The Rehabilitation of Bucky Barnes

by DancesWithNargles

Summary

Post Captain America: The Winter Soldier (not Captain America: Civil War compliant)

Natasha has been crucial to Barnes' survival and recovery. When Hydra captures Natasha, he knows she can take care of herself, but Bucky is a little biased and possessive, and he's going to make them regret they ever taught him to inflict pain on his victims.
Chapter Summary

Finding people is easy. Making them come with you is a little harder...

Chapter Notes

(I cut three chapters from the beginning of this story because I felt, after rereading several times, that this is where it really begins)

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjNdAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

res'ig'na'tion rezəgˈhɑːSH(ə)n noun: Acceptance of something undesirable, but inevitable.

"Miss You" by Trentemøller--

Natasha had found Barnes almost a week ago, but she wasn’t about to tell that to Steve. Knowing him, he would’ve jumped right out into the Winter Soldier’s line of sight, calling out and expecting Barnes to run into his arms in a joyous reunion. She couldn’t help but laugh at her mental depiction of the moment:

“Bucky!” Steve shouts, arms open, running toward the Winter Soldier.

“Steve, pal! Where ya’ been?” Barnes answers with a smile, arms open to receive Rogers as the wind blows their jackets around them, beautiful piano music playing in the background. They would collide together with laughter and warm embraces, apologizing to each other for lost time.

Until the Winter Soldier’s programming kicked in, and then he would grin deviously before jamming a knife into Steve’s ribs.

Natasha shuddered at her morbid daydream, allowing her mind to wander in another direction:

Bucky, homeless and alone, remembering his past before the Winter Soldier, coming to Roger’s front door with his bangs dripping from the downpour of rain. He would lift his thin arm to knock on the door, cheeks gaunt with hunger and eyes full of sorrow.

“No.” Steve would answer the door in surprise, taking the fragile shell of a man into his arms and offering him a place to stay.

No, it couldn’t happen like that, either. The Winter Soldier was a highly-trained assassin! He could blend in, steal whatever he needed, and survive alone for a long time before he looked for help. But
what she was looking at with her own eyes didn’t make much sense, either… There, a good fifty feet away from her—a thin and dirty homeless man, lying under a sheet of newspaper.

This was Barnes? This is what Hydra’s great weapon had been reduced to? Wearing a smudgy jacket and frayed baseball cap, Barnes’ oily long hair fell into his face, overshadowing a prickly, gritty beard. Something stirred inside of Natasha at the sight of him—was it pity? The shock of it tasted wrong, giving Natasha cause to take in her surroundings. There were a few passer-byers on the sidewalks, one patrol cop, an overweight man selling hot dogs— movement! Barnes wasn’t sleeping under the newspaper anymore.

Where had he gone? There! He was holding out a paper cup toward a middle-aged man in a suit with a briefcase. With a flick of his wrist, the seemingly-homeless Bucky pressed the silencer nozzle of a gun into the business man’s gut, the rapid and precise shot inaudible to those around them. Lowering the business man to the bench in a sitting position, Barnes calmly and quickly returned the firearm into his dirty jacket, taking the briefcase from the dead man’s hand, and striding away from the scene.

So fast and calculated was Barnes’ execution of motion that no bystander could have seen it. The middle-aged man had been a Hydra agent-- the same one Natasha, herself, had been sent after not one week ago when she caught her first glimpse of Barnes. Natasha fell in step with the crowd, tailing Barnes from a distance and promising herself that this time he wouldn’t escape her.

Beneath an unused highway bridge, on pavement untouched by the sun, the Winter Soldier perused through the papers of the briefcase, setting them on fire when he obviously hadn’t found what he wanted.

“I didn’t expect you to be so reckless.” Natasha announced, walking into plain view under the bridge with her hands up and empty.

Barnes looked up, but didn’t register surprise from where he sat on the ground. “Why are you talking to me?”

“I’ve been following you.” She said with crossed arms, standing a few feet away.

“I know,” He said in aggravation. “But why are you talking to me? Why now?”

“I’m not the only one following you.”

The Winter Soldier shrugged. “I don’t want to see Captain Rogers.”

“I wasn’t referring to him.” Natasha said, fighting the urge to reach for her gun. The way Barnes was sitting so passively unnerved her. “I meant Hydra. Or did you think you could just gun down their assets one by one and they wouldn’t find out?”

It was true—Hydra couldn’t have been more obvious in their efforts to find their lost assassin if they had been wearing hats wired with orange flags flapping above their heads!

Barnes sighed, finally rising to his feet and causing Natasha to take a step back.

“I wasn’t trying to take out Hydra. I was trying to make sure they weren’t following me, but it looks like I’m running out of places to run.” He said.

“You know they won’t just leave you alone, right?”

“Did they send you to kill me?” Barnes asked tiredly. The resignation in his voice made Natasha
falter for a moment and she wondered how willing he would be to come with her.

“I don’t work for them, or SHIELD.” Natasha shook her head. Well, at least, not for the moment—Shield had some bugs to work out before she was willing to offer her services to them again.

The Winter Soldier scanned her face before his features relaxed. “I believe you.”

“I’m all by myself, Barnes.” It was a risk to test the name out on him, but he didn’t look repulsed and it caused her to inwardly sigh in relief. “And I think we’re looking the same thing. You said you were running out of places to run—I can fix that, for a little while.”

He eyed her curiously.

*Take the bait,* she mentally demanded. Natasha made a “follow me” motion with her hand and, surprisingly, Barnes stepped alongside her as she made her way to the car. So far, so good, she thought. *Let’s hope I’m not making a mistake.* . . .

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Relocation

Chapter Summary

Great. So, finding him wasn’t hard, getting him to come with her wasn’t hard, but now they need to share a small space for a while. Is this really going to work?

Chapter Notes

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re`lo`ca`tion  rēˈlōˌkāt  intransitive verb: To move to a new place

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“Orange Ocean (Loscil Remix)” by Kodomo---

They drove in silence, the sun descending in the rear-view mirror as the car moved away from the crowded city and into the slums. But even in the silence, she knew he was analyzing her.

“Where are we going?” Barnes asked in a grizzly, tired voice.

“A safe-house.” Natasha answered, parking the car under a cluster of dead trees that had grown together in the upper branches, forming a natural tunnel.

How much of ‘Bucky’ is still in there? Natasha wondered, silently leading him to a small structure beyond the tree-tunnel.

The small, graffiti-covered, ratty house was falling apart on the outside, but was remarkably tidy and clean on the inside—floors of grey concrete and white block walls, windows boarded up, and only a handful of furniture scattered throughout both rooms. The main room was empty except for a mattress, and Natasha gave it a slight nudge with her boot as she motioned for Barnes to follow her into the kitchen, where there were two chairs beside a table. Without a word, the Winter Soldier sat rigidly on the edge of a creaky wooden chair, back straight and arms “resting”—more like hovering—over the top of the scratchy table.

“It isn’t much,” Natasha looked around at the door-less cabinets and stained sink. “And I know it doesn’t look like it, but it’s clean.”

The assassin stared at her unresponsively, as though the state of the room was entirely irrelevant. Natasha sat across from him, noticing for the first time the way his fleshly hand trembled and the quivering sway of his bangs as they dropped in front of his face. So, she mused, being a vagrant was an act, but being sick wasn’t.
“The water still works in the bathroom, if you want to clean up.” Natasha offered. His appearance was obviously a cover meant to help Barnes get to the Hydra agent, and she imagined he must have been uncomfortable in allowing himself to get so shaggy.

But the Winter Soldier’s eyes widened for a moment before he glared at her and shook his head. He plainly didn’t want to be that vulnerable around her. It was just a flash, just a brief moment that her mind wandered, but Natasha wondered what Barnes looked like without the long hair and beard.

“How hungry?” She asked after a long moment of silence. *Easy questions first, harder things later…*

Barnes shook his head again and raised the bottom of his shirt for Natasha to see. On his waist was a mark—a spot for a feeding tube.

Natasha looked at him in surprise. “Then how are you eating?” How did he maintain that much muscle with a feeding tube? Then again, she recalled, cryogenics could mess up a person’s organs.

“Working on it.” Barnes growled irritably. “Protein shakes don’t upset me much.”

“Hmm.” She acknowledged, watching his eyes shift from angry to exhausted. “And when was the last time you slept?”

The blueish, sunken skin around his eyes twitched as he raised them to meet her glance. “I haven’t reported in… two weeks.” His voice ground out, just before a shiver ran through his body.

“I’m not talking about cryo-sleep.” She said, settling herself against the back of the chair, hoping to lend an atmosphere of calm. “What about a normal REM cycle?” The Winter Soldier didn’t answer, but the slight shake of his head told her enough. It had obviously been too long.

“What do I call you?” Natasha asked quietly. Barnes’ eyes were full of skepticism and he was clearly asking himself why he was there at all, probably assuming that he would be leaving soon. Not if Natasha had anything to do with it. “Listen, I know you don’t trust me, and that’s fine, but I still need your cooperation.”

Natasha rested her hands out on the table, palms up and open, and knuckles resting against the scratchy wooden surface. It was a show of vulnerability, proof that she had no intention of moving against him. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Are…” He eyed her curiously. “Are you asking for my help?”

“Yes.” The corner of her mouth twitched into a smile. Was this the first time someone had smiled at him in a genuine display of warmth since he’d been trapped by Hydra?

His eyes lingered on hers with an expression that looked partly shocked and partly relieved. “Who are you looking for?”

“Bucky Barnes.”

The light of curiosity in his face dimmed down, replaced by a small look of disappointment, but when he met her eyes again, they said what he was thinking. *I’m looking for him, too.*

“So, what do I call you?” Natasha repeated.

“James.” His parched lips supplied. “I’m not certain about much, but I know that I’m James Barnes.”

“James,” Natasha smiled widely at him. But her victory was cut short when James gripped his head
in both of his hands, eyes scrunching shut in pain as his fingers clenched at the roots of his hair with a sharp gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Natasha’s limbs jolted. “James, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“Stop,” James moaned, pressing his forehead to the table, hands still fisting his hair. There was a small sound—barely audible—coming from inside of James’ metallic arm, and Natasha sprang up from her chair, hoping with everything in her that it wasn’t a detonation device about to go off.

“James,” She tried to sound calm as she stood over him, but the fear was most definitely there. “You have to walk me through this—what can I do to help you?”

He looked up at her with gritted teeth, obviously in a tremendous amount of pain, made visible by the blood vessels that flared beneath his forehead. Crying out and slamming his metallic hand down, the table crumbled beneath the blow and James jumped to his feet, glaring at Natasha.

“Why are you really here?” He shouted, spit flying from his bared teeth.

Natasha held up her hands, eyes widening as she took a step away from him. “James, calm down.” Barnes looked ready to erupt with fury, and no matter how many times Natasha had seen something similar with Bruce Banner, she had to admit that it frightened her.

“Rogers sent you, didn’t he?” James bellowed, taking a threatening step closer to her.

“I’m not here for Steve,” Natasha kept her hands raised, but was internally judging a counterattack against the enraged man moving toward her. “I’m here for James Barnes.”

If Natasha had blinked in that moment, she might not have survived—James’ arm swiftly jutted out, a concealed blade having made its way into his hand, and Natasha only had a second to react. Attempting to block his stab, she chopped at his hand to move the weapon away—but his metallic arm was stronger than she thought and the blade sank into her lower waist. Kicking out with her leg, Natasha thrust her foot into James’ chest, pushing him backward before grabbing the handle of the knife and wrenching it from her body.

“Bad marks, assassin,” James growled at her, standing in a defensive pose against the wall opposite to where Natasha leaned against the countertop, staunching the blood at the wound above her hip with her hand. “You let me get too close to you.”

“And I’ll do it again,” Natasha said firmly, trying to ignore the pain that made her want to curl in on herself, but the Winter Soldier had known exactly where to strike her and she wasn’t able to stop a moan. “Because I’m not an assassin, just like you’re not the Winter Soldier.”

Barnes didn’t lower his defensive stance, but his eyes softened. “Do you expect me to show remorse?”

Natasha was beginning to feel bleary, her eyelids were closing despite her demand that her eyes remain trained on James. “Maybe not today, but eventually, you will. When you’re….” Heaviness made her body sag to the side and she anchored herself on the countertop with a faltering grip. “… when you’re James Barnes again.” Cloudiness was obstructing her vision and Natasha felt herself being pulled down. She couldn’t remember falling; instead, the ground was pulling itself up to smack her in the face.

The last thing she saw before the world turned dark was a set of hands reaching for her. ..
Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :}

Chapter Summary

Judging from the beeps in his mechanical arm and the way he's screaming in pain, Bucky might be in more trouble than Natasha originally thought...

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**repro`ba`tion** rep-ruh-bey-shuhn noun, verb A severe form of disapproval

--“Twice” by Little Dragon--

A set of hands.

Natasha was drifting, but she could feel fingertips on her bare skin. Her eyes flew open and she tried to sit up, but a cold set of metal fingers pressed her shoulder back to the concrete floor.

“Don’t move,” someone commanded.

Natasha’s head swiveled to look into James’ face. He was kneeling over her as she lay on the ground, his metallic arm returning to her naked hip where his other hand held a needle and thread.

“What are you doing?” She croaked. Was he James again or had he reverted back to the cold, calculating Winter Soldier?

“Closing the wound.” His whisper sounded angry, but not quite regretful. The Winter Soldier. He wasn’t James at the moment, but somehow he also wasn’t an immediate threat. “Stopped the bleeding. Didn’t have stitching wire. Stole this.” The words were clinical, even scolding, as though he were an instructor who was disappointed with a pupil.

“Where are my pants?” She asked, raising herself to her elbows as he clipped the thread with his teeth.

“Soaking in the sink.” He said numbly. “Cold water gets the blood out.”

Natasha was too hardened to feel embarrassment at being half bare and the Winter Soldier was clearly still dominant in this man’s mind, shown by the complete indifference he wore when he had been touching her and now by barely looking at her. Lowering himself into a chair beside the broken table, James’ eyes narrowed at her face.
“Didn’t hit anything important.” He said condescendingly. “But the Black Widow shouldn’t let her guard down so easily.”

At first, Natasha thought about being offended, but then a thought appeared as if from nowhere: this was how the Winter Soldier was showing that they were allies—her name as a spy mattered enough to him to ‘rebuke’ her for a slip-up with a non-fatal knife wound, and then to tend to her afterward.

_How considerate_, she thought sarcastically. But she would take what progress she could get.

“I’m not leaving,” James said with a flicker of annoyance. “But I’m not ready to speak with Steve Rogers, not yet.”

“Do you remember him?”

James’ frown turned into a scowl. “Not much. I get headaches when I try to remember.”

Pulling herself up from the ground, Natasha was surprised to find that she only felt a little lightheaded, a stinging sensation in the cut at her waist. The Winter Soldier’s aim was true, having missed anything vital, but had penetrated enough flesh to put her at a disadvantage. Maybe he’d done it out of anger, she mused, but maybe he’d also done it to disarm her and cause her to be less of a threat.

Again, she was struck by the irony of the act—he’d handicapped her because he intended to stick with her for a while. Sticking with her meant he was willing to hear her out. More progress. They spoke more, all while Natasha wrung out her rinsed pants and set them on the windowsill of the broken-down kitchen to dry, and she was encouraged when she learned that James had gone searching for information on himself and Steve Rogers. James still had reservations and he was disgusted with the “biased propaganda” the Smithsonian and other sources fed to the populace.

“I’d rather not hear about how he’s saved the country over and over again.” James cut her off as she started to speak about Rogers.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Natasha grunted as she slid down to sit on the concrete ground. “I was going to tell you about the little things, the personal things.”

James let out a sharp, irritated sigh and clasped his hands together in his lap, but then nodded his head for her to continue.

“When we were on the run from Shield, we hid in the crowd at a mall.” She recalled with a small smile. “There were agents close-by and I told him to put his arm around me and laugh at something funny I said. He’s such a dork; I’ve never heard such a nerdy laugh in all my life.”

James didn’t look amused, but he also didn’t look as though the description had been a waste of his time.

“And then afterward,” Natasha went on, “we hijacked a truck, heading out to break into a Hydra facility. I remember asking where he’d learned to steal a car. He was offended and corrected me: ‘We’re not stealing, we’re borrowing. Get your feet off the dash’. Even though it seemed like the world was ending all around us, agents chasing after us, trying to kill us, he still had time to be kind to someone.”

James’ face tilted to the side and he stared at the ground, lost in thought. Natasha wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw puzzlement and then recognition.

“Germany,” He whispered so softly that she didn’t hear at first, and then he repeated himself louder.
“He learned in Germany. I showed him how to wire the ignition. We needed a ride to…” He swung his head to look at the doorway and then returned his glance to the concrete floor. “…somewhere.”

Reaching up to touch his forehead, James winced, but kept speaking. “Brooklyn. He was from Brooklyn.”

“You’re from Brooklyn, too, James,” Natasha said, alert and ready for another violent outburst, but it didn’t seem to come.

“That’s where I lived,” James shivered in pain, clenching his teeth together and clasping at the roots of his hair. “Where I learned how…” Crying out, James doubled over, falling to his knees on the ground and pressing fists to his temples. “My head’s on fire!”

Springing to her feet as fast as her injury would allow, Natasha spun around and grabbed her still-wet pants from above the sink, pressing them to James’ head to offer relief while he screamed in agony. His tormented shouts and heavy breathing distressed Natasha, but she resisted the urge to cover her ears and kept her hands around the cold, wet fabric.

“Why won’t they…” James gasped, riding through a wave of pain, “Why won’t they let me remember?”

Natasha’s eyes flew to the metallic arm and, once more, she heard a soft beeping noise and this time caught a glance of light emanating from beneath one of the folds of metal.

“Hydra,” She breathed, fingers hovering over the panel on his arm. “There’s something in your arm, James—you have to tell me about this arm.”

“Damn the arm!” James snarled, though his pain was visibly dimming.

“I agree, but you need to fill me in—is there something else to it? Is there something inside of it causing you to hurt?”

“Drugs,” James breathed, still gasping for breath, but to Natasha’s relief he seemed to be free of the immense pain from before. “Something, I don’t know what, but something. For compliance.”

_Compliance_, Natasha repeated inwardly. Suppressants, probably, to keep him from resisting Hydra’s orders— and his memories were a form of resistance, apparently.

He sagged, leaning to one side, but her arms were around his shoulders in an instant. Keeping him from toppling over, his body fell heavily into her hold, fatigued from the attack on his mind.

“I could hurt you,” James said in a threatening tone, but he sounded too tired to act on it.

“I don’t think you have enough energy for another lesson,” Natasha dared to chide. “You need to sleep.”

James made a sound of disagreement, but he was already sliding out of her hold, heavy in her arms, and grunted some form of plea. As glad as she was to have it, Natasha realized the tranquilizer Bruce had given her wouldn’t be necessary.

“I’ll keep watch.” Natasha promised, hoping it would offer him some comfort as she pulled him out of the chair and practically carried him under his arms.

Eyelids visibly heavy and head bobbing, James shuffled his tired feet through the doorway of the kitchen and into the room beyond it. Gravity had helped him into the bed, more so than Natasha.
There was a reason she hated this hideout—it was bare-bones even though she’d scrubbed it from top to bottom.

A long-buried maternal instinct nagged at her and she disappeared from the house to retrieve a blanket from the car. James looked like he would survive without it, but there was a kindness to the action that Natasha couldn’t ignore, one that she knew he’d gone without for long enough. How long had he gone without a caring touch? Whatever Hydra had done, they’d done it well enough to keep a grip on their "weapon" even from a distance. It was likely his arm was beginning to run out of whatever drug Hydra had been feeding into it and, knowing their ruthlessness, Natasha couldn’t deny the possibility of a failsafe—something to kill the Winter Soldier if he failed to report in after a certain amount of time.

Natasha heard the mattress squeak and a muffled thump in the next room, rushing in to see James crumpled in a heap beside the bed.

“The key,” he was moaning, clutching at his head and pressing his eyelids together painfully, each wrinkle appearing at the corner of his eyes like the shattering of glass. “Where was the key?”

“James,” Natasha approached him cautiously, prepared for him to lash out at her. “What key?”

“Agh!” He shivered and convulsed, the skin around his lips tight as he bared his teeth against some unseen horror. “Where is it?”

“What key, James?” Natasha repeated louder, drawing closer and kneeling beside him.

Suddenly his eyes flew open and James looked at her with a strange combination of triumph and severe pain. “The brick! Steve’s key was under the brick.”

His labored breathing scared Natasha, but she could see that he had gained some mental victory. Just then, a tinge of red caught her eye.

“James, your arm is bleeding.” She blinked as if to clear her vision and gently picked up the robotic limb. “How is your metal arm bleeding?”

“It’s still there.” He croaked, clenching his eyes shut and resting his head against the concrete floor in fatigue.

She could only assume he was referring to a remnant of his arm, but as she inspected the limb closer, Natasha noted that there was a flashing light and a burst of green liquid at the fold of metal just below the red star. Natasha’s eyes roamed the Winter Soldier’s pained form, considering her options. As much as she’d wanted to do this alone—to have brought James Barnes back to Steve more… well, whole, she couldn’t have known just how much help would be needed. Letting out a reluctant sigh and gripping James’ shoulder, she said, “We’re gonna need Stark.” . .

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Re-evaluation

Chapter Summary

Natasha takes Bucky to see Stark and it goes better than she thought it would.

Chapter Notes

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re´e´val´u´a´tion re-ih-val-yoo-ey-shuh noun: A conscious decision made by an individual, developing a plan to get their life back on track

--“The Angry River” by The Hat, Father John Misty--

They were climbing into the car when Natasha felt the Winter Soldier's familiar scowl.

“Come on, get in,” She prompted, hesitating to lower herself into the car until James was safely in, too.

But he stood there, glaring at her more, without even touching the passenger door.

“What’s wrong?” She tried very much to hide the aggravation in her voice, but it had already been a long day and was leaking into early morning. 4:00 AM, last she'd checked.

“Can Stark be trusted?” James demanded.

Natasha’s brow furrowed. “If he has to remove it, you want me to reassure you he’ll give it back?”

The single nod of James’ head was barely visible, but the bangs in front of his face quivered, and that was confirmation enough for Natasha. She leaned over the top of the car and fixed her eyes on his.

“We’re—” She struggled to find the word. Friends? As much as I’d like to think so, that’s probably a word he’ll be offended by right now. “—allies, right?”

This time his nod was much more pronounced, and it spurred Natasha’s hope even higher. If he was willing to make allies, he could be convinced to trust—a slippery slope, but it could eventually lead to a reunion with Rogers, her ultimate goal.

“I promise you, if Tony tries to withhold it from you in any way, I will fight to get it back.” Like she needed any more license to punch Stark in the face, but there were no traces of a smile on her mouth, only grim determination.
The Winter Soldier nodded again, and if he’d been touched by the sentiment, he didn’t show it. They both ducked into the car, Natasha speeding them away from the slums. She allowed herself to glance at him from the corner of her eye and found him staring at her. Well, staring was better than glaring.

“Are you nervous?” Natasha asked him, more out of a way to fill the silence rather than curiosity.

The Winter Soldier raised his organic hand in response, hovering it high above his lap for her to see. He seemed to be silently saying, *See? No shaking. Not nervous.*

“I need to warn you about Tony,” Natasha said with a small grimace. “He likes to joke around, but he’s perfectly serious about his work. I’d advise you not to listen to his banter, but keep an ear open for technicalities. It might help you to repair yourself in the future.”

James’ forehead wrinkled in surprise. “You mean… I could be autonomous? Without a technician?”

“If that’s what you want, James.”

“You’d let me do that?”

Having stopped at a red light, Natasha turned her head to see the depth of James’ expression: disbelief, wonder, skepticism. In that moment, Natasha dared to do something that hours ago would have been astonishing—reaching over with her right hand, she tentatively rested her palm against James’ forearm. What was even more astonishing was that he let her do it. Natasha knew from experience that touch had a language all its own.

“James, there's no letting about it, you're your own man,” Natasha quirked a smile, keeping her left hand on the wheel as she drove past the now-green light. “You give yourself orders now, even if that means you don’t want to come with me.” It was a gamble, but she brought the car to a curb and stopped it, allowing the engine to run. “If you wanted to get out right now, you could.”

Dormant were the eyes of the Winter Soldier and James’ eyes filled with something else, with *someone else*. That person looked at her in astonishment, as though he’d woken up for the first time and was grateful to see her. *Hi, there,* she mentally sang to him with a grin. *Are you Bucky?*

But just as quickly as Bucky had made an appearance, he was subdued and pushed down again, the numbness returning to the Winter Soldier’s face as his hand reached for his forehead.

“Let go,” he murmured to himself in frustration, the pain clearly increasing as he grimaced.

“Stark tower,” Natasha reminded him, pulling away from the curb and driving faster than was really necessary. “We’re almost there.”

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*“Twice” by Waterstrider*---

Reaching their destination and guiding him out of the car, Natasha was startled when James threw an arm around her neck, thinking at first that he was about to attack her, but then coming to understand he was too hurt and exhausted to stand on his own. Tapping her finger impatiently at the control panel on the glass door of Stark Tower’s entrance, Natasha attempted to bypass Tony’s lock.

“Having some trouble?” an image of Tony appeared on the glass door, smirking at her attempts to figure out the code. “I hope so—I had a stray agent wander in here a while back, had to rewrite the system. Doesn’t mean you’re not wanted. But go away.”
“This is more important than movie-night with Bruce,” Natasha snarled sarcastically, eyes burning at his computerized face. “Let. Me. In. Now.” Shifting with the heavy arm over her shoulder, she moved as much of James into view as possible. “I’ve got a sick man who needs to see you.”

“You’re not helping your case.” Tony huffed in annoyance. “Sick people belong in a hospital, not Stark Tower—”

It was desperate, maybe too desperate, but Natasha reached for the nearly-unconscious James’ mechanical hand and pulled it up and into view. Thankfully, James was too unaware of it to retaliate.

“Damn it.” Stark cursed under his breath. ”18th floor.”

Immediately, the door swung open, and they took the elevator to the left. Struggling to shuffle her hurt companion into the lift, Natasha wasn’t in the least surprised when the elevator picked up at incredible speed, though neither of them could feel the pull or push of it. When the doors opened again, Tony was standing with what looked like a ray gun aimed at them.

“Did you take enough secret spy pills this morning? You do know who that is, right?”

“Tony.” Natasha cautioned, taking slow steps forward as the Winter Soldier’s head started to pick up. “This is James. He needs help.”

As Barnes looked up and his eyes widened. “Howard?” Familiarity and astonishment played across his features.

“Nope, that’d be dad.” Tony kept the ray gun pointed at them. “How is he James now? And isn’t Steve looking for this guy? And how did you find him? And when—”

James bent over with a wince, his hands flying to his head while Natasha worked to keep him from falling backward. The green and red oozed from James’ arm with a fury, dripping messily onto the black-tile floor while the beep and blinking light appeared louder and brighter.

“Stark, you need to tell me why it’s doing that,” Natasha pointed in alarm. “Please, you need to help him!”

Something objective and quiet came over Stark and he went to James’ other side and helped to lift the man to his feet.

“There.” Tony pointed at a metal chair in the corner, close to a set of workbenches and tools laid out in chaotic organization. They hefted James onto the chair, which Natasha supposed was meant for Tony when maintaining his chest arch reactor, and Natasha stood back, not wanting to be in the way.

While James fought for breath, sweat glistening over his forehead, he whispered a frantic, “Wait,” and reached for her with his fleshy hand. She saw, for the second time that morning, the frightened eyes of Bucky Barnes re-appear and she took his hand firmly in both of hers.


“Damn right, Tony knows what he’s doing.” Stark grumbled at her. “The question is: do you know what you’re doing?” Donning a pair of strange goggles and what looked like an eyedropper, Tony took a sample of the liquid and stared intently at it while the glasses moved on his face, scanning it and identifying it. “Or has Mr. Kill-You turned you over to the dark side?”

“Shut up, Stark.” Natasha warned, seeing the raised lip James’ brought up in a snarl. “You don’t want to make him angry.”
“I’ve already got one friend with anger management issues—not so sure I need another.”

There was a click and a faint beep at Tony’s touch on the Winter Soldier’s wrist, and the appendage whirled for a few seconds before completely detaching.

“Ah,” Stark raised the metal hand to wave it at Natasha. “Hi, I’m a brainwashed, soviet spy and my best friend has been trying to find me for weeks, but good thing a SHIELD agent found me first, cause now I—”

“Stop that.” James’ growled, his patience visibly taxed.

Tony set the hand down and began to detach the forearm in the same way. “Am I the only one in on this big secret?”

“You’re not.” A voice spoke up from behind them. All heads turned to face Banner, standing in the corner of the room as though he’d always been there.

Really? Natasha groaned inwardly, movie-night with Bruce wasn’t that far off the mark. Overhead, Jarvis announced that not only had Steve Rogers entered the building, but was currently in the elevator and heading up.

“Too many security breaches,” Stark muttered.

Natasha tried to keep her focus on James’ hand, rubbing over the knuckles calmly, which was anything but what she felt herself. “Stark, why did you call Steve?”

“In case anyone hasn’t noticed, I’ve alternated between cowering in fear with a taser and working on this gentleman’s arm.”

“I called Steve.” Banner said with crossed arms, slowly crossing the room to inspect Tony’s progress. “I don’t think keeping secrets from each other is the best policy anymore.” James’ metal forearm and wrist were resting on the table behind Stark, whose hands were hovering over the segment of elbow and bicep.

“That wasn’t your call to make.” Natasha held back her fury.

“It’s not yours either.” Bruce shook his head at her. “Steve didn’t back down when this guy was pummeling his face over the Potomac, I don’t think an angry outburst would hurt him further—”

“I was trying to save Steve from that.” Natasha snapped, keeping her grip on James firm when he winced under Tony’s hands. She looked up, expecting Bruce to look frustrated with her, but all she saw was understanding and sympathy.

“I know you were trying to do the right thing,” Bruce timidly reached out to squeeze her shoulder. “But letting the Winter Soldier use you as a punching bag to spare Steve a few bruises—”

“He could have killed him.”

“He could have killed you.”

“Then, at least, I’d have completely repaid one of my debts.” Natasha looked him square in the eye to let him know she was serious.

“That’s not the kind of debt Steve would ever want you to repay.” Banner objected, just as the sound of the elevator met their ears. The double-doors opened to reveal a very shocked and disbelieving
“Buck?” The super-soldier barely whispered, taking a few shaky steps forward as Banner stepped out of his way.

As soon as Steve saw the missing pieces of James’ arm, he frowned and growled out, “Stark, what the hell are you doing?” But before Tony could answer, Steve grabbed at Tony’s shoulders and pulled him away from the metal chair. “What the hell are you doing? Leave him alone!”

“Steve, please, calm down,” Natasha held her hands up peaceably.

“Don’t tell me you were keeping me from this.” Steve pointed at the metal limb attachments on the table with gritted teeth. “Were you working for Stark? So he could get his hands on—”

“Captain Rogers,” A firm monotone voice chided, startling everyone when their heads swiveled to see that it came from Bucky on the operation chair. “You’re interrupting the procedure I came to this place for, of my own accord.”

Steve took a puzzled step backward in confusion.

“If Natasha can assure me that none of you will try to take me captive…” James paused to glance at her tiredly, waiting for her confirmation. She nodded in earnest. “Then I might be willing to talk with you when Mr. Stark is finished.”

“Bucky,” Steve took a hopeful step forward, but Natasha corrected him: “He prefers ‘James’.”

If Natasha hadn’t spent the last twenty-four hours being glared at by the Winter Soldier, she might have buckled under the scowl Rogers was sending her, but as it was, she was too tired to care.

“You promise?” Steve looked intently at James. “You’ll stay long enough to talk?”

James nodded robotically, his tone just as blank. “I might be more receptive once the suppressant is removed.”

“Suppressant?” Steve’s looked between Banner and Stark, pointedly avoiding Natasha’s gaze.

“If the soap opera can continue elsewhere, that’d be great,” Stark said through gritted teeth, resuming his work with a delicately precise movement over James’ bicep. “I’m a little too busy to savor everyone’s overly dramatic facial expressions and sappy dialogue.” At first, no one moved, unsure of who was staying and who was leaving, until Stark stood upright and looked from face to face. “That means ALL of you. Out.”

“Natasha stays.” James said, squirming slightly as he looked down at the missing pieces of his limb.

“Let me make this perfectly clear,” Tony sighed in exasperation. “Banner is the only one qualified to assist me and there’s not enough space for two cooks in this kitchen. I don’t need to explain why Captain Rip Van Winkle needs to get out. As for Kim Possible—”

“Natasha stays.” James repeated, unimpressed.

Once Banner ushered Steve back to the elevator, Natasha first looked at James’ metal nub of an elbow and then at Stark. “Tell me what’s going on with this.”

“There’s damaged tissue just beneath this panel,” Stark indicated the area where the fluids had come from. “But there’s something else. You mentioned suppressants, what’s that all about?”
“Drugs.” James supplied. “To make certain I was obedient to Hydra’s orders.”

Scanning over the area with something that looked like a camera, Stark nodded. “It looks like fused wiring into organics.”

Natasha shuddered at the thought, but tried to keep her face blank. Fused? Wiring into organics? It sounded mercifully brutal and raw. “Is this tapped into his nervous system?”

Tony nodded. “Thankfully, you’ve come to the right mad scientist. I’ve had a lot of experience with machinery tapping into nerves.” To prove his point further, he flicked the arc reactor in his chest. “I can fix this, but I’d rather Darth Vader wasn’t awake for it.” Tony scratched at the back of his head.

“You want me unconscious?” James slowly edged away from Tony’s touch in wariness.

“James, I promise we’re not going to confine you.” Natasha tried to take his hand again, but he turned from her with the same wariness. “You’re free to go when this is all over.”

“This could have been a plot—you gain my trust, only to betray me when you have me cornered.” He said, face turning white as his bangs fell over his sweating forehead.

Natasha sighed, much as a mother who was trying to get her squeamish child to take disgusting medicine. Picking up a towel from the workbench and wiping James’ brow, she leaned forward and spoke in a calming tone.

“I’ve had a heavy-dose tranquilizer in my jacket since before I first spoke to you.” She pulled it out to show him, dropping it into his shaking hand. “I could have easily sedated you, but I didn’t.”

James held the tranquilizer between two trembling fingers, vacant eyes slowly focusing on it.

“And you remember the drive here—I stopped the car, I said you could leave if you wanted to.”

James slowly nodded, understanding her point.

“Tony and I are talking to you about this instead of forcing you into it. I’ll bet your handlers never gave you that courtesy.”

The hollow stare fell away and his face registered insecurity, a pleading look that asked her to help him.

“Bucky,” Natasha gave him a small smile, recognizing the fearful man. “Trust me; everything is going to be okay.”

Four hours later, Natasha emerged from the improvised surgery to find Steve pacing in a theater room while Banner lounged on a black leather couch.

“How is he?” Steve still looked upset with her.

“He’s fine. He’s sleeping.” Natasha said, plopping down on the couch beside Banner. She jolted when the man touched her cheek, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping at something along her jawline. When Bruce’s hand came away, the handkerchief had dots of blood on it. None of which belonged to her.

The two men waited for her to speak on, but Natasha was savoring the peace and quiet of the room and gathered an exhausted breath. “There was wiring… the metal arm was feeding him chemicals, but Tony was able to remove them from the arm altogether. He’s working on an ‘upgrade’, he said.”
The jaw muscles in Steve’s cheeks worked as he ground his teeth together, sitting down on the coffee table opposite where Natasha lay on the black leather. “How bad is it, Nat?”

Natasha blinked, trying not to doze off. “What?”

“Do you think he’ll…” Steve took his head in his hands, letting out an emotion-filled breath, as though to clear his mind enough to speak. “Does he remember me?”

“Whenever he spoke about you, he’d get headaches.” Natasha explained, pulling her arm up to pillow her head. “We think his arm was set to block memories intentionally. And it looks like the amount of… whatever it was that was pumped into his arm was supposed to last several months, but he burned through it in almost two weeks.” She opened her eyes enough to send him a look of comfort. “That’s progress, Steve. He’s been trying, he’s been fighting. Now lemme sleep, hm?”

As her mind began to wind down, seeking the sleep—oh, the wonderful sleep—she needed, she felt a set of hands pull her shoes from her feet and the settling of a blanket over her curled up form. Even when the world was ending, Steve had time to show kindness… Even though he was obviously still angry with her, it didn’t stop him from caring for her.

Natasha smiled in thanks, eyes still shut, and she listened to the footsteps of the men as they left the room. . .

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
He wakes for a moment as Bucky Barnes, charmer from the 40's, but maybe that's not such a good thing.

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynjj8NRP

ren'no'va'tion ren-uh-vey-shun verb: The act of rebuilding or tearing down to make better

--“We Move Lightly” by Dustin O’Halloran--

“Could be a while before he wakes up,” Banner warned, lingering in the doorway of one of Tony’s smaller guest-rooms, as if unsure whether to stay or leave.

Steve nodded passively, resolved to keep his internal promise of staying by Bucky’s side. He felt Bruce’s hand squeeze his shoulder in encouragement before leaving him along with the sleeping Barnes.

For the first half hour, Rogers was content to watching his friend’s face, full of peace despite his still-haggard features. Steve told himself he wouldn’t speculate on the treatment Bucky had received at the hands of Hydra, but it was difficult not to let his imagination wander as he took in the rough scars on Bucky’s face.

Ironically, it wasn’t until much later when Steve found a book to read and was engrossed in it that Bucky began to stir, head lolling over his pillow as he made swallowing motions with his throat.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Bucky whispered. “Three seven two…”

“Buck?” Steve was startled by the sudden whisper and nearly leapt out of his chair. Leaning over the waking man’s face, he swept Bucky’s long bangs away from his forehead.

“Is…is…” Bucky’s eyes groggily fixed on Steve, consciousness alternately dimming and lighting up in his pupils. “Steve?”

“Bucky,” Steve smiled at him, overwhelmed with relief and joy as Bucky’s eyes registered recognition. Roger’s eyes were beginning to well up, but the wetness was obscuring his vision and he brushed it away.
“Steve,” Bucky swallowed and smiled, eyes drifting shut for one drowsy moment. When they opened again, Bucky’s eyes crinkled with confusion.

“What happened?”

Bucky’s clear recognition of him was too much for Steve’s already racing heart, but then Bucky croaked out with a dry cough, tilting his head to look at the nightstand and shifting to reach with his left arm for the glass of water.

“I’ll get that,” Steve insisted in mild panic, twisting and swiping at the glass before Bucky was able to raise his arm from beneath the sheets.

“You don’t have to baby me, Cap,” Bucky growled, pulling his torso up to sit, “It’s not—”

Despite Steve’s effort to keep Bucky from reaching for the glass, Bucky threw out his left arm to grab it from Steve’s hand—and stared at where the elbow ended and the forearm was missing. Rough, scarred ridges ran along the fold where the skin would have stretched over elbow and arm, bandaged in some areas where the metal attachment hadn’t fit properly.

“Steve,” Bucky’s eyes widened with horror. “Oh, God— Steve!” He shuffled back against the headrest as though the absence of arm was a monster he could shrink back from. “What—”

The glass slipped from Steve’s hands and crashed to the floor as he reached out to settle the unnerved Barnes. “It’s okay, you’re safe, we—”

“What happened to my damn hand?” Barnes shouted in dismay, pressing his chin against his neck to look down at the damage to his shoulder and chest—where the remainder of electrical nodes jutted out from his skin, taped down along his bicep. “Oh, God, what happened to me?”

Bucky’s eyes rolled upward and his shoulders slumped, just about toppling over the side of the bed in a faint when Steve leapt forward to catch him.

“You’re gonna be okay, Buck,” Steve managed to choke out, heart aching at the terror he’d seen on Bucky’s face and clutching the man to his chest in a trembling embrace. Bucky groaned against him, a dead weight in Steve’s hands, but it would take more than that for Steve to drop him.

As he was laid onto his back by strong and sure hands, Bucky’s eyes fluttered open and closed. He whimpered and a look of remorse passed over his features. “What have… what have I done?”

Steve wasn’t sure how to answer, but held his friend’s remaining hand in both of his.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky coughed, squeezing Steve’s hand weakly. Suddenly, he clutched desperately at Steve’s shirt, eyes alight with fear and regret as he met Steve’s gaze. “Tell her,” He coughed again, the last remnants of his energy clearly giving out while his face turned white. “Tell her I’m sorry.”

“Who, Bucky?” Steve’s hands started to shake, but he kept a grip on Bucky’s shoulders. “Who do I tell?”

Slowly sinking back onto the pillow as his eyes rolled into his head, Bucky breathed out, “Tasha…”

Chapter End Notes
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Natasha thinks it might not be a good idea for her to stay in the tower while Steve and James sort things out.

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When Natasha awoke again, it was because her stomach was growling. The scent of something cooking had drawn her from slumber. Drowsily, she pulled herself up from the couch, startled to find a pillow where her head had been, along with a heavier blanket than the one Steve had left her with. Had she really slept so deeply that she hadn't felt any of this? The coolness of the shiny, black tile felt good on her bare feet and Natasha pulled her fingers through her hair as she strode slowly down a hallway, letting her nose tell her where to go.

“Good morning, princess.” Greeted a familiar voice.

“Sam,” Natasha blearily smiled until her cheeks hurt, stepping forward to wrap her arms around his neck in a quick hug. She liked Sam. He never pressed for information when she was unwilling to give it, which ironically drew it out of her most of the time. Another thing that coaxed her admiration was Sam's wise decision to make more food than he could eat in one sitting-- it was inevitable that someone else would smell his sumptuous cooking and saunter into the kitchen, and this was enough to ply a retelling of Natasha's encounter with the Winter Soldier. Sam listened more than he ate of the eggs, bacon, and pancakes.

“How’s James?” Natasha ventured as Sam sat back in his chair, sipping at his coffee.

“While I'm pretty sure you're smart enough to understand the technical terms, I’m gonna give you the cliff notes, because that's all I can handle myself.” Sam rolled his eyes. “The way Banner said it, it's like there’s a spinning compass in Barnes’ head and there’s a picture of Bucky on North, a picture of the Winter Soldier on South. Key words can set the wheel spinning and you don’t know which picture you’re going to end up with.”

Sam eyed her with some weight, “If you hadn't found him when you did... Natasha, you were
responsible for something really important. The stuff in Bucky’s arm was locking that brain-wheel down, it wasn’t letting it spin. The drugs are still making it out of his system, but instead of the Winter Soldier always being in the front, now it’s Barnes primarily in the front.”

“That’s good,” Natasha nodded, relief flooding her chest.

“Well, it can be,” Sam shrugged. “But it could also be traumatizing. Before, when it was the Winter Soldier in the front, he could compartmentalize and he could gloss over things, bad things. But Bucky… I don’t know how much that man can handle. Let’s say the Hulk tried to pick a fight with the Winter Soldier, what would happen?”

Natasha frowned, not quite understanding. “He’d fight back. He’d strategize, calculate—”

“He’d process it just fine, it wouldn’t phase him.” Sam nodded. “But what if Bucky Barnes was faced with the Hulk? He was a Howling Commando, but… that was a different kind of tough, back then.”

Now she understood. But she didn’t want to admit that he was right. “Steve’s not doing so bad, though. Give him time, James might surprise you.” And as much as she wanted to stay, she needed to be honest. “I think I need to leave for a few days.”

“How come?”

“Steve’s got his friend back, I don’t want to step on his sunshine. Steve needs to be James’ lifeline right now, not me.”

Sam nodded, but his face scrunched in disagreement. Out of all the people she’d met, Sam was the most amiable when it came to an argument. Normally, someone would try to talk her out of something, or else physically stop her. But Sam could recognize that she thought over her decisions carefully and he respected her privacy.

“When will you be back?”

“Not sure.” She admitted, rising from her chair. “Should I even come back? Steve is still mad at me and I don’t want to mess up Bucky’s progress now that he’s—”

“Natasha,” Sam scolded. “Steve’s not mad. He needed a little time to think. I’m pretty sure he knows you did it to help, not to hurt. You helped Barnes get here, that was incredibly brave.” Leaning in his chair, Sam snatched a protein shaker from the counter-top and handed it to Natasha. “Give this to Steve? It’s for Barnes.”

Natasha wanted to cross her arms and refuse, but instead grasped the protein shaker. “Why don’t you give it to him, Sam?”

“Because it gives you a chance to stay goodbye before you leave,” Sam grinned at her knowingly. “And you are going to say goodbye.”

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Natasha confessed to herself she wanted physical proof that Barnes was alive and hadn’t escaped from the Tower. Creeping into the guest room on Steve's level of the Tower, she saw Steve hunched over the edge of the mattress to rest his head on James’ blanket-covered leg. One of Steve’s hands was outstretched above his sleeping head, gripping Bucky’s only hand.

From the foot of the bed, Natasha let her eyes roam over James sleeping form—his bearded chin and long hair were clean and someone had combed through his dark locks. Under his eyes, blue bags of
exhaustion were still visible, but they weren’t as harsh as before. Slowly crossing over to the other side of the bed, Natasha set the protein shake down on the nightstand.

“He’s been asking about you.” Steve whispered, raising his head from the bed to look at her.

“I thought you were asleep.”

Steve shook his head. “Bucky’s really upset about something he did, but he won’t tell me what. He just keeps asking me to tell you he’s sorry.”

Natasha could feel the blush burning through her cheeks. This apology had come much sooner than she’d anticipated. And Steve could see it on her face, even if he didn’t understand it.

“I was questioning him,” Natasha explained. “He had awful, awful headaches whenever he tried to remember anything. I was probably pushing too far and he didn’t know how to react, so he reverted to training.”

"Meaning what?"

When she didn't say anything, Steve's eyes lowered to the bandage on her rip, a rounded mound under the fabric of her pants.

Steve’s shoulders went rigid. “He did that to you?” And then all at once, his eyes softened and he shook his head, regret blooming in his face. "I'm sorry."

“Steve, you know I've had lot worse.” She grinned, trying to ease the tension. “He took care of me afterward, but told me he wouldn’t apologize for it. He said that if I was as good a spy as he’d heard, he shouldn’t have been able to do it, and that this was just another lesson among many not to let my guard down.”

Steve's jaw muscles clenched. “What did you say to that?”

“I told him those were the words of the Winter Soldier. I told him there would come a day when he felt like saying ‘sorry’ again, and that when he did, he’d be James Barnes again.”

The impact of those words visibly struck him.

“Sam said to give him this.” Natasha pointed at the protein shake. “I'm sure you've been told that James hasn’t eaten real food in a long time, so he'll have to drink these often.”

“You sound like you’re going somewhere.” Steve rubbed at his eyes.

“For a few days.” She waved a hand at him and Barnes. “You two need to sort this out,” Now that you have a chance of talking without getting your face ripped open. “But Steve, promise me you’ll still be cautious. They’ve programmed him in other ways…”

“I’ll be careful.” Steve answered, watching her as she walked to the door. “Natasha, wait.”

She turned in the doorway to face him.

“You’re coming back, right?”

Fisting her hips, Natasha tried not to meet his eyes and failed. “I didn’t know if I should—”

“Bucky wants to see you.” The command in his voice and the ferocity in his eyes was protective in a way Natasha had never seen from him. All Natasha could do under that gaze was nod.
Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Natasha returns and Buck gets a little spooked...

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--- Should Have Known Better” by Sufjan Stevens ---

After three days, Natasha returned to Stark Tower, tip-toeing into the same communal kitchen where she’d spoken to Sam. It was just before sunrise and she thought she’d be the only one awake, but the light in the kitchen said otherwise. Back turned toward her, Buck hunched over the counter-top with a cup of tea in his single hand, dressed in a faded white V-neck shirt and black plaid sweatpants. The rolling waves of his hair—washed and shining—were bound in a bun by a rubber band at the back of his head. It took a moment before Natasha could bring herself back from wondering how he got an elastic in his hair with only one hand.

“Good morning,” She tried to announce herself quietly, but he whirled, nearly spilling his mug of tea.

“Holy mother of—” A wavy tassel of hair escaped from the bun as he spun to face her with wide eyes. He shut them and put a hand over his heart, regulating his breathing while his other stump of an arm lowered from where he’d thrown it out and away from his body. “You scared me half to death.”

“I’m sorry,” She genuinely meant it, but it came out as a laugh.

He looked good. The beard was shaven away, only the hint of a five o’clock shadow forming around his jawline, and his skin was clean and vibrant. The bandaged nub of his left arm even looked better, the color having returned to it. Wires were taped down around his collar bone, but they were more or less hidden away by his shirt, and Natasha errantly wondered how far down they went.

Bucky skirted the countertop as though afraid to get too close to Natasha while she strode across the room. She reached into the refrigerator as non-threateningly as she could while grabbing for orange juice, setting it on the countertop and letting out a soft snicker.

“Every time,” she muttered quietly to herself, but he continued to watch her warily and she repeated
herself loud enough for him to hear. “Every time we see each other, you assume I’m here to kill you.”

“Makes sense, though, right? Last you were here, I stabbed you. Wouldn’t put it past you if you were lookin’ for a little payback. Not like I can make up for it any other way.” His eyes went hollow for a moment, as though lost in morbid thought and then his gaze fixed on numb nothingness.

“There’s no making up for it. You were acting on instinct. I can't hold that against you.” She assured with full forgiveness, but it was obvious he didn’t hear.

Natasha slowly closed the distance between them and stood directly in front of Barnes, reaching a very slow hand to delicately touch his right forearm. Startling from his stupor, he tried to edge backward like he couldn’t fathom how she could stand so close to him.

“We’re fine, Bucky. We get to start over now. Clean slate. I don’t know you—you don’t know me.” She said quietly. “But I’d like to know you. Like why Steve calls you Bucky, for starters.”

He blew out a slow breath through his nose, reluctantly settling himself. “It’s short for Buchanan. Like the president.”

In a moment of courage, he reached for her hand, shaking it comfortably like they were new acquaintances. Well, they were. Natasha could see that the man before her was not the same one she’d found.

“James Buchanan Barnes, at your service, ma’am.” He said with a wink, pulling her hand up to peck at her knuckle.

“Mm,” Natasha answered with a smile and a genuine blush. “You used to be pretty suave, huh?”

Eyes twinkling, Bucky lowered her hand from his mouth, one corner of his lips rose in a mischievous grin. “What do you mean ‘used to be’?”

“Well, given that things have changed a bit since 1945,” Natasha let the sentence die and reclaimed her hand, secretly having enjoyed the small act of chivalry.

Another quick revelation struck her: Bucky Barnes smelled like soap. 'Mountain Breeze' was a blaring distinction from the Winter Soldier, whose scent had obviously been more raw.

“Charm,” Barnes' voice was velvet-smooth, ”never goes out of style. And if it has, I’ll bring it back.” He paused, as if to think on something he might add and then the hollow look reappeared in his eyes. Bucky seemed to be staring at nothing, unhearing and unseeing.

“What was I…?” He grimaced. “I was saying…”

“Charm,” Natasha offered, her heart breaking as she watched him struggle. “You were talking about bringing a little 1940’s charm into the twentieth century.”

“Right,” Bucky’s brows scrunched together, testing out the idea of believing her, but then he surrendered whole-heartedly and smiled widely again. “Where I come from, a gentleman knows how to show a lady a good time.” And from the way he was looking so pointedly at her, Natasha knew he was intending to demonstrate.

A reserved part of her wanted to shoot him down, not to allow him to form a dependency on her… but with the way he was smiling at her, so sure of himself and looking so alive after having gone through so much hell…
Natasha met his eyes and smiled. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Recuperation

Chapter Summary

His mind can't decide where the midway is between Bucky Barnes and The Winter Soldier. Thankfully, he's got Steve and Natasha to help him sort through it.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`cup`er`ation ri-kuh-rey-shun verb: Recovery from a traumatic experience or injuries

--“First Defeat” by Noah Gunderson--

It was Natasha's new guilty pleasure to watch Steve interact with Bucky when he was having a clear-headed moment. Barnes would smile freely during these times, elbowing Steve as though nothing terrible had happened to either of them.

“The landlady wasn’t so happy about it,” Bucky was in the middle of a story, sitting back against the couch cushions beside Steve. “So, this tiny fella,” He squeezed Steve’s shoulder, “shows up at my door one day, unannounced, and she takes one look at him and says, ‘Sonny, are you lost?’ and Steve gets so red in the face that he…”

But, as with most of these recollections, something would set Bucky off and the life in his eyes would immediately dim, his features falling from bliss to the deflation of a man who had seen unspeakable horrors.

“He…” Bucky seemed lost for words and stared into nothing, his hand unconsciously sliding down from Steve’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Buck,” Steve said, dimming in response to his friend’s sudden blankness, keeping a tentative hand on Barnes’ forearm. “We’ll finish later. Let’s go get something to eat.”

Staring numbly ahead, Bucky nodded, eyes still fixed on empty space while he allowed himself to be led to the kitchen. This had become a new habit: Steve needed control over something, and if it couldn't be to fight against the terrors that haunted Bucky, then at least he could fill his friend's belly.

“Natasha,” Steve found a moment alone with her, standing just outside the kitchen as Sam talked and fixed a protein shake. Bucky was errantly nodding at everything Sam said, but it was clear from his
eyes that he wasn’t in the same room.

“What’s on your mind?” Natasha asked.

“I need help.”

“With?”

Steve ran a tired hand through his hair and this was the first time Natasha had noticed the bags under his eyes. “I know I can’t keep this up, but I don’t know what else to do. And I know that if I lose any more sleep then I’ll be no good to anyone.”

"I'm glad you're admitting it. Anyone can see that you’re sleep-deprived. Does that mean Barnes isn’t sleeping through the night?”

"Bruce and Tony said Bucky's body is still relearning a Rem cycle, but every time he tries to catch a wink, he wakes up screaming just a few hours later."

"So let him process it," Natasha insisted, crossing her arms. "He's a big boy, Rogers, you can't hold his hand in the night just because he's--"

"It's not about him, it's about..." Steve suddenly looked ashamed and his gaze dropped to the floor. "Tasha, I haven't... he means too much to me, I can't let him be alone like that--"

Comprehension bloomed in her mind and Natasha reached out a hand. "Steve. Calm down, I'll help. Is it your peace of mind we're talking about?"

He looked loathe to admit it and Natasha could understand that— Steve Rogers wasn't a selfish person except when it came to Bucky and if he had to be down for the count while his friend suffered then the only consolation was that someone else was available, should Bucky need them.

“Please,” his voice sounded so defeated, “I didn’t want to ask, but—”

“I wasn’t saying no,” Natasha inserted quickly. “I was just asking for clarification. Wasn’t sure if you’d want my help after I went behind your back to find him.”

Tilting her head to look through the doorway again, she could see that Bucky’s focus had returned and he was weakly smiling at whatever Sam was saying to him.

"I'm glad you asked me," She tried to reassure Steve, "and not Sam."

"I kind of did."

Natasha's eyebrow rose in scrutiny. "And he said...?"

"Rule number one and two."

That caused Natasha to laugh. "Exactly."

Rule number one in Sam's book was: I don't psycho-analyze my friends. Rule number two was: I'm not a psychiatrist and there's no salary in the world that could convince me to take on the Avengers. Rule number three was: I have a life outside of the Avengers. I report for duty as the Falcon, but other than that you will leave me the hell alone. There were other rules, all of them wise and winning of Natasha's hard-earned respect.
“Bucky trusts you, Natasha,” Steve said as though it were explanation enough. “I don’t know all of what you did for him, but… thank you.”

--“Another Glacier” by Peter Broderick--

Bucky felt like his body was floating, but it was falling upward, rising through layers of something cold and tingling like clouds. His senses began to sharpen and in the distance he could hear a siren. Fingers twitching, he realized he was waking from a deep sleep, and he felt something rough and sharp in his throat as the siren continued to grow louder and louder in his ears.

It was becoming too loud now and he wanted desperately to throw his hands over his ears to block out the sound—it wasn’t a siren, someone was shouting. A long, drawn out, consistent wail…

“Bucky!” a second voice was muffled by the loud and terrified cry. “Bucky, open your eyes!”

When he did, he understood that the pain in his throat and the loud sound filling his ears was his own screaming. The sound stopped and he took in a deep, choking breath, blinking until he could see the warm light of a lamp and the taupe walls of Steve’s guest room.

“Bucky?”

He sat upright and swiveled his head to see Natasha. Was she on watch? They never talked about it in front of him, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew someone would always be supervising him.

“Are you with me?” Green eyes were trained on him, locks of bright red hair on either side of them. Bucky’s mouth was dry. “What happened?”

Natasha sat back in her chair, her feet propped up on the edge of the mattress. “You were screaming.”

Bucky turned his head to look at the single bed sheet draped over him in confusion. “I was? I don’t remember…”

“Were you dreaming?” Natasha crossed her legs and waited for him to speak.

“I don’t remember.” Bucky repeated softly. He looked down at his bare chest, glistening in sweat, and wondered if this was a dream as well. As though his mind were a vehicle slipping along ice and veering out of control, Bucky began to methodically catalog the objects in the room.


“Are you with me?” Natasha repeated herself, and he got the feeling she’d been talking to him, though he hadn’t noticed.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, eyes rounding in shock. “Was I staring again?”

Natasha nodded and said, “About three minutes.” Panic started to fill his chest when he understood
how much time he lost to these wandering moments.

“I don’t know why I do that.” He groaned, taking his face into his single hand. Why was it so hard to keep focus? The panic was starting to creep into his limbs and his left arm was throbbing where it ended at the elbow.

Bucky knew what he wanted—the comfort of touch—but he didn’t know how to ask. He wasn’t even sure he deserved that comfort after his slow recollections of all the wrong he’d done. Was touch even a human privilege for him anymore?

“Barnes?” Hearing his name again, he was terrified of slipping focus and losing another three minutes to numbness. His right arm twitched and he raised it to her for a moment, a desperate plea for consolation, but then retracted it— It disgusted him that he should be begging for comfort from one of the people he’d hurt.

But Natasha, having some secret window into his mind, understood his silent cry for help and picked up the edge of the sheet to pull it back.

“What are you doing?” The panic in his chest increased and he could hear the throbbing of his heartbeat in his ears.

“Lay down,” Natasha gently commanded, slipping off her shoes and sliding her feet under the blanket.

“Natasha,” He started to object, but she pressed against his shoulder, causing him to lay on his left side as she spooned against his back.

“Breathe,” she ordered, laying a hand over his heart and feeling it racing. “Count in your head. Fifty, down to one.”

Obediently, Bucky closed his eyes and concentrated on the mental countdown, finding himself calmer with each second. Natasha’s closeness was like a stinging medicine against a scrape—a pain that almost felt good. Her arm was curled around his waist and he couldn’t stop himself from lining his good arm along it, unconsciously stroking the skin at her wrist with the pads of his fingers.

Bucky’s love for Steve was strong—that brotherly love born from a history he could feel all the way to his bones, even if he couldn’t call back all the memories. But his trust and, yes, love for Natasha was sharp. Steve’s affection was like a soreness in Bucky’s heart, consistent and unwavering, but Natasha… she was like a finely-sharpened narrow blade that pierced delicately, yet quickly, right to the source of him.

---“Touch” by Daughter---

Natasha admitted to herself that Bucky’s soapy scent was beginning to grow on her, nuzzling her nose into the back of his neck as she spooned against him. She couldn’t tell if he was sleeping, but at least his heart-rate had slowed. They’d narrowly avoided a panic attack, she recognized, and she was about to drift into sleep when he felt his fingers caressing her wrist.

It was puzzling that his small touch stirred a strong response in her, but Natasha quietly allowed herself to enjoy it. And then the touch stopped and he twisted, trying to face her though her nose was still pressed into his neck. “Turn around.”

Rolling over to face away from him, Natasha tried not to jolt in surprise when he pressed his chest
against her back, sliding his right arm under her neck. Bucky let out a trembling breath, perching his chin over her head, and went to rest his left half-arm against her waist— but then pulled it back as if stung.

“Does your arm hurt?” She asked quietly.

She felt him shake his head. “I’m sorry, didn’t know if you were… disgusted by it.”

“I’m not, Bucky.” She smiled into her pillow.

When he made a noise that sounded like relief, Natasha gently brought the nub of his left arm to her waist again, purposefully stroking it to reassure him.

“James,” He said suddenly and decisively.

“No Bucky?”

His sigh of frustration warmed her scalp. “Tried it out for while, but it just isn’t right. S’not comfortable. Steve—I can remember Steve saying it, s’fine when he says it, but—”

“Then James it is. You don’t have to explain.” Natasha snuggled her head further into the pillow, shutting her eyes. “We’ll take everything at your pace.”

His low-muttered ‘thank you’ was the last thing Natasha heard and if he’d kissed the back of her head, she was too tired to notice.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Re-education

Chapter Summary

Uncomfortable truths come out at the shooting range...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`ed`u`ca`tion ree-ee-o-key-shun verb: To learn again what one has forgotten or lost

Natasha was well aware that James needed to take things slow, but he obviously needed something to do. The distractions for a former assassin within the confines of Stark Tower were limited, but she and Clint silently agreed to fill James' days as best they could.

Clint, it turned out, wasn't as cautious of Barnes' as Natasha expected him to be, and she could see the little tactics he used on Barnes that he'd used with her when she'd first defected to SHIELD.

“Steve says you have a wicked throw,” Barton said as he stood beside James in the Avengers Tower shooting range. “I like a good knife myself, but have you thought about using something else?”

James held the pistol in his single hand expertly, as though the absence of a limb was no hindrance. The corner of James’ mouth quirked into a half-grin, squinting at Barton in amusement.

“Have you read my file?” James breathy laugh quivered his hand and he lowered the weapon without firing. "You people gotta stop saying that-- it wasn't all that long ago."

“Don’t get me wrong,” Barton held his hands up. “But you failed to take out Steve, three times. I think, from where we’re standing right now, it’s not such a bad thing that you lost your edge.”

Natasha wasn’t sure what to make of James’ expression, something between disappointment, anger, and a hint of mistrust in the eyes that narrowed at Barton. He took a step toward the archer and she tensed.

“Do you have a pen?”
The question stumped both her and Clint, but Barton recovered first and reached into his vest, offering a blue marker. James nodded and snatched it from Barton’s fingers, jogging toward the target and motioning for Barton to follow.

“This is, what? Fifty feet from where Natasha’s standing?”

Barton nodded.

James picked up the standing target and jogged it further away, to a point Natasha mentally measured as a hundred feet. “Write the alphabet in small print. Random letters, as many as you like.” He patted the target and jogged back to Natasha.

When Clint was satisfied with his work and the target was covered in small letters, he trotted to join Natasha and James where they stood, watching Barnes with interest—all while James watched Natasha with interest. He was scrutinizing her, but for what, she didn’t know.

“Choose a letter.” James instructed without taking his serious eyes from Natasha.

“J.” She smiled at him, hoping she could motivate that frown to soften. But it didn’t and James’ head swiveled around to glance at his target, one hundred feet away. Not two seconds had passed before the first shot was fired.

*Bam! Bam! Bam!* Three shots, all in quick succession. James lowered the pistol and handed it to Barton, walking slowly toward the target as Clint and Natasha followed.

Her eyebrows rose. Clint had scribbled multiples of letters all about the target, the blue ink bleeding in certain places where he’d tried to write in small print, but the three holes covered any evidence that Clint had written any J’s.

“There were four.” Clint smirked, crossing his arms with a triumphant smile.

“Where’s the other one, then?” Natasha squinted.

“There, look—right there.” Barton pointed.

“That’s an ‘F’.” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Is not!” Barton griped. “I wrote a few of them upside down.”

“Then why is there a slash in the middle?” Natasha nudged his shoulder.

“It’s a marker, Nat. Markers bleed.”

“That’s definitely an ‘F’, Clint.”

James cleared his throat from behind them and motioned for them to step away. They took a step back and there was a whoosh of air before Natasha realized James had thrown a knife at the supposed ‘J’. A short sting of something ran through her chest and she attributed it to being impressed with James’ speed.

“The point was,” James voice was crackly, as though he’d suddenly become exhausted, “I have a method for distance and a method for close combat. I don’t want or need any more training.”

Barton nodded with a lopsided grin. “Have it your way, but promise you’ll find me if you change your mind.” Clint looked ready to leave and turned to do so, but James’ voice stopped him.
“I wasn’t trying to kill Steve the first two times.”

Natasha and Barton froze.

“Nick Fury was the target, the first time.” James went on, staring at the floor with regret. “Fury was shielded by a wall, couldn’t see him— I was watching Steve through the window, judged the distance to Fury by where Rogers was looking, and shot through the wall to get to Fury. Lack of visibility made it hard, but not impossible. I wasn’t ordered to kill Steve, so I didn’t, not even when he pursued.”

Natasha remained still, but Barton shifted his weight to one leg, crossing his arms.

“Agent Sitwell and Natasha were my targets the second time. But Natasha gave me a run for my money.” James raised his eyes to look at Natasha, guilt heavy in them, and they pierced Natasha’s heart much like his knife had pierced the target. “And then Steve showed up and…” He swallowed, grimacing. “He wasn’t supposed to be there, he was supposed to be long-dead. Captain America was a title, something that would have been passed on, but…” He raised his face to look at the entrance of the shooting range. “Steve.”

Natasha turned to see that the name wasn’t just a reference to the memory, but recognition of the man now filling in the doorway.

“You weren’t supposed to be alive.” James addressed the blond super-soldier. "I still don’t understand how you’re here, now.” He stepped toward Steve, grasping for Natasha’s hand before she could escape with Barton. Barton strode on, only looking back long enough to send her a silent message: Nope, you’re staying. And then he disappeared through the doorway behind Rogers.

_Traitor._ She nearly stuck her tongue out at him. What was she, James’ personal safety blanket?

“Not sure I understand either.” Steve admitted, scratching at the back of his head and leaning against the wall beside the door.

James scanned him skeptically, standing a few feet away from Rogers. “What were you doing in a block of ice anyway?” His grip on Natasha’s hand tightened, but she didn’t understand what he had to be anxious about.

“The Red Skull was headed to the United States.” Steve said as blandly as if he were giving a report. “We boarded his command plane and discovered several smaller planes inside armed with bombs that—”

“I know what happened, dammit, I read about it.” James growled with a tension that puzzled Natasha. What was wrong with him? Furthermore, why was he gripping her hand like this? She thought about pulling it away, but he wasn’t hurting her—it seemed to her that he was asking for strength. “But _why_ did you crash the plane into the ice?”

Steve swallowed, tapping his fingers nervously against his hip. “I wasn’t familiar with the controls and there wasn’t time to—”

“ _Why are you lying to me?_ ” James’ gritted his teeth together, releasing Natasha’s hand and working his knuckles into a fist. He glared at Steve, pausing just long enough to recover his patience, “ _Why did you give up?_ ”

Natasha weighed her chances of leaving the room versus how uncomfortable it would be to stay.

Steve ducked his head and spoke in a dull voice, “I didn’t want to win the war without you. We
Shame and brokenness were plain on the man Natasha assumed had never given up in his life.

“What about Peggy?” James murmured bitterly. “You didn’t need me, you could have had a life with her.”

Steve winced and nodded. “No, I couldn’t. It was selfish of me, but she understood. She was there when I…” He swallowed again and Natasha feared he might throw up. “…when I found you.”

“What are you talking about Steve?” Natasha finally spoke. “What did you find?”

“It was after Bucky fell from the train. After we brought Zola back. I went looking for you in the ravine. I wasn’t even sure I was in the right spot. Peggy came, too, we were almost attacked by wolves. They’d been feasting. Found an arm. In a blue sleeve.” Now Steve looked up, eyes full of misery. “And blood. There was so much blood. Couldn’t find the rest of you. Thought the wolves tore you apart—”

“Oh, God,” James fell to his knees, his shoulders shaking. “I was there, Steve. I was right there! Just a mile away from where you were standing. Oh, God,” James buried his face in his hand, chest heaving with loud breaths. Crumpling beside him, Steve wound his large arms around James’ silently sobbing frame.

“I’m sorry.” Steve managed to say, but then James pulled away enough to grab the front of Steve’s shirt and shake him.

“Don’t ever do that again!” He shouted angrily, inches from Steve’s horrified face. “Damn it! Don’t make me come back from the dead to tell you how stupid it was to give up like that!”

At this point, Natasha’s endurance had expired, and her feet moved autonomously toward the door. The last thing she heard was Steve making promises to James—his voice didn’t carry down the hallway enough for her to hear the words, but she knew the tone of them.

“They make up, yet?” Barton was standing in front of the elevator. Had he been waiting for her?

“Sort of.” Natasha didn’t want to think on it. Right now she needed a moment alone, time to process everything she’d heard. Like the irony that James could have been found before Hydra warped him into the world’s most deadly assassin.

“I wondered how long it would take.” Barton stepped into the elevator with her, speaking as though he’d anticipated their conversation. Maybe she’d seen the signs of it, too—the way Barnes and Rogers were eager to talk, though over nothing important.

“You’re taking on a lot, Natasha.” Barton warned after a long silence. “Make sure you’re not stretching yourself too thin.”

“How did you keep from stretching too thin when you were looking after me?” Natasha wondered aloud, feeling burnt out even though she hadn’t been directly involved in the conversation between the two super-soldiers.

“I didn’t.” Barton laughed, tilting his head to grin at her. “I let you wear me out without regret. I knew it’d be worth it.”
Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter ;)}
Relaxation

Chapter Summary

Everyone is having a hard time sleeping. That is, until Barnes begins to break down from exhaustion...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeyJn8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**relaxation** ree-lak-sey-shuhn noun: the state of being free from tension and anxiety.

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"Tip Of My Tongue" by The Civil Wars--

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Natasha was exhausted. Used up, tired to the bone, eyelids heavy exhausted. But trying to find a comfortable position in the sea of blankets and pillows did nothing for her. Normally, she would build a protective cocoon around herself—Clint always called it the ‘nest of solitude’—and tonight it wasn’t working. Throwing all blankets, pillows, and sheets from the bed, she laid herself out perfectly flat and waited, counting her breaths.

Nope. Not working.

Groaning and pulling herself up from the mattress, Natasha ignored the stab of tight muscles between her shoulder blades. There was only one other option to help her sleep and, thankfully, living in Stark’s Tower meant there was a steady supply of alcohol.

Her bare feet padded silently along shiny black tile, the hem of her oversized T-shirt draping around the edge of her shorts, and her fingers brushed along the glass wall as hearty whoops met her ears.

Sam, she realized with a grin. Was Sam pulling another overnighter with Cap and Barnes? Ducking her head into the entertainment room, she was surprised to see Steve perched on the black leather couch with a Wii race-car controller in his hands. Oh, if only she could Facebook this…

Beside Steve was James, whose eyes were glued to the enormous screen and the three racecars fighting for first place, single hand struggling with his own controller, but Sam sat on the floor in front of the couch, biting his lip between shouts of obscenities at the other two. Natasha leaned against the large archway behind them, crossing her arms and watching with an enormous grin.

“You are not taking that corner!” Sam crowed.

“I can, and I will.” Steve countered, tilting his body dramatically as though he were turning with the
force of a speeding vehicle. “Buck, help me out here!”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Sam was pulling ahead of them, the grip on his Wii wheel tightening as he neared the finish line on the screen.

“Bucky, Bucky, Bucky—don’t let him take it!” Steve called out.

“I know how to fix that,” Barnes uttered—and then he reached down to pull Sam’s controller from his hands!

“What are you—dude!” Sam stared at the screen incredulously, watching Barnes take the victory. “You can’t just take a man’s steering wheel like that!”

Steve bent over with riotous laughter, slapping James’ knee and Sam’s shoulder.

“Unbelievable.” Sam shook his head with a scowl. “That is the second time you’ve done that to me—it’s a dirty trick, man. That’s foul.”

“Second?” James quirked an eyebrow at him. “When was the first?”

“On the bridge,” Sam rose to his feet, tiredly stretching with his arms above his head. “Remember? You threw Sitwell out a window—”

Before things could get awkward, Natasha cleared her throat. “Is there another Wii remote for me to wipe the floor with you all?”

They all startled and turned to face her. “Or are we watching a movie?”

The three of them looked from one to the other before nodding. “Movie.” They agreed in unison.

“Roman Holiday,” James squinted at the screen.

“1953, Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn,” Natasha recited, knowing James preferred to have the information beforehand. Stark had made the mistake of showing him the original Mad Max, and he’d hated it so much that he insisted on a synopsis, a rating, and a cast of characters beforehand. “She’s a princess, he’s a reporter, she escapes from her guards to have a few days to herself and runs into the reporter.” Natasha settled herself down beside James with a bowl of popcorn in her lap. “And hilarity ensues.”

As the tv screen filled with the opening credits, the smell of soap once again filled Natasha’s nostrils, her eyes grazing James’ closely-shaved jawline. His cleanliness was no doubt an obsessive-compulsive habit, setting him apart from what he once was.

Sam sat lazily on Natasha’s other side and Steve up a seat in front of James’ legs. Despite the presence of two other couches, they were all trying to give Barnes the option of closeness without making him feel trapped. There was still that wariness in James’ composure and the look of uncertainty in his eye, as though he expected to be kicked out and onto the streets again. Natasha stretched her fingers out slowly, making her movement obvious, and touched the brown locks above James’ ear. He went rigid and held his breath, but as she combed her fingernails through his dark strands James’ muscles loosened and he nearly leaned into her hand.

“Why do you keep it so long if you always pull it back?” Natasha wondered aloud as the beginning credits rolled for the movie.
James inhaled nervously, as though afraid of giving a wrong answer. “Do you... you want me to cut it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Natasha said, silently reminding him not to read into comments like they were orders. “I was just curious.”

“I don’t know what to do with it.” He closed his eyes and practically purred into her soft strokes. “Can’t wear it like I used to—I’m not Bucky, not anymore.”

Natasha could see Steve’s shoulders tense from the corner of her eye, but she ignored him and continued to run her fingers through Barnes’ hair. He snickered at something Audrey Hepburn was saying when he reached to grab from the bowl in Natasha’s lap and overshot his mark—brushing a hand against Natasha’s bare knee instead. She’d seen it coming and did nothing to stop it, but James’ face snapped in her direction, eyes wide with apology.

“It’s okay.” She soundlessly mouthed, looking down to see his hand hovering over her knee as if asking for permission. Her nod won a grin, and his fingers lowered and rested atop her knee.

--"This Night" Black Lab--

“Natasha?” She heard, and her eyes snapped open. When had they closed?

James’ face was hovering over hers and she could feel his fingers in her hair. Suddenly aware of the warm, firm cushion of James’ leg under her neck, a twitch of her toes made Natasha aware that her feet were resting in Sam’s lap. The darker man’s eyes were closed and his head was tilted, propped up by the corner of the couch while his hands rested on Natasha’s shins. Steve was nodding off, fighting against the tired weight of his eyelids from where he still sat on the floor.

“When did this turn into a slumber party?” Natasha laughed quietly, stretching her arms above her head with no intention of getting up.

“About three hours ago.”

“When did the movie end?”

“Two hours ago.” James smiled confidently down at her with that cocky half-grin.

“You could have said something.” Natasha said with mock frustration, but James saw through it.

“Hard to be bored with a pretty woman sleeping on me.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Well, if you’ll help me get my feet away from Sam, I’ll give you your lap back.”

“Who said I wanted it back?” James’ grin grew even wider and Natasha felt his fingers resume combing through her hair.

It was probably some misguided admiration of her efforts to help him, but Natasha could see the blaring affection in his features. She wasn’t sure what to do about it, and it didn’t help that she was still finding her footing with him. As the Winter Soldier, he’d been impressive—brutally efficient, precise, and dominating. As Bucky Barnes, he was charming, intelligent, and moral like Steve. Natasha couldn’t help but admire the two personalities for their own strengths, but now that he was trying to meld the two... Natasha really didn’t know where to draw any lines. And she wasn't sure
she wanted to.

It must have been the lack of sleep, because she opened her mouth and whispered, “Do you want me here?”

James blinked, brows furrowing. “What?”

She didn’t bother to repeat herself, but waited for him to process the question.

“Natasha… Yes, I do.” He bit his lip. “Do you not want to be here? I can let you up, if you want to go back to your room—”

“I meant in the Tower.” Natasha frowned. Did she even know what she was asking? "If you wanted me to leave, I would."

A strand of hair fell into his determined-looking face. “No, I want… I don’t know what I would do if you weren’t here.” His features adopted a somber frown and James removed his hand from her hair, brushing his thumb against skin at her collar-bone.

_Not the frown,_ she grimaced. _I just got the smile back on your face…_

“I’m difficult to handle,” He muttered. “I don’t know why you keep coming back. You don’t have to. Thank you for coming back. I know Clint is… I know he helped you, but this isn’t the same. You’ve lived it, you know it, Nat. You see me when I’m blank and you know what’s going through my head.”

He rubbed a hand over his face before resting his hand back on her shoulder, and it surprised Natasha how cold her skin felt in that small break from his touch, grateful for that heat of his flesh when it returned. “I feel like… I’m trying to build something with toy blocks. And every time I’ve got something built, some other kid comes and knocks it over.”

James shook his head. “And then I build it again and it gets knocked down. I learn things, I keep those with me every time, but I keep figuring out who I am and then it falls apart, over and over again.” A tear glistened in his eye. “I don’t know if I can pick up the blocks again, Natasha. I need help. Steve and Sam,” He turned his head to look at them, “they help. You help. You keep forcing me to pick up blocks and start over.”

He was visibly upset and he might have said more, but Natasha hushed him and raised herself up from his lap, stealing her feet away from Sam without waking him, and sitting closely beside James.

“You’re tired,” Natasha said, reaching a hand around Barnes’ back and rubbing it in what she hoped he perceived as soothing and not condescending. “You won’t need to pull all-nighters for much longer, your body is getting used to the idea of sleeping every night.”

James nodded, covering his face in his hand and taking in a deep breath, as though he didn’t quite believe exhaustion was the source of his distress.

“James, your body is overtired, your mind becomes unguarded when you're overtired.” Natasha patted his shoulder. “Get up, we need to get you to bed.”

“Steve,” James uttered, probably to wake his friend, but it came out in a whimper, causing Steve to snap out of his nap and face them.

“What’s wrong, Buck?” Steve rubbed his eyes.
“James needs sleep.” Natasha offered, gently jostling Sam from his own nap.

“Lemme help you up,” Steve held out a hand to his friend, but James was unresponsive, his eyes wandering the room in a feverish haze. “Let’s get you to your room.”

There was a shaky moment where Barnes nearly stumbled into the coffee table and everyone's arms jerked outward to steady him, but it was Steve who caught up James under the shoulders and knees, carrying him and redirecting after he whispered, "Not mine. Yours."

Natasha caught one last glimpse of James’ clouded expression and wondered what his eyes were seeing before she returned to her room and collapsed on the bed.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Re-creation

Chapter Summary

Sam has an unconventional method of winding James down, and it might or might not give Steve a heart attack...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`cre`a`tion rek-ree-ey-shun verb: To tear something down and bring something new into existence

--“The Draw” Bastille--

James and Steve were at it again. They didn’t need to be shouting to be in a heated argument, but part of that unsettled Natasha—she would have preferred an angry outburst from James instead of the deadpanned, monotone zombie he was this morning.

“—too many people.” She could hear James say from the kitchen. “I killed them.”

“Hydra targeted them, not you.” Steve replied as she rounded the corner to step in. James’ face was blank, his eyes hollow again. He did that, she realized, after a hard night of re-emerging memories.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve tried to put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, but Bucky shrugged him off.

Natasha didn’t bother to hide her presence-- if they were going to argue in the communal kitchen, then they shouldn't be surprised when other people showed up and listened-- resting her weight against the wall with crossed arms.

“It is my fault.” James’ lack of expression was haunting. “I pulled the trigger. I remember pulling the trigger. And I remember not feeling any remorse while I did it.”

The anger radiating from Steve was like a heat filling the room, like an overcompensation for James’ lack of emotion. But she wouldn't intervene. Natasha had rules, just like Sam, and one of them was: don’t help unless asked to. It was obvious Steve saw his losing fight and he fixed his desperate gaze on Natasha.

Silent plea acknowledged. Time to pull out the big gloves. “You’re right, Barnes, it is your fault.” She said.

Steve was incredulous. What the hell are you doing? His eyes cried. She wished she could pull him
aside privately to explain that Barnes was searching for purpose.

“What are you going to do about it?” Natasha let her arms swing by her sides as she took slow, but confident steps toward James. He was peering skeptically through unkempt bangs, but she could also see satisfaction there. He wanted someone to tell him he was a monster. It would justify how angry he felt with himself. “End your life? Killing yourself doesn’t bring back the dead. Hurting or punishing yourself has the same effect.”

Steve clearly wanted to come to James’ defense, but James shrugged off his reaching hand once more.

“Or you could do something more productive.”

“Like what? Send flowers to the families of my victims?” Bucky grunted sarcastically, clearly preferring the option of self-punishment. “With a little scribbled note: sorry I killed your children, but I’m trying to be a better person now.” He shook his head, hand trembling at his side as Steve stood helplessly beside him.

“Destroy what’s left of Hydra.” Natasha’s mouth quirked. “Stop them from using anyone else, from killing anyone else. And stop being so masochistic. You don’t need to take responsibility for Hydra’s crimes.”

She ignored Steve’s glare. How could he understand? He’d asked for the SSR to experiment on him, to change him into something different; James hadn't asked for this, it had been forced upon him and maintained through abusive discipline, repeated rape of his mind, and robbery of his identity. And yet, James still wanted to own up to those crimes. His nobility astounded Natasha and she swelled with admiration.

But that wasn't enough for James and he shook his head, glaring at both of them before storming out of the room. Natasha stretched out a hand to stop Steve from following.

“Don’t tell him it’s not his fault.” She said softly.

It was a credit to Steve that he didn’t push past her with all that superhuman strength. “But it wasn’t his fault.” Steve argued stubbornly.

“That’s not what he wants to hear. It doesn’t serve his re-emerging idea of morality. He’s been brainwashed by the enemy not to care about right and wrong—but now that he’s getting that sense back, it’s demanding justice from him. By saying that he isn’t accountable for what he’s done, you’re doing exactly what Hydra did: taking away his choice.”

Though Rogers didn’t seem to agree, he saw her point and nodded reluctantly. “That’s ironic, coming from the woman who bends right and wrong all the time.”

“I bend it to help people,” Natasha corrected. “And I’m still figuring it out. James is a lot faster than me.” She lowered her hand. “Give him some time to think.”

--"A Song To Help You Remember" Slow Dancing Society--

How there was a broom closet in Stark’s Tower was beyond James. How someone found him in it—after hours of sitting and brooding in silence on the floor, back against a shelf, forehead against his bent knees—was also beyond James’ comprehension. But the thing that stumped him the most was that Sam found him when he was certain there must be others looking, too. And out of all of them,
Sam was probably the only one James could tolerate right now.

"Tell Steve you want some space, next time," Sam said, switching on the overhead light before shutting the door and sitting beside James. "That way he won’t freak out and search the Tower with a fine-toothed comb. He still doesn’t known how you got JARVIS not to snitch."

James felt like he couldn’t speak if he wanted to. He’d felt spent before he even woke that morning from the nightmares of emerging memories coming out in dreams and leaving him raw.

They sat in silence, Sam’s shoulder tentatively touching Barnes’, but it was likely due to lack of space. James needed the closeness of the room, the limitations of the small space and short walls; it was protective, insulating.

“Sometimes it feels like you’re pretending, doesn’t it?” Sam broke the silence, but his tone was such that he didn’t expect an answer, which James was grateful for. “You only half-way feel the reactions you’re over-expressing for the sake of other people. It takes effort, putting on a show to prove you’re okay. Cause you’re not.”

Hearing that truth so openly confessed was painful, but also so good, and James pressed his nose even further into his knees, single arm tightening around his bent legs.

“And then some days, you’re all used up from pretending and you can’t feel anything at all.” Sam went on, though now it sounded as though he were describing his own struggles. They were no less true for James, but the former assassin was beginning to understand that Sam wasn’t quite as put-together as he made it appear, and James’ ears perked up, listening intently.

“Those are the days when you feel like shutting everyone out, giving as minimal effort as possible, or just plain calling it quits. But you know what the sad part is? The next time you start feeling like you’re alive again and you want to connect with those friends you pushed away, you’ll hesitate. A voice in your head will say, ‘I haven’t talked to them for too long, maybe they’ve moved on without me’ or ‘Maybe they’re upset with me for pushing them away’, and you back off, you stay isolated.”

James hadn’t himself given it much thought, but it was plain that Sam’s words were spoken from past experience.

“It’s a slippery slope, man.” Warm fingers brushed over James’ right forearm, a brief contact that communicated what Sam said next, “but it’s a mental lie and a sticky trap. All of us get it, that sometimes you need to be alone, but all of us are sticking with you, too, when you want us. Whenever that voice of doubt creeps into your head, you shut it up with fact: We’re not going anywhere.”

Taking a deep breath, James nodded, resisting the urge to flinch when Sam patted at his back.

“You think fact is enough,” James whispered, “to fight that voice?” He wasn’t being skeptical, it was an honest question.

“Man, facts are stubborn things.” Sam smiled, a brilliant effect in the dimly-lit space. “And when you don’t have weapons or armor, all you’ve got is the truth. We’re not going anywhere.”

James nodded again, a heavy burden lifting from his shoulders, releasing his tongue from its brooding prison. “I don’t want to hide, but on the days when I’m worn out, I don’t know what truth to hold on to. Who am I, Sam? I’m not ‘Bucky’ anymore, no matter how much Steve wants me to be. I’m not the Winter Soldier, but I can do all the things that person did.” He chanced a look in Sam’s direction and the darker man’s eyes were soft, sympathetic. “Who am I, Sam?”
“You’re James.” A voice spoke from above their heads. Apparently, the door had opened without either of them noticing and Natasha’s head poked through.

“But who is James?” He asked without missing a beat. “And how do I figure out who he is?”

“Day by day.” Sam answered, nodding at Natasha.

Her hand was on the door, communicating that her visit would be brief. “You’re always something, James—even at rest, you are something. You take it with you wherever you go, no matter how little or many resources you have. Possessions can be taken away, even memories, but what you are…” Natasha tapped her fingers against the doorway. “For me, it’s fluidity. I mold myself around a situation or around people and I become whatever serves them best. I have certain consistencies—habits, relationships, tendencies—but the rest is all up in the air.”

Sam nodded, but James’ mind was wary of the consequences of this new information. When he looked up again, Natasha was gone.

“What ‘thing’ are you, Sam?” James was hesitant to ask.

Sam was thoughtful as he pulled his feet in to sit cross-legged. “I guess it’d be support. I’m an extrovert, so I get my recharge through being with people, but I also like to give something back. When a friend is at their lowest point, you can either leave ‘em or help ‘em. I always wanted to help ‘em, but the VA got me certified to do it better.”

“Support,” James repeated to himself.

“I think, in the 1940’s, you would have called it ‘playing second fiddle’. I sure as hell don’t want to be in the lead.”

James raised his hands to his head, painfully aware that it was ‘hand’ and not ‘hands’, but his left arm mimicked the movement all the same. “I remember Cap trying to find a way into a Hydra base. I was in the forest right across from it, hidden in the snow, but I was in charge of cover-fire when their soldiers tried to take out Rogers.”

Sam nodded. “He told me you were a sniper.”

James wasn’t sure why he’d mentioned the memory, but another one came and he decided to unravel what his mind was trying to tell him. “When Steve was smaller, he got sick pretty often. One winter, we were both having a hard time finding work, couldn’t afford heating, and Steve couldn’t breathe. I remember holding him,” James held his hand out in a curve, as though imitating the hold, “and his body was shaking so hard. He was cold and he couldn’t breathe, and I couldn’t do anything about it except hold him under all the blankets we could find.”

Sam’s eyes were wide, probably picturing the two men huddled together, fighting to keep Steve alive.

“When I got shipped out to Europe,” James winced, trying to understand why these memories were popping up and what they were supposed to mean. “I found out that one of the men under my command was only seventeen.” James frowned, rolling his eyes. “He was a big guy, though. Hard to tell his age, but somehow I found out. I decided not to report him, but I kept an eye on him. I told him I’d get him home, but it wouldn’t be in a casket.”

“What happened to him?”

James’ mouth twitched into a grin. “Well, hopefully, I made good on my promise. He wasn’t
captured with the rest of our division because he was on detail, back at camp. When Cap brought us back, the kid told me I was a hero. I tried to keep tabs on him, but being a Howling Commando didn’t leave me a lot of free time.”

“You like to take care of people. Watch their backs for ‘em.” Sam suddenly smiled. “That’s your thing.”

Is that what his brain was trying to say? “I guess so… hard to do that now. I’m a mental case.”

“James, we’re all mental cases in this tower,” Sam lifted himself from the floor, offering James a hand up. “It’s practically a requirement to gain residency.”

“I can hardly take care of myself, let alone…” James brow crumpled and his mind switched gears, forgetting Sam’s outstretched hand. “Natasha…”

“What?”

“Natasha—she said her thing was fluidity. Said she becomes what people need her to be.”

Sam crossed his arms, patiently waiting for James to form his thoughts.

“Do you think she’s doing that with me?” He wasn’t sure if Sam could see the hurt in his eyes, but he attempted to keep himself neutral. “Is she just… humoring me?”

“Would you be disappointed if she was?”

“Yes.” He ground out.

Sam’s fingers twitched and he held out his hand adamantly, helping James to his feet. “You know the hell she’s lived through, she needs to be fluid—Natasha’s never had something consistent. Barton is probably the only person who’s ever stuck around, and even he was brainwashed by Loki to fight her. Can you blame her?”

“No,” James admitted, tying his hair back with the rubber band he had in his pocket. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“Don’t like it? Do something about it,” Sam challenged with a mischievous grin. “She did say there were things she holds on to, things that don’t change for her.” Sam winked. “Maybe you could be one of those things.”

James felt like he should have argued, but he nodded instead. Sam looked… well, smug.

Waving James out of the broom closet, he laughed. “You two are the weirdest people I’ve met, but that might make you perfect for each other. I’m not gonna lie, I ship it.” And he enthusiastically chattered about it, testing James’ silent patience, as the both of them strode through the hall and entered the elevator.

James frowned at the elevator panel, glancing at Sam out of the corner of his eye. “Why are we going to the roof?”

The devious grin on Sam’s face was hard to look away from. “Tony’s an awesome guy—can multitask like a wizard—I asked him for a special favor. You’re gonna help me test it out.”

James shook his head, eyes toward the ceiling. “You’re not going to tell me what that means, are you?”
“Nope.” Somehow Sam’s wide smile got wider.

"By the way," James leaned his head back against the elevator wall. "Whatever happened to Rule number one and two?"

Sam snorted. "The rules are in place so *I* can bend 'em when I want to. Gotta keep myself from catching the crazy running around here."

--“Run Boy Run” by Woodkid--

Steve couldn’t believe his eyes. Stark had mentioned something about Bucky being on the roof and it had left a nervous feeling in the bottom of Steve’s stomach. So when he set foot on the outdoor level at the top of the Tower, he had to take a deep breath and tell himself he wasn’t seeing what he was seeing.

Bucky was standing on the ledge of the balcony, looking down at the drop below.

“Bucky?” Steve took a few quick steps forward before breaking into a run. “No! Don’t do it!”

But Bucky took that step forward and Steve’s heart stopped. His best friend’s body plummeted downward.

“NO!” Steve roared, plowing into the balcony railing so fast that it creaked beneath his hold, his horrified face tilting downward to watch as Bucky dropped through the air like a rock, becoming smaller and smaller with each second.

“Steve—” Sam appeared beside Steve, hands outpeaceably and Steve whirled, taking him by the shoulders in an ungentle grip.

“What have you done?” Steve shouted into Sam’s face. “Why did you—”

“Steve!” Sam’s hands clamped around Rogers’ arms, his eyes demanding Steve’s focus. “Calm down! Look again.”

But he couldn’t—he couldn’t watch Bucky fall again. Instead, his ears caught the sound of Bucky’s awful scream as he descended lower.

And it got louder. And louder. How was it getting louder if he was falling--

Steve gripped the railing and looked down again, jumping back as a whoosh of air blew against his face, a large *thing* passing by him as it rose high into the air. The scream, he realized, was a cry of exhilaration.

Bucky was soaring through the air on the Falcon flightpack, silver wings glinting in the sun as they opened wide with Bucky’s one arm. He sailed through the air, rising above Stark tower.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Sam grinned and the apology faltered on his lips with a tremulous laugh. “I should have warned you beforehand, but I had to get him outside for a while.”

“You know,” Steve let out a deep breath and though his heartbeat was still pounding, he found it difficult to be angry when he saw the overjoyed grin on Bucky’s face, soaring in a wide circle above them, “Getting someone outside used to mean tossing a baseball around.”

“New times, old man,” Sam laughed. “He was being the Mopey Soldier and needed something to
get his heart pumping again. A baseball wasn’t gonna cut it.”

Bucky swooped down over their heads, causing them to duck, before he landed on the platform beside them, bringing the wings back into the harness.

“Having fun?” Steve walked toward him, helping to unbuckle the harness around Bucky’s chest.

Bucky nodded with a dopey grin. “Just flying and finding life’s purpose. You know, everyday things.” It was obviously sarcastic, but more playful and less bitter than Steve had heard from him in such a long time.

Steve nodded, lips pressing into a humorous smile. “That’s… uh, that’s good. And?”

“Found something to take care of.” Bucky’s smirk said that his answer was an inside joke, but Steve was too pleased to see him in good spirits to care.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is incredibly precious to me. I really wish I’d had a Sam to give me advice instead of learning things the hard way. In fact, this chapter is probably the reason this story was written at all!

No update tomorrow-- next chapter comes on Monday!

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Natasha learns that Tony considered putting a self-destruct button in James' new arm, which has been purchased on some unconventional credit...

Chapter Notes

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re`an`îma`tion ree-an-uh-mey-shun verb: to restore to life, to revive

Natasha was rubbing her sore ankle in the entertainment room when Sam, Steve, and James returned from whatever antics they'd performed on the balcony. It was easy for Natasha to see the difference in James after his pep-talk with Sam in the broom closet. She hadn't stuck around to hear the whole of it even though her ears had been itching-- a bad habit from constantly listening in as a way of life--but for once, she gave the gift of privacy.

"Are you all right?" James jumped over the back of the couch to land on the cushion next to her, his handsome features care-free.

"Yeah," She nodded, amused by the glow on his face, a smile twitching on her own lips. "Are these two getting you into trouble?"

"What makes you say that?" Sam winked at her, setting himself down on the other couch, his Falcon-harness clattering noisily onto the coffee table.

"You've got that look." She shrugged.

"I don't know what kind of trouble you think Captain America and The ever-patriotic Falcon get into," Sam brought out a wrench and made and adjustment to the harness, "but Bucky, here, enjoyed every minute of it. So there."

Whatever they'd been up to, Steve's expression was somewhere between my-friends-are-annoying and my-friends-are-hilarious.

"You sure you're okay?" James nodded at her foot. He was so tentative about accepting and offering touch that she’d begun to recognize when he was asking for permission. But before she could open her mouth, Jarvis’ voice sounded above their heads, summoning James to Tony’s ground-floor workshop. While their interaction had been minimal, there was no denying the tension between James and Tony, proven mostly through Tony's complete avoidance of them all.
“If I’m not back in a few hours, send a rescue team for my body.” James smiled wryly at them, stepping toward the elevator just behind the wall with the huge flat-screen TV.

A frowning Steve, however, didn’t appreciate the joke. “If you’re not back in half an hour, I’m coming in after you.” Natasha heard the serious sentiment in his voice and squeezed his elbow once the elevator closed and descended down the shaft.

“It’s gonna be fine,” Natasha tugged at his arm. “If you think I’m gonna let you sulk until he comes back, you’ve got another think coming.”

Sam echoed Natasha’s sentiment and they fell into easy conversation until Steve was reclining against the cushions of the black leather couch, feet propped up on the coffee table while Natasha inched closer to Sam, watching curiously as he worked over the flight pack.

“I swear on a stack of bibles, Steve,” Sam was grinning from ear to ear, sounding less than apologetic, “I had no idea you’d be coming out there when you did—I promise I didn’t do that on purpose.”

“You still scared me half to death.” Steve muttered with a shake of his head, sipping at the beer Natasha had slipped into his hand only minutes ago. She knew the alcohol wouldn’t do anything for him, but it was the human act of the thing that was more important and even Steve Rogers needed a reminder that he was human now and again. “I have a phone, you know? It would have been that easy to send me a text message—”

“Wait, am I missing something? What happened?” Natasha’s brow furrowed.

Sam laughed and nearly dropped the screwdriver in his hand. “Bucky needed a little adrenaline rush, so I took him to the roof and let him put on the wings—” he held up the harness to illustrate, “—and as he was getting ready to jump off the ledge, mother hen here,” Sam patted Steve’s foot where it rested on the table, “has to show up and get the wrong idea.”

“Oh, no,” Natasha groaned.

“You don’t have to look so broken up about it, Sam,” Steve took a sip from his beer.

Sam still smiled, but looked a little more repentant. “And I am sorry. Next time, I’ll give you a heads up, okay?”

“It’s fine,” Steve waved a hand at him, forgiveness coming much quicker than Natasha expected. “It was confusing, that’s all. But it was good for him. I saw his face, Sam. He looked,” Steve paused, recollecting the moment, “He looked like he was having a good time. He looked alive again. So… thank you for doing that.”

“No problem.”

Natasha wasn’t sure how to manage the silence that followed, feeling like an intruder, and she rose to head to the kitchen nearby. From where she stood at the kitchen counter-top, she saw through the open archway that Steve was lost in thought, staring at his shoe as he continued to nurse the almost-empty beer bottle in his hand.

“He said something about ‘finding his life’s purpose’. What’d he mean by that?” Steve asked of Sam, but at that distance she couldn’t hear Sam’s reply. The ingredients for a smoothie made it into her hand as she strained to hear Wilson’s voice. It was at a different frequency than Steve’s, being lower and harder to pick up on. Even with her back turned to them and the soft clip of cabinet doors, Natasha could only hear parts of their hushed conversation.
“Yeah, he’s always been like that.” Steve’s higher-toned reply came.

Sam murmured something else.

“It used to get pretty bad.” Steve replied regretfully. “We couldn’t afford to keep running me back and forth to the hospital—he joked that we should’ve moved to the alley behind the doctor’s ward so we could walk in whenever we needed—and we had to make do at home. The gas would go out because everyone was using their heaters, the water would stop because the pipes would freeze from getting so cold, and sometimes we couldn’t go out with the snow being that bad.”

From what Natasha could put together, he was recalling a time before the war, when he and Barnes had lived together.

“So he’d put the mattress in front of the fireplace, lay under a blanket with me, and let me soak up his body heat. That was all we could do. I remember one time I got him sick and he was burning up with a fever, but he said it was just that much more heat to keep us both from freezing.”

A low reply.

“Yeah, people would say that, but he always had a girl on his arm, so I knew it wasn’t true. I heard stories about the first war, soldiers doing the same thing in the trenches to keep warm. Wasn’t anything wrong with that. That’s just the way Bucky was—the guy that would find the bird with the broken wing, bring it home, nurse it to health, let it fly free and find another bird to patch up.” Steve let out a bitter laugh. “I wasn’t a little bird after the super-soldier serum, though. But he surprised me, found a way to watch my back anyway. Like he was rising to the challenge. Makes me wonder…”

Natasha started cutting a banana to throw into the blender.

“Dr. Zola injected him with a serum, not the same one as mine, but something like it. Dr. Erskine told me the serum would amplify things, not just flesh and bone. He said a good man would become greater and an evil man would get worse—the Red Skull proved that theory true. I wonder if Bucky’s determination got amplified.”

“Makes sense.” Sam said loud enough for Natasha to hear, but the rest of his words were lower. Pressing a button on the blender and liquefying the contents inside, Natasha was letting this information sink in when the blender stopped and Steve spoke again.

“Really? I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Natasha’s eyebrow twitched and she turned her head slightly to peer at them through the archway. Steve looked slightly frustrated and Sam was beaming widely—like his favorite sports team had just beat Steve’s.

"You’re not his mom, Rogers,” Sam laughed. “It doesn’t matter what you feel about it.”

She wasn’t sure why those words made her nervous, but Steve glanced in her direction and locked eyes with her for a moment, almost as if to say, Don’t screw it up or you’ll have me to answer to. Her head snapped back to look at the blender. What was that all about?

Immediately, a silence fell over the area and Natasha’s instincts flared up. Someone was creeping up behind her, trying to catch her off-guard. Ha! Not on her watch. But she’d let them think so until the last moment…

The slightest whirring sound met her ears, comparable to Tony's mechanical suit.
"You know, Stark, there are better ways of sneaking up on me." She growled, turning and jolting when she realized who it was. "James!"

"How’d you know I was sneaking up on you?" He adopted a false pout.

"The room went quiet——" She peered down at his left arm. His whole left arm.

James bent the metallic appendage at the elbow and wiggling its fingers. Where the Winter Soldier's arm had been glossy and striped with segments, this arm was matted and covered in a dark grey rubber-like sleeve, completely smooth.

"It’s different now.” He pulled down on the collar of his V-neck, showing her the area that was no longer riddled with wires, but dotted with scars. Natasha’s fingers moved to gently stroke at the skin there, surprised at how smooth it was. She heard his intake of air at the touch and saw cautious eyes staring down at her. When the pads of her fingers brushed over his bicep, she could feel the pound of his heartbeat. His blue eyes were looking down at her with such fixation that she felt like blushing—how did he make her feel like that? She wasn’t unaware of her attraction to him, but Natasha was wary of it and withdrew her hand immediately. The sigh from his nostrils made him sound disappointed.

"Tony added touch sensors.” James looked both excited and nervous about this news and pulled the hair away from his ear to show a tiny chip attached just behind the earlobe. “Sends the nerve-information right to my brain, no wires.”

"Does that mean you can feel this?” She stroked at the smooth metal on his wrist inquisitively. Just like before, the soft caress to his forearm had him holding his breath, the same muddled-thought expression on his face.

"Uh-huh. That’s...” James paused, watching her fingers on his arm. “That’s the first time I’ve felt anything there since... I guess, 1945.” His eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head when she got to his wrist, running a firm thumb along his palm, and he released a sigh of ecstasy. An errant thought appeared: she liked touching him. She liked causing this reaction. And she wanted to keep making him feel like this...

Natasha immediately ducked her eyes when she realized they weren’t alone in the kitchen.

"You didn’t even startle her, did you?" Sam was still grinning at them. “Our turn—show it off already.”

James shook his head to clear whatever thoughts he’d been lost in, alone with Natasha, and held out the arm toward Steve and Sam for inspection.

Steve stepped forward and clasped James' hand, both of them smiling in wonderment as James processed the new sense of touch, but it took a little more courage for Sam to be so easy-going. Natasha was puzzled by, but a moment later put together that the Winter Soldier had been the one to damage Sam's wings in mid-flight. Despite his appearance of confidence and ease, Natasha recognized the signs of someone who was battle-tested and carried regrets.

"The best part about it...” James tilted his head to look down at his arm. Reaching over with his fleshy hand, he pressed three fingers to seemingly random areas of his bicep and something began to shift in his shoulder, pulling away from the organic stub of his remaining arm. He held the metal arm in his right hand with a proud smile.

"Why is that the best part?” Sam’s eyebrows came together.
Laying the arm on the counter-top beside him, James unconsciously brushed his fingers over the scarred nub. “Because… sometimes I just want to be James Barnes. It’s not so hard to manage things with one hand. I kinda got used to it.”

Natasha could see that he wasn’t being entirely honest, but she guessed that the arm held too many memories for him.

“You’re not the same man, James,” Natasha remembered the smoothie she’d been making and poured it into a glass, handing it to James with a wink. “And that’s not the same arm.”

“No, it’s not.” He nodded at her in thanks and took the glass. “But it’s heavy.”

“Can’t Tony do something about that?” Steve was clearly offended at the idea of Stark giving Barnes anything that would load him down.

“Not—not *that* kind of heavy,” James’ face dropped. “Like… the weight of responsibility. I’ve got a lot to make up for—”

“No, you don’t.” Steve interrupted, but James held up a peaceable hand, asking the blond to hear him through.

“I have a duty to right as much wrong as I can, now.” James amended. “Because you all put a lot of work into me. And I…” Natasha saw his face on the brink of that hollow despair and she wanted to strangle whatever demon was ruining his moment of clarity. “I killed Tony’s parents.” He looked from face to face. “Did you know about that?”

“No.” Sam and Steve answered in unison. But when he came to Natasha’s face, he demanded nothing but the truth from her.

“Yes.”

“That’s why he’s been avoiding me—sorting it all out in his head. He said he thought about putting a self-destruct fail-safe in the new arm. But then Tony,” James shook his head at the ground with a grin, “He said he’d rather bill me for the arm. He said I was running on credit, and I could clear my name by making the world a safer place to live in.” And then he rolled his eyes. “Although, I might be censuring a few of his words.”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Reapplication

Chapter Summary

James has a terrible nightmare only to find Natasha is gone...

Chapter Notes

Sorry I skipped a day, but something bad happened (like REALLY bad, shake you up bad). Here's a long chapter to make up for it.

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjIndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`app`li`ca`tion ree-ap-li-key-shuhn verb: The act of putting something back into special use or purpose

--“On The Shore” Slow Skies--

Natasha would gladly ignore all else to spend as much time with Barnes as she could, but duty was calling. And calling. And calling. Her phone continued to vibrate insistently.

“Natasha,” Nick Fury’s scolding tone was perceptible even through the crackly phone reception. “You know you’re not helping him by staying there.”

“Yes, I am.” She whispered defensively. They’d both agreed James’ name and previous title weren’t to be spoken on any channels of communication. Too many people were looking for him. “Can you give me a little more time?” Natasha strode from the entertainment room—it had to be on movie night, didn’t it—to find the privacy of a quiet, empty corner.

“The window on this mission is closing,” Nick sternly reminded her. As if she needed a reminder. This mission was founded on her information, her lead they were tracking, her work that had gotten them this far. “You'll help your friend better by taking his opponents down.” Hydra was another name off limits. “You want him safe? Keep the hunters off his scent or take ‘em out altogether.”

Natasha didn’t mean to hesitate, but Nick seemed to read her mood through the phone.

“The sooner you leave is the sooner you can get back.”

“They’re never going to stop looking for him.” Natasha shook her head in anger. There was no happy, carefree future for James Barnes, but the least she could do was clear his path a little.

“Never say never,” Nick said. “As time goes on, they’ll realize they’re losing their grip on him and
he’ll become less interesting. It’s an uphill battle now, but it won’t always be.” Nick paused. “Have you told him about my offer, yet?”

Natasha answered immediately, protectively. “He’s not ready.”

Fury had seen another Natasha in James: an asset molded by evil, but useable by either side. However Natasha knew James wasn’t ready for that. She wasn’t ready for that. Why it mattered to her so much was a mystery, but then so many things were these days—the way she couldn’t sleep at night, hoping James would show up at her doorway and ask if he could join her; the way he’d ask for permission to touch her and the way his face lit up when she said yes; the way he was always looking for her, not always needing to be near her, but just knowing where she was and keeping tabs on her. It should have been annoying, but it wasn’t.

“Something tells me he never will be ready if I leave it up to you.” Nick chided, adding a reluctant sigh. “I need you to be objective about this. Understand, he has a better chance of survival if he keeps up the fight, but on our side.”

“Well, don’t hold your breath for an understudy for Captain America,” Natasha snarled. “Three days, Fury. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Tomorrow.” Nick refused adamantly. “Same place. Same time.”

Natasha wanted to be candid with Barnes, but how was she supposed to start a conversation like this?

“Hey, by the way, I’m heading out tomorrow to eliminate a Hydra threat so they don’t figure out you’re in Tony Stark’s tower and come to blow it up. Oh, and you can’t come because I want to keep you safe for as long as possible. But whenever you do set foot outside the tower, Nick Fury is going to ambush you with a recruitment offer. He’s probably already got a super-suit ready with the letters S and A flashing across the chest: Sergeant America! I hope you like bright blue stretch leggings.”

Imagining his toned, leg-hair-covered calves in stretchy blue material was enough to make her laugh.

“What’s so funny?” James. Of course James knew where she was, who was she fooling? He was probably the only one she would consider calling her equal in stealth.

Natasha sighed and turned to face him, taking his metallic hand in hers. “You. That’s what’s funny.”

“You think of me when I’m not around? Cute.” He grinned dangerously.

“I’ll think of you while I’m away,” Natasha said purposefully. Sooner was better than later anyway.

James’ face dropped. “Going somewhere?”

She nodded, pressing her lips into a line.

“Be gone for long?” He frowned, running his thumb along her palm.

“I promise I’ll come back when I can.”

“Can’t…” His jaw was grinding, clenching his cheek muscles and distorting his handsome features. “Can’t someone else… be gone?” She could tell he wasn't asking for specifics on purpose. “Can’t they do what you’re gonna do?”
“I’m not sure there’s anyone else who can do what you and I do.” She winked, trying to lighten the mood. “At least, not well enough.”

James nodded, glowering at the floor before looking her in the eye. “Dangerous?”

Those piercing blues demanded honesty.

Natasha kept her face passive. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

Nodding again and gripping her hand tighter, James led her away from the dark corner. As they walked back to the entertainment room, he kept looking back as though checking if she was still there. Not that she could escape his strong grip. And…well, not that she wanted to escape. He didn’t say much for the rest of the evening, answering everyone’s questions with grunts and not contributing to conversation. They took the hint.

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--“The Best Part” by Gungor--

Unknown to the world, Natasha listened to a lot of music, so it was no wonder a song was floating through her head that she couldn’t shake: How many times will you let me change my mind? I can’t decide if I’ll let you save my life or if I’ll drown.

What was the name of it?

I hope you see through my walls… I can’t find a reason to be loved. I never wanna leave you but …

Arms. That was the name of it.

“What are you humming?” James breath tickled the hair behind her ear as he nuzzled closer to her beneath the sheets. She’d known he wasn’t asleep, knew from the way he’d molded his body along her spine and legs, and the way he’d rested his hand on her hip. She could practically hear him counting her breaths.

“Song running through my head. I try my best to never let you in, to see the truth, and I've never opened up. I've never…” Too soon. She couldn’t say it. I've never truly loved till you put your arms around me. “…you put your arms around me and I’m home.”

Home. Something she used to think was an outdated concept. But home, she was beginning to realize, was linked to people. Nick, Hawkeye, Steve. She loved all of them unashamedly. And now James…

“Yeah.” James reached around her hip and squeezed her hand, his chin brushing at the back of her head as he pressed a soft kiss to her hair and then the skin at her neck, traveling just below her earlobe. Natasha could feel the tension in his muscles. It was as though she was a pool of water and he was a sponge, desperately trying to soak in as much of her as possible. It stirred her to pity.

“I’ll be back soon.” She murmured quietly, squeezing his hand back.

“Yeah.” James repeated, non-committedly. His sigh of bitterness warmed against her neck. To his credit, he said nothing further—no pleading with her to stay, no pressuring her for information on where she was going, no confessions of deep affection. Neither of them really needed to say it, it was a given, a gradual ascent into something undeniably firm.

Did they care about each other? Yes.
Would one ever betray the other? No.

Would one kill to keep the other safe? Yes.

Would one die to keep the other safe? Yes.

That was all that mattered, right? And the same could be said of Barton and Steve and Sam, Natasha knew, but the difference was that Barton, Steve, and Sam only *dipped their toes* into the dark world Natasha *lived and breathed* in. No one she'd known had ever sunk as deep as she had. Except for James.

She smiled, rolling herself over and pressing a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth. No, she still didn’t believe in fairytales, but she did believe in two kindred spirits who had seen the lowest levels of hell and were content to strain for the edges of heaven.

James raised himself to lean on an elbow, eyes roaming Natasha’s sleeping figure under the single sheet. Her limbs were arranged like a ballerina in mid-pose and he was enraptured by her dancer’s body. Hours ago, she’d glided atop him, fitting herself like a puzzle-piece to him, reminding him that his body was capable of ecstasy. She probably hadn’t planned on the side-effect, though—his overly-protective nature, unearthed from the same depths as that eruptive euphoria which lay dormant for decades.

Natasha was precious to him. She saw into his tangled string of brokenness and patiently taught him to untangle it. A pat on the back was nice, and a kind word was helpful, but those things did little good when he was sitting on the floor and staring helplessly at his shattered fragments, wondering how in the world he was expected to put them back together. Natasha would hand him a single piece and help him either throw it away or place it where it needed to go.

He knew what she hadn’t been telling him. He could practically smell Hydra all over this op. It wasn’t that James wanted control of Natasha, or even that he thought her incapable, but just because she could weather danger, it didn’t mean she needed to subject herself to it. Wasn’t that the advice everyone was trying to cram down his throat? Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.

James sighed. There would be no sleep for him tonight. He would stare until her image was imprinted in his mind, until he could call it up at will. If he looked long enough, would he dream about her during the time she was gone? Would his dreams fixate on the way their bodies had moved together? Or would he dream the lonely nightmares of ice and darkness and gunshots and blood?

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"Chasing Pirates—Santigold and Snotty Remix" by Norah Jones---

There was no tear-felt goodbye the next morning, no looks of longing, or standing strong and watching her go-- Natasha was simply gone. And this, the less-painful option that she'd so wisely chosen, suited James just fine.

James’ first night without Natasha had been blessedly nightmare-free, but he figured his luck wouldn’t hold out for the second night. He was right.

He’d screamed through an awful dream of Natasha falling from the train in Austria instead of him, waking up to find Steve sliding into bed with him, gathering the shaking James in Steve’s arms. James’ nerves were too frazzled to care that he was clinging to Steve like a child, tears streaking Steve’s T-shirt while he gripped the blond’s elbow.
“She fell,” James breathed into Steve’s shirt. “The train. She fell. Not me.”

“Just a dream. She’ll be back.” Steve’s arms tightened around him.

But James couldn’t get the image out of his head. “Watched her face when she fell. Never seen her so scared. Damn it, is that you’ve been livin’ with all these years? Watchin’ my face over and over —”

“Doesn’t matter now.” Steve said with authority. “I get to wash it away with new memories. Like you makin’ a fool of yourself around Nat. Or flying with Sam’s wings.” Steve ran comforting fingers through James’ hair, pressing a kiss to James’ forehead and rocking Barnes gently in his muscled hold. “S’just a dream, Bucky. It won’t be as awful tomorrow as it is now. Just breathe. Let it pass.”

This quieted Barnes and as the minutes ticked by, his heartbeat finally slowed.

“You woulda’ been a good father.” James sighed, finding his voice again once the tremors of his body stopped.

“Sure, Buck.” Steve sleepily rumbled from above James’ head.

“Still could be, if you’d get your sorry ass out there.”

“Sure, Buck.”

Though the third night was better, the worst came on the fourth morning.

“Sergeant Barnes,” He heard from behind him in the kitchen as he gathered the mush that would serve as his breakfast. He hadn’t completely worked solids into his diet yet, but at least applesauce was back on the menu.

James didn’t turn around to see who it was. He didn’t need to. He knew. “Not a Sergeant anymore. Not unless my rank carries over despite my defection.”

“It’s not defection if you weren’t conscious enough to make decisions.” Nick Fury stepped quietly over to stand beside him, glancing at the food on the countertop. “You tried cottage-cheese yet?”

“I was conscious enough to kill in the name of Hydra.” James said curtly. “Cheese and I aren’t friends right now.”

“What about hummus?”

“What about telling me why you’re here?”

Nick cocked his head, leaning an elbow against the countertop and eyeing Barnes skeptically. “I could give you three guesses, but I know you’re smart enough to figure it out.”

“Here to recruit me?”

Nick waved his hand. “Sort of. Why, would you say ‘yes’ if I did?”

“Probably not. Don’t know why you would trust me after I was Hydra’s attack dog.”

Nick smirked, crossing his arms. “You really don’t get it, do you? If I held that against you, I’d have to hold it against Steve Rogers, too.”
James dropped his spoon noisily, his neck snapping to glare at Nick. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“I mean, he was working for Hydra, too, if you really think about it.” Nick didn’t look phased by the murderous expression on James’ face. “Hydra invaded Shield. Hydra was giving us the operations, the targets, the objectives. Captain America worked for Shield, but if Shield was Hydra, then Steve was working for Hydra. Makes sense, right?”

Nick put his hand on the countertop and leaned closer to James’ face. “Look, I’m not gonna coddle you. I know you can handle the truth. There are some angry people out to get you and your friends. The only way we’re gonna stop ‘em is if we’ve got all able bodies. Take another shot, what’s your second guess as to why I'm here?”

“You want me to find something.” James could sense at least that. “Want me to go fishing for your missing eye?” James sneered at his own grotesque joke. He was beginning to feel like a grotesque joke himself, a twisted weapon being traded between agency to agency.

“Close.” Nick raised his eyepatch, as grim a joker as the assassin before him. “But the eye’s right here. I need you to help me find someone that’s gone missing. Someone you, personally, don’t want to go missing.”

Natasha.

Chapter End Notes

Not to worry, more tomorrow!
Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Chapter Summary

Natasha might have bitten off more than she could chew, causing her and Barnes to become captives of Hydra...

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Graphic Violence

I strongly suggest you listen to the songs while you read, it's pretty epic.

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_re-appropriation_ ree-uh-proh-pree-ey-shun verb: the act of taking something back, reclaiming a belonging

---“Drone” by James Netwon Howard---

Natasha was in the back of a van, hands bound behind her back, legs tied together, black bag over her head, and shoulders being squeezed between two large men with guns. But underneath the shroud, she was smiling.

It had taken a long time to set up everything the right way, to make it look like they’d surprised her, but it had been worth it. They’d been sloppy and wouldn’t have succeeded except that she wanted to be taken. If _this_ was the best Hydra could do, then her hard work over the last few months—scattering and eliminating the remnants—had been successful. These agents were the dregs at the bottom of the cup.

Her internal compass told her where she was with every turn and bump in the road, analyzing the map in her head, but then the vehicle descended violently downward. For a moment she thought they’d skidded out of control, driven over some ledge, and were about to crash—but they met ground again and she could hear tire-screching echoing against close walls. Tunnels? Time passed and the van abruptly stopped. The back doors squeaked open, and she was pulled by the elbows, tossed onto the concrete ground and left waiting.

Sniff. They were in the sewers, but at a level just under the subway system. Sniff. The faintest exhaust from a large computer. Sniff. Something else. Something metal, giving off an antiquated scent.
No one was speaking. She expected chatter from the ten men she’d counted in the van, but it was
dead-quiet. Just the low beeping of machines, the hiss of exhaust, and the roll of plumbing
throughout the bricks walls in the large room. Natasha grunted and rolled onto her back—she used
the sound to measure the room by the echo it gave. Wide and tall, covered in brick, probably fifty
feet high and sixty feet wide, and there was a—

Snick! She heard, rather than felt, the sinking of a short needle at her neck and her nerves sharply
protested as her skin was filled with something cold and sickly.

Damn it. A numbing agent. The effect was creeping over her body like a cold sweat and she only
had moments to act before her limbs were shut down—jamming her thumb as hard as she could into
the wristband on her right hand, she activated the homing signal for Fury. It was silent, but the press
of it brought her relief. She hadn’t meant to go underground in the literal sense, but the signal would
be strong enough to reach Fury. Who knew, she might even take out these amateurs before any other
agents showed up.

The sack was pulled from her head where she lay sideways on the ground.

Two men stood over her, but she was aware of more behind her, and a dark-haired, angry-looking
man in a combat suit nodded to the other with a short, “Okay.”

Angry-man approached her with a tanned and muscled outstretched hand, taking a fistful of her hair
and dragging her across the floor. Natasha gasped at the pain of the strands pulling at her scalp,
unable to retaliate while the numbing substance shut down her limbs.

Training taught Natasha to relocate pain, but her brain’s commands to her body were blocked by
whatever they’d given her. It was a new and interesting sensation to be completely vulnerable and
have several locks of hair ripped from her scalp.

Natasha was hauled into a thin metal chair, wrists bound to the arms of it and ankles bound to the
legs of it. You’re not useless. As long as your eyes are working, take stock of what you can and get
on with it.

Brick walls. Concrete floors. Puddles of murky water in the corners. Four large, circular openings in
the walls. They’d blocked off this area of the sewage system, except for the entrance they’d driven
the van through. There were three machines—all very old. One of them was a generator. The one to
the left was something Natasha had never seen before, though she’d understood the rudiments of it
enough to put the puzzle together: A cryogenics tank.

It should have scared her, but the sight of the antique cryo-tank gave Natasha hope. If Hydra was
resorting to this old clunker, it proved they were running out of resources. The cryogenics tank
looked a lot like a massive-sized French press: a cylinder of glass, braced on two sides by metal, with
rickety, metal stairs reaching from the ground to the top of the tank, where a port-hole hatch sat open.
Did they really expect someone to stand at the top and drop in through that circular opening?
Whoever had designed this machine had clearly not thought that part through.

But to the right of the ancient cryogenics tanks sat another machine which would have made Natasha
shiver if she weren’t drugged. Dread clung to her lungs like sharp ice. While she didn’t know its
official name, she knew its purpose well enough. This monstrosity had wiped James’ memory far too
many times, had brain-washed him for Hydra’s purposes.

Was that their plan? Had they kidnapped her to lure James in? Natasha knew that if he had any idea
she was in Hydra’s custody, he’d come barreling through the walls to get her back. But maybe…
maybe Hydra was only interested in her. Maybe they didn’t know where James was. Maybe they
had no idea she was associated with James.

“Why are we waiting?” someone whispered to someone else.

“I’m not answering that in earshot of the asset.” Angry man growled.

_Aw, no villainous monologue explaining your plan?_ Natasha inwardly snorted.

“What if the drugs wear off and she gets out—” the nervous man started to say, but his voice was suddenly drowned out by the firing of two gunshots.

Natasha’s eyes twitched to the left where the angry man stood over the crumpled, bloody body of the nervous man.

“Anyone _else_ have any annoying questions, or can you all do as you’re told?” He called to the remainder of agents.

No one said a word. But they didn’t need to. They’d already given Natasha enough information to report to Fury.

*Hydra’s down to its last legs. Recruited staff: inexperienced. Leadership: likely to go rogue when all assets are disbanded. They’re scavenging for outdated equipment and likely attempting to replace the Winter Soldier because they realize he’s out of their grasp.* Good news for James, but bad news for her if they succeeded in wiping her mind. It was a possibility she wouldn’t ignore, but until either Nick sent backup or the chemicals in her system burned out, there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop it.

A tall man approached angry-killer-man and ducked his lips to the dark man’s ear, whispering so Natasha couldn’t hear. They knew she could read lips, didn’t they?

_The technician is two hours out. Says he knows how to work the chair and the tank._

“Good,” The dark-haired man nodded, “Cause I sure as hell don’t.”

Two hours. More than enough time for her to recover, break out, and contact Nick Fury. Piece of cake.

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“Esmerelda” by Ben Howard---

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Steve braced himself as Bucky tried to push past him. “We need a plan.” Steve firmly reminded him.

“When I asked for your help, I meant _right the hell now_. I could do it alone—”

“I know you could do it alone,” Steve held up his hands peacefully, eyes never leaving Bucky’s erratic gaze. He was an odd mixture of fury and control, like the iron cage around a roaring lion trying to escape. “But you did the right thing, coming to me. You asked for help and I’m giving it to you the best way I know how: We need a plan.”

“Then stop wasting more time and make one already!” James hissed, stepping back and allowing Steve to lead him to the dining room.

Fury had brought a handful of maps and set them out on the table—it probably wasn’t necessary, being in Stark Tower where a screen was never far and holograms were abundant, but Steve was particular about the way he did things, and Nick respected that. Nothing aided Steve’s memory of
tactic like the crinkle of paper beneath his fingers or the harsh line of a charcoal pencil.

“We created listening zones in these areas,” Nick indicated on the map with a pointed finger. “Surveillance found heat signatures, power signatures, movement. They were there in the scans, but they weren’t there when we checked it out in person. We needed Natasha to play captive so we could figure it out. We were monitoring her and at 0600 this morning her signal gradually got weaker and weaker until we couldn’t track it anymore and she blended in with all the other frequencies.”

“They were underground.” Hawkeye guessed, and Steve glanced over his shoulder to see Bucky glowering darkly.

Nick nodded. “That was two hours ago. Romanov activated her homing signal only minutes after Barnes agreed to help find her.”

Oh, Steve’s eyes flickered to Bucky again. So that’s why he’s chomping at the bit.

Nick went on. “Normally, I wouldn’t worry about it. We could probably roll in there and find her sitting on a heap of bodies, sipping coffee and looking over their documents.” Nick slid a paper across the table toward Steve. “But they’ve taken her to the same coordinates as this thing.”

Formulas were scrawled in quick handwriting with a picture of… “I don’t know what that is.”

“He does.” Nick inclined his head toward Barnes, whose eyes widened when he saw the picture.

Something creaked and Steve took a step back. Bucky was gripping the edge of table, causing it to whine and wrinkle under his metal hand. It took a good amount of bravery for Steve to reach his hands out and set them over Bucky’s wrist, slowly untangling the talon-like fingers from the table’s cracked surface.

“What is it?” Steve’s heart dropped, dreading the answer.

“Cryo-tank.” Bucky’s voice was gnarled, robbed of the ferocity he’d shown only moments ago. “From… the beginning.”

“They’re gonna freeze Tasha?” Barton was incredulous.

“No,” Steve tried to answer calmly, but the word was too loud to be anything but adamant. “We’re getting there, first.”

“They’ve had her for two hours, Cap.” Hawkeye said with reluctance. “Banner’s not here, Stark is God-knows-where—”

“We’ll leave without them, if we need to,” Steve was beginning to feel the panic well up in his chest, probably the same panic that had gripped Bucky. He’d been right, they were only wasting time at this point—

“Bucky?” Steve turned to look at him, but the man had vanished. “Damn it.”

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“17 hour head start” by James Newton Howard---

Natasha’s eyes snapped open. No touch or sound had woken her—it was just a feeling. Something was different.

A portly grey-haired man in a knitted sweater and glasses was walking around the generator between
the cryo-tank and that horrific memory-wiping chair. The technician had come early. It couldn’t have been two hours already. Or maybe the drugs were still lingering in Natasha’s system. No matter, she was able to flex her arm and leg muscles and they hadn’t noticed the thin homing device in the lining of her jacket.

“Just tell me if you can make it work,” Angry-killer addressed the technician.

“If I don’t do this right, these things’d kill ‘em! You wan’ ‘em to die? Fine by me,” The technician spoke in a heavy drawl. “Dese machines take precision and patience, Ruger. You brought me here fer a reason, now lemme do da job!”

Thud!

Natasha craned her sore neck to see an agent fall to the ground.

Thud! Another agent dropped.

“What da hell—” The technician put a hand over his chest, looking around in terror. “You tol’ me it’d be safe!”

Ruger pushed past the technician, eyes scouring the openings for the intruder. “Do what you came here to do and shut up.” He spoke into the comm on his sleeve. “Crows nest, be alert.”

Natasha’s head swiveled as someone emerged from the shadows, coming up behind an agent and slicing his throat as another one took aim. The dark figure used the dead man’s body as a shield and then launched it, causing the shooter to fall backward.

James. It could only be James. The person Natasha wanted most to see, and yet the person she wanted furthest away from this situation. With a reluctant sigh, she raised her chair and stood, rolling the chair until it hit a wall. It creaked under the pressure of her exertion, allowing her hands to slide from her bonds. An agent came running, shouting in surprise as he aimed his weapon at her.

Natasha smiled. If you’ve got a gun, use it. She mentally scolded him. Last chance, buddy. One, two, three— She lurched forward, flipping her feet up and over her head, crashing the chair down on the man and gaining enough wiggle-room to free her feet. Snatching up the man’s weapon, she fired a shot at his head and whirled to train her weapon on whoever was left.

James had dispatched five men already, his hair swaying around his face as he moved swiftly and efficiently. Natasha allowed herself a few seconds to watch him—there had never been any time to admire how fast he was, or how quickly he processed the threats around him, compensating with strategy and an immense amount of focus. But playtime was over.

“Ruger,” Natasha remembered, looking for the angry man among the bodies littering the ground. The technician was still working over the generator between the machines, but there was no sign of the dark-haired leader anywhere. “James?”

James’ head snapped in her direction.

Natasha hesitated for a moment, eyes wide as she tried to read his expression. Was he lucid? Did he recognize her? “James,” she said his name again, approaching him slowly. “What are you doing here?”

“Natasha,” he uttered in relief, stance relaxing. “You dropped off the map. Fury said—”

“What a mother hen.” Natasha rolled her eyes. “I had it under control.”
“You were tied to a chair.” James reminded her with a raised brow.

“Would that have stopped you—”

Someone was creeping up from behind her. Ruger. It must have been. Natasha allowed him to “take her by surprise” and he grabbed her arm, pulling it painfully behind her back, as he wrestled the barrel of a gun underneath her chin. By letting him have the "upper hand" and a hostage, Ruger could be made to feel he had power over them-- and an empowered villain almost always gloated about "the plan".

“Put the gun down.” Ruger ordered, shuffling his body behind Natasha’s and pressing the gun to her throat until she felt like it was choking her. James made no movement.

“I said,” Lowering the gun, Ruger fired a shot at Natasha’s left leg, the bullet biting into her calf, “Put. The. Gun. Down.”

Apparently, Ruger wasn't the gloating type. She'd have to get her information another way.

“James,” Natasha gritted her teeth, watching Barnes’ eyes burn with rage at Ruger, “Afghan scientist. Do it.”

“Shut up,” Ruger warned her, spit flying from his mouth to land on her cheek as he squeezed his arm tighter around her waist.

“I’m not gonna shoot him through you, Nat.” James looked offended that she would even suggest it. He dropped the gun, taking a powerful and slow step toward Ruger. “You shouldn’t have touched her.”

“You don’t have a gun,” Ruger reminded him, likely grinning, though Natasha couldn’t see.

“I don’t need one,” James snarled before he became a blur of action.

Natasha was shoved to the side, her world spinning as her head collided with the concrete, but she heard the second shot go off and she heard the sounds of scuffle. Hands against the floor, she shook her head and tried to raise herself up, but the room was swaying and she couldn’t focus her eyes. A howl of pain echoed through the room as well as the grizzly snap of bone and the sinking of a blade into flesh. Unable to trust her sense of balance just yet, Natasha rolled over onto her side to see what remained of the two men.

Ruger was on his back, down for the count, his left leg bending awkwardly at the shin. James was staggering toward her, dropping to his knees beside her leg and gently handling the area around her bullet wound.

“Passed right through,” He breathed in relief. “Thank God.” His hands slid around her waist and under her back, lifting her slowly to sit up. The side of her face pressed against James’ shoulder and was instantly wet.

“You’re bleeding.” Natasha lifted a hand to wipe it from her face, fingers pulling at the stab-hole in his jacket. “A lot.”

“I’ll be fine.” James shook his head. “Can you stand?”

“Head’s spinning.” Natasha grumbled irritably, attempting to right herself but falling into James’ hold.
He tightened his grip, obviously enjoying her closeness, but Natasha could only feel the frustration of a long day in which her body hadn’t been following commands, either due to drugs or injuries. James scooped her up, carrying her under her knees and shoulders and kicking at Ruger’s body as he strode by it. Just as Natasha was about to protest that they weren’t finished, James suddenly stumbled and she toppled onto the floor again.

Natasha’s backside collided painfully with wet concrete and she craned her neck to see that James had been struck by something. A dart in his neck.

Flit! Flit! Two more darts—one in his right shoulder, and the other ricocheting off of his metal arm.

“James!” She tried to crawl toward him, but something was pressing against her injured leg. A foot. Someone was standing over her—correction: standing on her. Natasha tilted her head upwards—a man in black body armor, goggles concealing his face except for the malicious grin pulling at his leathery lips. The foot pressed harder against her bloody limb, causing a shriek to squeeze itself out of her lungs. James was on his hands and knees, gasping for air and gagging as Ruger hobbled up from behind him, pulling one of the darts from Barnes’ neck and tossing it to the floor.

Natasha had come into this assignment believing it was being handled by rookies, but now she knew she’d been played. More agents spilled from the circular openings in the wall and surrounded them, guns trained on her and James.

For the first time that day, she was beginning to feel like she’d bitten off more than she could chew.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a doozy to write, but your comments are like the reward of sweet applause! New chapter tomorrow :)

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong!
Recitation

Chapter Summary

James is about to be re-acquainted with Hydra's cryogenics tank. There's nothing Natasha can do to stop it and it's not likely Steve will reach them in time...

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Violence and terror

Use the music prompts, I dare you not to cry... All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES—found on username Sassafras Cass. Link:
https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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reˈciˌtaˈʃən res-i-tyu̇-shən verb: to repeat aloud from memory

---“Get Him On The Plane” by James Newton Howard--

Someone’s foot was pinning Natasha to the ground, applying direct pressure to the gunshot wound on her leg. James had been taken off-guard by five sedatives, but he hauled himself up again and with lightning-quick speed and a fearsome bellow, he flew toward the man standing on Natasha. James’ metal hand struck out, squeezing the man in a choke-hold until with a sickening crunch, something in the gurgling throat gave out with a final sound of life.

“I said don’t touch her!” An unhinged James roared into the corpse’s face before throwing him down. Natasha expected another volley of darts to fly through the air—it would take more than five to bring down the Winter Soldier—but none came.

“Fine, you do it.” Ruger, somehow impervious to the pain of his gruesomely-broken leg, limped toward them, using his rifle as a crutch. He eyed Natasha with a devious grin she didn’t understand. “Icarus flew into the sun wearing...?” Ruger waited for an answer.

Natasha whirled to face James as he robotically ended the phrase. “…wax… wings.”

His eyes went hollow and his form went rigidly straight. His expression was blank, eyes dead. Trigger word, she realized: code embedded in his subconscious to make him obedient. Hands reached out for Natasha, restraining her, but she couldn’t bring herself to struggle. She could only watch and hope that James would resist.

“James,” She spoke his name sternly. “Bucky, don’t let them do this to you.”

A command of attack was given and James’ eyes snapped to Natasha. His strong hands threw her at
a table, causing papers to fly everywhere. When he approached her again, she was already on her feet, ready to defend herself, though not quite settled on a plan of attack. She didn’t want to attack James—any more than she’d wanted to attack Hawkeye when Loki had stolen his mind—but the code-words had rendered James blank and unresponsive to her.

The men behind James laughed and Natasha shuddered as she stepped backward on her injured limb.

“Nat,” James breathed shallowly, and the air caught in her throat.

Nat? He was coming at her again, but slower this time. Nat? His features softened and it looked as though he was warning her, telegraphing his movements. Deflecting a set of soft blows, Natasha realized they were staging a fight for the audience that was now trotting to surround them.

“Steve’s coming,” James whispered as low as he dared, throwing false punches toward her face and a lazy kick to her side. We’re stalling until Rogers gets here. Of course Steve knew where James was. Of course he would be coming after him. And if Natasha knew Steve, he was bringing an army to bury this place.

Though Natasha was too schooled to show relief on her face, Ruger somehow sensed the change in the atmosphere. There was no time to warn James before someone pressed a syringe to his neck, emptying the sickly-green liquid into his bloodstream while a swarm of hands caught Natasha. A needle nipped at her skin as James reached behind his head and flung down the agent who’d attacked him.

“I’m not stupid.” Ruger limped, stalking close to the weakened James, who fell to his knees under strain from the sedative. “I can see you pulling punches.”

The veins on Barnes’ neck and face throbbed visibly, his shaking hand closing around the needle that was still in his neck. He pulled it out with a gasp, gagging for a moment before grasping his head in his hands. Dark locks of his unbound hair fell around his terrified eyes as they met Natasha’s.

Ruger aimed a thumb at the bulky, dusty machine in the far corner. “Pick him up. Get him in the chair.”

Natasha could only manage a weak swat at the hands dragging her back to the center of the room. Even her blood felt heavy, pulling her down, down, down to the concrete’s cold kiss of gravity, with only enough power to raise her head and watch in true panic as three men hauled James up.

“No, no, no, no,” James mumbled, widened eyes fixated on the torturous device before him, digging his feet into the ground as they tugged him forward.

The terror on his face filled Natasha’s veins with ice and she attempted to slither across the floor. No one bothered to stop her, probably because they didn’t consider her much of a threat like this. Inch by inch, she urged herself on, using James’ outcries as motivation.

Ruger was speaking to James. “Do you want the mouth-guard or not?” He said as he held up a piece of black rubber.

---“Divinity” by Jeremy Gera---

Natasha wanted to scream, wanted to tear Ruger apart with her bare hands, crawling faster toward James and the machine. Frightened beyond rationality as they towed him, James let out a whimper,
and the noise struck Natasha’s heart like a shot of adrenaline.

No. A blazing fire built in Natasha’s chest, burning its way through the fearful ice at her core and clearing her mind. Not again! Never again!

Absolute terror filled James’ sweating face and he screamed, trying to pull away from the hands that were pressing him into the chair, but his drugged limbs weren’t responding. His savage, animalistic cries echoed across the tunnel walls, slicing through the air with an inhuman distress. Natasha was so distraught by his cries that her mind turned off her ears to save her sanity.

Focus, she reminded herself. Find what you’re looking for and act quickly. There! On the ground beneath the generator between the two machines was an enormous wrench from the technician’s repairs. Anger lent her a burst of energy and she leapt forward, hoisting the wrench over her head and bringing it down with a crash against the generator. Sparks flew, lights fluttered, and Natasha brought her weapon down blow after blow!

James managed to roll himself from the seat, collapsing on the floor with deep gasps. The men restraining him darted to the sparking machine, attempting to turn it off. Natasha was kicked in the stomach, shuffling backwards until she fell to the ground beside James, who reached out with shivering hands to clutch her aching body against him.

He spoke her name, but his breathy voice cracked, raw from the previous screams that had ripped themselves from his throat. Drawing in an unsteady breath, Natasha whispered encouragement.

“Steve—’s coming—just hang on—little longer—” It was all she could get out before the inevitable happened. A boot collided with her spine and then her temple, knocking her senseless. The last thing she heard clearly was James’ feral shouting. Natasha’s head was reeling after enduring so many blows and things unfolded in a throbbing blur.

Blink. James was standing in front of her.

Blink. “—cryogenics tank hasn’t been damaged.” The technician said to Ruger, who responded with, “Do it.”

Blink. James’ limp body was being dragged toward the cryogenics tank.

Blood trickled from his head and down his cheek as he sagged in the agents’ arms. They carried him up the rusty stairs to the top of the tank. Natasha jerked, but her hands and legs were tied down—when had they tied her to another chair?—and she sat helpless, a captive audience to the tank not ten feet in front of her. Old metal screeched loudly as they cranked open the port-hole of the ancient cryogenics tank, one agent standing over the opening and two hauling the unmoving James.

“James!” She cried, hoping to rouse him. But he lifted his head with defeated eyes, bone-deep tired of fighting.

“Don’t watch,” He gritted out pathetically. “Natasha, please, don’t watch.”

“Just drop him in already,” Ruger waved a hand at the men atop the tank.

Releasing him unceremoniously, James fell through the circular opening and into the glass tank. And despite his plea not to watch, Natasha looked on desperately, gasping when the water in the tank cushioned his fall. James’ flailing limbs desperately kicked against the liquid and she could see the panic starting to take hold of James as she counted the time since he’d last taken a breath.

“He’ll drown!” Natasha shrieked, fighting against her restraints, but the agents took their precious
time walking down the steps before standing in front of the control panel at the end of the stairs.

Tears obscured her vision and guilt ate at her heart. She couldn’t just sit there, she had to do something! But the terrible truth worked its chilly way down her spine as the tank started to freeze over. James was still flailing, pounding against the glass with his hands, but his movement paused in mid-blow, a grimace freezing on his face as ice coated his now-unseeing eyes.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter tomorrow (Things will get better, don't worry. I give my whumpees happy endings)

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)

Reorientation

Chapter Summary

Steve arrives too late, but can he still save his friend?

Chapter Notes

Warning: Graphic description (references to brain matter)

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`ori`n`ta`tion ree-awr-ee-uh n-tye-shuhn verb: the act of figuring out once more where you are, to point yourself in the right direction

--"A Great Divide" by Dustin O’Halloran--

Natasha’s eyes went dark, her heart barely beating after watching James’ disturbing struggle in the cryogenics tank. The technician complained that she’d damaged the generator pretty badly. Good. At least her tussle had accomplished something.

Ruger replied, “Let me know when you’re done. Don’t bring him out of the tank until she’s been processed first.” Didn’t that sound lovely…

Drug-induced exhaustion and raw emotions dragged Natasha away from the waking world and into a dreamless abyss.

“Natasha?”

What?

“Natasha?”

What do you want? “Process” me and get it over with already.

“Come on, Tasha. Wake up.”

Clint Barton?

The ground was cold against the back of her shirt and her leg throbbed. She’d been laid out on the floor and a quick glance at the room told her everything she needed to know: The Avengers had
arrived, subdued the Hydra agents, freed her from her bonds, and bound her bullet-wound.

Natasha blinked away the remaining grogginess to see Clint’s fond smile. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving your sorry—”

“I’m not gonna ask you again!” Sam’s angry shout echoed through the room. He was stepping on Ruger’s neck, weapon trained at the agent’s head, and demanding information. But Natasha knew it was useless. Whatever Sam wanted from Ruger, he wasn’t going to get it that way.

“Where’s Steve?” Natasha growled darkly as Clint helped her to her feet.

Her eyes fell on Steve, haunted and petrified before the cryo-tank, his tortured expression eating away at some of the anger in Natasha’s tensed chest.

“We got here as soon as we could—” Steve started to say.

“You should have stopped him from leaving!” She shouted, limping toward Steve as quickly as she could with her injured leg. “They almost took him!” Her eyes were wet and her mouth was quivering, her face shaking with barely-controlled rage. “I had to watch them put him in that thing!”


She was nearly screaming in Steve’s face. “You should have stopped him!”

Natasha threw a fist at his shoulder and he did nothing to deflect it. Standing solidly, Steve accepted blow after blow as she gave voice to the loud accusations that had kept her company while watching James’ writhing form in the tank. And then Natasha was too tired to throw another punch and her final blow died down with her anger, melting into despair. Her hand, damaged from hitting Steve rather than causing damage, slid from his shoulder and her lungs heaved.

“Damn you.” She sobbed weakly, head hanging low. “You should have left him at the tower. You should have…” The words died in her mouth and Steve caught her wrist, pulling her to him and encasing her in his large arms, as though he could protect her from despair.

“I know.” He whispered in a shaky breath, squeezing her tightly while she laid her crying face against his shoulder. “I’m sorry—I know. It’s my fault, Natasha.” Steve’s shaking hand was petting her hair, his own silent tears spilling down and wetting her red locks, and they poured out their anguish in silence. But that silence was interrupted by Ruger’s foul voice from beneath Sam’s foot.

“He cried, ya know,” Ruger laughed, enjoying their helplessness and causing Natasha’s stomach to flip. “Right before we put him in the chair. It was pathetic. He cried. Like a toddler.”

“Shut your mouth,” Sam pressed the gun to Ruger’s head again.

"You wanted me to talk. I’m talkin’.” Ruger didn’t seem to care about the gun. Either that, or he—like Natasha—knew that Sam wouldn’t use it and he went on to describe in detail the fear on James’ face, calling it weakness.

Steve’s grip around her strengthened almost painfully and Natasha sensed his temper flaring in his veins, like an electric volt making him ten times stronger than normal. His hands stopped shaking, but Natasha could sense the buzz of fury flowing throughout his body. With careful control, Steve placed his hands on Natasha’s shoulders and slowly pressed her away from him, his eyes taking on a look that truthfully frightened her: He didn’t look murderous, he didn’t look anguished, he didn’t
even look angry—Steve simply looked resigned.

“Sam, is he answering any of your questions?” Steve gritted out with wrath in his voice, so opposite from the calm composure he wore.

Sam shook his head, as wary as Natasha of this new side of Steve.

Steve nodded once and then strode coolly over to Sam, snatching the gun from Sam’s hand before firing at Ruger’s head. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Steve!” Sam jolted back in surprise, gawking incredulously, but Rogers kept firing.

Four. Five. Six times. Natasha was keeping track of the gunshots, every sound of the firearm appeasing her more and more. It was wicked of her to be taking such comfort from the continuous sound, but then Ruger hadn’t worried about his wickedness against James—or Natasha and Steve in their grief.

Click. Click. Click. The gun was empty, but Steve kept pulling.

“Steve,” Sam pulled the gun from his friend’s grasp, still shocked by what Steve had done. “He was dead after the first one.” There was no way Ruger couldn’t have been, not with so much brain matter all over the floor.

“Ahem,” Tony cleared his throat, working over the control panel for the cryogenics tank. “I think I can get him out safely—emphasis on the think part.”

“I don’t want think, Tony, how about know?” Steve’s anger was still on the surface, but it was obvious he was trying to bury it again.

“I didn’t design it, Mr. Impatient, this machine is an antique and you have to treat it nicely or else James’ isn’t going to survive decompression.”

“What does that mean?” Clint wondered aloud, coming alongside Natasha and gently squeezing her elbow.

“Can anyone tell me what happens when you take frozen glass and put it in steaming water?” Tony looked around the room. When he was answered with glares, he rubbed his hands together and continued. “This thing has a countdown process; we need to wait another hour or so.”

“An hour?” Bruce strode up to the panel in nothing but shorts, having shrunk down from his much larger, green form. He squinted at the panel and shook his head. “No, no, I’d say four, just to be safe.”

“Four hours?” Sam asked incredulously. “Can we even wait that long? Hydra’s not going to swarm this place while we’re waiting, are they?”

“If they do, they’ll regret it,” Natasha said softly. Her voice was used up, gravelly from its efforts that day.

“Is Bucky going to be okay when he comes out?” Steve asked, as though dreading the answer.

“Probably not, but he’ll be alive.” Tony murmured.

--“Slip Away” by Josh Garrels--
As hard as it was to look at him, Natasha parked herself in front of James’ tank and waited, crossed-legged on the floor. After an argument between Sam, Bruce, and Tony, they measured the time out to be an hour and a half—but it was still too long to Natasha.

She barely noticed the way Clint came to sit beside her.

She barely heard the way Steve paced behind her, his steps somehow keeping in rhythm with her heartbeat.

She barely heard the whispers between Bruce and Tony, something about how to manage the wiring.

She didn’t respond to the way Sam encouraged her or how he checked on her bandage. That had hurt a little, but Natasha’s mind was blank. All she wanted—no, needed!—was to see James come out of that tank.

And finally, that moment arrived.

“Okay, everyone gets a station,” Tony clapped his hands together, having taken off his helmet and removed his gauntlets. “Steve, up top—you’re gonna need to pull him out. Sam, you’re catcher, assisting Steve,” Stark pointed to the control console. “Bruce and I are on operation and wiring. Hawkeye, you’re on sedatives.”

“Sedatives?” Clint raised an eyebrow as Steve and Sam passed him by, climbing the short set of stairs to stand over the tank’s hatch. “For what?”

“In case our resident cyborg wakes up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Natasha snarled at the quip, but crossed her arms, looking to Steve and Sam and then to Stark. “And what am I supposed to be doing during all of this?”

Tony opened his mouth, clearly about to say something inappropriate, when Bruce laid a hand on Tony’s forearm and shook his head. “Be nice. She wouldn’t hesitate to fold you like origami if she didn’t need you to stand at the controls.”

Natasha popped her knuckles in agreement.

Clearing his throat again, Tony took the hint. “To be honest, I don’t have a job for you, just do what you want.”

Natasha nodded, grateful he hadn’t given her a miniscule task to make her feel useful. Making her way to the stairs, intending to lend support at the top of the tank, she caught sight of Hawkeye twirling a sedative between his fingers.

“Here we go,” Tony pulled on a lever above his head, eyes squinting and muscles tensing as he exerted force against it. “All right, Cap, open the hatch.”

Twisting the circular release, Steve grunted as he threw the door open, causing it to bang loudly and startling everyone in the room.

“Geez,” Tony huffed, pulling out some wiring and handing one of them to Banner.

Sam squatted and reached down through the port-hole, pressing his fingers to the gel-like substance that held James’ in place—but then he shrieked in pain, pulling his hand back out and waving his fingers through the air.
“It’s cold—it burns.” Sam waved his stinging fingers. Steve grabbed them to see rough singes covering Sam’s knuckles to the wrist like soggy burn marks.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Steve sat and dropped his feet into the hole, hands gripping the edges of the port-hole while he lowered himself up to his waist in the tank’s gel. Gritting his teeth, Steve lowered himself further and Sam reached out to grasp Steve’s wrist as Steve plunged wholly into the gel.

Steam rose from Sam’s arm where it gripped the submerged Steve. The dark man pulled with all his might to bring Steve upward, grunting with exertion. When his head surfaced above the gel, Steve gasped and sputtered, his other arm in an iron hold around the waist of James’ unconscious form. Natasha jerked forward, helping Sam to raise Steve until the super-soldier was able to gain his own footing. James’ limbs hung uselessly, his head swaying as they eased him upward.

With a final heave that made his muscles tremble, Steve hoisted James feet out of the opaque muck, dropping him to the solid surface beside the hole. Contact with the burning gel had Natasha hissing, but she grasped James’ limp hand, desperate for a solid reminder that he was finally free.

Steve dropped onto the surface beside the hatch, shuddering violently as he crawled beside the unresponsive James. Some of Steve’s uniform had been eaten away by the freezing gel and Natasha could see red, puffy burns on his pale flesh. Sam held his burnt hand to his chest, regaining his breath after the exertion of tugging two enhanced soldiers. Natasha had new-found respect for him and promised to thank him later.

“Bucky?” Steve brushed his friend’s slimy hair away from his forehead and wiped at the moisture still clinging to James’ face. “Stark! He’s not breathing!”

“Cap,” Clint beckoned to him, tossing up something that Steve easily caught. It was a manual oxygen pump and as much as Natasha hated that it was necessary, she was relieved it was there at all.

Steve pressed the mask to James’ mouth, squeezing the plastic bag at the base, and as soon as he released pressure on the hand pump a gurgling sound erupted from James’ throat. Immediately a torrent of thick, watery gel gushed from his mouth and into the bag.

“Ugh,” Sam turned his head, unable to watch.

“Come on, Buck,” Steve looked down in panic as he continued to pump the mask, drawing gulp after disgusting gulp of liquid from James’ lips. “Come on, Bucky.”

Natasha could see the growing concern on Steve’s face, but allowed none of her fears to take hold. When the bag came back empty, Steve pressed his hands against James’ chest, forcing the still-unbreathing man’s lungs to compress.

“Come on, Bucky.” Steve said in an almost scolding tone as he pushed his hands against James’ chest again. “Breathe. Do it now!” And while Steve coaxed James’ breath, Natasha held hers.

Finally, James’ eyes flew open and he picked up his head to gag, roughly coughing up chunks of ice, and greedily drawing in breath. Rolling over to vomit more of the disgusting gel, his body shivered as though only now noticing the sensation of cold.

Humming a sigh of relief, Natasha couldn’t look away from Steve’s grin of triumph. “You did it. You did it, Buck.”

James’ head rolled as he looked back and forth between Steve, Sam, and Natasha, his eyes shutting
for a moment as he dragged in another rough breath and coughed. Locking gazes, James grasped for Steve’s arms, desperately seeking warmth. Steve winced as he pulled James up to sit, pressing him against his burnt chest, but holding him close all the same.

“Ruger?” James’ voice sounded wet and haggard, the skin at the corner of his eyes wrinkling as he crammed them shut.

“He’s dead.” Steve answered.

“Steve made sure of it,” Sam said with no small amount of regret. Watching Captain America lose his cool had probably shaken Sam quite a bit.

Cradled in Steve’s hold, James began to speak in Russian and all heads turned to Natasha.

She didn’t bother to translate, but replied to his question. “I’m fine—just angry that Steve was late.”

“I’m sorry I gave up. Please, Natasha, forgive me—” he begged.

“Stop.” She said firmly in English. “You didn’t give up. I watched you, you didn’t—”

“I hurt you.” He whispered breathlessly. “They made me hurt you…” and then his head fell back against Steve’s chest, arms hanging limply at his sides, and his eyes rolled into his head with the last traces of his energy.

Chapter End Notes

Will it get better or worse? Find out on Monday!
(Although, spoilers, I promise it will eventually be a happy ending!)
Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Revelation

Chapter Summary

Natasha watches helplessly as James looks to be losing his mind. It doesn't help things when a certain Asgardian Prince steals James to another planet...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

rev`e`la`tion rev-uh-ley-shuhn noun: the divine or supernatural disclosure to humans of something relating to human existence or the world

--“Am I” Gungor--

Frigid down to his bones, James couldn’t get warm. He coughed again and again, shuddering under layers of blankets as Steve slid his chair closer to his bed. Steve had insisted on a hot bath, but James had only shaken his head in silent protest. He couldn’t stand to be submerged for a good long time.

He blinked slowly and when he turned his head to look at Steve, a drowsy Sam occupied the chair instead, his head lolling over his chest. James looked long and hard at Sam’s face, and when he took another slow blank, James was startled when the face morphed into Bruce’s.

Every time he shut his eyes, James was looking into a new face, though there was only ever one person at a time in his room—he realized, with no small amount of panic, that he was drifting through time. Normally, it would have frightened him, but the chill in his core was distracting and his mind kept shifting like a car spinning on an icy road.

Blinking again, bright green eyes were looking down at him this time. Reaching a cold hand for Natasha, James muttered her name again, stilling when he saw someone standing behind her. His eyes weren’t focusing—was it Ruger?

“You bastard,” James’ brow creased in anger and he grit his teeth, calling on all of his strength to lunge forward, but his weakened body betrayed him and he dumped himself clumsily to the wood floor.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, Ruger!” Saliva flew from James’ mouth and he lunged again, wrapping his fingers around the man’s throat. Spots appeared in his vision and his strength suddenly waned, causing him to buckle backward and hit his head against the nightstand.
Ruger was hacking through his crushed windpipe and Steve was helping him to his feet—

*Steve! Get away from Ruger! What are you doing?*

— while Natasha pulled James back onto the bed, pinning him. When his vision cleared, he found that it *wasn’t* Ruger who had been standing behind Natasha. It was Bruce. As though trying to spare him from feeling guilty, James’ brain commanded him to stare at a fixed point on the wall: a dot, probably a piece of dust smudged against the taupe paint. His mind reasoned that Tony’s Tower was immaculate and the smudge was out of place, a worthwhile mystery to consume his mental facilities. He spent the next few seconds trying to determine how it had gotten there. Or, what had felt like seconds…

“Bucky?”

Steve. Steve was there. Steve was sitting on James’ bed. Steve was talking. “Bucky, snap out of it…”

“There’s dirt on the wall,” James throat felt like sandpaper. He pointed at the dot and Steve exhaled loudly, leaning away from the bed and scratching the discrepancy from the wall. Relief. James was relieved that it wasn’t there anymore. Everything was chaos, but at least the wall was clean again.

“Have you… you’ve been staring at a piece of dirt for twenty minutes?” Steve’s tone sounded broken, sounded sad.

*Don’t be sad, Steve. The dirt’s gone, everything’s fine now.*

“Bucky?” Steve sat down on the side of the bed again and laid a hand on James’ shoulder, running his thumb along James’ skin and sending a chill through his spine. Steve was hot. Scalding. James was laid bare to the sensation because there was no more dot of dirt to stare at.

“I’m cold,” James murmured, starting to tremble as goosebumps made their way up and down his flesh.

And no wonder—he wasn’t sure how, but the blankets had been kicked away and his torso was bare. He wanted to be warm again, wanted to feel the sun on his skin or the heat of another body, and he asked himself why he was cold. *Because you were in cryo-sleep and they didn’t bring you out properly*, a clinical voice hummed in his head.

Cryo-sleep… The gel invading the spaces of his body, the crackle of frost snapping at his skin, the fullness of the liquid inside of his lungs, creeping into every crevice… James’ eyes roamed to Steve’s sitting form, his breathing becoming difficult as he imagined his lungs being filled with the wet stuff.

*Can’t breathe.* Steve’s torso was bare, just like James, but there were random windings of light gauze around his chest and arms, skin covered in ridged scorch marks that were set with deep purple and dark brown. *Can’t breathe.* Steve’s face and hands were covered in the rashes as well, but they looked to be healing fast.

*How did I get out of the tank? I was pulled out. That’s not how it’s supposed to work—they didn’t follow procedure—I shouldn’t have been taken out like that—is that why I can’t think?—my mind is all over the place!*

James’ train of thought switched gears again and he struggled to breathe, but with the dot gone from the wall, James’ mind decided to be occupied with organized bullet points:

*Point one:* He’d attacked Natasha when Ruger had used the trigger word.
Point two: Steve’s body was burnt from jumping into the tank to save him.


Point three: Sam was sporting a forearm that was wrapped in gauze as well.

What am I trying to do again? Oh, that’s right: breathe. Gasp.

Point Four: He’d mistaken Bruce for Ruger and nearly strangled him to death. Black bubbles danced in his vision. Maybe he should count those instead of bullet points, but they kept flickering away. Choke. Sputter. Gasp.

Point… what number was he on? Tony… James had killed Howard.

An invisible hand pulled a lever in James’ head and he couldn’t remember where he was or what he’d been doing.

“Don’t let Zola take me again, Dougan! I can’t do it again!” James’ anguished plea didn’t sound like his own voice.

“Dougan’s dead,” Steve murmured quietly, holding James’ hands in both of his.

“Cholera…” James sounded like a frightened child—he felt like one. “Zola’s giving it to them, I don’t know why—he gave ‘em cholera and they’re dead… but I’m too sick to keep this up for much longer…”

“Bucky, you’re not behind enemy lines anymore,” Steve brushed the hair away from James’ face with his shaking fingers, tucking locks behind his ears. “We rescued you, remember? We walked back to camp—you got better, remember? We went out for drinks, Peggy said she was gonna go dancing when the war was over. War’s over, Buck. Do you remember where you are?”

But James seemed to be stuck in the past. “He made me sick, Steve. I thought I was gonna die. And then he’d put me back in the cell with Dougan and Gabe and… and Jim.” He finally looked Steve in the eye, focusing on his friend’s face. “Dougan took care of me. He and Gabe, they kept me going. Told me I’d see you again.” The smallest flash of a smile passed over his face. “Dougan was right…”

Steve’s touched expression said that this was new news to him, a story he’d never heard.

Why can’t I focus? Why can’t I keep track of my thoughts? Why do I keep switching? I want to see Natasha again. No! Hydra will make me hurt her again. I want to see her. I don’t want to see her.

“Steve,” He whimpered, tired of his mind playing games. “Is this… is it real, are you here?”

“I’m here, Bucky,” Steve squeezed his hands hard, but James could only feel it in one hand. Was his left arm asleep? It must be, he couldn’t feel anything. Wait… he didn’t have a left arm. That’s right. No more tattoo.

“Steve,” James felt the tears roll down his cheek. “Am I losing my mind?”

“I don’t know,” Steve finally answered. Truth. James liked truth, even though it was hard to take sometimes. Truth was good. Truth was… I want to see Natasha. James stopped talking after that, despite their many efforts to get him to speak. If a question couldn’t be answered with a nod or a shake of the head, then they were out of luck.

Go away.

---“Landfill” by Daughter---

Natasha was bitter. Her arms were crossed as she sat in the chair outside James’ room, just beside the door. In the five days since he’d been rescued, she’d tried to come into the room, but he would tell her to leave once he saw her— one time, he’d been so adamant that he’d shouted at her with his lungs’ fullest capacity, veins bulging in his neck as he warned her back before collapsing.

What had she expected? That once James had been saved that everything would return to normal? Happily ever after? She should know better than that. But it didn’t make her resentment any easier to bear. Natasha only wanted to help…

“He’s angry with himself for attacking you,” Sam explained, standing over her chair with his hands on his hips. “He doesn’t want to do it again.”

Natasha nodded, but it still hurt. She knew she would wait, she knew she would sit outside his door until… until when?

“He’s so quiet now.” Natasha murmured absently, recalling the first time James had left the room: Floating like a ghost, wandering aimlessly through the tower and staring out the large windows at the skyline below. Every one of the tower’s inhabitants would attempt to comfort him, but he wouldn’t acknowledge them.

“I don’t know how to break through to him.” Natasha’s face softened from a frown. “James doesn’t scream at night the way he used to and I guess I should be grateful for that, but the quiet bothers me so much more.” She wasn’t sure why she was talking to Sam about this, but…

“I tried to sneak in a few nights ago,” She went on, deciding not to question it. “Thought he wouldn’t notice. Thought he might actually be grateful and… I dunno, snap out of it, I guess. But he just opened his eyes… he got up and left. Found somewhere else to sleep.”

“You’ve got a beating heart like the rest of us, Natasha,” Sam said as he knelt on the floor in front of her chair, laying a hand softly on her knee. “Even if you pretend it’s colder than any of ours. James is trying to deal with this alone, don’t you make that mistake—we’re here if you need us.”

“I’ve been through worse—” She started to say, but Sam cut her off with a frustrated laugh.

“And that makes this any less painful now?” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that what they taught you in Russia? Deal with it all by yourself? Well, you’re not taking orders from them anymore are you? So, why would you cope the same way they instructed you to? That doesn’t make any sense, Natasha.” Sam crossed his arms and looked down at her.

She hadn’t expected his words to strike her so hard, but he was right. For the first time since they’d returned from the sewer, she acknowledged the full weight of her emotions—betrayal and uselessness.

“Honestly,” Sam rose and stood with his hands on his hips again, “I think you need—”

The heaviness in her chest constricted her breathing and she sprang to her feet, sliding her hands
around Sam’s waist and burying her face in his chest.

“Uh,” He was taken aback by her embrace. “A hug. That works, too.” He lowered his arms to wind
around her, laying his cheek on the top of her head. She just stood and breathed, allowing the
closeness of another person to help process these unruly emotions boiling inside of her. And then she
felt something else behind her.

“Natasha sandwich,” Sam chuckled, his chest vibrating against her cheek. Steve was holding them
both from behind her. Okay, so hugging Sam had been helping, but this was a bit much…

And then another person enveloped them all in his enormous hold. When had he come back? The
moment had officially become awkward.

“My friends,” Thor’s deep and gentle voice sounded from above their heads. “All will be well. No
need for such defeated embraces after such a victory.”

“I’m feeling snubbed.” Tony said from somewhere beyond the heap of flesh that was Natasha, Sam,
Steve, and Thor. “I didn’t get a ticket to snuggle-con 2014.”

“S’okay, I didn’t either,” Banner snickered.

Natasha said something, but her head was still pressed to Sam’s chest because of the many arms
surrounding them, and no one heard her. Her cheeks were burning from embarrassment.

“Um?” Barton’s voice came from somewhere beyond the huddle. “I’m looking for Tasha?”

“She’s the gooey center of that lollipop in the hallway.” Tony laughed. “Get licking, Barton.”

“I…” Steve was struggling to move away from her, but didn’t make it very far. “Er, I can’t move
until Thor lets go…”

“My apologies,” The thunderous man released them, stepping away with a huge grin.

Natasha took in a full breath as the many arms withdrew and quickly stepped away from Sam. “That
is why I have a hard time with affection.”

“I’ve got no regrets,” Sam was grinning from ear to ear, nudging her shoulder. “The Black widow,
ex-KGB assassin, and deadly member of the Avengers just hugged me. That’s almost as awesome as
being friends with Captain America.”

“What brings you to Tony’s tower of terrors?” Clint smirked at the Asgardian Prince behind
Natasha.

“Tony has made me aware of the situation with your brother, my friend,” Thor clasped a large hand
on Steve’s shoulder, “I know what must be done. If you grant me permission to act, I can assure you
James shall fight alongside you once more.”

Natasha’s brows rose. Stark asked Thor for help? Of all people… but then she was distracted by the
silent, but powerful exchange between Thor and Steve. They seemed to be speaking without words,
eyes heavy with understanding, sympathy, and remorse.

I, too, know what it is like to lose a brother. Thor’s expression looked to say.

Rogers’ head bowed and then he looked toward James’ room. “I don’t… he won’t talk to me. He
won’t talk to anyone, not even Natasha.”
Thor’s eyes strayed to Natasha’s, as if to communicate that he understood there was something between her and James. Or there had been, which is what Natasha’s bearing must have told him because he cocked a brow at her.

“Uh, Steve,” Sam waved a hand at the demi-god in a red cape. “I don’t think this is such a good idea—has Bucky even met—”

“It’s fine, Sam.” Steve nodded, opening the door to James’ room and allowing the tall Asgardian to pass through.

“It gladdens me to know I have your trust in this, Captain,” The tall warrior Prince literally ducked under the doorway and then turned around to face them all in the hallway. “But I fear I must ask for more: Whatever you hear from within this room, disregard it. I cannot command you, but I entreat you, do not interfere...”

A flurry of concerns popped into Natasha’s head—and apparently a few others’ heads as well—but Steve only nodded and turned with a look that pleaded for them all to agree.

--"Bloodstream” by Ed Sheeran--

Natasha wasn’t sure what to make of “whatever you hear, please disregard it,” but after an hour of silence beyond the closed door, there was a distinct sound of something crashing and something else being crushed. It took every ounce of Natasha’s self-control not to jump up and dash into the room, and when James’ frantic shouting came next, she almost caved—but Steve’s hand on her arm stopped her.

She glared into his face, silently condemning him with words she would never say: You were late once already, don’t you dare be late to save him a second time!

James hollered loudly and an object crashed against the other side of the wall closest to Steve, causing him to flinch and grip Natasha’s arm that much harder. Thor’s immense baritone finally answered, a gentle and kind tone filling the air before the rolling of thunder crackled overhead. A flash of lightning appeared under the door and still Steve held her back from the door.

“Give him a minute,” Steve said in a controlled voice, probably saying it to himself as much as her.

“Let me go,” Natasha warned. She was dangerously riled, determined to storm in and demand that Thor leave James alone, but another clap of thunder silenced her, a shriek of terror accompanying it.

And then silence.

Natasha found she was breathing loudly, now that there was no deafening thunder to mask it. She clenched her eyes shut and willed her heartbeat to slow. They heard nothing else from the room and it unnerved her, causing her hands to shake with adrenaline. Rogers’ looked just as unsettled as her and nodded—finally!—causing her to dart forward and throw the door open.

The room was trashed, the bed having been flung over on its side and the glass from the windows littering the floor. Ripped sheets scattered the floor and a large circular tattoo adorned the floor, strange symbols and insignias that were undoubtedly Asgardian.

Thor and James were gone.

“Where are they?” Natasha demanded as she stepped in, glass crunching beneath her boots, but she
feared she already knew the answer.

Sam rounded the corner instantly, hand on the doorway as he leaned into the room. “Holy sh—”

“He took him?” Steve looked around helplessly, standing above the black scorched circle on the floor. “He took him to Asgard?” he whirled to face Sam. “Why? Why would he do that?”

Sam shook his head, clearly just as mystified, when Tony appeared behind him and rolled his eyes.

“Look at that—it’s like If You Give a Mouse a Cookie, but with ninjas—tell me the rest of the rooms are okay—”

“Shut up, Tony.” Natasha snarled, stomping out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

How’s that for a cliff-hanger? More tomorrow!

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)}
Rehabilitation

Chapter Summary

In which we see the reason Thor brought James to Asgard...

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry the uploads have been happening so late in the day (which means some of you don't see it until the "next" day). I'll do my best to get them out earlier!
All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`ha`bil`i`ta`tion ree-huh-bil-i-tey-shun verb : the process of helping a person who has suffered an illness or injury restore lost skills and so regain maximum self-sufficiency.

--“Stars” by Grace Potter and the Nocturnals--

The city lights shimmered far below Natasha where she sat on the floor of the entertainment room, gazing out the glass wall at the life and movement of the brilliant lights. Those lights, she mused, were like their own galaxy. But that only served to bring her thoughts back to James. What galaxy was Asgard in?

The night Thor had taken James, Natasha hadn’t bothered sleeping. She hadn’t slept the night after that, either. And it was likely she wouldn’t be sleeping tonight either. Each day grew another layer of protective callousness, slowly dissolving her worries until she could barely hear them.

Steve, however, was the opposite.

“Part of me wants to stay here and do nothing but wait,” He confessed as he lowered himself to sit cross-legged beside her. “The other part wants to throw myself into as much work as possible.”

Natasha didn’t answer and her indifference must have irked Steve.

“He’ll be back,” Steve re-assured as she continued to stare at the sky.

At the back of her mind was a desperate need to know where James was, to know that he was safe, to know that he was being helped instead of hurt further, but she had no control over anything that was happening—and so it was buried, that crippling emotion of helplessness, hidden behind layers of anger and indifference in an effort to spare her.

“Is this what you felt like?” Natasha spoke quietly. “When I’d found him, but I wouldn’t tell you where he was?”
Steve peered at her for a long moment and she wondered if he would lie to try and spare her feelings or lash out at her with the truth. What goes around comes around...

“I was angry with you for blocking me out,” Rogers nodded. “But I wasn’t worried. I knew you’d take care of him.” He reached over and squeezed her shoulder.

Though she dearly wished to apologize for putting him through it, she did nothing, squashing down the feeling of helplessness once again.

“He’s coming back,” Steve whispered again, as much to himself as to her.

---“Silence of Siberia” Lowercase Noises---

“Walk with me, friend Barnes.” Thor said in that fatherly, authoritative tone which instantly humbled and calmed James. He clutched the dark blue cloak closer around his shoulders, rising from his seat on the balcony and obeying Thor’s gentle command.

The Asgardian’s alpha male presence should have been intimidating, but James craved it. He wanted to be commanded, wanted someone to make him ignore his own musings by giving him orders to focus on instead. And, though Thor seemed to recognize his power over James, his manner convinced James that the Prince would never abuse that power.

*Eat, friend Barnes. Sleep, friend Barnes. Walk with me, friend Barnes.* It brought James relief.

“Tell me about your dream last night.” The red cape swayed behind the ankles of the heir to Asgard.

“Same as the others.” James tugged the cloak close around his neck, absently stroking the soft fabric. As strange a gift as it had seemed when they first arrived, James couldn’t deny that it had become a comfort object, a security blanket. “Hydra comes. They use a trigger word. I kill everyone.”

“The pool has unleashed your fears.” Thor nodded.

The pool. That damned pool. James had *hated* having to wade into it:

“I can’t do this,” James was shivering in the open air, both from the cold and the extreme fear seizing through his limbs, gazing down the ledge of scratchy, brown rocks at the glowing purple water. Water was supposed to be clear, not colored...

“You can.” Thor said simply, calmly and he stood at the center of it. “And you will.”

J ames shuddered violently and lowered a bare toe into the water, gasping when he’d gone in enough to be covered to the knee. “I can’t…” He gasped for breath, his chest heaving and his heart beating frantically at the thought of being submerged. “Please, don’t make me do this…”

But Thor’s eyes showed that he wouldn’t give in, wading over with outstretched arms, silently asking James to descend further. “I will not make you do it alone. But you must do it, friend Barnes.” His tone held no room for negotiation.

With weak and shaking arms, James gripped the rocks with hands like claws, pushing himself further down until his foot reached the bottom of the pool. Reaching out on instinct, James couldn’t stop himself from clutching Thor’s arms like a lifeline.

Thor nodded in approval and encouragement, leading James through the water to the center of the
“I will count to three.” Thor’s voice was stern. He must have known James would beg to be led away from the water.

“I can’t—” James peered down frantically, shaking violently in fear.

“You must.” Thor admonished with a soft voice.

“No, I mean…” James threw off another shudder and clenched his eyes, opening them again when he knew his voice wouldn’t break. “I can’t make myself do it… I need help.”

Nodding in understanding, Thor lifted a wet hand and laid it gently over James’ head, drops of purple water running down James’ face as he took deep breaths in and out, attempting to gain control over the tremors of his quaking muscles.

“One,” Thor started. James’ eyes snapped up, looking into Thor’s with a vulnerability that must have cracked at the Asgardian’s composure. He regarded James with pity, but counted on. “Two… three.” The last word was a whisper and the gentle push against James’ head motivated him down.

Down, down, down. His feet hadn’t moved from the bottom, but it felt as though he’d been plunged backward into the depths of some wide ocean, never to find the surface again.

There were sharp pains in his head, as though a thousand small strings were being pulled taut. Snap! Snap! Snap! The strings pulled apart, the frayed ends whipping against the inside of his skull. He struggled and clutched at his head, but his lungs weren’t burning and his body wasn’t screaming from lack of air. The sting, like antiseptic to a scratch, was beginning to fade and the water began to soothe. It felt like his body had been made of sharp, jagged edges and the water was filing them down to blunt curves. The snapping in his head was still loud and startling, but it didn’t hurt anymore.

The water went still and James went still with it. Quiet. No more tumultuous thought and overwhelming of his senses. It was quiet! And peaceful.

James thought about coming up for air, but not because he needed it. Mostly, he wanted to surface because it was a force of habit. He’d never been in a body of water without needing to reach oxygen as fast as possible. This was—dare he think it?—nice. At his leisure, he came up, blinking in the sudden light of a pink sky above the black and brown rocks around the pool.

“How do you fare now?” Thor was already out of the pool, sitting on the edge of the rocks with his feet dangling into the water, torso glistening as light reflected from the droplets of water clinging to him.

“Better,” He breathed his first easy breath in decades.

James had hated that pool, but it had been worth it.

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Natasha hadn’t been to Stark Tower for a week and she was nervous about what would be waiting there for her. Stepping into the entertainment room—where once there had been laughter and tears and recovery—Natasha’s ears were ringing with how quiet it was. Her feet tentatively took her towards James room.
“Anyone home?” She called, touching James’ door, but not daring to go in.

“He’s not back, yet.” She heard Steve’s voice from down the hall. Striding to Steve’s room, her nose was assaulted by the smell of blood. The bedroom portion was empty, but he called to her from the bathroom and she rounded the corner to find him sitting on the edge of the tub.

“Damn, Steve, what happened to you?”

His uniform was slashed through the front, starting at his collar bone and curving to his left side, similar slices lining his legs and his right wrist. He looked tired, but more than that, Steve looked like he’d already been scolded for doing something stupid and was waiting for her to do it next.

“Wasn’t paying attention,” He grumbled, removing his boots and laying them in the bathtub.

“Maybe this is a stupid question, but shouldn’t you be getting stitches instead of bleeding into your bathtub?” Natasha knelt in front of him and helped him slowly slide the glove off of his right hand, a stream of blood dripping onto the tile where it had collected in the finger-holes.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Not necessary—just need to be taped up. Super-serum will do the rest.”

“Someone come at you with a machete?” Natasha helped him to pull the jacket from his shoulders.

“A chainsaw, actually,” Steve laughed humorlessly, pulling the sticky, red-stained T-shirt over his head. All at once, Natasha’s mind was noting the differences between Steve’s naked chest and James’.

Where Steve was pale, smooth, and bare, James was lightly scattered with brown hair and dark, rough skin; where Steve’s muscles were pronounced, poofy like they’d been filled with air, James was compact and thick, though no less powerful; and where Steve’s curve and tone had been engineered to impress the eye, James tone was smaller and firmer, appealing to more normal proportions.

“It’s not that bad,” Steve stretched his fingers to hover above the slice near his ribs. “The suit took most of the damage.” He sounded like he was trying to reassure her, perhaps mistaking her pause for concern over his injury.

Natasha’s eyes vacantly landed on Steve’s admittedly small wound and she heard a small release of breath.

Oh. The sigh had had come from her. And she was crying.

Steve’s hand gripped hers and he squeezed, bringing her back to the present. “He’s coming back.”

“That seems to be your new mantra.” Natasha grunted sardonically, clearing her throat and pressing her lips together as she applied small strips of tape to his wrist.

“Don’t do that, Natasha.” Steve sounded angry, causing her to look up at him from where she knelt. His eyes instantly melted to sympathy, as though regretting his previous tone. “Bucky didn’t abandon you, so stop acting like it.”

“But he did.” She wiped her hands with the towel and stood.

“Thor took Bucky, he didn’t—”

“James decided he didn’t need my help anymore, Steve.” Natasha said blandly. “I found him, helped
him get back on his feet, and he doesn’t need my help anymore. *It’s fine,*” she lied, “Just part of the recovery process. I wasn’t his handler.”

Steve gaped at her incredulously. “Is that really what you think? Or is that what you’re telling yourself to believe?”

Natasha couldn’t bring herself to tell him that she didn’t have it in her anymore—trying to care for people and expecting them to reciprocate. She’d done that so many times before, the most recent person being Bruce. But she couldn’t say that. Natasha didn’t want to be pitied.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing.” Steve shook his head, rising to his feet, eyes burning with anger. “I’ve heard you tell a lot of lies, Natasha, but I’ve never watched you try to swallow them yourself. Bucky told me—”

“He’s not Bucky anymore, Steve.”

“Bucky told me,” Steve spoke over her, “that he loved you.”

It didn’t strike Natasha as new news, didn’t make her blush or cause her composure to break. She’d known, but it had been a quiet knowledge, a slow confirmation that had built layer upon layer. What did raise her heart rate was how hard it was to push down her own sentiment. Natasha couldn’t, *shouldn’t*, need someone—she had to be a lone entity, able to pack up and go at a moment’s notice, able to function without distraction, without any leverage for the enemy to use against her.

“I know you, Nat. And I can see you thinking that you gotta do this alone,” Steve said over his shoulder as he stepped out of the bathroom. “But I know you love him, too. I’m just waiting for you to have the guts to admit it.”

Chapter End Notes

I won’t drag out the tension, I promise! Things will be better tomorrow ;)
Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

The long-awaited reunion...
And a Natasha sketch: http://the-spartan-bird.tumblr.com/post/125128448381/natasha-romanov

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjNdAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`con`cil`ia`tion rek-uh n-sil-ee-ey-shuhn verb: restoring to friendly means

--“An Ending, A Beginning” Dustin O’Halloran--

“Natasha.” Her name was called.

Shut up, Rogers.

Shut up, Wilson.

I don’t want to talk about Barnes anymore. Leave me alone.

Oh, not you, too, Barton. I don’t need your help. I’ve got this. I know, I know—James is coming back soon and I’ll be happy to see him even though I’m mad right now. Yeah, yeah, I know.

You’ve got to be kidding me—Bruce, I’m not talking to you about this either. You’re the last person I want to talk to about James. Why do you even care? Do you feel guilty about rejecting me? Is it pity? Pity because I’m attracted to men who think they’re too dangerous to be with me? Please, just leave me alone.

Don’t you get it? If I give an inch to how much I miss him, I’ll break.

Oh, God. Now I’m praying. I’ve only done that a few times in my life. You all keep cracking away at the wall I’m hiding behind, and now I’m leaking through it. Oh, God, bring him back to me.

It hurts. James told me to go away. He’s afraid of hurting me if he stays with me—but does James know how much he hurts me by being away? Hurt, hurt, hurt, either way, that’s all it does.

Barton… Clint, help me. Steve, help me. Sam, help me. Bruce… you just sit there and listen.
What if he comes back and doesn’t need me anymore? If I get my hopes up and he returns and doesn’t want me… I don’t know what I’ll do. Is it worth the risk?

“Natasha?” Steve called her name again, blue eyes peering at her with concern. “Are you okay?”

“I miss James.”

Steve’s jaw dropped at her confession. “Oh my word…”

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“Duet” by Rachael Yamagata---

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“Your friends are worried sick about you.” Jane’s voice cut through James’ thoughts as he leaned against the balcony railing, watching the pink and orange Asgardian sunrise.

Jane Foster had arrived earlier that morning during breakfast. James wasn’t sure what kind of Earthly cuisine Thor had been exposed to, but he was too grateful for Thor’s kindness to complain that bright pink mush-of-grain was not oatmeal.

“They thought you were being held here against your will.” Jane went on when James didn’t answer, his elbows resting against the stone railing. “Actually, that’s what I thought, before I got here. It’d be just like Thor to barrel forward without telling anyone what he was doing. I thought I was coming here to rescue you.”

“I asked him to let me stay here for a while.” James admitted, still staring at the colors of the sunrise.

“A few weeks is not a while.” Jane cocked her head and raised a brow, following James’ example and leaning her elbows against stone. “Do you intend to go back?”

James’ jaw muscles worked. “I don’t know, yet.”

“I heard about what happened at the Hydra hideout.”

James blew out an irritated breath. “It’s not likely you know all of it. My brain was a tangled mess of spaghetti, but Thor…” The healing pool, he shivered. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But that’s why you’re here.” Jane pointed out. “It doesn’t sound like you’re coming back any time soon, and then Natasha…” Jane looked embarrassed. “I think that’s the real reason they called me.”

“What’s wrong with Natasha?” A flurry of protective feelings swarmed his core. No, she didn’t need him. He needed her, but he was working on repairing himself enough to be around her again.

“Well, she’s…” Jane bit her lip. “Er, I don’t know how to say it… She’s pining? Ugh, that’s probably not—”

James snorted. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

Jane held her hands up. “I haven’t talked to her myself, so I don’t know, but Steve Rogers was pretty determined when he called me.” She turned her head and looked him in the eye, demanding his full attention. “Steve seemed really, really pissed off. He said if you really meant what you said about her, you’d come home right-the-hell now.”

“Steve said that?” James was amused.

“I was censoring. I’m still shocked that Captain America occasionally curses.”
“I mean what I said,” James said aloud to himself. “But it doesn’t change the problem.”

“Then what’s the problem, James?” Jane held her hands up in irritation. “Are you going to sit here and mope forever?”

“If I go back now, I could kill someone.” James started to fume. The words were tumbling out of his mouth, unbidden and full of his fears. “Someone could accidentally say one of the trigger words in the back of my consciousness, I could turn into a machine again—I could slit their throats and I wouldn’t be able to stop myself. I’ve been trained to do this thing, this awful thing!” He was starting to shout. “And I can’t let it kill Steve or Natasha because they’re all I’ve got!”

Jane didn’t look phased by James’ outburst, but then he considered that she was dating the god of thunder.

“You love Natasha.” Jane stated without question.

He nodded, strands of his hair escaping from the plaits Thor’s attendant had braided. “I might have put a bullet in my brain to quiet the ghosts if not for Natasha. Something about her touched what was left of my humanity.”

Jane let out an exasperated sigh and threw her hands up in the air. “You know what’s irritating? Watching two people want and need each other, but acting like they don’t because they don’t understand how much the other person wants and needs them! It’s a hopeless soap opera, James—and I would know, my assistant Darcy Lewis watches them—and it’s ridiculous!”

James didn’t look up from the railing, but he was smiling, obviously entertained by Jane’s frustration. “You think I’m unnecessarily complicating things?”

“Yes,” Jane crossed her arms and exhaling sharply. “Yes, I do.” She tapped her foot for a moment and then turned fully to James. “Is the problem with the trigger words all there is? I mean, is there anything stopping you from being with her other than that?”

“No,” James shook his head, wondering what she was getting at.

“M’kay,” she nodded, bobbing her head enthusiastically. “Then it’s not a problem.” She quickly took his hand and pulled him inside, away from the balcony. “We can fix this.”

“Requim” by Lights and Motion--

Natasha shook away the disorientation from her head, counting her breaths and waiting for her stomach to settle from the effects of being transported between Earth and Asgard. Jane had returned sooner than they’d expected, relaying that they had an invitation to Thor’s realm if they wanted to see James. Natasha had attempted to be stoic, up until the rainbow beam caught them up and whirled them through space. It actually hadn’t been that bad, she mused. Poor Steve was not so lucky.

“I’m fine,” He lied, groaning and doubling over beside her with his arms around his middle. “Just gimme’ a minute.”

The sky above was a strange and dizzying array of colors—blue, purple, and green, like the northern lights—and while Natasha could appreciate it for its beauty, it wasn’t familiar and therefore set her on edge. The gleaming city on the other side of the bridge could have been likened to Oz for all its size and grandeur. It was alien in every sense of the word. Natasha looked out over the multi-colored bridge before them, trying to ignore the low sound of rushing water beneath it.
“Heads up, Steve.”

Rogers’ tried to shake the nausea from his limbs and they looked up just in time to see the two figures approaching from the other side of the bridge. One was very obviously Thor, his blond hair and red cape standing out from his surroundings, but the other figure was shorter and darker.

“Bucky?” Steve said in obvious disbelief— Natasha could hardly believe her own eyes.

James’ brown hair was pulled back into a braid, the tip just long enough to fall over his shoulder where a dark blue cloak fell neatly over his frame and swayed with his very confident gate. The black and blue clothes beneath the cloak were non-descript, but still very Asgardian. Greeting them with a tentative smile, James looked torn between his joy in seeing them and the fear that they might be angry.

Despite her many days of fuming, Natasha felt anything but angry right now.

“My friends!” Thor raised his hands and beamed at Natasha and Steve. “Welcome to my home!”

James looked like he wanted to say something, but he settled on nodding his head at the two of them, coming to stand before them while Thor stood a short distance behind.

“Not bad,” Steve waved a hand at his friend’s clothes.

“Thanks,” James’ lips crept into a cheeky grin. The both of them stood and looked at each other without words, unsure who should move first, and then James threw all caution to the wind and stepped forward to put his arms around Steve’s shoulders. Sighing in relief and gripping tightly around James’, Steve patted his back and looked as though he might never let go.

“You’re a punk.” Steve grumbled into his friend’s neck.

James’s breathy laugh was hesitant. “That’s my line, right? I remember that.”

“Yeah, well, next time remember to tell us where you’re going and how long you’ll be staying there.” Steve said sternly, though he looked too pleased to see James in good health to hold on to his aggravation. Reluctantly, he let go of his friend and went to stand behind him. James was looking somewhat expectantly at Natasha, who had remained still and silent until now.

---"Chasing Cars" Sleeping At Last---

James was leaner at the waist than Natasha remembered, and his shoulders were broader. Asgardian food was definitely agreeing with him—he might even be able to match Steve! But no matter how much her eyes roamed his healthy frame or took in his waiting expression, her muscles froze her where she was.

Steve, still standing behind James, rolled his eyes at the two of them and nudged James none-too-gently, causing him to collide with Natasha. Automatically, James’ arms went out to break their fall and he gripped Natasha around the waist, stopping himself from toppling her over with wide eyes and an apologetic expression.

She snorted at Steve as James straightened them out, looking down at her in silence. He kept opening his mouth like he wanted to say something, but no words seemed to come.

“Missed you.” She confessed, causing his eyes to lit up and a grin to spread over his face.
James’ hands twitched against her ribs and he sighed. “All right, give it to me.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “The works. Gimme’ the works and don’t hold back.”

Gratitude at seeing James alive and healthy had covered up Natasha’s resentment, but suddenly her temper flooded back to the forefront of her mind. “A month and a half? A month and a half, James?” She smacked lightly against his shoulder, but he didn’t let go. “And then we have to track down Thor’s girlfriend to get in contact with you? Only to find out that he brought you here because you asked him to? All this time, I’ve been telling myself that you were taken from us—but you left!”

It was clear he was struggling to control his expressions, but he remained silent, hands still gripping at her sides, waiting for her to continue.

“You left, you found a new home, and now you’re all friendly again. James Barnes, the human yoyo. He makes you hot one minute and cold the next. There’s a Katy Perry song that sums you up perfectly. How about you stop being noble for one second and let me decide if you’re too much for me! I didn’t become the Black Widow because I avoided danger, you numbskull.”

She shut her eyes and blew out a calming breath before regaining her composure. Steve and Thor were incredulous—James was probably the only one there who understood that operatives could dump weeks-worth of anger into one tirade, processing it and finding closure all in the same minute.

“There.” Natasha sighed in relief. “Done.”

“Good.” He bent down and claimed her lips in a hard kiss, teeth clicking against hers. Dipping her backwards, James pulled her close and pressed against her.

Natasha was vaguely aware of Steve and Thor laughing, but her senses were happily drowning in James’ scent and taste and touch. And, Lord, it felt so good! A sigh of absolute ecstasy eased out of her chest and into the mouth of the man kissing her. Her focus was so bombarded with how warm and delicious his lips were that it was a shock—and a tragedy—when he pulled away.

James put his hands on her shoulders and bent his head to be eye-level with her. “I was being an overly-cautious idiot. You and Steve are too important for me to lose. Asgard isn’t home. Earth is home. You are home.” James shifted his weight, but his icy blue eyes continued to pierce Natasha’s. “Forgive me. Please, forgive me.”

The recollection of the last time he’d said those words—when he’d been pulled from the cryogenics tank— was branded in Natasha’s mind, an eerie echo of a time that felt both recent and long ago.

Natasha nodded, her mind still so full of the taste of his mouth. “Just don’t do it again.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he smiled, grabbing her hand in his and leading her past Thor and Steve.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Regeneration

Chapter Summary

Thor and Jane program "anti-trigger" words into James' subconscious-- will it work?

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`gen`er`a`tion: the action or process of renewing something

—"How Low" Jose Gonzalez—

The echoes in the stone hallway weren’t loud, but every little sound put Natasha on edge: the shuffle of Thor’s boots as he led them down into the deep bowels of Asgard’s bronze palace, James’ nervous and reluctant gait, and the quiet murmurs of encouragement Steve whispered to his friend. James’ bleak bearing was enough to overshadow Rogers’ optimistic expression, but he walked on until Thor indicated a room lit by torches. It was a wide and tall prisoner cell, comprised of the same scratchy blackened stone as the hallway. But it would serve their purposes perfectly.

They all stepped into the room, looking around at the lit torches that lined the walls, when James immediately protested, “Natasha doesn’t need to be in here.”

“It won’t be a problem,” She rolled her eyes at him, but Steve was instantly at her side, muttering low into her ear. “Don’t make this any harder for him.” He whispered sternly. “He didn’t even want to do this—don’t make him turn back now.”

Resentment burrowed through Natasha’s core, but not because she was offended— It was because he was right. She selfishly wanted to be in the room with James during this test because she thought she could handle it, and not entirely because she wanted to lend support.

“Please,” Steve’s voice softened and he put a hand on her shoulder. Natasha nodded half-heartedly, passing by James and heading for the door. But then she stopped in her tracks and turned back, reaching up to his face with a hand and kissed his jawline. He turned his head into the kiss, sliding his lips to hers while his fingers fumbled with the clasp of the heavy cloak over his shoulders.

“Take care of this for me?” James reverently held out the dark blue cloak, priceless treasure that it was, but she knew its emotional value to him was even more.
“You’ll do fine.” She lent him a small smile, taking the heavy covering from him and folding it over her arm, hoping her eyes mirrored her confidence. Natasha turned quickly—before she changed her mind—leaving Steve, Thor, and James alone in the room, striding through the doorway to join Jane Foster.

The women shared tense gazes and Natasha whispered, “Tell me we can override Hydra’s programming. Tell me you’re right about this.”

Jane was taken aback, hands pausing over the heavy lock on the door, looking Natasha up and down as though uncertain she should answer such a question.

“I… can’t.” Jane’s brow scrunched in sympathy. “I mean, I don’t know—that’s why we’re testing this—I could say I’m confident?—but I don’t want to give you a fixed answer—that’s not how science works—and even though the brain is a lot like—”

Natasha grinned wryly at the young woman. “Thank you.”

Jane was bewildered, obviously not expecting that response.

“Thank you for telling me the truth.” Natasha clarified. “It’s a hard answer, but it’s the truth.”

“You’re…welcome? I guess.” Jane shook her head in confusion, turning the circular crank on the wooden door and peeking through the wide barred-window at the cell’s occupants.

“Are you ready?” Steve nodded toward James.

“No,” James snorted, causing Steve to pause. “Doin’ it anyway. Let’s get this over with.”

“Jane.” Thor called to her, a signal that made Natasha’s heart pump faster.

“Ms. Romanov?” Jane bit her lip in embarrassment. “Tell me the words again. I forgot…”

Natasha’s eyes met James’ through the window and in their own silent way they sent each other strength for what would happen next.

“Icarus,” Natasha whispered to Jane, “flew into the sun wearing…”

—Listen to “Heavy In Your Arms” by Florence + The Machine—

“…wax wings.”

When Jane spoke the words aloud from the other side of the door, James felt his limbs seize and his mind go blank. He could feel the nothingness creep over him; the terrifyingly stillness that made his head and body feel like an empty cavity, waiting to be filled with… orders.

Orders. He waited.

As if underwater, he heard the numb-sounding murmurs of two figures beside him, but his senses were trained on the one voice giving the command. Order me. I’m yours.

“Attack,” The order finally came, but it sounded more like a question than a command. No matter. Orders were orders.

Snapping from his frozen stance, the Winter Soldier took into account the size of his opponents, their
build, and known skill-set. He grabbed at the shorter of them, a strangle-hold over the man’s neck, and used it to anchor him as the momentum of his running feet launched his legs into the air, catching the larger man off-guard as he kicked at that enemy’s face. Two opponents, varying in size and strength, and he still had a few seconds to act on the element of surprise. Not a large advantage, but there was no choice… orders were orders.

There was an itch at the back of his mind, an urge to remember something important though he couldn’t quite grasp it. The numbness of his ears receded, able to catch the shorter man shouting someone’s name—Bucky?—while the other was attempting to calm him with a deep baritone voice. Good. Sentiment would stop them from being effective, but the Winter Soldier was nothing if not effective.

Landing on his feet, the Winter Soldier felt for the knife that should have been at his side and came up with nothing, instead swinging out with his metal arm. He caught the smaller man by the legs, causing the man to topple backwards, and then the Winter Soldier struck out with his other hand to push against the smaller man’s chest in mid-air, quickening the man’s descent toward the floor.

The falling man crashed into the stone, causing veins of rock underneath him to crackle in a spider-web pattern, and the Winter Soldier was about to bring his elbow down heavily on the man’s windpipe when his ears picked up another order.

It was spoken in a strange language, but it pierced his head like a jagged knife, creeping all the way into his neck and traveling down his spine in a painful, fragmenting pattern until he thought his bones would crumble within his skin.

“Sleep.” Said the commanding voice. The Winter Soldier’s mind instantly drifted into slumber, falling through the black waters of consciousness to that deep void where even dreams dare not enter.

— “Cemetery” By James Newton Howard—

James blinked into torchlight, eyes groggily focusing on a black, stone ceiling. Where was he? His unfamiliarity with the setting unnerved him and a cold sweat working its way up his spine and over his forehead.

“Bucky?”

Steve! Even if James didn’t know where he was, at least Steve was there.

“Steve,” James’ voice cracked. He couldn’t shake the panic, couldn’t stop the shivers and the cold sweat, and didn’t bother to get up. “Um… where…?”

Steve’s face appeared above him and the blond smiled with victory. “It worked, Buck. Jane’s programming—Thor’s magic—it worked.”

“Oh,” James’ voice broke again, even at this simple word. Stop shivering, damn it! “That’s… that’s good…” His head was clear, but his emotions were through the roof. If he couldn’t slow down his heartbeat or steady his breathing, he was going to have an anxiety attack.

Steve immediately picked up on his friend’s distress. “Can I touch you? Is that okay? Can I help you up?”

Too many questions. But, yes, it would be nice if Steve would help him up—especially when he
didn’t think he could manage the motion with his frayed nerves. He still couldn’t stop the shaking…

Steve’s hands crept under his neck and waist, gently raising him until he was sitting up, and James’ internal compass was suddenly spinning out of control. Arms shooting out to wrap around Steve for anchoring, James’ face pressed against his friend’s chest and he struggled to maintain steady breathing.


A few moments later, James’ head was set right again—the test. They’d performed the test, counter-acting Hydra’s code words with the new words Jane and Thor had ‘programmed’ into him. And it had been a success. James wanted to feel relieved—he wanted to process that success—he wanted more than anything to admit that it was safe to go back to Earth—but the feeling of raw, sensitive fear running through his veins wouldn’t settle down.

“Steve,” There was no embarrassment when his voice broke this time. He took in another deep breath, closing his wet eyes and pressing his nose further into Rogers’ chest. “Take me home.”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :(
Reciprocation Part 1

Chapter Summary

Get ready for happy fluff...

Chapter Notes

It's late, I'm trying to edit a 5,000 word chapter, I'm tired, and I realize, "I could just cut this guy in half and make it a two-parter, no problem!" So, erm, here's part 1...

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

reciprocation ri-sip-ruh-key-shuhn noun: responding to a gesture or action by making a corresponding one.

— “The Light” The Album Leaf—

As soon as the brilliant lights of the Asgardian beam dissolved, James instantly relaxed. It was gratifying to stand once again in the common room of the Tower he’d come to call home. But the relief-filled moment was interrupted by the sound of Steve’s boots skidding against the polished tile, barely making it to the kitchen trashcan where he unleashed the contents of his stomach. James shared a look with Natasha, wondering if she’d be doing the same, but he found her just as calm himself.

“Steve...?” James leaned into the kitchen, brows knit together.

A pale Rogers spit out the awful taste in his mouth, rising unsteadily to his feet. “I don’t know how you can handle that. Makes me sick.”

“That’s ironic, you’ve had a lot more practice being sick than I have, pal.” James winked at him.

He could see that the rainbow beam—and the events of the last few days—had taken a toll on his friend and James was about to thank Steve gratuitously when Rogers waved a hand at him. “That’s enough space travel for me today—you need me for anything, I’ll be sleeping this off.”

James lingered for a moment, not knowing how to ask or initiate what he wanted, but Steve seemed to understand. He pulled James in for a quick embrace, murmuring that he was glad to have James back with them, before he disappeared down the hall to his own room.

“I think Steve’s got the right idea.” He said as he turned to face Natasha. “But I was wondering if I could ask for a favor, first.” James scratched sheepishly at the back of his neck. “I’m thinking about a
haircut…”

Natasha hummed, the corner of her mouth pulling into a smile, and James’ heart rate sped up when she slid her fingers along his braid. It shouldn’t have sent a piercing thrill to his core when she touched his hair, but it did. He wasn’t sure what to do with that.

“I’ve got scissors in my room.” She declared, pulling him along.

Her bathroom was devoid of decoration, spotless in a way that would have had a person with OCD sighing in relief. And as he sat on the rim of the bathtub, she changed out of her black combat suit in the bedroom, not bothering to close the door behind her. James couldn’t be sure, her expression wasn’t easy to read, but he thought she did it on purpose.

Once she was dressed—grey sweat pants and a maroon tank top that made James heat up at the collar—she swept into the bathroom, pointing at his hair. “Any idea of what you want?”

“Any idea of what you want?”

You. James bit his lip, trying not to stare while she dragged a desk chair into the bathroom. Now that his mind wasn’t impaired—“tangled spaghetti” he’d told Jane Foster—his thoughts were easier to decipher. Jane had said Natasha was “pining” for him? He couldn’t see it in the red-head gathering hair-cutting supplies from the bathroom drawers. He hoped it was true, he hoped she—

Natasha leaned forward to catch his hand, pulling him to sit in the chair. “If you don’t pick something soon, I’ll give you a mullet.”

“Gah, I thought we were friends, Natasha.” He schooled his thoughts for a moment, considering. “I’m open to ideas. In fact, I’m very open to your ideas.” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

“Hmm.” Her mouth twisted into a wry grin. “I’ve got an idea or two. But first, that beard’s gotta go.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He stroked the frizzy whiskers lining his jaw. He pushed down at a sting of panic, clearing his throat. “But I think, uh…I’ll do that part myself.” Having someone else holding a blade to his throat wasn’t something he was ready for yet.

It suddenly struck him that he was still wearing his Asgardian cloak and he stepped through the bedroom door, laying it out on the bed with no small amount of respect.

“Are those stars or frost?” Natasha pointed at the silver etchings around the edges. She looked like she wanted to reach out and touch it, but was resisting, afraid she might upset something solemn between James and his Asgardian gift.

“Believe it or not, I asked the same question,” James grinned, fondly smoothing out the folds. Gently reaching out to grasp her wrist, he moved her hand across the fabric, a wordless permission. The cloak was soft, like velvet, and had a weight to it that was sure to block out even the worst chill.

“I asked if Thor if he gave this to me because of the Winter Soldier. He laughed at me.” James’ lips quirked, replaying the account in his head. “Thor said that frost and stars are almost the same thing—cold can burn and extreme heat can chill—except that one drowns out the light and one radiates it. He told me I had a choice between being one or the other.”

“You’re getting all sorts of good advice.” Natasha smiled. “Make sure you listen to it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” James sent her a cocky grin that he hoped was still as charming as it had been seventy years ago.

It took some time for him to become clean-shaven, standing in front of Natasha’s sink with clippers
and a disposable razor, but his hard work paid off.

“Better?” James wiped his chin off with a towel.

“Much,” She beamed at him. “My turn with the scissors. Sit.”

If he flexed a little when he removed his shirt, he wasn’t going to admit to it, and it was worth it to see the light flush of her cheeks. When Natasha offered to wrap a towel around his shoulders, he shook his head.

“It’s a little confining,” he admitted, his bare chest expanding when he heaved out a sigh.

“Are you gonna’ be okay with this?” Natasha held up the clippers.

“Not sure. But I know you’ll stop if I need to you.”

Natasha nodded. “There’s ways to distract you, to make this easier.” And without explaining herself, she planted herself on his lap, facing him with legs out on either side. He hadn’t been ready for it, but the not-so-subtle grin on his face said that it wasn’t unwelcome, reinforced by the way his hands were sliding around her waist to grip her just below her ribs.

“Don’t tickle, I’ve got scissors.” Natasha reprimanded him, running her fingers through his long locks and measuring.

“Not thinking about tickling.”

She didn’t respond, but focused on the snipping above his forehead. “Still nervous?”

“Nope,” He answered with a gulp. “Definitely distracted. The Black Widow is ticklish?”

“Yes,” She hissed at him, concentrating on a dark lock of brown hair that didn’t seem to be cooperating. “But there aren’t many people that know that.”

“Aw, I’m special.” He batted his eyes at her. “What other deep, dark secrets do you keep?”

“You’re awful greedy, aren’t you?” She leered, and James watched his short braid fall to the floor.

“Only with you.” He murmured, unsure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“All right. Secrets…” Natasha mused on the word and stopped using the clippers to look him in the eye, giving him all of her attention for a moment. “I’m incredibly tactile.”

“That’s a secret?” James raised an eyebrow at.

“It has to be. It’s hard to admit I like being touched when most of what I get is a sharp kick to the face.” James brow crinkled with anger at the thought of anyone kicking her in the face, but she raised her hands to continue cutting his hair and spoke on, not allowing him to dwell on it. “But now it doesn’t have to be a secret. Now it’s just… advice. For you.”

In response, he smoothed a hand under her shirt, pressing his fleshly palm against the bare skin at her back while his prosthetic fingers rubbed small circles over her ribs. “Something I won’t soon forget.”

“Do I get to learn any of your secrets?” She continued to measure out sections of hair.

James snorted. “You probably know ‘em all.”
“Come on,” Natasha goaded. “Not everything in your head was written in files. Tell me something only you know.”

“I like redheads.” He quipped.

“Good to know—anything else?” She leaned back, appraising her work and correcting small mistakes. She rose up from her seating in his lap and went to stand behind him, but he caught her hand, causing her to look down at his affectionate eyes.

“I used to like dancing. Not so sure I can pull it off anymore. S’okay. I used to like watching it just as much.”

There was a look in her eye he couldn’t pinpoint, like she was filing this information for later use, but he didn’t have long to think about it because an electric razor appeared in her hand and James flinched, the sound of the razor causing his teeth to set on edge. Immediately, his body donned a cold sweat, a chill gripping the back of his neck, and a tremor of weakness batting at his chest.

“It’s okay, James.” Natasha turned the razor off and set it on the countertop, circling around to kneel in front of him. “If it’s too much—”

James lurched forward in desperation, pressing his lips to hers and clutching at the back of her head, but the grip was born of fear and not control. Natasha gently stroked at his newly-shaven cheeks, reassuring him with the touch of her fingers and the press of her lips. Distraction, she’d promise, and distraction she gave. Slowly the adrenaline melted away and they were holding each other, him in the chair and her, kneeling on the floor.

Their lips parted enough for Natasha to speak. “Do you want to keep going?”

James’ felt bloodless, but he attempted humor anyway. “Of course I want to keep going, but we’re in the middle of a haircut, Nat.”

That earned him a light smack to his chest. When he opened his eyes again, Natasha was standing behind him, but instead of turning the buzzer back on, her fingers were massaging his scalp.

A long, drawn-out, sinful noise escaped his throat and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. It was like someone had bottled up pleasure with warm honey and was letting it dribble down his neck and through his nervous system. He could hear Natasha snickering at him, but frankly he was feeling too good to care. With one hand in his hair, Natasha turned the razor on and swept it across the base of his head, and he found himself too blissfully occupied with her caress to care about the sound.

“James,” She said his name softly, the buzzing sound gone, but the tingling from her fingertips remaining. “James, open your eyes. It’s done.”

Blinking slowly, he squinted the small mirror in Natasha’s hands, taking in his reflection and turning his head so that he could see every angle. Small clusters of shaven hair fell from his shoulders as he stood, twisting around to face the large bathroom mirror behind him. From the top of his head to the crown, the brown locks were inches long, but swept back—and downward from the sides he was gradually shaven almost to his scalp.

“It’s called an undercut,” Natasha said after James was silent for a moment too long.

“I used to do somethin’ a bit like this,” He ran his fingers through the top. “In the 40’s. This is more… modern.” He turned to face her. “I like it.” James fingers twitched, and in a rare moment of courage, he cocked his head at the shower. “I need to wash the bits of hair offa’ my shoulders. You wanna’ join me?”
More tomorrow-- lot's of happy, fluffy, Avengers movie-night stuff coming!
Reciprocation Part 2

Chapter Summary

Warning: Unabashed fluff and Star Wars spoilers (for episodes 4, 5, and 6-- although the movies have been out since the late seventies, so I'm pretty sure it's not spoilers anymore)
Oh, and I sketched something for this chapter (I'm super shy about it, but here it is): http://the-spartan-bird.tumblr.com/post/125128360036/steve-and-bucky-are-coffee-snobs-sketch

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

—“Honey Jars” Bryan John Appleby—

Steve rubbed away the remnants of sleep from his eyes and groggily padded down the hallway from his room on bare feet. His two-hour catnap had actually sapped him of energy and he was in desperate need of coffee. War-time had taught him the value of that blessed substance, that amber-colored nectar of life, but the super-serum had erased all hope of coffee ever being of use to Captain America again. That is, until Steve had mentioned it to Tony.

Steve reached into the kitchen cabinet to retrieve his “special blend” of “dark roast”, custom-made and tested by none other than the billionaire genius who owned the building they were living in, when it struck him that Bucky might finally be able to have some as well. It had been a long time since he’d shared a steaming cup of joe with his friend, made longer by Bucky’s inability to eat certain things since his capture with Hydra, but Steve determined with his foggy mind to find Bucky and at least ask.

Padding back down the hallway, Steve nudged open the door to James’ room, not really surprised to find it empty. His feet shuffled further down the hallway to Natasha’s room, and he’d only meant to knock on the door, but it wasn’t shut all the way and his fingers accidentally nudged it to swing open.
He caught it before it banged against the wall.

Natasha and Bucky were asleep and curled into each other on the bed, arms wound tight and legs tangled together. Bucky’s Asgardian cloak was draped over the both of them, but they were clearly unclothed and had recently come from a shower. There was an indent in part of the metal headboard above them, curiously shaped, but definitely work of Bucky’s mechanical hand. Steve didn’t have to think hard to guess how the dent got there.

He hadn’t meant to stare, hadn’t meant to walk in on such a private moment, reached for the door
handle to close it as quietly as possible when Bucky stirred.

Bucky’s face was pressed into the top of Natasha’s head, her own face burrowed somewhere into the bend of his neck, and his eyes fluttered open. When he locked eyes with Steve and smiled comfortably, Steve’s sense of awkwardness abated and gave way to a deep-felt relief. He couldn’t remember the last time Bucky had looked so content and safe.

*Everything okay?* Bucky worded silently.

Steve nodded quickly, not masking his blushing smile and mouthing *Coffee?*

Bucky’s eyes widened. *Coffee?*

*Yeah,* Steve pointed toward the kitchen, disappearing from the doorway.

It was hard to stop grinning while he measured the scoop of roasted beans into the coffee grinder, taking care to keep the grinds coarse and not too fine.

“It’s not gonna’ do anything for me,” James appeared in the kitchen beside Steve wearing only black sweatpants, watching Steve’s delicate workings over the art that was coffee. “But just the taste of it will be enough. Is there any chocolate?”

Steve shot him a wry grin and had to conceal just how elated he was at the question. “I always make sure there’s chocolate with the coffee.”

Coffee and chocolate was Bucky’s special treat, back in the forties, when they could afford it. And after they’d joined the army and the field coffee tasted like it’d been filtered through a sock, it had become a necessity to put a bite-size of chocolate into the coffee to make it tolerable. Following his awakening to the twentieth century, Steve had taken to drinking his coffee like that out of habit, something familiar in such an unfamiliar world.

And against all odds, he was standing beside his best friend once more, preparing coffee in the way he’d been certain Bucky would have forgotten about. He slid the bar of chocolate across the countertop to Bucky as he poured the grounds into the glass French press. “And you just wait until you’ve had some of this coffee—Tony cooked it up.”

“What’s so special about that?” Bucky raised a brow at him. “What’d he put in it?”

“You’ll have to ask him—I don’t mind not knowing, because the ‘caffeine’ in it works.”

Barnes shook his head at Steve and pulled a mug from the cupboard. “It could be the leftover grease from his Iron-man suit, or Hulk-perspiration, or—”

“You’re disgusting,” Steve twisted his face, pouring the steaming water into the French press and setting the lid over the top. “All right, five minutes and we’re in good shape.” He turned his attention to James, pointing at the new haircut. “I like the hair. It’s kind of…”

“Modern,” Bucky supplied, running his fingers through it. “And still a lot like how we used to wear it.”

“Used to?—I still wear my hair the same way I used to.”

“That’s cause you’re not brave enough to do something different.”

“Don’t need different,” Steve mumbled.
Bucky snorted. “So, here you are, trying to get me accustomed to the twentieth century, and you won’t even take that small step forward.” He crossed his arms. “Are you waiting for Tony to build a time machine so you can hop back to the 1940’s?”

If Bucky expected him to laugh, Steve’s heart wasn’t in it and he inwardly asked himself the same question. “It’d be easier…” He admitted aloud.

Barnes studied Steve’s face intently. “Steve, that’s… it’s futile, you know that? We’re not going back. There’s no… we gotta’ keep moving forward. You told me the serum is gonna’ keep you alive for a lot longer than the average guy anyway…”

“I know,” Steve nodded in irritation, eyes resting on the French press and jawline tensing. “I’ll live through even more changing times.” He didn’t want to admit it, but there was a small nagging voice at the back of his head telling him to confide in Bucky—Steve had been asking for Bucky to share his struggle, it was only fair that Steve do it, too. “There was a shield agent. Name was Coulsen. He was a good friend. We were talking about the suit for Captain America and I asked if he didn’t think the stars and stripes were a little old fashioned.”

Steve looked up to see that Bucky was listening and he went on. “He said that with everything happening in the world, maybe it could use a little more old fashioned.”

Bucky nodded thoughtfully. “Was a good friend? So he’s…”

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He died for something he believed in. Couldn’t ask for a better death than that, right?”

“You’re something morbid, you know that? We were talking about haircuts and you had to go and turn it into a speech about truth, justice, and the American—”

“Stop it.”

“It doesn’t change the point, Stevie,” Bucky fixed him with a playful glower that had too much mischief in it to be serious. He lifted himself up to sit on the countertop and look down at his friend. “We’ll get you integrated with the twentieth century. I’m here now and there’s nothing left to stop you.”

“Stop him from what?” Natasha stepped into the kitchen in a cotton robe that clung to her curvy frame.

“Being so serious and cynical. That’s my job,” Bucky winked at Steve. Natasha came to rest her backside against the cabinet between Bucky’s dangling legs, and he rested his hands against the bend of her neck, thumbs rubbing in small circles to massage the muscles there.

If Steve had any reservations about them being together, those concerns were demolished by the casual way they gravitated toward each other and that look of belonging in Bucky’s face.

“Is that a French press?” Natasha nodded at the glass container. She reached out a hand toward the pump at the top. “Do I get to push it down—”

“No!” James and Steve reached out to stop her hand at the same time. Natasha’s face wrinkled in confusion and she withdrew her hand slowly.
“It needs another two minutes to steep.” Steve tried to explain himself, but Natasha was already shaking her head at the both of them.

James continued to rub circles into her neck and she crossed her arms. “It’s a science—” He tried to excuse his outburst.

“Yeah, yeah. Coffee snobs.”

— “Tell Me Where You’ve Been” by Hotel Eden—

“Look who’s back!” Sam clapped a hand on James’ shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” James started to say, but Steve cut him off.

“Stop apologizing to every person that welcomes you back.”

Natasha squeezed James’ hand to reinforce the sentiment when Tony arrived at the entertainment room with a six pack of Guinness in one hand and a set of movies in the other.

“I’m absolutely astounded.” Stark looked toward the group standing behind the couches. “Not only have you avoided Star Wars for this long, but you’re inviting me to movie night in my own tower.” He shook his head, immediately switching modes. “I brought beer.”

“That’s not beer,” A struggling Rhodey snickered, hauling two grocery bags on each arm. “I brought beer.”

Steve scurried over to help Rhodey set the bags down in the kitchen while Tony argued that taste was subjective and the alcoholic beverage in question would need to be sampled to provide enough information to form a proper conclusion. Thor, appearing from the kitchen with two blue boxes on his shoulders, announced that he had brought sustenance for movie-night as well, courtesy of Darcy Lewis.

“What’s—” James squinted to read the label on the blue boxes. “—pop tarts?”

Tony made a dramatic gasp and clapped his hands against his face, “You’ll find out soon enough, but one of those boxes is entirely for him.”

“That is only partly true, friend Stark.” Thor smiled, opening the boxes and dumping the contents out on the coffee table. “I shall only require fourteen of these.”

Sam laughed, beer in hand. “I thought I had a sugar problem.”

“Where’s Bruce?” Tony glanced around the room. “I need someone to help make snarky scientific commentary with.”

As soon as Bruce appeared, a loud holler of, “Hey!” erupted from Tony, Sam, Rhodey, Thor, and Clint. Banner jolted, wondering what they were Hey-ing about, and cautiously approached the couch like a threatened and wary cat. A button on Tony’s remote closed the blinds of the wall-sized window and the lights dimmed, plunging the entertainment room into perfect movie-watching darkness.

Three couches, all situated to curve around the enormous screen in front of them, were just enough for the crowd that had gathered for Steve, James, and Thor’s introduction to Star Wars. James rested
his mechanical elbow against the arm of the middle-most couch, tucking his other arm around a lounging Natasha. The silver pouches Thor had put on the table were piquing his curiosity and James leaned over to grab one, hesitating when Natasha warned him that he might not want to try it.

“Do not listen,” Thor goaded, tossing a pop-tart pouch in James’ direction. “It is a Midgardian treasure and any naysayers present can keep their unwanted opinions to themselves.”

Sam laughed and clinked his beer bottle against Thor’s while Steve agreed that James should take it easy on the frosted, gooey pastry.

They were halfway into the first movie when Tony began objecting to theories of propulsion—

“I’ll bet you twenty dollars I could build a life-size Millennium Falcon.”

“You’re on, but only if we can fly it for Avengers missions.”

—and Thor began to correct his formula on the insistence that the millennium falcon couldn’t sustain enough gravitational push to—

And that’s when the pop tart James ate tried to make an appearance again, causing him to shoot up from the couch and dash to the bathroom.

“Pop tarts: 1. James Barnes: 0.” James could hear Tony say. “Next time, you should just bring him some poison.”

“I am truly sorry,” Thor said with heavy guilt. “I hadn’t intended—”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve objected, and James could hear his footfalls down the hallway before his head popped around the doorway.

“Pause it,” They heard Sam scold Tony.

James looked up to see Natasha at the doorway as well and instantly he was wracked with guilt.

“I think I…” James spit, “think I broke your toilet.” Splinters of ceramic wove in a crackling pattern from the seat to the base, his metal arm clutching at the seat with a much-too-strong hold.

“And I don’t think I care, seeing as it’s really Tony’s…” Natasha knelt beside James, offering him a wet towel to wipe his face with.

“Can I get you anything?” Steve looked partially amused and partially concerned.

James shook his head. “Just get the rest of those pastries outta’ the room before I go back.”

The rest of the movie-marathon was uneventful, except for two instances:

The first was when Thor insisted Darth Vader needed to be taken out—and Stark’s firm rebuttal that he wouldn’t be saying that at the end of the second movie. No one had been ready for Thor’s indignant reaction upon learning that Darth Vader was, in fact, Luke Skywalker’s father. The Asgardian Prince had been so distraught that he thundered out of the room and paced through the hallways of the tower, only returning when Tony insisted that the third movie would solve everything.

The second instance had been much quieter. James’ hand fluttered over Natasha’s side when Han Solo was about to be encased in carbonite. The scene was too much like his own “encasement” in the cryogenics tank, Natasha’s horrified face playing over his memory. The soft stroke of fingers
through his hair pulled him back to the present and he released his likely painful grip on her waist. James met her gaze and lowered his face to kiss her when Princess Leia confessed to Han Solo that she loved him.

“I know.” Came Han Solo’s reply, and James jolted, halting halfway to Natasha’s lips and snapping his neck to glare at the movie screen.

“What the hell?” James’ outburst brought on the attention of every eye in the room. “You don’t—that’s not—you’re s’posed to say it back—”

“I know, man,” Sam was smiling, entertained by James’ outrage. “Tell me about it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony waved at them irritably. “Fan Forums everywhere have talked it to death for the last forty years. He’s a scoundrel, that’s what scoundrels do.”

— “Small Memory” Jon Hopkins—

It was early morning when Natasha woke in her bed, head snuggled against James’ shoulder, her arm flung over his chest. Thanking whatever it was that woke her, Natasha was perfectly content to stare, exhaling in satisfaction at the picture before her. James’ features were so masculine that it made her ache—curved cheekbones, the slight dimple in his chin, the mocha tone of his skin, and the color of his shut eyelids. James was the picture of comfort with his handsome face against a plush pillow and his arm stretched lazily above his head. She wanted so badly to reach out and brush her fingers through his dark brown locks, but she didn’t want to disturb this moment of bliss.

James grunted, shifting to his side and pulling her closer against him, which inevitably pressed her face against his chest. It’s like cuddling an octopus, she thought, trying to stifle a laugh.

“Are you awake?” She whispered, her lips brushing up against a scarred pectoral muscle.

Another grunt hummed in his throat above her head.

“Do you want some coffee and chocolate?”

There was no grunt this time and James made no effort to move.

Natasha waited for a few moments longer before whispering into his chest.

“Do you know why love is for children?” She said softly in Russian.

No answer. She smiled.

“Because children are innocent and can love with everything they have.”

Still no answer, but that only made Natasha brave enough to speak on.

“I can’t remember being innocent. I don’t think I ever have been. But you make me feel like I am.”

James snuggled closer, adjusting his position in sleep.

“I love you, James.”

He’d heard it all. James listened quietly to Natasha’s confessions and it made his heart swell.
“I'm not so innocent myself.” He whispered to her in Russian, startling her into staring up at his face. “And I love you, Natasha.”

Chapter End Notes

No chapter update tomorrow, new chapter comes on Monday-- and there will be PERIL! *whooshes cape dramatically and scurries for an exit while wagging evil eyebrows*

There was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you find grammar mistakes!
Re-integration

Chapter Summary

James and his Hydra-programming are battle-tested...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`int`e`gra`tion ree-in-tuh-grey-shuhn noun : the process of returning the mind to an cohesive state after it has been deranged by phychosis / the process of recalling an entire memory from a partial cue, as remembering a speech upon hearing the first few words.

--“One Way Or Another” Until the Ribbon Breaks--

James was never bothered by Natasha’s tendency to wake before dawn. It also never bothered him on the rare mornings when she gently coaxed him to wake with her. Those mornings were always well worth it. If someone had told James ten months ago that he would be lucky enough to carelessly watch the sun rise with a beautiful woman, he’d have accused them of lying and threatened bodily harm.

The vibrant hues of blue blended into yellow as the sun’s illumination grew, the soft and warm wind stirring through James’ hair as he sat beside said beautiful woman, and he let himself sigh in complete contentment with the moment. God knew he didn’t have enough moments like these; he’d store them away for later, for when reality decided not to be merciful.

They were both satisfied to sit in silence, and James felt he could have sat there for hours doing nothing but watch the change of colors in the sky—until his stomach grumbled. James sighed reluctantly.

She chortled. “It was bound to happen eventually. Come on.”

Natasha caught him by the hand and led him back to the common room, stealing kisses along the way and griping about the scratchiness of his chin. James’ serum might not work the same way Steve’s did, but one thing they had in common was rapid hair growth.

They were steps from the kitchen and he wasn’t sure what alerted him—just a feeling—but his body tensed with the awareness that they weren’t alone. No matter what healing Thor’s world had done for him, James couldn’t fight ingrained instinct and his thoughts came in rapid segments.
Assess the amount of targets.

Knife in left boot, handgun in side-holster.

Non-armor articles of clothing on myself or Natasha.

Secure Natasha. She was safe behind his left arm, where he’d pinned her gently between himself and the wall.

“James?”

He trusted her to find a weapon and alert the others in a timely manner if it came to it.

Assess venturing further into exposed position or guarding Natasha.

“James,” she was touching his arm, attempting to calm him, but his muscles tensed and he barked out a sharp, “What?” before taking his eyes off of the kitchen to look down at her.

“It’s okay,” She stepped out from behind him and he resisted the urge to throw her back against the wall.

Enemy. Unsafe. Aren’t you tracking that? His blazing eyes tried to communicate to her.

But hers were trying to say something as well. I’m safe. You’re safe. Misunderstanding. She took a few steps and James fought every fire-pained nerve not to leap in front of her, keeping his feet where they were.

“It’s just Nick,” She waved him over.

A strangled breath left James’ lungs and he flexed his right hand to stop it from trembling after such an unexpected adrenaline rush. Resentment prickled at him and he growled as he strode into the kitchen after Natasha.

“Merciful God— tell me you’re not moving into the tower, too.” James sneered at Fury. “What do you want?”

“Hmph.” Nick answered, pawing through the contents of the cupboard. “While that doesn’t sound much like a thank you, I’ll say ‘you’re welcome’ anyway.”

James scoffed, “Somehow I feel like you telling me Natasha was in trouble was less of a favor to me and more of a favor to you.”

“I wasn’t in trouble,” Natasha interjected, crossing her arms and leaning her hip against the countertop. James inwardly moaned—why did she have to look so amazing and tempting right now?

“If I hadn’t asked you to stop them from scrambling her brains and turning her into Hydra’s next asset, we’d be having a completely different conversation right now.”

While there was one thing James appreciated about Fury—that the man didn’t care for small-talk and didn’t treat James like he was about to fall apart— Nick had chosen the wrong morning and the wrong red-headed lover to pick on.

“She wouldn’t have let them,” James gritted his teeth and leaned close to the dark man’s face. “She could have taken down every single one of them by herself—the only reason she didn’t is because I showed up and blew her plans to hell.” He backed away, expression falling, eyes tentatively meeting hers.
Natasha looked touched. As though she had no idea the amount of confidence James had in her. He mentally kicked himself. They’d been so caught up in his disappearance to Asgard that what had happened in the sewers hadn’t once come up.

“While that’s probably true, you both got back safely.” Nick found what he wanted in the cupboard and scooped coffee grounds into the filter of the coffee-maker. James had never touched that machine and heaved a sigh of relief that Nick hadn’t gone for the French press. That was Steve’s French press. Fury had already stepped on too many figurative toes that morning for James’ liking.

“Nick, we’ve got things to do,” Natasha’s patient voice grated against James’ nerves. She didn’t have to be so kind to him. “Was there something you needed help with?”

“I’m here to help you,” Nick poured water into the coffee machine and pressed a button, turning around to face them fully and bringing out a handful of folded papers from his jacket. “Or, more specifically, I’m here to help Captain America.” He held out the papers to James, “A favor for a favor.”

The coffee-maker sputtered and spit out brownish liquid James assumed passed for coffee while he fingered through the papers, brows scrunching together. There were pictures of Steve, in and out of uniform, and there were words written in code beside each of the pictures—one of them was a picture of Steve before the super-soldier serum. The old photo struck a chord in James, the scantest flash of a memory—throwing an arm over the shorter man’s shoulder and slapping the newspaper against his chest, announcing that on his last night before shipping out, they were going to see a science exhibit—and then James turned his eyes up to Nick again.

“Am I supposed to know what this is?” There was no venom in his voice, just the curiosity of a man who had forgotten too much and remembered too little.

“No,” Nick shook his head, grasping a coffee mug and blowing on the hot contents before taking a sip. “But this information is most valuable to you. Hydra’s not the only cranky bastard trying to get their hands on you, Natasha, Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner, Tony Stark—any of you, really. Anyone connected with the super-soldier serum will need to watch their back for a good long while.”

“Have you cracked this code yet?” James shuffled the papers, looking for a translation.

“Not yet. Don’t have a whole department dedicated to that sort of thing anymore,” Nick smiled wryly. “I’m just me. A man with resources. And my resources brought this to my attention. Someone is after Steve.”

“You said ‘favor for a favor’,?” James face scrunched into heavy skepticism. “What’s the favor you’re askin’ me for?”

“Protection,” Nick sipped at his coffee again—the cup was nearly empty and James assumed Nick had lost his tongue’s sense of heat or taste. “For Steve Rogers. Something you were planning on doing anyway. But something easier done if you’re out in the field with him.”

James shook his head, letting out an ironic laugh. “I knew this was coming. I just didn’t think I’d let you sell it to me so fast.”

“So, you’re in?” Nick set the mug down in the sink.

“I’d do anything for Steve.” James murmured, wishing Nick would just get out of the tower and leave me alone with Natasha!
When James approached Steve to talk about joining the Avengers on missions, his friend was all-too-willing to accept, the gleeful smile on his face enough to break James’ heart. But then they got to the heart of the matter and Steve’s optimism faded. Whoever was looking for Steve would just as easily settle the former Winter Soldier. James wasn’t as concerned for his own safety as Steve’s, but that had always been the problem with their relationship.

That evening was full of nightmares. They weren’t memories, they were fears of what was ahead. Steve, lying broken and bloody in James’ arms. Natasha burnt alive. Sam falling out of the sky with one wing. Even images of Thor being ripped apart. And then there was snow. So much snow. And it was burying James alive…

He shivered under the blanket, reaching up to cover his face with his shaking hands. Not again, not that dream again. Freezing. Too much ice. Was it about the cryogenics tank? Or was it falling from the train? Maybe it was Russia again… cold. Too cold. He tried, really he did, not to shake so hard that it woke Natasha, but it was fruitless.

“James,” Her hand was warm on his shoulder. “What’s—you’re freezing.”

He wanted to shrug off her hand, to tell her it was okay, just go back to sleep, but he knew she wouldn’t leave him alone until he responded to her. His mouth wouldn’t open, though. Too cold. But, bless her, Natasha didn’t offer to draw up a hot bath, she didn’t insist that he put on more layers, and she didn’t get up to grab more blankets. She simply scooted closer to him and pressed soft kisses to his neck before settling herself back to sleep at his side, an arm and a leg draping over him casually, as though she weren’t trying to warm him up. Clever woman.

James could ride a fine line between embarrassment and anger, and the usual reaction he elicited—someone trying to baby him or act like he couldn’t handle what was going on—only exacerbated that struggle. Natasha and Thor seemed to be the only ones that understood his unspoken plea: treat me like I’m normal and I’ll respond normally.

Natasha’s body heat was helping, but James couldn’t stop shivering from the residual cold of the dream. In a quick movement, Natasha reached down to the foot of the bed and pulled something up and over him. Oh. The cloak. The weight of it was comforting. His own personal cocoon.

“Better?” Natasha whispered from where her nose brushed against his collar bone. The touch made him shudder, but at least this time it wasn’t from cold.

“Mm-hm.” His fingers twitched against her shoulder, stroking the soft skin there and grounding himself in the scent of her shampoo and the weight of the cloak. The chill was gone and he was contentedly warm once more.

“Love you.” She nibbled at his ear.

“You, too…”

James wasn’t even supposed to be ground-level with the rest of the Avengers, but circumstances had forced him from his perch at the tallest building, away from his high-powered rifle.

Clint and Natasha had been pinned down in the open square by multiple Demolition Men— is that really what they were calling themselves?—and Tony had been too busy dismantling a bomb to lend assistance, so that only left Banner and Rogers. James had let a word linger in the air, “Captain…?”
that unspoken question that wasn’t quite asking for permission, but was definitely an offer. Steve had
reluctantly agreed, outnumbered by a hoard of the D-Men and too far to get there in time.

The skies darkened as James slashed out at numerous foes, a wave of relief running through his spine
as Thor’s lightning swept downwards and fried five Demolition Men. Seriously—who were these
morons and why were they wielding construction tools? It didn’t matter, whatever bone they’d
decided to pick with the Avengers, they had come fully prepared.

Thor roared and threw out his hammer as Clint’s arrows flew through the air, but it was Natasha’s
electric armbands that caught James’ eye. What she couldn’t supply in strength, she more than made
up for with precise motion and electric current. If only he had a moment to watch her graceful
form…

“Soldier!” One of the Demolition-Men shouted. “Hydra sends its regards!” And then the man began
to speak to him in Russian, wooing the skulking predator lurking at the back of James’ head,
ushering the Winter Soldier’s programming to the forefront of his mind to unleash its sickly sweet
rage.

James’ steps faltered and he stood as though bound by shackles. He had forgotten those words, that
entralling and terrible spell over his conscience, but another song of magic had already begun.

Thor’s loud and booming voice uttered words in an alien tongue, a menacing threat against the one
who had used the trigger words against James and a chant to press back the Winter Soldier. Alien it
might be, but Thor had told him the English words weeks ago:

\[
\text{Back, back, back—into the depths again for your soundless slumber— down into the dark}
\text{ocean with your uncivil tongue, brawl no more this day. Peace. Learn the quiet and rest until you}
\text{are bidden to return—but not today. Back, back, back.}
\]

The tune lulled the dark menace downward in James’ head and he drooped under the weight of the
spell, as though his physical form embodied the slinking back of the Winter Soldier. Hands held him
upright and his mind cleared, head swinging forward as he returned to his center of gravity. He
couldn’t tell who was helping him to stand, but Thor stood before him, hand outstretched to him with
that fatherly expression James had secretly become so reliant on.

“There is still more to do, my friend,” Thor grinned at him. James clapped his hand against Thor’s
and took a deep breath to clear his senses, jumping back into the fight.

And while he struck out at his enemies, his clear head supplied a fond memory, recalling aged the
voice of his Basic Military Training instructor:

“If ya fall off’a the horse, ya get right back into that damn saddle— else the fear’ll tell ya not to set
on the horse again. Better ta look that fear in the eye while yer \textit{in} the saddle, an' kick that fear's ass
straight to hell, so's ya can keep riding yer steed.”

Chapter End Notes

That wasn't peril, by the way. Just you wait... ;}
Chapter Summary

In which there is peril... and the author strongly suggests you listen to the song prompts while you read the chapter...

Chapter Notes

I will murder you with feels. Here’s some music to make it more painful:

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

reˈforˌməˈʃən ref-er-mey-shuhn noun: the action or process of changing to make better

--“It’s Happening Again” James Newton Howard--

The Demolition Men were far too organized to be amateurs, supplied too well, and their goals were too well-placed... but when it came down to the individuals, they were just a bunch of thugs. So, how did a mass amount of criminals end up being so effective? There was really only one answer, but Natasha dreaded to say it, let alone think it: someone was helping them.

The Avengers had been called out once more to fight against this new foe. Their battle in an office-building, crowded by cubicles and file cabinets, had come to an end and now Natasha scanning their surroundings as though for the first time. It was the first of the building’s they’d evacuated that day, silent and dark despite the sunlight that tried to filter in through the windows, and it caused Natasha’s instincts to flare immediately.

“Captain,” She came to stand beside Steve and Sam, the only other two in the building with her. “This looks familiar. Do you know what this place is?”

Rogers nudged a toppled-over filing cabinet with his boot. “Nick’s resurrecting Shield.”

“This is the new Shield?” Sam raised a quizzical brow at the ransacked space, almost in disgust.

“One of the pieces, most likely,” Natasha said, crossing her arms. “That’s how it started the first time—plant the departments in separate locations, that way it’s harder to take down when it’s still so vulnerable.”

“The Demolition Men have been targeting Shield’s new departments, then?” Sam moved over to a desk and shuffled through a few papers. “But these Demo guys are a bunch of idiots, how could—”
“They’re a bunch of idiots who now have ties to Hydra.” Steve interrupted. “Hydra’s too weak to stand on its own legs, but they have experience and resources. All they lack is the manpower to carry it out.”

“So they’re using the Demolition Men to do their dirty work?” Sam blew out a sharp breath. “That’s… that’s actually pretty brilliant.”

“James,” Steve spoke, pressing a finger to his earpiece. “Did you hear all that?”

“I heard you, Captain,” James voice crackled into all of their earpieces. “Cut off one head…”

“Yeah, yeah. How are we looking out there?”

“Clint’s coming to join you, Banner and Thor are still under fire on First St., Stark is working on dismantling the bomb, and I’m up rooftop across from your building—”

Something glinted in the sun and Natasha peered through the window to see James wave at them with his metal arm.

“— tracking a swarm of Demo men coming your way.” James sounded nervous, like he wanted to jump up and take them all on by himself. “Damn, they’re fast—I can already see a hoard on the first floor. They’re gonna bottleneck you. You need to get out of there now or I’m coming in to give you backup.”

“Negative,” Steve rolled the word off of his tongue like he understood how badly James wanted to leave the roof.

Clint’s voice came over the communication’s link. “I second that. Am I coming in for backup too or are you getting out like the Soldier says?”

“Stay where you are, Hawkeye. We’re heading out,” Steve said, already in motion with Sam and Natasha following behind.

---“Castle Of Glass (M. Shinoda Remix)” Mike Shinoda---

They were just leaving the cubicles and entering a spiral stairwell when they heard the raucous of Demolition Men on the levels below.

Natasha could see something working in Steve’s eyes—that fast-paced brain strategizing and computing quicker than hers or Sam’s—and he bent over the railing to look below. Steve muttered a curse under his breath before looking to the five levels above them. At the top, the ceiling bore a circular glass window to the bright blue sky and puffy clouds.

“Stand back.” Steve ushered, waving them away from the railing, “Up against the wall, there.”

Leaning over the railing with his rifle, Rogers shot at the ceiling window, dashing back against the wall as the shards of glass fell through the air and shattered over the heads of the Demolition Men below.

“I don’t think glass is gonna slow ‘em down much, Cap,” Sam looked at him like Steve was crazy, and suddenly Steve grabbed one of Sam’s shoulders.

“Get Natasha out of here and then come back for me.”
“Aw, hell no!” Sam shook his head furiously at the same time Natasha swore at Steve in Russian.

Steve spoke quickly and practically. “Three of us won’t last against that many Demolition Men, we’re in the middle of the building and help can’t get to us quickly, you can’t carry the both of us, and I’ll be damned if I let you take me first and leave Natasha all by herself.” It was clear he’d thought through the variables enough and they were wasting time by arguing when the masses of D-men were nearly there. If they didn’t make a decision now, the decision would be made for them.

Sam was shaking his head, but he moved toward Natasha.

“You keep your damn hands to yourself—I’m staying right here!” Natasha shouted at him, stepping back and bumping into Steve, who had his arms around her in a second, subduing her struggling limbs to pass her off to Sam.

“No! Let go! No!”

But Steve was too strong and Sam gripped her, nearly pulling her arm out of its socket as he blasted through the air. There was no point in struggling now that she was dangling over empty space and Natasha threw her arms around his waist as they flew through the broken window. She took one last glance downward and saw the wave of D-men rush over Rogers like a torrent of water.

The bright sun blinded Natasha before she realized Sam was flying over to James’ rooftop.

“Drop me and go get Steve!” Natasha shouted, considering letting go once they were over the building, but Sam probably knew what she was thinking and gripped the back of her jacket. “James can catch me—just go get Steve!”

“Barnes!” Sam warned over the comm link. “Heads up!”

James looked up just in time, dropping his rifle when he saw Sam release his hold on Natasha. The feeling of weightlessness lasted a few seconds before her shoulder and knee collided with James’ uplifted arms. They both toppled backwards and James grunted under Natasha’s weight, snarling at Sam in Russian.

“—the hell does he think he’s doing!” James sat and pulled Natasha upright in his lap, hands moving over her to check for injuries. “Are you hurt? If he so much as scraped your knuckle in that fall—”

“Get up!” There was desperate tremor in her voice. “Steve—he’s still in the building—the D-men—he needs cover fire!”

James jumped to his feet in an instant, pulling Natasha alongside him.

“Where?” He demanded, leaning over the railing of the building’s edge and offering Natasha one of three rifles beside them. Gladly accepting, she pointed—across the street, left corner of the building, eighth floor, where hordes on hordes of Demolition Men ran up the stairwell.

“Target the third floor,” James indicated in a controlled tone, allowing something dark to take over and keep him focused. “Take out three of the stragglers and then aim one floor up. Three shots, one floor up, repeat.”

Natasha silently obeyed, peering through the scope on her weapon and carrying out his instructions exactly. The Demolition Men near the lower levels were slow, waiting for the ones above them to go a little faster—and they were also the ones most vulnerable at the moment.

A squeeze of the trigger. Click. Click. Click. Three fired shots caused the D-men to dart away from
the window, no longer moving up the stairs.

Click. Click. Click. Natasha heard James’ weapon fire, targeting them at the top. She couldn’t see Steve on the stairwell anymore and assumed he had gone back to the office-area, but the least she and James could do was stop the influx of enemies pouring in at him until Sam could get there.

Click. Click. Click. Natasha worked her way up the flight of stairs, reloading when necessary and keeping her shots concise and efficient. James’ worked his way from the top downward and soon the men were in such chaos that up or down the stairs didn’t matter to them anymore.

“Sam,” James spoke coldly into his comm. “Tell me you found him.”

The sound of a scuffle filled everyone’s ear-pieces, but finally Sam crackled out, “I found him—I’m right here with him.”

“Get him out right the hell now.”

“Can’t do that.” Sam grunted, obviously struggling with an opponent. “One of these bastards broke the wings. I’m stuck here with him.”

“Steve?”

No answer.

“Steve?” James tried again.

“His ear-piece isn’t working.” Sam huffed.

“Barton?” James called. “Do you think you can get in there?”

“I’m already on it.” Clint said. The sounds of struggle that had accompanied Sam’s voice were now becoming the same background noise as Barton’s. “Those guys on the stairs are pissed, though. You stopped ‘em for a while, but they’ll be back if we don’t do something… bigger.”

“You’re the one with the explosive arrows.” James growled. “Tony, are you done with that god-awful machine yet?”

“Who died and made you the Captain?” Tony irritably chimed in.

Out of the corner of her eye, Natasha watched James’ face drop and his eyes squint into a murderous glower. “Steve Rogers will if you don’t hurry up.”

“Two minutes.” Tony interjected, still busy with a bomb the Demolition Men had left in another building.

“Fine, where’s Banner?” James tilted his head toward Natasha. “Er… he doesn’t have an ear-piece, does he?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

James sighed. “I’ve got one shot at this,” he picked up an alternate rifle, aiming it at the top of the stairwell. It was a smaller version of a rocket launcher, the most volatile weapon the Avengers felt comfortable giving him, even though he’d groused that it was a glorified potato-gun. “I’m gonna try and take out the top of the stairs.”

Lining up the sighting with this scope, James blew out a steadying breath, but before he could pull
the trigger, a pain-filled scream filled their ears.

--“Trauma Room” James Newton Howard--

Steve’s comm link might not be working, but Sam’s was, and that’s why James heard Steve’s unholy, bone-shattering scream.

“The Captain’s down!” James heard Clint say over the comm. “The D-men are crowding us in here!”

He expected to feel torn between taking the shot and hurrying to Steve, but the Winter Soldier knew his business of waiting patiently for the right opportunity. Training kicked in and he judged the distance between buildings again. Watch the wind-speed. Compensate for building sway. Altitude… Count down from five…

“Is anyone else coming?” Barton called into the open link again, but James sank to deep into training to register an emotional response.

Boom! The crack of the recoil against James’ shoulder. The trail of smoke following the rifle’s round. The small explosion that happened outside of the building. The second explosion at the inside of the building. The crumbling of the stairs at the top, making it impossible for anyone to even leap across it.

James snapped up from his spot and ran like hell with his rifle. How he made his way to the ground floor of Steve’s building was an adrenaline-hazed mystery, but he remembered Natasha tossing him a grapple-gun and wrapping his arm around her waist as he let the rope lower them down. That same gun was in his hand now, pulling them upward, beyond the damaged stairwell and right to the floor Steve, Sam, and Barton were on.

Get to Steve, get to Steve, get to Steve.

Thugs in construction gear—using nail guns of all things, jackhammers, and small wrecking balls—were coming at Sam and Clint repeatedly beside a handful of damaged cubicles.

And with his opponents turning their backs to him, it was almost too easy for James.

Muscle memory, rapid calculation, and adrenaline took over, dead or defeated bodies heaping around him in a blur. It took someone shouting his name repeatedly to come out of his stupor and acknowledge that there was no one left to fight. Before James registered the other Avengers, he saw the trail of blood on the ground and followed it in a foggy haze to its source.

“No, no, no, no,” James whispered. Steve.

Even unconscious, Steve’s face was twisted into a grimace, and he lay flat on his back beneath Sam’s capable hands. The fabric between Steve’s abdomen and Wilson’s soaked fingers was blood-stained where he applied pressure, only pulling back when James nudged the damp cloth enough to see the damage beneath. There was a hole in Steve’s middle, slightly larger than James’ fist.

“—came at him with a jack-hammer.” Clint sounded bewildered and guilty, kneeling beside James. “Just started drilling away at him before I could—”

Wakefulness returning, Steve’s face contorted and then he unleashed the worst sound James had ever heard in his life. There was a gasping breath and then a scream, a distraught plea overwhelmed by
pain. But the cry stuttered wetly in his throat, as though the hole in his middle robbed him of air and Steve’s body tremored as he tried to take another breath, his legs writhing against the dusty carpet beneath him.

“Steve!” Sam pressed hard against Steve’s shoulders to keep him from sitting up. “I need you to stay still!”

The blond soldier nodded and relaxed his arms obediently, but continued to convulse and draw in uneven breaths, small streams of blood making their way through his jacket and pooling on the floor underneath him.

“Stark,” James wasn’t sure how he found his voice, but he did, pressing a finger to his ear-piece. “Can you fly Steve out—”

“I’m already on my way.”

“Cap,” Sam was putting a thumb under Steve’s left eye, leaning forward to get a better look at his pupils. “No fallin’ asleep right now. Stay awake, talk to Bucky.”

“We—” Steve gulped air loudly. “We stop ‘em?” He moaned an odd gurgling noise, rolling his head to look at James. “Everyone out? Bomb?”

“Tony’s done with the bomb,” James tried to keep his voice steady, but he couldn’t shake the horror that he might be watching his best friend die after finally feeling like things were looking up. “No more D-men coming up here. They know you’ll give ‘em hell if they do.” He tried to smile, but his muscles wouldn’t obey.

“You—okay?” Steve spit up a combination of saliva and blood. “Everyone okay?”

James took up Steve’s hand and cradled it between his own. “On second thought, shut up, Steve.”

--“Some” Nils Frahm--

James fought hard to stay by Steve’s side from the moment he entered the medical building, but he knew full well that he couldn’t go into the operating room. Refusing to sit, he took guard stoically by the door with an unrelenting scowl. Sam was nearby and his Falcon gear was a strange contradiction to the way he lounged in a chair and, after two hours, dozed off.

After three hours, the head physician finally joined them in the hallway.

“Tell me.” James uttered concisely, waiting for the grey-haired man in silver glasses to speak.

“I’m not working with exact science here.” The doctor reminded him irritably—or was it wearily? He had just spent three hours wrestling with physiology that healed faster than they could probably keep up with.

“Based on what I know, the muscle and tissue damage will definitely heal because of Dr. Erskine’s super-soldier serum. Captain Rogers’ bones are even re-knitting themselves in the spinal column where he was struck. But as for major organs… his liver was punctured and one of his kidneys was obliterated. His liver might or might not repair itself, I don’t know. The kidney’s the hard part—there are pieces, but I can’t put it back together like a puzzle, and even the serum can’t magically grow a new kidney from nothing.”
“People make do with a single kidney all the time,” Sam’s brows furrowed.

“Yes, but Captain America can’t.” The Doctor said condescendingly. “His body’s much different than yours or mine and he needs more than we do to function because of the serum—”

“What about a donor?” Sam interrupted.

“The average kidney won’t work.” The doctor took off his glasses and wiped his brow tiredly. “Like I said, he’s got super-soldier—”

“What about me?” James spoke up without a second thought.

“What about you?” The put his glasses back on and looked James up and down.

“I don’t have the same serum, but I’ve got… something,” James hesitated on the details, but the doctor took a good look at him.

“Who are—?”

James rolled up his left sleeve and looked away from the doctor’s gaze, the metal of his fingers glinting in the hospital light. He was waiting for the judgement, or the call for security, or… well, whatever a normal person would do after finding out who he was.

The doctor’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t look frightened. “That’s not what I was expecting.”

“You know who I am.” James could see it in the man’s face.

“Anyone who watches TV knows who you are.” The doctor didn’t look mistrusting, but something about him was irritating the hell out of James. Maybe it was just that he was Steve’s doctor.

“Then you know what I can do to people who aren’t being compliant.” James snarled, even though he himself recognized the empty threat lacked its usual venom. He was desperate—Steve needed help.

“And I’ve been in my practice long enough not to be intimidated by patient’s loved ones.” The man looked James square in the eye, calling his bluff. “Even if they’re world-renown assassins.”

Bravery. Good. This guy would need it if he was going to operate on a super soldier that anesthesia couldn’t put under. He’d stared down the Winter Soldier and had been able to hold his own. James’ inhibitions about the physician melted away and he gave a satisfied nod.

“Would it work to give Steve one of my kidneys?” James rolled the sleeve back down.

“Before you answer that,” Sam held up a hand, looking James in the eye. “How are you supposed to walk around with only one kidney?”

James growled and pointed at where he could see Steve through the window. “That’s Captain effing America in that room and I’m the spat out leftovers of a long-dead assassin organization.” He turned his eyes to the doctor. “Blood, marrow, skin grafts—whatever I’ve got that Steve’s missing—anything you need, you take it.”

The doctor nodded with a glint of admiration in his eye. “Lots of people have the wrong idea about you. I hope I’m the first of many to admit that.” He held out a hand and James paused before reaching to give him a handshake.

“Barkley,” the man introduced himself.
Aside from the quiet beeps of machines and Steve’s slight wheezing, the hospital room was quiet—lending Natasha some much-needed peace.

“What’re they sayin’?” Steve whispered, propped up enough in the hospital bed to see James and Sam speaking to the doctor through the window.

Of course Steve would remember that she could read lips. And of course she didn’t have it in her to lie to him.

“James is offering to give you a kidney.” She pressed a soft kiss to Steve’s temple without relinquishing her firm hold on his hand, stroking her thumb along his wrist.


Natasha turned her eyes back to the window and squinted. “…And blood, and marrow, and skin…”

Steve coughed, a wince crinkling his forehead and causing him to grit his teeth. “That’s… a little overboard.”

“Steve,” Natasha raised an eyebrow at him, continuing to rub her thumb along his wrist. “You do know you’ve got a hole in your middle the size of a grapefruit, right? That’s not so overboard…”

“No, no, that’s not how this works.” A humorous smile spread across his face and he tilted his head to look at her. The blood vessels in his eyes ran red and agitated, but his blues shined through despite it. “See, I’m supposed to say ‘I’m fine’ and then escape from this hospital bed and go find some thugs to rough up, all while forgetting I’m injured.”

“Not a good plan if you’re telling me beforehand.” Natasha smirked at him, squeezing gently at his hand with both sets of fingers. “I’ll have Thor set his hammer down in your lap and then sit back and watch you squirm while I eat a bowl of popcorn. Maybe I could sell tickets.”

That summoned an even brighter smile from Steve, his blue eyes glistening and his mouth twitching while he suppressed a painful laugh. “Ugh, just as long as I get a cut of the profit…”

Steve’s face scrunched as a wave of agony passed through him, his right hand shooting out to the handle of the bed and his left hand gripping Natasha’s with enough strength to crush it. She cringed under the pressure of his hold, but made no sound, eyes fixed on his strained expression and willing the discomfort to go away with every trembling breath.

“Sorr—” He let go of her hand, realizing he was hurting her, and quickly grabbed at the railing until his knuckles were white, the veins in his forehead becoming more pronounced as he ducked his head and continued to grit his teeth. “Not fine—I’m not fine—”

Natasha didn’t hesitate to press the button on the bed, summoning the nurse before tapping at the window to get everyone’s attention. Machines were starting to beep louder and the railing on Steve’s bed squealed under the exertion of his muscles. Hospital staff poured into the room and Natasha made way, her heart sinking in sympathy when she caught James’ fearfully lost expression in the doorway. James jolted in surprise when Steve gave a sharp cry, mangling the hospital bed further in his powerful grip. But Natasha couldn’t look—it would haunt her to look—let the doctors handle it, she needed to escape!
“James, we need to let them do their job.” Sam’s hand was on James’ shoulder, trying to lead him away, but James resisted and stayed where he was, fixated on the medical staff as they worked over Steve.

Natasha wanted so badly to leave, considered herself a coward for wanting to get away from Steve’s broken cries of torment, and stood in front of James—not blocking his view, but keeping herself from looking back.

“She nearly whimpered, vision blurring with tears, and it shook James from his manic gaze to look at her instead. He was clearly torn between staying with Steve and helping Natasha, but eventually he nodded and made slow steps backward. "Wait!" One of the nurses called, immediately causing them to turn around. “Um…” The short, blonde woman held Captain America’s shield in her small arms. “He said… can you take this?”

If he wasn’t already in shock, Natasha swore she could see it consume James as he tentatively stretched forward. Once one of the arm straps touched his fingers, the nurse whirled and headed back for the room, and the shield might have clattered to the floor if James hadn’t caught it in time.

CNN News Channel 48 “We have breaking news coming to you live from our regular daytime anchor Amy Miller at the Banner Hospital in down-town New York. Amy, can you tell us what’s going on down there?”

“Well, we’ve just confirmed rumors that the Avengers brought none other than Captain America himself to the cardiovascular wing of Banner Hospital. He arrived in critical condition and we are getting mixed reports, but a majority of them say that he has already passed away…”

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t kill me yet. I promise I’ll make it better.
Chapter Summary

Surgery and secrets...

Chapter Notes

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES—found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Re`pre`sen`ta`tion rep-ri-zen-tee-shuhn noun: the description or portrayal of something in a particular way or being of a certain nature

--“I Found” Amber Run--

Natasha thought she could handle it, watching through the observation window at the operation room.

“I know you’re not happy about this—” James started to say, tracing his fingers along Natasha’s lips.

“This is your choice to make, not mine. I don’t have to be happy about it.” She rebutted, exhaling past the nervous tension in her throat.

His face relaxed into a small, but relieved smile. He obviously wasn’t expecting that answer. But choice was something Hydra had stolen from him; James was finally making decisions for himself again and Natasha would be damned if she ever tried to take that away. Even if she disagreed with his choices to be put under the knife.

Doctor Barkley stood in the narrow gap between two operating tables—on one table lay the battered Steve, whose skin had taken on grey hues, a plastic breathing mask covering his nose and mouth. On the other table, James was lying bare under a clean sheet, having been put under only minutes ago. It was a relief his modest super-serum allowed anesthesia to work, but the same couldn’t be said of Steve Rogers.

“Are you sure you want to be here?” Sam asked from beside Natasha.

“I don’t know what else to do right now.” She admitted.

She could do this, even if Natasha felt the way Steve looked—bare, cut open for the world to see. Two of the men she loved most were strapped to tables under people with sharp instruments. And there was nothing she could do to help. But she could watch. Maybe that would somehow lend them
strength. Maybe that would stop anything bad from happening.

An oxygen tank of Banner’s tranquilizers, concocted for the Hulk, sat on the floor, a tube running to Steve’s mask. Everyone hoped it would be enough to keep Rogers under for the entire procedure, but the physicians couldn’t be certain how much to dose him with. He was visibly edging in and out of consciousness and Natasha’s heart fluttered at the first grunt he made, grabbing for Sam’s hand reflexively.

“Unh,” Steve groaned an objection when a nurse touched his open wound, his head lolling under the clear mask over his face. The nurse waited and Doctor Barkley ordered the anesthesiologist to up the dosage on the tranquilizers, nodding at the nurse to continue her probing.

“Unh,” Steve repeated louder, beads of sweat rolling down from his forehead as he weakly flexed against the restraints around his wrists.

“Sam,” Natasha whispered, not knowing herself what she was asking for. She could do this. She could do this. She could—

Tony Stark slid into the room like a ghost, wearing rubber gloves, a mouth covering, and a hairnet, moving toward the machine attached to Steve’s mask and adjusting a dial on the side of it. It was curious how he’d entered the room without causing a disturbance, but Natasha was grateful to see that his adjustments to the machine did their job—Steve’s head tilted to the side and stayed there, muscles loosening, eyes shutting, and hands going limp.

Sam let out a loud breath of relief and rubbed circles into Natasha’s back, using his other hand to loosen her grip on the windowsill. Her white knuckles and broken fingernails revealed she’d been gripping it like a lifeline.

“Do you know how many times I’ve done this, Sam?” Natasha muttered brokenly. “How many times I’ve sat behind a window like this and watched someone I care about getting worked on?”

Sam stole his eyes from the window and looked down at her, shaking his head slowly.

“It’s more than the fingers on one hand.” She slouched under the weight of so many awful memories. “And every time, it hasn’t ended well.”

“Well, this time it will.” Sam reassured her, pushing on her shoulder to guide her away from the window. “Because this time, you’re not watching.”

Natasha argued, but Sam cut her off. “This time, you’re going to do what us average people do when family is in the hospital—you’re finding somewhere not here to sit so you can agonize over the next few hours. Then someone’s going to call you and tell you that everything went fine and that visiting hours are between 9am and 6pm.”

Natasha allowed herself to be led from the observation room, feet moving mechanically down a brightly-lit hall as Sam pulled her by her hand—and that’s when they bumped into Bruce.

“How’s it going in there?” He rubbed his hands together nervously, scrutinizing their faces like he expected bad news.

“They’ve started, but things are looking good,” Sam sounded bent on keeping optimistic. “And Natasha’s going back to the tower to get some sleep.”

She pulled her hand out of his in disgust. “I’d rather sleep in the janitor’s closet than head back to the tower.”
“It’s not a good idea to leave the hospital right now…” Bruce looked over his shoulder and rubbed his hands together again. “There’s… I barely made it past the reporters at the back entrance. Apparently, someone said they thought Steve might be dead and they’re running with it…” He grimaced at them and shoved his hands into his pockets. “And then one of the nurses told them about Bucky holding the shield and they’re kind of running with that, too.”

“What?” Natasha was exhausted, she’d admit that, but was she hearing Bruce correctly?

“Hold on,” Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you saying that they think Rogers is dead?”

“Yes,” Bruce elongated the ‘e’ as if he were uncertain.

“And they think he’s passed the Captain America mantle to Bucky?”

“Yes,” Bruce said with more confidence, rocking nervously on his heels.

“Do they know who James is? Or was?” Natasha trained her eyes on Bruce, wary of the answer.

“I…” Bruce stopped fidgeting and shook his head. “I don’t know about that. I don’t think the name Winter Soldier has come up, but they’re definitely asking who this new ‘mystery Captain America’ guy is.”

“That’s just messed up, man,” Sam looked like he wanted to storm down to the lobby and set the record straight, but Natasha knew that wasn’t the best way to handle it.

“Let them say what they want,” Natasha sighed. “They’re just digging holes for themselves to fall into later when Steve wakes up. It’ll be worth it to see their faces when he releases an official statement. Hi, my name is Steve Rogers and I’m not dead.” Wow. Sam’s optimism was rubbing off on her. And from the way he was grinning at her, he knew it.

“That’s my girl,” Sam pulled Natasha into a sideways hug with a smile. “But we gotta’ find you something better than a janitor’s closet to sleep in.”

Eventually, they were directed to family sleeping quarters, a hotel within the hospital, and by that time Natasha was so energy-depleted that she knew sleep would come fast. Sam didn’t leave her like she expected him to and he reasoned that he wouldn’t really be able to go back and watch, so he might as well keep her company. It wasn’t long before Clint appeared in the taupe-colored, lightly furnished room to find her sitting beside Sam on the couch, both of their feet propped up on an ottoman and Natasha’s head resting against Sam’s shoulder.

Neither of them needed to speak for Clint to understand, and he shoved the ottoman further toward Sam, sitting at Natasha’s side and gathering her into a hug.

“That’s not how you get her to sleep,” Barton muttered to Sam, pulling on Natasha’s shoulders to cause her to lie sideways on the couch. “You get the feet, I’ll get the hair.”

Natasha rolled her eyes at him, but pressed her cheek into his thigh and allowed the soft touch of his fingers through her hair to goad her closer and closer to sleep. Sam’s hands were rubbing circles into her heels and she would have sighed in contentment if her heart hadn’t been so heavy.

“Relax, Nat.” Clint scolded softly. “They’re gonna be fine. I wouldn’t say that unless I believed it.”

---“Way Down We Go” Kaleo--
“We have breaking news coming to you live from our regular daytime anchor Amy Miller at the Baywood Hospital in down-town New York. Amy, can you tell us what’s going on down there?”

“Well, we’ve just confirmed rumors that the Avengers brought none other than Captain America himself to the cardiovascular wing of Banner Hospital. He arrived in critical condition and we are getting mixed reports, but a majority of them say that he has already passed away…”

Click.

“He was headed to surgery, but I don’t think they got him there fast enough—”

Click.

“Can we trust this new Captain America? Will he embody the same national pride and heroism as Steve Rogers did—”

Click. The television fell silent and turned off.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Steve rubbed his face with the hand that was taped up with IV’s. “Just because I asked the nurse to have Bucky hold the shield for me?”

“Don’t look at me,” Sam said in amusement, leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped together behind his head. “I don’t have the paparazzi following me around everywhere.”

Anger flushed over Steve’s face, but it only brought relief for Natasha as she sat beside James’ bed, comparing her memory of Steve’s grey complexion to the red of his now-frustrated cheeks. For herself, she couldn’t care less what the media thought of her or her little screwed up family.

Natasha was bent forward on James’ blanket, her chin resting in the crook of her arm while her other hand combed fingers through her sleeping lover’s hair. His face was so peacefully lax in sleep—smooth cheeks, unwrinkled brow, faintly lavender eyelids, and the way his lips fell slightly open—and Natasha let herself stare all she wanted.

Across the room, two sets of eyes watched her and she noted the sudden silence from Sam and Steve. Sam was blushing and smiling to himself. Yeah, yeah, Sam. Natasha couldn’t decide between rolling her eyes or laughing. Steve only looked like he approved, shameless enough to continue watching while her fingers played with James’ hair.

Come on, James. Wake up so you can tell your best friend to get a girl of his own, huh? Warm relief flooded her as she felt his chest expand with a deep breath, her hand creeping out to take his and keeping clear of the multiple IV’s taped down over his right wrist. The metal prosthetic had been removed, his stump of an arm exposed to fresh air for the first time in days.

“Come on,” She whispered, leaning forward to press a kiss against his forehead. His fingers twitched and his brows wrinkled together, but his eyes remained closed, and the tremor of a small breath left his lips. “Show me those steely blue eyes I love so much.”

James’ fingers twitched again, tickling against hers, and he made a small sound in his throat, head rolling slowly against the pillow. Natasha was watching and waiting intently when a series of musical beeps sounded from within the hospital room. She looked up, only to see Sam’s head swivel toward the table against the wall.

“Someone’s calling you, Steve.” Sam retrieved Steve’s phone from the folded up pants on the table by the door. He was about to hand it to Steve when his eyes dropped to the screen. “Who’s Unlucky Number?”
A look of astonishment and near-panic filled Steve’s face. “Sam, give it to me.” He commanded, reaching out to snatch the phone, but withdrew his hand when the movement stretched at the bandages around his middle. “Don’t answer it. Please.”

The phone stopped humming and went silent in Sam’s hands.

Sam peered at the screen again. “Now they’re sending you a text. All it says is ‘status?’ Who is it, Steve?”

“If you’re not gonna’ give me the phone,” Steve tried to hold his arm out again, “Then at least send them a text telling them that I’m alive.”

“Steve,” Natasha found herself taking steps towards Sam, “We don’t want to tell anyone anything right now—”

“This isn’t a security breach,” Steve’s eyes were wide with alarm.

“Then why aren’t you telling us who it is?” Natasha demanded sharply.

“Because a man is entitled to his privacy.” Steve glared stubbornly.

“What man? And why are you protecting him?”

“Natasha, calm down, this isn’t what you think—”

“Hold on, hold on, hold on,” Sam looked down at the phone in surprise. “They’re calling again.”

Natasha snatched the phone from Sam’s hands and pressed a button to answer. “Who is this?” She said to the caller.

No one spoke on the other line, but Natasha could hear hurried footsteps in the background before the mystery person ended their call.

“What did they say?” Steve’s worry was beginning to get on Natasha’s nerves and he leaned forward, grimacing as he repeated himself. “What did they say?”

“They didn’t say anything.” Natasha swiped through the text history on the phone and found that a good portion of it had been deleted, but four messages remained—

Sent: Plan?

Received: Domestic today.

Sent: Meet tonight?

Received: Same place. Midnight.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, Rogers.” Natasha said after reading the texts out loud. “Giving me lectures on how secrecy destroys trust.”

“Natasha,” Steve said in a warning tone, snatching up the phone when she threw it onto the blanket beside him. “I promise, I haven’t lied to you. You’re right, I’m protecting someone.”

“Steve,” Sam stood alongside Natasha. “You know how this could look and I wanna’ give you the benefit of the doubt, but… you’ve got to give us something to work with.” He crossed his arms. “You know you can trust us, so why…?”
Steve leaned back against the raised mattress, rubbing his hands over his face and blowing out a reluctant sigh. But before he said anything, the door flew open and a very out-of-breath Sharon Carter burst in.

Sharon’s eyes were wide and wet, lips open in disbelief as she locked eyes with Steve, who fixed her with a similar expression. The two of them gaped at each other in silence while Sam and Natasha, both too stunned to speak, watched Sharon cross to Steve’s bed and reach for his face with her hands, head ducking down to lock lips with Rogers.

“Oh…” Sam’s eyebrows shot up, one hand covering his mouth in surprise. Natasha was still too startled to say anything, but her mind was putting the puzzle pieces together: *Unlucky Number—thirteen. Agent Thirteen of Shield. Agent Carter. Captain America’s secret… she couldn’t believe where this was going… lover? Was that too strong a word for someone like Rogers? Maybe girlfriend? …no, definitely lover.*

“Why didn’t you answer?” Sharon’s eyes were full of tears as she withdrew, hands hovering over him like she didn’t know where she was allowed to touch him with so many bandages. “The news reports keep saying you’re dead and then I called and you didn’t pick up—I had to see for myself.”

“I’m fine, Sharon.” Steve held her palm against his face, kissing at her wrist.

Fine? Natasha was starting to hate that word with a vengeance. Would everyone stop using that word? Clearing her throat to remind the two that they weren’t alone, Natasha rested her hands on her hips. Steve sent Natasha an impatient look, like she was interrupting something important.

“Tell me what happened.” Sharon insisted, sitting down in the chair Sam previously occupied, her face twisting at the sight his wrapped middle.

Before Natasha could intrude again, Sam wound an arm around her shoulder, guiding her back to James’ bed.

“Give ‘em a minute,” Sam insisted, glancing back at the two. “You just pay attention to this guy,” Sam pointed at James, “and I’m gonna’ get us all some coffee.” He turned to leave, but then paused and swiveled around. “Or do you need something a little stronger?”

“Coffee’s fine.” Natasha sulked, crossing her arms and leaning back in the chair enough to put her feet on the bed beside James’ knees. “With a shot of whiskey.”

“Irish coffee, coming right up.” Sam said, shaking his head and moving quickly like he was grateful for an excuse to leave the room.

Natasha’s resentful brooding was interrupted by a gravelly voice.

“Hey.”

James’ cheeks bloomed with warm color, his icy blue eyes taking her in like she was a delight, and his hand stretched out to grasp hers. The tubes across his face constricted his grin and then he tiredly rolled his head across the pillow to look at Steve before frowning and turning back to Natasha.

“Why’s Cap kissing a blonde?”

The bitterness over Rogers’ secret had subsided with James’ awakening but it was still there. “He realized he can’t have you now that you’re mine.”

James’ throat rumbled with a small laugh as his hand came to rest on his chest, tubes tugging at his skin. “I like that.”
“Like what?”

“Being yours.” He called up that devilish lady-killer grin and fumbled for her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing at her knuckles. “Just you wait. When I get a clean bill of health, we’ll go dancing somewhere, have a good time.”

“Dancing, huh?” She couldn’t stop smiling. Was he still loopy from the drugs?

“I gotta show off a little, give you incentive to keep me around, ya know?”

Oh yeah, he was definitely still a little high. But it made Natasha happy to see him so relaxed.

“Gotta charm your socks off, make you feel like you can’t live without all this.” He teased, fingers circling to indicate himself before reaching for her hip. But he stopped reaching when the tubes weren’t long enough to let him. “You think I’m charming, right?”

Natasha was grinning so widely and trying so hard not to laugh that she couldn’t say a thing. Barnes seemed to deflate at her silence and reached for her hip again.

“Nataaaaasha,” He whined.

She moved her hip within grabbing distance and crossed her arms. “I can tell you right now, I definitely wouldn’t be this happy without you. How’s that?”

“Works for me, doll.” His eyelids slipped closed again, but his ridiculous grin stayed, fingers losing their strength as Natasha picked up his arm and put it back on the bed.

---“I’ll Be Good” Jaymes Young--

Natasha was falling asleep in the chair beside James’ bed, when a visitor snuck through the door and into the room. The lights had been dimmed, Steve was sleeping, and Sharon and left about an hour ago, but Natasha had hidden so the nurses would think the room was empty. Visiting hours were over, but Natasha wasn’t bothered by bending the rules and James had only laughed happily when he realized she was still there. So, who was this newcomer? Natasha slunk back into the shadows to watch and wait.

“James,” The person’s features were obscured by the darkness, but Natasha would know that voice anywhere. “You awake?”

“Something you need, Stark?” James voice was husky with sleep.

The well-dressed Tony didn’t bother with a chair and stood with his arms crossed over his chest. “First things first. Wanted to thank you.”

“For?”

“Not going back on that promise we made.” Stark’s condescending tone didn’t sit well with Natasha, but James hung his head as though chastened.

“I almost did.” James muttered. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Meh,” Tony shifted his weight. “In your defense, you were a little effed up with Hydra’s crazy pills. Couldn’t expect you to remember it. Thor told me, though, that you practically demanded he take you to Asgard.”
“I thought I was dangerous. I thought he could help me.”

Steve stirred in his bed and both men’s head swiveled to look at him, but then they resumed their discussion when the blond man didn’t wake.

“I don’t take issue with that,” Tony held up a hand. “But I gave you that arm for a favor. Once Thor’s brain-healing grape-juice pool fixed you up, though, you took your time coming back.”

Natasha could hear James grinding his teeth. “I know…”

“You know, redemption stories don’t write themselves.” Tony muttered bitterly. “They need a little help. The next time you’re an idiot and you think they’d all be better off if you left or killed yourself, you look down at that metal arm and remember that mission we talked about.” Tony took a step forward. “If you aren’t with them, you can’t complete it, and I’m not gonna waste my time on you again if you leave.”

James nodded solemnly and Natasha wondered how he wasn’t furious with Tony for saying those things. *I’m not gonna waste my time on you again?* What was that supposed to mean? And what favor had Tony called in with James? What mission? Natasha had a misunderstanding with Steve earlier that day—finding out that he was secretly seeing Sharon Carter—and maybe she should give Stark the benefit of the doubt, but Tony wasn’t as trustworthy as Rogers’.

“Anything else?” James voice sounded small.

Stark was headed toward the door. “I’m gonna take care of the press, clear up this crap about Steve being dead and you being his runner-up, but I’m also gonna need to show you off. I’ve got a ‘skin’ sleeve for your arm. You’re passing as James Barnes, Steve Rogers refrigerated friend and POW in Hydra’s captivity, but without all the villainy. * Victim*, not assassin.”

“I guess that’s sort of the truth.” James snorted. “How long will that lie last?”

“Until someone puts two and two together. Not long. But enough that you can save kittens from trees, kiss babies, and wave the American flag in the faces of criminals on public television. At least then we can spin the turn-around story and people will buy it.”

“I guess I’m in your debt again.” James said as Tony stepped toward doorway.

“Even more incentive for you to keep it up with that favor.” Tony whispered before he disappeared and closed the door.

Natasha spoke once Tony was gone, “What favor?”

James didn’t startle at her voice, but reached for her hand as though he were worn out and afraid, firmly winding her fingers with his and taking a steady breath. “He wouldn’t mind if I told you, but he doesn’t want you to talk to him about it—he made that part clear.” James fingers brushed along Natasha’s arm and she waited for him to speak.

“The condensed version is that you’re all his family. Sounds fluffy and cute, but he threatened to kill me if he found out I was an imposter or a spy. He has a lot of trust issues.”

*Who wouldn’t have trust issues when you find out your life-long mentor hired terrorists to kill you for profit?* Natasha could almost hear Tony say.

“He told me about Steve when he came outta’ the ice. Said he could see the depression in Steve’s face even though Steve pretended to have everything together, knew Steve didn’t even want to be
alive. Stark says I’m the match that started the bonfire in Steve again. And if I left and made him go back to the way he was, then I’d pretty much be killing Stark’s family. Everybody needs Stark in some way and he likes to be needed, but Steve is the glue that holds them all in the same place.”

It dawned on Natasha that she wasn’t as observant of her teammates as she’d thought. Tony was completely and totally right.

Steve wanted a safe place for James to live—what could be safer than Avengers tower, truly Stark’s Tower?

Banner was a nomad, but with Steve taking up residence in the tower, he’d been there a lot more.

Clint followed Natasha—but only to make sure she was taking care of herself—Natasha was following James, and James was following Steve.

Even Thor, who was dependent on them for nothing but friendship, tended to come to the tower only because the rest of them were there…

“He called it my mission to stick with all of you because that was my programming.” James was errantly writing on the back of her hand with his fingers. “The deal was that I get the arm if I can keep the family together.”

Natasha sighed. Yeah, James was right—it did sound fluffy when he said it like that. But she imagined James wasn’t giving her the full glory of Tony’s expletives and imaginative death threats. Still, it was a relief to learn the secret, to find out that it wasn’t as bad as she’d feared.

“That’s not a bad deal.” She leaned over the bed, kissing James’ temple. James leaned into the touch like he wanted to mold himself into every part of her. He had that heartbroken touch-starved expression when she pulled away, but she reminded herself to firmly resist it. They’d already tried sharing the hospital bed, only to find they were both covered with too many injuries to get comfortable.

“The faster you get better is the faster you’ll be out of that bed.” Natasha said unnecessarily, feeling the ache of wanting to be close to him just as acutely.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
"Not by my might, or my power, or by the strength of swords, but only through the love of my fellows of war-- all we've lost will be restored."

Because I neglected you for two days, I will not only give you a long chapter, but I will also break my no-Sunday-upload rule ;)

All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass. Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

Following Steve and James' recovery and return to active duty, the Avengers found themselves once again fighting against the Demolition Men. This time, it involved hostages on the helicopter pad of a news building, along with the threat that if the Avengers interfered, they'd throw their captives off of the roof. When Steve couldn't tactically come up with any other options, Natasha volunteered to enter the building stealthily, catch the D-men off-guard, and secure the media staff. In the end, they all agreed, but only if James lent support from a distance.

Once she was fifteen floors up, Natasha quietly dealt with the guards at the entrance to the roof, breathing a sigh of thanks to Tony Stark for the electrical batons he'd made specifically for her. But the remaining two gunmen on the helicopter were somehow alerted and latched onto a camera-man. The grungy thugs shouted obscenities at her, stepping dangerously close to the edge. Fortunately, their attention was focused on her and not on James as he crept up the stairwell, aiming at one of the gunmen. The gunman's head erupted in a spray of red before the rest of his body fell backward and disappeared over the ledge, flying downward through open air. The remaining Demolition Man began to shout even louder as he pressed the barrel of his gun sharply into the young camera-man's temple.

The click of James' gun made it evident he was about to fire again, but she held up a hand, cautioning him to wait. Approaching the gunman slowly, Natasha spoke calmly, trying to keep his attention without forcing his hand. But the D-man was too frantic and grabbed the tall, skinny youth by the collar, clumsily pulling backward enough that they both flailed for balance.

In that moment, Natasha didn't think; she only acted. Leaping forward, she grabbed hold of the
camera-man’s hands, yanking with all her might as the gunman plummeted over the edge with a shriek.

The camera man scrambled toward Natasha, knocking them both backward with him falling awkwardly on top of her. Grunting as he landed, the camera man’s eyes went wide, mouth agape with breathlessness.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” He kept repeating in a whisper, large eyes pinpoint and staring at her face.

“Listen,” She groaned in discomfort. “I know you’re freaked out, but I need you off of me.”

“Oh my gosh,” He seemed to realized how he was positioned over her body and shakily tried to move his legs.

Natasha recognized the effects of shock and used her own strength to roll him onto his side. “You’ll be fine, just breathe. What’s your name?”

He raised a trembling arm when she offered a hand up, still out of breath and clutching at his shirt collar with his other hand. “Um… I’m Jeff.”

As soon as he was on his feet, he looked at their surroundings in astonishment, running finger through his short, spikey brown hair which was pointing in all directions. “I can’t believe that just happened…”

Natasha snickered. “I’m sure you’ve seen worse than this. You’re a camera man in New York.”

“It’s, uh…” Jeff watched the other hostages head for the stairs, running a hand through his hair again and smoothing his plaid button-down shirt. “It’s different when, like, when you’re in it.”

“The dangerous part’s over,” Natasha nudged his shoulder, peering at the stairwell and wondering where James had gone to. “We need you and your co-workers to leave the—”

“I, er… could I stay?” Jeff’s nerves seemed to melt and he smiled sheepishly at her. “I mean, I was hoping to, er, meet Iron-man…”

Natasha wanted to roll her eyes, hesitating when the voices began to crackle in her ear-piece, all assuring her that they were headed up immediately. She sighed. What could it hurt? “Fine. Just answer a few questions.”

Jeff’s uneven smile lit up his face like a puppy.

“The Demolition Men, did any of them talk to you? Did you overhear anything?”

“They didn’t say much,” Jeff shoved his hands into the pockets of his tan pants, which were somehow long enough for his stork-like legs. “but… I think I can help you—I didn’t hear what they wanted, but I think I caught it on camera. There was this thing,”

He was spinning around, arms flapping as he stepped with long and awkward legs, searching for something intently. “A machine! I caught it on camera!”

The clank of metal boots behind Natasha couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than Stark’s Ironman suit. A glance upward and Natasha saw Sam sailing in a circle overhead, dropping Steve onto the roof beside her. The others appeared one by one, but still no James. Where had he gone?
“Tony Stark,” Jeff breathed with adoration, twirling around and forgetting the camera, jaw dropping as Stark pulled back the facial part of his helmet. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh…”

“Why’s the kid still here?” Tony pointed at Jeff.

Natasha shrugged. “Said he wanted to meet you.”

“Ah.” Tony took a step forward, allowing the very excited Jeff to shake his hand.

“And Cap,” Jeff’s eyes turned to Steve. “Cap! So, it’s true, you are alive!”

Steve nodded distractedly, eyes probably scanning for James as much as Natasha’s were.

“Cap, you gotta tell me,” Jeff held up excited hands, “who the other guy is.”

Steve shared a nervous glance with Thor, but Jeff only became more animated in his wonder. “It’s killin’ me, I just gotta know. I saw the press conference, I heard what Tony said about Mr. Barnes, but I gotta hear it for myself…”

“He’s a friend.” Steve said adamantly. It was obvious that his patience was worn and he looked ready to usher the young man down the stairs. “Everything Tony said about him was true. His name is James—”

“Is he here?” Jeff’s head swiveled eagerly, looking around at the roof-top.

“Jeff,” Natasha interrupted, clearing her throat. “Maybe you should show Captain America what you filmed on your camera…?”

“Oh, right!” Jeff whirled around again, his button-down shirt fanning out as he bent to pick up the large news camera at his feet. “Sorry, I just…” He held the camera in his arms like he was afraid it would grow wings and fly away from him, but his eyes were trained in Steve. “Your friend, he’s a hero. Whoever he is, he saved you, Cap. There are rumors all over the place, but—I was just hoping I could thank him.”

Something about the implied request didn’t sit well with Natasha, but she wasn’t sure what it was…

Steve, however, melted into warm appreciation, affected that someone felt that kind of reverence for Bucky, and he pressed a finger to his ear without hesitation. “Buck, would you mind joining us?”

Natasha could hear the white noise of James’ open line, but Barnes didn’t answer. Something didn’t feel right. What were her instincts trying to tell her? She scanned the roof again, trying to open her senses to this unease that wouldn’t leave, trying to pin-point it when James stepped out from the stairwell with a glare. His expression spoke his mind. This isn’t a good idea.

Taking slow, calculated steps forward, James watched Jeff warily. Trust was something James didn’t give in abundance to strangers, but the way his face was working into suspicion further confirmed Natasha’s fears. This wasn’t right—something wasn’t right about Jeff…

---“If I Had A Heart” Fever Ray---

It was with a guarded stance that James allowed himself to come closer to the young man, but he just couldn’t shake the wary feeling eating at his core. His skin was crawling and his fight-or-flight was screeching at him. And as soon as he was a few steps away from the young man, he understood
Jeff’s expression changed completely—from one of absolute wonder to one of absolute malice. His lips formed words that James hadn’t been prepared for, unlocking a baser part of James’ mind that was suddenly rattling the chains he’d locked it up with. The monster in his head roared, furious and desperate, clawing its way up his consciousness.

He was only dimly aware of the confusion of his team while Jeff spoke the nonsensical words, drawing out the assassin from within him, but Natasha seemed to sense it instantly.

“Thor!” Natasha called out and the Asgardian laid a hand on James’ shoulder, beginning to whisper the words to counteract Hydra’s terrible key to his mind—and that’s when the camera in Jeff’s arms exploded in a flash of light.

This was no impact explosive, but a flash bomb, creating an ear-piercing ringing in James’ ears. The last rational thought melting away from James’ consciousness was that Hydra was brilliant: They’d used another trigger word and set off a sound grenade to deafen him, effectively blocking out any counter-words, sealing their orders in his mind. The flash grenade wouldn’t block his hearing for long, but it would be just long enough to do damage. It was a message: We still own you, even from afar, and you will serve us.

I’m sorry, James whispered as he sank downward, past his cognizance to be engulfed in a cloud of black.

The Winter Soldier’s head snapped up with alertness. He found he was deafened, but sound wasn’t the only sense available to him. He struck at the person putting a hand on his shoulder, putting distance between him and the enemy, leaping away from the circle of bodies to judge how many there were. Stark, Thor, Rogers, Romanoff, Barton—Wilson and Banner’s absence was a mystery to the Winter Soldier, but it wasn’t one he could puzzle over at the moment.

First threat: Stark. Grabbing the Captain’s shield, James threw the heavy disc of vibranium at the Iron-man suit, catching him in the middle before James flipped and took Rogers in a choke-hold, using the man’s throat as an anchor to kick out at Barton. Clint stumbled backward, close to the edge of the building, but Natasha grabbed his hand before he made it too far. With the element of surprise gone, the Winter Soldier would need something bigger to take on multiple foes at once.

They were shouting to him—he could see their lips moving, but his ears were still ringing, a trickle of blood dripping down his earlobe and onto his shoulder—but the Avengers made no move against him. Sentimentality. An advantage. He was ramming his fists into Clint’s chest, kicking at Steve’s chin, sliding under Thor’s massive legs, and crushing the armor around Stark’s body with his metal hand, but his targets’ only move was to defend themselves from him.

The Winter Soldier wasn’t expecting the Black Widow to be the first to attack, swinging out at him with her legs, but he ducked and lashed an arm out to throw her off-balance. His fingers curled around her elbow, yanking her closer until he could reach his metal hand around her windpipe. Holding her over the edge of the building, he gripped her by her throat as her legs kicked at nothing but open air.

And then the Winter Soldier began to release his hold on the Black Widow.

-- “Bang Bang” by 2Cellos, Sky Ferreira--
Natasha could barely breathe under the grip of the metal hand on her throat, but she managed to gurgle his name past her lips. Her legs twitched as she dangled over the edge of the building, wondering if his intent was to strangle her to death or to drop her. Honestly, she’d rather he just pick one already.

No recognition filled his eyes, no emotions passed over his face. He was the Winter Soldier. And his cold, dead, shark-like eyes barely registered that he was even looking at her, probably calculating a strategy against the others. The fingers under her chin twitched and she waited for them to release her entirely.

But then something flickered over his face.

James' lips parted and his eyes grew large, slowly understanding what he was doing, slowly resurfacing from that great depth in his mind. Fear worked its way into his features and his stance faltered, his hold on her neck loosening just enough that Natasha slid from his grip. He was opening his hand enough to let her breath, but seemed to forget his hand was the only thing keeping her up.

Natasha began to fall and all time seemed to slow.

The rush of air around her stole her breath and she gasped, eyes fixed on the man above her, his mouth opening wide in a cry of alarm as he scrambled to grasp her again, fingers catching at nothing. She was already too far away, watching his overwhelmed eyes become smaller and smaller with the growing distance.

But she was still close enough to see the moment his face morphed from desperation to determination, the sudden adrenaline almost visible over his body—he threw his arms forward, diving after her.

Something slammed into the back of her head and for a second Natasha thought she might have already hit the ground, but then her body was moving through the air again—in the wrong direction, upward!

“Time to ride piggy-back.” Stark said, trying to maneuver her behind him, but she was disoriented and couldn’t get a good hold. “You know what? Nevermind.” The air rushed around her once more as Stark maneuvered to carry her in front of him. “Sam? You got him?”

“I’ve got Barnes.” Natasha heard through her earpiece. She tried to speak, but there was too much motion and she couldn’t see straight with Stark flying them in a spiral toward the roof. It was like someone had taken her internal compass and decided flick it into spinning obnoxiously.

“‘m gon’ be sick.” She managed to warn Tony.

“Not on the suit.” Stark murmured back, setting her back safely on the rooftop. It was a good thing they landed when they did because her stomach couldn’t have taken any more flight stress.

Questions came at her from all sides, but the one thing she wanted was the one thing she didn’t get.

“Where’s James?” She was too dizzy to look at the sky yet.

Someone mentioned that he’d made it to the roof, but that he’d bolted for the stairs before anyone could get to him. When she was able to look up, Natasha’s urgent gaze fell onto an earpiece near the stairwell, crushed like it had been stomped on.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out who the ear-piece belonged to.
Natasha wasn’t among the search party looking for James, comprised of astonished Avengers who clearly expected her to be the most concerned. Instead, she found her way back to their Tower, cleaned herself up and threw the bedsheets into the washing machine like it was any other Monday. She was putting the sheets back onto the bed, inhaling the sweet fragrance of newly-washed sheets, when Steve appeared in her doorway. Tired and forlorn, he watched her in fascination, removing his helmet and then his gloves.

“I don’t understand.” A defeated Steve continued to remove his uniform, pieces of gear pooling at his feet in the hallway.

As much as she wished she could explain, there was nothing Natasha could say without betraying the confidence of both James and Tony. It was an accident she’d witnessed their exchange at the hospital in the first place, but she didn’t have license to talk to Steve about it, and so she nodded, clearing her sore throat. “Give him a few days.”

“A few days?” Steve shook his head angrily, exhaling with impatience. “Natasha, last time he disappeared—”

“Steve,” Natasha said sternly, giving him a look she hoped he could read. “Trust me. Let him be for a little while.”

*Keep the family together. Stay together.* The surreptitious promise between James and Tony filled her with a confidence she tried to convey to Steve, but she could see that he wasn’t quite convinced. So she told a half-truth.

“He promised me,” Natasha placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder, meeting his eyes with a friendly smile, “and I have to take him at his word. It’s your turn to believe me when I say he’ll come back. I’m just getting things ready for when he does.”

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*Confusing Happiness* by Lo-Fang

James *almost* betrayed Stark again.

He’d nearly convinced himself he couldn’t be saved from the animal inside of him. In the days that he wandered aimlessly, the only thing that fought against the demons in his head was the phone calls he made to Natasha with the stolen phone. It was desperate and he wasn’t sure why he’d even made that first call, leaning against the brick wall of a dark alley…

“How?” Natasha’s voice met his ears through the receiver and his heart skipped a beat. Confusion was palpable in her voice when he refrained from speaking. “Who is this?”

James couldn’t bear to say anything, couldn’t summon the breath or thoughts to tell her what he wanted. He exhaled in defeat, purposing to hang up, but somehow that breath was enough for her to know it was him.

“James.” It sounded like she was smiling warmly and his heart beat faster. “Do you want me to come and get you?”

*Oh, Natasha, no. Don’t find me. Don’t come looking for me like a lost dog. I’m pathetic, Natasha. I don’t know why you haven’t given up on me yet...* but he still couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“I know you need space right now. It’s okay, James.”
His anxiety turned into guilt, coaxing wetness from the corners of his eyes, but he only ran a hand over his face and listened on. *You’re so weak, you bastard, you can’t even talk to her! What’s wrong with you?*

“It’s okay,” She said again. “I’ll just talk, okay? Let me fill you in on what happened today.”

Natasha wasn’t a chatterbox by any degree, but she knew how to fill the dangerous silence—the quiet that threatened to break him when his loud, despairing thoughts shouted and echoed off of the walls in his head.

“Steve’s recovering well, but he’s head to toe in stitches and complains that super-soldiers heal too fast for them. He’s been annoying the hell out of Sam and I thought for sure he had endless patience, but I guess I was wrong. Sharon’s the only one who’s been brave enough to stand up to Steve—he said something snotty to her, something about how she was only pretending to be a nurse as a cover, but then she gave him this look. It was fantastic, James, it immediately put Steve in his place and he didn’t make a sound while she calmly explained that she had, in fact, taken years of medical training as a CNA and then as an emergency medic…”

Though it was a ramble, it was inclusive—it played upon the fresh memories James’ brain was storing—and James listened contently while Natasha spoke on and on and on, never prompting him to reply, but letting him know that he was missed, that everyone was safe, and that he was welcome back whenever he could manage it.

Only once in those four days did Natasha let slip her loneliness for him and it cracked at the already broken pieces of his heart.

“I hope you’ll… I know you want some time alone. I know you need this. But… please, I want you to come back. I wasn’t ready. After Asgard… I…”

Natasha paused and the silence was so thick that it choked James. He clutched at his forehead, tears spilling over his grimy cheeks and sticking to the bangs falling down his face. The silent sobs wracked at his chest, nearly causing him to drop the phone in his hand. He slid down the wall, backside thumping against the ground, still holding his face as the tears and his breaths became loud enough for his lover to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Natasha whispered before picking back up at the string of conversation she’d left off. “So, we’re planning to watch Casablanca this Friday. I don’t know why it had to be Friday, it’s not like we have jobs that run from nine to five like the rest of the world, but Tony insisted that it creates normality. I’m beginning to question his definition of normality, though, especially when he…”

--- "Bless This Morning Year" by Helios---

Natasha awoke to an alert from Jarvis, announcing that James was standing at the common entryway to the Tower. Standing? Not coming in? Jarvis confirmed that James was making no movement to enter the building, as if he were still deciding. Natasha threw the blankets off and shoved her feet into some shoes, dashing out of the bedroom with a short, “Thank you, Jarvis.”

One long elevator ride and a brisk trot brought Natasha and her wildly beating heart to the lobby where she threw the glass door open to see a morose James standing in silence. She didn’t care about being tentative now; Natasha hadn’t seen him for days and threw her arms around his unmoving shoulders, tightening her hold until she heard him grunt. To say that she missed him was an understatement. It had taken every ounce of her energy not to beg when he’d made those phone
calls, but now she was holding him. Now she was pressing her fingers against the back of his jacket, feeling his sharp shoulder-blades through the black leather, the contours of his muscles, and the hard column of his spine.

He took in a breath, his chest expanding against hers, and she could feel the quiver in it, threatening to unleash the tears he was clearly holding back. His arms rose slowly, fingers softly touching at the back of Natasha’s tank-top, hands moving uncertainly.

Was he afraid of hurting her? Natasha could recall countless fictions where characters had said the line, “You could never hurt me,” and she wanted to snort in disgust. James was very capable of hurting her. Both of them acknowledged that reality. But she was willing to risk it anyway.

“I missed you so much,” She sighed into his hard chest. “I’m glad you came back.”

She could feel the swallow of his throat against her forehead. “Needed you.”

Natasha looked up and saw the haunted look in his wet eyes, the way he was averting his gaze from her, and she reached for his hand to gently tug forward.

Refusing to meet her eyes, James followed her into the elevator. His hair was gritty and unkempt, some of it sticking to dried sweat on his forehead—maybe even a little blood—and his appearance told her everything she wanted to know: He hadn’t eaten, he hadn’t slept, and he definitely hadn’t made any efforts to clean himself up or address his injuries. Pushing down her swelling emotional response, Natasha allowed herself to be driven by a mental checklist: Clean him up, feed him, get him to bed.

James didn’t argue when she brought him to her room, leading him into the bathroom where she began to unwrap him from his combat suit. The water in any Stark building never needed long to warm up, but Natasha turned the shower on because she needed the white noise while she worked. The defeated way James held himself frightened her.

“Come on,” She nudged him over the short lip of the shower stall. He paused in mid-movement, removing his mechanical arm in a smooth motion and allowing it to drop loudly on the tile floor. It wouldn’t have surprised Natasha if the action damaged the tile more than the prosthetic arm, and though it was water-proof, she understood the need to be free of anything weighing him down.

Blank-faced, James stood directly under the showerhead, allowing the water to run down the sides of his face as Natasha applied generous amounts of soap to the areas where three-day-old blood had caked to the skin on his chest. There was black asphalt mixed into some areas and a fragment of rock still embedded in his side, but Natasha worked over the unmoving man with tenderness.

“Doesn’t hurt.” James reassured her, looking down at where she was delicately attempting to remove jagged pebbles from the slash on his ribs.

Natasha looked up with a scowl. “Don’t lie to me. This has got to hurt. Don’t tell me it doesn’t.”

“Can handle it.” He said as streams of shower water trickled down his naked muscles.

“I know you can,” Natasha acknowledge curtly. “But I don’t want you to hurt. Call me sentimental.”

In an action that surprised her, James’ hand went for her elbow, bringing her to stand upright and pressing greedy, hungry lips to hers. The kiss was so unexpected and overwhelming that it took a minute—and a pause in the way his tongue caressed the corner of her mouth—before she realized he’d distracted her so he could hastily remove the fragments of rock himself.
Cheater. Natasha was running her soapy fingers through the long hair around his crown when he sighed in contentment, eyes shutting while he savored the touch of her hands over his scratched and scraped scalp. When he opened his eyes again, Natasha’s heart swelled with sympathy at the confusion and dread she saw there.

He suddenly knelt in front of her with droplets of water running down his face, tentatively touching the gunshot scar on her waist with his lips and pressing to it a gentle kiss, following it with kisses to every wound he’d inflicted on her.

The bullet wound from when he’d shot the scientist through her.

The other bullet wound from when Hydra had sent him after her, only to be stopped by fateful first encounter with Steve Rogers.

The stab wound from when he’d been disoriented in the safe house, questioning her loyalties and uncertain about whom he could trust.

The tear in her calf where Ruger had shot and stood atop her.

And the remaining bruises on her neck from where he’d strangled her on the roof of the news building.

There were other scars, other ridges of skin that had been hastily stitched or grafted at a moment’s notice, and James kissed those as well, as though to take responsibility for any harm that had ever come to Natasha.

“Let’s get you dry,” she encouraged after he rose to kiss to her lips. She wasn’t unappreciative of his soothing, but she knew he didn’t have the energy to stand for much longer, turning the dial to stop the stream of water at his back and wrapping a towel around his shoulders.

James mechanically brushed away the moisture on his body with a towel, following Natasha into her room while she draped the Asgardian cloak over his shoulders. Once again, she reminded herself to thank Thor for the thick, warm covering.

“Put these on,” Natasha reached into a dresser drawer, offering him thick sweatpants and a long-sleeved thermal shirt, both of which he sluggishly pulled over his limbs. “I’ll be right back, don’t go anywhere.”

It was difficult to leave the room, but Natasha tore herself away and into the kitchen, only returning when she had soup and buttered toast—fats and carbs to make him feel full, nutrition to meet his body’s needs, she reasoned, as though everything she was doing would restore him to what he was before.

A now-clothed James was curled up on the middle of the bed with the dark-blue cloak wrapped around his muscled frame, but looked up when Natasha set the tray of food down on the bed.

“I don’t like crumbs in my sheets,” Natasha raised a playful eyebrow, “but I think I’ll let it slide just this once.”

James nodded, but his eyes registered nothing more than exhaustion, absently chewing at the toast after he’d dipped it into the soup. A few chewing motions later and some of the life returned to his eyes—as well as a low moan of pleasure from his throat.

“Good cook,” He praised her, scooping up soup with his spoon.
Both the bread and the soup were consumed with surprising speed, and she was about to return his bowl to the kitchen when he mumbled, “C’mere.”

The bowl was forgotten on the dresser and her shoes were hastily tossed aside as she all but lunged onto the mattress. James’ starving arms pulled her closer to him, a bicep under her temple, the bridge of her nose pressed into his sternum, and the nub of his left arm resting on the curve of her waist while his fingers stroked sleepily through her red hair.

He seemed content enough, and it was more than she could have hoped for after the incident four days ago. Whatever self-loathing would return when he woke in the morning, she would handle it—but for now, he had a full belly, soap-scented skin, and her warmth around his battered body.

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-- “Home Again” by Michael Kiwanuka--

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The self-loathing returned, just as Natasha anticipated, but at least James was making an effort to resist it. Sort of. He didn’t speak much—jaw muscles too occupied with that tense grinding he was so good at—but he didn’t hide himself away and he didn’t brush off the presence of the others.

Casablanca had been postponed and it was more than a week later when their assortment of spies, soldiers, and scientists were gathered on the entertainment room couches, popcorn flying through the air whenever Tony and Clint tried to throw it into each other’s mouths.

Sam had made a comment and Steve was arguing adamantly. And that was the first time James smiled—and snickered!—since the incident on the helicopter pad.

“Don’t bother, Sam,” James’ voice was rough from non-use, but his lips curled into a grin. “He’s as stubborn as they come.”

The room fell silent, all eyes turning to him in. But, unsurprisingly, it was Tony who spoke up first.

“All right, someone give Wilson a medal for getting grumpy-gills here to talk.” Satisfaction was plain on Tony's face.

“Grumpy gills?” James mouthed with a sneer, turning his head to Natasha with questioning eyes.

“Pixar.” Tony answered simply, turning his interest back to the TV screen.

“That’s what we should watch next!” Clint pointed a finger at Stark. “Finding Nemo. Or Brave. No, Toy Story!”

Natasha’s hand crept quietly over to James’ elbow to give it a squeeze. A tentative smile crept onto his face and he picked up his arm to lay it across her shoulders. James would be fine. Hydra had done their worst and it still wasn’t good enough.

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“I hung my head, for the last time in surrender and despair.

Before I’m dead, I’ll take the last climb up the mountain, face my fears.

The time has come to make a choice, to use my voice for the love of every man.
My mind is made up. Never again, never again will I turn round!

Though they may surround me like lions and crush me on all sides— I may fall, but I will rise.

Take courage sons, for we must go under the heart of darkness and set them free.

But don’t lose heart when you see the numbers – There’s no measure for the faith we bring!

It’s given us to overcome if we run where the spirit calls us on.

The greatest things have yet to come. With the dawn, we will rise.

Not by my might, or my power, or by the strength of swords, but only through the love of my fellows of war—

All we’ve lost will be restored.”

-“Rise” Josh Garrels

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, there was no beta for this story, so please let me know if you see anything wrong! Please leave a comment if you like the chapter :)
Reputation

Chapter Summary

Bucky answers much-asked questions, and Steve supplies a horrifying lesser-known story...

Chapter Notes

Just a warning-- the chapter numbers are going to change soon, I plan on reformatting. The first three chapters are too short and it bothers me :/
All song prompts are in the Spotify playlist: Story Soundtrack for THE REHABILITATION OF BUCKY BARNES-- found on username Sassafras Cass.
Link: https://open.spotify.com/user/128495777/playlist/74U17y9oEjJndAeynj8NRP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re`pu`ta`tion rep-yuh-tee-shuhn noun: belief or opinion that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic

-- “Circling” Nils Frahm--

James was safe. He had to remind himself of that.

I’m in Avengers Tower. I’m safe. Steve is sitting on the other couch. Natasha is standing right behind me. I’m the idiot who orchestrated this interview, and all I have to do is talk. I’m not going to be attacked. I’m not going to freak out, I’m not going to...

Taking a moment to steel his resolve, James took a breath in. Upon opening his eyes, he met Steve’s encouraging gaze, felt the soft squeeze of Natasha’s hand on his shoulder.

“Maybe we should start with your name.” The reporter chimed in, tucking a brown lock of hair behind her ear and exposing pearl earrings. She sat closest to James on the black leather couch.

“James Buchanan Barnes,” He stated shakily, willing his nerves to settle and reminding himself of why he was doing this.

Because it bites back at Hydra. Because the world will come to the wrong conclusions if I don’t tell them the truth. Because I need to confess it.

James gave the information the Smithsonian already had on him. He told the reporter about his parents, where they were from, how they ended up in Brooklyn, how and when he met Steve as well as the friendship that budded from that first meeting. And then he went on to recount the information the Smithsonian didn’t have— like how he hadn’t like Peggy very much when they first met.

“Why didn’t you like her?” The reporter asked. Her name was Kate, but James didn’t feel like
acknowledging that. It made this all that much harder to talk about and it was easier to just pretend she wasn’t a person—A person with feelings, a person who would pity him, a person who would try to console him. He didn’t want it.

“At the time, I didn’t realize it, but she was just another reminder of how different my best friend had become.”

Steve looked shocked by this sudden revelation, but held his tongue, waiting for James to go on.

“And how did it go, that first moment when you saw that Steve Rogers wasn’t the same man you left behind in America?” Kate—no, stop, “the reporter”—prompted in a kindly tone. It didn’t sound like she was hungry for a story. Her tone was sweet, like she was a therapist.

James chose not to comment, clearing his throat and shaking his head. He couldn't tell her his true thoughts on that terrifying moment: buckled to a table within the Hydra base, thinking he’d finally lost his mind and had been hallucinating Steve the entire time, only to find himself walking across enemy lines and back to base, learning with each step that he’d never “wake up” because it wasn’t a dream.

“The history books record that most of the 107th was held prisoner by Johann Schmidt. Can you give us your perspective on that?”

James nodded. “We had no idea what we were up against. We honestly thought that Hydra was just another Nazi weapon depot. We’d taken those out with no problem. I was in charge of a squad of nine men. If I had known what we were walking into…What the Swiss scientist wanted….” James ground his teeth, willing his jaw not to lock up on him. Going on to describe the mass capture of the 107th, James didn’t linger on the details, but paid tribute to the brave men Zola experimented on before him.

“He didn’t know what he was doing,” James said of Zola. “He was obviously working on it, trying to fine-tune it, and he blasted one of my men with a beam that incinerated him in seconds.” James could almost recall the smell of charred flesh, the sight of black ashes lining the floor of the lab, the roll of his stomach as he helplessly watched from where he was strapped to a table himself. “I think he learned pretty quickly that he couldn’t replicate Stark’s vita-rays.”

“But he was trying to re-create Erskine’s serum?”

“I couldn’t have known it at the time, but yes.” James nodded, lips pursing as he considered what to say. “I had thought he was trying to make chemical weapons.”

Kate’s brow furrowed. “What made you think that?”

“He was injecting us with something, made us sick. I don’t know why, but out of all of ‘em, I had the lesser of the symptoms,” James couldn’t help but scratch at his arm, remembering the sensation of rashes all over his skin. “But the others had open sores, weeping wounds…”

His hands were covered in boils and sores scattered the skin on his face, but the worst of the rashes were on his neck, at the edge of his hairline. If he didn’t go crazy from not being able to scratch the itching blisters, he would definitely die from infection within a week. He’d screamed at the others to stay away when the Nazis brought him back to the barred cell – it was a terrifying thought that he might be contagious and he’d already put them through hell by leading them into this place, he couldn’t stand the idea of making it worse by infecting them—but eventually his terror won out and he stopped resisting the hands that tried to care for him. Death would come and he wouldn’t have been able to see home again, wouldn’t have been able to say goodbye to his sister or Steve,
“Mr. Barnes,” Kate’s soft voice snapped him out of the brief flashback. Natasha’s hand was on his shoulder and Steve was standing over him and restraining his metallic arm. His right arm was wet and stinging… apparently, he’d unconsciously scratched at the skin until he’d bled, metal fingers tinted crimson.

“I’m sorry,” He said automatically, blinking slowly and grounding himself in Natasha’s touch.

Where did he go from here? James glanced up at Steve with questioning eyes, unsure of how to start again, but Steve only shook his head.

“We don’t need to tell anymore today,” Steve said irritably, pulling tissues from the box on the coffee table and pressing them to the scratches on James’ forearm.

That’s when James realized he wasn’t in this alone. As much as he might like to think he was, James wasn’t the only one reliving these memories—Steve was processing every facet as though their hearts were pounding in unison.

“I can handle more,” James argued softly, but what he was asking with his eyes was something different. *Will you tell me if I’m hurting you?*

Steve considered, jaw muscles clenching and unclenching, but then he returned to his seat with a huff.

“On your return, Captain Rogers formed the Howling Commandos,” Kate spoke, “and on one of their final assignments you were said to have fallen to your death. Obviously, that story is inaccurate. Can you tell me what happened after the incident on the train?”

This was the big mystery to the public, the reason he was sitting down to this interview, and he suddenly found himself without words. If he could have willed the pictures in his mind onto paper, he would have, but that’s not how an interview worked. Words. He could do this. He could use words…

Kate turned her head to look at Steve. “Would you mind filling in some of the gaps? There were rumors of how you went to look for a body, but the report was hastily thrown together and then you yourself went missing and the account was never confirmed.”

All eyes had turned from James to Steve, who crossed his arms and sat back, scanning their faces.

“The objective was to board a train carrying Schmidt's head-scientist, Arnim Zola. We completed our objective, but it cost us.” His eyes twitched to James. "As soon as we had Zola, I stole a map and a jeep and went back to the ravine. It wasn’t hard to find the right spot. The zip-line was still there and Howard Stark walked me through the math of where Bucky’s body might be based on the speed the train.”

Steve bit his lip for a moment before continuing and James felt a sudden urge to tell Steve this wasn’t necessary.

“I was supposed to be alone, didn’t tell anyone what I was doing except Howard, but Peggyjumped into the back of the jeep before I could stop her. I had a one-track mind, so taking making her turn back didn’t seem like an option. We found the ravine. We found the river. We kept track of where we were on the map…” Steve’s gaze went hollow as he remembered.
They’d ditched the jeep, trudging through the snow on foot. He heard the howl of wolves and immediately his gaze swept to Peggy. She was holding her own in the snow— clad in boots and thick trousers—and she held the map and compass, marking their progress with a charcoal pen. His protective nature surged, unable to abide by putting her in danger when he’d already lost… Damn it, Bucky, where are you?

“Steve,” Peggy pointed further down the river.

Oh, God. Oh, no. Now that he was here, could Steve bear to look?

“Bucky,” Steve breathed, eyes roaming over the snow-covered ground and the slow-trudging water of the river—there was an arm in a blue sleeve and a pool of blood beneath it. Nothing else.

His stomach heaved and he doubled over, but nothing came up as Steve gagged uncontrollably. As if on cue, three wolves trotted around the corner, baring their teeth when they caught sight of him and Peggy.

Steve’s vision went red. He imagined Bucky, clinging to life beside the stream only to be discovered by predators, made to suffer a gruesome fate after falling from such a great height. Peggy—loyal, brave, stubborn Peggy—stood behind him, gun raised at the rabid beasts. Setting his jaw and clenching his fists, Steve’s fury grew steadily, lending him a power that coursed through his body. He wouldn’t let them touch a hair on her precious head.

He wasn’t sure who sprang first, him or the wolves, but he didn’t fight the rage pumping through his veins alongside the serum. Fangs nipped, claws tore, but the pain was lost to him as his superhuman strength ripped the wolves apart. Steve’s savage roars echoed throughout the ravine. In mere minutes, the dismembered beasts lay in ragged pieces at his feet. There was one more foe just behind him and he turned to growl openly at it, preparing to lung and tear—

Peggy.

Steve panted, coming to himself again, taking in Peggy’s guarded stance and her rounded, horrified eyes. His stomach roiled in disgust at the gory sight of his grime-coated hands and the blood staining his uniform. When he took a step toward her, Peggy fell back a little, the gun in her hand twitching. It was pointed at him.

She was genuinely afraid of him.

Shame filled him until he thought he might choke on it.

“P-Peg,” He fell to his knees, squinting through the tears that flooded his eyes. “Peg, I’m not gonna… not gonna hurt you.”

No one would ever really understand why Steve chose to fly Schmidt’s massive airplane into the snow, the act that inadvertently froze him and brought him to today. The question most asked of him was why he hadn’t saved himself for Peggy’s sake. There were whole websites dedicated to their idealistic romance if he’d only found another way…

But Steve would never be able to look at her again without seeing the very clear memory of her horror. He’d nearly attacked her, lost to the haze of bloodlust and vengeance. He wasn’t an icon; he was a monster who’d ripped the wolves apart with his bare hands. Maybe she’d forgiven him, maybe that’s what their kiss in the car had really meant, but he didn’t know if he could ever forgive himself.
Steve blinked himself back into the present where Kate was waiting patiently for him to go on with his account. Bucky was watching him, as well, and under his friend’s concerned gaze, Steve felt a wave of calm wash through him. If anyone had defied the odds, it was Bucky. And if there was hope for Bucky then there was hope for Steve—hope that Steve had a chance of living again, too. And dear Lord, how Steve wanted to live again…

“We kept track of where we were on the map and eventually found what we believed to be Bucky’s remains,” Steve spoke. “We would later find out that Bucky had been injured in the fall, but since there were wolves in the area, we assumed he’d been picked apart.”

Despite the details withheld, Kate looked affected by this information.

---“Turning to Rust” Ciaran Lavery---

“I was put into cryogenic sleep until Zola was free to experiment again.” James answered another question. “They attached a prosthetic limb and had done so a few times with a few different models.”

This was the one part of James’ history he knew little about. He remembered being a teacher at the Red Room, remembered Natasha had been there, but neither of them had been able to piece together much. It had turned his stomach to learn that Natasha had been at the mercy of their brainwashing machines. The Red Room trained her to be lethal, pouring their efforts into sharpening and perfecting her—why would they risk wiping her memory?

She and James must have rebelled to earn that kind of punishment. Both of them. Together. That was the only conclusion they could draw from fragmented memories and the strange sensation of familiarity. Muscle memory didn’t happen overnight…

“Tell me about cryogenic sleep.” Kate prompted.

“The machines for it evolved over time, but the principle stayed the same.” James supplied blandly. “Freeze the body to preserve it. Bring it out with a specified thawing process, program the mind with basic orders, reinforce programming with discipline, and then freeze the subject when their use has been fulfilled.”

“You said they reinforced programming through discipline. What kind?”


“What’s a vacuum closet?”

James made a motion with his hands. “A small, pressurized space the air has been sucked from.”

“They’d put you in there if you resisted them?”

“Sometimes they would even if I didn’t. Just to keep it fresh in my memory.”

“Were you able to remember things between the freezes and the missions?”

“I could remember Steve quite a bit. He was still getting me into trouble after all those years—Hydra seemed to think they could beat the memory out of me, but he kept coming back.” He smiled, hoping it would encourage his friend, but Steve looked nauseous. Memories were resistance, resistance demanded punishment, and Hydra knew no mercy.
“A report says that you denied knowing him to his face. If you could remember Steve, why did you fight against him on the hover-battleship?”

He refused to make eye contact with Steve, but he could feel the other man’s eyes watching him, waiting for the same answer.

“I don’t know when it started, but they brought in Alexander Pierce,” James couldn’t help himself and smirked. “A handsome, young blond with a great sense of nobility who could put a patriotic spin on anything he said. Remind you of someone?” He craned his neck to look at Steve and then wished he hadn’t. Damn, Steve looked like he wanted to throttle someone.

“Anyway, that’s what Hydra thought, too. I couldn’t get over the memory of Steve, so they brought me a new Steve.” James scrubbed his hands over his face, realizing with surprising exhaustion that he’d been talking for almost an hour. *Time flies when you’re having fun*, he thought sardonically. “I guess my mind was messed up enough that I accepted their trick. Pierce was the best tactic they ever used and he could dominate me without having to resort to force. But then someone showed up on the bridge…”

This time James didn’t dare chance a look at Steve’s expression, sighing, “It was… confusing. And that confusion broke through years of programming, but it didn’t answer any of my questions…”

Kate cocked an eyebrow at him. “Were there others? Other agents like you?”

“Yes.”

Steve leaned forward in his seat. “Does Hydra still have them?”

“I don’t know.” James shrugged, trying not to think about it too hard. “They’d get loaned out, like library books, but we’ve been tearing Hydra apart, Steve. Hard to return a book to a burnt-down library.”

Kate snorted at the analogy, but she seemed to understand the implications. “Tell me about your missions.”

There was a lot James couldn’t have said, a lot he withheld for Steve’s sake, and a lot he could see Natasha piecing together anyway, but James attempted to be as honest as he could. He had been a machine—fed orders, living without touch, without identity, efficient due to his lack of sentimentality and morals, and threatening only out of necessity. Kate comprehended the distinction there—he had never been malicious, had never taken pleasure from hurting anyone, and had only done what Hydra had ordered him to do because they had stripped him of the ability to resist.

“But make no mistake,” James uttered with a low hiss. “I was unstoppable. You can’t empathize with a machine.”

“Your friends didn’t seem to think so,” Kate interjected, eyes twitching to Natasha, whom the reporter had obviously realized was more important to James than he was letting on. “You look like you’re holding your own now—that can only mean they were right.”

--- “Emancipation” by Helios---

James stretched his arms around Natasha, pulling her closer into him over the mattress, curling around her body and breathing in the scent of her hair. He was tired, grumpy, and he’d made his life’s morbid story public.
“Tell me I did the right thing,” James murmured into Natasha’s red locks, taking in a deep breath.

“You can’t fight alongside Steve unless you release a verifiable statement with publicly-accessible proof. The Avengers will handle the rest.”

James snorted. Well, it wasn’t exactly an encouragement, but he heard the message well enough: the ends justify the means—you get what you want, at the cost of some privacy.

Natasha’s soft kisses to his chest were distracting, her fingers at the waistband of his shorts even more so. “Stop trying to give in to your angst—you’ve got more important things to think about.”

He shuddered under her touch, inhaling sharply. “Like the beautiful woman trying to distract—”

“Seduce.”

“—forgive me, seduce me—”

“I wonder what Stark’s design for your new superhero getup will look like.” Natasha grinned, rolling him onto his back and stretching herself over him. “I’m thinking bright blue and fire-engine red to compliment the vintage look of Captain America’s tights. Maybe a small black mask so we can still see your handsome cheekbones.”

James groaned and attempted to squirm out from under her. “God save me…”

“Red boots that flare at the folds, bulky gloves with—”

“Natasha, shut up.” He growled, spinning himself to pin her down beneath him, kissing her to keep her lips from uttering the rest.

The End (FOR NOW)

Chapter End Notes

Well, my dears, this is the end of the story FOR NOW (I might or might not add to it as time goes by)—I’m starting the drafts on a story involving Peggy Carter and the Winter Soldier (more details to come!)

also, just FYI, I do prompts-- so please let me know if you have any ideas! You can find me on Tumblr as The Spartan Bird

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!