve, but on the way out of the old warehouse, Bucky muttered just loud enough for Steve to hear, "So you actually found someone to marry you, huh, punk?"

Surprised, Steve smirked slightly as he replied, "Yep. Did it without your help and everything, too."

Bucky laughed roughly. "Look at us heroes, huh? Only took us a few decades."

Steve gave Bucky a knowing look and quietly replied, "Just had to wait for the right girl, Buck."

His face suddenly tightened tensely, then Bucky whispered coarsely, "I sure did."

"So, time to tell me all about Mrs Rogers, Steve."

Steve's shoulders tensed and he hesitated before he turned away from the controls of the quinjet. "Maybe so, but you aren't going to get away without telling me about your wife."

"Yeah, ok, so talk."

"Uh, she's an international human rights attorney at the U.N. and so intelligent and well read that she can be intimidating."

Bucky snorted with amusement. "Sounds great."

"Shut up, Buck."

"I'm only teasin' ya, idiot. You always did go for the ones that were outta your league. So, is she a New Yorker?"

"No, she is originally from South Carolina. She is the sweetest girl I have ever met, Buck, and I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. I almost didn't talk to her because she is so beautiful that I was terrified. Luckily, Sam helped me out kinda like you would have done if you'd been there."

Fondly smiling at his old friend, Bucky said with a shrug, "You never could talk to girls, Steve. I hope your wife has finally convinced you that you're a great guy and so much more than a government science experiment."

Steve looked with surprise at Bucky, but replied, "Yeah, I guess so. She clearly thinks so. I'm luckier than I deserve."

"What's her name?"

"Mary-Claire."

"Yup, sounds right for South Carolina. Thea is English: Theodora Letitia Marie Worthing Arnwell."

Steve laughed as he replied, "D***, Buck. And you the guy who never stopped teasing me about Peggy being British."

Bucky closed his eyes and breathed out slowly before he fervently explained, "Yeah, well, Thea is special. Anyway, she's ten times smarter than me, honestly. Her PhD is in Spanish religious art and she was working at the Prado at one time. Now she's been moving from one tiny, s*** apartment to another tinier, even more s*** apartment all around Eastern Europe with me. Now that they think I
bombed that place, she won't be able to leave the safe house."

"Where is she, Buck?"

Suspicion suddenly flooding through him, Bucky replied roughly, "Need to know basis, Steven, and you don't need to know."

"How the h*ll did you even manage to legally marry her while on the run? Or did you use false names?"

"I wouldn't do anything cheap like that with Thea, Steve. Our marriage is real and legitimate. You figure it the f*** out, Steve. Come on."

Steve closed his eyes and huffed out a surprised breath. Bucky knew that Steve understood and waited to see what he would say. After a moment, Steve finally commented, "Oh. Was the box still there?"

Bucky nodded. "Yes. I know you must have gone there when you were looking for me. Didn't ya try to find it?"

"No. I…no. I don't think that I could have handled looking at all the stuff the other fellas put in there. There hasn't been enough time, you know? It is decades for everyone else, but just a few years for me. Monty was almost 90 when he died, Buck. Morita was 87. Dernier was 93. I haven't begun to process any of that stuff, Bucky, you know? I just can't do it yet."

"Yeah, I get it, Steve. I looked them up, too. I think reading about Dugan being gone upset me the most. I liked that stupid bastard."

Steve didn't reply for a moment, but then he said with a sigh, "Apparently he took over after I 'died'."

"Well with you and me gone, they didn't have any more brains so…sure. Brute force wins, right?"

Steve smiled. "You hated his hat."

Bucky snorted and made a rude gesture. "Well f***, Steve, everyone hated his hat."

Laughing, Steve replied, "True. So no, I didn't want to touch that stuff, Buck. I couldn't. I saw that they rebuilt the church."

"Yep, but it don't look the same, you know. That's where Thea and I got married."

"Yeah? Ironic."

Suddenly feeling the need to explain himself, Bucky insisted, "Nah, I'm telling you, Steve, that wasn't me. That was Frenchy. You know I didn't do that s***."

"I know that, Bucky, but we got kicked out of the church because of it."

"Well, funnily enough, I didn't share that particular anecdote with the old priest there. I think he had enough to deal with when he heard my confession. Took two days."

"Wow, Buck."

"Yes. However, I didn't have any other choice because we weren't getting married anywhere other than a Catholic church. Thea is more religious than my Aunt Beatrix was. You remember her?"
With a wry expression, Steve replied, "Sure do. My wife is extremely devout, as well."

"You used to be too, Steve. That change?"

"Maybe. I haven't really figured it out. I don't know how to reconcile ancient Norse myths being based on real beings."

"That's not the part that bothers me. I got my own issues though."

Hesitating a bit, Steve spoke barely louder than a whisper, as he asked, "Was our thing still in there?"

Bucky took a deep breath and then sighed. "Yeah. Want it?"

"No."

"It is at the house on Marsaxlokk."

"That's where you sent her, isn't it?"

Bucky shrugged. "You can't go there, Steven, no matter what happens to me. She won't go with you unless you have the password, which I'm not giving to you now. If she knows for sure that I am dead and it is publicly announced, then she will return to her family."

"Ok, Bucky. I understand. I don't need it back. We drew it together and it is a part of that time, which is gone now. I don't think that I'd find it funny anymore."

"It wasn't bad, Steve. Your caricatures were better than mine, which won't surprise you."

"Nah, you were good at that sort of thing, Buck."

Bucky smiled affectionately at his old friend. "You're a terrible liar, Rogers. Not much longer, you know. Better check the gauges."

Steve turned around and, as he started looking at all the controls again, said, "And you're a good one, Bucky. Maybe we better talk about how you expect this to go down once we get inside."

Bucky's smile slid off his face and he said tightly, "Yeah, ok, Steve. This place is a f***ing hellhole and no one's been there in years. It ain't gonna be a cake walk and who knows what this bastard has set up to greet us, right?"

"Just give me the outline of what you remember, ok?"

"These are memories I didn't ever want to revisit, Steve. You don't know what happened there, ok? Trust me. You don't want to know. It was bad."

Steve looked back with a pained expression and said only, "Ok, Buck. You don't have to tell me about that unless you want to. Just tell me what I need to know for us to be prepared."

"Be prepared for it to be ugly, Steve. Every memory that I have of Siberia is FUBAR. I was not s****ing you and Bird Boy earlier that the other Winter Soldiers were so bad that even HYDRA was afraid of them."

"S***, Buck."

"Yeah, so, you know, saddle up, Cap."
Steve snorted, but didn't laugh. "Ok, Sarge, yeah."

Bucky looked seriously at Steve and asked with a grimace, "What's gonna happen to your friends?"

Surprised, Steve turned and replied uncomfortably, "Whatever it is... I'll deal with it."

Thinking of Thea and Jamie, Bucky wondered if they wouldn't truly be better off without him there. Her family was wealthy and could provide for their son in ways he could not. Steve had a life without him, too, which he may have permanently thrown away for him. Bucky knew he was too f***ed up to be the man that Steve remembered. "I don't know if I'm worth all this, Steve."

When he opened his eyes as he waited for Steve to reply, Bucky realised that he knew that look—a patented Steve Rogers special. Steve was going to try to force the universe to make Bucky better if it was the last thing he did. Bucky groaned internally, since he both loved Steve for it and yet was frustrated. Steve just didn't know.

Steve answered softly, "What you did all those years... It wasn't you. You didn't have a choice."

Bucky's face spasmed with pain, as he remembered Thea saying nearly exactly that to him. He would do anything just to hold her again. Anything. "I know. But I did it."
Chapter 20

Shivering as he hunched down onto his knees, Bucky said hopelessly, “It’s really over, isn’t it?”

Steve’s forced smile dropped as he replied honestly, “Nah, Buck. It’s just gonna change. I’m used to that. So are you.”

No, it was much worse than that. He knew it was. Он только ухудшил жизнь других людей. Он был хорош в этом. (He only made other’s lives worse. He was good at that.) “You can’t go see your wife and babies. You’re wanted now. All because of me. I told you that I’m not worth all this, Steve. I’m not. I’m still a f***ed up HYDRA drone. Дерьмо! Maybe the Wakandan scientists can fix me like they say they can, but they can’t fix what I done. Why won’t you let me turn myself in, Steve? If you take me to them, then you’ll be free to go back.”

Bucky saw the shock and disappointment on Steve’s face and looked away as Steve replied urgently, “You think I would be free if you were in a prison somewhere? As if I could live knowin’ that you were unfairly imprisoned for something you didn’t have no say in doin’. That’s how ya see me now, Buck?”

It hurt to hear how loyal Steve still was. Why didn’t he understand that Bucky was too f***ed up to be worthy of friendship anymore? Он даже не мог защитить кого-либо, теперь, когда рука Зимнего Солдата была разорвана из его тела. Какая польза для него сейчас? (He could not even protect anyone, now that the Winter Soldier's arm had been severed. What use would anyone have for him now?) He couldn’t even think properly in one language or the other. English seemed thick and strange, but Russian seemed unnatural when talking to Steve, too. His brain was like scrambled rotten eggs. “Someone’s gotta pay for what was done, Steve. They don’t got Pierce now, right? He’s dead. Rumlow’s missing. They gotta have someone they can put on trial to be the face of HYDRA, so everyone sleeps better at night.”

Steve growled slightly as he responded, “Frankly, I’m not really that concerned about people who would sleep better because an innocent person was convicted of a crime. No, Bucky, that is not an option. If my feelings and your freedom aren’t enough to make you think better of that, then tell me what your wife would think? Would she say that she was better off going back to her previous life without you?”

Bucky groaned. The memories of that conversation with Bella hurt too much. “No chance. She told me that she would never be ok with me in prison. She was quite adamant about it. But sometimes Thea doesn’t make the practical choice. She was quite adamant about it. But she usually makes the emotional one, which I just can’t afford to let her do, Steve. I gotta think about her future, as well as Jamie and the baby that’s coming.”

“So, T’Challa’s offer to allow you to live here with them both isn’t something you are considering?”

Bucky dropped his face into his hands. Искушение уступить всему, что он хотел, было подавляющим его. Он отчаянно хотел, чтобы с ним была его любимая красотка. Каждый день он был вдали от нее, он чувствовал, что умирает быстрее. (The temptation to yield to everything he wanted was overwhelming him. He desperately wanted to have his beloved krasotka with him. Every day he was away from her, he felt as if he was dying faster.) For the first time in his life, cryosleep sounded desirable. “Me hiding out in a small African country is one thing, Steve. My Thea living here is another.”
“Why?”

Bucky sighed and roughly wiped his hands back and forth across his face. “Because her family cannot come here. T’Challa cannot permit it, since her brother is a diplomat whose travel is monitored. I want her somewhere that she can have her family back, Steve. She needs them. Losing her brother in Afghanistan nearly destroyed her. I gotta get her back near the other two brothers, so they can be a family again.”

Steve laid a hand on Bucky’s good shoulder. “Ok, I can understand that, at least. You know better than anyone how that feels, I know. Joe and Jack’s deaths still seem too recent and raw to me, but they were your brothers so I know you know better than me how that kind of loss feels.”

“You know, too, Steve. You lost everyone in one big punch. It was more gradual for me, since I didn’t remember everyone all at once. I don’t know how you handled it, Steve, but I’m glad that you did. I’m d*** glad that you’re still here in the f***** future with me.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know, Buck. I don’t know what’s worse though: losing everyone in one horrible drop of the axe or the torture of ongoing losses. So about that…I gotta tell ya somethin’. You’re not gonna like it, Buck, but I oughta tell ya.”

Fear gripping his belly in a swirling knot, Bucky yelped, “What?”

Steve dropped down onto his chair and leant back into it as he watched Bucky for a moment. Then he said slowly, “About how I handled waking up here in the future. I’d been ready to die after losing you, ya know, but I wasn’t gonna do it on purpose. I just was readier to accept it when I realised I had to take that plane down. Didn’t feel scared or nothin’. Just ready.”

“F*** that, Steve. I’m not worth anyone dyin’ over.”

“Shut up, Buck. I didn’t wanna die, but I wasn’t too miserable about it either. I was sad about losing out on a future with Peggy, but not distraught. It just…was. But wakin’ up here in the future was h*ll. It was an absolute horror show and the worst of it was that no one seemed to understand that I would feel that way. They all apparently thought that I just needed to catch up to modern culture and I’d be fine. Essentially, I was told that losing my entire world was nothing in comparison to the privilege of living with all of the advances of modern society. Of course, I am pleased about increased civil rights and broad-spectrum antibiotics, but how could I be fine with losing everything? Everyone I ever knew was dead. Except Peggy, because that was my life now that Peggy was the one person still alive and she was senile. H*ll, Bucky, our old neighbourhood in Brooklyn is too different to even recognise. Then they threw me into action so quickly. Of course, I fought like a good soldier as I’m supposed to do, but then I found out they were lying to us just like always, ya know? Once I completed the mission for them and the aliens were dead—seriously, aliens, Bucky—then I wondered if maybe I should leave New York, too. Maybe the Dodgers had the right idea when they escaped to California. I rode off on my bike for a bit. Wasted a few days before I realised that nowhere was gonna feel like home. Came back to New York and drifted for a few months. It wasn’t like I could actually go and get a regular job somewhere, right? Finally, I decided I might as well see if I could test my limits a bit. Find out just what I could do or maybe not do.”

Bucky stood up and stared down at his friend and stammered, “F***, Steve. T-tell me you aren’t sayin’ what I think you are!”

Steve closed his eyes and sighed. Then he looked up at Bucky regretfully. “You know that I am.”

“You absolute s***. How much did you ‘test your limits’ Steve? How far did you take it?”
Letting out a miserable bark of laughter, Steve stood up so he and Bucky were eye-to-eye. He quietly responded, “All the way. Turns out I can jump really far without a parachute.”

“F*** you, Rogers. Мудак. Как ты мог так поступить со мной? Bastard.”

“I know, Bucky, and I’m sorry. I haven’t done nothin’ stupid since that last time, which was about four months before I first saw Marie-Claire. I’d told myself that I was seeing how far I could push myself, but that last time, yeah, I knew what I was really doing.”

Bucky felt himself begin to shake as he said angrily, “Yet you punched me in the mouth when I said I’d tried to kill myself in the early days just to get away from HYDRA.”

With a sigh that sounded so exhausted that it made Bucky feel a rill of fear pass over him, Steve said with a shrug, “So sock me one in the face, Buck. I deserve it.”

Bucky spent a moment analysing his friend’s face and decided that Steve was not telling the truth that he was better now. Honestly, Steve looked pushed beyond bearing and no wonder. Dealing with all of Bucky’s s*** and losing his friends, his teammates, and his family could hardly be worth loyalty to an ancient friendship. “I don’t want to hit you, you idiot! I want to know that my best friend, my brother, is not going to give up on life. I’m fighting for myself here, ok, but it is like climbing f***ing Mt Elbrus all over again every day. When I first got free, I didn’t give up because I refused to surrender anything to HYDRA. Then I found Thea and I had an actual purpose again. Keeping her safe was enough. Then she gave me more—first marriage and then Jamie—so I actually had value as a person again. I know what it feels like to be lost, Steve. I know exactly what the despair of losing everything feels like.”

Steve ran his hand through his hair and said honestly, “I know that you do, Bucky. I know. I scared myself when I had to admit that last time what I was really doing. That was the last time I tried anything like that. You were always the smart one. I’ve rushed into everything thinking with my fists. You were the one who thought it through cautiously. You would have found your footing faster than I did and without the self-pity. I did find my way though. I’m not lost anymore. Well, not like that anyway.”

Bucky decided not to ask in what way Steve still was lost, since it probably largely had to do with the wreckage left behind from everything Steve had done for him. “Does your wife know about this?”

“No. I admitted once that I did something stupid that really scared me, but although she has asked, I’ve never told her. Apparently, I am catastrophically introverted and repressed. That is a direct quote from Sam.”

Surprised by the fierce jealousy that raged through him that Sam had taken over his place as best friend to Steve, Bucky forced himself to say curtly, “So, he knows what you did.”

“No and, yeah, probably. I didn’t tell him, but he is extremely perceptive.”

Reacting instinctively, Bucky snarled, “Sure he is. So perceptive that he thought my Thea might be an agent of HYDRA.”

Leaning against the wall next to him, Steve shook his head and answered, “Buck, Sam trusts me, but he knows how I am. He helped me search everywhere short of Antarctica for you, so he knows how far I would go to protect you. Mary-Claire’s brother was Sam’s partner in an experimental pararescue unit. According to Sam, he followed Riley into and out of various jams just like you and I always did. Then Sam watched Riley drop out of the sky just like when you…”
so...when I asked him once why he didn’t give up on helping me look for you, he said I would never have given up helping him if Riley were still out there somewhere. He has been my best friend here, Buck, whereas you are my best friend anywhere: my brother. I need you to be ok, Buck, which Sam knows. Therefore, it is not strange that he might doubt you and worry that I might not be making the most logical decisions.”

Он был таким эгоистичным. Черт, он был бесполезным другом. Стив заслужил гораздо лучше. (He was so selfish. D***, he was a useless friend. Steve deserved much better.) Bucky struggled to manage the words in English, finding his mind too sluggish to manage anything but Russian easily. “I’m glad you’ve got a friend like that now, Steve. Especially since…since I haven’t been much of one. You need someone at your back, ya know. You always did. I can’t do that for you, Steve, even if they get my brain unscrambled, since I can’t be a снайпер (sniper) with just one arm. Bird boy is loyal as f*** to you, even I gotta admit that. Even if he’s a pretty s*** меткий стрелок (marksman).”

“Some of that wasn’t English, Bucky. but I think that I understand. Sam does have my back, but he isn’t you. No one could replace you, Buck, not in any century.”

Bucky hung his head and thought that he was too tired. Too, too tired. “I don’t know, Steve. I just can’t be there for you now like I want to be. I gotta let them do this to me. I got to get my brain right. I may not like Bird Boy, but he’s got your back and I appreciate it. When they’ve got me on ice here, then you need someone protectin’ your six, right? You know you gotta have someone watchin’ you, since you’re gonna go head first into any trouble you find now, aren’t ya?”

Steve shook his head and smiled sadly. “Yeah, ok, maybe. You know me. But you could come with me, Bucky.”

“Not going to be any good to you if they can trigger the Winter Soldier. I’m a danger.”

Bucky watched closely as Steve tried to school his features into an expression of acceptance. It didn’t matter. Bucky knew how hard this would be for Steve to understand. Steve managed to ask, “You sure about this?”

Bucky nodded. “I can't trust my own mind. So, until they figure out how to get this stuff out of my head...I think going back under is the best thing. For everybody.” He knew that Steve didn’t misunderstand him. No matter what he decided about bringing Thea to Wakanda, he couldn’t even consider it until he was sure she and the children would be truly safe from the Winter Soldier.

She missed everything. The weird little snuffling sound he sometimes made when he slept. The way he would nervously shove his good hand into his long hair as he watched her. The little half smile he wore first thing in the morning as he watched her make breakfast. The light in his eyes as he played with Jamie. The intensity of his focus when he was caring for his ridiculous assortment of weapons. The joy he got from eating even her dodgy cooking. His hypermasculine attitude that usually drove her mad since he had to control everything in his desperation to keep her safe. His musky smell on their pillows when she awoke. The deep rumble of his voice in her ear as he read to her. His quite frankly intimidating strength. His beautiful eyes, which almost no one saw because he always hid behind his shaggy hair. And all of his various types of kisses: sweet ones, apologetic ones, jealous ones, thoughtful ones, and then the ones that made her forget everything outside of him. Most of all though, the myriad of ways that he showed her without a single word how wholly, truly he was in love with her.

She hadn’t taken it for granted. She hadn’t. She had always known that there was a good chance that he might be captured or killed. She knew what his past as the Winter Soldier really meant for
them. As much as she only wanted him to talk to her about the future as if it was theirs for the
taking—even though he continually tried to warn her as if he thought she didn’t really get it—of
course, she knew the truth. She just didn’t see any reason to spend time dwelling on something
they could not do more to change than they already were. She trusted his ability to keep them
hidden better than anyone else alive. Even she could tell that Bucky’s skills were incredible. If he
could not keep them safe and hidden, then no one could.

She had been willing to accept that they probably didn’t have years to be together. No matter why
she had gone with him originally—and she still questioned herself whether nascent feelings for him
had existed even then—she had married him that quickly because she knew. She knew that Bucky
was it for her no matter how bizarre and illogical it seemed at that point. In time, she understood
better why she found him so intoxicating and perfect, despite all his quirks and a multitude of
serious issues. She adored him beyond description. She loved him so desperately that facing a life
without him now was nearly impossible to accept. Reality was not appealing in the slightest, so
she would really, really prefer to avoid it. Reality, however, didn’t seem to take requests and had
been stalking her nearly every night since she and Jamie had arrived on Malta.

Thea did not regret anything though. She just wished—oh, how fervently she wished—that it had
worked out differently. Bucky was not coming back to her. Even in tiny Marsaxlokk, they had
television and enough other sources of news that she understood what had happened in Romania
that day. She was aware that her husband was wanted in connexion with a terror bombing in
Vienna that killed dozens, including the King of Wakanda. She knew that his past as the Winter
Soldier meant that no one would even try to find the real culprit. The footage she had seen was
remarkably well done. Of course, she knew it wasn’t him. Even if she wasn’t absolutely sure he
would not do something like that now that HYDRA wasn’t controlling him, she could have told
anyone who asked that the man in that footage walked wrongly. The posture was off. The
shoulders weren’t right. She knew her husband and that was NOT him.

Not that a court of law would listen to the testimony of the hopelessly besotted wife of the man
they believed was so obviously guilty. Bucky would never forgive her for trying to go to his
defence either. They had talked about his possible capture and he had forced her to swear to stay
away. If she didn’t have Jamie and the baby-to-be to think about, then she would still disobey his
wishes and attempt to defend Bucky anyway. Somewhere there would be street camera footage or
someone who saw Bucky in Bucharest—not Vienna—on that day, surely. His co-workers might
have been willing to testify. If she’d had to go to every newspaper or television channel in Europe
to get someone to listen, then she would have done it. It didn’t matter. She would respect his
wishes regardless of her feelings, since she needed to protect Jamie and their unborn child. Bucky
had been certain that no mercy would be shown to her or their children by the world governments.
She had more faith than that, but she knew that Bucky understood security things better.

Getting up from the bed with a huff of annoyance, since she clearly wasn’t going to sleep anytime
soon, Thea limped out to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. As she leant against the tiny table in
front of the ancient cooker, she thought of when they had stood in this very kitchen the morning
after they married. He had stared down at her with a confused, uncertain expression that made her
very sure that he doubted she cared much more for him than one might for a casual acquaintance.
Even now, he probably largely doubted she was truly in love with him. From the surprised,
grateful way that he had still accepted her affections—she doubted he would ever allow himself to
truly trust that she would not change her mind about him.

Thea carried the battered old teacup with its chipped saucer out into the sitting room. As she leant
over the edge of Jamie’s cot, she sighed and wondered how she was ever going to teach Jamie or
their daughter, who would be born into a world that hated her father, how wonderful Bucky truly
was. Jamie would forget and their daughter would never have experienced the tender kisses and
warm hugs of their father. The only picture that she had of Bucky was a horrible photo from his HYDRA file that was printed into an Italian newspaper that she had found. She had covered it with a plastic sandwich bag so she could let Jamie handle it in the hopes that it would help him remember. Truthfully, if Jamie recognised Bucky from that photo—in which Bucky looked murderously cruel with a blank, angry stare—then it would only be because Bucky had been reactivated by HYDRA. The picture was very like the man that had burst into Thea’s flat nearly two years before, but not much like the man who had loved to set Jamie on his back to give him ‘horsie’ rides.

After hearing that Captain America had chosen to follow Bucky in his escape from ‘justice’, Thea had known that the very small chance of seeing her husband again had likely vanished into nothing. If even Captain America felt the only solution was hiding his friend from the authorities, then surely Bucky would insist that it was too unsafe to come back for her. He always put her and Jamie’s safety above any of their happiness. Wherever Bucky and his best friend were hiding, Thea would not be useful with a child in tow and one more on the way, especially as she would need her medications and she was, once again, reduced to using her crutches every day. Maybe Captain America and Bucky could really keep each other safe with two former commando supersoldiers on the look-out for both HYDRA and the law. Every day that she didn’t hear that the Winter Soldier had been captured was a good one. She knew that the world governments would trumpet either a kill or a capture, so in this case no news really was good news. Knowing Bucky must be alive somewhere was enough. It had to be. So, her job was simply to keep Jamie safe and herself healthy as the day for their daughter to be born approached swiftly. That and to pray passionately and desperately (and as often as she could) that she was wrong, wrong, wrong and that she would really get to be with Bucky once again.

“Well what do you think, Buck?”

Suddenly feeling the need to be certain yet again that they were alone, Bucky looked around the room and said warily, “No. It isn’t the right time yet.”

Steve was clearly annoyed as he replied, “Buck, they have run all the tests numerous times. You have had several months to recuperate now. If she keeps to her due date, then your wife will give birth in just a few weeks. What are you waiting for? D’ya wanna see her or not?”

“F*** off, Rogers.”

Standing up from his chair, Steve glared down at Bucky and replied with fierce sarcasm, “Sure thing, Barnes. I don’t got anywhere else I’d rather be, right? I wouldn’t enjoy a visit to Geneva right about now to see Marie-Claire, right? So, forgive me if I’m not too sympathetic to your excuses, since you actually can see your wife—unlike me. Frankly, I don’t get it. This attitude of yours doesn’t match that of the man who was quite prepared to kill one of the Dora Milaje who suggested that Thea might be a security threat to King T’Challa.”

Bucky forced himself to push back the instincts that insisted that the angry man in front of him was a threat, then he stood up slowly and crossed his arms over his chest. “Exactly. Even the Wakandans could be a possible threat. I’m tryna keep her safe, you idiot. You think I don’t wanna see her? F***, I want that more than I can put into words. I burn for her so much that I can’t even think about anything else coherently sometimes.” Bucky looked away from Steve with embarrassment at his admission, but continued in a heavy voice, “I’m sorry you can’t go see Mary-Claire and the twins; I know that’s my fault, too. If you hadn’t done what you did for me, then you’d be back in New York with her now. But I gotta keep my girl safe, Steve. D*** it, you don’t really think that I would choose to be away from her or Jamie longer than I gotta, do you?”
Steve breathed out heavily and then replied in a low voice that told Bucky immediately that he was in serious emotional pain, “Yeah, well I have to be honest, Buck, but I have wondered a little if you do. You know that I’m a stubborn son-of-a-b****, so you haven’t tried to keep me from visiting you. Also, I got my own way in and out that you don’t have any say in. However, she doesn’t even know where you are and won’t be granted clearance to enter Wakanda without an escort. She doesn’t even know for sure you are alive, Bucky.”

Steve was peering at Bucky with an expression that he knew too well. There had not been many times that Steve had clearly told Bucky he was making a mistake, but he remembered this look nevertheless. It was evident that Steve was deeply disturbed about his relationship with Thea and worried about how Bucky was handling him discussing it. Черт, это полное дерьмо! (D*** it, this is bulls***!) Uncomfortable, Bucky looked away for a moment as Steve continued, “You got total control here with her—and from how you talk that’s the way your relationship with Thea works, Buck. Yet, although she’s about to have your second kid and has obediently followed you all over the absolute armpit of Eastern Europe, you somehow think she doesn’t truly want to be with you. I’ve wondered if that is part of your hesitation in sending for her.”

“F*** you, Steven. Who the h*** are you to even suggest that? I ain’t a controlling f*** like my father was with Ma. I’m not ever gonna be like that with my wife. She trusts me, even when I’m being ridiculously overprotective about something stupid or shivering from some nightmare and muttering crazy s*** in Russian. I won’t break her trust and I’m not lettin’ you say otherwise.”

Suddenly speaking with superlative calm, Steve replied gravely, “I did not say you were like your dad. You would never do that. I don’t care what fresh h*ll HYDRA dragged you through, Bucky, but that could never be you.”

Bucky tried to control his shaking by taking deep breaths and contemplating the strange medical devices that lined the back wall of the Wakandan hospital room to ground himself. From the moment she had agreed to go with him when they were in that filthy mausoleum, he had consciously done everything in his power to be the opposite of what his own father had been, especially those last years when he’d lived in the bottle. There was no f***ing way that he would let his girl be subjected to a life like his sweet, devoted Ma had lived, especially those last two years. He would never lay a hand on her. Even more important, he would never talk to her that way. Words hurt long after the bruises healed. And didn’t he f***ing know that too well?

“Look, Steve, it’s my job to take care of her and my son, ain’t it? My safety and contentment are completely secondary to theirs. I want Thea to be happy, but I need her and Jamie to be safe much more, Steve. Yeah, you’re right that I’m the one as makes most of the decisions, but that’s the way it needed to be for now. I know that she’s smarter than me about most things, but she doesn’t understand the world you and me live in at all. She trusts me to take care of that s*** because I promised that I would. Therefore, I’m not going to send for her until I know that she’ll be ok here.”

Grimacing at him with clenched fists, Steve replied, “I get that, Buck, but I still think you’re making a mistake. Listen, Mary-Claire has more brains in her little finger I got sum total. Honestly, she matches me for strategic planning, but she doesn’t get security concerns like I wish she did. A lot of what I’ve tried to put in place to keep her safe has…not been very well received.”

Feeling calmer as he realised that Steve had not been implying what he had thought, Bucky snorted as he said with a sudden look of amusement, “Oh yeah? Got yourself a spitfire there?”

“Ya know, not usually, but she’s sure got my number, Buck. H*ll, Sam thinks it is absolutely hilarious that a girl barely reaching 5 feet can shut me down with a look. Even you couldn’t do that, Buck. Seriously, you and Sam should get along much better than you do for all you both love
to give me s*** about everything. Frankly, Mary-Claire knows I really can’t tell her no with just the one exception: her security. We’d honestly never fought until I explained that she was going to need to have the babies in Switzerland. That was not a great conversation, Buck.”

“Huh, bet not. I think it’s more like Wilson and I both see through your s***, Steve. But your girl is safer in Switzerland. They got good healthcare there, right? You said the twins are out of the incubators now and meeting the doctor’s goals. They’re good, right?”

Looking even more stressed as he gripped his hands together, Steve replied with a nod, “Yeah, even better than meeting the benchmarks. It makes me itchy having so many people there know why, too. However, there wasn’t a choice, since we would have lost both of them otherwise. NDAs were signed, but that doesn’t mean anything if the money or incentive is high enough. The effects of the transfusion are lessening now, but both of them are now in the 95th percentile for growth. That’s apparently unheard of for babies born at 34 weeks.”

“Might not just be the transfusion, pal. We didn’t have much access to doctors, but Jamie has busted through every growth chart and met every benchmark very early. If the counterfeit HYDRA version of the serum did something crazy to my genetics, then what would the good stuff that you got do?”

“I don’t think so. Well, Bruce didn’t think so, I should say. He said if I had children that they shouldn’t be Enhanced like me.”

“Yeah, well sometimes scientists don’t know s***, Steve, and you know it. Jamie heals twice as fast as other boys his age apparently. I know he isn’t Enhanced to the degree you and I are, but he’s got something. He’s only been sick once and it was bad: encephalitis caused by a f***ing amoeba in the water we used for his formula, Steve. The doctor said no one survives acanthamoeba, especially not an infant. At least that bogus s*** that HYDRA injected into me was good for something if it can protect my kid.”

“D*** it, Bucky, seriously? But Jamie doesn’t have any complications, right?”

“Nah, nothing. That’s what firmed up my theory that Jamie got some of my abilities.”

“Did you talk to Shuri about that?”

Incredulous, Bucky laughed with disdain. “Are you actually asking, Steve? I am not volunteering information like that to anyone. My son will NOT be someone’s lab monkey. If it gets out that my abilities can be passed to my kids, then what would that mean? Have you thought about that, Steve?”

Steve’s eyes were narrowed and his nose flared as he replied carefully, “Of course, I have, Bucky. I’m very worried about the twins getting on someone’s radar. If they are deemed truly Enhanced then they would be subject to the Accords, too. Obviously, I don’t want any of that.”

“And you want me to bring my child here where they will not fail to notice he is not an average toddler? You want Thea here as a refugee? Well I don’t.”

Steve made a rude gesture that he probably hadn’t even thought of since 1943 and leant forwards into Bucky’s space as he aggressively replied, “Sure, ok, Bucky. I’m the bad guy here, am I? So whatcha gonna do then, huh? Basically, there isn’t any other option, Buck, unless a lot of things change. You aren’t plannin’ on leavin’ her in Malta forever.”

Cocking his head to one side, Bucky replied with equal aggression, “No, dumba**, I'm not. I just
gotta be sure I can trust the Wakandan princess. She is very young and too enthusiastic. She makes protocol mistakes far too often. I'm not sure my family will be safe here, Steve. I don’t need you tryna make my decisions for me.”

Steve did not try to hide his annoyance as he made a face at his friend. “Aww, says you, Buck. What do you actually think can possibly happen to them here in Wakanda that won’t happen in Malta, huh? Things can happen no matter where you are and here they will actually be trying to do right by us. Bad things can happen to anyone, anywhere, Buck. D*** it, do you remember what that old farmer did to DiAgostino in the old church in Agatapara? The Army dragged the guy all the way from Trenton to Greece to save that old man’s hide from Fascist bastards, but the old fool went and shot him just because DiAgostino talked to his granddaughter in town. You can’t control everything.”

Bucky’s shoulders dropped and he placed his right hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Of course, I remember Aggie, pal. Frenchy and me are the ones as buried him.”

“Yeah, I know you did, while I clocked the old murdering bastard in the jaw and then dragged him in to the mayor.”

Surprised, Bucky looked at Steve for a moment before he slowly asked, “I didn’t remember that part. Did you know what they would do to him?”

Steve angrily replied, “D***, Bucky, of course not. However, it was war. I wasn’t shocked that they did it either.”

“Yeah, I know, Steve.”

Steve sighed. “Looked that bastard mayor up last year. He died in prison, you know.”

Bucky smirked as he replied, “Oh yeah? Ain’t that a surprise?”

“Not at all.” Steve leant back against the wall and sighed as he purposefully dropped his shoulders and looked at his friend. “So, Bucky, you can be a brawler from Trenton sleeping in a church and still get your ticket punched because of an innocent remark to a pretty girl. Wakanda is the safest you can hope for Thea and Jamie. Malta is not, since it signed the Accords.”

“Aww, s***, Steve. I haven’t thought of Aggie in so long. Why’d ya have to talk about him? F***. That was a long time ago.”

“Believe it or not, it isn’t to me. Anyway, that doesn’t change reality either way, Buck.”

Bucky nodded and took a deep breath as he perched on the edge of the examination table. “Yeah. Yeah, ok, maybe. What are you doing about Mary-Claire?”

“She has a detailed plan of what she intends to do about our situation. In fact, she has set things into play that she won’t even tell me about. For now, she and the twins will stay in the house in Geneva where her brother, Robert, has installed a housekeeper and a nanny to help her. Her cousin, Glenn, is with her right now, too. There aren’t many other countries where I could safely visit, but she could also live in comfort. Unlike you, I wasn’t offered refugee status here.”

“Why not just stay there with her, ya dumba**? I can tell you’re crazy about her.”

Steve leant his head back against the wall and moaned. “I want to. I want to so d*** much, Buck, but I gotta do my job even if most of the world governments are trying to stop me. It is still the right thing to do. I just can’t abandon one responsibility for the other. I gave my word to Dr
Erskine, Buck. Somehow, I gotta do both even though I’m not sure how. Right now, Mary-Claire refuses to consider me quitting anyway. I asked her, ya know? But she looked at me like I’d suggested knocking over a bank or somethin’. So, Sam, Natasha, and I will just keep on.”

Pausing for a moment to look at his friend closely, Bucky put his hand on Steve’s forearm. When Steve wearily smiled at him, Bucky shook his head fondly and asked with an unusually gentle tone, “Did you actually ask T’Challa if your family could settle here, too? He would probably let your wife come. He likes you, Steve.”

Steve shrugged with exhaustion and replied tightly, “We get along well, sure. However, T’Challa can’t let me or Mary-Claire stay here, not unless he wants to broadcast that you are here, too. Mary-Claire is a UN attorney, who specialises in international human rights. She recently took on a particular specialty.”

“Let me guess: Enhanced like us?”

“Yep. Wakanda signed the Accords. She cannot work here without drawing attention. Switzerland is the only choice, unfortunately.”

“You’re an idiot, Steve. You can take a break for a few months. You should go stay with your wife and babies. You don’t get this time with your kids again. I’ve missed out on months with Jamie that I won’t get back. You don’t gotta be out there risking your life and freedom right now when you got a family as needs ya, understand?”

“You are somethin’ else, Buck. You seriously are gonna lecture me on that but leave Thea in Malta?”

“Nah, you were right. At least if she is here and s*** goes to h*ll, then I could go down protectin’ them. I wouldn’t even know if something happened to her or Jamie there, which has been the subject of half my nightmares lately. I tried to teach her how to fire a gun and use a knife, but there’s 12-year olds as would do better than Thea. You really gonna go?”

“Of course, Buck. Give me the password and I’ll do it as soon as I can get Sam back here. She’s in that old house they lodged us in, right?”

“Not the one all the men were in, but where you, Lieutenant Smythson, and that f***er stayed. Was it…Captain White? Watson? You know, that dirtbag—he made his sergeant carry coffee and shaving water up to him every morning. That little house.”

“Oh. That place was barely a shed, Buck.”

“Well they added on a kitchen and a tiny bathroom. It was where we stayed for our honeymoon. That house where all the guys stayed is gone, Steve.”

Steve groaned. “Like everything else, yeah. Okay, so what’s the password?”
Thea leant over the window sill and looked out into the tiny garden where she could see a small black bird nibbling at the seeds. It was a peaceful scene that she would have found pretty if the situation was different. As it was, it was no more beautiful to her than a barren moonscape. Nothing in Malta felt pleasant or nice anymore. Even memories that had once been sweet were now too painful to touch on most days.

The time they spent there at the time of their wedding was so precious that she couldn’t completely keep herself from returning to it mentally every few days when her longing for Bucky overwhelmed her. They had spent only one week there then and she had now been alone with Jamie in the tiny house for nearly 14. No corner of the little building seemed to retain the specialness of that time any longer, since everywhere had now been filled with the ache of being parted from her husband. Yet, the days after their wedding were some of the most beautiful times she could remember, so she couldn’t keep from occasionally steeping herself in bittersweet daydreams of that time. She had been so wildly attracted to Bucky already then and she had been slowly, clearly falling for him. Therefore, Thea had known that she was going to eventually be almost as painfully in love with him as he was with her. It had taken another few months to get there, but it had happened, just as she had expected.

In fact, their honeymoon was so special to her precisely because of his understanding and love at that time, despite her own slower pace—even if things got rougher in the months that had followed. She had told herself then that she wanted to come back to Marsaxlokk one day, but now she wished she could leave and never, ever return. She would rather flee to almost anywhere else and have the building be torn down rather than have to remain sleeping alone in the tiny house where they had stayed with hardly a moment in which their hands or arms were not entwined. If she did not still have a ridiculous, foolish hope that Bucky would come to find her one day, then she would leave and never come back. Any sweetness in those memories could be better appreciated from far away where she did not have constant visual reminders of what…who…should be there with her.

Jamie no longer asked for Papa to sway him to sleep at night. She was not certain that he even remembered how Bucky loved to play zoo animals, tell him wildly imaginative stories in Russian, or tickle him out of a tantrum. The baby would come in a little over a fortnight more. She had no way of knowing for sure if Bucky was even alive. Maybe she would never know. Her daughter would essentially be born an orphan and Jamie would never remember anything else. She had this mental conversation with herself every day, but it didn’t change anything.

Jamie was still taking his nap, which meant she could rest. Yet, she didn’t feel as if she wanted to sleep. She didn’t want to read. She had said her daily rosary for Bucky that morning. She’d whispered half of another as she watched Jamie sleep, but she didn’t have the energy to finish.

Thea pushed herself up slowly from the chair near the window and grabbed her crutches to swing over to Jamie’s cot. As she lovingly stared down at her son, she heard a sound that made her stomach drop. She spun on her heel and held her crutch up in the air as Bucky had taught her, ready to beat to death the person who had entered her home if they took even a step closer to her baby.

The blond man standing in front of her looked very distressed, as he explained apologetically, “Uh, hello, Mrs Barnes. Um, I’m so very sorry that we scared you. However, it was not safe for us to wait outside. The password is Teva.”
Thea dropped her crutch and stared back and forth between the two men that were standing in her small house. She tried to remember the correct wording of the question Bucky had given her. “Кто любил Василису Прекрасную?”

The tall man with the beard smiled. “The tsar, Mrs. Barnes.” When Thea stepped closer with her other crutch lifted threateningly, the man stammered in Russian with a terrible American accent, “Царь женился на Василисе Прекрасной.”

“Ok.” Thea lowered her crutch and looked at the other man, who seemed to be trying to blend into the background with a suspiciously neutral expression on his face. “Who are you both and why are you here?”

Looking both sheepish and nervous, the blond man replied softly, “My name is Steve Rogers, ma’am, and this is my colleague, Sam Wilson. Your husband, Bucky, sent us to bring you to him.”

Her head racing with confusion, hope, and relief, Thea leant into her crutches and closed her eyes. After a moment in which she realised that she might be going to pass out, she whispered, “I think… I need to sit down.”

Moving so rapidly that Thea realised that he must have already seen she was in distress, the other man—Wilson she thought—caught her as her knees started to buckle and helped her to her chair. He said very gently, “I’m sorry that we frightened you, Mrs Barnes. You and your child are safe, I promise. I assure you that Steve and I would never have entered the house without your invitation if we had not been concerned about being seen. Can I get you a glass of water or something?”

Thea shook her head and stared at him as she said faintly, “No, it is quite all right. I will be ok. I…I did not think that I would ever hear that password. It has just been 14 weeks since Budapest and there hasn’t been any news in the papers for almost that entire time. I wasn’t certain that Yasha was even alive.”

The man who had identified himself as Steve—Thea thought that he looked similar to the man she remembered in the news broadcasts but not quite the same perhaps because of his dark blond beard—smiled with understanding. She stared at him as he spoke, thinking of what Bucky had told her about his childhood friend, and wondered how similar he was to the person Bucky remembered. She only half heard him as he said, “Buck is fine. He is safe and we all feel that it should be safe for you and your son to go to him now. Are you going to be ok to travel, ma’am? We will have to fly to get where Bucky is staying.”

A fire kindled in her eye and Thea answered, “Try to keep me away, Captain Rogers. I’ll walk if I have to.”

Steve seemed surprised by the vehemence of her response, but smiled kindly. “I was referring to your advanced pregnancy, ma’am.”

“This baby is not being born away from my husband if there is any option otherwise. I’ll be on that plane, Captain. When do we leave?”

The other man, who seemed both highly amused and interested in their conversation, replied gently, “Actually, Mrs Barnes, we need to go as quickly as possible. We probably attracted attention when we landed.”

Blinking somewhat at being called Mrs Barnes, as she was only used to her cover name, Thea replied determinedly, “Good. Would you mind helping me get ready? I don’t have much here, but I don’t want to leave anything behind, since I never want to return.”
Sam asked with a friendly smile, “Of course. Do you have a suitcase, ma’am?”

“Just a bag, not a suitcase. There is another bag on the table in the kitchen, too. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to put all of Jamie’s snacks and things in that bag? He will want something to eat whilst we travel, I’m sure. I can pack my clothing, since there isn’t much at all.”

Sam hurried off to the kitchen, whereas Steve stayed. He looked down into the cot. “He is a very handsome boy. He reminds me of Bucky’s youngest brother, Joe, in a way.”

Thea smiled. “Yasha said Jamie looks like his grandfather.”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, he does a bit. His hair has a wave like Mrs Barnes’ hair did, too.”

She tilted her head and looked at him oddly, as she replied, “Really? Yasha never described her appearance to me and he doesn’t have any pictures.”

“Mrs Barnes was very petite and had wavy hair that she used to wear up in a large, poufy old-fashioned bun. She cooked wonderful dinners, but her baking was even better. Everyone that knew her liked her and Bucky worshipped her.”

Tucking her son’s second pair of spare shortalls into the bag, Thea replied with a small smile, “It was clear from how he spoke of her that she was an enormous influence of good in his life. Do you mind getting Jamie’s little bin of toys? We can leave the bin and just chuck the contents into the bag. Where are we going?”

Steve smiled regretfully, as he dumped the toys into the bag unceremoniously. “I’m afraid that I cannot tell you that yet. It will be a long flight, however.”

How very familiar that felt, Thea thought. “All right. I suppose that it doesn’t really matter, does it? Yasha never told me where we were going until we got there most of the time. Security always came first. Do you mind collecting the shoes and handbag over there?”

His smile faltering slightly, Steve sighed and then bent to snatch up the things she had indicated. “Certainly, ma’am.”

At that moment, the other man re-entered the room. “All packed up, Mrs Barnes. Is there anything else that I should get together for you?”

“Erm, no, I don’t think so. I suppose we shall have to leave Jamie’s wooden rocking horse. I can’t take that on a plane and it is so ancient that it would fall apart anyway. I’m almost done.”

Steve shrugged. “If you want the rocking horse, we can bring it. It is a private plane.”

“No, it is silly to pack it. I only got it because Yasha used to let Jamie ride him about the flat in Bucharest whilst he pretended to be a horse. It was Jamie’s favourite thing, so I hoped the rocking horse might be as close a replacement as I could find. Thank you, though, Captain.” Thea leant over to pick up Jamie, who started fussing immediately at being awakened too early.

Steve motioned to Sam, who was smirking and made a very rude gesture as he mouthed, “What??” Finally taking pity on Steve’s frustration, Sam decided to slide the smaller bag under the pram and started pushing it towards the door. Steve snatched up the larger bag and waited to see if there was something else that Thea would need.

She, however, was not looking at either of them, since all of her attention was focussed on her unhappy son. She kissed his forehead and soothingly crooned, “It’s ok, my darling. We are going
to see Papa. Do you want to see Papa?"

The little boy didn’t look impressed, but kept fussing and wiggling. Not looking away from him, Thea asked in an exhausted voice, “Would you get the picture please, Captain? That might help. Sometimes he will settle if I show him the picture and tell him stories about Yasha playing with him.”

“Certainly ma’am.” Steve looked inside the cot and felt a horrible pang of pain when he saw what picture she had meant. There was a newspaper photograph of Bucky from the time of the incident in Berlin. Had she no other pictures of him? He was not going to be the one to tell Bucky that his wife had soothed their son to sleep with a picture of the Winter Soldier. He handed the picture to her silently.

“Here we are Jamie, darling. See Papa? We are going to Papa now.”

“Papa.”

Her voice nearly breaking as she tried to remain calm, Thea said encouragingly, “Yes, darling, Papa. Won’t that be lovely? We are going in a plane with Papa’s friends. Then you’ll get to see Papa.”

“Papa go.”

“Yes, he did go, darling. Now he will be back.”

The baby pointed energetically at the picture. “Papa go, go, go, go.”

“Yes, Jamie. Let’s go see him. Ok?”

The toddler seemed quite pleased to hold the little picture and repeat off and on, “Go.”

Thea placed him carefully in the pram, letting him have a small faded grey bunny that was probably once white and then looked at the two men. “I’m afraid that I need my crutches today, so I can’t push the pram through the grass. It is too uneven for me, otherwise I could just use the pram to stabilise me.”

Sam stepped forwards and offered with a look at Steve, “I don’t mind, ma’am. I can carry the other bag, Steve.”

Steve shrugged as he picked up both the remaining bag and the rocking horse, then headed for the door.

Nearly two hours later, Thea was asleep in the back of the plane with Jamie in her arms and a blanket tucked all round her. Up front in the cockpit, Sam commented, “So I was right, you know.”

Steve seemed perplexed. “About what?”

“That she was going to be just like Marie-Claire is with you. Bozo crazy about your boy and ready to fight.”

“Yeah, you were a little bit right. He doesn’t seem her type, but holy s*** is she his. Almost like she was made to order for Bucky Barnes.”

“Yeah? Well, I would like to know how the f*** the d***ed Winter Soldier can get a girl when on
the run from HYDRA. Before we raced off to Romania I was all righteous and an American hero and could I get a date? No. All he had to do is stalk around waving his f***ing metal arm of death and he gets a girl that looks like that. Between him and you, it is enough to make a guy feel very inferior.”

Steve laughed. “I wasn’t expecting her to be quite that beautiful, no. And he used to make fun of the fellows who dated English girls during the war, I remember. However, Bucky has always had a thing for redheads.”

“Yeah? I like redheads just as much as I like blonds or brunettes. I’m not picky.”

“Somehow, I’m not too worried, Sam. I seem to remember you and a very beautiful, very lethal Wakandan woman getting to know each other much better recently.”

“Yeah, don’t I wish?”

Steve looked knowingly at his friend, but didn’t say more. Almost an hour later, they received a call, which Steve immediately took. He was not surprised to see a very haggard and wild looking Bucky.

“Was she there? Did you find her? Are they safe, Steve?”

“Yeah, she’s fine, Buck. I would let you talk to her, but she is resting and she looks like she needs it. The baby is with her. He looks exactly like Joe.”

Bucky’s eyes widened. “I am sure he looks so different. Three months change a baby so much. Was she ok though, Steve? Did it seem like she was taking care of herself?”

“Yeah, Buck. She is fine.”

Looking incredibly relieved, Bucky said uneasily, “After her brother died in Afghanistan, she even stopped eating, Steve. I’ve been worried. Thank G-d.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t do that with a baby on the way, Buck. It will be fine. She was pretty determined to get to you, I’ll tell you that.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah. Threatened to walk to you if we didn’t fly her, Barnes.”

Bucky looked with surprise at Sam and then back at Steve. “How much longer?”

“Uh, looks like three hours, I think.”

“Well, I’ll be waiting. Thanks.”

As soon as the call was ended, Steve sighed softly. “You can’t tease him like that, Sam. Seriously, don’t.”

Sam snorted and said seriously, “Hey. I tolerate the guy for you, buddy. I don’t like him and I don’t see myself ever liking him. But he’s your friend.”

“You know how much I appreciate that, Sam. A guy couldn’t ask for a better friend than you, ok?” Steve stood and put his hand on Sam’s shoulder before turning to go back and check on Thea.
“You are Theodora Arnwell Barnes, citizen of the United Kingdom, wife of the James Buchanan Barnes, and mother of James Buchanan Barnes, Jr., yes?”

Thea forced herself to look away from the quite terrifying women who stood on either side of the throne, instead focussing on tightly gripping the handle to her son’s pram. She tried to stand very straight and school her features to appear thoroughly unintimidated, but did not have any confidence that she was particularly successful. Thea’s eyes narrowed slightly as she debated carefully the several reasons she considered were likely why she had been brought into the royal court. As yet, she was very unsure of both her own and her husband’s situation, but she had a lifetime of experience with politics and diplomacy. Her instincts warned her to be very careful, so she merely replied with her most polite smile, “Yes, your majesty.”

The young king tapped one finger on his knee, as he drawled casually, “You are an art historian last employed at the Museo del Prado, holding a PhD in the History of Art with a specialisation in Iberian religious art, and educated at Clare College, Cambridge? Born in Coventry, England to Admiral Sir William and Lady Arnwell on 12 July 1986? Sister of Sir Richard Arnwell, Commander Thomas Arnwell, and the late Major Christopher Arnwell?”

As T’Challa spoke, Thea felt progressively more uneasy that a king was accurately reciting her personal history with great detail—his intent to intimidate was very evident to her. Why did the king know all of this and for what reason was he asking her to confirm it? Richard would warn her to be exceedingly cautious, but Bucky would go even further. She was certain that he would have told her never to trust and to be prepared to defend herself against an unexpected attack. Yet… apparently Bucky trusted these people enough to bring her and Jamie to Wakanda. She would have to assume that he had already determined that she would be safe, since she knew he would never have sent for her otherwise. Thea shifted to redistribute her weight so her hip would stop throbbing, as she had been standing for far too long. “Yes, your majesty, that is quite correct.”

His expression suddenly shifted from blank and nearly bored to a warm smile, as T’Challa stated, “Excellent, Mrs Barnes. You come from a respected family with a particular devotion to public service and many honourable warriors in its history. Wakanda is pleased to offer you and your children asylum as the family of the White Wolf, Sergeant James Barnes, formerly the Winter Soldier of HYDRA.”

She understood the underlying message clearly: she was offered the protection of the Wakandan government because of an agreement between the king and her husband—of which she was not privy to the terms. Thea fiercely kept to the strict rhythm with which she had been pushing the pram back and forth to keep Jamie asleep. She did not wish her emotional state to be easily readable, especially to the royal guards that she suspected would have little compunction in harming her or her son at the king’s command. She subtly shifted her weight yet again, but admitted to herself that if she did not take her pain meds soon, then she would be unable to mask her discomfort from either the Wakandans or Bucky. Although Captain Rogers had told her that they were friendly, she did not yet know Bucky’s assessment of the Wakandan government. He had repeatedly told her that showing pain is a weakness that enemies will exploit. More practically, the Wakandans might not wish to allow a woman with her health concerns to remain, as she would be a drag on their health system. Thea took a deep, slow breath to steady herself and then replied firmly, “I am very grateful, however, I cannot accept asylum unless I understand the terms of my residence here, your majesty.” She saw the faces of the guards tighten in anger and wondered if she had somehow insulted their customs, but decided that she didn’t really care at that
moment. No matter what decision Bucky had made in her absence, she would not agree to anything that put her children in danger, nor would she agree to do anything that betrayed her own country even if Britain was not likely to support her when she was married to the man some called the world’s deadliest assassin.

His face very calm, T’Challa asked with a clearly amused tone, “Terms, Mrs. Barnes?”

Hoping that she was not saying all the wrong things, Thea tried to say what she thought Richard would advise. “Yes, your majesty. I understand that you have very kindly kept my husband here and given him medical attention that he could not have got elsewhere. I am ever so grateful for your generosity, your majesty. Yasha deserves to be treated kindly after everything, really. However, I am loyal to my own queen, your majesty and, therefore, I cannot agree to any terms of asylum that would challenge that loyalty.”

T’Challa laughed, clearly pleased. “Ah, I quite understand, Mrs Barnes. Your husband has offered his services to my country, but you are not required to do anything of the kind, madam. My people cherish families and we would not wish Sergeant Barnes to be parted from his wife and child. You are merely my guest here, madam, with no obligation. Your loyalty to your queen and country is one that my people will greatly respect.”

Thea sighed with relief. She had played that correctly then, thank goodness. “Thank you. I am glad that Yasha is welcomed here, your majesty. His unique skills should be employed by a country that would value Yasha himself more than his usefulness. I believe that we can trust you in this, your majesty, so I am grateful.”

Laughing again, T’Challa replied, “The Winter Soldier no longer exists, Mrs Barnes, but the White Wolf is indeed valued by Wakanda. I shall keep you from your reunion no longer. As a guest of the royal family, you are welcome to go anywhere that is unlocked and unguarded within the palace. There are guards who can escort you anywhere you need outside these walls. Please, Mrs Barnes, you are most welcome in my home.”

Dropping a slight curtsy as she had been strictly taught by her mother, Thea replied, “Thank you, your majesty.” The guards standing at the throne indicated that the audience was now complete, therefore Thea gripped Jamie’s pram and turned it around. She then followed the same guard that had escorted her into the throne room, who now led her out and then down a long corridor. At the end, she saw Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson waiting, who both silently joined her as she pushed the pram with both hands and tried unsuccessfully not to limp too noticeably.

“If you like, I can push Jamie, so you can use your crutches, Mrs Barnes.”

“No thank you, Captain. Yasha—I mean Bucky—will be worried enough. It is better if he doesn’t know yet that I’m having a flare right now, so I’d rather he not see me on crutches just at first.”

Steve and Sam looked at each other before Sam replied, “If you are in pain, Mrs Barnes, I think Barnes would want you to take care.”

Steve added gravely, “Buck already asked me about your health, ma’am.”

“Ah, and you told him, did you?” Thea stopped a moment and gestured exhaustedly towards them both. “Ok. Fine. I would rather he not have to see me on a gimpy day, but I suppose that can’t be helped now.” She bent and slid her crutches out from underneath the pram. As she began unfolding them, Thea continued, “It’s just that he worries so. Is he stalking across the floor and making his Winter Soldier face?”
Sam laughed. “Yep.”

As he helped Thea with her second crutch, which had collapsed slightly, Steve glared at Sam. “He is just anxious to be back with you, ma’am.”

Thea thanked Steve and leant gratefully into the crutches as he took over pushing the pram. Now dragging her right foot along slightly as she swung forwards, Thea replied, “I believe that, but Yasha’s anxiety about my safety has a worrying progression of behaviour starting at pacing and making one of his murder faces then moving to alternating between sharpening his favourite knife and cleaning his guns with firm intent, and next to repetitively making a fist with his metal arm as if he was preparing to punch a tank or whatever he thinks might endanger me. That is the point at which he gets a bit intractable regarding whatever he has decided needs to be done to protect me. I just hope he hasn’t reached the stage of doing that thing where he grips his hair and…oh he has? Oh dear.”

Sam laughed ruefully. “Definitely. I’m amazed he isn’t bald. You know your man pretty well, Mrs Barnes.”

“Oh no, is he really that panicked, Captain? You told him that they were letting me see him after my audience with the king, didn’t you? I was sure that he must trust the Wakandans or he would never have agreed to send for me.”

“Yes, he knows that you are here, ma’am. It really isn’t my place to talk about anything else.”

Thea stopped moving and said clearly, “What is wrong, Captain?”

Steve looked pointedly at Sam, who sighed loudly and walked ahead to where the guard was waiting. “Buck is worried whether you will still want to be with him.”

“Oh. Yes, all right, I suppose that I ought to have expected that.” Thea looked sadly at Steve and continued, “Of course, I do, you know. In case you are worried about that, since I know you and he are terribly close.”

“I am not worried, ma’am. I can tell that you love Bucky and I’m glad. He’s head over heels about you, which I am sure you know.”

“Thank you, yes, I do. Captain, I hope you know that you are really the only other person he trusts. He talked about you often and has told me more stories about the two of you than he did about his brothers or anyone else combined. He considered going to you multiple times when we were in hiding, but he didn’t want you to get dragged down with him. He’ll likely never tell you that, but he wanted to see you so much.”

His expression a mix of both pained and surprised, Steve replied thickly, “I’m sorry that he didn’t. I searched for him that whole time, Mrs Barnes. I need to take you to him now, ma’am. He was nearly beside himself when I saw him a half hour ago and I do not think he will have gotten any calmer since then. He needs to see you.”

“I know. That’s how Yasha is. He’s probably going to be very difficult about everything, too. Please take me to him?”

Steve nodded and gestured to Thea to go ahead. They proceeded down the corridor and joined Sam and the guard—Steve helping to push the pram and Thea slowly pulling herself along on her crutches. Finally, when they turned onto the last corridor, the guard stopped outside a doorway. Thea bent down to pick up Jamie, who was awake but still sleepy, and allowed one crutch to
dangle on her elbow so she could cuddle her son to her as she leant into the other. The doors opened and she slowly moved inside the bright white room that seemed to be filled with strange gleaming machines. Before she could look around properly, she heard a movement to her left and spun about just in time to see him move.

Bucky nearly exploded forwards. He reached Thea almost before she had any time to react. Both she and Jamie were wrapped so tightly in his arms that little Jamie began to squirm uncomfortably. Bucky felt it and pulled away to kiss his wife’s face desperately. “You are ok? How is little doll?”

Thea seemed incapable of speech as she looked up at him, drinking in his image and yet almost afraid to believe that it was really he. Finally, as tears streamed down her face, she whispered, “I didn’t think I would ever see you again.”

In the background, Steve backed away and turned to leave the room with a huge smile on his face and a glance over at Sam, who nodded and followed him out.

Unconcerned with anyone else but his wife and son, Bucky held out his hands and said gruffly, “Hey, Jamie, buddy. Come to Papa?”

The little boy seemed very uncertain of Bucky, but did not fight when Bucky picked him up. “Papa has missed you, little guy. You have grown so much. You’re a really big boy now, aren’t you?”

“Go, go, go, go, go, go, Papa.”

Bucky looked horrified and turned towards Thea, who smiled reassuringly. “No, Yasha, it’s ok. I told him we were going to Papa, so he’s been saying that since we left Malta.”

Relieved, Bucky said in a voice that wavered only slightly, “Papa has missed you every day, buddy. Did you take good care of Mummy? Did you love her lots for Papa?”

“Wup. Mmmer. Wup.”

Thea laughed. “Love. It was his seventh word.”

He kissed his son’s head and replied, “Yeah? You love Mummy? Guess what, buddy. Papa loves Mummy, too. You and Mummy are going to get to stay with Papa now. Just like before.”

“Mmmer, Mmmer. Pa gogo seeumtago. Wheeee!”

When Bucky looked at her for a translation, Thea shook her head. “Ok, I have no idea there.”

Jamie seemed quite thrilled with Bucky’s beard and was rubbing his hands along it and babbling, as Bucky looked between his son and Thea. “Are you all right, Bella? Truly?”

“I am ok, but I’m never going back to Malta. Never.”

Bucky nodded. “Ok, krasotka. The safe house served its purpose. You and Jamie were safe.”

“Safe, but not happy. Miserable really. I won’t go away like that again, Yasha. I don’t care what happens now, but I’m going to be there beside you next time. I must be. I cannot bear not even knowing what has happened to you. Promise me that you won’t ask that again?”

Pulling his son’s small fist from his beard with a wince, Bucky shook his head and drawled firmly, “If stayin’ with me would put you or the children at risk, then you can’t expect me to agree to that. I can’t do that, krasotka.”
“I won’t run away again, Yasha. I can’t. I did what you asked this time and it was nearly unbearable. Next time, I want to be there with you.”

His voice deepened, as he looked fiercely down at his wife. “I won’t promise that, Bella. Your safety comes first always.”

Thea looked up at him and said seriously with an edge she had never allowed herself to display to him before, “Don’t send me away again.”

Bucky wrapped his arm around her tightly and answered roughly, “I’m not sending you anywhere, Bella. The king has agreed to let me remain here indefinitely, as well as my family. I have volunteered to work with their forces when my particular skills are required, so we ain’t mooching or nothin’. They’ve got a place for us to stay here and everything. It won’t be like the s*** places I provided for you before. It’ll be different here, krasotka. More like what you deserve, ok?”

Thea recognised how uneasy he was and that he feared whether she would remain with him in Wakanda, but she knew that now was not the correct time to address that. Therefore, she smiled slightly and commented, “Wakanda is definitely very different. I spoke to the king. He seems very welcoming.”

Bucky nodded and shifted uncomfortably as he continued patting Jamie’s back with one hand and stroking the boy’s head with the other. “Yeah, he is. I’m going to be able to do some things for him, so I can repay his hospitality. It’ll be ok here, Bella. We can stay for a while. Steve says that they are working on a plan to fix things for other Enhanced to go back, but I don’t know that I’ll ever be included in that. I got too much mayhem and death in my past for them to forgive me too easily.”

Thea quietly replied, “I will stay wherever you are, Yasha. Do I still call you that? They all called me Mrs Barnes, so I know we aren’t using the cover story any longer.”

“Nah, they know who I am sure enough. You can call me Bucky or Yasha. Whatever you prefer is fine, Bella. We got a room here for now. Eventually, they’re gonna let us go to an apartment in the city, but not for a few weeks more. You wanna go rest and put Jamie down? It’s gotta be time for him to sleep soon.”

“He slept some on the plane and napped a bit since then, but I think he will still go down pretty quickly. Can we go there now?”

Bucky’s expression brightened considerably, as he said firmly, “Yeah. Let me get the baby’s stroller and we’ll go. You ok to walk, krasotka?”

“I’m ok.”

“But you need your meds soon, don’t you?”

Thea sighed. “Yes, I do.”

“Ok. I’ll get them for you when we get to the room, but tomorrow they want to do a body scan, ok? They’ll check the baby, but they also got some different treatments here for your RA. They told me that they can pretty much stop the progress of the disease even though they won’t be able to undo past damage as easily.”

“That sounds pretty unbelievable, Yasha.”

“Yeah, but based on the s*** that I’ve seen them pull off so far, it’s possible they can do it. Maybe
you won’t have to deal with as much pain, ok? That’s what I’m hoping for.”

Thea looked at Bucky and wondered if this was the reason why he felt the need to volunteer to work for the Wakandan government when he had sworn to her he would never again sell his services to any government again. Captain Rogers had told her that the asylum had been offered independently of Bucky’s new employment. She shook her head, resolved to find more about that later, and allowed herself to look up at Bucky. She saw that he was looking with nervous concern down at her, so she smiled sincerely and said, “I love you, Yasha.”

“I have to do my therapy that day, Bella. I can’t.”

Thea looked over at him out of the corner of her eye and asked seriously, “Would you prefer to schedule your therapy after the holy day mass or would you rather I be escorted by a Wakandan? I am quite comfortable with the guards, Yasha, but you are the one who always insists that you be the one to take me anywhere.”

“It isn’t a day of obligation, Thea. You can miss this.”

Standing up straighter, she looked over at Bucky and said coldly, “You didn’t just tell me that attending mass is not important, did you?”

“It isn’t necessary.”

“Neither are a lot of things, but you will find you miss them all the same. I will ask Bhekizizwe to take me. Don’t worry about it.” Thea quietly slipped out of the room and into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her before she dropped onto the chair by the window. She heard the door open and shut, but did not turn around. Instead she continued staring blindly out into the night as she waited for whatever Bucky was going to do or say.

“I know that it is important to you.”

Thea shrugged and shifted back towards the window. “Obviously, or else I would not have said that I intend to go. I know that you hate church, so I don’t like asking you to take me. I was trying to respect your wishes by letting you know I wanted your escort, since I know you dislike anyone but you guarding me. I think it is silly, but I am still trying to be understanding of what you think you need to do to keep me safe. It is tiresome though. I feel like you are a dog guarding a bone, but you are so intent on keeping it safe that you’re never going to do anything else but guard it. I’m a person, not a bone. Your children need more than just a guard dog, too.”

“Wakanda is not completely secure, Bella, and I’m no longer a secret known only to HYDRA. The world still believes me to be a terrorist and the murderer of King T’Chaka and the other victims of that attack. Your name is known to the world governments now, as well. I got to keep you safe, krasotka.”

Thea did not turn around, but continued staring out into the very dark sky. “Do you honestly believe that I would be at risk in the capital city of Wakanda with a palace guard escorting me, Yasha?”

Bucky frowned. “Probably not, but I can’t risk it.”

Turning in her chair to face him, Thea asked seriously, “Does my opinion matter to you?”
“Of course, it does. It is my job to keep you, Jamie, and Winnie safe, however.”

“Jamie and Winnie will be in the creche here in the palace. It is just me going. I am quite capable of attending a church here with Bhekizizwe’s help. He is always kind and thoughtful of my needs. He never walks too fast. He can get me in and out of somewhere nearly as quickly as you can. I would be fine. Quite frankly, I would be fine even without escort, but I know that the king won’t allow that.”

“Of course, he won’t. You are the wife of the Winter Soldier. If someone were to capture you, then they would have me entirely at their mercy. It would not take much surveillance of me with you to realise that I would do anything to ensure your safety. The king cannot allow a security risk like that to occur nor such a breach of hospitality.”

“I suppose. However, I am not very likely to be kidnapped in a church here inside the most secure city on earth, Yasha.”

“You do not know what is likely. Last year, no one in Wakanda would have dreamt that N’Jadaka could usurp the throne. If that can happen to the king, then what could happen to you? Why do you think they allow my children in the palace nursery? No child of European background has ever been allowed there before.”

“So, you want me to understand that my children are at high risk of kidnapping, Yasha?”

“There is nowhere safer, Bella.”

“That is not an answer. Are my children at risk here?”

Bucky wrapped his metal hand around a small statue on the table next to him and crushed it into powder as he growled, “I don’t know. The likelihood is small, but that could be said about the threat assessment that many of my victims would have made for themselves. Someone good and very determined could do it. I could have done it easily.”

“How many people could do that?”

“Like me? Two. Romanova and T’Challa himself. I trust them both at the moment. How many could get it done but without my skillset? Perhaps a dozen people. Steve—although he wouldn’t. Barton probably wouldn’t. Otherwise…Ivashutin, Stepichev, Nagy, Bamgbose, Ademola, Ishikawa, Gyeon, Muk, Famosa, and Raimos. Maybe Wowereit on a very good day.”

“You know the names of all these people?”

Bucky snorted. “Of course, I know the identities of all the top assassins. My information is not as perfect as it was 31 months ago, but I do not think that I am wrong as I have tracked several databases. There are some Enhanced that I did not include. Six in particular. They are not likely to interfere, as long as we are in Wakanda.”

Thea replied flatly, “Terrifying.”

“It should be, but you don’t sound like you mean it.”

“I suppose. I am tired, Yasha. I am going to go to sleep early.”

Frowning uneasily, Bucky asked, “Do you need some medication? Should I get the Inhibitor?”

Jerkling her head to indicate disinterest, Thea sat down on the edge of the bed.
“Bella?”

“I am not ill, Yasha. I am just tired.”

“All right. Let me take a shower and then I can join you.”

“Not necessary.”

Stricken, Bucky gripped the chair beside him far too firmly, as he gasped, “Bella. I…”

Thea looked at him intently and repeated softly, “Like I said, this is one of those things that is not necessary. There is another bed in the room where Jamie sleeps.”

Bucky nearly wrenched the back of the chair as he tried to control himself enough to reply calmly. “Krasotka, please don’t turn me away. I am sorry.”

“So am I. Goodnight, Yasha.”

Bucky stood still as he watched her, his breaths heaving and fists clenched at his side. Finally, he quietly said, “If that is what you want. Goodnight, krasotka. I love you.”

Just as he reached the door, Thea sighed. The sound of her sitting up in bed made Bucky turn around and drop his hand from the door handle. “I am not a prize to be guarded. I am a person with feelings.”

“Bella, I know you are. But you are a treasure that I must guard. You know that.”

“We are not on the run any longer. The Wakandans want us here. The king personally selected Bhekizizwe as my bodyguard. I am dutifully trying to follow every protocol that you set out for me when I first got here, but you won’t let me. I have feelings and I deserve for you to respect them. Until you can, then I really need to be allowed space.”

Bucky growled, “Space. You want us to separate?”

Thea’s expression tightened and she said angrily, “No. I simply want you to leave me alone for now because I am very disappointed in you. I don’t want you to try to cuddle up to me so you can convince me to forgive you and forget all about what I need.”

“Yes, you do. And I always let you, since I love you and I know you need me beside you. However, as I said, maybe that isn’t necessary right now.”

Bucky crossed the room and hoarsely replied, “It is. It always will be.”

“Maybe for you, yes. I have always obeyed you no matter how difficult the request, Yasha, since I trusted that you were doing everything for our safety. But you told me several weeks ago that we are as safe here as you could ever have kept me before. Therefore, I don’t understand why I may not take advantage of the freedom I currently have in Wakanda. We probably will not be here forever, so I should do what I can now. Is it so very unreasonable to expect you to follow your own rules now or to ask you to respect my feelings? Or can you not actually relinquish control enough to allow someone else to protect me for a few hours?”

“I will reschedule my therapy, Bella. Please, I will take you to church, since it is important to you. Don’t send me away, krasotka.”
“This isn’t just about mass tomorrow. This is about how we are in general. You have controlled every aspect of my life since the moment you burst into my flat. I haven’t fought you on it very often, but some things are too important to me to let go. I quite literally am following all your rules, but you keep using your veto powers to decide suddenly that something isn’t safe, therefore you refuse me permission. I cannot live like that, Yasha. It is not fair to me. Keep to your own rules and I will obey them. Arbitrarily attempt to control me and things will not go well. Good night. I will see you tomorrow morning.”

Bucky watched her silently for a whole minute and then turned on his heel. Without a word, he slipped out the door and closed it behind him.
"Sir Richard Arnwell?"

Sitting up and patting round on his bedside table for his glasses, Richard replied groggily, "Yes?"

"My name is Sebastian Crawley, sir. I'm with the embassy in Bern."

First shoving his glasses on, Richard then clicked the lamp on, as he replied, "Erm, yes, sorry, this is not a secure line."

"No need, Sir Richard, this is a private matter."

Richard looked down at the phone and saw that the number was blocked. "Hmm, sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

"Sebastian Crawley, Sir Richard. I am tasked with delivering a message to you. Are you ready to receive it, sir?"

First swinging his legs out of bed, Richard then hurried across to his desk. "Erm, yes, I suppose so. Go ahead, please."

"Right, sir. My message is actually for both you and for Commander Arnwell. It is from a Theodora Barnes. I am meant to tell you that Mrs Barnes is temporarily staying at Avenue Rosemont 14, Geneva**. After a moment the man asked, "Sir Richard? Did you need for me to repeat the address?"

Gasping, Richard stammered, "S-sorry, did you say a Th-Theodora Barnes? I don't understand."

"Yes, sir. Mrs Barnes wanted me to make certain that you knew her name was now a Mrs. James Buchanan Barnes."

He rasped harshly, "Good ***! Thea?"

"Is there a particular message that you want me to convey to Mrs Barnes?"

"Is she there? Is my sister there?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not sure what you mean."

Richard nearly shouted, "My sister, you tw*t. Theodora Arnwell. Is she actually there with you? She's alive?"

"I am very sorry, sir. Mrs Barnes made it very clear that she is Theodora Barnes and asked me to make this very clear in my message."

"All right, all right then, as you like—Mrs Barnes. Is she there?"

"No, sir. She is in Geneva, as I have said. Did you have a return message, Sir Richard?"

He tried to think, but could not find his way for a moment. Finally, Richard replied, "No, yes, yes! Please tell Mrs Barnes that Commander Arnwell and I will be there."

"Very good, Sir Richard."
"Thank you. You have no idea what this means to our family, Crawley. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir. Good evening."

Nearly an hour later, Richard had punched out his brother's number for the sixth time and this time he got an answer.

"Yeah? This had better be bl**** important, Dick, because it is three in the morning."

"Thomas! Get a bag packed. You are flying to Geneva."

"No. Now piss off, Dick. I was sleeping."

"Not anymore. Get out of bed, tell your friend to go home, and get a bag packed. Geneva. I'm going to be flying out in three hours."

Thomas groaned and swore roughly before he asked, "What is so d***ed important about going to Geneva now in the middle of the bl**** night? And I don't have anyone over, idiot. Samantha and I..."

Richard demanded, "Shut up. Sod Samantha anyway. I just got a message from the embassy in Bern. It was from a Theodora Barnes."

"Don't. Just don't, Dick. We looked for most of seven months straight. She is gone."

"No, she isn't. This is her. She is in Switzerland, Thomas."

The sound of something being tossed and then shattering made Richard grip the table in front of him miserably. Clearly, Thomas had been drinking again. "And why the f*** would our sister disappear and go live in Switzerland when she would know we have been mourning her for two years? That is not Thea. She would never do that to us."

Richard returned to packing his bag as he talked. "Well, a clue is in her married name that the embassy gave me. Mrs James Buchanan Barnes. The Winter Soldier is James Buchanan Barnes. He is a wanted fugitive along with his best friend Captain America, since they didn't sign the Sokovia Accords and they broke out a bunch of other Enhanced who didn't sign from a secret prison. Switzerland did not sign that treaty."

"Ok, now I know you've gone mad. Our sister did not run off to marry the s***ing Winter Soldier, Dick. F*** you and the miserable horse you rode in on, you horrible bastard. How dare you keep pushing this? I can't do this again. I can't."

"Well, I'll tell you what I think, Thomas. I am going to be on that plane."

There was silence for a moment and then the sound of cursing. "Are you absolutely certain that this is a legitimate lead?"

"Yes. She disappeared shortly after the whole nonsense with SHIELD/HYDRA occurred here in D.C. Now she is in Switzerland, which is one of the countries where non-signatory Enhanced Persons can reside legally."

"But a former HYDRA assassin, Dick? How desperate do we want her to be alive to have to believe that could have happened? Running off with some HYDRA operative on the very anniversary of losing Chris? Thea. Our sister. This sounds likely to you?"
Richard shook his head. He would deal with that if it came to it. "I don't know. I am not pretending to anyone that I am not pretty d***ed desperate to find her. Make your choice, Thomas, but as for me, I'll be sat on that plane to Geneva in three hours."

"Ok, ok. But if this isn't real then I will actually kill you, Dick. I can't take this anymore. You've followed every lead and half-lead and even non-lead that anyone would sell you for two years."

"Well, if this is a false lead, then I will finally give up. I didn't search this out. I got this call out of the blue. And there was no request for money."

"Not yet. However, every con out there knows that you would pay anything for a lead on our sister."

"I know. Probably true."

"The more I think about it, then I am even more struck by the ridiculousness of this."

Richard gritted his teeth. "If it is Thea, Thomas, then as much as I would be overjoyed to see her, I will also be more than furious to find out that she has allowed us to suffer all this time. She would need a truly stellar excuse."

"Yeah? Like marrying the s***ing Winter Soldier?"

"Not good enough. Would need to be even better than that. So, are you coming?"

"Of course, yeah. Because I'm a complete and utter t**, I'll be there."

"Not happening, Bella. We spoke about this and I told you no. I am not changing my mind. You are not going because it is not safe, so I will not allow it."

Thea stood up and moved to lay the baby down in her cot, standing very still as she watched Winnie carefully. After several moments, she said in an odd, flat voice, "You promised me that I could, Yasha. You said when things were safer that I could let them know I am alive."

Bucky wriggled his shoulder and rubbed furiously at his new arm, which he still hated more than he was willing to say, and replied, "It is NOT safe. How can you think that it is safe, Thea, when you would have to use Wakandan stealth technology just to get there? Switzerland is far from a safe option. It is far too open. The Swiss will not keep foreign operators from getting to you. They just won't help them. Neutrality is not safety. Wakanda offers you protection. You and the children must remain here."

Spinning on her heel, Thea looked at her husband and said succinctly, "Do not insist on me remaining, Yasha."

"Bella. I will not budge on this. You and the children are staying here."

First taking a deep shaking breath, Thea then replied, "No, we are not. I am going to fly to Switzerland with my babies to see my family tomorrow. It is finally safe enough for me to let them know that I did not die. I will not allow them to grieve further."

Bucky crossed the floor and put his hand on her arm. "And I will not allow you to take my children out of the country without me there to protect them. You cannot put yourself or them in danger. The risk is too great. This is not acceptable on any level, Theodora."
Furiously shaking him off, Thea angrily answered, "Is that so, James? I am sorry that you are unhappy about my choice, but that will not change what I have decided. I am going. The babies are going. Perhaps it is a good thing that you cannot go. I do not really need you there now like this."

Falling back several steps, Bucky stared down at his wife with an expression of horror and disbelief. "You would go back to them? You are leaving me now?"

"I want to see my brothers, Yasha. They are my family. You know how much I have missed them. You promised me that I could as soon as we were somewhere safe and now, we are. Far worse, I know that they will have been utterly distraught over losing another sibling. I cannot continue to put them through that now that it is no longer necessary. The Wakandan government has sent the message along through various channels to the British embassy, so my brothers will already be aware. I am going."

Bucky paced the floor for a moment before he looked back at her with an expression of such misery that Thea asked, "Why can you not let me do this without being unreasonable?"

"How am I supposed to be ok with you leaving me? No man would be reasonable about that. Not that you haven't had cause since the day I kidnapped you from your apartment. I figured I was on borrowed time from the beginning, but that doesn't make this any easier to take, Thea. You waited all that time in Malta. You said you were happy to be with me again when Steve brought you here. F***. I finally got you a decent place that is worthier of you than all those s***holes we were in before. You could have an actual life here. Guess that would mean if you wanted a life with me though, right?"

"You are being unnecessarily melodramatic. I am leaving the country of Wakanda. Not you. I am not leaving you."

Bucky shook his head. "Yeah, you are. F*** it. It is probably better if I go find somewhere else to be right now. I don't know how to deal with this and not make things worse."

"Yasha, I do not want to leave you. I'm not divorcing you. I am simply going to Geneva where my brothers will be able to see that I am alive just like we talked about. They can meet their nephew and niece. I will come back as soon as I have seen them."

"Ok, Bella. Make your plans. I'll return later after I take a walk or something. Gotta go clear my f***in' head before I do somethin' I will really regret."

"This doesn't have to go this way, Yasha. Don't be like this about it, please."

Bucky did not turn around, but stalked out of the room without another word.

"Something about this seems very wrong, Dick. How could the wife of the Winter Soldier possibly afford a house in this portion of Geneva?"

Richard shrugged, but did not bother to hide his own discomfort. "I don't know. I don't know about any of this. If you would rather, I could go in and if it is some sort of trap then we won't both be exposed."

"Don't be an a***hole, Dick. Best get this utter disaster over with then. Come on." Thomas hopped lightly up the stairs and pressed the bell. "If someone wanted state secrets, then they hardly needed to drag the both of us here to Geneva, did they? At worst, this is all about money."

Nodding awkwardly as he gripped his small bag, Richard looked up and down the quiet residential
street before turning sharply back towards the door as soon as they heard the sound of bolts being undone.

A petite, extraordinarily beautiful woman with quite long black hair stood in front of them and asked with an air of surprise, "Bonjour. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez, messieurs? May I help you?"

Surprised to hear such a very American accent, Richard replied, "Yes, I hope so. We were given this address to see a Theodora Barnes?"

"Oh. Ok. What are your names, please?"

"Sir Richard Arnwell and Commander Thomas Arnwell."

"Just a moment, please." The door shut in front of them, leaving both men staring at it.

"Ok, Dick, this has just got really weird. And it was already very odd."

"Yeah, hasn't it just?"

The door opened again, but this time the woman smiled more broadly and said, "I am sorry about that. I had to find the pictures to confirm your identities. I'm terrible about this security stuff and I really shouldn't be. Steve is always worrying me about it. Please come in?"

Both Richard and Thomas walked into the entry hall and waited as the woman shut and locked the five bolts and reset the digital security pad. "I should introduce myself, I'm sorry. My name is Mary-Claire Rogers. I'm a friend of Mrs Barnes or rather more like her sister-in-law, I suppose. Our husbands are more like brothers than friends. In any case, Mrs Barnes is not here. Neither of us expected you to come this quickly."

Thomas exploded with fury. "Right. Ok. This has gone on long enough. Who are you? Who precisely is Mrs Barnes? My brother might follow any and every possible lead about my sister no matter how ridiculous it is, but I'm fed up to the teeth with it. Either you know what is going on and you tell us or we leave."

Mary-Claire stepped back slightly and flushed brilliantly. "I am sorry. Did they not tell you anything? Were you not given Thea's letter at the airport?"

Richard spoke through clenched teeth, "No."

"Oh. Oh dear. Y'all were supposed to be met by some embassy people and get her letter. The embassy promised faithfully that they would do that. I don't understand what could have happened. Of course, they were supposed to let us know that you were coming, too. Would you let me call her? I could tell her to hurry back."

"So, this Mrs Barnes is meant to be our sister Theodora? That is what you expect us to believe?"

"She is your sister, Thea, yes. Oh, my goodness." Mary-Claire hurried over to a table on which a slender mobile phone had been tossed. "I'm going to call her, ok? Would you rather go in and sit down or wait here? I cannot imagine how awful this is for you."

"No. No, you cannot. I do not pretend to know who you are, but I doubt you can imagine my and my brother's situation."

Mary-Claire held the phone up to her ear and stared nervously up at both men as she waited. Finally, she stammered, "Thea? Your brothers are already here. They didn't get the letter." She
flashed a horrified look at both men before she answered, "No, no, I do not think that they do. What do…"

The phone was wrenched from her hand by Thomas, who shouted into the phone, "Look here, just who are you and what do you think you are pulling here?"

"Oh Tommy, I'm so sorry. They promised you would be given my letter so you'd know for sure it was me. I will hurry back to the house just as soon as the driver comes back round. Glenn has just now phoned him and I am sure he can get us back quickly. Oh Tommy, I'm so, so sorry."

Thomas did not reply, but handed the phone to Richard before stumbling over to the wall and leaning back against it as he wheezed with shock.

"H-hello?"

"Richard? Is that you?"

"Oh f***. F***, Thea," Richard's voice raised angrily, "How could you do this?"

"I really couldn't do otherwise. I promise you that there were truly legitimate extenuating circumstances. This is the very first opportunity that I have had to contact you safely. The driver has just come round. We will bundle in and come directly back. Will you wait there, please?"

"We will wait, but you had better have an almighty good reason for the h*ll that we have been through these two years."

"Richard, I promise. I'm so, so sorry. I love you and I've missed you terribly."

"Yeah, well, I'll wait to hear your excuses." Richard hung up the phone and handed it back to Mary-Claire.

Mary-Claire stood for a moment, looking back and forwards between the two men, before saying gently, "Perhaps you would like to come on back to the library and wait? Lucinda could get us some coffee or tea or something?"

Richard put his arm round Thomas and said harshly, "Yes, very well."

Mary-Claire turned quietly and walked towards the back of the flat before entering a large, paneled room that was filled with bookcases. She gestured towards a sofa and some chairs before pressing the speaking button on the intercom. "Lucinda, nous voudrions du thé et du café ainsi qu'un peu de gâteau et des biscuits. Les frères de Mme Barnes viennent d'arriver après un long voyage."

An elderly voice replied, "Oui, Mme Rogers. Voulez-vous que je modifie le menu pour le diner?"

"Probablement, Mme Barnes espère qu'ils resteront avec nous pendant plusieurs jours."

"Oui, Madame."

Mary-Claire turned towards both men, who had seated themselves awkwardly on the sofa, and asked seriously, "Maybe a drink? I think there is some decent scotch somewhere here, but we might have some other stuff. My cousin likes his options occasionally."

Richard nodded and replied warily, "Yeah, scotch for both of us, maybe a double for my brother."

Thomas had slumped back into the sofa and was holding his head between both hands.
"This really wasn't how this was supposed to go, but I don't mind answering any questions. If you would rather that. Or you could wait for Thea. I am very sorry."

"Has she been living with you here?"

"No. She is just visiting."

Richard frowned. "Did she know you before?"

"No. My husband Steve is Bucky's best friend."

Thomas dropped his hands and looked at her before he muttered, "S*%d it, of course, he is," then laughed bitterly.

"So, then your husband is the fugitive war criminal, Steve Rogers?"

Sharply setting down the bottle of Macallan, Mary-Claire tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as she replied sharply, "My husband is a war hero, not a war criminal, Sir Richard. You are perfectly well aware of this, I'm sure. You will not speak that way about him again."

"If your husband truly is Steve Rogers, formerly Captain America, then he is wanted for several violations of the Sokovia Accords treaty, in addition to questioning regarding the escape of HYDRA agent and war criminal, the Winter Soldier."

Shoving both drinks at Richard, Mary-Claire replied, "Oh Steve is wanted for those violations, yes, he most certainly is. Funnily enough, Sir Richard, international law does not convict a man simply because he is accused. Inconvenient, of course, for people who would rather use the court of public opinion to damage the reputations of good people that they cannot otherwise touch. Yet, thankfully for those of us tasked with working with international law and safeguarding human rights, those same people have not yet managed to make suspicion sufficient for imprisonment or conviction in most countries."

Thomas snorted. "Hard to have any other opinions when the only thing we know is that Captain America f***ed off to who knows where with his Winter Soldier buddy after they broke a dozen laws in Berlin."

"I understand that y'all don't know me, Steve, or Bucky. Perhaps you don't really have the imagination to understand what they both have gone through or the reasons why someone might be willing to break the law to keep their best friend from being unfairly imprisoned, tortured, and treated with less decency than one does a dog. Nevertheless, I don't think that y'all will want to talk that way about Bucky to Thea if you are planning to have some kind of relationship with her going forwards. She is really, really loyal to him."

Richard looked over at Thomas before he replied, "Quite frankly, Mrs Rogers, I'm not ready to be convinced that my sister has married the b**** Winter Soldier. The idea is preposterous and absurd. Thea is not the kind of girl to run off with a vicious assassin."

"The f***ing Winter Soldier, I ask you." Thomas sneered, "You must think us idiots, Mrs Rogers. If that's your actual name."

"Mary-Claire Rogers, yes, that is my name. I won't presume to rate your intelligence, but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't underestimate mine. Quite honestly, it isn't my job to convince you of anything. I am merely loaning my home to Thea, so she could meet you two in a neutral, safe location. I can understand why this is hard to believe and why you would be very upset by it. Y'all don't have to like me. However, please don't talk like that to Thea. She will not be very
understanding. You cannot imagine how dedicated to Bucky she is. She knows all his flaws and
doesn't even pretend that they aren't quite serious ones. Yet, she is so devoted to him that even
Steve was shocked. She followed him all over the saddest parts of Eastern Europe and lived in
hovels so they could keep hidden from HYDRA. She learnt Russian for him because of his
horrible flashbacks. She has had two children with him. She is wildly in love with Bucky."

Richard choked out, "Children?"

Thomas downed the entirety of his drink as he mumbled, "That isn't even the bit that surprises me,
Dick."

Looking very uncomfortable, Mary-Claire ran a well-manicured hand through her jet-black hair
before she explained, "They have two. James is 17 months. Winifred is only 2 months. Winnie is
upstairs with my sons and the nanny, since they are napping. That's why Glenn insisted they take
Jamie over to the animal park, since it isn't too cold today. I'm sure they will be back very soon."

Richard grunted and waved his hand vaguely. "Who is Glenn?"

"Oh, Glenn is my cousin. He is living with me for a bit, since Steve is not able to stay here right
now."

Thomas asked coldly, "But our sister does not live here with you? Nor the Winter Soldier?"

"It would probably be better if you referred to him as Bucky Barnes, instead of the Winter Soldier.
Thea is touchy about that. They live elsewhere."

"Where precisely?"

Mary-Claire shook her head. "Sorry. I cannot tell you." She sighed. "It is not safe for you to know."

"Safe for whom, Mrs Rogers?"

"Thea and the children, of course, but also for you. Your brother-in-law is the deadliest assassin in
the world, Sir Richard. Steve says that Bucky nearly matches him for strength and is much more
skilled with weapons and fighting. He also says that Bucky will literally do anything to protect
Thea and the children. There are still groups of people who want to capture the Winter Soldier and
use him against his will. Those are the ones you need to be most concerned about, of course. They
would not hesitate to use either of you as leverage. Trust me, you do not want anyone to know why
you are here and to whom your sister is married. Actually, you probably don't want anyone
knowing you met me either. Steve and I tried to keep everything secret, but we were outed when
the state of New York executed an illegal search of our home when I was at home. I'm not sure he
is right, but Steve at least thinks that HYDRA might think they could get to Bucky via Steve by
capturing me. I'm not sure that you want anyone knowing you came to see me therefore."

"If you are Captain America's wife, then why are you here? Seems a bit dodgy to me, honestly,
since you claim he doesn't actually live here with you."

"Commander Arnwell, I work for the UN as an international human rights attorney. I am certain
your brother can explain why Switzerland works better for me than New York City these days."

Richard sighed. "They didn't sign the Sokovia Accords, Thomas, so Rogers could visit and not risk
deporation. Same reason why it made sense to me that the Winter Soldier might be here,
remember? But he isn't, is he, Mrs Rogers?"

Mary-Claire shook her head. "No. That would be very unwise. He stayed back where he and Thea
have been living."

"Not many other places that did not sign the Sokovia Accords, Mrs Rogers."

Thomas grunted with annoyance. "Who says they have been somewhere like that, Dick? Supposedly they moved all throughout the a*se end of Europe, so they could be in s***ing Bolivia or Burma. Does it even matter? As long as the bastard isn't here, so I don't have to kill him, then I don't really care where he is. He can stay there."

"Not if Thea thinks she is going back there, Thomas."

"F*** that for bananas. Not a chance."

"Not a chance of what, Thomas? I could hear you spouting off all the way in the entry hall, you know. This isn't a very good beginning—and I do want us to be able to sort things out—but I will not have you speak poorly of Yasha."

Both Richard and Thomas stood up abruptly as they heard their sister's voice.

Thomas shouted, "Who the b****y f*** is Yasha?" Yet, Richard stumbled towards his sister and wrapped his arms round her. "It is you. I cannot believe it. Thea."

Thea hopped up and hung her arms about her brother's neck as she kissed his cheek. "I've missed you so, so much, Richard. Thank you for being willing to come. I know you must be so angry and have so many questions. I promise that I'll answer everything that I can."

Richard stepped back and said stiffly, "I won't pretend that your answers had better be very good."

"I know."

Mary-Claire laid a hand on Thea's shoulder and asked quietly, "Ok, darling?"

Thea turned and smiled slightly, "I don't know, but it is fine. Thank you. Glenn went up with Jamie."

"I'll join him then. Just call if you need something. The housekeeper is bringing in tea and cake and things."

"Thank you, Mary-Claire." Thea turned back towards her brothers and watched Thomas, who was still standing stiffly with his arms crossed over his chest. "Yasha is a Russian nickname for James. That is what I call Bucky."

His chin jutting out fiercely, Thomas pugnaciously, "I thought Bucky Barnes was meant to be an American."

"Yes, but he was a prisoner of war with Nazi Germany's HYDRA first, then he was held by the Soviet HYDRA for a very long time, then for a short while by American HYDRA. Most of his memories from his time as a captive are from the time under the Soviets. Russian is very natural to him."

"Right. So, tell us how you met your lovely former American/now Russian HYDRA assassin husband? Is there a dating app for that?"

Gripping her cane tightly in her left hand, Thea took three swift steps forwards and slapped her bother's face fiercely. "He was a prisoner of war, Thomas. He was tortured for decades. Decades,
Thomas. You cannot begin to imagine what they did to him. It does not bear thinking of. He has only told me the bits he had to and those were nearly indescribable."

Sighing deeply, Richard put his hand on Thomas' arm and said quietly, "That's enough, Thos."

***Note: This Geneva address does exist, however, it is not residential, but a commercial property.
Chapter 24

“White Wolf.”

Bucky groggily answered, “Yeah? Sorry, sorry.” He sat up halfway and asked as he peered at the screen with one eye open, “What is wrong, General?”

“You must come immediately. Something has happened in Geneva.”

“Я буду биться в их мозги, пока они не умрут!” In one rapid movement, he leapt off the bed and landed in a standing position with an enormous shout. “Is a team being sent?”

“Of course. We will leave when you arrive at the airfield.”

“Are they alive? What about Steve’s family?”

“We do not know. The house is empty. I am sorry, White Wolf.”

Bucky paused in the middle of snatching on a pair of black tactical trousers, realising from the patches and stitched-up tears they were the pair he had been wearing when he met Thea. His hands were shaking. This would not do. The Winter Soldier’s hands did not shake. Смерть врагу и я буду мечом. “Have you contacted him?”

“Not yet.”

“I will do it. Ten minutes. I need to prep my weapons.”

“Very well, White Wolf. The king will meet you there.”

Bucky growled as he shoved his head through the top of a tight black shirt. “Please tell King T’Challa that I am grateful.”

“Mrs Barnes and your two children were under the protection of the king, White Wolf. Wakanda will not let this stand.”

Это был не Ваканда, который потерпел неудачу на этой работе. As he clumsily fumbled with his tactical vest, Bucky gruffly replied, “Thank you, I am truly grateful. Nine minutes, General Okoye. Thank you.”

“You are welcome, White Wolf.”

Boots. Where were…not those. Yeah, those were better. Более функциональный. Лучшее сцепление с подошвой. Bucky pushed his feet into each boot quickly and rapidly worked to fasten them as he considered his weapons. Did he have enough blades or should he request another pair of throwing knives? Two more pairs to be safe, perhaps. Ему нравилось гладкое ощущение ножа в руке. Было так много эффективных способов принести смерть с хорошим лезвием. The pair of P226s and Thea’s P238 for good luck. And…the Intratec was secure. Они никогда не видели его маленького Интратека в руке, пока не стало слишком поздно. Skorpion strapped firmly…yes. His Barrett, of course, but was he likely to need the Milkor? He only had 10 grenades for it. Bucky shook his shoulders and jumped twice. It all felt like it would be manageable if he carried the Barrett instead of strapping it, so, sure, he could take the Milkor. Good. Взрывы были бы полезны.
His eyes swept the room and then he lunged for the tiny, folding travel icon of the Богородице and the Christ Child that Thea had bought in Minsk. His mother had always trusted in things like that, he remembered. How did it go? ‘Sub tuum praesidium confugimus…Sancta Dei Genetrix…’ He didn’t remember the rest. Maybe that would be enough. Better put that in the inner pocket or it would be crushed.

Putting his phone to his ear, Bucky charged out of the room and began running towards the airfield.

“Yeah? Bucky? What is it?”

“They took our families, Steve.”

“They…WHAT?!!”

Bucky snarled into the phone, “Steve, we will find them.”

Breathing heavily, Steve demanded, “The children?”

“The house was empty…so, they think so.”

“Do we know if…if…”

Grunting with pain at the misery in his friend’s voice, Bucky replied, “No, Steve. I know nothing more.”

“S***. Sam! Sam!! Get the quinjet going. Now!”

“You have Romanova, too?”

“Yeah, she’s running over now. Aw, s***, Bucky. This can’t be real. They got my wife and boys? I am gonna tear their f***in’ faces off. Our children, Buck. Are they sure?”

“Yeah, Steve. They seem to be. I dunno more yet, but I will. Soon.”

Bucky heard his friend make a low, feral moan that made him close his eyes for a moment, as Steve demanded with pained rawness, “Bucky…there is only one way this ends. Yes?”

Да, но не так, как ты думаете, дорогой друг. Laughing with sharp aggression, Bucky then growled, “One way, Steve. Not sure how many are coming with me, but T’Challa is helping.”


Bucky could hear Natasha’s shaken response in the background, “Forty minutes at top speed. What happened, Steve?”

Steve’s words hit Bucky like bullets, as the reality of the situation sunk in further. “They got our families.”

As Bucky approached the Wakandan jet with a nod at Princess Shuri, he said, “Let me talk to Romanova while you get ready. I’ll see you there, Steve. One way.”

“Ok. One way. Together?”

“Зимний Солдат, это я Романова.” Winter Soldier, this is Romanova.

Bucky breathed out to calm himself as he said, “Стив собирается пожертвовать собой. Не позволю ему. Пожалуйста. Стив уходит от этого, ты понимаешь?” Steve is going to sacrifice himself. Do not let him. Please. Steve walks away from this, do you understand?

He caught the hitch in Natasha’s husky voice, as she demanded, “А как насчет тебя, солдат?” And what about you, Soldier?

Bucky boarded the Wakandan jet behind Okoye with a respectful nod towards King T’Challa, as he replied, “Стив, его семья, моя жена и дети должны уйти от этого, Романова. Неважно, как это должно произойти.” Steve, his family, my wife and children have to walk away from this, Romanova. No matter how that has to happen.

There was an unexpected note of aggression in Natasha’s reply, “Тебе нужно принимать правильные решения, Солдат. Это не должно быть самоубийственной миссией. Детям нужен их отец. Или ты все еще действительно Зимний Солдат?” You need to make the right decisions, Soldier. This does not need to be a suicide mission. Children need their father. Or are you still truly the Winter Soldier?

He laid the Barrett down across two seats and leant against the bulkhead next to them. “Я не Белый Волк, Зимний Солдат или Баки Барнс, Романова. Я Яша, чья жена и дети были взяты от меня. Если они умрут, я тоже.” I’m not the White Wolf, the Winter Soldier, or Bucky Barnes, Romanova. I’m Yasha, whose wife and children have been taken from me. If they die, so will I.

It seemed that he had responded correctly, as Natasha snarled approvingly, “Люди умрут, Яша, но это не мы. Мы найдем и уничтожим этих пизд. Ты и Стив спасете своих детей, и я помогу вам принести боль и смерть каждому из этих ублюдков. People will die, Yasha, but not us. We will find and destroy these ****. You and Steve will save your children, and I will help you bring pain and death to each of these bastards.

Bucky croaked, “Спаси их. Это все, что имеет значение.” Save them. That’s all that matters.

Natasha’s voice lowered as she stated clearly, “Не для них. Увидимся там. Смерть нашим врагам, боль их друзьям.” Not to them. See you there. Death to our enemies, pain to their friends.

Surprised to hear those words again, but understanding her message, Bucky growled, “Смерть нашим врагам, боль их друзьям.” Death to our enemies, pain to their friends.

There was a sudden scuffle audible on the other line and then Steve’s panicked voice shouted, “Buck, Buck, I talked to Mary-Claire.”

Bucky punched the speaker button on the phone, so everyone else on the plane could hear as he replied, “Thank f***. Are they all ok? Where are they?”

“Thea and your children are not there. Mary-Claire hasn’t been able to find out where Thea was taken. She is sure it ain’t the government though, Buck. Nothin’ sanctioned anyway. One of her contacts found out that your brothers-in-law were being held by police for murder, but apparently one of them works for the British Diplomatic Corps and got a message sent through to them. Charges were miraculously dropped and yet they’re being expelled from the country.”

“Murder? What the f***, Steve? Do they have bodies? How is Mary-Claire there if Thea is gone?”
"'Cause she wasn’t in the house when this happened, Buck. Mary-Claire went with her cousin and
the twins to a hotel, so Thea and her brothers could have some private family time. So, she didn’t
know until I called Glenn’s phone that anything had happened. She’s calling all her contacts now
to find out anything she can. I don’t know nothin’ about the murder charges. None of this makes
sense, Bucky."

"S***. Мой член в рот шлюхе! Я покрою их напалмом и подожгу, пока они не будут плакать
и просить сладости смерти." Мy **** iн a ****. I will coat them in napalm and set them on
fire until they cry and plead for the sweetness of death.

“Ingcuka. Captain Rogers.”

Bucky turned and looked at Okoye, forcing himself to respectfully reply, “Yes, General?”

Fixing a firm glare upon Bucky, as if to say that she knew exactly what he had just muttered in
Russian, Okoye said calmly, “We have found a report of two bodies discovered not far from the
Mrs Roger’s residence. Captain Rogers, they were already identified as members of your wife’s
household staff: an elderly Swiss housekeeper named Lucinda Amstutz and a young Moldovan
nanny, Ludmila Postica. The house seems to have been thoroughly searched according to police
reports, but these documents are quite clearly inaccurate and false. It is apparent that the local
police are not to be trusted.”

Steve said succinctly, “S***.”

The phone connexion crackled slightly, garbling whatever Sam was saying to Steve in the
background, as Natasha commented slowly, “Geneva police are slow, but usually trustworthy as a
group. If the police are bending rules, they have been given believable reasons from someone
powerful. Likely someone in the Conseil d’Etat.”

Steve demanded roughly, “How do you want to do this, Buck? You tell me where you want us.
It’s your call.”

Я хочу убить их всех, Стив, что ты думаешь, я бы хотел? Bucky turned to T’Challa. “Actually,
Steve, we better let King T’Challa take the lead on this one. If it is only my family that is missing
then that makes this a Wakandan concern.”

T’Challa nodded at Bucky. “Very well, Sergeant Barnes. I am honoured by your trust, but very
pleased to have this chance to reclaim the honour of Wakanda. Your family was under my personal
protection, so I take particular… exception… to this turn of events.”

Surprise evident in his voice, Steve asked, “Do we think this is HYDRA?”

“Perhaps, Captain. I do not know. However, I think that there is a larger motive behind this, do
you not?”

Steve let out a sharp breath and, after a pause, asked, “Do you think it is time to start, your
highness? Mary-Claire says that only 70% of the plan was in place, but that it still might work.”

“Perhaps so, Captain. Now that we have the excellent news that Mrs Rogers and your children are
safe, perhaps it is time to begin.”

“I called Stark. Thought he might be able to, I don’t know, data mine or something. Got Banner
instead, which was...a shock, but he told me that whatever s*** is going on there we can worry
about later. Honestly, it sounded big, Buck, but he insisted it could wait for now. So, Banner said
they will start looking for any chatter online. Banner thought Stark was willing to come help if I
needed it. Probably that means he's going to do his own thing, Bucky, but it's Stark, so that's the usual. I haven’t updated them since I talked to Mary-Claire.”

“Yeah, he does. Mary-Claire didn’t give him all the details at first, but he was smart and confronted her. She decided to let him in on all of it. He will support it, but he doesn’t like certain parts of it.”

T’Challa solemnly replied, “I believe that Mr Stark is honourable, gentlemen, and he will put emotions aside to do the right thing.”

Flopping back against the bulkhead, Bucky sighed angrily. He hated this plan. Это будет адское страдание, даже если это сработает. He didn’t disagree with the logic that Mary-Claire Rogers had used to devise it. She was as intelligent as she was beautiful and quite devious for a pint-sized Southern belle. However, this plan involved too many moving parts. Too many ways to go wrong. Too many conspirators. Простые планы - лучшие планы. Either everyone succeeded or everyone failed, so there was an incredible risk factor. It didn’t make sense that Stark was willing to put his own freedom on the line for this, when not that long ago he’d been fine letting half his supposed team go down in flames. Ему нельзя доверять.

“I will go along with your plan, Steve, but only if we find my family. I’m sorry, but you know what I’m going to do if I don’t.”

“Buck. We will find them.”

Благословенная Богородица, я прошу вашего ходатаства от имени моих возлюбленных и моих детей. “Yeah? Well we sure f***in’ better. I will burn a strip from Geneva to Khabarovsk if I gotta seek revenge, Steve. You know that.”

T’Challa’s eyes held a mild look of surprise even as he said calmly, “Ingcuka, Wakanda stands at your side in this, in addition to Black Widow, Falcon, Captain Rogers, and apparently Mr Stark. You are not alone.”

Standing up and bowing towards T’Challa, Bucky said in still rough Xhosa, “Thank you your majesty, however, today there is no Ingcuka. The Winter Soldier is awake and planning to bring Death to save my family. I will follow your orders, but please understand what I am today.”

Okoye’s head snapped up from reading the large tablet in front of her. Also speaking in Xhosa, she threatened, “You will obey my king or you will face my wrath, Ingcuka.”

Bucky nodded and switched English with the strong Brooklyn accent of Sgt Barnes. ‘That’s just what I was sayin’, General, ma’am. The Soldier always follows orders and today I’m followin’ King T’Challa. I only want all of you to know how I’m gonna do it. There ain’t no mercy in my heart and I will bring the worst death I can manage to every one of them f***ers until I got my family out.” In the background, Bucky could hear Steve’s shocked grunt, but he kept his eyes focussed seriously on Okoye.

Satisfied, Okoye thrust the tablet towards him and waited. Bucky read it over and muttered a curse. “Well, Steve, looks like one of you needs to call Stark. He’s starting the party early. F***ing bastard’s gotta do it his own way again.”

As Steve muttered, “D***, it,” Natasha said something rude in Russian. Then, speaking up for the
first time, Sam said, “Awww, s***, Steve, didn't I tell you not to call Tony yet? D*** it. I’m gonna get shot outta the sky, aren’t I? Huh? Steve. Bad enough I’m signing up to go back to that d*** floating prison here, but I’m gonna be shot down by the f***ing Swiss, aren’t I?”

Bucky ignored Sam’s complaining and snarled, “Romanova?”

“Already tried three times, Soldat. Maybe a call from your end?”

T'Challa sighed. “Very well.”

She had no idea how long they had been there. It felt like days, but it couldn’t have been more than 12 hours. She didn’t even know if they had left the city. They’d driven the van for nearly 2 hours, but, somehow, she felt as if they had doubled back and circled around. She couldn’t be sure though. They might have made it all the way to Bern for all she knew. The men who had taken her from the house had worn plain black suits. The people removing her and the children from the van had worn full coverage white jumpsuits with hoods and goggles. Not at all ominous, of course. The building they’d put them in had no noticeable identifying marks. She had tried to find something like Bucky had taught her, but had failed miserably.

The bare room was small, dark, and very cold. Far too cold for Winnie, who had not been fed in nearly seven hours and had only just been soothed to sleep after being placed inside Thea’s jumper and held close. Jamie had been asleep for an hour, which was a relief. His terror had made him physically ill, which had further annoyed their captors. Whoever these people were, Thea did not think that they had any intention of allowing her or the children to go free. They were bait in a trap. Nothing more.

Thea was far too tired to do much beyond sit on the cement floor with Jaime in her lap and Winnie in her arms. She had exhausted her tears long ago. It was her fault that this had happened. She could not pretend otherwise. Her children were going to die because she had not listened to Bucky’s concerns about their safety. The Wakandans had seemed so certain that every precaution had been made, but Bucky had been right. He was always right about safety. Just like in Constanta when he had done what she wanted and everything went so badly. She should have trusted him. Now she wouldn’t have the chance to make that right and her babies were going to pay for her foolishness.

At least, she thought that Thomas and Richard were all right. By the time that her brothers would have realised that the interrogators taking her away from them at the police station were not security personnel, it ought to have been too late for them to do anything rash. At least she hoped so. She had not heard a struggle before she’d been bundled into the van. There was no reason for them to be killed, too. Oh, she prayed that they were safe.

Richard. When she had agreed to flee with Bucky all those months ago, she had known he would struggle with her disappearance the most of anyone. His face when she had first entered the room at the Rogers’ home would haunt her forever. Which would likely only be these next few hours probably, since Bucky had surely been told by now so the trap bait would not be needed alive for much longer. Richard had aged a decade and was so thin that she worried there might be serious long-term health consequences. That would only get worse now.

But Thomas’ raw fury had surprised her. She knew they would both be angry and hurt, but she had never expected the viciousness of Thomas’ rage. He had not even let her touch him. And now he was going to blame himself for that, which horrified her. Thomas had always felt like the sibling that had been left a bit outside the circle. He didn’t deserve this and it was all her fault. It really was.
Thea was unable to keep from sobbing aloud as her mind turned back to Bucky again. Nearly every moment since they had taken her, she’d been agonising over how terrified and miserable he must be feeling. He would kill himself trying to get to her and the babies. She knew this. He would allow the Winter Soldier to awaken and take over. He had feared becoming the Soldier again and she would be the cause of it. Yet, in the facility where they had brought her, she did not see how even her Yasha with all his super-soldier skill would be able to breech it. She had heard three sets of gates clang as the drove in. Then the van had gone down some sort of lift system.

At least she knew that Mary-Claire Rogers, her children, and her cousin were safe. It had seemed unnecessarily kind of Mary-Claire to insist on moving to a hotel for two days, so Thea and her family could have privacy. Now, Thea was so grateful that at least her stupidity had not put any further people at risk. Captain Rogers was a delightful man—dissimilar to Bucky’s description of him and yet quite the same somehow. Naturally, he would treat her differently than he did his childhood friend, but his character seemed like what Bucky had portrayed to her. At least his family was safe.

Thea closed her eyes, clutching her baby a bit tighter, and allowed herself to think of her husband. Her Yasha was so wonderful and so very complicated. She had utterly failed in her attempt to explain to her brothers why she adored him so completely. They had refused to believe that her sentiments were genuine and that Yasha was a good man.

Of course, yes, Yasha was possessive and quite controlling. His mental health was still quite poor. But he was wonderful. So clever and quick-witted that it had always been a thrill to talk with him about all the wide range of things she and he had each read. His humour was dark and rare, but devastatingly good. He was generous and thoughtful. He never failed to do whatever necessary to make her comfortable.

Most surprising, honestly, was how well he understood her. He ought not to be the sort of person who would be interested in her, nor she in him. It didn’t sound sensible at all. However, Thea knew that her love for him was only outmatched by his for her. It was impossible not to be swept away by the way her Yasha lived and breathed for her. She had only intended to meet with her brothers the once and then return to Wakanda, after which she would never have left his side again even if that kept her away from her family. It had felt so necessary to make things right to her brothers. But now, now…all she had done was bring harm to everyone she loved. Worst of all, she had sentenced Yasha and her precious babies to death.

Well. It did no good to wallow in self-pity. However long she had, then that was what would deal with. She would concentrate on making her babies as comfortable as she possibly could. And she would spend her time in constant prayer. That was purpose enough, wasn’t it? The Divine Mercy Chaplet was always soothing and simple enough to remember when she was in pain. Hopefully, they had completed all the interrogations. They had not bothered her in several hours. It had to have been clear to them that she knew nothing more than what they already knew. Whoever the traitor at the British embassy had been, they were remarkably well informed both about Yasha and about Wakanda.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Thunk. Clank.


Cradling her son as he moaned in fear, Thea tried to hum a lullaby whilst she shifted Winnie to her other arm. For a while, the sounds seemed to disappear and then, all at once, they increased dramatically. Obviously, there was some sort of confrontation going on in the building somewhere.

Her body so stiff and bruised that she could not even hope to get up, Thea tried to focus her mind on listening. The percussive bangs seemed larger. Closer. And the metallic thunking sound was irregular, but maybe louder? The clanking and gunfire seemed connected somehow, but that didn't make much sense either. There wasn't any guarantee that the altercation had anything to do with a rescue effort. Oh! Oh dear, the clanking was Captain America's shield hitting things. Yasha had brought Steve! How had Steve got back his shield? The bangs...well, her Yasha did like explosions. And the thunking sound...yes, that was him, too. He had taken the bait in their trap and come after her. Yasha had found them and was nearby! Yet, they had expected Bucky Barnes to come for his family, so, surely, they would be prepared. Thea choked back a sob as she fervently prayed that they wouldn't kill him. That her Yasha would be ok. That he would make it there to her, so the babies would be safe.

Thea brought Winnie closer and checked the baby's breathing once again. She knew it wasn't good that the baby had not wakened in several hours, not even to cry for food. No one had come in to check on them in quite some time. Not since they had dumped her back on the floor of their cell after using the blinding light and battery apparatus during the last interrogation. They must have finally decided that she had nothing left to tell them—and they were quite right, too. The pain had numbed somewhat, which Thea did not think was actually a good sign, oddly enough.

Bang. Bang. Then rapid gunfire came from more than one direction. Definitely closer. There wasn't anywhere to go or hide, nor was she capable of moving even if there had been. Thea pressed a kiss into Jamie's hair and hoped that none of her gaolers would come back to get her before Yasha and Steve made their way inside. The hatred that the older man, who had supervised the last 'interrogation', had shown towards her was terrifying in its intensity. She knew that it probably had more to do with her status as the Winter Soldier's wife than it did her personally, but the man's viciousness and his blatant loathing of her children made it clear that the reason for his hatred was less important than his willingness to act upon it. If the man believed Yasha might succeed in getting to her, he might very well decide to kill all three of them just to torture the Winter Soldier further.

As she laid on the floor and fought the wave of panic that threatened to overcome her, Thea listened to the sounds of the battle outside. When a particularly large explosion caused the floor to vibrate, Jamie began crying in terror and clinging desperately to Thea's arm. Her voice still hoarse from her last session of 'enhanced' interrogation, Thea tried to whisper just loud enough for Jamie to hear her. "It's ok, darling. All that noise is just Papa and his friends outside. Papa came to stop the bad men and bring us home."
The little boy lifted a hand to Thea's cheek and said, "Papa?"

"Yes, darling. He and Uncle Steve are stopping them right now."

"Papa." Jamie laid back down and said, "Wup Mmmer."

"Mummy loves you, too, my darling. Cuddle close, ok? Let's keep your sister warm, yeah?"

Jamie looked up at Thea and said, "Mmmer."

"Yes, darling, it's ok. I love you."

Suddenly an immense vibration shook the ground of the room they were in, which caused Jamie to scream in fear and Winnie to wake up. As she held her now squalling baby, Thea tried to keep her breaths as even as possible.

The sounds became more methodical and louder. Thunk. Thunk. Clang! Thunk. CLANG!

Thea lifted her head just as there was an enormous squealing and creaking sound at the entrance to the room. Then, the door was pulled completely off its hinge and tossed aside by a blueish-black metal arm.

Thea knew that the man advancing towards her was Bucky, yet she hardly recognised him. His body was hunched and tensed like an overwound coil as he stalked towards her. His eyes were wild, his cheeks covered in sweat and streaks of black and grey night camouflage paint, and his expression implied horrific slaughter towards anyone in his way. His hands were both streaked with blood, his hair hung wildly around his face, and his right leg was oozing from a nasty injury.

Following close behind him was Steve. If she had not met Steve in much different circumstances and also known he was Captain America, Thea would have been terrified by the man she saw. His face was devoid of any emotion other than pure rage. His longish hair was as wild as Bucky's, face diagonally marked with grey and green paint, and the front of his black uniform had been ripped by something very sharp, since she could see the sliced skin underneath. The long cut along one of his forearms and gash across one cheek were both quite fresh. He did not pause to speak, but snatched up Jamie as Bucky was picking up Thea and Winnie. Neither man spoke, but immediately turned to leave. Steve was holding his shield—in the moment, Thea noticed that it was covered with dirt and blood—so it was in front of Jamie, who was tightly held in his other arm. Bucky adjusted Thea so she could hold Winnie whilst he carried her, then allowed himself just one kiss on her forehead before he charged out of the room.

Thea was crushed so tightly to him that all the nerves that had been inflamed by the last interrogation session seemed to ignite at once. She involuntarily screamed in agony, which caused both Steve and Bucky to stop and look at her with matching expressions of horror.

As his eyes darted around them, watching their perimeter, Bucky growled thickly, "Мы не можем остановиться, Белла. Их больше. Мы должны вытащить тебя отсюда." (Can't stop, Bella. There still are more of them. Need to get you out.)

"We have to get the children to safety. Please, Yasha, don't worry about me."

Bucky glanced down at her and nodded. She watched him as he seemingly had a silent conversation with Steve. They both then ran in the direction of the continued gunfire. Following Steve into the stairwell, Bucky took the stairs at a shocking rate, as he followed his friend towards the upper levels. Whilst they continued to climb, Thea focussed on keeping conscious and forcing herself not to let Bucky know just how painful his grasp on her was.
Finally, Steve stopped and looked back at Bucky. "Ok?"

"Better take the baby. Need to have more use of my hand."

Steve stepped forwards and said softly, "Thea, may I take her?"

Thea shook her head. "She's not doing well. It was very cold and they never gave us anything to drink."

She saw Steve glance at Bucky and then reply, "I gotta take her, ok? You're gonna need to hold onto Buck with both hands, so he can use a gun. You can't do that if you're holdin' onto Winnie. Lemme take her, Thea. I promise that I'll keep them both safe."

Looking up at Bucky, who was alternating his gaze between the stairs above and below, she saw the ravages of extraordinary emotion. She suddenly realised that the only thing keeping him from insanity was his Winter Soldier persona. If she forced him to become more like Bucky or, worse, like Yasha…then he might be unable to complete the mission. "Ok. She's very weak. Please."

"I'll keep her safe, Thea. I swear it." Steve gently took the bundled-up jumper that contained Winnie and laid her on top of Jamie and rolled them towards his chest.

"Как в Констанце, Белла." (Just like in Constanta, Bella.) She forced her arms to move and tried to wrap them around his neck. If they had very far to go, then she wouldn't be able to maintain the hold. Bucky rapidly pulled from his back the Skorpion that she remembered him constantly tending during their time on the run. "GO!"

Steve burst out through the door and ran so fast that Thea wondered if even Bucky could keep up. She screamed as Bucky began spraying gunfire to cover Steve, but when he started running, she realised that he was moving just as fast. Yet, as he ran, he turned and moved his weapon around to aim in multiple directions. Somehow, he managed to slide in a new clip before he released the Skorpion and began shooting with another weapon that Thea had not even seen him pull out. The sound was deafening and the pain in her body so overwhelming that Thea realised she was going to lose consciousness soon. Therefore, she shoved her right arm into the sleeveless side of his tactical vest and her left through one of the straps, then whispered, "I'm sorry, Yasha."

As soon as she awakened, Thea knew that she was not where she expected to be. This was not Wakanda: the smells and sounds were all wrong. But she was in a hospital bed, she was sure of that. It was better if they did not know she was awake until she at least had found her bearings. Yasha was not there. He would have known the instant she breathed differently that she was no longer asleep. Had they captured him? Was he…was he…no. No. And her babies? Oh, heavens above, if only her babies were safe somewhere. If they were not, then she would do whatever she needed to do to take revenge on whoever these people were.

"Но, добрый витязь, день проходит, а нужен для тебя покой."**

Waves of panic washing over her, Thea lay still for several more moments, trying to decipher what she was hearing. She knew it was Russian, but the voice was female. Her comprehension was not bad usually, but Thea was finding it difficult to understand for some reason. She could feel that she was on very heavy pain medication and her brain was too slow. Had they made it out safely? Was she now with some other group? If it was someone from HYDRA, Thea didn't think they would be speaking so pleasantly. Almost as if to a child….oh! Oh, she knew that little snuffling sound! That was her boy!
She opened her eyes and saw a petite woman with bleached blond hair reading to Jamie, who appeared enthralled. The woman tapped the tablet screen and, without looking up, said calmly, "Ruslan and Ludmilla. It seemed appropriate."

Thea tried to remember both who Ruslan was—she was sure Yasha had read her that story—and who this woman might be.

"Natalia Romanova, I work with Steve Rogers. Rogers and Barnes are down the hall. Rogers is awake, but your husband is still sedated. Your daughter is doing very well. They have her in a paediatric unit. She should be released tomorrow with no lasting effects. Your brothers are safe and suffered no injuries. Rogers' wife and children are also perfectly fine."

"Mmmer."

Both Natasha and Thea looked down at Jamie, who was reaching out with grabbing fists for Thea. Natasha lifted Jamie up and settled him on the very edge of the bed with her hand at his back. "Just for a moment, little Yashka. Your mother is still getting better."

"Mmmer! Mmmer! Wup Mmmer. No seep, Mmmer." As she laid her hand on Jamie's head, he asked, "Papa?"

Thea kissed his head and said as calmly as possible, "I love you too, darling. I won't sleep right now, no. Your Papa is just fine. He's with Uncle Steve. They stopped the bad men, didn't they?"

"Mmmer owieowie."

"Yes, darling, the bad men gave me owies, but they're so much better now, aren't they? Were you enjoying the story Miss Romanova was telling you?"

Jamie looked up at Natasha and considered for a moment before he declared, "Ho'sho."

Natasha smiled brightly and replied, "Да, это хорошая история, умный мальчик." (Yes, it is a good story, clever boy.)

Jamie laid down next to Thea and put his head on her arm. "Seep?"

"Yes, darling, you may sleep next to Mummy if you would like." Thea looked at Natasha and asked quietly, "How long have I been here and where precisely is here?"

"You are in Geneva under private home care. They placed you in an induced coma for several days, but you've been out longer than that. It has been eight days."

"Oh! Eight days! I cannot imagine how Yasha must be doing."

Natasha made a wry expression, as she answered, "As well as you think he is doing. Your brothers have asked to be notified when you did wake. Would you like me to do so?"

"My brothers are still here in Geneva?"


Thea's attention shifted immediately to her son. "No, darling, I won't sleep for a little bit, but you can rest right next to Mummy. It is perfectly safe."

"Papa zuhdo'ow?"
"Yes, darling, he is safe, too. You may see him later."

"Ya seeshash seep."

Natasha replied to him, "Да, Яшка, сейчас безопасно спать. Мама не спит, а папа увидится позже." (Yes, Yashka, it is safe to sleep now. Mama is awake and Papa will see you later.)

As she saw her son’s eyes drooping heavily, Thea said in slow Russian, "Мама и папа любят тебя. Сестренка любит тебя. Теперь безопасно." (Mummy and Papa love you. Sestrenka loves you. It is safe now.)

She looked back at Natasha and said, "It is always Yasha who speaks in Russian with him. We decided Russian for him and English for me. It helped my comprehension too, since I had to know what Yasha was saying. But I always worried that Jamie would speak in a Russian-English hybrid, but that is the first time that he has done so."

"He will get his balance back. He has been through a lot."

"Yes, he has. He was separated from Yasha for months when Yasha was in cryostasis and we were in the safe house. He was so attached to Yasha before and when we were in Wakanda he was just barely at the point of feeling safe and close to Yasha again. Now only a few months later, my son was kidnapped and then left alone with a stranger during my torture sessions. And now that we are here, the only person that has always been there to sooth him—me—is in a coma for eight days. I think 'a lot' is an understatement."

Natasha blinked slowly as she replied emotionlessly, "I agree. However, he will be back with you now and he can see your husband again soon. You cannot have expected a guarantee of anything as the wife of an international fugitive."

"No, of course I did not, but this would not have happened if I had listened to Yasha and stayed with him instead of trusting Steve and the Wakandans that I could safely visit Switzerland. He has kept us safe so far. I put my child in danger needlessly by taking them out of Wakanda without Yasha to protect us. I won't make that mistake again."

Nodding with agreement, Natasha added dispassionately, "I'm not sure even Barnes could have stopped this if he had been there, but you are right that it was a foolish risk to have taken. I understand why you did, but the people who took you used your sentiment towards your family as a weapon against you and—through you—Barnes. They will use your children as a trap, as well, if they can. They do not care about you or your feelings except for how they can be a tool to further their agenda. I know this because I was trained to think like they were, just like Barnes was."

"I know. Yasha told me about you, actually. He remembers you from his time in HYDRA captivity, as well."

Natasha looked at her oddly, "Does he?"

"Yes, he definitely remembers. He says that you would make an excellent ally and that he is pleased that you have been the one watching Steve's back on your rogue missions, since he cannot."

Her face still registering slight surprise, Natasha replied gravely, "That is very interesting. They have a complicated relationship."

Thea's voice was very quiet, as she replied very emotionally, "Oh, yes. Yasha would not have been able to break through his conditioning if it had not been for Steve. He has talked about that day
multiple times." Her anger evident in her words, Thea continued, "I…I am very glad that the people who trained him are all dead. And the people who handled him in DC. And that Pierce bastard. I am very, very glad he is gone. And Rumlow. Oh, I am so incredibly glad that Rumlow got what he deserved."

Her voice was quite sharp as Natasha asked, "Rumlow handled Barnes?"

"No. They worked privately on a mission together. He was horrible to Yasha. Genuinely, he deserved a terrible fate."

Natasha spoke with perfect equanimity, yet her scepticism was clear to Thea. "We did not have any intel that the Winter Soldier worked independently with Rumlow."

"No, probably not, but based on what he did to Yasha, Rumlow was a shocking sadist."

Natasha sighed. "I worked with some like that. HYDRA doesn't appeal to the gentle and kind, unfortunately."

"Well, I hate them. I hate them so much."

Shrugging slightly, Natasha answered a little disdainfully, "I don't have the luxury of hate right now. When they are no longer a threat then I will allow myself emotions about it. They are not our only enemies either. The people who took you were not HYDRA."

"I know. They laughed when I asked them that. They said they were trying to bring a monster to justice and put a dangerous threat under lock and key. They meant Yasha and Steve, you know."

"Interesting phrasing."

Thea looked intently at Natasha, as she explained, "Yes, I thought so, which is why I made sure to remember it. The older man, who watched my last torture session, asked only three questions. Did I know that my husband had killed mothers and children just like me and my babies? Did I understand that by harbouring a terrorist I had made it possible for them to put me in the prison on Guantanamo Bay? Did I understand that unless I cooperated I would never be allowed to keep my children, since they were only half-human and I had allowed them to be raised in the presence of a known HYDRA terrorist and assassin?"

"Half-human. That is the first that I have heard of Ross attempting to define the Enhanced as fully nonhuman."

"Ross? Is that his name? Thank you. I will remember that."

Natasha nodded with approval at Thea's attitude. "He is the Secretary of State."

"Not for long, I think."

Shrugging noncommittally, Natasha almost smiled. "Perhaps."

"One of the men who had come with Ross later had a long conversation with one of my torturers. He spoke in Spanish with a strong Salvadoran accent, since apparently they don't have any capability for intel and don't know that I was an art historian at the Prado."

Natasha now laughed. "Priceless. What did you hear?"

Apologetically, but quite firmly, Thea said, "I would prefer to tell Yasha first. I hope you don't
mind. I hope that I can trust you, but I don't know you."

"Certainly. If you were my partner, I'd be quite displeased if you trusted someone on face value. I am sure Barnes will agree. He is more Winter Soldier than James Barnes right now than he was at the Berlin airport. Rogers and Wilson seem to think that interacting with you will help him adjust. However, right now I think that you should expect that he will be the most hypervigilant and paranoid that you have ever seen him. I suspect you are familiar with that part of him."

Her eyes narrowed, Thea replied pointedly, "Very much so. He broke into my flat to force me to help him and then kidnapped me to protect me from HYDRA. Then when we were hiding in the nastiest, most squalid abandoned building possible, he killed three men who were threatening my safety after one of them suggested raping me. After that, whilst he had me stashed in a ruddy mausoleum, he killed a HYDRA agent who had recognised him and put the body in the boot of the car he stole. We drove hours in that car before I even knew that. That was in my first 72 hours with him. I know the Winter Soldier very well."

Natasha was regarding her appraisingly, as she stated, "And you married him."

"Of course, I did."

"Interesting."

Thea's expression flattened, as she replied dismissively, "Not particularly. People fall in love and marry every day. Are you sure Yasha is still sedated? I'm awfully tired, so I cannot be certain how long I will be able to stay awake. You know he burns through medicine rather quickly."

"Normal meds, yes. This is a Wakandan drug."

"Oh. Well, that is different, isn't it? We aren't going to be able to go back there, are we?"

Natasha replied gravely, "No. Well, technically you are on Wakandan soil at the moment, but you cannot return now. They have begun to implement the plan."

"I thought as much when I saw Stark outside the compound. That made sense, since there seemed no other way for Steve to have his shield back. Quite frankly, I hate this plan."

Natasha nodded. "It is very cleverly designed, but I don't relish what is coming much, no. Mary-Claire Rogers has my respect for her strategic skill, however."

"Is there any way to be sure that Yasha isn't awake?"

"The most obvious one. He is not in here."

Thea nodded in recognition of the obvious validity of Natasha's assessment. "Could I see Steve then, please?"

Natasha tilted her head. "If you like. It might be a moment, as he is technically a prisoner."

Thea fought to keep her eyes open. "I will try to stay awake."

Chapter End Notes
** That line is from Alexander Pushkin's poem, "Ruslan and Ludmila". The poem is about how the hero, Ruslan, must save his beloved bride, Ludmila, after she is kidnapped by an evil wizard, Chernomor.

FYI: Here Bucky is probably 80% Winter Soldier, 10% Yasha, and 10% Sgt Barnes of the Howling Commandos. On the other hand, the Winter Soldier did not go into combat here with Captain America. Technically, yes, but not in reality. This was Steve Rogers as he once was: a quick-to-brawl Irish kid from the same poverty-stricken Brooklyn tenement as his childhood best friend Sgt Barnes. Between the Winter Soldier and Steve Rogers, the lethality against their foes on this mission was intense. In the next chapters, you will see how both Winter Soldier/Yasha and Steve deal with that experience.

As for the Russian-English hybrid that Jamie is speaking, the Russian words are pronounced as any toddler might: missing letters and a few sounds. For example: ya seeshash seep is я сейчас sleep (correctly pronounced Ya syechas sleep, a hybrid sentence) Source: my own son's wonky attempts at hybrid speech at this age. :-)}
When next she awakened, Steve was sitting on the chair next to her. She could see that he had not slept and was emotionally unwell, but at least he appeared to have no injuries.

“Did Natalia take Jamie with her?”

Steve looked up sharply and replied, “Yeah, Natasha and Sam are only on monitored house arrest, so they can move around more freely. Buck and I are a different story. How are you feeling, Thea?”

She sighed. “Horrid. But so grateful. Thank you, Steve. I really thought that my babies were going to die there in that awful place. Natalia said that Winnie is in a paediatric unit? Is she truly well?”

“Actually, they brought her home this morning, but she has her own nurse here. I am sure they can bring her to you later when she is awake.”

“There really won’t be any lasting health concerns? Is she like Jamie?”

Steve looked seriously at her and replied, “It seems like she is. The first MRI of her head was devastating, which was why the physician who first treated her said there was less than a 10% chance. Not even 24 hours later, he adjusted that to a 60% chance after her second MRI, which was nearly perfect. The hospital was far too excited about her unusual recovery, so we’ve had to implement a variety of distractions. Mary-Claire told the neurologist that she had been doing novenas to St Philomena, which is quite true by the way. Some of them may accept that and just think of us as some of those weird super-religious Catholics. T’Challa has purposefully been very dismissive of any discussion that Winnie’s healing ability was due to anything other than having been born in Wakanda. Naturally, Ross has been there, and he’s much too interested. That is when Stark decided he wanted to take a turn, so somehow the initial information in the system has been changed. Her initial MRI now looks quite different with an apparent glitch having switched her MRI for that of a baby that died the week before.”

Thea struggled to sit up as she exclaimed with primal fury, “Ross was near my baby?! Did he touch her? Tell me that he did not put even one finger on my child, Steve.”

Steve reached out and put a hand on her arm. “He did not touch her, Thea. I swear it. T’Challa knows about Ross, so he made certain he was there when Ross visited the hospital. Bucky asked the same question and T’Challa assured him that Ross was not even allowed into the ward to see Winnie.”

Settling back into the cushion, Thea took several moments to calm herself as she quietly cried. Finally, she said, “I’m sorry. Would you pass me a tissue, please?”

Steve gently pressed a tissue into her hand. “I have seen Winnie today and she is healthy. No marks or scars. She is breathing normally and, apparently, she is eating extremely well for a girl her age. The nurse told me that she is responding to stimuli perfectly normally, too. She is going to be absolutely fine, Thea.”

“Right. Ok. Thank you.”

“Of course.”
“You know, Winnie was not assured of having inherited Yasha’s regenerating abilities, Steve. It did not seem as if Jamie had before he got ill either. Yet, I asked St Philomena the Wonder-Worker to pray for Jamie when he had the acanthamoeba infection. According to Yasha, HYDRA had done quite a range of research, which determined that there was no way for any Enhanced properties to be passed on genetically, but I hoped that perhaps G-d might allow it and work a miracle. Mary-Claire knows about that, which is probably why she chose a novena to St Philomena, too. She told me that your children did not seem to have any of your healing ability at birth, which was why you had to do the transfusion when they were born so premature, and that there are apparent no residual abilities beyond their size and superb health. So, perhaps the scientists are right about inheritability and both my children were saved through St Philomena’s intercession.”

Steve nodded gravely and then sat down again. “That might be true, Thea; I don’t know. Mary-Claire certainly believes so. Yet, we need to be very careful about this. If Enhanced persons can pass on their abilities genetically, that puts us and our families at much greater risk. We need to play down the whole thing if possible. Anyway, you can feel safe about Winnie. She really is doing well.”

“Thank you, Steve. I will never forget that you saved her and Jamie. A few hours later, then Winnie would not have made it. And you carried them both through gunfire behind your shield, which meant you couldn’t move it to defend yourself or throw it to stop any attackers.”

“Thea, I would have done anything to save either of the children. Anything.”

“I know. I just want you to know that although you are Yasha’s his best friend, his brother, that I hope you will allow me to consider you family now, too.”

Steve’s unusually grey complexion reddened somewhat and he looked quizzically at her. “Thank you. I would be honoured if you felt that way. However, it was partly my fault that this happened, Thea. I believed that I had a better level of protection on my family than I actually did. We thought that we had put sufficient safeguards into place to keep my wife and children safe and that these would be enough that you could visit with little risk, too. We were wrong and that error nearly cost you and the children your lives.”

As distraught as she still was, Thea could see Steve’s misery and made herself smile at him with compassion. She needed to be sure he did not continue to blame himself, which Bucky had told her that Steve was very prone to doing. “No, Steve, the choice to come despite Yasha’s objections was mine alone. He correctly assessed the danger. I thought he was being jealous. Well, he was, but that was not his main motivation. Yasha is able to dispassionately analyse a situation even when his emotions are very unstable—he just temporarily puts all that aside somehow to make his assessment. Unfortunately, I could not completely remove sentiment, so I ignored the niggles of concern that contacting my brothers might alert the wrong people. My mistake, not Yasha’s and definitely not yours, endangered my family and then everyone who had to come and rescue us. I have to live with that decision and I think it will always haunt me. You saved us, despite the risk to yourself. I am sure you wanted to protect your own family, but instead you came to rescue mine.”

Getting up from the chair with a jolt, Steve stood very stiffly beside her bed. His fists so tightly fisted at his side that his fingers were white, he took a few moments to calm his breathing. Finally, he replied, “Of course, I came after you. Bucky’s family is mine, too. He would have died in the attempt to get you, Thea. As it was, he and I barely made it out even with the Wakandans on the outer perimeter, Sam and Natasha working the edge of the inside, and Stark flying around causing his usual chaos. With only the Wakandans and Bucky, none of you would have gotten out. I will not lose Bucky again, so I’ll do whatever it takes. That is just how it will always be with me. I
don’t know why she is so understanding and forgiving of that, but Mary-Claire knows and seems to understand our bond somehow.”

Despite her desperate thoughts of Bucky nearly overwhelming her, Thea curbed her impatience enough to do what Bucky would want her to do. He would want Steve to be ok, so she would do her part. Accordingly, Thea forced herself to smile kindly and reply very gently, “Steve. Do you think that anything else in the world but seeing you could have saved Bucky from his programming? Nothing else that happened all those years managed to do that. Yet, after decades as the Winter Soldier, simply interacting with you was enough. Do you understand how little he remembered about himself then? He only knew you, but nothing else. When he left on this rescue mission, do you think he wasn’t ready to die to protect you if necessary—even if that meant leaving me a widow and the babies orphaned? He would never admit it even if I were to ask him, but I am very sure he knew it was very likely to come to that. If the people Yasha loves are not safe, then he isn’t either. It is ok to want to protect your brother after having lost him once before. Your friendship and brotherhood came long before you and he had families.”

Steve huffed out an embarrassed, yet relieved breath. “Yeah. Yeah. That sounds like Buck. When we formed the Howling Commandos, he’d just been captured and experimented on and was suffering, but he never said a word. He simply followed me around Europe, bossing around the other Howlies who saw I was a complete greenhorn, and always making sure that I was safe. Always that I was safe no matter what that meant for him—a few times even sneaking his rations into my bag until I caught him at it.”

Thea reached out her hand and waited until Steve lightly took it. “Steve, that is how he is. That is how Yasha…Bucky…demonstrates love. He needs to protect what is important to him and destroy anything that threatens it. That once meant beating up jerks who were fighting you in an alley. Or laying on the floor next to your bed when you were sick, so your mother could go to work. Then it meant working extra hard in sniper school, since they told him he could better protect his fellow soldiers that way. Then it meant making sure the other soldiers followed your lead and worked together, so you could do what you did best: make the right plan and then jump into the breech. And, of course, it always meant making certain you didn’t die. That is Bucky to you and Yasha to me, but it is who he is at his core.”

His expression miserable and his eyes blazing, Steve muttered, “I don’t deserve that loyalty and devotion. Never did. Buck has always been the one who was special.” He stepped away and leant against the wall of the small room. “Never understood why he wasted his time being friends with a dumb punk like me, but I loved him for it. His mother once told me that she knew the moment that she first saw us together that our lives would be intertwined. She had no clue how right she was.”

“No, no one could have predicted your futures. One of the few things that used to be able to change things around when he was having a bad day—before the babies were born, I mean—was talking about the two of you as kids. He liked talking about the silly things you two did or trouble that you two caused. Those were some of the only times I ever heard him laugh. He still cannot remember his maternal grandmother’s name—the fact of which he agonises over still because he remembers how much she loved him—but he could tell me every detail about the first time you two went to Ebin’ Field, was it?”

“Ebbets, oh yeah, that was an amazing day. July 2nd, 1938. He bought the tickets for my birthday and I was a real jerk about that. Felt he should use all that money on himself or something. I didn’t get it then, you know, but I do now. We had a great day even though the Dodgers ended up losing to the Giants. Freddie Fitzsimmons pitched. He remembers that?”

“He remembers quite a lot about those days if it has to do with you. The other details are less
“Well, most of our childhood was spent at each other’s side, so that isn’t so odd really. His grandmother was Aibhlinn, but she was usually called Evie. Maybe you can guide him to remember it.”

“Thank you. He needs to remember on his own, but perhaps I can direct him with the right questions now that I know. It would hurt him to know that you feel guilty about how he always protects you, Steve. He would feel like you didn’t trust him and that you were rejecting his friendship.”

“S***!” Immediately, Steve looked contrite and embarrassed as he stammered, “Sorry. Sorry, I wasn’t thinkin’.”

Thea shook her head and replied, “I am married to James Barnes, Steve. I hear that word and worse from him a dozen times in a day.”

Oddly that made Steve smile reminiscently, but then his expression dropped again as he said, “I just meant, well, I don’t want him to think I could ever reject him—no matter what happens. I trust Bucky, although before his programming was deactivated, I knew I couldn’t trust the Winter Soldier. That wasn’t him though.”

Thea tilted her head and answered cautiously, “Not then. He isn’t really just your old Bucky either though, Steve. He’s become part Bucky, part Winter Soldier, and part someone new. I’m sure Steve Rogers is not the same guy who went into the ice.”

Surprised, Steve laughed bitterly. “No one but you, Mary-Claire, Sam, and Buck seem to get that. The rest of the world seems to think that I’m actually a cardboard hero, Captain America, with corresponding stereotypical, outdated views and desires. I don’t know who they think all the guys fighting in the war were, but we were just kids like the soldiers are now. We did stupid things, got drunk, played cards, complained about our commanders, talked about girls, dreamt about girls, tried to find girls, and did whatever we could to find normalcy in the midst of h*ll.”

“I believe that.” Thea paused for a moment as she thought about Bucky and how it had mattered to him to know about Christopher. She knew about Mary-Claire’s brother, Riley, too. Finally, she decided to say more, as Steve had to know that there were more people who could empathise with the reality of veterans no matter which war. “My grandfather and father were officers in the Royal Navy, as is my brother Thomas. My brother Christopher, however, chose the Army. He used to write me emails as often as he had access to a computer. They were silly emails, angry emails, emails where he clearly had drunk a few too many, loving emails about his fiancée before she broke it off, miserable ones after she did, emails about how he felt after some of the horrid things he saw, and, finally, a letter explaining why he did what he did. War is awful and rough and no one who goes comes back the same. If they are lucky enough to come back at all. It doesn’t matter which war, Steve.”

Steve looked at her with sympathetic understanding. “No, it doesn’t. I am sorry about your brother, Thea. They say it gets easier with time and maybe they are right. Mary-Claire seems to feel that she has some hope of healing now that it’s been four years since Riley died. Perhaps I just haven’t been awake long enough to get to that point. I really hope that you do.”

Thea shook her head. “It is hard to imagine it, but I suppose anything is possible. I know you lost more, since your whole world is gone, but please don’t think that you have to pretend to the people you trust that you are alright.”
“Yeah, there have been times when I handled it remarkably poorly. I am doing better now though. Knowing Bucky was alive was the start of finding a purpose again. Then falling in love with Mary-Claire gave me an actual reason to want to live. However, I do have to keep the façade up, Thea. Captain America is something bigger than me and it is a responsibility that I was given. I laid that mantle down when I felt that I had lost the right to wear it. But Stark has asked me to carry on, so I will do it again. That means that I got to live up to the ideal.”

“That isn’t right, Steve. You are a man, not a myth.”

“Buck and I are physically 70 years younger than the guys born when we were. We can’t be a part of the current generation of people our physical age. Not sure where Bucky or I fit in—he is the only other person on Earth who shares the same predicament. For me, the expectations laid on me shift depending on who I’m talking to. Anyway, the younger people now just see World War II vets as nice, elderly men, most of whom married and have grandchildren. Those same guys would have whistled at Rita Hayworth during a USO show, got drunk on every leave pass, and bet on cards like half the other soldiers I knew.”

“That doesn’t sound like you though.”

“No, that wasn’t my thing, but when I wasn’t in uniform, I could blister the paint of the side of a barn with my language whenever Buck and I were together. We were not saints. Buck loved cards, but he was very straight and narrow otherwise. He was strict with the other guys about getting drunk or if he saw any soldier catcalling a girl.”

“That sounds like Yasha. He has a desperately serious nature even though he has such a wonderful sense of humour.”

Surprised by her understanding, Steve smiled. “He does. No one has ever made me laugh like Bucky.”

“I’ve been awfully patient about asking, Steve, but I need to know. When will I get to see him?”

“Huh. Well…you see, that is under negotiation still as we speak. He is awake and under very heavy restraint. We were visited by a UN delegation just this morning and, now that he is healed, they insisted on restraints that are electronically monitored by their people. They weren’t happy about me being allowed to remain in a cell unrestrained, but they had no paperwork to force the issue like they did with Buck. I only came down here ten minutes before you awoke. They’re giving me an hour with you. That was Bucky’s condition for not breaking the restraints, which frankly I think he could still easily do in the state he’s in. I would estimate he is still more Winter Soldier than your Yasha at the moment.”

“Oh, so you realised that?”

“That I was fighting alongside the Winter Soldier to rescue you? Definitely. I know Bucky and I’ve met the Winter Soldier.”

“I need to see him, Steve. I need to see my daughter and I need to see my husband. I’d like Jamie with me, too, but I’ve been able to hold him and see that he really is ok. I have to see Yasha even if that means you take me down there and I talk to him in whatever restraints he is in. I don’t care. If one of you do not bring him to me or take me down there, then you will need to sedate me because I will get out of the bed, tear all these tubes out, and crawl down there.”

Steve’s eyebrows were raised nearly to his hairline as he watched her and then replied in awe, “I think we will figure something out and soon, Thea.”
“Very soon, Steve. Please.”

The smell changed abruptly as the wheelchair carrying Thea was pushed around the corner and into another corridor. She pressed Winnie to her chest and tried to focus on the fact that she was going to see her husband and not on the reason she could smell ozone, blood, and sweat before she even got to enter the room.

The door was opened and she could immediately see the two holding cells in which Steve and Bucky were being kept. Steve was standing and staring furiously at the guard, who was facing him with a nasty grin. Bucky was seated on a bench with both arms fiercely restrained at his side, his head immobilised, and his legs held firmly down with one large bar. Furthermore, there was a muzzle over his mouth.

Immediately, the woman pushing Thea’s chair demanded, “Nkosana! What is the meaning of this outrage? Why is Ingcuka being held thus? The king himself ordered mercy and respect.”

“The UN man told me that I should restrain the Winter Soldier like the animal he truly is. That is just what I am doing, Thandiwe.”

The nurse made a sound of anger and frustration. “You are a fool, Nkosana. Your loyalty is to our king, not the UN.” She looked down at Thea, who was sobbing as she stared at Bucky, and asked, “Mrs Barnes, ma’am, will you be quite alright if I leave you here?”

“Yes, thank you, Thandiwe. I am perfectly alright. Will I be allowed the full hour still?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Thea tried to smile as she looked at Bucky and, after a side glance at the guard, began to speak slowly in Russian as she held Winnie up for Bucky to see. “Я привел нашу дочь, чтобы ты могли видеть, что она сейчас здорова.” I brought our daughter so you could see that she is healthy now.

The guard demanded, “Hey! You must speak so I can understand.”

Steve growled, “She is just showing their baby to her husband, you creep.”

“How do I know that she isn’t planning something?”

“Perhaps the fact that she is holding her child and sitting in a wheelchair with an IV pole beside her would clue you in, huh, buster?”

“You don’t get to talk to me like that. You’re a fugitive and a criminal now, not the almighty Captain America anymore.”

Thea said very quietly, “Please. I am just talking to my husband. He is more comfortable conversing in Russian. Why may I not speak to him how he will understand me best? Wouldn’t your wife speak to you in Xhosa, sir?”

“My wife would not have to speak to me in a gaol cell.”

“I am sure you are right, but my husband is in a cell and I want to talk to him. Please allow us some privacy and the ability to speak in his most comfortable language.”

“I thought he was supposed to be an American, huh?”

“Of course, but he was a prisoner under Soviet control for decades.”
“Hmph. Very well, but no reaching into the cell and speak slowly. Everything is being recorded.”

“I do not mind. We are only talking of our daughter.” Thea looked back towards Bucky and was horrified to see a tear had rolled down his cheek as he watched her talk to the guard. She blew him a kiss and smiled lovingly at him and then took a deep breath. It was time. She had to say everything quite correct and not deviate from what she and Natasha had devised. “Я люблю тебя, Яша. Я надеюсь, что вы знаете как полностью и совершенно я люблю тебя. Мне жаль, что я уехал в Швейцарию, чтобы навестить свою семью. Я должен был выслушать вас, что это не безопасно. Я не знал, что Росс отправит своих людей схватить меня и детей, убить няню и экономку Стива, а затем пытать меня за информацию о вас. Я должен был знать, что он будет настолько безжалостен, убивая даже Натали и Сэма об условиях в тюрьме РАФТ, что он тайно бежит.”

I love you, Yasha. I hope you know how totally and completely I love you. I am so sorry that I left and went to Switzerland to visit my family. I should have listened to you that it was not safe. I did not know that Ross would send his people to capture me and the children, kill Steve’s nanny and housekeeper, and then torture me for information about you. I should have known that he would be so ruthless after hearing from Natalia and Sam about the conditions on the RAFT prison that he secretly runs.

So far, so good. Or at least she hoped...her Russian was still a bit dodgy and the wording Natasha had given her was very important to get right. Despite her nerves, Thea smiled again at Bucky, as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She could see the misery on his face, but the tension in his shoulders told her that he understood exactly what she was doing. As Steve had said, Bucky was more Winter Soldier than Yasha at that moment. And since Yasha did, the Winter Soldier also knew the plan. It was time to continue. “Я был так неправ думая, что это была просто ревность с твоей стороны. Я должен был знать лучше, моя дорогая Яша. То, что произошло, определенно не стоило того, чтобы наконец увидеть моих братьев после двух лет сокрытия, не потому что это подвергло моих детей такой ужасной опасности от людей Росса.”

I was so wrong to think it was just jealousy on your part. I should have known better, my darling Yasha. What happened was definitely not worth finally seeing my brothers after two years in hiding, not since it put my babies in such horrible danger from Ross’ people.

She stopped for a moment to gauge Bucky’s reaction. His face was wet from tears, but his expression was unchanged from blank wretchedness. He was thinking and analysing her every word. She leant down to kiss Winnie’s head and then held her up again so he could see Winnie’s face. “Мне сказали что он пытался увидеться с нашей дочерью в больнице, Яша. Слава богу, администраторы следовали закону и отказали ему во въезде, поскольку у него не было постановления суда. По-видимому, он пытался доказать какую-то глупость из-за того, что Винни был Расширенным только потому, что ты ее отец. Хотя ученые доказали, что он не может пройти генетически или через переливание крови! Я не знаю, кому он заплатил, чтобы кто-то переключил первоначальное МРТ-сканирование Винни, но я рад, что кто-то нашел подделку и исправил ее.”

I am told that he attempted to get in to see our daughter at the hospital, too, Yasha. Thank goodness the administrators followed the law and refused him entry, since he didn’t have a court order. Apparently, he was trying to prove some foolishness about Winnie being an Enhanced just because you are her father. Even though scientists have proven that it cannot pass genetically or via blood transfusion! I don’t know who he paid to get someone to switch Winnie’s initial MRI scan, but I am glad that someone figured out the fake and fixed it.

At that moment, the door to the detention room was flung open and an irate man began berating the guard in Xhosa whilst another stalked to the cell and opened the door. As he began talking, the man pressed a button on a device on his wrist and the restraints were loosened enough that Bucky was able to shift his posture slightly. “I must apologise wholeheartedly on behalf of Wakanda, Mrs Barnes. Your husband is not supposed to be kept under these conditions.” The man made another tap on the device and the muzzle dropped off. “I understand that our guard took his instruction
from someone with the UN delegation, but that carries no weight here. Regardless of the UN’s position, Wakanda does not believe in using such cruel, inhumane conditions for its prisoners.”

Stepping back and looking into Bucky’s face, the man asked, “Are you more comfortable, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Much. Thank you.” Bucky’s eyes followed the man carefully, as he kept his entire body tensed as if he were ready to react to anything. Thea felt a moment of alarm, as she felt certain that Bucky had seen something that she had not. She darted her eyes over to Steve, who was clearly on edge but not on alert. Perhaps she was mistaken.

“Are you in need of medical attention? Water?”

Bucky stared at the man for a moment before he croaked out, “Water, please.”

“Very well. Captain Rogers, I must ask the same of you. Your face and arms are injured.”

“I am fine, Captain Qukubana. The guard likes to use his stick, that’s all. I’ll heal.”

“You were not authorised to use force upon prisoners already in the cells, Nkosana Mpangele.”

“The prisoner was insulting my family, Captain.”

“Was he? Well, if that is so, then the recording will show that and he will be properly disciplined. In the meantime, you are being relieved by Corporal Mthunzi.”

“But Captain…”

“Report downstairs immediately, Corporal Mpangele.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will leave you to your visit now, Mrs Barnes. Mthunzi will give you some water, Sergeant Barnes. After your visit with your wife, you will be taken for a health assessment to be certain your healing has not been obstructed by the restraints.”

As the door shut behind Captain Qukubana, the short, stocky guard approached Bucky’s cell with a cup of water. He gave Thea a friendly smile and then held the cup to Bucky’s lips. Bucky drank the entire cup and then looked back at Thea longingly.

“I would ask you both to converse in English, Sergeant Barnes. Corporal Mpangele was impolite, but he was correct that the guards need to hear everything that is said to and by a prisoner.”

Bucky did not move his eyes from Thea’s face as he replied hoarsely, “No problem.”

“Are you ok? You don’t look well, Yasha.”

“I’m fine, krasotka. I’m just tired and worried about you. You were unconscious for a long time. They didn’t expect you to have trouble waking after they removed the medicine keeping you in the coma.”

“I know, but I’m ok. You must have been so worried. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t gotta apologise for that, Bella. I just want you healthy. The only things in the world as matter are you and the children, understand? I ain’t worried about nothing but you three.”

“As you can see, Winnie is fine. Jamie is doing well, too. He is speaking in a Russian-English
hybrid now, which is your influence, of course. Natalia was reading him Ruslan and Ludmila earlier.”

“S***, was she? How appropriate, huh? Some bastard kidnaps a man’s girl and he’s got to get her back. How like Romanova to choose something so on the nose.”

“She’s like that, isn’t she? Jamie seems to adore her and was winding her hair around his fist when she was holding him.”

“It sounds like he is ok. You sure Winnie’s going to be ok? Ross’ people weren’t nursery workers. I doubt they gave you any baby formula.”

“No, nothing. None of us had anything to eat or drink the entire time. The dehydration was what was so dangerous for Winnie, Yasha.”

“I know, krasotka. She’s still so young. I wish I could hold her.”

“I’ll lift her up for you again. See? Just a few scratches on her face are left. She’s nearly good as new. Still the prettiest baby girl you ever did see, isn’t she?”

“Gorgeous. Just like her mother.” Bucky blinked several times to clear the tears out of his eyes and then asked, “How about you, Bella? Steve said they thought the electrocution might have inflamed your RA.”

“Yeah. They have me on a lot of painkillers right now. They will monitor me and see how much long-term damage I have sustained. The contact burns from the jumper cables are worse, honestly. I might need grafts or something. I don’t really want to talk about that, please? You did understand me, right? You do know that I love you.”

“Yeah, baby, I do. Я тоже тебя люблю.” At a sound from the guard, Bucky apologised, “Sorry, sorry. I forgot. All I said was: I love you, too.”

“Please keep to English, Sergeant Barnes, or I will have to terminate the visitation period.”

Bucky nodded. His accent slowly thickened even further into the archaic Brooklyn style she had heard him use when speaking about his childhood with Steve. However, this time she knew it was all purposeful, although she wasn’t sure why. “What happened ain’t your fault, baby. You’re not used to thinkin’ about vengeful bigots like Ross. People like him hate Enhanced of any kind, so they think the rules don’t apply when it comes to what they wanna do to an Enhanced. He knew that capturin’ you and the babies would bring me outta where we were hidin’ from HYDRA.”

“But you warned me that people might try to hurt us to get to you. I thought that since Steve’s wife is a UN attorney and lives openly in Geneva, that no one would dare capture me in her house. I just felt that, surely, no governmental group like Secretary Ross’s people would do anything so openly, since they would realise it was horrible publicity to kidnap a family. And HYDRA knows how much you hate them for the torture and abuse they put you through to program you into the Winter Soldier. I should have listened to you. This is all my fault, Yasha.”

Bucky started to reply, but his eyes widened and he began gasping. As his breathing became shallower, he started making a horrible choking sound. Thea screamed and Steve began shouting just as the guard slapped his hand against the alarm button, which began blaring. Bucky’s seizure became more violent, so the guard opened the cell door just as several guards and Thea’s nurse rushed into the room. Two of the guards released the restraints holding Bucky, but laid overtrop him as if they were hoping to ensure he could not escape. Steve was gripping the bars in terror—
watching his best friend struggle for breath. Thea gripped Winnie to her chest and sobbed. Finally, the nurse jabbed an injection into Bucky’s arm and he went still. Although he was breathing more normally, he was no longer conscious.
Chapter 27

As Mary-Claire pushed Thea's wheelchair up to the hospital room in which Bucky was supposedly being treated, a guard jumped in front of them and insisted in strongly accented English, "I am sorry, mesdames, however, I am not authorised to allow any visitors at this time. You cannot be here!"

Thea gripped the armrests on her wheelchair and glared at the guard, as well as the physician who opened the door of the hospital room to investigate the source of the disturbance outside. "I most certainly do have the right to see my husband and that is precisely what I intend to do."

Smiling brightly at the doctor, Mary-Claire handed her a packet of papers as she said, "Hello, I assume that you are Master Sergeant James Barnes' physician, Dr Haueter? Excellent. This is Theodora Barnes, Sgt Barnes' wife, who has come to see her husband. My name is Mary-Claire Jefferson Rogers. I am an attorney representing the interests of the United Nations' OHCHR. It seems that there has been some irregularity in the case of directives regarding Sgt Barnes. I hope that these documents will settle the matter, however, so there is no further confusion."

The doctor looked between Mary-Claire and Thea shaking her head, then said, "I sympathise, as I would also like to see that the Winter Soldier—regardless of his crimes—be treated correctly according to Swiss law regarding prisoners. However, we are unable to change the orders that have been given at the very highest level. It is simply outside of our purview."

Mary-Claire sighed, her hand resting gently on Thea's shoulder to restrain her, as she replied with an edge, "In fact, your orders are on those papers, Dr Haueter. All of these documents were already presented to this hospital before today, so there is frankly no excuse for the incredible abuse of human rights that you and your colleagues have perpetrated here. What has been done to Sgt Barnes is shockingly extra-legal, as you really ought to have been aware. You cannot have thought that any of this is proper procedure, Dr Haueter."

The guard spoke up defensively, "Madame, I do not think that you understand. That man in there is an incredibly dangerous assassin. He has killed hundreds. There is a good reason that he is to be kept under restraint and guard at all times."

Giving the guard only a look, which was enough to cause him to be quiet immediately, Mary-Claire turned to the physician as she said sharply, "Regardless of your opinion, doctor, your patient must be treated properly according to both Swiss and international law. You might want to take a look at what I handed to you there, Dr Haueter, since those papers contain all the guidelines and directives covering the required care of Sgt Barnes while he is in the care of this hospital."

The woman frowned and urgently waved over a colleague, as she flipped cursorily through the papers. "Well, what is all this nonsense then? Are we supposed to treat the Winter Soldier as if he were a tame kitten?"

Turning away dismissively, Mary-Claire smiled at the man who had just walked up to them and introduced herself. "Good afternoon, doctor. My name is Mary-Claire Jefferson Rogers and this is Theodora Arnwell Barnes, the wife of Dr Haueter's patient: Master Sergeant James Barnes. I am an attorney with the International Human Rights Council of the United Nations. It seems that there might have been a significant amount of irregularity in the treatment of Sgt Barnes by this hospital, which I am now here to investigate."
"Not particularly, Dr Amstehl. I have been following the security protocol that was set by our hospital security force, of course. Medically, I am treating the patient for clonidine poisoning, multiple broken bones, a stab wound in the kidney, and several dislocated joints."

Mary-Claire tilted her head and looked at the younger doctor, as she commented with deceptive calm, "That is quite surprising, Dr Haueter, since the only injuries noted by the Wakandan security personnel when they transferred Sgt Barnes to your hospital were several minor scratches, bruising from the restraints, and a broken finger in addition to the suspected poisoning. How do you explain these additional injuries, Dr Haueter?"

The doctor's eyes narrowed as she replied coldly, "I cannot possibly be expected to explain that, Ms Rogers. This is the condition in which the patient arrived at the hospital."

Mary-Claire included the senior physician in her glance, as she smiled dangerously and said, "In fact, the initial assessment of Sgt Barnes by your hospital triage team does not mention any of those additional injuries, Dr Haueter. The triage form is included in the stack there, which I gave you to reference. This means that any additional issues have occurred while Sgt Barnes has been under the care of this hospital. Since Sgt Barnes has been unconscious since before his arrival here, the only possible explanation for additional broken bones, dislocated joints, and a stab wound is that one or more persons have been allowed to mistreat Sgt Barnes during his time here."

The guard by the door pulled out his radio and started to call down to his colleagues, but Mary-Claire turned towards him to say very seriously, "If you are contacting your head of security, you may find that he is unavailable. It was my understanding that his interrogation was to begin about an hour ago. However, I am far from opposed to you calling for more guards to support you. I think it would be beneficial if there are more security personnel protecting Sgt Barnes while he is here."

Thea, who had been sitting very still in the wheelchair as she watched Mary-Claire act her part, found herself unable to fully control her emotions by this point. After making a superhuman effort to keep her tears from spilling over her cheeks, she asked in a shaking voice, "Am I going to be allowed to visit my husband now?"

The guard replied uncomfortably, "I'm very sorry, madame, however I could lose my job if I were to allow anyone other than approved medical personnel into this room."

Mary-Claire sighed and stated succinctly, "I am sure that is what you were told by your superior. Nevertheless, it is utterly false." She then turned back to the two doctors, both of whom had been flipping through the papers that Mary-Claire had given them, and asked, "Do you both understand the concerns that some of us at the International Human Rights Council have regarding the treatment of Sgt Barnes?"

Pointing to one of the papers in his hand, the elder of the two doctors stammered, "I...I was not aware that there was any question as to the guilt of the prisoner in any of the multiple assassinations for HYDRA."

Thea tilted her head with an aggressive little growl and, before Mary-Claire could intervene, replied sharply, "How is that at all relevant? I understood that physicians and other medical personnel were required to make their treatment decisions regardless of any personal opinion about or bias towards the patient."
Dr Haueter nearly spat with fury as she replied, "My treatment has been perfectly fair despite the disgust that any average person might feel for the fact that my patient is a mass murderer and a monster, who spent most of his adult life serving an organisation that most Swiss consider pure evil."

Mary-Claire quickly interjected before Thea could speak again, "Have you done an MRI of his brain yet, Dr Haueter?"

"Why would we? Of course not."

"Yet your patient has been unconscious for two days, despite his known injuries being insufficient to explain this according to my independent consultant. Additionally, Sgt Barnes is also believed to have experienced catastrophic brain trauma during his decades as a POW and captive of HYDRA. Although I freely admit that I am not a doctor, it seems strange to me that none of you have even considered a scan of some sort." Marie-Claire then smiled with bright ferocity and continued, "Fortunately, I have an order here for you to complete one today. You might find the results… instructive, since, as physicians, you can judge better than I can the effects of repeated electrocution, extensive torture, and long-term starvation on the brain of an adult male."

Dr Amstehl muttered under his breath, his face white with horror. Yet, Dr Haueter turned a face full of hate first at Thea and then Mary-Claire as she said nastily, "We will do what is required, but that is all that will be done here. The Soldier is just an asset of HYDRA. He is hardly a person—he doesn't think or feel other than to do HYDRA's bidding. I do not need to concern myself with more than the minimum legal requirements regarding the treatment of prisoners."

Mary-Claire clamped her hand so tightly on Thea's shoulder that Thea looked up in surprise at her, which gave Mary-Claire the opportunity to say, "Ah, thank you for that, Dr Haueter. Now I will be able to alert my colleagues that it is as we suspected." She handed a sealed envelope to the guard, then added, "Perhaps I should tell you that one of your anaesthesiologists—Dr Zindler, your senior pharmacist—Ms Neumann, the head of security and two guards, as well as three nurses were all taken into custody a little while ago. Yet, despite significant circumstantial evidence against you, Dr Haueter, I was not completely certain that you were HYDRA until now. Thank you for clearing that up so nicely."

Having now read and understood the warrant he had been handed, the guard had clumsily pulled out his handcuffs and was now preparing to place them on Dr Haueter. Yet, before the guard could grab her hands, the doctor screamed, "No! No! You are all fools! We will prevail! All of you are feeble, snivelling children—unwilling to do what is necessary for the future of humanity." She swivelled to face Thea and spat at her. "Especially you! Did you really believe that the Winter Soldier could be domesticated like a lapdog into a doting father and loving husband? We trained and then retrained him for decades. Myself, I worked on him for six years. Every time he rejected his programming, we just wiped his mind and reinstalled it. He is not a person. He doesn't have rights. He is just an asset. He is the slave of HYDRA and we will reclaim him. You are all too weak and pathetic to be willing to commit to do what is necessary to bring order. That is why you will be subjugated. You will lose. Hail HYDRA!"

Dr Haueter reached for her pocket and then raised her hand to her mouth, as the guard simply stood staring in shock at her. Mary-Claire insisted desperately, "No! Don't let her do it!" Yet, by the time Dr Amstehl and the guard both tried to stop her, it was too late. The woman slumped to the ground without another word, leaving the others still staring at her in utter horror.

Several moments later, three guards came rushing up, but stopped when they saw the Dr Haueter on the floor—clearly dead. At this point, Thea placed her hand on Mary-Claire's arm and looked up
at her stricken face. Although Mary-Claire had stopped screaming and was now silently sobbing, Thea worried that she was very far from ok. She whispered gently, "Darling, it is ok. The woman was a HYDRA goon, just like Stark thought. Do you need your medication?"

Mary-Claire seemed to pull herself back to reality and peered down at Thea with a puzzled, dazed expression, "Did I do something silly? I think I might have checked-out there for a moment."

"Nothing silly. We were all shocked. You were still screaming when the guards arrived, but we are all overwrought."

Mary-Claire wiped her cheeks with her hand and then fumbled with her handbag before pulling out a small silver box. "I am alright. Sorry if I scared you."

The other doctor looked up from where he was kneeling beside the body of Dr Haueter and asked, "Are you in need of medical attention, mesdames? It is perfectly understandable. I…this is an unthinkable thing to have occurred in our hospital. I can hardly believe it."

Mary-Claire shook her head, as she took a small yellow pill, and replied, "No, thank you. However, you will likely be called to be deposed about this incident, Dr Amstehl."

"Of course. Of course. This certainly goes beyond anything I could have imagined. " The man turned towards Thea and asked, "If you would like, Mrs Barnes, I can allow you to see your husband now. The paperwork seems to be straightforward regarding both your rights and his. I sincerely apologise for any inappropriate treatment that you and Sgt Barnes have experienced before now."

Thea nodded. "Please. Please, let me see him. May Mrs Rogers accompany me?"

"I think that is acceptable under the circumstances, yes, Mrs Barnes."

"Oh, thank you. I am so grateful to you."

Mary-Claire shook her head. "I'm afraid that we must first document Sgt Barnes' condition before we enter. I admit that I do not know the appropriate procedure for this, Dr Amstehl."

"I don't think that I know exactly either, Mrs Rogers. This is quite outside of my realm of experience." Suddenly, Dr Amstehl stopped and stared. He watched Mary-Claire for a moment and then asked slowly, "Mrs Rogers…is your husband Steve Rogers?"

Mary-Claire nodded. "Yes, of course. I worked as an international human rights attorney for several years before I met him, but my marriage to Steve is why I became a specialist in the human rights of Enhanced persons. That is also why I am aware of the minutiae in this case, Dr Amstehl."

"You'll forgive me, of course, but I think that I would like to see your identification, Mrs Rogers. I hope that you do not misunderstand, but your husband's relationship with Sgt Barnes is quite well known."

Mary-Claire reached into the outer pocket of her handbag and handed him several folded papers, her passport, and her UN identity card. When the doctor finally passed them back to her, she said calmly, "I hope that you feel more comfortable now, Dr Amstehl."

He smiled tightly, as he nodded. "Yes, thank you. You are wise to request the current injuries to be recorded, Mrs Rogers. I will speak to the guards about that now. If you and Mrs Barnes are quite sure that you are alright and not in need of medical attention, then I will leave you both here. When the guards are finished, I am quite comfortable with you accompanying Mrs Barnes in to see her
husband."

Thea spoke up quietly, "Will you examine him, as well, doctor? I am so worried that horrible woman might have done something to him. There must be some reason that he has remained unconscious, is that not correct?"

"Yes, of course, Mrs Barnes. However, I must speak with my colleagues and superiors to determine the proper next course of action."

After first glancing up at Mary-Claire to make certain it was ok to reply, Thea said sadly, "Very well. You should know, however, that Yasha…James, that is…has told me that HYDRA used specialised drugs to sedate him or manipulate his mind, which were designed particularly for his Enhanced body. It is possible that whatever they used might not show up in any standard blood tests."

"I will bear that in mind, Mrs Barnes."

The slow, continuous beep of the machine, the whooshing of the ventilator, the passing footsteps in the corridor outside the room, the occasional announcement on the speaker by the door…these sounds had eventually joined together to become a steady state annoyance to Thea, but no longer enough to drive her to distraction. None of them were the sound that she wanted to hear anyway. After four days of sitting at Bucky's bedside, she had told herself that she would have done nearly anything if she could just see any change.

Yet when the change did occur, it was actually worse than before. A horrible choking sound awakened her from where she had dozed off in the chair. She lifted her head from the edge of Bucky's bed and nearly screamed as she saw Bucky reaching up with his metal hand to rip the tube out of his mouth. "Yasha! Wait. Wait, please. I'll find the doctor, so you don't hurt yourself. Please."

As soon as he saw her face in front of his, Bucky stopped fighting. Yet, his chest heaved up and down as if he were in agony. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes focussed on Thea with such intensity that she had to force herself to look away to find the call button. "They should be here soon, Yasha. It will be ok. Oh, I'm so grateful you woke up. I've so been afraid that you wouldn't. I thought that I might lose you."

Her hand was suddenly trapped in the firm grip of Bucky's metal hand, then lifted reverently up to his face. As he pressed her fingers to his cheek, she felt the tears begin to run down his cheeks and onto her hand. However, just then, a swarm of medical personnel rushed into the room and began attending to Bucky, which meant that Thea was once again going to be expected to sit and wait. She did not resist when she was pulled back by one nurse and then allowed another nurse to begin to escort her out into the corridor to wait for them to complete whatever needed doing. However, as soon as the breathing tube was removed, Bucky began roughly shouting in hoarse Russian that they would remove his wife from the room over his cold, dead body.

"Madame, can you translate, please?"

Surprised, as she had not even realised that he was not speaking English, Thea said with embarrassment, "He was asking you to let me stay. I'm sorry."

When he heard her voice, Bucky ripped the restraint on his right wrist completely off the bed rail
and managed to sit up despite the attempts of three nurses to keep him prone. Switching to English, he rasped desperately, "Bella! Don't go. Baby, stay. Please."

Thea took two steps closer to the bed and tried to respond calmly. "I was only going to sit outside in the corridor whilst they worked on you here. I was not leaving, Yasha."

"Please. I need you here, Bella. You know that I do."

Thea looked at the Dr Amstehl, who was waiting to listen to Bucky's chest, and asked, "May I stay here then, doctor?"

"I don't frankly see any alternative, Mrs Barnes. However, if Sgt Barnes cannot calm himself, then we will have to consider sedation."

One of the nurses moved to make room for Thea, who came around to Bucky's left side again and placed her hand in his. Immediately, Bucky clutched it tightly, the vibranium fingers wrapping firmly around hers as he breathed out with a guttural moan. "Don't leave, Bella. I couldn't take it."

"I am not going anywhere, Yasha. I've only been back to the hotel to sleep and hold the babies each night. My brothers have been there with them during the day and the White Wolf's friends have been handling security, so you know they are safe, Yasha. I've been back every morning to stay with you all day. And wherever they send you next, then I'll be there, too."

"How long?"

"How long have you been here? Five days. I was not allowed to see you during the first 37 hours."

"Days? Why have I been here for days, Bella? The serum should have fixed me ok in under 24 hours. What happened?"

"HYDRA. They had two doctors, four nurses, a pharmacist, and several other hospital personnel here, who apparently were going to try to bring you back to heel. They didn't count on your conditioning having already been removed."

Closing his eyes in hopeless misery, Bucky swore, "Блядь! Чертовски дерьмовые сумки. Разве я не был достаточно замучен? Разве не хватило семи десятилетий плена? Они всегда будут преследовать меня как сбежавшего раба. Я никогда не буду свободным. Чертова пизды."

Thea tried not to react, as she understood his anger, yet she was nearly at her emotional limit, as well. She was unable to keep herself from letting out a small sob, which brought Bucky's attention wholly back on her.

Bucky watched her for a moment and then said in a choked, despairing voice, "Я так их ненавижу, Белла. Я должен просто позволить им убить меня. Было бы лучше, если бы я умер, красотка, так что ты не всегда подвергался угрозе со стороны ГИДРЫ или этой чертовой пизды, Росс. Мне очень жаль, красотка. Мне так жаль. Ты заслуживаешь мир, а не я. (I hate them so much, Bella.I should just let them kill me.It would be better if I died, krasotka, so that you were not always threatened by HYDRA or that d*** p****, Ross.I'm sorry, krasotka.I am so sorry.You deserve the world, not me.)"

She yanked her hand back from Bucky and replied only, "No! You promised me, Yasha."

The doctor interjected uncomfortably, "If I may interject, Sgt Barnes, there are some tests that we need to do at this time. I also need to discuss with you your current health situation, which would be best to do in private."
Thea responded, "Of course, doctor, I will let you have a while alone with my husband. I will be waiting outside."

"Bella, no!"

"I will come back when Dr Amstehl is finished with you, Yasha."

Thea forced herself to hurry outside into the corridor despite hearing Bucky call out miserably, "Не оставляй меня таким. Белла!"

Once she had shut the door behind her, Thea could not keep herself from bursting into tears. She rushed away from the door, knowing that because of his advanced hearing Bucky would almost certainly hear her and become yet more agitated. When she reached the row of chairs in the small waiting area at the end of the corridor, Thea pulled her phone out of the pocket of her skirt.

She heard the alarm in her brother's voice as he questioned, "Thea? What is wrong, pet?"

"Yasha's awake. I think that I need you to come, Tommy. Please?"

Thomas sharply asked, "What's wrong?"

"Yasha needs to see Jamie. Please, will you bring him, Tommy?"

Thomas sighed with relief and replied, "Of course, I can, pet. But are you sure you don't want Richard instead or perhaps that ruthless little beauty that's been organising this scheme to rehabilitate both your husbands in the public eye? If there are any politically sticky situations that arise, I'm the last person you want there. You know how I am, Thea."

"No, I need you, Tommy. I want you to meet Yasha."

There was a long pause before Thomas finally answered uneasily, "Oh. Are you sure, Thea? The man's been in a coma for days. Might not be the best time to meet the in-laws, really."

"Tommy."

"Right. Right. OK. I'll just collect Jamie and be over directly."

"You won't be long, will you?"

"I'll come as quickly as possible. You don't want me to bring Winnie then?"

"Not right now, unfortunately. That might be too much, too soon for Yasha."

"Right. I'll just go then, ok, Thea?"

"Thank you, Tommy." Thea hung up and shoved the phone back into her pocket. She then sat back in the chair and allowed herself to almost drift into a stupor as she waited to be able to return to Bucky's room. It had pierced her heart to leave when she could hear from his voice how desperate he was for her to remain. Yet, she knew that she had to be firm. She had to be strong for the both of them.

"Mrs Barnes?"

She pushed herself up with her cane and the chair next to her, just as the doctor approached. "Yes, Dr Amstehl?"
"Sgt Barnes appears to be physically healing remarkably well at this point. It seems that the antidote provided yesterday by the Wakandans has managed to allow the Winter Soldier serum to complete the healing process. His emotional state, however, is deeply concerning, Mrs Barnes. I have given him a massive dose of sedative, but it has had very little affect. Possibly the only thing that might be effective, in fact, would be for you to return to the room or else we will need to place him into a medically induced coma. His distress is quite intense, I'm afraid."

Thea shivered as she nodded and then said, "I am ready. In a little while, my brother will be coming with my oldest child. I think that will also help calm Yasha immensely."

"I am afraid that I would have to see a drastic change in Sgt Barnes before I could approve a small child entering the room with him. At the moment, I cannot feel that your husband is emotionally stable enough not to do harm to himself."

"I know. We've been through this before. The horrors of what HYDRA did to him and how they imprisoned his mind while they used his body to commit their murders are almost more than he can bear at times, Dr Amstehl. Having one of the doctors here who used to do those things to him will have only brought those things to the forefront of his mind again."

They stopped at the door to Bucky's room and Dr Amstehl reached for the door handle to open it. "I understand, Mrs Barnes. I will monitor the situation."

Thea stepped inside and froze stiffly at the end of Bucky's bed as she realised what he was doing. He had been in the middle of removing the fourth handcuff that had been used to restrain him, but it was now dangling from his right ankle as he had stopped when she entered the room. The other three cuffs were strewn across the floor in varying stages of destruction. Bucky sat rooted in place on the edge of the hospital bed with an expression of terror on his face.

"I said that I would come back when they finished checking you over, Yasha. What did you really think that you were going to do? Were you going to race out there and get yourself into even worse legal trouble? You have to cooperate with them, Yasha, or there is very little chance that we will be allowed to stay together as a family and get you repatriated."

Bucky did not reply for a few moments, his breathing still harsh and rasping with the strain of his prolonged distraught state. Finally, he replied roughly, "You left. The plan didn't really matter anymore if you weren't here."

Thea's eyes widened and she stepped closer to him. "Yasha, please listen to me. I am not leaving. I'm never, ever leaving you. Please, любимый, I need you to trust me right now."

When he heard the Russian endearment, Bucky's eyes stopped darting between her and the door. Instead, they snapped firmly to her face and he replied slowly in a shaken voice, "They told me that you had flown back to England with the children. They said that you had believed what they told you and that you were cooperating with the authorities against me."

She gasped and asked uncertainly, "Who told you this? Surely not Dr Amstehl...I was sure he was ok. Mary-Claire said he was cleared. We have never left, Yasha. I don't have anything to say to any authorities unless it helps you."

"No, it was the other doctor. I think...I think it must have been when I first arrived here. I didn't remember at first. She called herself something else, but it was Dr Peterl."

The way that Bucky snarled the doctor's name, Thea realised it must have been 'Dr Haueter'—the HYDRA doctor. "Oh, Yasha. They knew just what to say to hurt you, didn't they?"
"Psychological torture is part of the game to them, baby. They used to taunt me about Steve's death aboard the Valkyrie, every time that I would remember myself and fight back against the programming. It was always the last thing they'd say to drive it all home. It was usually enough, too."

"I am not leaving you, Yasha. Also, Tommy is coming here with Jamie."

Bucky's eyes flamed brightly as he asked, "Jamie is still here?"

"Of course, he is. Winnie, too. However, I am just having Tommy bring Jamie for now. Is that ok?"

"You'll actually let me see him, Bella?"

Thea moved the final few steps towards him and propped her cane against the table so she could sit on the edge of his bed. "Yasha, I need you to listen to me say this again. I love you. We are still together. The babies and I are safe. I'm healing pretty well, really, thanks to Wakandan medicine. No one is abandoning you. We are still your family and we want to be with you. Do you understand?"

Bucky shook his head as if to clear his mind and then looked carefully at Thea. He ruefully replied, "Whatever they did to me, I'm still not right, krasotka. I'm still confused. Everything they said still feels real."

"Well, it will pass in time, won't it? Once you can see for yourself that it was lies, I mean."

"Yes. You have been here this whole time? Really?"

"Yes, really. Wakanda wouldn't permit me to come for the first day, since I was still too ill. I think during that time was when Mary-Claire managed to get all the paperwork sorted for us to come over here and take legal control of your care. I don't know how she does all this so cleverly, but she knew just what to say and to whom to say it. But once I got inside this room with you, then I only left to return to the hotel at night."

"Whatever those f***ers did to me must have been pretty serious, baby, if your presence here wasn't enough to wake me." Bucky tugged her down to him sharply, so he could press a desperate kiss to her lips. Yet, when she threw her arms around his neck and responded quite enthusiastically, he tightened his arms so she could hardly move.

Despite being quite uncomfortable, Thea laughed lightly. "Budge over, you. You're large, so I've only got a sliver of real estate over here. Until they come in and stop me, I plan on laying down right here next to you."

Bucky moved over and pulled her beside him so rapidly that Thea gasped and then laughed again. "Gently, silly. Good heavens, Yasha, I've missed you so much."

"When you visited me in the cell, you said you were going to need surgeries and grafts or something."

"I am healing well, любимый, I promise. We can discuss that more later. Ross did do some permanent damage, but I really will be alright. Oh! I think I hear Jamie out there crying. Maybe he and Tommy are here already."

"S***, I never even asked you about your brothers. Are they ok?"
"Physically, yes. Emotionally, not remotely. I want Tommy to be the first one of my brothers to meet you, ok?"

"Yeah, if he wants to meet me, of course."

The door opened to allow three nurses and Dr Amstehl to enter the room. It was clear that they were stunned both to see Thea cuddled up close to Bucky and that he had destroyed his restraints with such apparent ease.

"I'll let you examine my husband now, Dr Amstehl, whilst I go find my brother."

Sceptical, the doctor asked Bucky, "You will stay calm, Sgt Barnes?"

Bucky nodded seriously. "Yeah, I'm ok. It's fine."

"Will you be able to remain calm once your wife leaves the room?"

"Yeah, I said that I'm fine. Unless you're planning to keep my family away from me, then I don't care what you gotta do."

Dr Amstehl nodded. "Very well. I will permit your son to visit, but you must understand that I will render you unconscious at any sign of agitation. I will not allow a child's safety to be jeopardised."

"You don't gotta worry. I'll end anything that puts my child at risk. That includes me. Now that Thea's not in the room, I got to say something. I don't know what happened to Dr Peterl or whatever she is calling herself these days. I hope she is dead or at least suffering somewhere. But I digress. I better not find out that you're HYDRA, too. I'm not going back. I won't be taken captive again. I'd rather die first. Do you understand me?"

"I'm not working with HYDRA, Sgt Barnes. Dr Haueter is dead by her own hand. No one is going to take you captive."

"I won't allow anything to happen to my family either. If I see even a hint of any harm come to them, then I will be merciless in retribution. They are non-combatants."

"I am not HYDRA, Sgt Barnes. I understand your lack of trust and I sympathise; however, it is not necessary. I wish you and your family well."

"Other than my wife, Steve Rogers, and King T'Challa, I haven't had anyone that I could trust anyone in over 70 years. Every single other person has betrayed me in the end, ok? I've had every permutation of every trick played on me. People who want to be 'friends'. Doctors who appear to be the only one who cares. Trainers who praised me like I was something special. Fellow prisoners with escape plans that somehow would work if only I would help. Supposed double agents who were going to help me get free. Even once a girl who claimed she'd fallen in love with me and wanted us to run away together. I've heard it all, ok? I even fell for half that s*** in the beginning. King T'Challa ain't never pretended s*** to me. I know who he is. Steve is still the same wonderful, dumb punk he's always been. And Thea is a wondrous anomaly that I will never understand. Even if she had turned out to be another trick, then I wouldn't have regretted believing it. But she somehow isn't. Anyway, I don't got any trust left to spread around, doctor. I can offer you a truce and that's all I got."

Dr Amstehl attempted to school his expression of horror and pity into something neutral, but failed miserably, as he replied, "I understand, Sgt Barnes, and I appreciate your honesty. I am glad for you that you do have your friend and your wife. Mrs Barnes is exceptionally devoted to you."
"I don't deserve any of it. I know how unworthy I am."

The doctor sighed. "It sounds to me as if you deserve to finally find some happiness, Sgt Barnes, so I hope that you can accept what is being offered to you."

"Yeah, I'm not ignoring it."
Thea stared into the mirror of the brightly lit bathroom and wondered when she had aged so much. She looked at least ten years older than she had the day she met Bucky. Maybe even more. Her skin was pale and pasty. The shadows under her eyes were deep. She was puffy about the face and along her neck. It was a bit horrifying to think how obviously the strain of her life with Bucky had taken a toll on her body, really. The Wakandan princess had sworn to her that the RA had been halted permanently by whatever magic/vibranium-science random, hand-waving sort of medical treatment that they had done. There ought to only be the residual damage from the past ravages of the disease. Yet...Thea knew her health still wasn’t right. Everything was off. Perhaps it had been off for a while, but she’d had so many other things happen since the Wakandan ‘cure’ that she couldn’t be sure. She’d had the baby. She’d been dragged off and tortured. She’d been sat for days in a Geneva hospital worrying if the next nurse/doctor/aide/food service person coming into Bucky’s room was a HYDRA goon. She’d repeatedly travelled with Mary-Claire and all four of their attorneys to the specially outfitted prison cells where Steve and Bucky were being held as they awaited formal charges. She’d endured the phalanx of photographers and journalists as she entered and exited the court where the Article 5 hearing for her husband had been held. She’d dutifully recited the scripted words she was meant to parrot at no less than five press conferences. All of it, everyday stuff, she was sure. No reason to feel stressed or a bit run down, was there?

Perhaps Tommy was right. Maybe she was now psychologically conditioned to accept her standard of life with Bucky as not just acceptable but desirable. The extremes of it all had (somewhere along the way that she could not quite identify) become ok. The extraordinary highs and terrifying lows were just how things had to be. Or something like that.

Before the day that he had burst into her flat and literally taken control of her life, Thea would have said she was the sort of girl who liked a traditional gentleman. One who could share in her passion for the arts or who knew how to order a perfect dinner in a truly good restaurant. The sort of man who wore the correct tie. A gentleman who—just for kicks and giggles—actually drove nearish to the speed limit. A man who spoke multiple languages like she did, yes, but perhaps not one who was most comfortable cursing in extremely crass Russian. Perhaps even the sort of chap who thought that a bookshelf was essentially meant for books, not as a lovely display case for his favourite 50-cal sniper rifle. Maybe, in fact, a man who didn’t have the sort of nightmares that left him crying and begging to be allowed to embrace death. Yes, certainly she’d hoped for a man who was fairly confident in his memories of the past or his ability not to murdering people with a shockingly powerful metal arm.

Thank goodness she hadn’t married that unnamed, vaguely described, almost certainly painfully boring gentleman, then.

She heard the movement behind her and turned around with an exhausted smile. “Was I taking too long?”

“Nah. I was just worried that you were sick. You haven’t been feeling well lately, baby.”

“That noticeable, is it?”

“To me, yes.” Bucky kissed the back of her neck in the way that always made her knees buckle slightly and, with his mouth just barely above her skin, spoke so she could feel the vibrations of his voice travel up and down her spine. “So, what do you think, krasotka?”

“I think you’re doing that on purpose, that’s what I think.” She turned around and gave him a half-
hearted glare. But his self-satisfied smirk was enough to make her shove him playfully and add, “And no. Not interested.”

“Bella.”

She laughed. “No, no, not at all, nothing doing, thank you for offering, but absolutely not.”

Despite her teasing tone, she could still see Bucky’s excitement drop off precipitously. Therefore, she immediately wrapped her arms around him and said rather seriously, “Yasha, sarcasm is an Englishwoman’s bread-and-butter, really. You must know that by now, silly. Of course, I want to have the evening all alone just with you. I should have thought that was astoundingly obvious by the way I cried piteously when Steve suggested it.”

“I-I don’t feel confident enough to be sure, Bella.”

Thea sighed. “Sometimes I wonder what I must do to make you feel sure of me, Yasha. I think that I’ve rather sufficiently proven my devotion to you, quite honestly.”

“Yeah, I know. You have been incredible. So much more than I deserve. It is my problem, not anything due to you, krasotka. I just…I just know I’m not worthy of you, Bella. I can’t ever be good enough, so it’s hard to feel self-assured about us.”

“Right. Yes, that makes perfect sense, Yasha. You shouldn’t trust that I’ve definitely made my decision by now. I definitely wasn’t offered a dozen opportunities to testify against you in exchange for a lifetime of protection and a ticket home for me and the children. They didn’t attempt to bribe me with a rather substantial fortune to lie about you. They didn’t threaten over and over to take away my children if I stayed with you. I haven’t actually just agreed to never go back home to England once you are repatriated, so, basically, I am under threat of not being allowed to re-enter the country if I went back for a family wedding or something. You see, don’t you, that means I cannot EVER go back to my family’s home, Yasha. Ever.”

Thea had accentuated each point by jabbing her finger into his chest with increasing ferocity. She took a moment to catch her breath, as she was starting to hyperventilate. The look on Bucky’s face was one of frightened shock, which only served to upset her further. He didn’t understand and she HAD to make him finally get it.

Accordingly, she threw her arm out to steady herself as she rather hysterically continued, “I didn’t spend all these weeks tirelessly repeating exactly what Natalia and Mary-Claire told me to say whenever a reporter asked me something, did I? Or have to publicly and continually pour out all my feelings for you over and over and over. I enjoyed testifying to the universe that yes, I did fall in love with the man who kidnapped me—you phrased that so nicely, General Hernandez. And yes, Counsellor Vanderwijk, I did run off with a former HYDRA assassin and have two children with him, why do you ask? And, oh I do appreciate the reminder, ‘honourable’ Judge Prydz, about the time that my children and I were kidnapped and tortured because someone hates my husband. And yes, Senior Investigator Neumann, you horrible, evil hag, I know how bad everything looks because you have carefully crafted your questions to make it appear like I’m a crazed, delusional Winter Soldier groupie. But it isn’t that way at all. It isn’t. Our marriage is wonderful and everything I will ever want, but no one cares. Nothing I said about you matters to them. They don’t care about the kind, generous man you really are, the agony you feel about everything they used your body to do, the struggles you have all the time to overcome the effects of decades of torture and captivity, and oh golly, the precious way you love our babies, and…and the utter sweetness of the way you love me. No, instead, I just look sad and pathetic to the whole world and they still think you’re a monster. I’m such a private person, Yasha, that speaking all any of this to anyone but you or my brothers has been like being flayed alive.”
As she had madly ranted at him, Bucky had almost seemed to go into a state of disassociation. However, at her last comment, Bucky’s head snapped up and he rapidly stepped back until his back hit the bathroom wall. He was staring at her with such horror that Thea felt a rush of fury that he apparently hadn’t considered before now what she had been going through. For him, for the babies, for their family. “Oh yes, did you imagine that I have just floated through a lovely dream holiday here in nice, friendly ‘the Hague’—a city I now hate like the fires of Santorini? It’s been ever such a lovely stay here. You can see why I would choose this, since it has been so easy. Right? Or…or, Yasha, you might consider that despite it all, I am quite consciously choosing you and a life with you because any other outcome is utterly, horrendously unacceptable. You are worthy, Yasha, since I say you are. You love me. You love our children. This is what I choose.”

Bucky shook his head slowly, his mouth gaping as he tried to find the words to reply. She waited there for some time, but, finally, turned and started to leave the room.

“Wait. Wait. Bella. Wait. I don’t have anything to say to all that. I can’t fix it. I can’t…I can’t make anything better for you. F***, your life has been h*ll and I knew that, but holy f***ing s***, I had no idea you were suffering that much. Bella. Please.”

She turned around and forced herself to look at him with the last bit of energy she had left. “It isn’t something that can be fixed. People are always going to doubt you. They’re always going to think that I’m, at best, deluded and, at worst, your accomplice. Other people have placed us in this situation and yet other people are working to help us. We are powerless either way. Fortunately, the United States has officially recognised your identity, your citizenship, and your prisoner-of-war status. The evidence of what was done to you is so extensive that even nasty old Judge Prydz could not ignore it. You will not face international charges.”

“It isn’t over, Bella.”

“I know. Oh my goodness, I know. Do you think I’m not entirely aware?”

“I…” Bucky shook his head again and went silent.

“Mary-Claire says that the next stage of the plan is going to hit hard when we arrive in New York. Frankly, it sounds horrible and I don’t even know what is going to happen. It is like…it’s like some horrible choose your own adventure book where you keep waiting to see if you’ve chosen the ending where you fall off the cliff.”

“S***. Bella.”

“Why won’t you say anything, Yasha? Please?”

“Because…there just isn’t…f***.” Bucky slid down the wall onto the floor and then whispered, “Because it hasn’t actually been bad for me, baby.” He half sobbed and then cleared his throat before croaking miserably, “I’ve had you out there fighting for me and Steve by my side again. For the first time in years, I am not alone in my fight.” He lifted his head up to look at her briefly and then said in a more certain voice, “I never could see much hope for me when I made plans for our future. I knew they’d find me. I was completely sure that they would kill me eventually, but probably torture me first. I was prepared for it, as long as I knew you and the children were safe. But hope? Nah. Didn’t have none.”

He took a deep breath and then spoke in a softer tone that made her move closer and kneel down on the floor in front of him. “They returned my silver star, Bella. They…I’m going to actually be a recognised veteran. I’m James Barnes again, not the Asset, Soldat, or Winter Soldier. I am a person again. A man.”
Thea reached out and touched his knees, which were bunched up to his shoulders as he held his legs tightly to body. But instead of comforting him, her gesture seemed to cause him physical pain. He then continued in a rasping, broken voice, “And yet, now I realise that all the time that I’ve been starting to feel like I was finally coming in from the cold and that my family might actually be returned to me, you’ve been living in absolute h*ll and I didn’t even see how bad it was for you.”

“That doesn’t make it your fault that this is happening, Yasha. I am angry, so angry, but not at you. I am raging with fury towards all the people from your past, the ones who are trying to use you for their own purposes now, and the journalists who are trying to make their careers off our pain. I despise them all and it is a bit scary, since that is not typically the sort of woman that I am.”

“You are angry at me though, krasotka. You can be angry at them, too, and still be furious with me.”

Thea shook her head determinedly. “I am less angry and more very disappointed. Yasha, I need for you to stop questioning whether I still want to be here with you. I am not trapped. I am not being forced. I’m not deluded about you. So, you really need to get with the bloody programme and finally see that, despite having been handed multiple other options, I only want this one. You. Us. Our family.”

“Ok.”

“Ok? Just like that.”

“Yeah. You are right.” Bucky moved slowly onto his knees so as not to surprise her, then pulled her up to him. “You are right. You picked me. It doesn’t matter if I don’t feel worthy, does it? I just gotta make sure I am.”

“You are.”

“Bella.” Bucky wrapped himself around her tightly and whispered into her hair, “Thank you.”

The car wended its way down the very long drive that Thea knew so well that it made her heart ache. It had been over three years since she’d been home. The old tree with the swing was gone, but the one where Christopher had ended up stuck for hours when Thomas had dared him to climb it was still standing. The far pasture was in bad repair. Richard was always such a cautious steward of the estates, so it concerned her to see that. It was either a sign of how bad things had got for Richard emotionally or of the state of his financial affairs. She knew he had expended enormous sums in his search for her. Perhaps it was a sign of both.

Bucky’s voice was tight and low as he asked, “This is all your family’s land, krasotka?”

“Mnhm. It used to be larger, but the tax burden was too immense. My grandfather sold off quite a lot. My father is the one who opened the house up to the public during the summer to help make ends meet. The ruins of the abbey are early Norman. That’s the only reason we get many visitors really. The house itself is just a standard Georgian pile though, since the original buildings were burned during the Civil War and our family had another estate at that time so they didn’t bother to rebuild for a while. As houses go, it is not particularly special to the average tourist.”

Steve leant forwards and looked out the side window at the lake and said quietly, “Honestly, it is incredibly beautiful here, Thea. It must have been a wonderful place to grow up.”
“Well, thank you, but I didn’t really. I spent summers here when my grandfather was alive. When Father inherited it, I was 12 and already at school. So again, summers and holidays. I never lived here full-time. But I’ve always loved it here. I fought my brothers like a tigress for the old blue room, since it had a view of the lake. There, you can see now.”

Bucky stiffened next to her as he saw the immense brick structure and turned his head sharply to look at Steve. Steve also seemed rather awestruck.

Mary-Claire, however, happily commented, “Oh, it’s a lovely house, Thea. I cannot wait to see your old room. Sarabeth had the good room at our house—the one with the balcony overtop the side gardens. Robert and Riley had the rooms with the huge bookcases, which I also thought was so unfair. Great-aunt had the one with the other balcony. Mine was the old nursery, since they needed to keep me close to my parents. It didn’t even have a real fireplace, just an old coal one, so I always felt cheated. No closet either—just a big ugly Victorian wardrobe.”

Thea laughed. “Same. Closets were a 19th century thing and Arnwells are allergic to renovations. Truly, baths are quite an adventure, as you never know what you’ll get. Also, I had a narrow old coal fireplace that had a supremely ugly electric fire installed sometime in the 40s. But you actually need the fireplaces in this place. It literally could not be draughtier and actually dare to call itself a house. Typical old English home, really. I suppose that isn’t a massive concern in South Carolina, is it?”

“Not really. Central air-conditioning is the thing that you want to ask about when it comes to old Southern houses. Window units are woefully inadequate. When you come to visit, we’ll put you in the back guest room. That room has such wonderful AC that you could wear a sweater in July.”

“I am not certain if I’ll be allowed to visit, but I appreciate the invitation. I believe that I am restricted from leaving the state of New York once I am processed.”

“That is not part of the paperwork that I arranged, Thea. Did they give you something else this morning at the American embassy?”

Steve looked at Bucky and then back to Mary-Claire. “They have decided that Bucky needs more extensive monitoring and, since Thea is not allowed to be more than 100 miles from his location, they decided to restrict them both to the boroughs only.”

“Oh good heavens, Steven; you did not think to mention this to me then? You two allowed her to sign that paperwork without letting me read over it?”

As the car slowed to a stop in the half-circle near the front door, Bucky spoke up aggressively, “There wasn’t any choice. We needed you supervising the children’s paperwork, right? It was a f***ing good thing we did, too, considering what they tried to do with Jamie’s birth certificate. And Thea wasn’t being given the choice to have someone read anything over. It was sign or be refused entry into the country.”

Mary-Claire slapped her hand on her knee angrily. “They knew I’d go with the children. I should have expected it. Ugh!”

Steve grabbed her hand in his and said gently, “You have predicted 90% of what they’ve tried to pull and fixed up everything else that you hadn’t expected before they could finish their move. There had to be one thing they’d get by us. It isn’t that bad, beautiful.”

Thea smiled thankfully at Steve and then said, “You’ve truly been incredible, Mary-Claire. We really wouldn’t be here if it were not for the plans that you and your colleagues made. All that
matters is that we are going to New York together and that my children will be there with us.”

They waited as the rest of the caravan of police and military vehicles encircled their own and the van with the children, social workers, and marshals.

The door to their car was opened by an agent, who allowed first Mary-Claire to exit and then Thea. After both women were taken over towards the van where the children were being held with the team of marshals and the two social workers, a swarm of uniformed men surrounded the vehicle where Bucky and Steve were waiting. Finally, Steve was allowed to exit and his ankle shackles were checked for tightness before they were reconnected to his handcuffs. Then, Bucky was pulled from the vehicle by two of the SAS personnel, who passed him to the four others that were waiting to tighten and recheck all of his restraints.

“This is utterly ludricrous. I have agreed to host my brother-in-law and Captain America in my home at my own expense until the time of the court martial, which, I might add, is saving both Her Majesty’s and the American governments a tidy sum. They are not to be prisoners in my home, nor would any of these ridiculous measures be sufficient to stop a super-soldier who was disinclined to cooperate. You are acting purely out of a desire to shame, which I will not allow. Take those bloody things off. Now.”

Richard stood in front of the enormous and quite intimidating SAS officer, who had just been preparing to hand him the transfer of custody papers, and stared the man down from his unimpressive 5’7”. Pushing his bifocals back up, Richard snatched the paperwork and repeated. “Off. Now.”

“My orders are that the restraints stay on until they are inside the property, so as to ensure that the children are in a safe environment.”

“You utter twat, just where do you think the children will be when they are inside the house? These men are fathers, major. They will be changing nappies and reading bedtime stories about trains or unicorns just like every other decent father in Britain tonight. What precisely is it in aid of to force the children to see their fathers in chains right now? This is my private property and I alone will determine how my guests are to be treated whilst they are on my land. Take those ridiculous things off before you embarrass yourself further.”

“Very well, but on your head be it, Sir Richard, if anything happens.”

“What is going to happen between this point and the front door that could not happen six seconds after they are inside the house and the restraints are removed?”

Bucky sighed. “It doesn’t matter, Richard. Let them have their victory.”

The officer turned on his heel and moved to remove Bucky’s handcuffs, however Bucky just turned his wrist so they popped off. He shrugged when he saw the man’s fury and just muttered, “Sorry. They aren’t broken or nothing. It was just easier that way.”

The man hissed with anger and gestured to several of his subordinates to remove the other chains on Bucky and the restraints on Steve. Steve looked over at Bucky and, after a look that immediately made Bucky want to demand that Steve shut his stupid mouth, completed the same manoeuvre that Bucky had and said with a bright smile, “Thanks, Major Halsey. These things itch.”

Richard snorted with amusement and said succinctly, “Right. You lot can escort them in. I’m going to see to my sister and the children. Who even knows what ridiculous procedure you have in
place there.” AS he walked away, he muttered angrily, “Utter twats. Commissions used to mean something. What has Britain come to if this is the best of the officer corps?”

Steve fell into place next to Bucky and nudged him. “Hiya, Buck. Having fun?”

Bucky glared at Steve and said in a low voice, “You’re such a little s***, Rogers. These things itch.”

“Mmhm. It was just easier that way, Buck?”

“Well, it was. They take forever to fiddle with their little keys.”

“Sure, Buck. So. Thea’s ancestral home, huh?”

“Looks like it.”

“Holy s***, Buck. Us, the two guys as had to heat our bath water on the wood burner and take hip baths like it was freakin’ civil war times. Who the hell have we become?”

“Dunno, Steve. I ask myself that every d*** day.”
Chapter 29

The silence in the room was almost painful. Thea had not moved, nor had Bucky been brave enough to speak. In fact, in the past four hours, Bucky had hardly said anything at all except whatever was needed to get the children settled or to discuss expectations or arrangements with Richard and the multiple security personnel that would be managing Steve's and his house arrest. Steve had pulled him aside for a brief, very urgent conversation in the odd little bathroom off the back service corridor—as they had felt that this was the least likely room to be bugged—but even that had been more of a whispered one-way briefing in which Bucky had done little more than nod his head. Actually, he would have to inform Steve later of the locations of the over two dozen listening devices or cameras he had found so far, but of course he'd only had the opportunity to search five rooms. There would certainly be more as the house was enormous. And the SAS were slippery bastards—which he could respect at the same time as hate, but SIS or whatever they wanted to call themselves these days were truly a f***ing looooooongtime thorn in his side.

When Bucky had slipped into Thea's old bedroom after putting Winnie down for bed, she had been seated at the window, looking out over the lawns towards the lake that she had pointed out to them earlier in the car. The room was approximately twice the size of the old apartment that he and Steve had been sharing in Brooklyn at the time he was drafted. The enormous, ancient bed hung with heavy, blue curtains was probably older than America. The fireplace was newer: that wall had clearly been modified when the newer wing of the house had been added. He could see why Thea had said the old electric heater was ugly, but Bucky could not help but think just how much he would have done to have a heater that modern and efficient at the time it was installed. Steve had always suffered from chilblains in the winter and usually came down with his worst chest infections in January or February. Bucky had spent many a night barely sleeping, as he'd listened to his friend hacking miserably.

Bucky turned his head to look around at the pale blue, panelled walls of the room—one entire side of which was covered in a mixture of photos of various Olympic skating stars, a large poster of a group of three men that he assumed were in some sort of musical group (what the h*ll was a house mafia anyway), and six excellent paintings of horses.

His head snapped around to look, as he heard her soft voice explain, "I begged my father to let me drag every single painting of a horse in here when I was 13 or so. I went through a phase. Well, a few phases as you can see from the other nonsense on the walls. Apparently, they never moved anything. I don't even remember those silly posters still being up there the last few times I came to Arnwell, but they must have been." Thea stood up and sighed with such deep exhaustion that Bucky started to move towards her. However, she crossed the room away from him as rapidly as possible whilst still leaning slightly into her cane, then reached out for the largest of the posters and ripped it down. She then began tearing at every picture and poster that had been taped or tacked up on the long wall on which the bed was located and then throwing them all over the ground. "If I don't take them down now…" she ripped the last one down and shredded it in one large movement, "then they will still be here when our children are my age. Richard is probably not even going to let anyone into this room now, Yasha. Can't you tell that it was a shrine already?"

He had no idea what to say, but she was right. Her family had been keeping the room as a shrine to her for much more than the past two years. Surely, she had been past the age of putting up posters for quite some time. "Yes."
"It will only be worse once I leave. It is silly. Why did I ever want a signed poster of Alexander Abt on the wall anyway? Just because Milena brought it to me, that didn't mean I had to actually put it up. I was so sentimental. I kept everything. Every scrap, every memento." She stalked over to an enormous double-width wardrobe and wrenched open the door. Inside were dozens of colourful, gauzy short dresses. "My ice-skating costumes."

Woah. Is that what women wore ice-skating these days? Those looked like tiny ballet dresses. Or something. Bucky had a sudden image of how beautiful Thea must have been out on the ice and clenched his fists in anger that she could no longer participate in the sport she had loved. "Oh. Well, they meant something to you, krasotka. It makes sense that you wanted to keep it all."

"Well, I don't now." She reached inside and scooped out an armful of the little spangled dresses and tossed them onto the floor. "What is the point?" She pulled out another large armful and said fiercely, "It isn't like I will be going to a fancy-dress party where I need to look like a silly ice princess. I should have donated them ages ago."

"You could do so now, couldn't you?"

"Probably not. Fashions change. I doubt anyone wears these styles now. It doesn't matter. I'd really rather they were burnt anyway." Thea pulled the last bunch of dresses out and threw them—hangers and all—onto the heap on the floor.

Moving quickly to catch her before she started destroying something else, Bucky looped his arm around her waist and said softly, "We can get rid of them if you want, baby, but it isn't urgent. We expect to have at least a week here before they transfer Steve and me to the US. We have time to go through all your stuff and see what you want to keep. Anything you want can be sent to us in New York."

"No. I do not want my last week ever at my family home to be spent looking at all the things that were taken from me, Yasha. I want to focus on where my life is now. I need to dwell on that instead or I think I might lose the plot entirely. I'm nearly there already."

Bucky knew that there was a lot more going on than he was probably aware of. He just hoped that he wasn't going to make any substantial missteps and that, perhaps, she would be willing to talk to him about it. "Ok, baby, I understand that. And I'm with you now, right? I'm with you and we are doing this together, so no one is losing anything. However, we don't have to tear up the room tonight. Why don't you tell me about some of it? Talk to me about what you want me to know from then."

Thea pulled away and crossed the room again to the bed. As she climbed up on top of the huge, fluffy silk eiderdown, she patted the top and said sharply, "Well, come on then."

Bucky walked around to the other side of the bed and waited. Thea had lain on her stomach, facing the opposite wall. Aware that it was very unwise for him to be next to her on a bed at that moment as his own desperation was overwhelming him, Bucky compromised by propping himself against the side of the thick mattress and turning to face the wall where she was gazing.

The painting, which he had hardly noticed beyond its location during his detailed cataloguing of the room during entry, was astounding. It was, honestly, breathtakingly beautiful. Which was, unfortunately, another reminder of how strongly the Winter Soldier still lived in him. Bucky Barnes would have noticed an exquisite piece of art like that. The Soldier had simply decided that it was an excellent location for both video and sound recording devices, as well as a reasonable place to set at least two guns and several knives at the ready.
"Richard bought it for me the year that he first inherited the estates from our father. The trustees were furious that he would waste such a huge sum on one item, but I think the inheritance went to his head for a little while. Nevertheless, I think it is probably one of the most extravagant things that he ever bought. It is probably hard for you to imagine, but Richard had a serious wild side to him when he was younger. When he was 23, he had a horrible accident though. That was when he changed, really. But he used to be much more impulsive."

"I admit that I cannot imagine that. He seems extremely serious now, Bella."

Thea nodded. "Well, he had the accident and then inherited everything too young. He did not deal well with my RA diagnosis either, since he is such a worrier. And then Christopher died and I went a bit mad. Then I disappeared and was presumed dead for two years. Richard is the sort that tucks all his misery inside and then suffers bitterly and quietly. Things have not been easy for him."

Bucky leant both elbows into the mattress as he watched her. "No. I am sorry to think that I was the direct cause of some of that, Bella."

Thea finally turned her face towards him and he nearly lurched across the bed to lay his hand on her cheek when he saw the depth of her unhappiness. She leant heavily into his hand and sighed. "We cannot change the past, nor would I want to do so. We could not be together now if things had not begun as they did then, Yasha."

He insisted urgently, "I did not say that I regret it, krasotka. I do not. I need you, Bella. You know that I do."

"Well, unfortunately tragedy is a constant companion of the Arnwell family. For every successful development, there is usually something nasty that precedes or follows. I suppose that I ought not to have expected anything different, really."

Bucky frowned. He knew that tone and it was a harbinger of bad things to come. He needed to redirect her attention. "Tell me more about the painting, Bella?"

"Oh. Do you like it?"

"I think like or dislike isn't the way anyone should talk about it, Thea. It is supposed to touch the soul and make you think of your salvation, isn't it? I don't think that anyone could be unmoved by it."

Thea's eyes lit up with surprise and pleasure. "I am so glad that you say that."

"Of course, I do. It is a frighteningly emotional and very beautiful piece."

"I have another important work, actually, which was in my flat in DC. Mummy had a school friend, Letizia, who lived in Madrid. I went with Mummy to visit her when I was 8. Letizia's husband, Señor Basavilbaso, was an important collector of major Iberian religious works. That was how I first fell in love with that genre of art: I was entranced by the beauty of all Señor Basavilbaso's paintings. I stayed in touch with him over the years; he sent me books and I sent him letters. In a roundabout way, he is even the reason that I got the interview at the Prado. When he died, Señor Basavilbaso was kind enough to leave me a very special miniature of the Blessed Virgin. Richard purchased this painting from Letizia's estate for me when she died a few years after that."

"It is incredible, Thea. It must have cost Richard a huge amount."

"I never asked, of course, but I am sure it did. Richard is having it shipped to his house in DC. When we are settled in New York—wherever they allow us to live—then he says he will bring
both pieces up to us."

Bucky stared at the large, gilt-edged painting of the Annunciation and breathed out harshly. "We are so different, Bella. Our experiences could not be more opposite from each other. I think the only things we have in common is that we came from English-speaking, Catholic families with 3 boys and 1 girl."

"I don't think that you are going to find anyone who has your life experience, Yasha. The similarities or lack thereof in our past are not nearly as important as where we both are now."

He did not respond for a moment. Finally, he looked away towards the curtain-covered windows and said uneasily, "I agree mostly, yet I also don't think that is true regarding our expectations for family life. Due to the terms of my repatriation agreement, we are going to be raising three children together in the same house as Steve and his family. And knowing Captain Old-school, he's going to want several more kids in addition to the twins. That's a lot of kids in one building, Thea. Now, I grew up living in very close quarters with a large family, but you…"

Thea eyed him with a frown and interrupted, "That doesn't matter, Yasha. We can suss out a plan to make it work. It is hardly insurmountable."

"Thea, baby, of course, we can handle it. You are an amazing woman, who has proved repeatedly that you are equal to anything that marriage to me has thrown your way. Even more incredibly, Bella, is how you…you filled my life with colour and beauty when I hadn't lived anything beyond black and white h*llscapes in decades. You did that, Bella. And wherever we are going to live in Brooklyn, you can be d*** sure that it won't be as nasty as that h*llhole in Minsk. Yet, somehow you turned even that tiny little room into the only place on earth that I wanted to be. Baby, I would live anywhere with you. I am just worried about how hard it is going to be for you. At least in all the s****y places we lived in Europe, we had privacy."

"We will have privacy enough. I don't think we will have a two-bedroom flat or anything even remotely close to it. Mary-Claire Rogers is not going to live anywhere that doesn't have plenty of space for her children. Or her wardrobe. Or somewhere for her husband to paint, apparently. Those are the three things she specifically mentioned when we talked about finding housing. Interestingly, Steve is equally determined that we choose a place in Brooklyn and not Manhattan."

"Of course, he is. He's a HYDRA-baiting needlessly foolish risk-taking idiot, but he ain't stupid."

Thea laughed. "Do you want to know what Mary-Claire told me that Steve said?"

"Sure. What did my genius pal say now?"

"That Bucky Barnes would have his guts for garters if he even considered planning to raise the kids anywhere other than a decent Brooklyn neighbourhood. Something about a promise you two made once."

Oh. Holy f***ing s***balls. That memory had not been there a moment ago. But now he had a distant voice that seemed like it was whispering in his ear, but staticky like a poorly tuned radio. A tiny, restive blond punk sitting up in his d*** sickbed—because, of course, he was—insisting with that worried look that had always made Bucky give in to whatever was being asked, 'Buck, promise me, ok? When we're grown up. You know. I just want our kids to know each other.' And he felt rather than heard his own hurt, shocked response. And remembered how he had never even considered that there could be any other way that their lives would work out. 'Don't be an idiot, Steve. We're gonna live next door to each other. It's a d*** guarantee.'
Bucky came back from the twisty annals of his mind and looked up to see Thea watching him with concern. "I was remembering. I didn't…I…"

She reached out and interlaced her right hand with his left. She always did that when she was trying to make some very serious point at the same time as reassure him that she still loved him—when she knew how uncertain, yet desperate he was to hear it. "Steve needs you, Yasha. When I was sick and you were in that cell at the Wakandan embassy, Steve told me then that he would do whatever it took not to lose you again. That he would always feel like that and that Mary-Claire understood. I doubted that at the time, but it turns out that he was right about that, too. She would find a way to move an entire mountain range to allow Steve to be able to stand at your side, since she understands how important the two of you are to each other. She talks about Steve the same way that I do about you, Yasha. She thinks he is literal perfection on legs."

So…yeah, that soothed one of his critical concerns then. He had been worrying about how Steve was clearly drowning in his love for Mary-Claire Rogers. Although he had also suffered quietly as he watched his newly super-soldiered best friend blunder about with his planet-sized infatuation with Peggy Carter, it had frightened Bucky far more to see how painfully in love with his wife Steve was. Steve's adoration of Mary-Claire was shockingly abject, which worried Bucky in the extreme, since he had not been able to tell the depth of Mary-Claire's feelings at all. Southern belles were an entity utterly outside his ken. But if Thea was this sure, then he would relax on that front. Steve needed a challenge, so he was always going to fall for a girl that he had to work to keep up with. However, Steve was all heart and passion, so it would break him to live with unrequited love. Even Bucky had barely survived that particular h*ll. "I don't deserve you, Bella. I know that I don't. I won't ever be able to do enough to be worthy of you. But I am going to spend every breath that I have left making sure that you and the children have everything that I can give to you."

Thea shook her head. "We need you. That is enough."

Bucky grunted with frustration. He was trying to send a d***ed message here. "Let me give you more than just enough, Bella. Please. Let me take care of you. Please, baby."

Her voice became quiet and soft in the special way it did when she spoke when she was feeling particularly emotional. Message received then. "Oh, but you already do. I know that you always will, too. I'm not refusing you, Yasha. You are the most romantic, thoughtful man alive, I think. I just feel that it is important that you know how valuable you are. You are enough."

Uncertain how to take either of those compliments, as they did not match what he knew to be the truth, Bucky decided, instead, that if she thought she'd been romanced before now…well…let's see what she said tomorrow.

Steve slumped back so his head was resting on the back of the long, ancient sofa where he and Bucky were sitting together. The shadows in the room were deep enough that the large portraits that hung along both sides of the room looked completely black. The heavy old brocade curtains were closed so even the light from the nearly full moon could not get inside. Only the soothing glow from the low fire and one lamp near the doorway illuminated anything at all. Steve's expression, however, was absolutely clear to Bucky. He had known that look for so long that he could probably recognise it in the absolute pitch black.

"So, what do you think, Steve? Is it possible?"

"Maybe. I don't know, Buck. It is risky."
"Yeah, well, so's just about everything you and I have done together since 1923, pal."

"It would sure be fun though."

"It isn't like they'd be looking for either of us at a f***in' baseball game, right?"

Steve snorted with amusement. "Well, it is the Dodgers."

"Yeah, still mad at 'em though. Cali-f***in-fornia, Steve."

"Well, what am I supposed to do, Buck? They didn't ask me for permission or nothin'. And I ain't gonna become a Yankees fan, ok? Not as long as I still breathe."

"Steve, no one is accusing you of being a f***in' moron. Though I'm wondering what you think about the new consolation prize team."

"Eh. It's baseball in New York, so I guess I'll take it even if Mets is a dumb name. At least they don't follow this new s*** that the so-called American league added to the mix."

"What's that?"

"Oh. Ohhhhh, Buck. You're gonna be so furious."

Bucky sat up with a jerk and turned to face Steve more directly. "Wadda ya mean, Steve?"

Steve laughed for almost an entire minute before he calmed down enough to say, "Conversation for another day, Bucky. Because, one, I got other things we gotta talk about right now and, two, I don't wanna wake up the household. Cause you're gonna be royally pissed off."

"What did they do? Did they ruin baseball, Steve?"

"Well, I mean, all the decent teams are still sensible enough because they're in the National League. Where anyone with any d*** sense would be, obviously. But seeing as, unlike you, I'm not a cheater and I don't like cheating ways…"

"Hey! I ain't the one as took a fuzzed ball into that game with O'Hanlon and the Carleton brothers."

Steve turned away from Bucky as he tried to hide his shifty expression from his friend's laser-focussed night vision. "It was the only d*** ball I had, Buck."

"Keep trying to sell that story, Steve. Maybe one day you'll find a buyer. In the meantime, what did they do to ruin baseball? S***. I mean, we fools all went off to war to freakin' save the world for freedom, goodness, apple pie, and the honest pure all-American wholesomeness that is baseball and they can't even keep their commie mitts off the best d*** game in the world? I lived with Soviet bulls*** for decades, Steve. And Soviet cr*p is utter balls, Steve. But I figured at least America—home of Barrett, Gerber, and Colt—still had sense."

Steve lurched forwards with a loud bark of laughter and then explained with a voice nearly choked with amusement, "Well, leave it to you to list America's top achievements as excellent weaponry and baseball. The travesty that I'm talking about though is called the designated hitter rule. Pitchers don't hafta swing a bat no more."

"Huh what?"

Almost giggling with glee at Bucky's reaction, Steve explained, "They don't gotta hit, Buck. They have a designated hitter that does it for them."
Enraged, Bucky whispered in horror, "Like a freakin' ringer?"

"Yep. Got it in one, Buck."

His voice raising to a low growl, Bucky demanded, "What the actual f***, Steve?"

"That was my reaction, too. But the dumba** who was teaching me about modern baseball when I was getting my 'Bring Cap into the 21st Century' lessons from SHIELD was a d***ed White Sox fan."

"Well, Chicago is for losers anyway."

Bucky could hear the pleased laughter in Steve's voice as he responded, "Not everyone is privileged enough to be born in New York, Buck."

"Huh, not everyone is even privileged enough to be born in the correct borough, Steve."

"True. Little spider kid is from Queens."

Well, no one was perfect. He'd liked that boy, actually. "Yeah, well, he seemed like a decent enough kid though. Not like he was from Jersey or nothing, jeez, Steve."

"Oh, Bucky, meant to tell you. I finally looked up what happened to Mack Peoples."

Ughhh, that bastard had been an oxygen thief. "Tell me it was gruesome."

"Very. Really, really appropriate. Remind me to tell you later. It's a good story, but I'm too tired to do it justice."

Bucky laughed. "Good. He was such a d*ck, Steve."

"That he was, Buck. That he absolutely was."

Now certain that he had Steve in a better frame of mind then earlier when the greyness of Steve's expression had made Bucky's protection instincts scream in agony, Bucky sighed. Time to get down to it. "So. Time to do get things done tomorrow."

Steve hissed out a long, low breath. "Aw s***, now?"

"Yeah, it's time."

"Well…well, ok. But for the record, Bucky, I do NOT like it."

Bucky laid his hand on Steve's arm and said seriously, "Didn't ask if you liked it. I don't f***ing like it. But it has got to be done."

After a pause, Steve said sharply, "Fine."

"So, how are we going to handle it?"

A much longer hesitation this time made Bucky worry for a moment that he had missed something. Was Steve truly not ready to take this step? But when he replied, Steve's voice was merely resigned. "I'll call him."

"Not without me there."
"No, no, Buck. I meant that I'll initiate the call. Video call."

Bucky took a surprised breath and then replied stiffly. "Right. Ok. Should be fun."

"Barrel of laughs, Buck."

At least he had somehow made Steve laugh again. Even if he had no idea why. "Shuddup, Steve."

"Buck?"

Bucky's head snapped up and he peered through the charcoal-hued haze of light to analyse Steve's face. "What, Steve?"

"Thank you."

"What the ever-living f*** for, Steve? Pal, I ain't done nothin'."

"Bucky."

He sighed. "Fine. Ok. I know. But you gotta understand, Steve. I was the Asset for decades. They suppressed everything that made me a person, but there was a reason it kept failin', ok? They had to keep wipin' me because just showin' me the news reports of your death wasn't enough to keep me compliant for long. But then you awakened James Barnes again. Thea made me human again, but you woke me up. So, put that in your pipe and smoke it for a while, Steve. If either of us should be grateful, then it's me. I don't like us talkin' about it. We're brothers just like we always have been. It ain't never gonna change. Right?"

Steve reached out and gripped Bucky's shoulder at the same time as he made a choking gasp. "Buck. Always. Always."
"So, that was fun."

Bucky's head snapped up and he looked over at Steve. "Holy s***, Steve."

"Well, you weren't sayin' nothin', pal. We gotta talk about it sometime."

"Sure. Lemme pencil you in about a week after never."

Steve snorted with amusement. "Look, so maybe it hasn't been a fun-filled few days. Won't always be like that."

Rolling his eyes at his friend, Bucky replied, "Steve, you gotta work on this optimism thing you got going on."

"I dunno, Buck. I think it's ok. So, your wife's extended family definitely hates you."

Bucky snidely answered, "Hate is really such a weak word at times, Steven. I think we've worked ourselves solidly up to odium in the last week."

Steve waved his hand dismissively at Bucky and sarcastically responded, "Aw, says you, Buck. You were such a teacher's pet for Mrs O'Malley. You and your 'elevated vocabulary.'"

"Can't help it if some of us made an effort in school, pal. Tommy's a decent guy, but yes, the rest of Thea's family, especially her Aunt Arabella and Great-Aunt Patricia clearly think that I am the scum of the earth."

His face darkening immediately, Steve flopped back against the back of the bench and replied sharply, "Yep, they do. And I think that they are narrow-minded, snobbish witches. And that's the clean version of my sentiments."

Bucky laughed. "Naw, don't let me stop you from sayin' it like it is, Steve."

"Yeah, that would be unwise, Buck."

With an angry grunt, Bucky nodded. "I know, Steve. If I was the man that they all think that I am, I'd have actually put my metal fist through their face. As it was, I just quietly sat there looking as inoffensive as a former HYDRA assassin with a vibranium arm possibly can. Didn't do a very good job though, even though I didn't rise to any of the bait that each one of them threw at me."

"They were trying to cause trouble, Buck. They wanted to make you look dangerous, so our friendly SAS minders would lock you up. I've met HYDRA agents that I liked better than some of Thea's aunts."

"Yeah, well it wasn't all my history working for HYDRA that they hate, Steve. Thea's great-aunt so politely informed me that I am just a labouring-class boor and that I cannot possibly hope to please someone like Thea. Apparently, no enlisted soldier has ever had the temerity to court an Arnwell, not in however many generations they've been around."

His eyes wide with shock, Steve ground his teeth together as he replied, "What a nasty old snob."
"Yeah, but it isn't like she's wrong. I had a few semesters of art school back in '41 and that was all the higher education that I ever had. If it weren't for my—shall we say…special windfall, then the only way I'd be able to provide for my family would be as a warehouse worker or something similar."

Steve eyed Bucky with concern as he replied, "Well, waddaya think I'd be doing if I wasn't tossing my giant frisbee around? Same thing, Buck."

"Steve, you've always been the top of the heap. Don't sell yourself short—not to me, pal."

"Ok, Buck, but if you get to say that, then I can tell you what I think without you complainin'. You know that you've always been the one everyone wanted to follow. I don't care what your wife's family says. Your wife has made her opinion very clear and she agrees with me."

Bucky smiled slowly and breathed out, "Yeah. I don't got no right to be so lucky. Holy s***, Steve, she's incredible, ya know?"

"Yeah, you got a great girl, Buck. We each got stupid lucky, right?"

"We did."

They both watched as Thea's cousin Owen stalked around the opposite side of the lake in the spreading twilight.

His eyes narrowed almost to slits, Steve stood up and whispered, "I honestly hate that guy."

Bucky growled. "He accused me of threatening him when I suggested that he should be kinder to Thea. He even tattled on me about it to Major Cornish. The a***h*** was making her cry, Steve. What was I supposed to do, sit on my a** and do nothin'? I even used my polite words. Sister Therese-Marie would have been proud."

Scratching his beard angrily, Steve responded, "Well, who gives a rat's hind leg what the b*stard thinks, huh? And when I talked to him, I didn't use my polite words at all. There was plenty of exculpatory video evidence if they try to blame you for somethin'. All the cameras that they got around, well, we got just as many. I don't trust them an inch, Buck. Not at all."

Bucky sat very still as he watched Steve pacing. Then he said seriously, "Don't go fightin' any more battles that we don't need, Steve. Major Cornish refused to make a report when I pointed out that the entire encounter had taken place in front of three witnesses. Owen will always be nothin' more than a whiny s***. So, let's talk about the really good stuff, y'know, since you wanna talk, Steve. Talk to me about Stark."

Steve flopped back onto the bench where he'd been sitting before with his sketchbook in hand. "I don't think that Tony and I are ever going to be able to heal the breech, Buck. We may not have seen eye-to-eye on everything, but we were friends. Good friends, I thought. He drove me d*** near crazy, but he was someone I liked and even trusted."

"Until I f***ed it up, yeah."

Tossing his sketchbook onto the ground in front of them, Steve insisted, "No, it wasn't you. It was me and it was Tony. He made Ultron, Buck. That was him. The result haunted him, which, yeah, it should have, but it wasn't healthy. He wants to fix everything and when he can't...he blames himself. And I was so frozen inside that I didn't have a self, not outside of the fight anyway. So, it was a bad combo. Then, I saw you and Steve Rogers suddenly woke up. Next, I met Mary-Claire and suddenly I actually wanted to live. But Tony...he has a different focus. He thinks of the team,
but as a unit worth saving despite compromise. I thought of the team as a group that was worthy because it was out there saving without compromise."

Bucky frowned and stated firmly, "You're an idealist, Steve. Always have been. There can be compromise where your honour is not lost and a good outcome is possible."

Gesturing wildly, Steve seemed desperate to make his point. "I agree with that, Bucky, but I'm not going to sit back and watch when I could be out helping. I'm not going to be sent out on missions with which I cannot agree. I'm not in the Army anymore. I gotta take the blame or the credit either way for my actions. This UN council thinks of dollars and politics. The Avengers was supposed to be a group that could go right to the heart of serious trouble and help quickly."

Bucky nodded understandingly and answered, "I know, Steve. I get it. But we cannot ignore the fact that we are not just people. We're weapons. You and your Avengers were able to stop an entire alien army by yourselves. Just the six of you. People were grateful, but you can see why they'd be afraid, too."

"We are there to protect them, Bucky. That's all we want. But we aren't perfect. Sometimes there are casualties, as in any battle. It is awful, but that is the cost of the fight. If we hadn't gone after Rumlow in Lagos, thousands would have died from the biological weapon they had. We didn't set off the bomb, Rumlow did. We just tried to contain the blast and, unfortunately, weren't as successful as we should have been."

Bucky didn't speak, but just put his hand on Steve's back. He knew why Steve had been distracted on that mission. He also still knew all the tricks to getting his hot-headed friend to calm down. So, he waited patiently, not moving his hand or looking at Steve. They sat there silently as Steve put his brain through its paces—beating around mentally as he tried to find a non-existent solution. Bucky felt Steve's shoulder blades twitch and, almost smiling that his friend still had all the same tells, he told himself that Steve was finally ready to admit defeat. Then, just as he always had at that point, Steve looked sideways at Bucky and said, "Alright, Buck." Then, as soon as Bucky removed his hand, Steve slumped back into the back of the bench and said, "Ok." Bucky nodded and smiled.

However, Steve's long, shuddering sigh caused Bucky to lift his head sharply and stare through the almost dark at his friend. He could see Steve's unhappiness plainly, as Steve said softly, "Sometimes, the timeline is fuzzy for me, Buck. I feel like I'm in two places at once."

Honestly, he felt like that all the time, but perhaps Steve had been luckier. "Just sometimes?"

"I dunno. It isn't like I don't know what year it is or nothin'. It's just...like the two timelines of my life are weirdly blended. It doesn't feel like you and I, and I mean us as a pair, are any different, Buck."

"Why should we be, Steve? We are different individually, but our brotherhood isn't changed. It moulds to meet where we are."

"But who gets to have that? Why are we so lucky, Buck?"

"Because a lot of our life has been h*ll. I wouldn't have made it through much without you, Steve. Truth."

Steve shivered. "Well, I wasn't making it through. I told you about that."

"Yeah and I told you what I would do if you even thought of doing something dumb like that again,
you idiot. I will resurrect both you and the Winter Soldier and beat the ever-living s*** out of you if you do anything stupid like getting yourself killed by taking a senseless risk."

"Bucky, sometimes risks are necessary."

"Is jumping out of a plane that is in the process of safely landing long before it gets there necessary?"

"Uh, no, but we talked about that time already, Buck. I don't need another lecture. I know I oughta have waited."

"That's d*** right, Steven. And I know you. There ain't anyone else alive as knows you like I do, punk. And you have never seen a risk that didn't look necessary. You think it's fun."

Steve looked guiltily at his friend and then answered, "Not exactly. I just don't think about the risk most of the time."

"I know you don't. That's why you got me, punk. You're gonna listen to me and run s*** by me before you go off half-cocked as usual. You're a tactical genius, but every d*** plan has one thing in common: you right in the crosshairs. And almost always there was a way we coulda mitigated some of the risk. You're gonna get better at that, aren't you, Steven?"

"You're really on a roll tonight, Buck. What's gotten into you?"

"You really gotta ask, Steve?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. What is going on, Buck?"

Buck darted his eyes over at Steve and snarled in a low voice, "Deadpool, Steve? Wade Wilson. That's who you picked?"

Clearly shocked that Bucky knew, Steve replied uncomfortably, "He owed me, Buck. And…yeah, ok, he wasn't my first choice. He's a little…"

"Crazy?"

"Unorthodox."

"He talks to an imaginary audience, Steven."

"As I said, he is unorthodox. But he will do anything he's got to do in order to get the job done. And I needed someone who would come all the way to Geneva at the drop of a hat. Also, I needed someone who was afraid of me."

"Doesn't seem to me that Deadpool would have any fear of Captain America. He didn't fear HYDRA. And how the h*ll did he owe you?"

"Please don't ask, Buck. Ok? He isn't afraid of Captain America. He's afraid of Steve Rogers."

"Huh. Now you're definitely gonna have to tell me that story, Steve. There are only 3 people alive other than me who know just what you are capable of doing to protect someone."

Steve sighed and peered guiltily over at Bucky. "Ok, ok, but not now, alright?"

Bucky grunted as he stood up and then replied, "Fine. Let's go in. I gotta make sure Thea took her meds. The Wakandans did a great job with the grafts, but she still has to take that powder for
another four days."

"What did they say about lasting effects?"

"Possibly none. They did a scan or whatever they call it. The RA is still halted in place. The damage hasn't worsened. She shouldn't even scar. Sometimes, I really love the future."

Just as he always had as a kid, Steve hurried to get the door before Bucky could open it for him. "I didn't feel that way for a long time, Buck. But right now, I'm pretty ok with it."

"It was a pretty tough day, wasn't it?"

Thea looked over at Mary-Claire, who had just sat down beside her and nodded mutely. For nearly half an hour, she had been staring out the row of windows that ran along the back of the orangery, but she had barely noticed what was going on outside on the lawns where Steve and Bucky were sitting on a bench overlooking the lake and talking animatedly in the twilight.

Mary-Claire placed her hand lightly on Thea's forearm as she said, "I have a lot of experience with family drama, unfortunately. It can be so much more devastating than other types, can't it?"

"Yes. I really didn't expect my family to be so unpleasant. Yasha says that I was being rather wishful to think that, since, according to him, no one who truly cares about me would want me to be married to the Winter Soldier."

"If Bucky was still only the Winter Soldier, then they would be right, Thea. The difficulty with his assessment is that Bucky doesn't accurately see who he is now compared to before. Either of his befores, honestly."

Thea sighed miserably. "Maybe. I suppose that I never met him when he was 100% Winter Soldier. He had already regained self-determinacy by the time he burst into my flat that evening. He didn't know who he was, but he was in control of himself nevertheless."

Humming sadly, Mary-Claire nodded. There was a long pause before she said, "Steve fought him as the Winter Soldier, you know. He said it was like living through a nightmare when he was actually awake. He has frightening dreams about it still, yet with a different outcome."

Thea nodded her head twice and then looked away. "Yasha dreams of the same thing. Except in his dream he wakes from the conditioning after he has killed Steve. He has never been able to go back to sleep on the nights when he dreams that nightmare."

"They've been through so much, Thea. I don't know. " Mary-Claire craned her neck to try to see where Steve was seated with Bucky's arm around his shoulder. When she saw him throw back his head and laugh deeply, she sighed and turned towards Thea. "I used to worry that I couldn't live up to Peggy Carter. The day he proposed, I admitted that to him. And, being Steve, of course, he launched into an earnest explanation of everything. And it boiled down to his admission that his love of Peggy was part of his youth. And now, he was a very different man, but still a man, and he loves me with all the fervour of his manhood. I had no idea how he really meant that then. Now that I know more, I just fear that Steve will be crushed when he realises that I'm not quite the woman that he has built up in his mind as a paragon of womanhood. He seems to need to believe that I'm perfect and, naturally, I'm really not."

Thea smiled sadly with understanding. "It is difficult when they put us up on the proverbial pedestal, isn't it? Every time that I do something silly, thoughtless, or unkind, Yasha eventually convinces himself that it was really his fault. That he didn't do a good enough job of explaining
what I should do or that he has not done a proper job of proving his trustworthiness."

First sitting further back into the cushion on the sofa, Mary-Claire then turned so she could better see where Steve was and replied with weariness, "They may look only a bit older than we are, but they really are from a completely different generation. They were born before any of our grandparents, Thea. I didn't realise before we married how much that affects Steve's personal world view. There is so much machismo and strict gender roles that gets in the way. I don't mean he wants to force me out of my career and into the kitchen. It is himself: Steve simply has enormous expectations about what a husband should do to care for his wife."

Thea shook her head and replied seriously, "That is remarkably familiar, but I wish it wasn't. Yasha seems to feel like he has not properly done his job if I so much as get a papercut. Although, unlike Steve, Yasha will never allow me to work outside of the home—not that the American government would allow any museum to hire me. However, it isn't just generational differences, Mary-Claire. They both grew up so poor and, in a time when class mobility was rarely achievable. He is now convinced that he ought to provide the same lifestyle in which I grew up. Nothing that I say seems to make a difference."

"You can understand why that would be difficult for him to believe, Thea. Steve worried about that, too, until Robert explained about my trust fund; yet he isn't at all comfortable with using my inheritance either. He feels as if he should be the one to provide everything for me, which is pretty ridiculous and kind of misogynistic. I'm glad that I can pay my own way for all the ludicrously priced things that I like. If he had to stress over how to afford my hairdresser coming out to my apartment whenever I like or my addiction to really exquisite shoes, then poor Steve would go crazy."

Thea shrugged and said wryly, "Or you'd just have to give them up."

"Well, obviously, that's what I would do. I am spoilt, but not selfish. I don't actually need any of those things, so I wouldn't think of asking for them if we weren't wealthy. I simply like them and, since I can afford them, I indulge."

"So did I, before, but it was surprisingly easy to get used to going without. Nevertheless, I nearly cried with relief when Richard insisted that I order a new wardrobe to be sent out to the house before we leave. All five of the outfits that Yasha brought from my flat are quite ratty after two years of hard wear and two pregnancies. I do have the two dresses I got in the Golden City, yet, I feel odd wearing those outside Wakanda."

"Oh, a whole new wardrobe? That is exciting! When should it all arrive?"

Thea smiled warmly and gestured widely with one hand as she replied, "Tomorrow. Harrods is quite the one-stop shop, as it were. Six pairs of shoes, a dozen or so day dresses, two suits, five nightdresses and a range of underthings, and then all the scents and powders and face creams that I've missed—even coats and hats despite them being off-season. I even bought a new hairbrush. It will be wonderful. Yasha nearly spit fire when I told him, but Richard insisted that it was a trousseau/wedding present. And since Richard had only just been told that the progress of my RA was stopped in Wakanda, he was feeling so generous towards Yasha that he insisted on providing quite a few bits of furniture and silver that belonged to Mama's family, as well. There's a ton of it all sitting out in the dower house unused."

"Oh, that will be great for the house in New York then. However, was Bucky ok with that?"

"Surprisingly, yes. Apparently, trousseaux were still commonly done in his time and the bride's family often gave furniture or things like that. Yasha went into that conversation ready to fight and
came out rather pleased. Richard isn't a diplomat for nothing, after all."

Mary-Claire slid down so she could lean her head against the cushion and replied as she looked up at the intricate metalwork on the ceiling. "My brother is as far from a diplomat as might be possible. He is famously rude to outsiders and entirely comfortable bulldozing right over anyone who stands in his way. Luckily, he strongly approves of Steve and Steve works hard to be very polite no matter what Robert says."

Thea laughed. "Richard will never approve of Yasha, I think. Tommy was the one who was so horrid about Yasha when we were in Geneva, if you remember. However, he and Yasha have been thick as thieves when dealing with all my aunts these last two days. They seem to understand each other very well, so I'm hopeful that they will continue to get along."

"Oh, I definitely remember how your brother reacted in Geneva, so I'm as shocked by how well they have gotten along as you are. Yet, it is a delightful surprise, for a change."

"Yes, it is. Have you looked at the packet of house listings? It would be nice if we could find one that we like before we are taken to New York. If we could get everything finalised and take delivery of the furniture and household goods soon, then we might be able to move in by the end of the courts-martial."

"That would be ideal, yes. I haven't looked at the realtor's packet yet, but I will try to peak through it tonight. First, we need a ridiculous amount of space for New York. Second, Steve has so many security restrictions and third, there are the list of things that Bucky has added. Fourth, there are the requirements from the government. Fifth, so many closets or the space to build closets. Non-negotiable. Honestly, I don't know how Marla even found eight options. Also, I was thinking that since they will be held in the detention facility until the courts-martial are done, you, me, and the children can simply stay in Glenn's old apartment until the house is ready. He hasn't sold it yet."

Surprised, Thea asked, "Is there space? That is four young children in a bachelor's apartment, Mary-Claire."

"Oh yes, there is space. Glenn never does anything halfway and he used to live there with my best friend when they were together. There are four bedrooms and a quite enormous kitchen. Not that I cook unless starvation is imminent."

Thea laughed ruefully. "Well, I can cook very basic things. I had to learn rather quickly or we would have eaten lamb stew, eggs on toast, or boiled potatoes for two years. That is all that Yasha knows how to make. Yet, the only things he ever wanted were all Russian foods, so my abilities in the kitchen are limited to three Russian soups, kotlety and potatoes, cabbage or meat pirozhki, stuffed chicken, and blini. I tried pelmeni once, but that was a horrible failure."

"I've never eaten Russian food before."

Frowning as she replied, Thea responded, "Well, neither had I, but that is what made Yasha happiest. The day that I first made cabbage pirozhki, he nearly cried with happiness. I'm really not a good cook, but I can make enough of the things that make him happy. Yasha won't eat borscht, however. Apparently, HYDRA fed him borscht from a tin every time they took him out of cryo."

"I think that I see a meal delivery service in our near future, dear."

Thea smiled with amusement. "All that I want right now is a proper curry. I'm sure we can find somewhere in New York that can do one, right?"
"In New York? Dozens. Just wait until I introduce you to a real breakfast. We Southerners have that meal completely perfected."

"I look forwards to it. However, Yasha only eats kasha porridge with eggs and two cups of tea with jam. Every single morning."

Mary-Claire grimaced. "Oh dear. Wait a moment, how does one eat tea and jam? Do you mean the jam is on toast?"

"No, it is a traditional Russian thing. They stir the jam into the tea much like I would do sugar. I cannot get used to it, so we kept a pot of sugar for me, too."

"That sounds revolting. Wouldn't the fruit pieces float in the tea?"

Thea shook her head. "No, they mostly sink to the bottom and then Yasha eats them. He doesn't like tea made the English way either. He says it doesn't taste right."

"Ick. And I only drink iced tea, not hot unless it is freezing cold outside. Steve drinks gallons of coffee."

"Oh, yes, Yasha loves coffee, too."

"Is yours a morning person?"

Huffing with annoyance, Thea replied, "Sickeningly so. I like mornings, but I rather think that they don't begin before six. Yasha is awake at 4 for his first run of the day."

Mary-Claire shivered pointedly. "Steve loves to run miles a day. Actually, I think that he might even need to do so or else his muscles don't get enough use. It is a lot like their ridiculous metabolism. There are consequences to being a supersoldier."

"That there are."

"For the most part, however, the benefits are pretty great."

Surprised, Thea smiled cheekily and asked, "Did I ever tell you why Yasha sometimes calls me kitten? He once picked me up in the seated position with just one arm and placed me in the front seat of the vehicle. I told him that he lifted me like a baby kitten."

"That's funny. I hate that Steve can pick me up so easily. I have always hated being so short and it reminds me that I'm super tiny."

"Well, have you told Steve that?"

Mary-Claire made a face as she said, "Yes, and he understands, since he was so small before the serum. But no matter what, I'm still over a foot smaller and my hand fits entirely inside his palm."

Thea nodded with comprehension. "It is interesting how differently we see the same thing, but I do understand. After my initial diagnosis with the RA, I got rather stroppy any time that my brothers had to do something for me."

"I just hate being weak. I have always felt that way. I had so many problems as a girl. Crushing anxiety. I'll tell you about it one day, but it was a very serious problem. I still have issues now."

"You've overcome so much then. I think you're quite incredible."
Her expression deeply sceptical, Mary-Claire stated bitterly, "Thank you, but I promise you that I am not. I have to be managed by everyone from my brothers to my assistants to Steve. I have long-acting anxiety meds and short-acting anxiety meds and my brother has my psychiatrist's cell phone number in his phone. I await the moment when Steve tires of how cautiously he has to step around my peculiarities."

Thea took both Mary-Claire's hands in her own and said very seriously, "I am so sorry that you feel that way, but it is objectively true that you are really quite amazing. Without all the work that you've been putting in with your consortium making plans for nearly two years, we would not both be sat here in my family's house with our husbands and children, as we await transport to the States. I don't think that Steve will ever be disappointed in who he married. He has stars in his eyes when he looks at you."

Mary-Claire did not look up at Thea, but took a shaky breath and responded, "Thank you. I absolutely hated nearly every moment of what I had to do. However, as soon as I saw where the prevailing winds were blowing, I realised that I had to do something or everything would fall apart for Steve. I think that I would have wanted to do something even if I had not met him, but the moment when I realised that I was willing to do absolutely anything legal if it was necessary to help Steve was when I understood that I am in love with him."

"We have both done rather a lot just to be able to stay with our husbands. And there is so much more to come, too."

"I know. That is why I have agreed to stay on at the UN as director of the new Enhanced department. Until there is someone else trustworthy to whom I can hand over the reins, then I am stuck. I never thought that I would go so far for one person, but I would go much further for Steve."

"I know you would, dear. I can tell that you adore him. He's a really great guy, too. You have excellent taste."

Mary-Claire laughed a little. "He's wonderful. I wish more people could know Steve Rogers and not just Captain America."

"Sounds a bit familiar. I think that I might have said very nearly the same thing regarding Yasha to Tommy a few hours ago."

"Even Steve is in awe of how much Bucky worships you, Thea. I don't mean that he doesn't approve or doesn't understand why Bucky loves you. It is just that he has never seen Bucky act this way. Apparently, Bucky was a big flirt back in the day, but was never serious about anyone. Steve says that he always knew it would take a lightning strike to capture Bucky's heart and that, when it happened, Bucky would fall hook, line, and sinker."

"I don't really know why though. He has told me why, but it doesn't make much sense. I think he just had not had anyone be kind to him in so long that I looked special by comparison."

"Honey, you are talking nonsense. Beyond the fact that you are very beautiful, you are one of the sweetest people that I've ever met. Even Alice is going to like you and she hates nearly every other woman on the planet beside me. Of course, he was bowled over by you. You aren't giving yourself any credit."

"That is very kind of you to say, but you do realise that he claims he fell in love with me within 30 seconds of entering my flat, don't you? In that time, he had time only to see what I look like, that I am disabled, and that I am a quiet, obedient sort of girl. That's not typically the winning
"Steve claims it happened to him when he was eavesdropping on a heated conversation between Alice and me in a café. That doesn't sound very promising either, does it? But he apparently went back to that café every day for two weeks in the hopes of seeing me again. Then he balked when I did come in, since he was intimidated. Steve Rogers was intimidated by a 5'1" girl from South Carolina."

"I imagine that he was simply intimidated by your beauty."

"Sam told me that he had to give Steve tips on how to approach me, which is laughable. Any man that looks like Steve, yet has that sweet, honest smile was going to get at least the benefit of the doubt from me."

Thea smiled. "I remember sitting in an old mausoleum where we were hiding before we fled the country—it was an awful place—and trying to tell myself that I couldn't risk allowing Yasha's incredible good looks to influence any decision regarding him."

"Had you not then fallen in love with him?"

"Not quite, no. That was only the third day. Yasha was really difficult and very rough when I first knew him. I know that you think he is controlling now, but you have no idea how bad it was then. It was not fun."

Mary-Claire bit her lip and attempted to look as uncritical as possible as she admitted, "I think he is extremely possessive, yes. However, he would do anything you wanted about most things. Your children's and your safety are the only exceptions that I have seen, but even Steve cannot budge him about those decisions."

"Oh, that isn't all, but that is where Yasha is most controlling. I haven't always handled it well. I was often miserable during the first six months or so. I hid things from him and I kept my feelings from him, since I thought he might manipulate me to gain more control. I bent over backwards to please him so he wouldn't descend into one of his self-hating misery binges."

"That does sound awful. You don't have to answer, but I cannot help but wonder how it got from there to now."

"It does sound bad when I only mention those bits, but there is so much more to Yasha than any of that. I do not like how our relationship began, but I would go through it all over again if it meant I still gained him. He is worth it."

"I am glad."

"How I fell in love with him…that is difficult. I've tried to trace it myself. It was both gradual and instant. I connected with him and felt in tune with him even at the same time as I hated what was happening to my life and was deeply afraid of him. Yet, he is clever and very quick-witted. He has a wonderful, dry sense of humour. He is unselfish and exceedingly loyal. He is extremely honest. He notices even the smallest things and is thoughtful about everything he does."

"Yes, I can see why all of that would appeal to you."

"Honestly, he is precisely what I had always wanted, but in a very different package than I had expected. Imagine all of those things I said combined with a man with that physique and with those eyes staring down at you with desperate love. It was impossible to withstand all that for very long. I married him, since I could see how things would be, but he was so angry and miserable, yet so
determined that he would never push me. Therefore, we were married and he would rarely even kiss me, since he thought I didn't care for him."

"Steve could never have managed that. Before we were married, of course, he was perfectly correct and careful. But once we were married, he seems to need to be touching me nearly all the time. I didn't actually understand before we were married just how passionate a man he really is, you know. He just seemed so controlled most of the time."

"Yasha says that Steve has always been the wilder of the two of them. Yasha might have finished a lot of fights for him, but Steve was always the instigator. That's why Yasha is determined to be allowed to help on Steve's future missions. According to him, Steve needs a lot of watching, especially during the war."

Mary-Claire laughed. "And Steve talks about how Bucky was such a fierce protector of anything having to do with Steve that all the Howlies had to do to get Bucky to take their side was to convince him that it was the best thing for Steve. Apparently, Steve had to come down pretty hard on Dugan about it a couple times until they stopped that."

A fond smile crossed her lips as Thea tilted her head and considered her fingernails absently. "Yasha probably knew all about it, you know."

Mary-Claire laughed. "Probably, but Steve cannot stand the thought of anyone not treating Bucky with the utmost respect. You should hear his opinion of Major Cornish."

"I do dislike that man. I really feel like a bit of cake. How about it? Mrs Manchin let me know that she had several slices worth of the chocolate tart left."

"Absolutely. We had better go and grab them before Steve hears about that. There won't be a crumb left."
“Krasotka?”

Opening her eyes all the way, Thea lifted her head from the pillow and looked for Bucky through the darkness. “What’s wrong?”

His voice was barely a whisper as he croaked, “Please.”

After a moment of scanning the shadows of the room, she found him. Bucky was huddled between the long, ancient brocade draperies, that were now partially pulled off as if they had been wrenched apart in a panic by his prosthetic arm. Thea sat up and asked anxiously, “Yasha, what’s wrong? Are you ok?”

Bucky did not lift his head from where it was pressed against his knees, his long dark hair covering his face entirely. “No.”

Thea threw back the covers and scurried over to his side. Kneeling in front of him, she swept his hair back with one hand and leant forwards to kiss his forehead. “Was it a nightmare?”

“No. You’re worried about tomorrow? About what they’ll do to you during transport or about being separated from us?”

Bucky raised his left hand to her face briefly, but when the metal fingertips touched her face, he dropped it. “Yeah, I can’t stop thinkin’ about everything, honestly. It’s gonna be h*ll for you again, Bella, and I won’t be there.”

Choosing honesty over comforting lies, Thea replied softly, “Yes, it probably will be miserable. I won’t pretend that it isn’t going to be absolutely awful, Yasha. However, I trust that it will be worth it on the other side.”

“If there is one. It could all crash and burn, Bella. They could throw me in prison for life, you know. Then you’d be stuck with two kids and one on the way, but you wouldn’t have me to support you.”

Thea’s expression suddenly became intense, as she gripped his flesh hand in her left one. “Stuck? That is hardly the term that I would use, Yasha. The children are everything to me, you know that. And I would still have you, you know. You’d just be kept where I cannot be with you every day. As horrid as that would be, it would be infinitely better than when I didn’t even know if you were alive. And as long as you are alive, then I can bear this, Yasha. I can.”

Bucky’s legs pulled tighter to his chest and he moaned miserably. “You shouldn’t have to bear anything, kitten. You should be happy, Bella. You should have everything you ever wanted. And I will never be able to give that to you, no matter how well this court-martial goes. You’ve been forced to agree to limit your rights forever. The best that you’ll ever get is half a d*** house and a husband who is a monumentally f***ed up former prisoner-of-war with psychosis, memory loss, dementia, and whatever-the-f*** they call battle fatigue now.”

“Honestly, you’ve had all of that the entire time that I’ve known you, Yasha. I don’t see why you would expect me to be suddenly shocked to discover you’ve got significant psychiatric issues with which we must contend. I chose you before when I had no outside help, so why would I run from
you now when I do?” Thea sighed and scooted around to his left side. When she leant against his Wakandan-made arm, he instantly sagged into her and laid his head against hers.

“You are doing better, but there is a long way yet to go. I already love you though, Yasha. So, I will only love you more as time goes on, you know.” Bucky slipped his arm around her tightly and slid his legs flat onto the ground so he could pull her onto his lap. Thea allowed him to do so and then snuggled her head into his shoulder. “Post-traumatic stress disorder is what they call battle fatigue and, yes, they did diagnose you with an extremely complex case. The doctors said that you are sometimes in a dissociative fugue, Yasha, which is when you experience the psychosis and flashbacks. It is hardly surprising that you would be suffering after all that HYDRA did to you.”

His voice was barely audible as he whispered into her ear, “I don’t got no right to force you to suffer, too, Bella.”

“I’m not suffering, you silly man. You are a wonderful husband and father and I will not allow you to challenge that. You have persevered. You have become your own person again and you have made the choice to have your own family, then you have done everything necessary to take care of us.”

Bucky laughed bitterly. “Which is why Ross got his filthy, rotten hands on you, baby. Yeah, I’m a hero.”

Thea turned slightly in his lap, so she could look at his face. “Yes, you are a hero. You saved us when we were captured. You are the longest-held POW in history. You fought through decades of torture to take control of your mind again. You became Yasha, who I love. You became Papochka to Jamie and Winnie. You are our hero. That is all there is to it.”

“I don’t deserve you and the children, Thea.”

“Well, I think that you do. And it really isn’t up to you how we feel, you know. Either accept that your family loves you or you will make us all miserable by refusing it. Your choice, Yasha.”

“I will never choose losing you, Bella.”

Thea settled slightly in his lap, so she could look at his face. “Then you are going to have to keep pushing forwards through everything that is coming. I know that it will be difficult, but you have me and you have Steve. Most importantly, you have yourself again.”

Bucky breathed in and out slowly for several moments, then said very quietly, “I prayed that day. The day that I laid Steve on the banks of the Potomac. I didn’t even know what the words were as I was saying them. They just came out. Latin of all things. I guess from when we were altar boys. It was months before I realised what those words even were—it was when I was waiting for you to wake up in Algiers.”

“You were becoming your own person again. The memories of Bucky Barnes were in there, so it isn’t surprising that your mind pulled out something that it felt would help.”

“Maybe. But I didn’t pray when Jamie was sick. I was too angry. I didn’t pray when I thought you’d never love me. I knew that was what I deserved. I didn’t even pray when they took you. I became the Winter Soldier instead. I…I don’t know why I prayed then, but I haven’t ever again.”

“Perhaps you weren’t ready to consciously think of that yet, Yasha.”

“And I am now? I don’t know. I was layin’ there for hours, just worryin’ and thinkin’ about all the s*** that’s about to go down. Wondering if you’re gonna be ok. Realisin’ that if I don’t get
exonerated, that my kids are gonna be branded as children of a war criminal.” He gasped for breath and then continued with a sob, “So, I just busted up from the bed and suddenly thought, ‘Why haven’t I even said a rosary over my kids or nothing?’ My mother raised me better’n that. Da was a drunken bully, but Mam was an angel and she’d be so disappointed in me as a father. I ain’t done right by my kids. What kinda example am I? But then I couldn’t remember the words. I couldn’t remember how to start. However, I can tell you the six best places to knife a man or calculate the exact angle needed for a centre mass shot.”

“Yet, you know that I know the words, Yasha. You don’t have to do everything on your own. We can do it together.”

Bucky let out a shuddering sigh and then said, “Yeah. Yeah, ok. Thank you, krasotka. Tell me the words.”

Thea sank onto the long, low sofa and said in a wobbly voice, “At least the children are all asleep now.”

Mary-Claire sat beside her and replied seriously, “Thankfully, yes. Glenn did a good job getting everything arranged here, don’t you think? The nursery really looks quite nice.”

As she blindly stared at the wall in front of her where a large, original Franz Kline hung, Thea replied absently, “Yes. The children should do well in there. It is nice.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to see a doctor, dear? I’m concerned how you are handling the strain of everything. My own psychiatrist has put me on elevated doses of everything and I feel as if I am only just keeping myself from losing it.”

Surprised, Thea turned towards Mary-Claire and said succinctly, “No, thank you. They medicated me after Christopher died and I didn’t like it. I will manage. Your cousin really has been lovely.”

“Glenn is a darling. And I cannot believe how well Robert did in finding us nannies with special forces training. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Her tone utterly flat, Thea replied, “I think that nearly everything is possible if you have the money for it.” Pulling a blanket over to tuck round her knees, she added, “I am so grateful that your family is permitted to be involved. Richard is absolutely outraged that he cannot stay here with me, you know. So many of the decisions regarding me and the children are so needlessly petty, Mary-Claire. I live in dread of finding out the next silly thing that they will insist on.”

Mary-Claire made a sympathetic face and answered, “I know and I am sorry. It took every bit of machination and manoeuvring that I could manage to get the current arrangement approved. Unfortunately, they are quite well aware that the way to control Bucky is through you and the children.”

“Yes.” Thea sighed and, after a moment, she added, “Yasha would do anything they ask if he believed it was necessary to keep us together. Fortunately, he has good attorneys.”

Surprised, Mary-Claire laughed slightly. “Well, we try.” Then, she looked at the clock and said quietly, “They should have already left.”

“I know. No matter what happens, it is all set in motion now. We won’t be able to see them for days, will we?”

“Not until the first court appearance, no.”
“Two weeks. Why couldn’t they have let us all stay in England during that time? I do not understand why they have to go about things in this way. What is the point of keeping Steve and Yasha in their prison for two weeks when they were already under house arrest back home?”

“I know that it seems unfair, but there are reasons, I promise you.”

“I suppose so. However, after two weeks of separation from me and the children, Yasha will be in very bad condition. If he is doing really poorly, then I fear that could negatively affect the court-martial.”

Mary-Claire nodded. “I know. I am concerned about Bucky’s mental state too, especially if they keep him far from Steve. Currently, there are only two detention cells for Enhanced at Riker’s Island, which are next to each other. However, they were attempting to figure out a way in which to move one of them so Steve and Bucky would be isolated. We were able to block that effort as of yesterday, but I do not know what they might have managed to do today during our flight here.”

“Yasha told me that he expects that they will give him drugs to destabilise his mind during their transport.”

“In a way, that would be useful. I don’t mean to sound heartless, dear, but both psychiatrists that examined Bucky determined that medication would be detrimental and was not necessary. If they drug him, it would show mistreatment, prejudice, or incompetence, depending on their stated reason. Nevertheless, I really hope they don’t do anything of the sort. Bucky has been tortured enough.”

Thea swallowed a sob and gripped her hands tightly together. “All they need to do—in order to terrorise him now—is to threaten to keep him from me and the children. Beatings, drugs, abuse… none of that would be as damaging.”

Mary-Claire patted Thea’s arm soothingly. “I know, honey, I know. Steve and I have worked out a code for him to report to me what occurs during transport when I am permitted to attend my final meeting as his legal representation.”

“And you trust the new head attorney?”

“I do, yes. It was important for me to represent Steve and Bucky in Europe, but it would be an enormous conflict of interest for me to continue as their attorney now. I can no longer claim exigency or even uniqueness of the situation.”

“No, I quite understand. It was just such a relief to have you managing things, since I know that I can trust you.”

Mary-Claire smiled sadly. “I understand, dear, however, we each have a new role to play now. And one of my absolute favourite parts of the plan should occur tomorrow. If all goes well, it will be wonderful.”

Confused, Thea frowned, “What is happening tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid that I cannot talk about any of that, Thea.”

“Ok.” Thea tucked her legs up on the seat cushion and slumped over so she could lean against the left arm of the chair. “Ok. I know that you have to keep the secrecy about things, but I am just so tired, Mary-Claire. So very tired. And we have to go to that meeting tomorrow with Mr Stark, don’t we?”
“Unfortunately, we do. I don’t know how he will react to you, but I don’t think he will be particularly nice. He still hates Bucky and he’s very angry at Steve.”

Lifting her head back up from the side of the wing chair where she had laid it, Thea blanched and gripped her knees anxiously. “I thought that Mr Stark was helping us.”

“Oh, he is. Tony wants to put the team back together, even though he’s very bitter about what happened. He knows that he made mistakes and allowed his emotions to rule him that day in Siberia. He is also aware that the Sokovia Accords have been a dismal failure. Finally, I think Tony knows that he cannot be Ironman forever. He is concerned about who is put in place for the future.”

“He doesn’t want Yasha on the team though, does he? Is Yasha going to have to agree to work as an Avenger now?”

“No, but Steve won’t return to the team without him.”

Thea leant forwards and rested her elbows on her knees, so she could drop her face into her hands. “I didn’t know that. I suppose Yasha didn’t want to tell me.”

“You don’t want him to do it, Thea?”

“If he wanted to, then I wouldn’t mind. I just want him to be able to do something that is actually his choice—something he can believe in. I know that Yasha doesn’t want to fight anymore, since he’s said so. He only agreed to work as the White Wolf for Wakanda to protect me, you know. The first night we stayed in my family home, Yasha told me that he really just wants to spend his remaining time raising the children, reading, and tending a small flower garden of all things. But if Steve is going to keep on as Captain America, then Yasha can’t possibly not fight beside him, Mary-Claire.”

“I don’t think that Steve wants to fight anymore either, which has me pretty worried, actually. The fight is at the heart of who Steve is, you see. He believes in always doing what is right, regardless of the consequence. Yet, he is so disillusioned by how quickly he was vilified by the international community and shocked by how many people that he and his colleagues helped actually turned them in afterwards. Steve is feeling so disheartened that he told me he feels like he is lost at sea.”

“Yasha and I talked at length these last two days about his fears regarding Steve’s emotional well-being. It sounds as if Yasha was reading Steve exactly right, in fact. He is quite worried about whether Steve will manage if the courts-martial go poorly—especially Yasha’s portion. He thinks that Steve might do something foolish if they don’t treat Yasha properly.”

Mary-Claire stood up and walked over to the tray that the housekeeper had placed on the sideboard. She lifted the tea cosy and poured them both full cups of strong black tea, as she replied, “Bucky is right to be worried. I’m scared, too. It seems like nearly everyone forgets that our husbands are actual people. Steve is not some0073 comic book character, but a husband and father and friend whose job is being a superhero and whose hobby is painting. Bucky is not a storybook villain, but the longest serving POW and victim of decades of torture who is, at his heart, a guy from Brooklyn who loves his wife and kids more than anything in the world. These courts-martial are going to drag out every horrible thing possible, whereas the press will report on very little of the positive.”

“I know. However, that is why you and I came over now instead of staying in England, Mary-Claire. We are going to do as many interviews and allow as many sympathetic pictures to be taken over the next fortnight as we must. They need to know who Steve and Bucky really are and that is
something that you and I can do.”

Smiling fiercely, Mary-Claire replied, “That is precisely what I intend, Thea. You understand perfectly.”

Steve whispered so quietly that no one without a super soldier’s hearing could have understood, “Buck.”

Bucky didn’t reply, but he tilted his right hand enough to tap out a dash, dot, dash, dash. Surprised, Steve recognised the Morse Code for Y. Yes.

“Are you hurt?”

Dash dot. N. So…not hurt.

“Worried?”

Dash, dot, dash, dash.

Yes? Bucky never admitted to being worried, so he must be very concerned. Steve frowned and replied, “We’ll be ok, Buck.”

Dash dot.

No…no, meaning he didn’t think they would be ok? “Mary-Claire says we got a really good case for you. It’s mine that’s harder.”

There was a long pause and then Bucky jerked his head slightly, as if in pain, then his fingers tapped quite urgently: DASH DOT.

No? Was he worried about Steve’s case or his own or an entirely different thing? “Did they say something that got you worried?”

Bucky’s body froze and he was as still as a block of granite for a full minute. Finally, he tapped with his pinkie: Dash, dot, dash, dash.

Steve stiffened as he realised that Bucky was actually terrified about something that had been said or done to him between the time that they had surrendered for transport and then. They had been apart for nearly 30 minutes before boarding, during which time almost anything could have been done to Bucky. Steve had already been concerned about that time away, but he had not expected worse than what had already been done in Switzerland or Britain.

Before Steve could say anything further, however, the firm footsteps of Master Sergeant Biggleston and Corporal Li approached rapidly from behind. The two men stopped in front of both Steve and Bucky, who were seated several feet apart on chairs with an astounding number of chains and straps binding each of them so they were unable to move much more than their fingers, toes, or mouths unless they popped their restraints.

“Time for a security check, chaps. I think we shall start with the Winter Soldier first, Li.”

The corporal used the pole in his hand to poke and pull at each of Bucky’s restraints from far enough away that Bucky was not even within two arms’ lengths of him. The soldier used the hooked end of the pole to run along each of Bucky’s limbs and then began aggressively prodding at him until Steve suddenly growled, “Leave ‘im alone. He’s cooperating.”
Waving Li on to start prodding Steve, Biggleston stepped closer to Steve and replied gruffly, “It doesn’t mean anything that he is cooperating, you know. Criminals and monsters like him often play along until we let our guard down, Rogers. I don’t intend to put any of the men on this plane at risk by coddling either of you. You have both proven yourselves quite capable of escaping every enclosure and restraint that has ever been used on you, but your mate here is especially notorious.”

Steve noticed the preternatural stillness of Bucky beside him—beyond even that which might be expected of one of the greatest snipers in history—and Steve’s breathing quickened as he tried to figure out what was wrong. Yet, Steve had forgotten how deeply attuned to him Bucky always had been. Although Steve could barely see Bucky’s face since his own head was held firmly under two straps and a bar, he knew from the change in sound that Bucky was attempting to mask his own panicked breathing.

Turning from Steve to see what was going on with Bucky, Biggleston demanded, “Oi! Something wrong here, Winter Soldier?”

Biggleston’s voice was sharp and his posture indicated his alarm, but Steve did not think that his concern stemmed from the same source as Steve’s. As far as Steve could tell, Bucky’s breathing seemed to have actually stopped. Although he knew that Biggleston or Li would likely intervene immediately if they saw Bucky was in physical distress, his own panic was so severe that Steve made such a desperate attempt to turn himself that the bar holding his head in place creaked loudly.

In response, two other soldiers rushed forwards and began prodding Steve repeatedly with electric shockers on poles, as they shouted, “Don’t move! Stay still! Stay still!”

As soon as they stopped jabbing him with the stunners, Steve clenched his teeth in pain, as he growled, “Zap me again and I’ll actually pop these restraints so I can punch you both in the face. Honestly, it is actually taking an effort NOT to break ‘em, since it would be as easy as tearin’ wet paper. So, I’m genuinely tryin’ to comply. All I wanna do is see what’s happening with my friend. Now, what’s wrong with Bucky?”

The two guards both raised their sticks again and the shorter of the two started to poke it at Steve, when Biggleston commanded sharply, “Put the sticks down, you cheese-brained numpties. You had no business to shock Rogers without first issuing a warning, since he wasn’t doing anything but turning his head. Now step back or I’ll put you both on report.”

His eyes still wild, Steve demanded, “Biggleston, what’s wrong with Bucky?”

“Rogers, you’re not in charge here, so you don’t give the orders. You need to calm down or I will have to sedate you.”

“I am calm enough and I am asking a legitimate question. I need to know what’s wrong with my best friend, sergeant.”

Sighing angrily, Biggleston replied sourly, “The Winter Soldier is fine. He’s just gone quiet. In fact, he’s not making half the noise that you are, Rogers, which means he is complying. They warned your mate what would happen if he made a noise and it looks as if he’s taken that to heart. Perhaps you should follow his example.”

Steve’s face shifted into a truly menacing grimace, as he trained his eyes firmly on Biggleston. “They did what?”

Li spoke up with a snigger. “Command told the animal there that he wasn’t to make a single noise during the flight and that if they saw him even move other than to blink or breathe, he’d be
separated from you and put on ice until the court-martial begins. He’s a mass murderer, not some war hero like you want him to be. We can’t be expected to let him have free reign or we’d all be dead before we got to America to deliver you lot.”

His expression darkened into complete fury as Steve looked from Li over to Biggleston for confirmation or denial. When no denial was forthcoming, Steve furiously snarled, “In other words, you threatened to treat him like HYDRA did.”

Biggleston stepped up and put his face right in front of Steve and hissed, “Repeat that. I dare you.”

“Your corporal just told me that Bucky is not allowed to make any sound. That he is not to move, which is why he’s even masking the sound of his breathing so you won’t see or hear him move. Apparently, they told Bucky that if he stepped outside of these parameters—which even a sneeze would violate—he’d be taken away from me and frozen, like HYDRA did. Is that normal protocol?”

Although he did not reply, Biggleston kept his gaze evenly on Steve with no appearance of discomfort or guilt.

Now frowning furiously, Steve continued, “Your doctors already amputated his new left arm—which was surgically attached and not just a prosthesis. Then, just like HYDRA, your doctors are now drugging Bucky. They’ve poked that IV drip of anti-psychotics, muscle relaxants, suppressants, and tranquillisers into him, despite the psychiatrists’ warnings that he should not be given drugs like that.”

Biggleston shrugged. “None of that was up to me, captain. The arm was removed because it is a weapon. The medications are necessary to keep him from freaking out and killing everyone here. I’m not going to apologise for any of that.”

His righteous anger flaming even brighter, Steve insisted, “Bucky had two years since escaping from HYDRA without freaking out and killing anyone until a Sokovian operative intentionally activated him when he was under UN custody. Purposefully injecting Bucky with these drugs could actually cause problems because he can't think clearly with them, but they are unlikely to actually help with a thing.”

Corporal Li sniggered again, which earned him a glare from Biggleston. Not looking particularly sorry, Li muttered, “Sorry, sir.”

“Is there something amusing here that you’d like to point out, corporal?”

“Erm, no, sir.” Corporal Li looked away, but he was clearly still struggling to compose himself.

“Then, join Wiggins at the back of the plane. I don’t want to see your face for the duration of the flight. Send Ghorbani up here with Morran.”

Li nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Biggleston glared down at Steve, but said more quietly, “I cannot change the orders, captain. I know they say your mate was a POW and brainwashed. But he killed dozens at least. The truth is, the Winter Soldier is a HYDRA assassin. He’s not safe. If I cannot count on your cooperation, then I’ll have to sedate you both.”

Steve shook his head. “Do you know how easy it would be for Buck and I to break these restraints if we wanted? We are actually trying to stay in them. We are complying.”
“Just don’t make waves, captain. They want to make an example of you both. You know that, right?”

“Of course, I do, but I cannot change their intentions, Biggleston. Buck and I have done every single thing that they have asked of us. Every d*** thing, even the most outrageous of requests.”

“Honestly, I just don’t want trouble, captain. If your mate is quiet, I don’t care if he wiggles his fingers or sneezes.”

“Is he allowed to talk?”

“Don’t push it. If those two fools with the charge sticks over there can hear, then it is too loud.”

“He’s not going to be put in cryofreeze if he breathes too loud?”

Biggleston scoffed. “No one is threatening to freeze anyone, Rogers.”

Steve looked over at Bucky, who was frozen in place and clearly extremely distressed. “Why don’t you ask Bucky what they threatened, sergeant?”

“I don’t need to talk to the Winter Soldier, Rogers.”

“Why not?”

Turning angrily towards Bucky, Biggleston demanded, “Alright, Winter Soldier, repeat to me precisely what your orders were when they loaded you onto the plane.”

Bucky took a deep breath and then recited in his quiet, gravelly voice. “Master Sergeant James Barnes, due to the immense threat you represent to all those around you, you will be bound with specialised head, chest, abdomen, thigh, and ankle restraints in addition to standard shackles during your transport from this facility to the Enhanced Prisoner facility on Rikers Island, New York for your court-martial proceedings. SGT Barnes, you are not permitted to communicate with anyone other than the military personnel in charge of your transfer on penalty of significant punishment to be determined by those personnel. Although your left arm has already been pre-emptively removed, your other enhancements will also be suppressed to reduce your ability to harm those around you. To this aim, you will be administered five medications through an IV drip in your remaining arm, which will not be discontinued for any reason during transport. Furthermore, SGT Barnes, for the duration of this flight, you are to remain silent—making no sound louder than 30 dB. Any sound above this range will result in the temporary implant behind your left ear making a sustained, punitive tone with a frequency of 35 kHz until you are silent. Additionally, SGT Barnes, you shall remain as motionless as possible—since any significant movement will cause a current to pass through the restraints on your wrist, thighs, and ankles until said motion ceases. At any time during your transport, if it is determined that you have disobeyed orders, you can expect severe and immediate reprisals. Lastly, any infraction, regardless of duration or size, shall result in you being sent to cryofreeze storage until your trial, a permanent separation from Colonel Steven G. Rogers a/k/a Captain America, severing of any rights to see your children, and charges being laid against your wife, Theodora Arnwell Barnes, for child endangerment and knowingly aiding a fugitive.”

Biggleston grunted. “S***. Alright. Ok. You can talk to him, Rogers. Just…just be quiet about it.”

Steve asked tightly, “And can he reply?”

“Sounds like he doesn’t have a choice. They’ll play some dog whistle or whatever in his ear, apparently.”
“He can tap out a message to me.”

“Yeah. Fine. Never thought I’d see the day that I felt sorry for the d*** Winter Soldier.”
"Read this."

Accepting the tablet from Natasha, Tony narrowed his eyes and asked sharply, "Sharing secrets suddenly?"

"Transcript. You might be interested."

Tony dropped the tablet. "I've read all the pertinent s*** about what they did to Barnes. Not going to change my feelings."

"Read it, Stark."

Tony got up and walked away from Natasha without a further word. As he got into the elevator, he leant back against the wall and sighed miserably. He knew as well as anyone that Barnes could no more have kept from murdering his parents than water could help being wet. In fact, although it was incredible that Barnes had survived the physical torture, it was truly unbelievable that he had remained mentally functional enough to even comprehend HYDRA's orders after the unrelenting, extensive, and all-encompassing psychological abuse that had been perpetrated against him.

Tony knew he was at fault in laying so much of the blame on Steve for what had occurred. By now, he had both admitted the catastrophic failure of the Sokovia Accords and understood his own part in pressurising the Avengers into agreeing. He had not wanted his pseudo-family to fall apart. He had not wanted to lose the friends he had found. He did not want to be deprived of the chance to do real good. He had despaired at being blamed for death and destruction after he had worked so hard to become better. Dad would have approved of the Avengers. Dad would have wanted him to make everything right with Cap. Dad had even been friends with Barnes. Dad…could s***ck it. And, yep, obviously Tony hated how much he still wanted to make the man proud even though his father had been dead for decades. But…Dad would have listened to Cap, d*** him. Tony was losing his found family, his friends, his fragile new identity, and his hope at finding some way to posthumously please his father.

And he'd lost Pepper.

He knew. He knew that he had to make things right. Cap…Steve had tried. Steve…he'd called Tony a better friend when he'd hugged Tony outside that warehouse in Switzerland…but Tony knew better. He was a s*** friend. He'd tried to kill Steve when Steve kept him from exacting his pound of flesh from Barnes. He'd then spent two years refusing to forgive Steve for the very human mistake of protecting his best friend at another friend's expense. Tony would do far more to protect Rhodey from far less, honestly. But from the moment that he'd heard his mother's voice on that video…yeah…Tony had been absolutely ready to flense Barnes and gut anyone who helped him. Even Steve. Especially Steve, actually. Fair or not…ok, ok, obviously not, but whatever…Steve had been on that morally righteous pedestal for Tony, since Tony had been old enough to say Captain America.

And Barnes…s***, Barnes was the longest serving POW in history. The recipient of decades of torture beyond description. The ultimate victim.

Tony, however, was a sack wipe who was equally talented at relationship a***hackery as he was inventing.
So. On that excellent, self-hating declaration of truth…

"FRIDAY. Put it up on the screen."

The article flashed to life before him as FRIDAY snidely replied with chirpy sarcasm, "Done."

Sometimes Tony really wished that he hadn't given her personality so much leeway to indulge in snark. "Yeah. Huh. This looks like it will need more than a phone call, doesn't it?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"I'm not in the mood, FRIDAY. Better have the car ready in 15 minutes."

"It might be advisable to change, sir."

"Yeah, 30 minutes, then. Whatever. Gonna tell me what I should wear, too?"

"If you really want, of course."

Tony briefly considered replying (pouring a pint of bourbon for a morning pick-me-up, sending his fist into the first satisfyingly breakable thing he saw, yanking FRIDAY’s programme and donating it to City College...whichever, no biggie) but he pushed his impulses down and headed for his closet.

Just over two hours later, Tony was striding wrathfully through the corridor that led to the Enhanced Holding Facility portion of Riker's Island. His fury had only grown as he had made call after call and FRIDAY (she had partially redeemed herself, so he would maybe just be donating her to Rensselaer at the moment) had fed him information that confirmed what he had read in the transcript—which he still needed to find out how in the f*** Natasha had managed to procure.

Tony could feel his left hand shaking and tucked it in his pocket hastily, as he pasted his most obnoxious smirk onto his face and addressed the guards in front of him. "Open up, fellas."

A somewhat pudgy, but exceedingly tall guard with a name tag proclaiming him "T. Willis" gawked at Tony and stammered, "Uh...Mr Stark...we, uh, don't have any orders..."

He did not have time for this s***. "No orders? Do you think that I was just allowed to wander through Riker's Island without permission to be here? You know your security better than me, obviously, but that seems unlikely. Come on, let's work the problem, gentlemen. Do you have radios or whatever archaic technology they use here in this fine facility so you can call to your superiors?"

"Uh...yes, Mr Stark, but..."

The other guard—B. Jackson, apparently—nodded and said curtly, "He's authorised, Willis."

"Yeah?"

Tapping his earpiece, Jackson explained with a frown, "Order just came through."

Relieved, because he did not have the patience to deal with these clowns, Tony gestured sarcastically and repeated, "Awesome, let's open up."

Willis seemed unconvinced, so Jackson grunted with annoyance and then turned to begin entering the code for the door.
Once inside, Tony ruthlessly shoved his almost overwhelming panic aside and swaggered forwards into the room where both Barnes and Cap were being held. The lights overhead were so bright that—even wearing sunglasses—he had to blink before he could adjust and see which cell held Barnes.

"Tony!" It was just like Cap to sound so d*** excited to see him. As if Tony hadn't been about as rude and dismissive towards him as possible when they were in Switzerland.

"You look like s***, Rogers. Have they fed you at all?"

Steve shrugged. "Sure, but it is standard rations. I just require a minimum 4500 calories a day not to lose muscle mass."

"A fact that they are well aware of. So, they're trying to blind you and starve you. What else, Rogers?"

Steve frowned. "You can't do anything about any of it, Tony, so don't worry about it. It isn't your fault."

"Don't be so sure. You might as well tell me, Rogers."

"It's fine, Tony."

Tony turned to Barnes, who was standing very stiff and alert, as he intently watched Steve with a frown. Huh. Seemed like dear old Dad had been right about Sergeant Barnes being more devoted than a dog to Cap. And Tony knew to his own discomfort how fanatically devoted to his best friend Steve was. Again, a teeny bit like Tony and Rhodey. It was getting harder and harder to keep up even the veneer of self-righteous fury about the whole situation. "If Cap won't fess up, why don't you tell me, Barnes? What are they doing to him?"

In his distinctive, rumbling voice and strangely strong Brooklyn accent, Bucky replied uneasily, "It ain't that bad."

"Last chance, Barnes. Are these bastards mistreating Captain America? Come on. I need data if I'm going to fix anything."

Bucky sighed and then rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. Finally, he said miserably, "Yeah. Ok. Steve ain't gonna tell you nothin' because he's a self-sacrificing idiot. But they're not even giving him a regular food ration, not unless New York usually feeds its prisoners just one sandwich with a single slice of turkey on it for each meal. They only give him one cup of water for the day, too. And he's not allowed to exercise in the cell, so...so his muscles are hurtin' him. The serum made it so he can't go without moving for long. It used to be a real problem for him during the war when we had to hole up and wait for longer'n five or so hours."

"That it?"

Bucky looked over at Steve with an agonised, guilty expression and said, "No. He is taken for interrogation twice a day, which have lasted an average of 94 minutes each session. He'd probably swear to you that he wasn't given a leg injury there this morning, too. He ain't slept in days, because they don't never turn the lights off and they got a caterwauler goin' all the time that only Enhanced ears can hear. He was even refused a chance to have the Eucharist yesterday when a priest tried to visit us. He isn't allowed to do anything but sleep and read that Bible the priest brought him. He hasn't done nothing to deserve to be treated bad. He ain't a prisoner of war or nothin', so there's no excuse for the interrogations, too. It's wrong."

Tony frowned and looked at Steve for a moment. Then, he asked awkwardly, "They treating you
Bucky's embarrassment was obvious, as he responded, "Thank you for askin', Stark, but it really don't matter how I'm treated. I can take it. It's Steve as should be treated right. If you can make them do somethin' then please...please do. If they can just bring him more food and let him get some sleep at least."

Tony sighed. "Still nothing to say, Cap?"

Steve grimaced. "I knew it would be like this when I surrendered, Tony. I'm not being ungrateful to you, I promise, but I just really don't want you to get into any trouble on my behalf. I was prepared for worse, actually. It's only nine more days until the court-martial."

"Steve, they aren't giving out stickers and lollipops for how politely you handle the abuse. There is no reason for you to accept this kind of treatment."

Steve sighed. "Actually, every word I say and every action I take in here is being recorded. Any infractions will be used against me in the court-martial. I expected both Bucky and I would experience reprisals in here from people who feel that he's a terrorist and I'm a traitor."

Tony grunted with disgust. "Are they giving you the news in here?"

"No. Why?"

"Ross. They arrested him and charged him with a list of crimes that is satisfyingly long."

Behind him, Tony heard Bucky mutter something in Russian, but he didn't turn around. Instead, he stared at Steve, who had laughed aloud.

"Now that is the best news I've heard in ages. That's wonderful, Tony."

Surprised, Tony replied, "Didn't expect you to be this happy about it."

"No? You're talking about same Ross that made Banner's life h*ll? Or who forced through the Sokovia Accords? Yeah that guy is the one who gave the kill order for Bucky, Tony, even though Bucky had not been convicted or even charged with anything. Ross is responsible for my wife being mistreated when they executed that secret search warrant and then placed on the no-fly list to keep her from getting to Geneva for her job with the UN on time. Ross had my friends imprisoned in the Raft and you saw that place, right? Then, Ross sent people to my home in Geneva to kidnap Thea and her two children, murder my wife's housekeeper and nanny, attempt to frame Bucky's brothers-in-law for those murders, torture Thea with a car battery, and starve the children so the baby barely survived. Ross was there, Tony. He interrogated Thea in that warehouse while his people were torturing her. He tried to get to Winnie in the hospital, too. Not sure if you know about that. Ross is the one who ordered Bucky's mechanical arm to be amputated and that he be placed on antipsychotics and sedatives against two psychiatrists' orders. So yeah, Tony, I am really, really glad that Thaddeus Ross is going to see justice."

"Ok, ok. Although, you got to understand why they wanted Barnes' arm removed. It is a weapon."

Steve growled slightly before he said, "I didn't say removed, I said amputated. This arm was surgically attached. It isn't a prosthesis. The nerves are still giving him pain from the amputation, since he isn't given any pain meds."

"What the f***? You mean the Wakandan arm had mechanical nerves that registered pain? That...should be impossible even for them."
"Yes. Wakanda offered to immobilise the arm, so it couldn't be used. Amputation wasn't necessary."

"Holy s***, that's unbelievably advanced. Do they know that Barnes is in pain?"

"Yes."

"He's still on the other meds?"

"Yes."

Tony turned to Bucky and asked stiffly, "Are your attorneys aware, Barnes?"

Bucky nodded. "It isn't the same as during our transport here though. That was an IV drip, so the
serum couldn't metabolise those fast enough for me to think clearly. It ain't so bad now, really.
After about two hours, I can function ok."

Tony felt like he was going to be sick. "Function ok meaning you feel normal or…"

"No, but compared to the drugs that HYDRA used to shoot into me, it's nothing. After the first two
hours, I still remember my name. I'm not confused about what year it is. I still remember Thea and
the babies. It's…it's not bad, Stark."

Steve's growl was loud enough to make Tony turn on his heel and say sympathetically, "Yeah, I'm
with you on this one, Cap. The US government: not as bad as HYDRA. That's one view anyway.
Ok. I guess I found out what I came for. My attorneys will talk to your attorneys, etc. And uh…"

Tony looked up at the lights, which suddenly dimmed and then asked, "Feeling better?"

Tony could see Steve's relief, as he nodded in reply. Unable to help himself, Tony turned to Bucky.
"Truth, Barnes?"

"Yeah, the caterwauler is off, too."

"Wow, how about that. Ok, so, visiting time at the Superhero Pokey is up, boys." Tony gestured
wildly with both hands as he said with a smirk, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Cap."

So, actually, FRIDAY had excelled there: figuring out what he needed her to do in there without
him even speaking. She was back in his will, so to speak. Now he had to see what he could do
about meeting with Mary-Claire Rogers and Thea Barnes. Fun.

Bucky blinked at his lead attorney's face—uncertain what he had heard—and then asked gruffly,
"So, I'm not going to get a real trial."

"No, you aren't, Sergeant Barnes. They aren't going to proceed. The Article 32 hearing went your
way."

"But we wanted a trial. Steve's wife said it was important. We wanted all the evidence out there in
public."

Joachim Brodsky nodded and replied with a shrug, "I understand that, Sergeant, and I agree with
Mrs Rogers that a trial would have very likely helped swing public opinion entirely towards both
you and Colonel Rogers. However, the Army has decided that it does not feel that it has probable
cause to proceed. What that means is that they know they were not just going to lose, but they were
going to lose publicly, painfully, and horribly. The initial press was strongly negative against you,
but after the document dump that was leaked last week, that has all changed."

"Ok. Ok, but can they charge me again later? If they change their mind?"

Brodsky shook his head. "Not without new evidence of another crime."

"Wow. Ok. I…does that mean that I get to go home to my family now?"

"You do, yes. I am sure you have been longing to see them."

"Wow." Bucky stared blankly at the wall of the small cell in which he had been waiting and muttered something inaudibly under his breath as he tried to release the sudden tension in his shoulders. Then he said quietly, "No matter what Mary Claire said, I didn't think there was really any chance that I'd ever get to see Thea and the babies again except through video calls or something. Holy s***." Bucky looked with alarm at his attorney and apologised, "Sorry."

"Honestly, Sergeant, you're entitled. You've had very a difficult time."

"Thank you. But…but what about Steve?"

Brodsky shook his head and rather curtly replied, "Colonel Rogers' court-martial is separate, Sergeant Barnes. This decision isn't related to his case in any way."

"You mean that I'm going go home now, but Steve's going to stay there in Riker's Island and still go on trial? That's not right, sir. I can't leave Steve in there. The only reason they haven't been treating him worse is because they're afraid I might go crazy if he comes back with visible bruises or something. If I'm not there, then they'll really turn on him."

"Sergeant Barnes, there really is nothing we can do about that right now. I am sorry. Honestly."

His breathing erratic as he gripped his hair with his hand and tugged, Bucky insisted, "They have to let him go. It's not right. He's the one who's the hero. I'm just the dumb s*** who fell out of a train and got captured."

Brodsky looked over at the door and then up at the camera before he said, "Sergeant Barnes, you aren't going to help Colonel Rogers if you lose control right now. Do you understand?"

Bucky's head popped up and, as a sudden stillness came over his body, he said quietly, "I am in no danger of losing control, sir. I'm just real worried about my friend."

"Maybe so, but your demeanour is making me very uncomfortable. I do not like how you are gripping that rusted chair back, for example."

Breathing in and out for a moment as he watched his attorney, Bucky replied flatly, "I may have had a metal arm until the government chopped it off, but I'm not a robot. I have real emotions just like any other guy. I honestly assumed I was going to be on trial and then go away for life. I didn't think anyone would actually listen to the evidence and make a fair decision, you know. Now, they're probably going to retaliate against Steve because they can't punish me for HYDRA's crimes."

"I'm sure that Colonel Rogers' court-martial will be as fair as yours, sergeant."

"I hope so. Steve's a hero. He's the real deal, always has been. It isn't in his nature to give in to bullies like Ross or those guys that were trying to kill me in Budapest."
Gesturing towards the stack of papers in front of him, Brodsky said brusquely, "I was only hired to handle your case, Sergeant Barnes. I'm sure that Colonel Rogers' attorneys will do everything in their power to help him. In the meantime, sergeant, you are going home to your family."

Bucky stood up and then sat back down again so hard that the old chair slid back a foot with a loud creak. "Wait, so, they said I'm discharged. Right?"

"You have been granted an honourable discharge at the rank of Master Sergeant, yes."

"So...what about all those restrictions that they put on me? They said I couldn't live nowhere except where Steve is. That we have to live in the same house, not even in two parts of a duplex or something. And what about Thea and my children?"

The attorney frowned. "Sergeant, you are an American citizen without any convictions and the charges against you have been vacated. They cannot legally restrict where you live and your children have been granted US passports due to your own citizenship. Your wife is not an American citizen, however."

"Right. So...they still got me by the short hairs then, if they're gonna make things hard for Thea. They know I'm gonna do anything they ask if that's what it takes to be allowed to live with my wife and kids. Anyway, Britain made it real clear that I'm never welcome to return, so we can't live back with her family either."

Brodsky grimaced. "You can hire an immigration attorney, Sergeant Barnes, who could better advise you. Unfortunately, that isn't my area of expertise at all."

"Yeah, I get that. Ok. So, what do I gotta do now, Mr Brodsky?"

"Well, you'll be processed, but basically you're a free man, sergeant. You're being retired at the rank of master sergeant, so you'll receive pay. There is back pay owed to you, as well. A cheque in the amount of $5429.17 has been issued to you for this past month. There will certainly be more owed to you before your retirement is processed, since this is only your base pay and you are owed a housing allowance and a COLA and they have not yet issued payment for this month. I suspect it will be some time until you see anything more than these last two months of salary, but eventually you should be awarded what is owed."

Bucky grunted as he adjusted his posture uncomfortably in his seat and commented, "Thanks. Not that it wouldn't be nice to have something of my own with which to support my family, but money really isn't at the top of my thoughts right now. I just want to hold my kids, you know?"

The attorney frowned as he stood and said, "That should be possible within a few hours, Sergeant Barnes."

Finally standing up again, Bucky breathed out shakily and replied, "Thank you. You don't know how grateful I am. I didn't really think that I would get to have my family again."

"I'm sure they will be very glad to have you home, Sergeant Barnes. Mrs Barnes has been particularly insistent in her requests regarding your welfare. Frankly, I do not think that she will be satisfied until you are back with the family."

Slightly startled, Bucky shifted uncomfortably and replied, "Well, I...I know how lucky I am, Mr Brodsky. My wife is a wonderful woman."

Brodsky nodded and then, after a moment of hesitation, changed the subject. "They ordered your arm to be returned to you."
Bucky shook his head and grumbled. "Generous."

"I understand that it will need surgical reattachment, sergeant?"

"Yeah, well, they amputated it, so it remains to be seen if it will even be viable again. They didn't take any care when they severed it, so I'm sure there is pretty serious damage there in addition to whatever there was from HYDRA."

"The Veterans Administration is unequipped to deal with something as unique as both your metal arm and your enhancements. There are private clinics that might be willing to undertake the procedure, but the cost would be considerable. My team was contacted by Rand Enterprises' Daybreak Outreach, which is a charitable group that helps wounded warriors from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their physician, Dr Hansjorg Pesch…" Brodsky looked down at his notes in confusion and then continued, "sorry, that's Pesch, is apparently a specialist on amputation wounds and Rand is interested in helping you with the full costs associated with having your arm reattached. Rand Enterprises has very deep pockets, Sergeant Barnes, so it is one of the few who could probably afford to cover what would be required."

Bucky sighed, rubbed his forehead absently with the side of his hand, then said cautiously, "Extremely kind of them, especially since there are still a lot of people who think that I should rot in the h*ll for what HYDRA had me do."

"Perhaps so, Sergeant Barnes, but there are others who recognise that you are the longest held POW in recorded history. I've already given Mrs Barnes the contact information for Dr Pesch, so if you can make an appointment with him."

"Yeah. OK, thank you, Mr Brodsky."

The attorney glanced at his watch and then replied, "You are quite welcome, Sergeant Barnes. Now, I suspect that there is already a significant crowd that has gathered outside to await your release. Press and that sort of thing. Mrs Rogers has promised an interview with your wife on the day of your release, so I imagine that Mrs Barnes will be out there soon. Shall we finish up here, so we can begin your out-processing? There are some papers here to sign and initial."

Bucky took the pen that was handed to him and waited as Brodsky gathered up the papers and then turned them around for Bucky to view. He braced himself somewhat as he asked, "Where do I sign?"

"You will need to sign the last page, however there are some places that you need to initial, as well. Yes there. Good. Two pages past that…on page six, yes. Flip to page nine there, yes. Okay. And one more there on page eleven. Okay. Sign at the bottom. Very good, Sergeant Barnes. I believe that is all that I have for you. I know that this has been an ugly experience for you, but I hope that you will be able to settle down with your family and find some peace now."

"Yeah…me too. Thank you. However, if they don't let Steve go, then I don't see how I can find any peace at all."

Brodsky frowned almost angrily. "Well, to be honest, even a particularly lenient and benign panel is going to find that there is probable cause to charge. Therefore, Colonel Rogers will be going to trial and is likely to be convicted of—at the very least—refusal to follow a direct order. He may avoid prison time, but Colonel Rogers will not walk away from this without some penalty. I'm sorry, sergeant, but that is almost certain."

Bucky growled slightly and then said harshly, "That is unacceptable. I can't walk free and leave..."
Steve to take the fall."

"I think that Colonel Rogers would say that he is happy for you. He has shown more than once that he is willing to pay the cost to help you, Sergeant Barnes. It would be unfair to him to spoil your homecoming today with angst over something you cannot change. Colonel Rogers made a choice, so you should honour his wishes. Kiss your children and hold on to your wife like he would want for you to do."

"I know that's what Steve would want. You don't have to tell me. I've known the man for nearly as long as we've been alive. But I'm going to walk out there and put my arms around my family while Steve is in isolation back at Rikers. I cannot ignore that."

"No, I understand your feelings, Sergeant Barnes. Your friendship with Colonel Rogers is extraordinary. I get that you have a truly unique bond. How many things from either of your lives before the war still remain? One? Maybe two? Your neighbourhood is utterly changed. The church where your families attended is now owned by an Evangelical Lutheran congregation. Heck, even the Dodgers left decades ago. Colonel Rogers is your past and you are his. I am sure that this is something that will be taken into account in his trial, too."

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck with his hand again and took a deep breath. "Maybe. So...how is this going to go now?"

"You will stay in here for a while longer. They will come and get you soon."

"And what then?"

Brodsky looked at Bucky with surprise. "You will be taken out of the building and escorted to where your family will be waiting. What you do from there is up to you."

"Is it?"

"There have been no further restrictions placed on you, Sergeant Barnes. Once your retirement paperwork is processed, you won't even owe anything further to the US Army."

Bucky nodded. "Okay."

"Good luck, Sergeant Barnes."

Pointedly locking eyes with Brodsky, Bucky switched to English and said calmly, "Thank you, Mr Brodsky."

Brodsky smiled genuinely. "You are quite welcome, Sergeant Barnes. Although my grandfather's death in the Solovetsky gulag hardly compares to your own extended abuse and torture in the Soviet Union, I was raised with an abiding hatred towards the Soviet regime. My maternal grandparents both died at Birkenau, so you can imagine my opinion of the Nazis. It was my privilege to help a victim of HYDRA and an interesting challenge to employ the language of my childhood in explaining complicated legal concepts. Or, to be honest, for me to follow your much broader vocabulary. Yours has been a case that I shall never forget."

Bucky nodded sharply and then said, "Ok. You might as well go ahead and say it. There is no way you're gonna find a way to fit the last word naturally into conversation."

His surprise evident, Brodsky laughed shortly and then said in sharp, Russian, "Thank you, Sergeant Barnes. Freight car. Are you well, Soldier?"
Responding immediately, Bucky drawled in sarcastic, Brooklyn-accented English, "Yep, just peachy." Then, his expression both furious and exultant, he sneered, "And hey, I didn't turn into HYDRA's raging murder-whore again. Look at that. You can tell Stark that he could have just asked."

"I am not working for Stark anymore than I work for HYDRA, Sergeant Barnes. I am sorry that I cannot tell you more. However, the people for whom I do work...or should I say the group of which I am a part...needed to be certain that you are safe to be released."

Bucky looked down at Brodsky's left hand, which was holding the inexplicably charred remains of a sheet of paper that had been on the table a second previously, and then back up at his face. "Interesting. I've only ever met two of you before. Once in Alaska. Once in Prague."

As he nonchalantly blew away the pill of ash, Brodsky watched Bucky for a moment. He then replied in Russian, "We did not think that you were aware of the incident in Prague, Sergeant Barnes. I am impressed."

Pointedly refusing to return to Russian, despite his emotional state, Bucky snapped, "Of course, I knew. I can tell anyone who is not baseline once they use their enhancement or mutation."

Brodsky replied softly, "But not before."

"Obviously, as you've been working with me for weeks."

"Very true. Thank you for letting me complete the test."

Bucky shrugged and responded angrily, "Why not? It wasn't gonna cost me anything, since that s*** doesn't work anymore."

"At what point..."

Gritting his teeth, Bucky said with effort, "Longing. The words still hurt. Every time. I just don't lose control now."

"I see. I am sorry then, since you do not deserve to suffer further. Why did you allow me to continue if you were aware, Sergeant Barnes?"

"What did you want me to do, call for the guards? I didn't know what your next step would be if I refused. Maybe a...what is the English word for подкожное впрыскивание?"

Brodsky shook his head and replied, "I am sorry, but I do not know that word."

Both embarrassed and annoyed, Bucky explained, "Being drugged with a needle to the neck, that is what I have been waiting for, honestly. Anyway, it was important for me to figure out why you were doing it and who you work for."

"Yes, I understand. I'm sorry."

"Look, I don't care one way or the other about your kind. You're all safe from me as long as you don't work for HYDRA."

Brodsky pursed his lips and regarded Bucky for a moment. Then, he said with a sigh, "I'm sure that my colleagues will be relieved to hear that."

Bucky snorted. "Right."
"No, I am quite serious about that, Sergeant Barnes. Mutants don't dismiss the abilities of mutates like you or Colonel Rogers at all. The group to which I belong thoroughly respects your abilities and does not wish you ill. Although if we believe that you are a public danger, then we will intervene. Sergeant, I am very sorry that we had to end on this note. I wish you the best of luck in the future, Sergeant Barnes."

"I'm thankful for your help, Mr Brodsky. I would be even more grateful to you, however, if you could do one more thing for me."

"If it is within my power, certainly."

Bucky narrowed his eyes at his attorney and then said gruffly, "Please tell him that I need to meet with him."

Brodsky blinked at Bucky without replying for several moments. Then, he said, "May I ask why?"

"No."

"Then, I cannot be sure that he will agree, to be honest. He doesn't socialise."

"Neither do I, but I still need to meet with him."

"I will pass on the message. Best of luck, sergeant."
"Papa."

Bucky lifted his head groggily and attempted to smile at his son. "Yeah, buddy?"

"Play now."

He sighed and looked down at the pile of blocks that had been dumped unceremoniously in front of Bucky's feet by his son. "What do you want to build, Yashka?"

"Big house. No scary man. Полохой че'век уходи! (Bad man go away!"

"Yeah, that sounds pretty good, buddy. Мы должны держать всех плохих парней подальше, не так ли, Яшка? (We gotta keep all the bad guys away, right, Yashka?) We don't want any scary men in our house, do we? Ok, lemme get down there with you. How tall do you want the walls?"

"Big. Like papa."

"Well, that's pretty big, huh? Для этого нам понадобится много игрушечных блоков, приятель. (We're gonna need a lot of toy blocks for this, buddy.) I don't know, what about big like Yashka?"

The little boy laughed and squealed at Bucky's tickling, saying, "Papa."

"Ok. Let's see. How about this tall?"

Jamie giggled. "Больше, папочка! (More, Papa!)"

"More? Wow. We're gonna need a crane to build it any bigger. How about…this tall?"

"Ok, papa."

"Good. Хорошо, умный мальчик. (Good, clever boy.) Let's put the blocks all the way around now. Ok?"

In between casually watching his son clumsily pick up and place bricks in a loose square, Bucky looked over to the pink-festooned cot where his daughter was sleeping. He had barely left the room where his children slept and played for two days, except to sleep. Thea had been giving him space to be alone with the children at his request, but he could see how much it was bothering her. He'd never avoided her before, not like this. He had particularly been unable to ignore how fearful she was earlier that morning when she brought him his eggs and kasha. He was in a terrible place emotionally and it wasn't getting much better, as he knew what had to be done soon.

"Papa! Papochka. Постройте дом! (Build the house!)"

Bucky looked down at Jamie and smiled sadly. "Sorry, buddy, I was looking over at your sestrenka. Papa has to keep an eye on her, too."

Jamie frowned and shoved a toy brick at Bucky's hand. "Build now."

"Ok, ok, pal. You got it. Let's see. We need a huge gate and door, right?"
"Yellow."

"Uh, do you think we have enough yellow blocks, Yashka? I don't know if we do."

Jamie shoved some of the pile closer to Bucky and repeated, "Yellow."

"Well, we can start it yellow anyway. So, who is going to live in this house, buddy?"

"Mummer, Papa, Jamie, Ses'renka."

"Sounds good. What about Tetya Mary-Claire and your cousins?"

Jamie frowned. "No more."

Bucky sat back so his head was propped against the side of the sofa. "They are our family, Jamie, so we want to live with them. When Dyadya Styopa gets to come home, he'll live with us, too."

"No."

"Sorry, buddy, but that actually isn't up for debate, Yashka. We are all going to live in the same house."


Bucky picked up his son and placed him on his legs before resting his head lightly on top of his son's dark brown curls. "You know perfectly well that Steve isn't the scary man, Yashka. He is your Dyadya Styopa, who pushed you in the tree swing at Arnwell and carried you on his shoulders when we walked down to see Dyadya Richard's horses. He's a good guy, pal. Promise. And I'm not going to leave you. They said that Papa can stay now. Ok?"

"Papa sad."

"Yeah, Yashka, but it's ok. It's ok. I love you, little buddy."

"Love Papa."

Bucky wrapped his arms around his son and said in a shaken voice, "I love you very much, buddy. So much. It is going to be ok."

Jamie insisted urgently, "Mummer sad."

"Yeah, I know, buddy. There is a lot going on right now, ok? And you've got a new brother that's gonna be born in a number of months, so Mummy feels a bit sick sometimes. It will be fine though. She felt that way when you were born and look how great you turned out. Ты наша гордость Яшка. (You are our pride, Yashka.)"

Jamie seemed very unconvinced, but he didn't squirm or wiggle in Bucky's arms.

"Shall we finish building this big house now? Big and tall with a yellow door?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe we can call in Mummy and see what she thinks."

"Want Mummer now."
Bucky nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. OK, I can go and call her in."

"Papa stay."

"Yeah, both Mummy and Papa will stay in here, buddy. Sound good?"

"Ok." Apparently satisfied, Jamie looked back down at the blocks and began pushing one of them around. Bucky opened the door to the children's nursery and stood in the corridor awkwardly. He frowned at Gleb, who was pacing at the far end of the corridor, since he had believed that Shurik was the one scheduled for house duty. Yet, Bucky's focus was still on finding Thea, as he called out, "Bella? Krasotka?"

There was a flurry of movement across the corridor in the bedroom, the door flung open, and suddenly Thea was in front of him with a worried, anxious expression. "Is everything ok? Did Winnie wake up?"

Bucky tugged her close to him and said gruffly, "She's still sleeping, baby. Everything is fine. Yashka wants us both in there, so I thought why not?"

"You don't mind me coming in for a while? I know you were wanting some time with just you and Jamie."

"Baby, I'm sorry. I didn't really intend to exclude you. I just needed to feel like I could be alone with my children. I needed to be with them without someone mediating like I was a monster. Somehow that became pushing you away and I'm sorry."

Thea nodded. "Do you feel better?"

"A little. Will you stay now, baby? I'm done sulking. Promise."

Thea looked down at the ground and took a deep, uneasy breath. Then, she said cautiously, "You know, I have been trying to decide when to come in to talk to you. Something important has happened, Yasha."

Bucky peeked back through the door at Jamie, who was still stacking the blue blocks into walls, then said carefully, "Ok. What is it?"

"The president issued a pardon for Steve this afternoon. So, there is not going to be any court-martial after all. Since they were still at the Article 32 stage of the process, he was never formally charged, so he will be allowed to receive an honourable discharge. That means that Steve is coming home soon."

"Черт возьми! Holy s***, Bella, and you didn't come in to tell me that?"

"I didn't know about it until about an hour ago, Yasha. Mary-Claire has been out doing whatever it is she's doing. I have been trying to get everything ready. As soon as she gets back, then things are going to get serious. They are having some big meeting, so I've been trying to sort out the food and everything."

"You should have come to find me. I needed to know this."

Thea stepped back and said coldly, "If you say so, Yasha. Anyway, you know now. Does that mean that you're going to go off and do a perimeter check on the property and talk with the security team? Or are you still going to come play with Jamie and me?"
Bucky narrowed his eyes angrily at her, but said stiffly, "I promised the little guy that I'd stay in there. I'm not breakin' a promise to him."

"Well, then, let's go and see what we are building."

"A big house, apparently, where he only wants the four of us to live."

"Poor darling. He's so afraid that you're going to disappear again, Yasha."

Bucky nodded his head and replied roughly, "I know. He has every reason to be frightened and insecure, poor kid."

"Yes, he does. However, that doesn't mean that we cannot make things right. He needs stability and he needs love. He's going to get that from you, isn't he?"

"Yes. I'm not going nowhere, Bella. They said that I'm a free man, so I'm gonna use that freedom to spend my time taking care of you and the children."

"That is exactly what I have told Jamie, you know. I believe in you, Yasha. Have they talked to you about my status?"

He grunted angrily. "Yeah."

"I see. Is it like we thought?"

"Yes."

Thea sighed angrily. "Mary-Claire says that they don't actually have any standing on which to proffer charges against me, you know. And, legally and publicly, you are an innocent man. That means that you're a highly decorated veteran and POW. How are they going to force you into doing anything for them, Yasha?"

"Because we wanna keep things this way, baby. They know that I'm not stupid enough to believe that they couldn't turn things on me if they wanted to. If I wanna keep you and the kids safe, then I gotta play ball. Steve said the same thing, so I know he's expecting this both for me and for him."

"Ok. Right, so, does that mean that you're going to have to work with them all the time?"

Bucky shrugged miserably. "I don't know, baby. It might. Come on. Let's go in and play with our kid, huh? I don't wanna talk about any of that other cr** right now."

She nodded and let him take her hand.

"How long will you be gone, Yasha?"

"I don't know. He didn't say how long this would take. Could be a couple of days for all I know."

"And you're sure no one will know that you are gone? If they find out then it could be quite bad."

"No, I'm not sure, but this is too important a mission to quibble about the risk. Even though I don't like to talk about it, I am the deadliest assassin in the world, Thea, so I do have a fair few useful skills that I can use for this mission. You don't think that the Winter Soldier was called a ghost because I had any trouble slipping into and out of wherever I needed to go to take down my target, do you?"

Her expression instantly both fearful and angry, Thea whispered, "You don't have to be such a berk
about it, Yasha. I'm just worried."

Bucky growled and possessively put his arm around her, as he explained harshly, "Look, I cannot change what has to happen here. I don't want to do any of this, but it isn't up to me, Thea. I'm sorry that I'm being such a jerk, but I'm angry and this really is the best that I can control myself at the moment. I know that I've been treating you like s*** these last few days, Bella, and I've hated myself for it. You deserve better, krasotka. However, I AM going to come back to you even if I have to drag myself here by the fingernails. Whatever fallout there might be from this mission, it will not include anyone separating me from you and the children even if I have to hide us in Wakanda again."

"Oh. Well…ok, I suppose. What is going to happen tomorrow?"

Bucky released his firm grip on Thea and turned to begin pacing the space between the bed and the long wardrobe on the far wall. "We're going to fly with Mary-Claire to meet Steve when he does the White House ceremony. Then, you'll go back with them and I will disappear up to Westchester. Xavier has given his word that his own people will be in place here both as extra protection and as diversions if necessary. This is the best time to do this, Bella, since everyone will expect me to be glued to Steve's side from the moment he's released. They would not think that I'll run off and leave you alone either. This is the time that my absence would be least noticed. Also, there may be less invasive supervision for at least the first 24 hours, since Steve should be given a grace period to reunite with his wife and children. I need to take advantage of this."

"But…why, Yasha? What is so important? You never even mentioned this Xavier before yesterday. I don't understand."

Bucky looked at her with pained, desperate eyes and sighed. "Do you remember that evening in Constanta? How I was prepared to force the tsygane to return what was stolen?"

"Y-yes, of course I remember that day. It was horrible."

He shook his head angrily, his long dark hair whipping across his face so his expression was hidden. "It was not just your papers that I needed returned. There was one other thing that was important enough to retrieve that I was prepared to kill for it. Now that I have deposited it somewhere safe, I am going to make certain that item's hiding place can no longer be found."

"Was it that little wooden box with the strange symbol on the top?"

Shocked, Bucky's head snapped back up and he watched her for a moment before he replied, "Yes."

"I always got the feeling that I was forbidden to ask about that box. Where is it now?"

"I know where it is. You do not, nor can you. I have hidden it where it cannot be retrieved without someone dying. Even with the Hydra Discount Brand Serum, I almost died. But that was where I was told to hide it, so I did. Now, unfortunately, I'm going to go let someone play with my memories again."

Thea narrowed her eyes and asked, "This Xavier isn't some HYDRA scientist, is he?"

"No, krasotka. Nothing at all like that. He is a mutant with unbelievably strong telepathic abilities. Ordinarily, I would do nearly anything to stay out of the range of powers like Xavier's. However, this mission is too important for my likes and dislikes to matter. According to the person who gave it to me, the contents of that box must remain hidden or quite literally half the world will die."

"Yasha! That battered little wooden box? How is that possible?"
"All I can say is that the box isn't what it looks like, Bella."

"And Xavier can destroy it or something?"

Bucky breathed out through his nose sharply and said uneasily, "No, Bella, it cannot be destroyed. Not really, anyway. It is complicated. When I return, I will no longer know where I hid it. You don't know. Xavier is the only person who will, but that is part of the plan."

"Can you trust him with this knowledge?"

"I don't know. This isn't my plan. I'm following the mission that was given to me. I was supposed to hold on to this box until the opportunity to meet Xavier arose naturally. I wasn't supposed to seek him out before I had an opening."

Quite clearly fearful, Thea demanded angrily, "But who gave you this mission, Yasha? I don't like this. How do we even know that we can trust that person? This could be some HYDRA thing, couldn't it?"

"Krasotka, if I cannot trust the person who gave me the mission, then I cannot trust anyone. That's all I'm saying. This ain't HYDRA and it is something I gotta do. I'm just relieved as f*** to be finally letting this responsibility go."

Thea stared at Bucky for quite some time before she said gasped and exclaimed with shock, "No! Steve wouldn't do that do you, Yasha. I don't believe it."

Baring his teeth briefly in a feral expression of intense frustration, Bucky snarled, "HE DID. I was there."

"But he had no right to give you a mission back then, Yasha! You were not stable yet. Besides that, you told me that you hadn't had any contact with Steve since you pulled him out of the Potomac until that day in Bucharest."

Bucky punched the bedroom wall enough that a network of cracks spread across the wall and some of the plaster rained onto the gleaming hardwood floor. "Why are you pushing me on this, Thea? This is not something that you want or need to know."

"Because, Yasha, our relationship was built on what happened during that time. I trusted you to keep me safe even though you were clearly barely sane. I followed you even when you hardly seemed less dangerous than HYDRA, since I believed in you. You were not very nice, but you appeared sincere and genuinely determined to protect me. If you lied to me about not having talked to Steve, then what else did you lie to me about?"

Bucky closed his eyes and rasped miserably, "Bella, no. No. I didn't lie to you. It wasn't Steve. Not my Steve. It was another Steve. S***. Well, it was my Steve, but from the future. And yes, I know how insane that sounds, but it is true. So, I hadn't spoken to my Steve. I didn't lie to you. And… I don't know how to explain it to you. The Future Steve gave me the mission, but it wasn't…s***. He gave the mission to the Winter Soldier, not Bucky."

Thea stepped back as she gasped in horror. "He used The Words?"

Using his vibranium arm, Bucky briefly pulled her into him and kissed the top of her head lovingly. Then he released her so he could look down into her face as he replied in a hoarse, despondent voice, "Yeah. Yeah, he did."

"I cannot believe that Steve would do that! That is…it is unforgivable."
Seeing the shock and anger on Thea's face, Bucky shook his head and grunted as he tried to figure out how to explain. He couldn't have her start distrusting or disapproving of Steve because of all this. "Well, it would be if Future Steve didn't have permission, but technically he did, krasotka. Apparently, Future Bucky gave him permission and even came up with the plan."

He dropped his head back onto the wall with a loud thud, causing a further chunk of the wall to crumble onto the floor, and continued furiously, "Frankly, Future Bucky can suck it, but apparently that future was very different than our time. Somehow, I didn't have a family in that future, so I volunteered myself to do the mission, as I had the least to lose of anyone we knew and the skill set to get it done. Xavier thinks that when Future Steve time travelled, he created a separate timeline that we are now living in. I don't know, maybe he did. But regardless, I still got this mission and, since it's a Winter Soldier mission, it is going to eat away at my brain until it is completed."

Thea stood far enough back from Bucky that she was outside his arm span, as she placed both hands on her hips and demanded, "Hold on a moment. So…some Future Bucky gave a Future Steve permission to come back and activate the Winter Soldier to complete a bizarre, secret mission on which the fate of half the world depends? And you believed all this because some purported Future Steve said so? And this all occurred at a time before you met me when you were so unstable that you still didn't know past from present? And Future Steve thought that, despite being just barely escaped from HYDRA, you were the best choice for this all-important mission? He didn't think that there was another time period that was, perhaps, more advisable to come and force this on you?"

Bucky nodded. "That is pretty much exactly right. I didn't ask for details then, since I was the Winter Soldier. When I was owned by HYDRA—especially the Soviet branch—questions were not permitted unless I was asking for mission critical detail or supplies. Sometimes I was punished even for that. Future Steve didn't give the Winter Soldier permission to speak, so I didn't. Future Bucky probably told him not to, but there are so many details that I wasn't given that would have been immensely useful in carrying out this d*** mission."

"I cannot imagine Steve, any Steve, doing this to you, Yasha."

"There must have been a very good reason. There has to have been, Bella. There must also have been an unavoidable, galaxy-destroyingly horrible outcome if Steve tried to do the mission himself and it would have had to be so clear, inescapable, and horrible to make it obvious to my stubborn, self-sacrificing pal: Captain I-Love-Danger. Nothing else would have gotten him to agree both to have me do it and to activate the Soldier."

"I suppose."

Bucky dropped into the large, leather club chair beside the window and said desperately, "No, I know Steve, Thea. I know him. Back when Future Steve activated the Soldier, it tore to shreds all of the parts of me that had begun to hope that I could find Steve and he would help me. I'd already been to the Smithsonian in an attempt to make sure that what I thought I remembered really was true. I saw the exhibit and I watched that video. I saw how Past Bucky smiled as I looked at Past Steve and how I then laughed. At that point, I couldn't actually remember EVER having laughed. I didn't remember joy. Seeing someone with my face being capable of that emotion was…I can't explain."

Bucky hid his face in his hands as he hunched over in the chair. "But that guy—Past Bucky—trusted Past Steve like all my instincts said to trust any Steve anywhere in any time. And that guy, Bella, was me before HYDRA f***ed around with my brain, but after they'd injected me with the serum at Azzano. I was already changing then. I was living in a half-shadow h*ll at that time but I
could still believe in Steve—who looked so different from the way I'd always known him—yet, who was still completely Steve Rogers, my brother and friend. I trusted him then. So, I trusted Future Steve even when he activated me despite the fact that it nearly destroyed my capacity for any hope that I could ever be Bucky Barnes again and not the f***ing Winter Soldier. Regardless, you gotta know that I trust my Steve now and I do trust what Future Steve said. We aren't going to question that anymore, Thea. Understand?"

She flushed and said quietly, "Ok."

"I won't pretend that I wasn't angry when it was Steve's voice that said The Words and his face that I was watching as the Winter Soldier received mission orders. The Winter Soldier didn't know why he knew Steve, but he was furious. He knew that everything was wrong with the man who was somehow both a former mission target and a recent ally suddenly acting as a handler. He actually didn't want to accept the orders at first. Once I'd come out of the Soldier fugue and I was Bucky again…I got so violently ill that I was tossing up blood. Everything I had started to believe just dissolved and I couldn't think. So, I ran until I had to fight two supposed SHIELD goons who wanted to take me in, but I wasn't about to go with anyone with that tattoo behind their ear."

"Oh Yasha. You must have been so scared."

Bucky shrugged. "Honestly, I was barely lucid, krasotka. Then, when I saw you standing there looking in terror at me as I was pressing you against the wall, my sanity and my ability to process my memories were utterly derailed because suddenly ALL I wanted was to stay near you and protect you from everything. Nothing else mattered, especially not Future Steve's mission. But the Winter Soldier in my brain didn't let me ignore it, so I was sunk so deep in h*ll at that time that I have no idea how I managed to function enough to get us to Alaska. Furthermore, I was struggling to get clarity on what Future Steve had actually said versus memories from my past of my Steve that somehow kept getting caught up in the mess. I did finally get all that worked out, but it took a long time. Months after I'd met you."

"That explains a lot of what happened back then, Yasha."

"I suppose. But I would always have been a disaster if I'd met you then, Bella. The secret mission from h*ll was just sludge icing on a s*** flavoured cake."

"So, you are absolutely certain that this mission is legitimate? You're positive that it is real and not something HYDRA made you believe?"

Bucky pulled Thea down into his lap and wrapped her in his arms. He buried his face in her hair and breathed in and out deeply for several minutes before he replied hoarsely, "Well, I was mostly sure, Bella, but then Xavier confirmed it. So, it did happen: Future Steve crying when he said The Words in a truly terrible American accent, being given a mission with terrifying ramifications if I failed, the Winter Soldier raging with anger that he was being forced into service again and without any support and too little information, Future Steve apologising four different times before he returned to his time or whatever the h*ll he did, waking up in an alley with two broken ribs, a broken toe, and a concussion next to two dead bodies with HYDRA tattoos. All of it was real."

"Oh Yasha. I am so sorry you went through that. I am so sorry."

He held her for a while and then breathed out with audible anguish. "Apparently, I have Future Me to blame for this whole ridiculous plan. My Steve has nothing to do with it, Bella, so please don't blame him."

"I won't. I understand. The Steve I know would never say The Words. Something horrifying must
have happened if any version of Steve would even consider this plan."

"I have not told Steve about any of this yet. Once I'm back from Westchester, then I will explain to him and to Mary-Claire. All four of us will know that the box was hidden, yet none of us will know where it is. The person who wants it...honestly, Future Steve only told me about one but I can think of a lot of people who would want something like this...well, the person who is looking for it won't care whether I've told you or not. You are at no more risk knowing that I have had this object than if you hadn't known. He'd torture and kill you either way. So, you might as well know so you can be careful."

Terrified, Thea breathed out shakily and peeked over at connecting door to the room where her son and daughter were sleeping. "Is...is that likely?"

"No."

"Oh. OK. But what is it, Yasha?"

Bucky's voice changed as he sharply warned, "No, you don't need to know that. Ask me no questions about that. Did you ever open the box?"

Thea shrugged and then turned towards the very large painting that was hung above the bed, as she replied coldly, "No. I just saw the weird symbol on the top."

"Even if you had, what you would have seen was not real. Future Steve told me that the object had some magical thing done to it, so it would not appear to be what it truly is to nearly anyone who looks at it."

She scoffed, "Magic."

"Yup. Also, it was an alien who transformed it, but another alien who is searching for it."

Thea cut her eyes over to him and said warningly, "Yasha."

Bucky responded roughly, "And yet another alien was the one that made it in the first place. Yeah, I know this is all nuts, Thea, but I am wearing a f***in' metal arm that is vastly stronger and just as flexible as a real one. I was born in 1917 and here we are a century later, yet I'm still in my 30s physically. Steve and I can both leap from one building to another and run faster than a car. Aliens attacked New York on a flying dragon ship. I fought Steve on an invisible flying aircraft carrier. Honestly, it isn't as hard to believe Future Steve's story as it should be."

Flushed bright red, Thea quietly answered, "Well...I suppose that is true."

Now almost snarling, Bucky continued, "So, whether you believe it or not, I do. I'm gonna complete my mission and then, hopefully, finally be at peace about it."

"Ok, Yasha."

"Ok?"

Not lifting her eyes to his face, Thea sighed. Then she lowered her voice even further, as she explained, "I don't like any of this, but I trust you so I'm going to choose to accept it."

"Ok. Good. Thank you, krasotka."

After several moments of silence, Thea asked suddenly, "Yasha, exactly how long before you came
"to my flat did you see Future Steve?"

"Полный пиздец! Why do you need to know that, Thea?"

"Yasha, please answer the question."

He looked at her for a moment and then sighed. "It was almost nineteen hours."

"Nineteen hours? Yasha! That's...that's why you barged into my flat, isn't it? And why you were so rough despite it being weeks after the fight on the helicarrier. Your personality was only just coming back from being reactivated as the Soldat."

"Yes."

"Oh, Yasha. Were you already becoming more yourself before Future Steve came and used the Words? Did he take that away from you, too?"

Bucky slumped back onto the chair again and grunted miserably. "It doesn't matter. This was a mission that someone had to do, Thea. I understand why I was selected. They obviously didn't know that I'd find you."

"But I still cannot believe that Future Steve couldn't have come back and task his past self with the job. What could have been so terrible that torturing you with this was preferable?"

"I don't know, Bella. I have wondered that so many d*** times. It is incredibly unlike Steve to agree to this plan. I don't understand at all. I don't...but...anyway, it doesn't matter. I was chosen and, apparently, I actually volunteered myself. And, the way I see it, baby, this s*** mission is probably the only reason that I met you. So, in a way, I should be f***ing grateful as h*ll for it."

"I don't understand that, Yasha. Why?"

He scrubbed both hands aggressively through his thick, unruly beard and said gruffly, "I had a place that I'd been sleeping and hiding out for two weeks before Future Steve came. I was planning to stay there for at least another week while I gathered intel and supplies. Since Future Bucky had apparently told Future Steve where that was, I began worrying who else might know or if HYDRA might find me. So, I had to get away and do something unexpected and out of character. That's what led me to your door that day. Future Bucky never did that, so he never met you. This f***ing mission gave me you and the babies."

"Oh. Well...I still think it was horrible of Future Steve to do it. But I'm immeasurably glad that you chose my door that evening, Yasha. I love you so much."

"This is why Xavier believes that we are in a separate timeline, krasotka. If Future Bucky is the same person that I am, he would have allowed the entire universe to burn before he gave you up. Therefore, I assure you that there is no chance that Future Bucky had you. Honestly, I probably would never have left Wakanda if I had not needed to save you. Not unless Steve was in danger or something. But the fact is, we're here. I have this mission. I gotta get it done and tomorrow is the day."

"Ok, Yasha. I understand. Whatever it is that you need me to do, I'll do it. Just explain to me the plan for tomorrow, ok?"
Tetya means Aunt, whereas Dyadya means Uncle. Styopa is a very common diminutive for Stepan (the Russian form of Steven).

Just as a fun aside: Check out 'Dyadya Styopa'. They were a series of poems by Sergey Mikhalkov, which was written about an enormously tall, strong, noble, and heroic policeman (Stepan Stepanov, i.e. Dyadya Styopa) who saves the day in over-the-top ways. The poems were written for children (specifically those in the Komsomol) during the early Soviet period, but were used for decades.

This is just the type of snide cultural reference that Natasha would make to Bucky (the likes of which only they would find amusing in the aftermath of their common horrifying Soviet-era experience), who would find the parallels with Steve to be quite hilarious. After which, of course, Bucky would insist that his children would have to call Steve 'Dyadya Styopa'. Steve, on the other hand, thinks that Bucky needs to find a better sense of humour and is looking forwards to when his twins can return the favour with Uncle Jimmy--the nickname that annoyed Bucky most during childhood. Natasha, to be honest, is quite amused by the surprising childishness of the world's two most powerful supersoldiers and (with Sam) finds them to be a source of continuing entertainment.
Chapter 34

Bucky stared angrily in front of him, as he waited for the man at the desk to pour him a cup of tea. This was the worst mission that he’d ever had. He could not wait to be rid of it. When he’d gone on that hellish trek to hide the box where he’d been ordered to take it, he’d expected to feel relief after he was done. Instead, he’d only begun worrying over whether he’d hidden it properly. Would someone find it? Was it safe there? He’d continually dreamt of it. Even when awake he had recurring images of the box itself. If anyone had read that thought in his mind, they would know everything. How had Thea not figured out what the symbol on the box meant? To Bucky, the hammer and sickle, the border of wheat sheaves bound with a ribbon bearing a typically hyperbolic communist slogan, and the red star—the red star that he loathed with all of his might—ought to have been an enormous clue to what that logo symbolised.

The rattle of a tea cup in its saucer being placed in front of him drew Bucky’s attention back to Charles Xavier, who commented on Bucky’s unspoken thoughts. “I imagine, Sergeant Barnes, that most Englishwomen of Mrs Barnes’ age would not recognise Soviet imagery of that type. The symbol on the box was quite small after all. If she were, perhaps, 10 years older, then she might have recognised enough to guess, perhaps. The outline of the reactors towards the centre could as much appear to be derricks or some industrial smoke stacks. Of course, at some point, I shall have to remove that image from her mind, too.”

Snarling with both fear and surprise, Bucky demanded, “And how are you plannin’ to do that?”

“That should be a very simple process. She didn’t ever handle the box, I understand. I need only remove the memory of what the symbol on top looked like. She will be left with a vague thought that there was image on the top of a box that she once saw in your bag and nothing else. I will then place another false thought about a plausible container for the stone in both of your minds, which will be a sensible redirect. That way, your memories will align, but neither of you will remember the true appearance of the object. I do not even need to be in the same room as Mrs Barnes for something that simple. I must apologise that I can only offer you Darjeeling, Sergeant. I believe that you prefer a more Russian style tea.”

Waving his hand as he shook his head dismissively, Bucky replied dourly, “My wife is from Coventry, Xavier. I am quite familiar with this sort of English-brewed tea: weak with sugar and milk.”

“Ah, yes. Russian tea culture is quite different and yet quite important there, it would seem.” Xavier hummed slightly, as if considering something. “Jam? Fascinating. I can offer you a bit of strawberry sort to stir in, if you would like. I admit that I was not previously familiar with that tradition, Sergeant.”

Bucky shook his head. “I may have spent more of my life there than anywhere else, but I am not actually Russian, you know. Both of my parents were born in Kilkenny. Anyway, jam would taste strange with a watery tea like Darjeeling.” He immediately picked up one of the cakes that had been deposited in front of him on a gold-rimmed porcelain plate. “So, what do we do now, Xavier?”

“Unfortunately, I will have to spend some time going through quite nearly everything. Your thoughts of this mission are interwoven with hundreds of other memories and emotions. I could mask your memory of the location quite quickly, but it would not withstand interrogation. I must find all the places that you have thought about, planned for, dreamt about, or acted on this mission. I do not want to take away anything more than the barest minimum. You have had your memory
damaged already.”

His plate now empty and the tea finished in two swallows, Bucky replied harshly, “I don’t actually want to remember any of this. However, that would be too dangerous. I should retain some memory at least, so I know what to avoid saying or doing.”

Placing his own teacup down on the table, Xavier replied firmly, “I agree. Therefore, unless you wish otherwise, I will only change the minimum and I will alert you as I go along to what I am doing.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m giving you permission to do whatever you gotta do. You don’t need to walk on eggshells just because HYDRA is a bag full of snake s***. My mind is damaged enough that you aren’t likely to do much more harm.”

“I shan’t do any harm, Sergeant Barnes. Of that, I can assure you most sincerely. I will not be party to damaging you further.” After a brief hesitation, Xavier continued in a tone that seemed almost embarrassed, “To the contrary, I would like to offer you something. I have learnt the hard way that hiding your pain from you will only damage you further. We cannot run from our experiences without irreparably changing who we are. Yet, I can offer to…soften the edges of some memories, if you would like. The damage would remain. Your experiences would be unchanged. However, the memories would no longer be as prominent. Other thoughts and feelings would be placed in the forefront of your mind, so they would, essentially, crowd out the other memories. Nevertheless, all the memories would still be fully intact and accessible.”

Immediately sitting bolt upright in his chair, Bucky insisted urgently, “I cannot do that. I have to remember. I’m the one that committed all the murders and caused all the mayhem associated with the Winter Soldier missions. I may not have had any choice then, but I do now. Someone needs to remember and someone needs to be held accountable. There isn’t anyone else but me left, so I’m the chump that’s gotta do it.”

Xavier sighed. “My friend, that is both virtuous and noble, but it is also ridiculously unnecessary. You may remain the guardian of the memories, but you do not need to continue to be tortured for your crimes when you were under HYDRA’s control. You have been through enough agony, have you not? I do not know of any government that would sentence you to more than what you have already suffered. Allow me to place the memories where they belong: behind your current experiences. You are so much more than the man who was enslaved by HYDRA. You are also their greatest victim. You deserve to be released now from the nightmare.”

“That’s where we disagree, Xavier. I’m still the guy that did it.” Bucky clenched both his hands around his thighs as he tried to control himself, but his voice came out exceedingly harsh and bitter. “POW, slave, victim…yeah, I know that I was all of those when they owned me. I hate all of those words, but I know they are accurate. However, I’m still the guy who pulled the trigger. I can’t be Bucky Barnes and not feel that guilt. This is who I am.”

“I know. However, there is a proper place for your guilt and your pain, Sergeant. It does not need to rule your life.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I am declining.”

Nodding with understanding, Xavier replied unhappily, “Very well. I shall accept your refusal. However, if at any time in the future you are ready for me to do this for you, then I ask you to please allow me the privilege of helping you.”

Bucky pushed his plate and cup away from him and then turned in his chair so he was facing more
towards the door. “Yeah, ok.”

“No, I am quite aware that you are determined never to allow me to do this. Unfortunately, I am able to see all of your pain, Sergeant Barnes. Much as you would be desperate to help some poor soul that you saw in mortal agony from a physical wound, I feel the same about what I am witnessing in your mind. I had never thought that I would experience a mind with more pain and anger than…” Xavier stopped and cleared his throat before he continued, “What you have been capable of overcoming is astonishing, to be honest. I have seen minds permanently destroyed by far, far less, Sergeant Barnes.”

“I can’t let myself fall apart—don’t have the luxury.” Bucky shrugged. “You’ve never met my Thea, Xavier. She’s reason enough to push through anything. And I gotta be there to make sure Steve doesn’t go and destroy a country when he’s trying to save the world.”

“Yes, I understand. You have two exceedingly powerful mental anchors. Your devotion to those you love is extraordinary. Your wife, your children, and your friendship with Colonel Rogers vibrantly colour almost every memory created since you escaped from HYDRA—to a degree that I have only ever seen in one other person before. Nevertheless, Sergeant, it is not the people in your life that healed you. It is your own doing and your choice. You are the one who has pulled all the mental chaos together and actually used it to fuel your healing process. This is honestly something that I’ve never witnessed before.”

Bucky grimaced and ran his hand shakily through his hair, as he worked to keep his control. “I’m not sure what you’re seeing, Xavier, I’m really not a complicated or remarkable man. I’m just a guy from Brooklyn, who was sent to war and got captured by the enemy. Twice. It woulda been a lot better for mankind had I died the first time, instead of Steve comin’ to save me. Not that I am complaining, since I’m glad that I was able to be there with him when he was runnin’ the commandos. He needed serious handling and none of those idiots he chose to go with us to hunt HYDRA coulda done it. Steve is two handfuls at the best of times.”

His eyes wide with understanding, Xavier gestured slightly, as he replied, “It is clear to me, Sergeant Barnes, that Colonel Rogers was and is very lucky to have a friend like you.”

Finally, unable to remain sitting, Bucky got up and stalked over towards the large window that overlooked the lawns below. After several minutes, he said brusquely, “Honestly, I’m the lucky one. Always was. Steve is so d*** intense: he cannot bear to live life in the slow lane. His mother once said to me that Steve’s soul was too much for such a tiny body. All the serum did was to make his body fit who he was inside. The way I see always saw it, how do you meet a guy like that and not wanna saddle up to ride shotgun, huh? Never understood why no one else seemed to see who Steve really is.”

“People too rarely look beyond first impressions, I’m afraid.”

Bucky laughed brittlely. “Steve was a runty, restive punk, ya know? Everything is either 0 or 100% with him and that’s exactly how I’ve always understood the world, so we immediately clicked, right? We roamed Brooklyn and, occasionally, even the lesser boroughs having varied adventures until the US Army sent me off on a solo trip where he couldn’t follow. I oughta’ve guessed he’d find a way into the fight, since he has never backed down from a thing in his life.”

Sighing heavily, Xavier replied, “There are few people who live their life so intensely, Sergeant. I understand your admiration for your friend; however, I question whether you comprehend your own appeal to those who truly know you. Have you considered why Colonel Rogers was so willing to fight the world to save you?”
Bucky looked away with annoyance and focussed his eyes out the window again and on the large oak below. “There isn’t much mystery there. We’ve been pals for most of our life, Xavier, and Steve’s never turned away from a fight when he believes in the cause. Doesn’t matter which of us is a Barnes or a Rogers, we’re family pure and simple. Understand? A lot of us guys had friends who were more like brothers back then. Seems like the only men who make friends like that now are soldiers who’ve fought together. But to a guy born in my time, having a good job, a true friend, and marrying a sweet girl was everything we were lookin’ for in life. So, I actually got the only things that, to me, are worth living for. I don’t deserve them, but I got ‘em. I’ll will find a way through all the s*** that’s crowding my brain on my own, Xavier.”

Xavier nodded. “I do believe that you shall. I must admit, Sergeant Barnes, that I find your mind to be remarkable. I hope that you will eventually allow yourself to consider more honestly why your friend is so devoted to you. If you see your qualities more fully, then it should help you to heal. It may even aide you in your marriage, since I suspect that Mrs Barnes values many of the same traits that Colonel Rogers does. Unfortunately, it is now time that we begin. There is not any way that I can make this painless, but I will do my best to ameliorate the discomfort that you do experience.”

Bucky pursed his lips briefly and then said with determination, “Let’s get it over with then.”

Steve’s head snapped up, then he turned around and demanded, “Where the h*ll did you go, Buck? And what’s with the decoy that Thea was hiding in your room?”

Bucky sank into the armchair across from Steve and replied roughly, “I’ll explain all of it tomorrow. For now, just trust me that it was necessary, ok? I’m too tired to say much more at the moment. The decoy is gone.”

“Who was he?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t ask. A mutant probably. I had a mission, Steve. Had to complete it. Couldn’t let anyone but Thea and Xavier know. Can you let it go for now?”

Obviously unconvinced, Steve leant against the chair back so hard that it creaked slightly. “If you insist, but you’re gonna have to explain to me how you know Charles Xavier, Buck.”

“Gimme a day, pal. I’m just not ready to talk right now. Tell me about the flight back. No trouble?”

“Nothing.” Steve frowned and amended his comment. “Seryozha still found a multitude of listening devices though, both in the plane and around the apartment. I guess we have to resign ourselves to the reality that they’re always gonna try, Buck.”

“Obviously. Maybe, it’ll present an interesting challenge when I make my perimeter checks, as Thea calls them. Every bug I find, then you can give me a pat on the head for a job well done.”

Steve punched his arm and grumbled, “You don’t gotta be a jerk about it, Buck.”

Rolling his eyes blantly at his friend, Bucky replied, “You seem to think that the wide range of people who want information from the world’s most powerful supersoldiers are suddenly gonna stop tryin’, since we aren’t in trouble with the law anymore or because we ask nicely. Not sure what process you used to come to that conclusion, buddy, but I think you oughta reconsider.”

“Go jump in a lake, Barnes.”
Bucky snorted with annoyance. “Officers first, Rogers.”

Steve kicked the side of Bucky’s chair and muttered, “Don’t have to wrap me up in cotton like a baby, Buck. I’m a big boy now. I can take care of myself.”

Despite himself, Bucky laughed. “Sure, you’ve proven that real well, Steve. Lemme review your Barnes-less record: signing up to be a secret government lab rat, storming a HYDRA POW camp by yourself, crashing a plane into the ice on purpose, leaping out of aircraft without a parachute multiple times, jumping out of an elevator, vaulting on top of a plane to retrieve your shield…”

Interrupting with a growl, Steve sharply replied, “Oh, give it a rest, Buck. I’ve been lectured enough by you for all that cr**. I don’t need it today.”

Bucky sat up sharply. “Steve.”

“What, Buck?”

Asking with consternation, Bucky reached over to put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’. I mean, I’m not gonna go to Leavenworth, which is a relief. I’m gonna get to live with my girl and my kids. You’re here. That’s all I ever wanted outta life, you know?”

“Is it?”

“Should be.”

“I recently said almost the same thing to someone, Steve, but I hafta admit that I wasn’t being totally honest with myself. I need more than just my girl, my kids, and my brother. I gotta have the adventure, too. I want peace, but I need the adventure, too. If I am inactive too long, I get the itch to go off and do somethin’ risky or else I start over-training and getting f***in’ paranoid as h*ll. I took a break while I was healing, but I cannot lean back and coast from here out. I’m just not made to sit and do nothin’, Steve. Neither are you.”

Steve groaned. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. But I’m tired of fightin’ against aliens or HYDRA and I cannot fight my friends again. I cannot go through that again, Bucky.”

“I know, pal. I do. However, we’re gonna be fightin’ against aliens or killer robots or maybe just other enhanced people, since we don’t run from the fight that comes to us. Right?”

“Yeah. Sorry I’m in such sour mood.”

“Mmhm. Did ya talk to Sam about this?”

Surprised, Steve replied, “No. Why would I?”

“Because he knows this s***. He is good at understanding you and he’s better at sayin’ some things than I am. He might have explained it better than I could.”

Steve shrugged. “Maybe, but I don’t wanna talk to Sam. Just tell me what you are tryin’ to say, Buck.”

“If you’re sure.” When Steve nodded, Bucky tilted his head and stared across as his friend. Well, the way I see it, you still feel guilty about that medal of honour. You also don’t think that you deserve any special recognition for any of the things you’ve done for people. And you’re
embarrassed that they handled your pardon in such a blatantly political way. Additionally, you’re feeling guilty that you accepted it and didn’t go down fighting for your honour in a court-martial. Finally, you’re feeling bad about the situation with Stark, about your friends getting in trouble, and that you’ve spent so much time away from your family. How am I doin’ so far?”

Steve curtly nodded his head, but Bucky didn’t miss how red the tips of his ears were. Therefore, he knew that he’d hit his mark. “Maybe.”

“What woulda happened if you’d been sent to Leavenworth, Steve? Think about me, Mary-Claire, your sons, the other Avengers, and all the kids that look up to you as a hero. What would we all do? And the next time that there was some threat to mankind or even just New York, do you think that we woulda won? You sacrificed yourself again here, Steve, because you are needed, so you accepted the pardon. You fell on the grenade again—don’t think I don’t remember that in my list of stupid s*** you’ve done when I wasn’t there, by the way.”

Steve got up and looked out of the window into the dark street below for a moment, then he crossed the floor to grab his coffee. Once he’d finished the last swallow, he roamed around the room anxiously for a while before he finally replied, “I don’t know. Maybe I just did it because I wanted to be with Mary-Claire and the boys. Maybe I just needed that.”

Bucky got up and crossed the floor to where Steve was propped up against a closet door. “That’s a d*** good reason, too. I wouldn’t fault that. It would be enough for me, honestly.” Placing his hand on Steve’s shoulder again, Bucky continued more firmly, “But as much as you longed to be able to accept a pardon for that reason, you didn’t agree to it just for your family. Did you?”

“No. No, I didn’t. But I don’t…I don’t wanna have to argue with you now, Buck. I’m…jeez, Bucky, I’m drowning in a Jeremiad ocean storm and I cannot find a way towards the light. Not unless Mary-Claire is there. That’s the only time I feel warm.”

Bucky smiled sadly. “Pal, that girl is shockingly head over heels about you. She’s a pretty incredible woman, too. Smart as a whip and cunning as can be. She’s like Hannibal and Subutai crossed with Carole Lombard.”

Smiling in spite of himself, Steve shook his head. “That’s quite a description, Buck. You always did like Carole Lombard.”

“Not as much as you swooned over Claudette Colbert, pal. I swear we snuck in to see It Happened One Night three times.”

“So sue me. Claudette Colbert was a beauty with class, Buck.”

“Mnmm. I’m sure her class is what you were thinkin’ about when you sat there gabbering away in French with her at that USO thing.”

Steve glared at Bucky and insisted, “I’m not gonna pretend anything of the kind, Buck. But she didn’t have anything on Mary-Claire. Did I ever tell you about our first date?”

“Actually, no.”

“Well, Mary-Claire was late and I’d been early. So, by the time she got there, I’d been nursing a drink for about 30 minutes. I was nervous enough that I thought I might be sick. As we ate, I kept looking at her and thinking, ‘how am I ever gonna keep a girl like her interested?’ And then, Mary-Claire wanted to take a walk. It was about -3 degrees outside and she had on a coat that wouldn’t keep a bear warm. So, I gave her mine. It was so cold that I wasn’t even sure I still had toes, since I
hadn’t felt ‘em in at least an hour, and I was startin’ to have that edgy feeling I get before a flashback, you know? Yet, she was holdin’ my hand, so what was I gonna do? We must have walked 2 miles just talkin’, but I’d have walked all the way up to the Bronx if I’d thought she was willing. The sound of me falling that deep that fast was probably audible in space, Buck.”

Bucky blinked at Steve for a moment and then admitted, “It was less than 10 seconds before I knew. One look into her face, honestly. I actually felt my world realigning and it was overwhelming enough I thought I might pass out. Thea literally shifted my world.”

Steve nodded. “Maybe that’s how it had to be for both of us, Buck. Sam says that I don’t do anything unless I can do it at volume 11 instead of 10. Some sort of movie reference or something, but I get it. But perhaps he’s right and you’re the same way.”

“Steve, pal, we’ve always been that way. You know, it seems to me that Mary-Claire likes your volume 11.”

Laughing with Bucky, Steve replied only, “Maybe.”

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